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 accoutrements 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

ascertained from the Langtons—Vincent Holroyd had certainly followed the couple to Laufenburg, and they had seen him there—Harold had found Mrs. Langton full of the wonderful news of the return of the dead. But nothing had come of it as yet; if there was a sensation in store for the literary world, Mabel's letters apparently contained no hint of it, and for a time Caffyn felt unpleasantly apprehensive that there might have been a hitch somehow in his admirable arrangements. Then he reflected that Mabel would naturally spare her mother as long as possible; he would not believe that after all the trouble he had taken, after Holroyd had actually hunted down the culprit, the secret could have been kept from her any longer. No, she must know the real truth, though she might be proud enough to mask her sufferings while she could. But still he longed for some visible assurance that his revenge had not unaccountably failed; and, as he had ascertained that they were to return on this particular evening, and were not to be met except by the Langton carriage, it occurred to him that there would be an excellent opportunity of observing Mabel at a time when she would not imagine it necessary to wear a mask. He would take care to remain unseen himself; a single glance would tell him all he needed to know, and he promised himself enjoyment of a refined and spiritual kind in reading the effects of his revenge on the vivid face he had loved once and hated now with such malignant intensity. The train came in with a fringe of expectant porters hanging on the footboards, and as the doors flew open to discharge a crowd, flurried but energetic, like stirred ants, even Caffyn's well-regulated pulse beat faster.

He had noticed Champion waiting on the platform, and kept his eye upon him in the bustle that followed; he was going up to a compartment now—that must be Mark he was touching his hat to as he received directions; Caffyn could not see Mark's face yet, as his back was towards him, but he could see Mabel's as she stepped lightly out on the platform—there was a bright smile on her face as she acknowledged the footman's salute, and seemed to be asking eager questions. Caffyn felt uncomfortable, for there was nothing forced about her smile, no constraint in her eyes as she turned to Mark, when they were alone

again, and seemed to be expressing her eager delight at being home again. And Mark, too, had the face of a man without a care in the world—something must have gone wrong, terribly wrong; it was clear! They were coming towards him; he had meant to avoid them at first, but now his curiosity would not allow this, and he threw himself in their way, affecting an artless surprise and pleasure at being the first to welcome them back. Mark did not appear at all disconcerted to see him, and Mabel could not be frigid to anybody just then in the flush of happy expectation, which she did not try to conceal; altogether it was a bitter disappointment to Caffyn.

He quite gasped when Mark said, with a frank unconsciousness, and without waiting for the subject to be introduced by him, "Oh, I say, Caffyn, what on earth made you think poor old Vincent was going back to India at once? He's not going to do anything of the kind; he's wandering about the Continent. We knocked up against him at Laufenburg!"

Caffyn gave a searching look at Mabel's sweet, tranquil face, then at Mark's, which bore no sign of guilt or confusion. "Knocked up against you!" he repeated; "why, why, didn't he *expect* to find you there, then?"

Mabel answered this: "It was quite an accident that he stopped at Laufenburg at all," she said; "he was going on to Italy."

Caffyn did not give up even then—he tried one last probe. "Of course," he said; "I forgot, your husband kept him so completely in the dark about it all—eh, Mark? Why, when you got him to come down to Wastwater with me he had no idea what festivities were in preparation—had he?"

"No, my boy," said Mark, with a perfectly natural and artistic laugh; "I really don't believe he had—you mustn't be shocked, darling," he added to Mabel; "it was all for his good, poor fellow. I must tell you some day about our little conspiracy. It's all very well for you, though," he turned to Caffyn again, "to put it all on to me—you had more to do with it than I—it was your own idea, you know!"

"Oh!" said Caffyn; "well, if you like to put it in that

way——" He lost his self-possession completely—there was something in all this he could not at all understand.

The fact was that Mark felt himself able now to face the whole world with equanimity; the knowledge that no one would ever detect him made him a consummate actor. He had long made up his mind how he would greet Caffyn when they met again, and he was delighted to find himself so composed and equal to the occasion.

Caffyn stood looking after the carriage as it drove away with them; he had quite lost his bearings: the papers in Holroyd's handwriting, Mark's own behaviour in so many instances, Vincent's rapid pursuit, had all seemed to point so clearly to one conclusion—yet what was he to think now? He began for the first time to distrust his own penetration; he very much feared that his elaborate scheme of revenge was a failure, that he must choose some other means of humbling Mabel, and must begin all over again, which was a distressing thought to a young man in his situation. He was glad now that he had never talked of his suspicions, and had done nothing openly compromising. He would not give up even yet—until he had seen Holroyd, and been able to pump him judiciously; until then he must bear the dismal suspicion that he had overreached himself.

One of his shafts at least had not fallen altogether wide, for as Mark and Mabel were being driven home across the Park, she said suddenly: "So *Harold* knew that Vincent was alive, then?"

"Yes," said Mark, "*he* knew," and he looked out of the window at the sunset as he spoke.

"And you and Harold kept him from hearing of our wedding?" she said. "Mark, I thought you said that you had told him?"

"Oh, no," said Mark; "you misunderstood. There—there were reasons."

"Tell me them," said Mabel.

"Well," said Mark, "Vincent was ill—anyone could see that what he wanted was rest, and that the fatigue and—and—the excitement of a wedding would be too much for him—Caffyn wanted a companion up at Wastwater, and begged me to say nothing about our marriage

just then, and leave it to him to tell him quietly later on—that's all, darling."

"I don't like it, dear," said Mabel; "I don't like you joining Harold in a thing like that. I know you did it all for the best, but I don't see why you could not have told him; if he was not well enough to come to the wedding we could have understood it!"

"Perhaps you're right,' said Mark easily, "but, at all events, no harm has come of it to anybody. How they are thinning the trees along here, aren't they? Just look down that avenue!"

And Mabel let him turn the conversation from a subject she was glad enough to forget.

CHAPTER XXXII

Little Rifts

One bright morning in May, not long after the return from the Continent, Mabel was sitting in her own room at the back of the small house which had been taken on Campden Hill; she was writing at a table by the raised window, when the door opened suddenly, and Mark burst in, in a state of suppressed but very evident excitement. "I have brought you something!" he said, and threw down three peacock-blue volumes upon her open blotting-case; the title, "Sweet Bells Jangled," ran in sprawling silver letters from corner to corner of the covers, through a medley of cracked bells and withered hyacinths in dull gold; the general effect being more bold than pleasing. Mabel was just about to exclaim sympathetically, "What a frightful binding they've given you, dear"; when Mark informed her, with some complacency, that it was his own design. "Nowadays, you see," he exclaimed, "you want something to catch the eye, or you won't be read!" Inwardly Mabel could not help wondering that he could condescend to such a device or think it necessary in his own case. "Look at the fly-leaf," he said, and she opened the first volume, and read the printed dedication, "*To My Wife.*" "I thought that must bring me luck," he said; "and now, darling, do you know what you are going to do? You are going to put away all those confounded letters and sit

down here, and read the opening chapters carefully, and tell me what you think of them." For till then he had made continual excuses for not showing her any portion of his new work, either in manuscript or proof, from mixed motives of vanity and diffidence.

Mabel laughed with affectionate pride at his anxiety: "This is what comes of marrying a great author!" she said; "go away and let me begin at once, and tell you at lunch how I enjoyed it."

"No," said Mark despotically, "I'm going to stay here—or you might try to skip."

"But I can't allow that," she protested; "suppose I find I'm obliged to skip—suppose it's a terrible disappointment? No, you ridiculous Mark, I didn't mean it—stay if you like, I'm not afraid of being disappointed—though I really would enjoy it best in solitude!"

Mark insisted; he felt that at last he was about to be reinstated in his own opinion, he could wait no longer for the assurance of triumph; when he saw with his own eyes the effect of his genius upon Mabel, when he read the startled delight and growing admiration in her face, then at last he would know that he was not actually an impostor!

There are many methods of self-torture, but perhaps few more ingenious and protracted than submitting the result of one's brain-work to a person whose good opinion we covet, and watching the effect. Mark imposed it on himself, nevertheless, chiefly because in his heart he had very little fear of the result. He took a rocking-chair and sat down opposite Mabel, trying to read the paper; by-and-by, as she read on in silence, his heart began to beat and he rocked himself nervously, while his eyes kept wandering from the columns to the pretty hands supporting the volume which hid Mabel's face. Hands reveal many things, and Mabel's could be expressive enough at times—but they told him nothing then; he watched them turn a leaf from time to time, they always did so deliberately, almost caressingly, he thought, but with no eagerness—although the opening was full of incident. He calculated that she must be at a place where there was a brilliant piece of humorous description; she had a fair share of humour—why didn't she laugh?

" Have you got to that first appearance of the curate on the tennis-ground ? " he asked at last.

She laid down the volume for an instant, and he saw her eyes—they were calm and critical. " Past that ! I am beginning Chapter Three," she said.

The second chapter had contained some of his most sparkling and rollicking writing—and it had not even moved her to smile ! He consoled himself with the reflection that the robuster humour never does appeal to women. He had begun his third chapter with a ludicrous anecdote which, though it bordered on the profane, he had considered too good to be lost, but now he had misgivings.

" I'm afraid," he ventured dubiously, " you won't quite like that bit about the bishop, darling ? "

" I'm afraid I don't quite," she replied from behind the book. The story had no real harm in it, even in Mabel's eyes ; the only pity was that in any part of " Illusion " it would have been an obvious blot—and that it did not seem out of keeping in the pages she was reading now.

She had sat down to read with such high hopes, so sure an anticipation of real enjoyment, that it was hard to find that the spell was broken ; she tried to believe that she read on because she was interested—her real reason was a dread of some pause, when she would be asked to give her opinion. What should she say ?

Perhaps it should be explained at once that the book was not a foolish one ; Mark, whatever else he was, could scarcely be called a fool, and had a certain share of the literary faculty ; it was full of smart and florid passages that had evidently been industriously polished, and had something of the perishable brilliancy of varnish. There is a kind of vulgarity of mind so subtle as to resist every test but ink, and the cheap and flashy element in Mark's nature had formed a deposit, slight, perhaps, but perceptible, in more than one page of " Sweet Bells Jangled." Mabel felt her heart grow heavier as she read. Why had he chosen to deliberately lower his level like this ? Where were the strong and masterly touch, the tenderness and the dignity of his first book ? That had faults, too, even faults of taste—but here the faults had almost overgrown the taste ! Surely if she read on, she would find the style attain the old distinction, and the tone grow noble and

tender once again—but she read on, and the style was always the same, and the tone, if anything, rather worse!

Mark had long since moved to a spot where he could command her face; her fine eyebrows were slightly drawn, her long lashes lowered, and her mouth compressed as if with pain—somehow the sight did not encourage him. She was becoming conscious that her expression was being closely watched, which seldom adds a charm to reading, and at last she could persevere no longer, and shut the book with a faint sigh.

"Well," said Mark, desperately; he felt as if his fate hung on her answer.

"I—I—have read so little yet," she said; "let me tell you what I think at the end!"

"Tell me what you think of it so far," said Mark.

"*Must* I?" she said, almost imploringly.

"Yes," said Mark, with a grating attempt at a laugh; "put me out of my misery!"

She loved him too well to make some flattering or evasive reply—she was jealous for his reputation, and could not see him imperil it without a protest.

"Oh, Mark," she cried, locking her hands and pressing them tight together, "you must feel yourself—it is not your best—you have done such great work—you will again, I know, dear—but this, it is not worthy of you—it is not worthy of 'Illusion!'"

He knew too well that it was his best, that it was not in him to do better; if the world's verdict agreed with hers, he was a failure indeed. He had been persuading himself that, after all, he was not a common impostor, that he had genius of his own which would be acknowledged far above his friend's talent; now all at once the conviction began to crumble.

He turned upon her with a white face and a look of anger and mortification in his eyes. "The first is always the best, of course," he said bitterly; "that is the regulation verdict. If 'Sweet Bells' had come first, and 'Illusion' second, you would have seen this sad falling off in the *second* book. I did not think *you* would be the first to take up that silly old cry, Mabel—I thought I could always come to my wife for encouragement and appreciation; it seems I was mistaken!"

Mabel bit her lip, and her eyes were dazzled for a moment: "You asked me what I thought," she said in a low voice; "do you think it was pleasant to tell you? When you ask me again, I shall know better how you expect to be answered!"

He felt all at once what he had done, and hastened to show his penitence; she forgave, and did not let him see how deeply she had been wounded—only from that day some of the poetry of her life had turned to prose. Of "Sweet Bells Jangled" she never spoke again, and he did not know whether she ever read it to the end or not.

They had finished breakfast one Saturday morning, and Mark was leisurely cutting the weekly reviews, when he suddenly sheltered himself behind the paper he had been skimming—"Sweet Bells" was honoured with a long notice. His head swam as he took in the effect with some effort. The critic was not one of those fallen angels of literature who rejoice over an unexpected recruit; he wrote with a kindly recollection of "Illusion," and his condemnation was sincerely reluctant; still, it was unmixed condemnation, and ended with an exhortation to the author to return to the "higher and more artistic aims" of his first work. Mark's hand shook till the paper rustled when he came to that; he was so long silent that Mabel looked up from reading her letters, and asked if the new book was reviewed yet.

"Reviewed yet!" said Mark from behind the article; "why, it hasn't been out a fortnight."

"I know," said Mabel, "but I thought perhaps that, after 'Illusion'——"

"Every book has to wait its turn!" said Mark, as he saved himself with all the reviews, and locked himself in the little study where he sketched out the stories to which he had not as yet found appropriate endings.

There was another notice amongst the reviews, but in that the critic was relentless in pointing out that the whilom idol had feet of clay—and enormous ones; after a very severe elaboration of the faults, the critic concluded: "It almost seems as though the author, weary of the laudation which accompanied the considerable (if, in some degree, accidental) success of his first book, had taken this

very effectual method of rebuking the enthusiasm. However this may be, one more such grotesque and ill-considered production as that under review, and we can promise him an instant cessation of all the inconveniences of popularity."

Mark crumpled up the paper and pitched it to the other end of the room in a fury—it was a conspiracy, they were writing him down—oh, the malice and cowardice of it! He destroyed both reviews lest Mabel should see her opinion confirmed, and her faith in him should be shaken.

However, sundry copies of the reviews in question were forwarded to him by good-natured people who thought it might amuse him to see them, and one was even sent to Mabel with red chalk crosses in thoughtful indication of the more unpleasant passages; she saw the date, and remembered it as the day on which Mark had fenced himself in at breakfast. She came in with the paper as he sat in his study, and putting one hand on his shoulder, bent over him with a loving reproach in her eyes: "Someone has just sent me this," she said; "you have seen it, I know. Why didn't you trust me, dear? Why have you let this come from others? Never try to hide things from me again, Mark—not even for my good! and—and after this let us share everything—sorrow and all—together!" She kissed him once on the forehead, and left him there to his own thoughts.

Why, thought Mabel, was he not strong enough to disregard criticisms if he was satisfied with his own work, as he evidently was? She hated to think of his having tried to keep these notices from her in that weak, almost underhand, way; she knew that the motive was not consideration for her feelings, and had to admit sadly that her hero was painfully human after all.

Still, "Illusion" had revealed a nature the nobility of which no weaknesses could obscure; and if his daily life did not quite bear out such indications, he was Mark Ashburn, and she loved him. Nothing could alter that.

* * * * *

Some weeks later Vincent returned from Italy, and one of the first persons he met was Harold Caffyn. It was in the City, where Vincent had had business, and he attempted

at first to pass the other by with the curtest possible recognition; he had never understood his conduct in the Wastwater episode, and still resented it. But Caffyn would not allow himself to be cut, and his greeting was blandly affectionate as he accused his friend of abandoning him up in the Lake district; he was determined, if he could, to convince Holroyd that his silence as to Mabel's impending marriage had been due solely to consideration for his feelings, and then, when confidence was restored, he could sound him upon the result of his journey to Laufenburg. But Vincent, from a vague feeling of distrust, was on his guard. Caffyn got nothing out of him, even by the most ingenious pumping; he gathered that he had met Mark at Laufenburg; but with all his efforts he was not able to discover if that meeting had really been by accident or design. He spoke casually of "Illusion," but Vincent showed no particular emotion.

"I suppose you don't know," he added, "that Mrs. Featherstone has done it the honour of making a play of it—it's going to be done at the end of the season at their house, before a select party of distinguished sufferers."

Holroyd had not heard that.

"I've been let in for it," Caffyn continued; "I'm playing that stick of a poet—Julian, the beggar's name is; it's my last appearance on the boards, till I come out as Benedick—but that won't interest you, and it's a sort of secret at present."

Vincent was not curious, and asked no questions.

"Who do you think is to be the Beaumelle, though?" said Caffyn; "the author's own wife? Romantic that, eh? She's not half bad at rehearsals; you must come and see us, my boy!"

"Perhaps I shall," said Vincent, mechanically, and left him, as much at fault as ever, but resolved to have patience still.

Caffyn's was a nature that liked tortuous ways for their own sake; he had kept his suspicions to himself hitherto, he was averse to taking any direct action until he was quite sure of his ground. He had those papers in Holroyd's writing, it was true, but he had begun to feel that they were not evidence enough to act on. If by some extraordinary chance they were quite compatible with Mark's

innocence, then if he brought a charge against him, or if any slanderous insinuations were traced to him, he would be placed in an extremely awkward and invidious position. "If I'm right," he thought, "Master Vincent's playing some deep game of his own—it may be mine for all I know; at all events, I'll lie low till I can find out where the cards are, and whether an ace or two has got up my sleeve."

Vincent had been able to speak with perfect calmness of his lost book, because he had almost brought himself to a philosophic indifference regarding it, the more easily as he had had consoling indications lately that his creative power had not been exhausted with that one effort, and that with returning health he might yet do good work in the world.

But now, as he walked on after leaving Caffyn, this indifference suddenly vanished; his heart beat with a secret and exquisite bliss, as he thought of this play in which Mabel was to represent his own heroine. To hear that his work was to receive the rather moderate distinction which can be conferred by its dramatisation on a private stage would scarcely have elated him under ordinary circumstances; it was no longer any concern of his at all. Still he could not resist the subtle flattery in the knowledge that his conception was about to be realised in a manner for which few authors would dare to hope—the woman who had inspired it would lend it all her own grace and beauty and tenderness to fill the faint outline he had traced with such loving pains. All the banality of private theatricals could not spoil that—she need not even act, she had only to be her own sweet self to give life and charm to the poorest play and the most incompetent of performances. And then, as he thought of it, a wild longing came over him to be there and see her; there might be something grotesque, and, under the circumstances, almost undignified in such a longing now, but it possessed him, nevertheless. He would not betray himself or Mark, but this one gratification he hungered for, and neither pride nor prudence had power to restrain him.

He had meant to see as little as possible of Mabel on his return, but he broke this resolution now. He would not keep away, he thought; surely he could trust himself to bear the sight of her happiness; it ought to reconcile him

more fully to all he had endured to secure it, and then he would be able to find out from her if this, which he had heard from Caffyn, was really true.

And so, having procured the address from Mrs. Langton, he went on that same afternoon to Campden Hill, not knowing, nor indeed greatly caring just then, that this was not the way to deaden the pain at his heart.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Mark Accepts a Disagreeable Duty

Vincent had his misgivings, as he walked towards Campden Hill, that at such a period of the London season his journey would most probably be a fruitless one. But as he approached the house he found one or two carriages waiting outside, the horses troubling the hot afternoon stillness with the sharp clinking of harness as they tossed their impatient heads; and by the time he had reached the gate the clatter of china and the sustained chorus of female voices coming through the open windows made it plain enough that Mabel was "at home," in a sense that was only one degree less disappointing than what he had dreaded.

He was almost inclined to turn back or pass on, for he was feeling ill and weak—the heat had brought on a slight tendency to the faintness which still reminded him occasionally of his long prostration in Ceylon, and he had a nervous disinclination just then to meet a host of strangers. The desire to see Mabel again prevailed, however, and he went in. The pretty double drawing-room was full of people, and, as everyone seemed to be talking at once, Vincent's name was merely an unimportant contribution to the general hubbub. He saw no one he knew, he was almost the only man there, and for a time found himself penned up in a corner, reduced to wait patiently until Mabel should discover him in the cool half-light which filtered through the lowered sunblinds.

He followed her graceful figure with his eyes as often as it became visible through the crowd. It was easy to see that she was happy—her smile was as frank and gay as ever. The knowledge of this should have consoled him,