

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,

he had expected it to do so, and yet, to tell the truth, it was not without its bitterness. Mabel had been his ideal of women, his fair and peerless queen, and it pained him—as it has pained unsuccessful lovers before—to think that she could contentedly accept pinchbeck for gold. It was inconsistent on his part, since he had sacrificed much for the very object of concealing from her the baseness of Mark's metal. He forgot, too, the alchemy of love.

But one cannot be always consistent, and this inconsistency of Vincent's was of that involuntary and mental kind which is not translated into action.

She saw him at last and welcomed him with an eager impulsiveness—for she knew now that she had been unjust to him at Laufenburg. They talked for some minutes, until Vincent said at last, "I hear you are going to play Beaumelle?"

"Oh, yes," said Mabel, "Isn't it presumption? But Mrs. Featherstone (you've met her once or twice at our house, you know)—Mrs. Featherstone would not hear of my refusing. Mark, I believe, thinks the part hardly suited to me, but I mean to try and astonish him, even though I may not carry out his own idea. I love Beaumelle in the book so much that I ought not to be quite a failure in the play"

"No, you will not fail," said Vincent, and dared not say more on that point. "I—I should like very much to see this play," he said, a little awkwardly. "Could it be managed?"

"I will try," said Mabel. "I am sure Mrs. Featherstone will give me a card for you if she can. But I warn you, Vincent, it's not a good play. There's one strong scene in the third act, and the rest is a long succession of *tête-à-têtes*—like a society 'Punch and Judy.' It will bore you."

"I think not," said Vincent, "and you won't forget, will you?"

"Of course not," she replied. "There is Mrs. Featherstone coming in now. I will ask her at once."

But Mrs. Featherstone had an air of suppressed flurry and annoyance which was discouraging, and Gilda's handsome face was dark and a little defiant as she followed her mother into the room.

"Can you get away from all these people for two minutes?" said Mrs. Featherstone, after the first greetings; "I've something to tell you."

Mabel took her through the rooms out upon a balcony overlooking the garden and screened from the sun by a canvas awning.

"We shall be quiet here," she said.

Mrs. Featherstone did not speak for some moments. At last she said: "Oh, my dear, I don't know how to tell you—I can't talk about it with ordinary patience yet—only think, our foolish, self-willed Gilda told us this morning that Mr. Caffyn had proposed to her and she had accepted him—after all the offers she has refused—isn't it too shocking to think of? And she won't listen to a word against him; the silly child is perfectly infatuated!"

"What does Mr. Featherstone say?" asked Mabel, to whom the news was scarcely a surprise.

"My dear, he knows very well it is all his fault, and that if he hadn't taken the young man up in that ridiculous way all this would never have happened—so, of course, he pretends not to see anything so very unsuitable about the affair—but he doesn't like it, really. How can he? Gilda might have married into the peerage—and now she is going to do this! I'm almost afraid these theatricals have brought it on."

Mabel was sincerely sorry. She was fond of Gilda, and thought her far too good for Harold. "It may come to nothing after all," she said, as the only form of consolation she could think of.

"If I could only hope so!" sighed the distressed mother; "but she is so headstrong. Still, he's not in a position to marry at present—unless Robert is insane enough to advance him to one. Would you speak to her? It would be so sweet of you if you only would!"

But Mabel felt obliged to decline so delicate a mission, and excused herself. Then, as they re-entered the room, she mentioned Holroyd's petition. Mrs. Featherstone recollected him faintly, and was rather flattered by his anxiety to see her play; but then he was quite a nonentity and she was determined to have as brilliant and representative an audience as possible for the performance.

"My dear," she said, "I would if I could, but it's quite

out of the question ; my list is overfull as it is, and I haven't an idea where we shall put all the people who will come ; there's so much talk about it everywhere that we have had next to no refusals. But if he's only anxious to see the play, and doesn't mind not being seen at it, he could get some idea of the treatment next Friday, if he cares to come to the dress rehearsal. You know we arranged to run right through it for the first time. We thought of a small impromptu dance after the rehearsal, so if Mr. Holroyd would like to come a little earlier I shall be charmed to see him."

So Vincent was brought up to the lady, who repeated the invitation to the rehearsal, which he accepted, as it practically gave him the opportunity he had desired.

Meanwhile Gilda had drawn Mabel aside towards one of the windows.

"Well," she said, "so you have been told the great news?"

Mabel admitted this, and added something as nearly approaching to congratulation as her conscience allowed.

"Ah," said Gilda, "you're on mamma's side."

"I am on no side," said Mabel, "provided he makes you happy."

"Which you think rather doubtful?" replied Gilda, with a jarring little laugh. "Really, Mabel, I do think you might resign him a little more gracefully!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand you," said Mabel proudly.

"No?" said Gilda. "You are very innocent, dear. I can't undertake to explain—only I am not altogether blind."

"I hope not," said Mabel, and left her. She was afraid that if she stayed she might be tempted to say what could do no possible good now.

Mrs. Featherstone had gone, with a gracious reminder to Vincent of his promise to come to the rehearsal. It was late in the afternoon, and everyone seemed suddenly alarmed at the idea of being the last to go, the consequence being that the rooms were cleared in an astonishingly short time. Mabel stopped Vincent as he too was preparing to take his leave.

"You must stay till Mark comes back, Vincent. He

has taken Dolly to the Academy—really, I believe, to get away from all this. You haven't seen Dolly since you came back, and she's staying with me for a few days. You won't go away without seeing her?"

Vincent had been disappointed at not seeing her at the Langton's the day before, and waited willingly enough now. It would be some comfort to know that the child had not forgotten him, and would be glad to see him. He had not long to wait. A hansom drove up, and the next minute Dolly came into the room with all her old impetuosity.

"I've come back, Mab," she announced, to prevent any mistake on that head. "We drove home a'll the way in a black cab with yellow wheels—didn't you see it? Oh, and in the Academy there was a little girl with a dog just like Frisk, and I saw a lot of people I knew, and——"

"Don't you see someone you used to know?" said Mabel, breaking in on her stream of reminiscences.

"Have you forgotten me, Dolly?" said Vincent, coming forward out of the shade. His voice was a little harsh from emotion.

The change in the child's face as she saw him was instantaneous and striking; all the light died out of her face, she flushed vividly, and then turned deadly pale.

"You knew Vincent wasn't dead really, Dolly?" said Mabel.

"Yes," whispered Dolly, still shrinking from him, however.

"And is this all you have to say to me, Dolly?" said Vincent, who was cut to the heart by this reception. Nothing was the same—not even the love of this child.

Dolly had not been long in recovering from the effect of Caffyn's last act of terrorism; for a day or two she had trembled, but later, when she heard of Vincent as away in Italy, she could feel safe from his anger, and so in time forget. Now it all revived again; he had sprung suddenly from nowhere—he was demanding what she had to say for herself—what should she do?

She clung to Mabel for protection.

"Don't you be cross, too!" she cried. "Promise me you won't, and I'll tell you all about it . . . you don't

know. . . . Harold said you didn't. And I never meant to burn Vincent's letter. Don't let him be angry!"

Vincent was naturally completely bewildered.

"What is she talking about?" he asked helplessly.

"I can guess," said Mabel. "Come away with me, Dolly, and you shall tell me all about it upstairs"; and as Dolly was not unwilling to unburden herself this time, they left Vincent with Mark, who had just joined them. Mark was uncomfortable and silent for some time when they were alone, but at last he said: "I suppose you have been told of the—the theatricals? I—I couldn't very well help it, you know. I hope you don't mind?"

"Mind!" said Vincent. "Why should I mind? What is it to me—now? I thought that was finally settled at Laufenburg."

"I felt I must explain it, that's all," said Mark, "and—and I've a great deal to bear just now, Holroyd. Life isn't all roses with me, I assure you. If you could remember that now and then, you might think less hardly of me!"

"I will try," Vincent had said, and was about to say more, when Mabel returned alone. Her eyes were brilliant with anger. Children can occasionally put the feats of the best constructed phonograph completely in the shade everything that Cassyn had told her about that unfortunate burnt letter Dolly had just reproduced with absolute fidelity.

"I know what happened to your letter now, Vincent," Mabel said. "Mark, you never would see anything so very bad in the trick Harold played Dolly about that wretched stamp—see if this doesn't alter your opinion." And she told them the whole story, as it has been already described, except that the motives for so much chicanery were necessarily dark to her. A little comparison of dates made it clear beyond a doubt that an envelope with the Ceylon stamp had been burnt just when Vincent's letter should in the ordinary course have arrived.

"And Dolly says he told her himself it *was* your letter!" concluded Mabel.

"Ah," said Vincent, "not that that proves it. But I think this time he has spoken truth; only *why* has he done all this? Why suppress my letter and turn Dolly against me?"

"Malice and spite, I suppose," said Mabel. "He has

some grudge against you, probably; but go up now, Vincent, and comfort Dolly—you'll find her in my little writing-room, quite broken-hearted at the idea that you should be angry with her."

Vincent went up at once, and was soon able to regain Dolly's complete confidence. When he had gone, Mabel said to Mark: "Harold has been here very often lately, dear. I tried to think better of him when I saw you wished it—but I can't go on after this, you see that yourself, don't you?"

Mark was angry himself at what he had heard. Now he knew how Harold had contrived to get rid of Dolly that afternoon in South Audley Street, it made him hot and ashamed to think that he had profited by such a device. He certainly had, from motives he did not care to analyse himself, persuaded Mabel to tolerate Caffyn as a guest, but lately even Mark could no longer pretend that his visits were not far more frequent than welcome.

Something of the old uneasiness in Caffyn's presence had begun to return, though Mark did not know why. At times before his marriage he had had moments of panic or mistrust, but he always succeeded in forgetting the incidents which had aroused them. If Caffyn suspected anything about "Illusion" he would have spoken long before, he told himself. After the interview with Holroyd at Laufenburg he had ceased to think about the matter—he was safe now. What harm could anyone's mere suspicion do him? And yet, for all that, he was not sorry to free himself from further intrusions of a visitor in whose glance he sometimes surprised a subtle mockery, almost as if his friend had actually detected his secret and was cynically enjoying the humour of the thing. It was only imagination on his own part, but it was not a pleasant fancy.

"He's an infernal scoundrel!" he said, with an indignation that was only very slightly exaggerated. "You are right, darling, you shall not have to see any more of him."

"But can't he be *punished*, Mark?" asked Mabel, and her eyes shone.

Mark coughed. If this affair were brought to light, some

of its later stages might not appear entirely to his own credit.

"I don't quite see what he could be punished for," he said.

"Not for stealing a letter?" she asked. "It was no less."

"Rather difficult to bring home to him," he said: "couldn't be done without a 'rightful' amount of—of scandal and unpleasantness."

"No," said Mabel, thoughtfully, "I suppose nothing can be done—and yet, poor Gilda! Do you know she is actually engaged to him? It's dreadful to think of that now. At least he shall never come here again, and mother must be told too when I take Dolly back. You will tell him, Mark, when you meet him, that he must not call himself a friend of ours any longer. You will make him understand that, won't you?"

"Can't you tell him yourself at one of the rehearsals?" asked Mark.

"I would rather you told him, dear," she said, "and there are no rehearsals till Friday."

"Oh," said Mark, "very well, darling, I will—of course I will!"

He was already beginning to feel that the interview might not be altogether agreeable.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### HAROLD CAFFYN MAKES A PALPABLE HIT

AS Mabel had said, she did not meet Harold Caffyn again until both were dining at Mrs. Featherstone's on the evening of the dress rehearsal. The instant he saw her he felt that some change had taken place in their relations, that the toleration he had met with since her marriage had given place to the old suspicion and dislike. It was an early and informal dinner, the guests being a few of those who were to take part in the acting later on. Mrs. Featherstone had contrived that Caffyn, notwithstanding his position as accepted suitor, should not sit next to Gilda, and on taking his place he found Mabel on his other hand and his *fiancée* opposite. As often as he could



he tried to open a conversation with the former, but she met him coldly and shortly, and with each attempt he fell back baffled. He might have persevered but for the consciousness that Gilda's eyes were upon them, for she had been growing very exacting since the engagement had been formally declared. But just before the ladies rose he found an opportunity to say, "Mabel—Mrs. Ashburn—am I unfortunate enough to have displeased you lately?"

"Displeased is not the right word," she said; "you have done far more than that."

"And am I not to be told my offence?" he said, looking at her keenly.

"Not here," she replied. "You can ask my husband, if you like."

"Really?" he said. "You refer me to him, then? We must try and come to an understanding together, I suppose."

"When you have heard him," she said, "there is one thing I shall have to say to you myself."

"May I come and hear it later?" asked Caffyn, and Mabel gave a little sign of assent as she left the table.

"I shall send down for you when we're ready," said Mrs. Featherstone at the door. "Will those who have any changes to make mind coming now—it's so late, and we must get in the way of being punctual."

One or two who were playing servants or character-parts left the table immediately; the others remained, and Harold, whose dressing would not take him long, found himself next to Mark, and rather apart from the men, at the host's end of the table.

"You're the very man I wanted to have a little talk with!" he began in an easy conversational manner. "Your wife seems deucedly annoyed with me for some reason—she says you can explain. Now, just tell me quietly without any nonsense—what's it all about, eh?"

Now that Mark had seen the other's conduct in its true light he was really indignant: Caffyn seemed a more undesirable associate than ever. He would have been justified in taking a high standpoint from which to deal with him—since, whatever his own errors had been, they would

never be revealed now—but somehow, he adopted an almost conciliatory tone.

“The fact is,” he replied, with an embarrassed cough, “it’s about that letter of Holroyd’s.”

Caffyn’s face slightly changed.

“The devil it is!” he said. “Thought I’d heard the last of that long ago!”

“You’re likely to hear a good deal more about it, I’m afraid,” said Mark. “It has only just come out that it was his, and unopened—you will find it awkward to contradict.”

Caffyn was silent for a time. Dolly must have spoken again. What a fool he had been to trust a child a second time!—and yet he had had no choice.

“Well,” he said at last, “and what are *you* going to do about it?”

Mark’s throat grew huskier. It was odd, for there was really no reason for being afraid of the man.

“Well, I—in short, I may as well tell you plainly, my wife thinks it is better we should not see any more of you in future.”

There was a dangerous look in Caffyn’s eye which Mark did not at all like.

“Ah, well, of course you mean to talk her out of that?” he said lightly.

Was there a concealed menace in his tone? If so, Mark thought, he probably considered that his services connected with Vincent’s sudden return gave him a claim. Well, he must disabuse him of that idea at once.

“It would be of no use if I tried to talk her out of it; but, to be quite candid, I—I don’t intend to do anything of the kind. . . . I know we’ve been friends and all that sort of thing, and till I knew this I always said what I could for you; but—but this suppressing a letter is very different. I can’t feel the same myself for you after that, it is better to tell you so distinctly. And then—there is poor little Dolly—she is my sister now—it seems you have been frightening her a second time.”

“On whose account—eh, Ashburn?” asked Caffyn.

Mark had expected this.

“I’m sorry to say on mine,” he replied; “but if I had known, do you suppose that for one moment— I

don't deny that, as I told you at the time, I was glad to see Holroyd leave town just then; but it was—was not so important as all that! Still you did me a service, and I'm sorry to have to do this, but I can't help myself. You will find others harder on you than I am!"

"Does that mean that Mrs. Langton has been told this precious story with all the latest improvements?" asked Caffyn.

"Not yet," said Mark, "but she must know before long."

"And as for yourself, you consider me such an utterly irreclaimable blackguard that you can't afford to be seen with me any longer?" pursued Caffyn.

"My dear fellow," protested Mark, "I don't want to judge you. But, as far as the conclusion goes, I'm afraid it comes to that!"

"Perhaps it has not quite come to that yet," said Caffyn, as he drew his chair closer to Mark's, and, resting one arm on the back, looked him full in the face with searching intensity. "Are you sure you have the right to be so very exclusive?"

If Mark could have controlled his nerves then he might have been able to parry a thrust which, had he only known it, was something of an experiment. As it was, the unexpectedness of it took him off his guard, just when he thought he was proof against all surprises. The ghastly change in him told Caffyn that he had struck the right chord after all, and a diabolical joy lit his eyes as he learned forward and touched his arm affectionately.

"You infernal hypocrite!" he said very softly. "I know all about it. Do you hear?"

"About *what*?" gasped the miserable man, and then with a flickering effort at defiance, "What do you mean?" he asked; "tell me what you are hinting at?"

"Keep quiet," said Caffyn, "don't excite yourself: they'll notice something presently if you look like that! Here are some fellows coming round with the coffee; wait till they have gone, and I'll tell you."

Mark had to wait while one man brought him his cup with the milk and sugar and another followed with the coffee. His hands shook and upset the cream as he tried to take up a lump of sugar.

"I wouldn't take milk if I were you," advised Caffyn. "Try a liqueur brandy."—a recommendation to which Mark paid no attention.

It seemed an eternity till the men had gone; all the time Mark tried to believe this was one of the old dreams which had not visited him for so long, or, if he was really awake, that Caffyn must have got hold of something else not *that*; he had had false alarms like this before, and nothing had come of them.

Caffyn seemed to have forgotten their recent conversation as he deliberately sipped his coffee and took a cigarette; he offered Mark one and it was declined.

"What do you suspect me of having done?" demanded Mark.

"Oh, my dear fellow, I don't *suspect* you," replied Caffyn, "I know. You can't play the moralist with me, you high-minded old paragon!" He spoke with a kind of savage jocularity. "I tell you I know that you got your fame and fortune, and even that charming Mabel of yours, by a meaner trick than I, who don't pretend to be particular, should care to dirty my hands with. I may have helped a child to burn a letter—I don't remember that I ever stole a book. I've been an ass in my time, I dare say, but not quite such an ass as to go about in a lion's skin!" Mark sat there dumb and terror-stricken. His buried secret had risen after all—it was all over. He could only say in his despair:

"Has Holroyd told you?"

Caffyn knew all he wanted when he heard that.

"We won't go into that," he said. "It's quite enough for you that I know. Do you feel quite such a virtuous horror of continuing my acquaintance now? Couldn't you bring yourself to overlook my little shortcomings this time? *Must* you really close your respectable door on me?"

Mark only looked at him.

"You fool," said Caffyn, "to give yourself airs with me. I've done you more than one good turn. I believe I rather liked you—you did the thing so well that I'm hanged if I should have had the heart to show you up. And now you *will* go and make an enemy of me—is it quite prudent?"

"What do you want me to do?" asked Mark, with his hand shielding his eyes from the shaded candles near him.

"Now you're getting sensible!" said Caffyn. "We shall hit it off yet! You've got some authority over your wife, I suppose? Use it. Stop this cackle about the letter; make her shut her mouth! I can't afford to lose the *entrée* to two houses like your father-in-law's and your own just now. I can be discreet, too—it shall be mouth for mouth. If you don't—if you stand by and let your wife and her mother go about spreading this story until I daren't show my face anywhere, why, I shall take care to come to grief in good company! Mabel can smash me if you like to let her, but if you do, by God, it shall bring my sting out! Is it a bargain?"

Mark hesitated. As they sat there he heard the sounds outside of arriving carriages and entering footsteps; people were coming in for this rehearsal. How he loathed the thought of it now! How was he to go through it?

"We shall have to go presently," said Caffyn. "I am waiting for my answer—yes or no?"

"No," said Mark. "I see no use in playing mouse to your cat. Do you think I don't know that it would come out sooner or later—if not from you, from *him*? As to forcing my wife to receive you as a friend, I'm not quite rascal enough for that yet. Do whatever you please!"

It was despair more than anything that drove him to defiance, for his knowledge of Mabel showed him that the bargain proposed, apart from its rascality, was an impossible one.

"Well," said Caffyn, with a shrug, "you leave me no choice, so in the course of a day or two, my friend, look out for squally weather! Whether I sink or swim myself, I shall see *you* go to the bottom!"

Mr. Featherstone, who was getting slightly tired of the enthusiastic young amateurs at his end of the table, here suggested an adjournment to the music room.

"You'll come and look on, sir, won't you?" said his son. But the merchant shook his head.

"I think I can hold on till the night itself, Bertie, my boy!" with a cleverly-fielded yawn. "I hear all about it from your mother. You'll find me in the billiard-room, if you want me, you know!"

Mark rose from the table to which he had sat down with so light a heart. Black disgrace was before him, the Laufenburg crisis had come again, and this time nothing could save him. He lingered behind the other men as they mounted the broad staircase, and as he lingered was overtaken by Vincent, who had just left his hat and overcoat below, and was about to go upstairs.

"Stop!" cried Mark. "Don't go up yet; I want to speak to you. Come in here!" and he almost forced him into the library, which was empty, and where a lamp was burning.

"So we're on a level after all, are we?" he said savagely, as he shut the door.

Holroyd simply asked him what he meant.

"You know!" said Mark. "All that generosity at Laufenburg was a sham, was it—a blind? It didn't suit you that I should give myself up of my own free will, and so soon, so you put me off my guard! And now"—his voice was thick with passion as he spoke—"now you have set that villain, that d——d Caffyn, on me! Chivalrous that, isn't it? I've fallen into good hands between you!"

Vincent was hardly less angry. "You think every one is like yourself!" he said. "If it is any comfort to you to believe that I can break my word and betray those who trusted it, believe it—it's not worth my while to set you right."

No one who saw his face could doubt that he, at least, was no traitor; and Mark felt lower than ever as he realised his mistake.

"Forgive me!" he stammered. "I see, I ought to have known better. I hardly know what I am saying or doing just now—but Caffyn has found out everything, and—and who could have told him?"

"If any one betrayed you, it must have been yourself!" said Vincent. "Look here, Ashburn, don't give it up like this—keep your head, man! He can't really *know* this; it must be all guesswork. Did he mention my name?"

"Yes," said Mark.

"Well, I must have it out with him, then. What does it matter what he says if we both contradict him? I think I shall be able to manage him; only, for Heaven's sake,

keep cool, leave everything to me, try to be your usual self. Where is this rehearsal going on? Let us go there at once, you'll be wanted!"

Mark said no more just then; he led the way to the music-room, and then went himself to the part which was screened off as a green-room.

The music-room was a long, high gallery, at one end of which the stage had been set up. There was a small audience of a dozen or so, who were mostly related to the performers, and admitted only because it had not been found practicable to keep them out. The rehearsal had just begun as Vincent entered.

It was much like most rehearsals, and would hardly lose its tediousness in description. There were constant interruptions and repetitions, and most of the characters wore the air of people who had been induced to play a game they thought silly, but who were resolved to maintain their self-respect as long as possible; this appearance might be due to an artistic reserve of force in some cases, in others to nervousness, in nearly all to a limited knowledge of the lines they had to deliver, and all these causes would certainly be removed "on the night," because the actors said so themselves. Still, on that particular evening, they prevented the play from being seen to the best advantage.

It was not a good play, and, as a dramatisation of "Illusion," was worse than the most sanguine of Mrs. Featherstone's acquaintances could have foreseen, and yet, as Vincent stood and looked on from the background, he felt strangely stirred when Mabel was on the stage. She, at least, had too intense a sympathy with her part to be able to walk through it, even at a rehearsal, though it would have been absurd to exert her full powers under the circumstances.

But there were moments in the later scenes (which even Mrs. Featherstone had not been able to deprive of all power or pathos) when Mabel was carried away by the emotion she had to represent, and the anguish in her face and low ringing tones went to Vincent's heart, as he thought how soon it might become a terrible reality.

He could scarcely bear to see her there simulating a sorrow which was nothing to that which might be coming upon her, and from which all his devotion might not save her this

time. He was impatient to meet Caffyn and find out what he knew, and how he might be silenced ; but Caffyn was on the stage continually in his double capacity of actor and stage manager, and Vincent was forced to wait until his opportunity should present itself.

It was a relief to him when the rehearsal, after dragging on through three long acts, came to a premature close, owing to the lateness of the hour and a decided preference on the part of the younger members of the company for the dancing which had been promised later as a bribe, and which they had no intention of sacrificing to a fourth act—for art must not be too long with amateurs.

The room was being cleared accordingly, when Vincent saw his hostess coming with Caffyn in his direction, and heard her say, " Well, I *will* ask Mr. Holroyd, then, if you wish it ! " She seemed excited and annoyed, and he thought Caffyn's face bore an odd expression of triumph. He waited for the question with a heavy anticipation.

" Mr. Caffyn tells me you're quite an authority," began Mrs. Featherstone (she had not yet found herself able to mention him as " Harold "). " You heard our little discussion about the close of that third act, just now ? Now do tell me, how did it strike *you* ? "

This appeal was an unexpected relief to him ; he protested that he was not qualified to express any opinion.

" Now really," said Caffyn, " that won't quite do ; we know how interested you are in the book."

" We are so grateful for the least little hint," simpered Mrs. Featherstone, " and it is so useful to know how a scene strikes just the ordinary observer, you know ; so if you did notice anything don't, *please*, be afraid to mention it ! "

Vincent had told himself that in going there he would be able to put away all personal association with the play ; he had given the book up once and for all, he only desired to see Mabel once as his lost heroine. But Nature had proved too strong for him after all : the feebleness of this dramatic version had vexed his instincts as creator more than he was willing to believe, and when in this very closing scene the strongest situation in the book had been ruined by the long and highly unnecessary tirade which had been assigned to the hero, Vincent's philosophy had been severely shaken.



And so at this, some impulse, too strong for all other considerations, possessed him to do what he could to remove that particular blemish at least—it was not wise, but it was absolutely disinterested.

He suggested that a shorter and simpler sentence at the critical moment might prove more effective than a long set speech.

Mrs. Featherstone smiled an annoyed little smile. "You don't quite understand the point," she said. "There was no question about the *text*—I had no idea of altering that: we are merely in doubt as to the various positions at the fall of the curtain!"

"I'm afraid I've no suggestions to make, then," said Vincent, not without some inward heat.

"Oh, but," put in Caffyn, and his lip curled with malicious enjoyment, "give us an idea of the short simple sentence you would substitute—it's easy enough to make a general criticism of that sort."

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Featherstone. "That is only fair, Mr. Holroyd!"

If he had been cooler he might have resisted what was obviously a challenge from the enemy, but just then he had lost some of his usual self-control. "Something of this kind," he said, and gave the line he had originally written.

"Now that is very funny," said Mrs. Featherstone, icily. "Really. Why, do you know, my dear Mr. Holroyd, that the speech you find such fault with happens to be just *the* one I took entire from the book itself?" And it was, in fact, one of Mark's improvements.

Vincent then saw for the first time that Mabel had joined the group, and he was angry with himself for his folly.

"Where has Ashburn got to? We *must* tell him that!" cried Caffyn. "That distinguished man has been keeping out of the way all the evening. There he is over there in the corner!" and he gave him a sign that he was wanted. No one had seen Mark for some little time, and he had interfered very little during the rehearsal. Now as he came towards them he looked shaken and ill.

"My dear fellow," said Caffyn, "this presumptuous man here has been suggesting that your immortal dialogue wants cutting badly. Crush him!"

"He has every right to his opinion," said Mark, with an effort.

"Ah," said Caffyn, with a keen appreciation of the situation, "but just explain your views to him, Holroyd. He *may* think there's something in them!"

"It is a pity," said Mabel, "that Mark's book should have been without the advantage of Mr. Holroyd's assistance so long!"

She was the more angry with Vincent because she felt that he was right.

"I don't think I quite deserved that," said Vincent, sadly. "If my opinion had not been asked I should not have ventured to criticise; and, now that I know that I have the book against me, of course I have nothing more to say. You seem to have misunderstood me a little," he added, looking straight at Caffyn. "If you can give me a minute I could easily explain all I meant."

Caffyn understood. "In private, I suppose?" he suggested softly, as he drew Vincent a little aside. "I thought as much," said Caffyn, as the other assented; "they're going to dance here. Come up on the stage: it's clear now, and the rag's down."

He led the way up the wooden steps by the proscenium, pushed aside the gold-and-crimson hangings, and they were in comparative darkness and absolute privacy immediately.

"Now," began Vincent, "you had some object in saying what you did down there. What was it?"

Caffyn had seated himself on the edge of a table which had been rolled into a corner with some other stage furniture. He smiled with much sweetness as he replied, "I say, you know, we'd better come to the point. I know all about it!"

Only the pressing need of discovering the full extent of the other's information kept Vincent from some outburst.

"What do you know?" he demanded.

"Well," said Caffyn, "I know that you are the real pig, so to speak, and that miserable humbug Ashburn's only the squeak."

"You mean you think you know that—what is your authority?"

"Now," protested Caffyn, in a tone of injury, "do you

think I should venture on a bold statement like that without anything to back my opinion ? ”

“ And if Ashburn and I both deny your bold statement—what becomes of it ? ”

“ Ashburn has not denied it, and if he did I could put my hand on some written evidence which would go a long way to settle the question.”

“ I should like to see your evidence,” said Vincent.

“ I was sure you would,” said Caffyn, “ but I don't happen to have it here ; in fact, the papers which contain it are in the charge of a very dear friend of mine, who chanced to discover them.”

Vincent did not believe him.

“ Perhaps you can describe them ? ” he asked quickly.

“ Aha ! ” said Caffyn, “ I've made you sit up, as they say across the water. Oh, I'll give you every information. Those papers are of interest to the collector of literary curiosities as being beyond a doubt the original rough draft of that remarkable work ' Illusion,' then better known as—let me see, was it ' Glow-worms ' ? no—something like it, ' Glamour ' ! They were found in your late rooms, and one needn't be an expert to recognise that peculiar fist of yours. Are you satisfied ? ”

Vincent had not expected this, having fancied that his loose papers had all been destroyed, as he had certainly intended them to be on leaving England. He was silent for some seconds, then he said : “ You must get those papers for me : they are mine.”

“ But my dear fellow,” argued Caffyn, “ what earthly use can they be to *you* ? ”

“ What business is that of yours ? ” retorted Vincent. “ I want them—I mean to have them.”

“ You won't do any good by taking that tone with *me*, you know. Just listen to reason : if you produce these papers yourself, you'll only be laughed at for your pains. You must let some one else manage the business for you. You can't smash Ashburn alone—you can't indeed ! ”

“ And who told you,” said Vincent, “ that I want to smash Ashburn ? ”

“ For Heaven's sake don't *you* turn hypocrite ! ” drawled Caffyn. “ You can speak out now—if you've

got anything inside you but sawdust, of *course* you want to smash Ashburn! I saw your game long ago."

"Did you?" said Vincent, who began to have the greatest difficulty in keeping his temper. "And what was my game?"

"Why," explained Caffyn, "you knew well enough that if you set up a claim like that on your mere word, you wouldn't find many to believe you, and you didn't feel up to such a fight as you would have before you; so you've very prudently been lying low till you could get Master Mark off his guard, or till something turned up to help you. Now's your time. *I'll* help you!"

"Then, once more, get me those papers," said Vincent.

"To think," observed Caffyn, with pity, "that the man who could write 'Illusions' should be so dense. Don't I tell you you must keep in the background? You leave it all to me. There's a literary fellow I know who's on lots of journals that like nothing better than taking up cases like yours, when they're satisfied there's something in them. I can manage all that for you, and in a few days look out for an article that will do Ashburn's business for him. You needn't be afraid of his fighting—he'll never have the nerve to bring a libel action! But you can't work this yourself; in your hands all that evidence is waste paper—it's the date and manner of its discovery which must be proved to make it of any value—and that's where *I* come in. I need scarcely tell you perhaps that I don't propose to mix myself up in all this, unless there is some better understanding between us in the future."

"You had better be quite plain," said Vincent. "What is your proposal?"

"There has been a little unpleasantness about a letter which little Dolly Langton and I accidentally——"

"I know the facts, thank you," interrupted Vincent.

"That makes it easier," continued the other, unabashed, "though you've probably been told the highly coloured version."

"I've been told that you bullied that poor child into burning a letter of mine which you hadn't the courage to suppress for yourself," said Vincent.

"Ah, that is the highly coloured version," said Caffyn, "but for the purposes of the present case we'll assume it

to be correct, if you like. Well, we can't possibly work together if you won't make up your mind to let bygones be bygones: you understand?"

"I think I do," said Vincent. "Provided I forget that a letter of mine was intercepted and destroyed, unread, by a cowardly, cold-blooded trick—provided I forget all that and treat you as an intimate friend of mine, I shall have your support?"

"Coarsely put," said Caffyn, "but you seem to have got hold of the main point."

"And if I decline," said Vincent, "what then?"

"Why, then," returned Caffyn, placidly, "I'm afraid that my friend in whose custody the papers are, and who really is as casual a person as I ever met, may mislay those documents or go off somewhere without leaving his address—which would make things awkward."

Vincent could stand no more; the anger he had suppressed for some time broke out at last.

"If you dare to make me an offer like that in any other place than a friend's house, if you even try to speak to me when we next meet, you will be unpleasantly surprised at your reception! Do you think any help you could give me would be worth the disgrace of having you for a friend? If I am asked my opinion of you, I shall give it, and it will not be one you would care to quote. As for the papers, tell your friend (you will not have to go very far to find him)—tell him he may do what he pleases with them, mislay them, suppress them, burn them, if he likes—perhaps he will be doing me a greater service than he imagines!"

He was afraid that he might have betrayed his real feelings in the matter; but Caffyn was too much a man of the world to believe him—he only thought that the other either had independent means of proving his claim when he chose, or felt convinced that it would be proved for him without the necessity of committing himself to any alliance or compromise. He could not help admiring such strategy even while it disappointed him.

"You're devilish deep, after all," he said slowly: "a little overdone that last bit perhaps, but no matter—I can read between the lines. And now, as I am due for this first dance, and they seem to be striking up down there—I'll ask you to excuse me. One word—if you want me to

play your little game, don't interfere with mine—you know what I mean ! ”

Vincent made no answer, and Caffyn went down to the music-room again, where about a dozen couples were already dancing. It was a small and quite informal affair, but one or two people had come in from other houses, and the room was filled, without the hopeless crush which it would have contained on an ordinary occasion.

He avoided Gilda, whose eyes, however, were following him watchfully, and made his way to where Mabel was sitting looking on at the dancing ; for she had declined to take a more active part, and was intending to make her escape as soon as Mark should come to rescue her.

“ I'll try one more chance,” he thought, “ and if that fails——”

Vincent had satisfied himself as he passed through the room after Caffyn had left him that Mark was not there. He went through a network of rooms, and out on the staircase, looking for him. Mark had had much to endure in the way of enthusiastic comments on his own work, and the delight he was supposed to feel at his wife's rendering of his heroine, while Mrs. Featherstone had driven him almost frantic by her persistent appeals, confidences, and suggestions with regard to the performance. He had chosen a moment when her attention was distracted to slip out unobserved. He knew he must return soon, but his nerves would bear no more just then, and, wandering aimlessly from room to room, he came to one in which some light refreshments had been placed for those engaged in the rehearsal, and he filled a tumbler of champagne from a bottle he found there, and drank it, hoping it would give him courage to go back and play his part to the end. As he put down the glass Vincent came in.

“ I was looking for you,” the latter began hurriedly, when he had satisfied himself that they were not likely to be overheard. “ I have seen Caffyn ! ”

“ Well ? ” said Mark, listlessly.

“ It is worse than I thought,” was the answer ; “ he has got hold of some papers—Heaven knows how, but he can prove his case. He half threatened to destroy them, but if I know him he won't ; he will use them to keep his hold over you—we must get the start of him ! ”

"Yes," agreed Mark, "I can disappoint him there, at all events. I'll go to Fladgate to-morrow, and tell him everything—it's all I can do now, and the sooner it is over the better!"

"You must do nothing without me!" said Vincent.

Despair made Mark obstinate. "I wish to God I had spoken out last Easter! You stopped me then—you shall not stop me this time! I'll keep that book no longer, whatever the consequences may be."

"Listen to me," said Vincent. "I will take back the book—I see no other course now; but I claim the right to tell the story myself, and in my own way. You will not be madman enough to contradict me?"

Mark laughed bitterly. "If you can tell that story so as to make it look any better, or any worse, than it is, I won't contradict you," he said: "that is a safe promise!"

"Remember it, then," said Vincent. "I will tell you more when I have thought things out a little. In the meantime, the less we see of that scoundrel the better. Can't you take Mabel home now?"

"Yes," said Mark, "we will go home, and—and you will come to-morrow?"

"To-morrow," said Vincent. "Tell her nothing till you have seen me!"

They were returning to the music-room when Mrs. Featherstone passed.

"Have you seen Mr. Caffyn?" she asked Mark. "I want to talk to him about the alterations in the fourth act."

"He went to sit out one of the dances with Mabel, Gilda said, but I sent her to look for them, and she hasn't come back yet. I think they must have gone through the Gold Room, and out on the balcony—it's cooler there."

When she had passed on out of hearing, Mark turned to Vincent. "Did you hear that?" he said. "Mabel is out there . . . with *him*—we are saved the trouble of telling her anything now . . . that devil means to tell her himself! I can't stay here!"

"Tell me where you are going—for God's sake don't do anything rash!" cried Vincent. "You may be wrong!" He caught him by the arm as he spoke.

"Let me go!" said Mark, wrenching himself free.

Vincent would have accompanied him, but the excitement had turned him suddenly faint and dizzy, and he found himself obliged to remain where he was, until the attack passed and left him able to move and think once more.

## CHAPTER XXXV

## CAFFYN SPRINGS HIS MINE

"I SHOULD like your opinion about those hangings in the Gold Room," Caffyn had said to Mabel, for the benefit of any bystanders, as soon as he reached her chair: "they seem to me the very thing for the boudoir scene in the third act. You promised to help me; would it bore you very much to come now?"

Tired as she was, Mabel made no demur. She knew, of course, that he wished to speak to her alone, and she had something to say to him herself which could not be said too soon. He led her through the room in question—a luxurious little nest, at an angle of the house, entered by separate doors from the music-room and the head of the principal staircase; but he did not think it necessary to waste any time upon the hangings, and they passed out through one of the two windows upon the balcony which had been covered in with striped canvas for the season.

He drew forward a seat for her and took one himself, but did not speak for some time. He was apparently waiting for her to begin. A *tête-à-tête* with a man to whom one has just forbidden one's house is necessarily a delicate matter, and, although Mabel did not falter at all in her purpose, she did feel a certain nervousness which made her unwilling to speak at first.

"As you leave me to begin," he said, "let me ask you if what your husband has told me just now is true—that you have closed your own door to me, and mean to induce Mrs. Langton to do the same?"

"It is true," she replied in a low voice; "you left me no other course."

"You know what the result of that will be, I suppose?" he continued. "Mrs. Featherstone will soon find out that two such intimate friends of hers will have nothing to do