

CHAPTER XXIX

IN SUSPENSE

MARK, as he left his wife with that hastily invented excuse of the forgotten tobacco, turned back with a blind instinct of escape; he went to the foot of the hilly little street down which Mabel and he had lately passed, and halted there undecidedly; then he saw a flight of rough steps by a stone fountain and climbed them, clutching the wooden rail hard as he went up; they led to a little row of cabins barricaded by stacks of pine-wood, and further on there was another short flight of steps, which brought him out upon a little terrace in front of a primitive stucco church. Here he paused to recover breath and think, if thought was possible. Above the irregular line of high-pitched brown roofs at his feet he could just catch a glimpse of the rushing green Rhine, with the end of the covered way on the bridge and the little recess beyond. It was light enough still for him to see clearly the pair that stood in that recess; Vincent's broad figure leaning earnestly towards that other one—he was drawing closer—now he drew back again as if to watch the effect of his words. Mark knew well what she must be hearing down there. He strained his eyes as the dusk shrouded the two more and more; he thought that, even there, he would be able to see a change when the blow fell. "Mabel, my darling—my innocent darling!" he groaned aloud, "have pity on me—do not give me up!"

As he leaned there on the rough stone parapet his panic gradually abated, and the suspense became intolerable; he could not stop there. By this time too the worst must have happened; it was useless to try to avoid the inevitable; he would go down and face his doom without giving her further cause to despise him. The idea of denying the charge never occurred to him for a moment; he knew that face to face with his accuser such audacity was beyond his powers; he had nothing to say in defence, but he must hear his sentence.

And so, in a sort of despairing apathy, he went steadily down again to the street level, and, with a self-command

for which he had not dared to hope, passed with a firm tread along the covered way across the bridge.

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After the first surprise of meeting, Vincent had had to explain, in answer to Mabel's eager questions, the manner in which he had escaped being a victim of the "Mangalore" disaster; the explanation was commonplace enough, and when it was given she exclaimed reproachfully, "But why did you lead us all to believe that the worst had happened? You must have known how it would grieve us; it was not like you, Vincent."

"Put I wrote," he rejoined; "surely you got my letter, Mabel?"

"You *did* write then?" she said. "I am glad of that. But the letter never came. I never dreamed that there was the slightest hope till I saw you here. I hardly dared to speak to you at first. And how do you come to be here? You have not told me that yet."

"I was on my way to punish a scoundrel," he said abruptly, "but I had almost forgotten all that. Never mind about me, Mabel; tell me about yourself now. You don't know how I have been longing for the very smallest news of you!"

"What am I to tell you?" said Mabel smiling. "Where shall I begin, Vincent?"

"Well, first, your own question back again," he said. "How do you come to be here, and all alone? Are your people at the hotel? Am I to see them to-night?"

"My people are all at Glenthorpe just now," said Mabel with some natural surprise, which, however, only made Vincent conclude she must be travelling with friends. Were they her future parents-in-law, he wondered jealously. He could not rest till he knew how that was.

"Mabel," he said earnestly, "they told me you were engaged; is it true?"

She had not yet grown quite accustomed to her new dignity as a wife, and felt a certain shyness in having to announce it to Vincent.

"It was," she said, looking down; "it is not true now. Haven't you really heard that, Vincent?"

But, instead of reading her embarrassment aright, he

saw in it an intimation that his worst fears were without foundation. He had not come too late. She was free—there was hope for him yet. But even then he did not dare to express the wild joy he felt.

“Do you mean,” he said—and his voice betrayed nothing—“that it is broken off?”

“Broken off!” she repeated, with a little touch of bewilderment. “Why—oh, Vincent, what a dreadful thing to ask! I thought you would understand, and you don’t a bit. I am not engaged now, because this is my wedding journey!”

If Vincent had been slow to understand before, he understood now. It was all over; this was final; irrevocable. The radiant prospect which had seemed to open a moment before to his dazzled eyes had closed for ever. For a moment or two he did not speak. If he had made any sound it would have been a cry of pain; but he repressed it. That must be his secret now, and he would keep it till death. He kept it well then at least, for there was no faltering in his voice as he said slowly, “I did not know. You will let me congratulate you, Mabel, and—and wish you every happiness.”

“Thank you, Vincent,” said Mabel not too warmly, thinking that, from so old a friend as Vincent, these felicitations were cold and conventional.

“You are happy, are you not?” he asked anxiously.

“Happier than I ever thought possible,” she said softly. “When you see my—my husband” (she spoke the word with a pretty, shy pride), “and know how good he is, Vincent, you will understand.” If she had ever suspected the place she filled in Vincent’s heart she would have spared him this; as it was she treated him as an affectionate elder brother, who needed to be convinced that she had chosen wisely; and it was in some degree his own fault that she did so; he had never given her reason to think otherwise.

“I wish he would come; I can’t think where he can be all this time,” continued Mabel. “I want you to know one another. I am sure you will like Mark, Vincent, when you know him.”

Vincent started now unmistakably; not all his self-control could prevent that. Till that moment it had not occurred to him that Mabel’s presence there, in the town

where he had expected to come upon Mark, was more than a coincidence. He had been led to believe that Mark and she were not even acquainted, and even the discovery that she was married did not prepare him for something more overwhelming still.

"Mark!" he cried. "Did you say Mark? Is that your husband's name? Not—not *Mark Ashburn*?"

"How that seems to astonish you," said Mabel. "But I forgot; how stupid of me! Why, you are a friend of his, are you not?"

Holroyd's anger came back to him all at once, with a deadly force that turned his heart to stone.

"I used to be," he answered coldly, not caring very much just then in his bitterness if the scorn he felt betrayed itself or not. But Mabel took his answer literally.

"Why, of course," she said. "I remember we came upon your portrait once at home, and he asked if it was not you, and said you were one of his oldest friends."

"I thought he would have forgotten that," was all Vincent's answer.

"I am quite sure he will be very glad to welcome you back again," said Mabel, "and you will be glad to hear that since you saw him he has become famous. You have been so long away that you may not have heard of the great book he has written, 'Illusion.'"

"I have read it," said Vincent shortly. "I did not know he wrote it."

"He did write it," said Mabel. "But for that we might never have known one another. He has to admit that, even though he does try to run down his work sometimes, and insist that it has been very much overrated!"

"He says so, does he?" Vincent replied. "Yes, I can quite understand that."

Some intonation in his voice struck Mabel's ear.

"Perhaps you agree with him?" she retorted jealously.

Holroyd laughed harshly.

"No, indeed," he said, "I should be the last man in the world to do that. I only meant I could understand your husband taking that view. I read the book with intense interest, I assure you."

"You don't speak as if you quite meant me to believe that," she said. "I'm afraid the book was not practical

enough to please you, Vincent. Ceylon seems to have hardened you."

"Very possibly," he replied; and then followed a short silence, during which Mabel was thinking that he had certainly altered—hardly for the better, and Holroyd was wondering how much longer he would have to bear this. He was afraid of himself, feeling the danger of a violent outburst which might reveal her delusion with a too brutal plainness. She must know all some time, but not there—not then.

He had finally mastered any rebellious impulses, however, as Mabel, who had been anxiously watching the bride for some time, went to meet someone with a glad cry of relief. He heard her making some rapid explanations, and then she returned, followed by Mark Ashburn.

Mabel's greeting told the wretched Mark that the blow had not fallen yet. Vincent evidently was determined to spare neither of them. Let him strike now, then; the less delay the better.

He walked up to the man who was his executioner with a dull, dogged expectation of what was coming. He tried to keep himself straight, but he felt that his head was shaking as if with palsy, and he was grateful that the dusk hid his face.

"Here is Mark, at last," said Mabel. "He will tell you himself that he at least has not forgotten."

But Mark said nothing; he did not even put out his hand. He stood silently waiting for the other to speak. Vincent was silent too, for a time, looking at him fixedly. This was how they had met, then. He had pictured that meeting many times lately, but it had never been anything like the reality. And Mabel still suspected nothing. There was a touch of comedy of a ghastly kind in the situation, which gave Vincent a grim amusement, and he felt a savage pleasure, of which he was justly ashamed later, in developing it.

"I have been trying to explain to your wife," he said at last, "that I have been away so long that I could hardly hope you would remember the relations between us."

Mark made some reply to this; he did not know what.

"At least," Vincent continued calmly, "I may congratulate you upon the success of your book. I should have

done so when we met the other day if I had understood then that you were the author. Your modesty did not allow you to mention it, and so I discover it later."

Mark said nothing, though his dry lips moved.

"When you met!" cried Mabel in wonder. "Did you know Vincent was alive then. Mark? And you never told me!"

"He naturally did not think it would interest you, you see," said Vincent.

"No," said Mabel, turning to Mark, "you couldn't know that Vincent had once been almost one of the family; I forgot that. If you had only thought of telling me!"

The two men were silent again, and Mabel felt hurt and disappointed at Vincent's want of cordiality. He seemed to take it for granted that he had been forgotten. He would thaw presently, and she did her best to bring this about by all means in her power, in her anxiety that the man she respected should do justice to the man she loved.

That conversation was, as far as Mark was concerned, like the one described in "Aurora Leigh":

"Every common word
Seemed tangled with the thunder at one end,
And ready to pull down upon their heads
A terror out of sight."

The terror was close at hand when Mabel said, in the course of her well-meant efforts to bring them into conversation, "It was quite by accident, do you know, Mark, that Vincent should have met us here at all; he was on his way to find some man who has—I forgot what you said he had done, Vincent."

"I don't think I went into particulars," he replied. "I described him generally as a scoundrel. And he is."

"I hope you were able to find that out before he could do you any injury?" said Mabel.

"Unfortunately, no," he said. "When I found out, the worst was done."

"Would you rather not talk about it," she continued, "or do you mind telling us how you were treated?"

Vincent hesitated; just then the sense of his wrong, the sight of the man who had deceived him, made him hard

as adamant. Could he desire a fuller satisfaction than was offered him now?

"It's rather a long story," he said: "perhaps this is not quite the place to tell it. *You* might find it interesting; though, from the literary point of view," he added turning suddenly on Mark, who did not attempt to meet his eyes.

"Tell it by all means, then," said the latter, without moving his head.

"No; you shall hear it another time," said Holroyd. "Put shortly, it's this: I trusted the other man; he deceived me. Nothing very original in that, is there?"

"I'm afraid not," said Mabel. "Did he rob you, Vincent? Have you lost much?"

"Much more than money! Yes, he robbed me first and paid me the compliment of a highly artistic chain of lies afterwards. That was a needless waste; the ordinary sort of lie would have been quite enough for me—from him."

Mark heard all this with a savage inclination at first to cut the scene short and say to Mabel, "He means Me. *I* robbed him! *I* lied to him! *I* am the scoundrel—it's all true! I owe it—now let me go!"

But he let Holroyd take his own course in the end, with an apathetic acknowledgment that he had the right to revenge himself to the very utmost.

The house at the nearer end of the bridge had a small projecting gallery, where he remembered having seen a tame fox run out when he was there in the autumn before. He caught himself vaguely speculating whether the fox was there still, or if it had died; and yet he heard every word that Vincent was saying.

"And what do you mean to do with him when you meet?" asked Mabel.

"Ah," said Vincent, "I have thought over that a good deal. I have often wondered whether I could keep calm enough to say what I mean to say. I think I shall; in these civilised days we have to repress ourselves now and then, but that won't, of course, prevent me from punishing him as he deserves; and, when those nearest and dearest to him know him as he really is, and turn from him, even he will feel that a punishment!" (He turned to Mark again) "Don't you agree with me?" he asked.

Mark moistened his lips before answering. "I think you will find it very easy to punish him," he said.

"Is he—is he married?" asked Mabel.

"Oh, yes," said Vincent; "I was told that his wife believes in him still."

"And you are going to undeceive her?" she said.

"She must know the truth. That is part of his punishment," replied Vincent.

"But it will be so terrible for her, poor thing!" said Mabel, with an infinite compassion in her voice. "What if the truth were to *kill* her?"

"Better that," he said, bitterly, "than to go on loving a lie! Whatever happens, her husband is responsible, not I. That is the correct view, Ashburn, I think?"

"Quite correct," said Mark.

"It may be correct," cried Mabel indignantly, "but it is very cruel! I didn't think you could be so harsh, either of you. Of course, I don't know what the man has done; perhaps if I did I might be 'correct' too. But, Vincent, I do ask you to think a little of his poor wife. She, at least, has done you no harm! Is there no way—no way at all—to get back something of what you have lost; even to punish the man, if you must, and yet spare his wife?"

"If there were," he cried passionately, "do you suppose I would not take it? Is it my fault that this man has done me such a wrong that he can only make amends for it by exposing himself? What can I do?"

"I suppose there is no help for it, then," agreed Mabel reluctantly, "but I wish she had not to suffer too. Only think what it must be to have to give up believing in one's husband!" and as she spoke she slid a confiding hand through Mark's arm.

There was another silence, and, as it seemed plain now that the interview was not likely to be a success, she made haste to end it. "We must say good-bye now, Vincent," she said. "I hope you are not so harsh as your words."

"I don't know. I feel considerably harsher just now, I think," he said. "Good-bye then, Mrs. Ashburn. By the way Ashburn," he added in a slightly lowered tone, "there is something I have to say to you."

"I know," muttered Mark doggedly. "Are you going to say it now?"

"No, not now," he answered; "you must meet me—where shall we say? I don't know this place—here? No, on that little terrace over there, by the fountain; it will be quieter. Be there at nine—I am going to tell your husband the details of that story, Mabel," he continued aloud, "and then we shall decide what to do. You will spare him to me for half an hour?"

"Oh, yes," said Mabel, cheerfully. She thought this looked as if they were going to arrive at a better understanding. Mark looked at Vincent, but his face was impenetrable in the dim light as he added, again in an undertone, "You are to say nothing until I give you leave. If you are not at the place by nine, remember, I shall come to you."

"Oh, I will be there," said Mark recklessly; and they parted.

As Mabel and Mark were walking back, she said suddenly, "I suppose, when you met Vincent last, you told him that you were going to marry me, Mark?"

"Didn't he say so?" he answered, prevaricating even then.

"I thought you must have done so," she said, and was silent.

Vincent *had* known then. He had deliberately kept away from them all. He had pretended to ignore the marriage when they met; that was his way of resenting it. She had not thought of this till then, and it confirmed her in the idea that Ceylon had sadly changed him.

They dined alone together in the large bare *Speise-Saal*, for the handsome hotel was scarcely ever occupied even in the season. Now they had it all to themselves, and the waiters almost fought with another for the privilege of attending upon them. The "Director," himself—a lively talkative little German who felt his managerial talents wasted in this wilderness—came in to superintend their meals, partly to refresh himself by the contemplation of two real guests, but chiefly to extend his English vocabulary.

Hitherto Mark had considered him a nuisance, but he was glad that evening when the host followed the fish in with his customary greeting, "Good-night! You haf made a goot walk? Guten appetit—yes?" and proceeded to invite them to a grand concert, which was to take place

in the hotel the following Sunday. "Zere will pe ze pandt from Klein-Laufenburg; it is all brass, and it is better as you vill not go too near. Zey blow vair strong ven zey go off, but a laty from heir vill gambole peautifully after zem on ze piano. You vill come—yes?"

When he had gone at last little Max came in and stood by Mabel, with his mouth gaping like a young bird's for chance fragments of dessert. Mark was grateful to him, too, for diverting her attention from himself. He grew more and more silent as the long Black Forest clock by the shining porcelain stove ticked slowly on towards the hour. It was time to go, and he rose with a shiver.

"You will not be very long away, will you, dear?" said Mabel, looking up from the orange she was peeling for the child. "And you will do what you can for the poor woman, I know."

"Yes, yes," he said as he reached the door. "Good-bye, Mabel!"

"Good-bye," she said, nodding to him brightly. "Max, say 'Good-evening, Herr Mark; a pleasant walk,'" but Max backed away behind the stove, declining to commit himself to an unknown tongue. Mark took a last look at her laughing gaily there in the lamplight. Would he ever hear her laugh like that again? How would he ever find courage to tell her? There was little need just then of Holroyd's prohibition.

He went down the hotel steps to the little open space where the two streets unite, and where the oil lamp suspended above by cords dropped a shadow like a huge spider on the pale patch of lighted ground below. The night was warm and rather dark; no one was about at that hour; the only sound was the gurgle of the fountain in the corner, where the water-jets gleamed out of the blackness like rods of twisted crystal. He entered the narrow street, or rather alley, leading to the bridge. In the state of blank misery he was in his eye seized upon the smallest objects as if to distract his mind, and he observed—as he might not have done had he been happy—that in the lighted upper room of the corner house they had trained growing ivy along the low-raftered ceiling.

So, too, as he went on he noticed details in each dim small-paned shop-front he passed. The tobacconist's big wooden

negro, sitting with bundles of Hamburg cigars in his lap and filling up the whole of the window; the two rows of dangling silver watches at the watchmaker's; the butcher's unglazed slab, with its strong iron bars, behind which one small and solitary joint was caged like something dangerous to society; even the grotesque forms in which the jugs and vases at the china shop were shadowed on the opposite wall.

He looked up at the quaint metal inn-sign, an ancient ship, which swung from a wrought-iron bracket overhead. "When next I pass under that!" he thought.

He came to the end of the street at last, when his way to the place of meeting lay straight on, but he turned to his right instead, past the *Zoll-Verein*—where the chief was busy writing by the window under his linen-shaded oil-lamp—and on to the bridge as if some irresistible attraction were drawing him.

When he reached the recess opposite to that in which Mabel had met Vincent he stopped mechanically and looked around; the towns were perfectly still, save for the prolonged organ note of the falls, which soon ceases to strike the ear. On either bank the houses gleamed pale under a low sky, where the greenish moonlight struggled through a rack of angry black clouds. While he stood there the clock under the church cupola above struck the quarters and clanged out the hour, followed after a becoming pause, by the gatehouse clock across the river, and such others as the twin towns possessed.

It was nine o'clock. Vincent Holroyd was waiting there on the terrace, stern and pitiless.

Mark made a movement as if to leave the recess, and then stopped short. It was no use; he could not face Holroyd. He looked over the side, down on the water swirling by, in which the few house lights were reflected in a dull and broken glimmer. Was there any escape for him there?

It would only be a plunge down into the swollen rushing torrent, and he would be past all rescue. An instant of suffocating pain, then singing in his ears, sparks in his eyes, unconsciousness—annihilation perhaps—who knew? Just then any other world, any other penalty, seemed preferable to life and Mabel's contempt.

From the recess he could see an angle of the hotel, and one of the windows of their room. It was lighted; Mabel was sitting there in the armchair, perhaps waiting for him. If he went back he must tell her. If he went back!

Whether he lived or died, she was equally lost to him now. His life would bring her only misery and humiliation—at least he could leave her free!

Vincent would speak and think less hardly of him then, and, if not, would it matter?

His mind was made up—he would do it! He looked towards Mabel's window with a wild, despairing gaze. "Forgive me!" he cried, with a hoarse sob, as if she could hear, and then he threw off his hat and sprang upon the broad parapet.

CHAPTER XXX

ON THE LAUFENPLATZ

VINCENT had left the *Gasthaus zur Post*, the old-fashioned inn outside Klein Laufenburg, at which he had taken up his quarters for the night, a little before nine, and walked down the street, with his mind finally made up as to the course he meant to take, although he shrank from the coming interview almost as intensely as Mark himself. He passed under the covered way of the bridge, and had nearly reached the open part, when he recognised the man he was coming to meet standing in one of the recesses. He noticed him look round in evident fear of observation. He did not seem, however, to have seen or heard Vincent, and presently the latter saw him throw his hat away, as if in preparation for action of some sort. Vincent guessed at once what he was intending to do; it darted across his mind that this might be the best solution of the difficulty—he had only to keep silent for a few seconds. Was it certain even now that he could prevent this self-destruction if he would? But such inhumanity was impossible to him. Instinctively he rushed forward out of the shadow and, seizing Mark by the arm as he sprang upon the parapet, dragged him roughly back.

"You coward!" he cried, "you fool! This is the way you keep your appointment, is it? You can do that afterwards if you like—just now you will come with me."

Tragic as a rash act such as Mark was contemplating is when successful, an interruption brings with it an inevitable bathos; when he first felt that grasp on his arm, he thought himself in the power of a German policeman, and, prepared as he was a moment before to face a sudden death, he quailed before the prospect of some degrading and complicated official process; it was almost a relief to see instead his bitterest enemy!

He made no attempt at resistance or escape—perhaps life seemed more tolerable after all now he had been brought back to it; he went meekly back with Vincent, who still held his arm firmly, and they reached the Laufenplatz without another word.

The little terrace above the Rhine was almost dark, the only light came in a reflected form from a street lamp round the corner, and they had to pick their way round the octagonal stone fountain and between the big iron salmon cages, to some seats under the five bare elms by the railings. There Vincent sat down to recover breath, for the scene he had just gone through was beginning to tell upon him, and he was overcome by a feeling of faintness which made him unable to speak for some moments. Meanwhile Mark stood opposite by the railings waiting sullenly, until Vincent rose at last and came to his side; he spoke low and with difficulty, but, in spite of the torrent roaring over the rocks below, Mark heard every word.

"I suppose," Vincent began, "I need not tell you why I wished to see you?"

"No," said Mark; "I know."

"From your manner on the bridge just now," continued Holroyd, relentlessly, "it looked almost as if you wished to avoid a meeting—why should you? I told you I wished my authorship to be kept a secret, and you sheltered it with your own name. Very few friends would have done that!"

"You have the right to indulge in this kind of pleasantry," said the tortured Mark; "I know that—only be moderate if you can. Cut the sneers and reproaches short, and give me the finishing stroke; do you suppose I don't *feel* what I am?"

"Reproaches are ungenerous, of course," retorted Holroyd; "I am coming to the 'finishing stroke,' as

you call it, in my own time; but first, though you may consider it bad taste on my part, I want to know a little more about all this. If it's painful to you, I'm sorry—but you scarcely have the right to be sensitive."

"Oh, I have no rights!" said Mark bitterly.

"I'll try not to abuse mine," said Vincent, more calmly, "but I can't understand why you did this—you could write books for yourself, what made you covet mine?"

"I'll tell you all there is to tell," said Mark; "I didn't covet your book—it was like this; my own novels had both been rejected. I knew I had no chance, as things were, of ever getting a publisher to look at them. I felt I only wanted a fair start. Then Fladgate got it into his head that I was the author of that manuscript of yours. I *did* tell him how it really was, but he wouldn't believe me, and then—upon my soul, Holroyd, I thought you were dead!"

"And had no rights!" concluded the other drily; "I see—go on."

"I was mad, I suppose," continued Mark; "I let him think he was right. And then I met Mabel . . . by that time everybody knew me as the author of 'Illusion.' I—I could not tell her I was not. . . . Then we were engaged, and, four days before the wedding, you came back—you know all the rest."

"Yes, I know the rest," cried Vincent, passionately; "you came to tell me how overcome you were! I thought it was joy, and thanked Heaven, like the fool I was, that I had anyone in the world to care so much about me! And you let me tell you about—about *her*; and you and Caffyn between you kept me in the dark till you could get me safely out of the way. It was a clever scheme—you managed it admirably. You need not have stolen from anyone with such powers of constructing a plot of your own! There is just one thing, though, I should like to have explained. I wrote Mabel a letter—I know now that she never received it—why?"

"How can I tell?" said Mark. "Good God! Holroyd, you don't suspect me of *that*?"

"Are you so far above suspicion?" asked Vincent; "it would only be a very few more pages!"

"Well, I deserve it," said Mark, "but whether you

believe me or not, I never saw a letter of yours until the other day. I never imagined you were alive even till I read your letter to me."

"That must have been a delightful surprise for you," said Vincent; "you kept your head, though—you did not let it interfere with your arrangements. You have married her—you—of all the men in the world! Nothing can ever undo that now—nothing!"

"I have married her," said Mark; "God forgive me for it! But at least she cares for no one else, Holroyd. She loves me—whatever I am!"

"You need not tell me that," interrupted Vincent; "I know it. I have seen it for myself—you have been clever even in that!"

"What do you mean?" asked Mark.

"Do you know what that book of mine was to me?" continued Vincent without troubling to answer; "I put all that was best of myself into it, I thought it might plead for me some day, perhaps, to a heart I hoped to touch; and I come back to find that you have won the heart, and not even left me my book!"

"As for the book," said Mark, "that will be yours again now."

"I meant to make it so when I came here," Vincent answered. "I meant to force you to own my rights, whatever the acknowledgment cost you. . . . But I know now that I must give that up: I abandon all claim to the book; you have chosen to take it—you can keep it!"

The revulsion of feeling caused by so unexpected an announcement almost turned Mark's head for the moment; he caught Vincent by the arm in his excitement.

"What," he cried, "is this a trick—are you in earnest—you will spare me after all? You must not, Vincent, I can't have it—I don't deserve it!"

Vincent drew back coldly: "Did I say you deserved it?" he asked, with a contempt that struck Mark.

"Then I won't accept it, do you hear?" he persisted; "you shall not make this sacrifice for me!"

Holroyd laughed grimly enough: "For you!" he repeated; "you don't suppose I should tamely give up everything for you, do you?"

"Then," faltered Mark, "why—why——?"

"Why am I going to let you alone? Do you remember what I told you on that platform at Plymouth?—*that* is why. If I had only known then, I would have fought my hardest to expose you, if it was necessary to save her in that way—for her sake, not mine. I don't suppose there ever was much hope for me. As it is, you have been clever enough to choose the one shield through which I can't strike you—if I ever thought more of that wretched book than of her happiness, it was only for a moment—she knows nothing as yet, and she must never know!"

"She will know it some day," said Mark, heavily.

"Why should she know?" demanded Vincent, impatiently; "you don't mean that that infernal Caffyn knows?"

"No, no," replied Mark, in all sincerity; "Caffyn doesn't know—how could he? But you can't hide these things: you—you may have talked about it yourself already!"

"I have not talked about it!" said Vincent, sharply; "perhaps I was not too proud of having been gulled so easily. Can't you understand? This secret rests between you and me at present, and I shall never breathe a word of it—you can feel perfectly safe—you are Mabel's husband!"

It is to be feared that Vincent's manner was far enough from the sublime and heroic; he gave up his book and his fame from the conviction that he could not do otherwise; but it was not easy for all that, and he did not try to disguise the bitter contempt he felt for the cause.

Mark could not endure the humiliation of such a pardon—his spirit rose in revolt against it.

"Do you think I will be forgiven like this?" he cried, recklessly. "I don't want your mercy! I won't take it! If you won't speak, I shall!"

Vincent had not expected any resistance from Mark, and this outburst, which was genuine enough, showed that he was not utterly beneath contempt, even then.

Holroyd's manner was less harsh and contemptuous when he next spoke.

"It's no use, Ashburn," he said firmly; "it's too late for all that now—you *must* accept it!"

"I shall not," said Mark again. "I've been a scoundrel, I know, but I'll be one no longer; I'll tell the truth and give you back your own. I will do what's right at last!"

"Not in that way," said Vincent; "I forbid it. I have the right to be obeyed in this, and you shall obey me. Listen to me, Ashburn; you can't do this—you forget Mabel. You have made her love and trust her happiness to your keeping; your honour is hers now. Can't you see what shame and misery you will plunge her into by such a confession? It may clear your conscience, but it must darken her life—and that's too heavy a price to pay for such a mere luxury as peace of mind."

"How can I go on deceiving her?" groaned Mark; "it will drive me mad!"

"It will do nothing of the sort!" retorted Holroyd, his anger returning; "I know you better—in a couple of days it won't even affect your appetite! Why, if I had not come over here, if I had gone out again to India as you hoped I should, you were prepared to go on deceiving her—your mind kept its balance well enough then!"

Mark knew this was true, and held his tongue.

"Think of me as safe in India, then," Vincent continued more quietly; "I shall trouble you quite as little. But this secret is mine as well as yours—and I will not have it told. If you denounce yourself now, who will be the better for it? Think what it will cost her. . . . You do love her, don't you?" he asked, with a fierce anxiety; "you—you have not married her for other reasons?"

"You think I am too bad even to love honestly," said Mark, bitterly; "but I do."

"Prove it, then," said Vincent. "You heard her pleading on the bridge for the woman who would suffer by her husband's shame: she was pleading for herself then—and not to me only, to you! Have pity on her; she is so young to lose all her faith and love and hope at once. You can never let her know what you have been; you can only try to become all she believes you to be."

In his heart, perhaps, Mark was not sorry to be convinced that what he had resolved to do was impossible. The high-strung mood in which he had been ready to proclaim his wrong-doing was already passing away. Vincent had gained his point.

"You are right," Mark said slowly; "I *will* keep it from her if I can."

"Very well," Vincent answered, "that is settled, then. If she asks you what has passed between us, you can say that I have told you my story, but that you are not at liberty to speak of it. Mabel will not try to know more. Stay, I will write a line" (and he went to the corner of the street and wrote a few words on a leaf from his notebook). "Give that to her," he said as he returned. "And now I think we've nothing more to say."

"Only one other thing," stammered Mark; "I must do this. . . . When they—they published your book they paid me. . . . I never touched the money. I have brought it with me to-night; you must take it!" and he held out a small packet of notes.

Vincent turned haughtily away. "Excuse me," he said, "it is not mine; I will have nothing to do with it. Under the circumstances you can't expect me to touch that money. Keep it; do what you choose with it."

"I choose this, then!" said Mark violently, and tearing the notes up, he flung them over the railings to drift down on the rocks or into the tossing grey foam beyond.

"You need not have done that," said Holroyd coldly; "there were the poor. But just as you please!" and he made a movement as if to go.

Mark stopped him with a gesture.

"Are you going like this?" he said, and his voice trembled. "If you knew all I felt, even you might pity me a little! Can't you forgive?"

Vincent turned. "No," he said, shortly, "I can't. I put temptation in your way, and though I never dreamed then that it could be a temptation to you, I could have forgiven you for giving way to it when you believed me dead. But I came back, and you went on with it; you lied to me—more, you dared to marry *her*, without a care for the shame and sorrow which was all you had to bring her. If I said I forgave you for that, it would be a mockery. I don't, and I can't!"

"I see," said Mark. "When we meet again we are to be strangers, then?"

"No," said Vincent; "if we meet we must do so as ordinary acquaintances—for Mabel's sake. But there are

no appearances to keep up here. Can't you see I want to be left to myself?" he asked, with a sudden burst of nervous irritation.

"Have your way, then!" said Mark, and left him there by the railings.

Mark's first feelings as he walked slowly back up the little street, where the little shops were all shuttered and dark now, were by no means enviable; he felt infinitely mean and small in his own eyes, and shrank from entering Mabel's presence while his nerves were still crawling under the scorching contempt of Vincent's dismissal. If, during the interview, there had been moments when he was deeply contrite and touched at the clemency so unexpectedly shown him, the manner of his pardon seemed to release him from all obligations to gratitude—he had only been forgiven for another's sake; and for a time he almost loathed so disgraceful an immunity, and felt the deep humiliation of a sentence that condemned him "to pay the price of lies by being constrained to lie on still." But by degrees, even in that short walk, his elastic temperament began to assert itself; after all, it might have been worse. He might by now have been drifting, dead and disfigured, down the river to Basle; he might have been going back to Mabel with the fearful necessity upon him of telling her all that night. One person knew him, and despised him for what he was; but that person would never tell his secret. That painful scene which had just passed would never have to be gone through again; he could think of it as a horrible dream. Yes, he was safe now, *really* safe this time. His position was far more secure than when he had read that telegram of Caffyn's; and here he wondered, for the first time, whether Caffyn had been deliberately misled or only mistaken in sending such a delusive message. But that did not very much matter now, and he soon abandoned speculation on the subject. He had much to be thankful for; his future was free from all danger. He had had a severe lesson, and he would profit by it; henceforth (with the one necessary reservation) he would be honest and true. Mabel should never repent her trust in him. "Sweet Bells Jangled" would be before the world by the time they returned, and after that he feared nothing. And

so, though he was subdued and silent on his return, there was no other trace in his manner of what he had suffered during the last hour. He had found Mabel by the window of their sitting-room, looking out at the houses across the river, which were now palely clear in the cold moonlight, their lights extinguished, and only a pane glittering here and there in some high dormer window, while the irregular wooden galleries and hanging outhouses were all thrown up vividly by the intense shadows.

"What a very long time you have been away!" she said; "but I know Vincent can be very pleasant and interesting if he likes."

"Very," said Mark, and gave her Holroyd's note.

"I leave here early to-morrow for Italy," she read, "and may not see you again for some little time. I have told your husband my story, but, on consideration, have thought it best to pledge him to tell no one—not even you. But the man who injured me shall be safe for your sake."

"You *did* persuade him, then!" she said, looking up gratefully to Mark. "Oh, I am glad! How good you are, and how well you must have spoken, dear, to make him give up his idea of punishing the man! So Vincent is going away at once. Do you know I am afraid I am rather glad?"

And Mark made no answer; what was there to say?

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Vincent stood there by the railings on the Laufenplatz for some time after Mark had left him; he was feeling the reaction, both in mind and body, from his recent conflict. "How will it all end?" he asked himself wearily. "Can any good come from letting this deceit go on? Is he strong enough to carry out his part? If not, the truth will only come at last, and be even more cruel when it does come." Yet he had done what still seemed the obvious and only thing to do, if Mabel's happiness was considered. He was ashamed even that he had not seen it earlier, and trembled as he remembered that only a providential chance had restrained him from some fatal disclosure to Mabel that afternoon on the bridge. But

at least he had acted for the best, and he would hope for it.

Thinking thus, he recrossed the river to Klein-Laufenburg, where a mounted German officer, many sizes too big for the little street, was rousing it from the first slumber as he clattered along, with his horse's hoofs striking sparks from the rough cobbles, and passed under the old gateway, where his accoutrement gleamed for an instant in the lamplight before horse and rider vanished in the darkness beyond. Vincent passed out, too, out on to the broad white road, and down the hill to his homely *Gasthaus*. He felt weak and very lonely—lonelier even then when he had parted from Mabel long ago on the eve of his Ceylon voyage. He could hope then; now he had lost her for ever! Still, one of his wishes had been granted—he had been able to be of service to her, to make some sacrifice for her dear sake. She would never know either of his love or his sacrifice, and though he could not pretend that there was no bitterness in that, he felt that it was better thus. "After all," he thought, "she loves that fellow. She would never have cared for me." And there was truth in this last conclusion. Even if Mabel and Mark had never met, and she could have known Vincent as he was, the knowledge might not have taught her to love.

CHAPTER XXXI

MISSED FIRE!

It was an evening early in May, and Harold Caffyn was waiting at Victoria for the arrival of the Dover train, which was bringing back Mark and Mabel from the Continent. This delicate attention on his part was the result of a painful uncertainty which had been vexing him ever since the morning on which he read Vincent's farewell note at Wastwater. "It is a poor tale," as Mrs. Poyser might say, to throw your bomb and never have the satisfaction of hearing it explode—and yet that was his position; he had "shot his arrow into the air," like Longfellow; but, less fortunate than the poet, he was anything but sure that his humble effort had reached "the heart of a friend." Now he was going to know. One thing he had