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-a-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

with me, and she will naturally want to know the reason. What shall you tell her ? "

" That is what I meant to say to you ! " she answered. " I thought I ought in fairness to tell you—that you might, perhaps, take it as a warning. If I am asked, though I hope I shall not be, I shall feel bound to say what I know."

" Do you think I can't see what you are aiming at in all this ? " he asked ; and under his smooth tones there were indications of coming rage. " You have set yourself to drive me out of this house ! "

" All I wish," said Mabel, " is to prevent you as far as I can from ever tormenting Dolly again—I am determined to do that ! "

" You know as well as I do that you will do much more than that. Mrs. Featherstone does not love me as it is : your conduct will give her the excuse she wants to get rid of me ! "

" I can't help it," she said firmly. " And if Gilda is brought to see, before it is too late, what things you are capable of, it would be the best thing that could happen for her."

" It would be more straightforward, wouldn't it, if you told her at once ? " he suggested with a slight sneer : " it comes to very much the same thing in the end."

Mabel had had some searchings of conscience on this very point. Ought she, she had asked herself, knowing what she knew of Caffyn's past, to stand by while a girl whom she liked as she did Gilda deceived herself so grossly ? But of late a coldness had sprung up between Gilda and herself which made it unlikely that any interference would be taken in good part ; and besides, there was something invidious in such a course, to which she could not bring herself without feeling more certain than she did that it was necessary and would be of any avail.

" If I was sure I should do the least good, I should certainly tell her," Mabel replied ; " but I hope now that it will not be necessary."

He bit his lips. " You are exceedingly amiable, I must say," he observed ; " but really now, why all this bitterness ? What makes you so anxious to see an obscure individual like myself jilted—and ruined ? "

"Am I bitter?" said Mabel. "I don't think so. You ought to know that I do not wish for your ruin, but I can't help wishing that this marriage should be broken off."

"Ah!" he said softly, "and may I ask why?"

"Why!" cried Mabel. "Can you ask? Because you are utterly unworthy of any nice and good girl—you will make your wife a very miserable woman, Harold—and you are marrying Gilda for money and position, not love—you don't know what love means, that is why!"

Even in the half-light which came from the shaded lamps in the room within she looked very lovely in her indignation, and he hated her the more for it—it was maddening to feel that he was absolutely despicable and repulsive in the eyes of this woman, to whose fairness even hatred itself could not blind him.

"You are unjust," he said, bending towards her. "You forget—I loved *you*: I expected that," he added, for she had turned impatiently away; "it always does rouse some women's contempt to be told of a love they don't feel in return. But I did love you, as I suppose I never shall love again. As for Gilda, I don't mind confessing that, on my side at all events, there is no very passionate emotion. She is handsome enough in her peculiar style, but then it doesn't happen to appeal to me. Still, she will bring me money and position, and she does me the honour (if I may say so without vanity) of caring very decidedly for *me*—it is fair enough on both sides. What right have you—what right has any one in the world—to interfere and make mischief between us?"

"None, perhaps—I don't know," she said. "But I have told you that I shall not interfere. All I am quite sure of is that I am right to protect Dolly, and, if I am asked, to speak the truth for Gilda's sake. And I mean to do it."

"I have told you already what that will end in," he said. "Mabel, you can't really be so relentless! I ask you once more to have some consideration for me. We were old playmates together once, there was a time when we were almost lovers, you did not always hate me like this. You might remember that now. If—if I were to promise not to go near Dolly——"

"I trusted you once before," she said; "you know

how you repaid it. I will make no more terms. Besides, even if I were silent, there are others who know—— "

" None who would not be silent if you wished it," urged Caffyn eagerly. " Give me one more chance, Mabel ! "

" You have had my answer—I shall not change it," she said : " now take me back, please, we have been here long enough."

Caffyn had been anxious from motives of pure economy to try fair means first, before resorting to extreme measures : he had tried irony, argument, flattery, and sentiment, and all in vain. It was time for his last *coup*. He motioned her to remain as she half rose.

" Not yet," he said. " I have something to say to you first, and you must hear it—you have driven me to it. . . . Remember that, when I have finished ! "

She sank back again, half quelled by the power she felt in the man. From the streets below came up the constant roll of wheels and " clip-clop " of hoofs from passing broughams, intermingled now and then with shouts and shrill whistles telling of early departures from sundry awning-covered porticoes around.

From the music-room within came the sound of waltz music, only slightly muffled by doors and hangings : they were playing " My Queen," though she was not conscious of hearing it at the time. In after-time, however, when that waltz, with the refrain, part dreamy, part passionate, which even battered brass and iron hammers cannot render quite commonplace, became popular with street bands and piano organs, it was always associated for her with a vague sensation of coming evil. Caffyn had risen, and stood looking down upon her with a malignant triumph which made her shudder even then.

" Do you remember," he said, very clearly and slowly, " once, when you had done your best to humiliate me, that I told you I hoped for your sake I should never have a chance of turning the tables ? "

He paused, while she looked up at him with her eyebrows drawn and her lips slightly parted.

" I think my chance has come," he continued, seeing that she did not mean to answer, " really I do. When I have told you what I am going to tell you, all that pretty disdain and superiority of yours will vanish like smoke.

and in a minute or two you will be begging my silence at any price, and you shall accept my terms ! "

" I do not think so," said Mabel, bravely ; only her own curiosity and the suggestion of some hidden power in the other's manner kept her from refusing to remain there any longer.

" I do," said Caffyn. " Ah, Mabel, you are a happy woman, with a husband who is the ideal of genius and goodness and good looks. What will you say, I wonder, when I tell you that you owe all this happiness to me ? It's true. I watched the growth of your affection with the deepest interest, and at the critical moment, when an unexpected obstacle to your union turned up, it was I who removed it at considerable personal sacrifice. Aren't you grateful ? Well, between ourselves, I could scarcely expect gratitude."

" I—I don't understand," she said.

" I am going to explain," he rejoined. " You have been pitying poor Gilda for throwing herself away on a worthless wretch like me. Keep your pity, you will want it yourself, perhaps ! Do you understand now ? I let you marry Mark, because I could think of no revenge so lasting and so perfect ! "

She rose quickly.

" I have heard enough," she said ; " you must be mad to dare to talk like this. . . . Let me go, you hurt me." He had caught her arm above her long glove, and held it tight for a moment, while he bent his face down close to hers, and looked into her eyes with a cruel light in his own.

" You shall not go till you have heard me out," he said between his teeth. " You have married a common impostor, an impudent swindler—do you understand ? I knew it long ago . . . I could have exposed him fifty times if I had chosen ! A few lines from me to the proper quarter, and the whole story would be public property to-morrow—as fine a scandal as literary London has had for ages ; and, by Heaven, Mabel, if you don't treat me decently, I'll speak out ! I see you can't take my word for all this. Perhaps you will take your husband's ? Ask him if his past has no secrets (there should be none between you now, you know) ; ask him—— "

He would have said more, but she freed herself suddenly from his grasp and turned on him from the window.

"You coward," she cried scornfully, "I am not Dolly—you cannot frighten me!"

He was not prepared for this, having counted upon an instant surrender which would enable him to dictate his own terms.

"I don't want to frighten you," he said sulkily: "I only want you to see that I don't mean to be trifled with!" He had followed her to the window, meaning to induce her to return, but all at once he stepped back hastily. "There's someone coming," he said in a rapid undertone: "it's Mrs. Featherstone. Mabel—you won't be mad enough to tell her!"

"You shall see," said Mabel, and the next moment she had taken refuge by the side of her hostess, her eyes bright and her cheeks flushed with anger. "Mrs. Featherstone," she said, almost clinging to her in her excitement, "let me go back with you, anywhere where I shall be safe from that man!"

Caffyn was no longer visible, having retired to the balcony, so that the elder lady was somewhat bewildered by this appeal, especially as she did not quite catch it.

"Of course you shall go back with me if you want to," she said; "but are you all alone here? I thought I should find Mr. Caffyn. Where is he?"

"There, on the balcony," said Mabel. "It is no wonder that he is ashamed to show himself!"

At this Caffyn judged it advisable to appear.

"I don't exactly know why I should be afraid," he said, with a rather awkward ease. "Are you going to publish our little quarrel, Mrs. Ashburn? Is it worth while, do you think?"

"It was no quarrel," retorted Mabel. "Will you tell Mrs. Featherstone what you dared to say to me, or must I?" Mrs. Featherstone looked from one to the other with growing uneasiness. It would be very awkward to have any unpleasantness in her little company when the play was so far advanced. On the other hand, she was not disposed to soften matters for a man she disliked so heartily as Harold Caffyn.

"Mabel dearest, tell me what it is all about," she

said. "If he has insulted you, he shall answer to me for it!"

"He insulted my husband," said Mabel. "I *will* speak, Harold; I am not afraid, though I know you have every reason to wish your words forgotten. He said——"

Here Caffyn interrupted her: he had made up his mind the only thing he could do with his secret now was to use it to spike the enemy's guns. Mabel was rash enough to insist on an explanation: she should have it.

"One moment," he said. "If you still insist on it, I will repeat what I said presently. I was trying to prepare Mrs. Ashburn for a very painful disclosure," he explained to Mrs. Featherstone—"a disclosure which, considering my position in the family, I felt it would be my duty to make before long. I could not possibly foresee that she would take it like this. If you think a little, Mrs. Ashburn, I am sure you will see that this is not the time or place for a very delicate and unpleasant business."

"He pretends that Mark is an impostor—that he knows some secret of his!" Mabel broke in vehemently. "He did not speak of it as he tries to make you believe . . . he threatened me!"

"Dear Mr. Ashburn, whom we all know so well, an impostor—with a secret! You said that to Mabel?" cried Mrs. Featherstone. "Why, you must be mad to talk in that dreadful way—quite mad!"

"My dear Mrs. Featherstone, I assure you I'm perfectly sane," he replied. "The real truth is that the world has been grossly deceived all this time—no one more so than yourself; but I do beg you not to force me to speak here, where we might be interrupted at any moment, and besides, in ordinary consideration to Mrs. Ashburn——"

"You did not consider me very much just now," she broke in. "I have told you that I am not afraid to hear—you cannot get out of it in that way!"

Mabel was well enough aware that Mark was not flawless, but the idea that he could be capable of a dishonourable action was grotesque and monstrous to her, and the only way she could find to punish the man who could conceive such a charge was to force him to declare it openly.

Mrs. Featherstone's curiosity and alarm had been strongly roused. She had taken up this young novelist,

her name was publicly connected with his—if there was anything wrong about him, ought she not to know it?

"My love," she said to Mabel, taking her hands, "you know I don't believe a word of all this—it is some strange mistake, I am sure of it, but it ought, perhaps, to be cleared up. If I were to speak to Mr. Caffyn alone now!"

"I shall be very willing," said Caffyn.

"No," said Mabel, eagerly, "if he has anything to say, let him say it here—Mark must not be stabbed in the dark!"

"It's simply impossible to speak here," said Caffyn. "People may come in at any moment through those doors as soon as this waltz is over. Mrs. Featherstone will not thank either of us for making a scene."

"The doors can be locked," cried Mabel. "There need be no scene. *May* they be locked, dear Mrs. Featherstone? He has said too much to be silent any longer: he *must* speak now!"

Caffyn stepped lightly to the doors which opened into the music-room; the key was on his side, and he turned it. The last notes of "My Queen" were sounding as he did so; they could hear the sweep and rustle of dresses as the couples passed.

"We shall not be disturbed now," he said, unable to quite conceal his own inclinations: "they are not likely to come in from the staircase. If Mrs. Featherstone really insists on my speaking, I can't refuse."

"Must I, Mabel?" asked the elderly lady, nervously; but Mabel had turned towards the door, leading to the staircase, which had just opened.

"Here is Mark to answer for himself!" she cried, as she went to meet him. "Now, Harold, whatever you have to say against Mark, say it to his face!"

Mark's entrance was not so opportune as it seemed; he had been standing unnoticed at the door for some time, waiting until he could wait no longer. He faced Caffyn now, unflinchingly enough to outward appearance; but the hand Mabel held in a soft close clasp was strangely cold and unresponsive.

Caffyn could not have wished for a better opportunity.

"I assure you this is very painful to me," he said, "but you see I cannot help myself. I must ask Mr. Ashburn

first if it is not true that this book 'Illusion,' which has rendered him so famous, is not his book at all—that from beginning to end it was written by another. Is he bold enough to deny it ? "

Mark made no answer. Mabel had almost laughed to hear so preposterous a question—it was not wonderful that he should scorn to reply. Suddenly she looked at his face, and her heart sickened. Many incidents that she had attached no importance to at the time came back to her now laden with vague but terrible significance . . . she would not doubt him, only—why did he look as if it was true ?

" Dear Mr. Ashburn," said Mrs. Featherstone, " we know what your answer will be, but I think—I'm afraid—you ought to say something."

He turned his ghastly face and haggard eyes to her and at the same instant withdrew his hand from Mabel's.

" What would you have me say ? " he asked hoarsely. " I can't deny it . . . it is not my book . . . from beginning to end it was written by another."

And, as he spoke the words, Vincent Holroyd entered the room.

His recent attack of faintness had left him so weak that for some time he was obliged to remain in a little alcove on the staircase and rest himself on one of the divans there.

His head was perfectly clear, however, and he had already perfected a plan by which Mabel would be spared the worst of that which threatened her. It was simple, and, as far as he could see, quite impossible to disprove—he would let it be understood that Mark and he had written the book in collaboration, and that he had desired his own share of the work to be kept secret.

Mark could not refuse, for Mabel's sake, to second him in this statement—it was actually true even, for—as Vincent thought with a grim kind of humour—there *was* a good deal of Mark's work in the book as it stood now. He grew feverishly impatient to see Mark and put his plan into action—there must be time yet; Caffyn could not have been such a villain as to open Mabel's eyes to the real case ! He felt strong again now; he would go and assure himself this was so. He rose and, following the direction he had seen Mark take, entered the Gold Room—

only to hear an admission after which no defence seemed possible.

He stood there just behind Mark, trying to take in what had happened. There was Mrs. Featherstone struggling to conceal her chagrin and dismay at the sudden downfall of her dramatic ambition; Mark standing apart with bent head and hands behind him like a man facing a firing party; Mabel struck speechless and motionless by the shock; and Caffyn with the air of one who has fulfilled an unpalatable duty. Vincent knew it all now—he had come too late!

Mrs. Featherstone made a movement towards him.

"Oh, Mr. Holroyd," she said, with a very strained smile, "you mustn't come in, please: we're—we're talking over our little play—state secrets, you know!"

Caffyn's smile meant mischief as he said: "Mr. Holroyd has every right to be here, my dear Mrs. Featherstone, as you'll allow when I tell you who he is. He has too much diffidence to assert himself. Mr. Ashburn has admitted that he did not write 'Illusion'; he might have added that he stole the book in a very treacherous and disgraceful way. I am sorry to use words of this sort, but when you know all, you will understand that I have some excuse. Mr. Holroyd can tell you the story better than I can; he is the man who has been wronged, the real author of 'Illusion!'"

"I've done him a good turn there," he thought; "he can't very well turn against me after that!"

A terrible silence followed his words; Vincent's brain whirled, he could think of nothing. Mabel was the first to move or speak: she went to Mark's side as he stood silent and alone before his accuser, and touched his arm.

"Mark," she said in an agonised whisper, "do you hear? . . . tell them . . . it is not true—oh, I can't believe it—I won't—only speak!"

Vincent's heart swelled with a passionate devotion for her as she raised her fair face, blanched and stricken with an agony of doubt and hope, to her husband's averted eyes. How she loved him! What would *he* not have given for love like that? His own feelings were too true and loyal, however, to wish even for a moment to see the love and

faith die out of her face, slain for ever by some shameful confession.

Was it too late to save her even now? His brain cleared suddenly—a way of escape had opened to him.

In the meantime two new-comers had entered. Mr. Featherstone, hearing voices, had brought up Mr. Langton, who had "looked in" on his way from the House, and for some time remained under the impression that they had interrupted some kind of informal rehearsal.

"Still at the theatricals, eh?" he observed, as he came in. "Go on, don't let us disturb you. Capital, capital!" "Langton," whispered the other, pulling him back, "they're—they're *not acting*—I'm afraid something's the matter!" and the two waited to gather some idea of what was happening.

Before Mark could reply, if he meant to reply, to Mabel's appeal, Vincent had anticipated him.

"Mrs. Ashburn—Mabel," he said, "you are right to trust in his honour—it is *not* true. I can explain everything."

The instant joy and relief in her face as she clung fondly to Mark's arm repaid him and gave him strength and courage to go on. Mark looked round with a stunned wonder. What could be said or done to save him *now*? he thought. Vincent was mad to try. But the latter put his hand, as if affectionately, on his shoulder with a warning pressure, and he said nothing.

"Do you mean," said Caffyn to Holroyd, with an angry sneer, "that I told a lie—that you did *not* write 'Illusion'?"

"That was not the lie," returned Vincent. "I did write 'Illusion.' It is untrue that Mr. Ashburn's conduct in the matter does him anything but credit. May I tell my story here, Mrs. Featherstone?"

"Oh, by all means," said that lady, not too graciously; "we can't know the facts too soon."

"I wrote the book," said Vincent, "before I went out to Ceylon. I was at the Bar then, and had thoughts of practising again at some future time. I had a fancy (which was foolish, I dare say) to keep the fact that I had written a novel a close secret. So I entrusted the manuscript to my good friend, Mr. Ashburn, leaving him to

arrange, if he could, for its publication, and I charged him to keep my secret by every means in his power, even if necessary, by allowing it to appear under his own name. I did not really believe then that that would be necessary, or even that the book would be accepted, but I knew Mr. Ashburn wrote novels himself, and I hoped the arrangement would not do him any actual harm."

Till then he had gone on fluently enough; it was merely a modification of his original idea, with a considerable blending of the actual facts, but he felt that there were difficulties to come which it would require all his skill to avoid.

"I was detained, as you know, for more than a year in Ceylon, and unable most of the time to write to England," he continued. "When I came home I found—I was told that the book had obtained a success neither of us ever dreamed of: curiosity had been aroused, and Mr. Ashburn had found himself driven to keep his promise. He—he was anxious that I should release him and clear the matter up. I—I—it was not convenient for me to do so just then, and I induced him—he could hardly refuse, perhaps—to keep up the disguise a little longer. We had just arranged to make everything known shortly, when Mr. Caffyn anticipated us. And that is really all there is to tell about that."

Throughout Vincent's explanation Caffyn had been inwardly raging at the thought that his victims might actually succeed in escaping after all. Forcing an indulgent laugh, he said, "My dear fellow, it's very kind and generous of you to say all that, and it sounds very pretty and almost probable, but you can't expect us seriously to believe it, you know!"

For an instant this remark appeared to produce a reaction; but it vanished at Vincent's reply. His pale worn face flushed angrily as he faced him.

"No one seriously expects *you* to believe in such things as honour and friendship!" he said contemptuously. "I am going to deal with your share in this now. Mrs. Featherstone," he added, "will you forgive me if I am obliged to pain you by anything I may have to say? That man has thought fit to bring a disgraceful charge against my friend here—it is only right that you should know how little he deserves credit!"

Secretly Mrs. Featherstone was only too glad to see Caffyn discomfited, but all she did was to say stiffly, "Oh, pray don't consider my feelings, Mr. Holroyd!"

Vincent's indignation was enough in itself to make him merciless, and then, as a matter of policy, he was determined to disable the enemy to the utmost. Everything that had come to his knowledge of Caffyn's proceedings he now exposed with biting irony. He told the story of the letter, suppressed to all appearances out of gratuitous malice, and of the cruel terrorism exercised over little Dolly; he showed how Caffyn had tried to profit by his supposed discovery of the fraud, and how Mark had studiously refrained from undeceiving him, and gave a damaging description of the sordid threats and proposals he had himself received that evening.

The victory was won. Caffyn's face was livid as he heard him—he had never foreseen such black ingratitude as this, and it upset all his calculations. He still had his doubts, after so many careful experiments, that the story of Vincent's was a fabrication, even though it was not absolutely inconsistent with what he had observed, and he could see no motive for shielding the culprit. But it was plain that every one there believed it—Vincent's word would be taken before his—he was thoroughly beaten.

No one had seen Gilda come in, but she had been standing for some time with red eyes and flushed face by one of the windows, and in the general stir which followed Vincent's explanation Mr. Featherstone came up to her.

"Well," he said, "we've been treated to a very pretty story this evening. This is the young gentleman you're going to give me for a son-in-law, is it, Gilda? But of course you don't believe a word against him!"

"I believe it all—and more," she said, with a passionate sob.

Caffyn turned to her. "You too, Gilda!" he cried pathetically.

"You might have deceived me even after this," she said, "only—mamma sent me to go and fetch you—I heard you out there on the balcony, talking to Mabel, and —and I went out by the other window, this one, and along the balcony to the corner——"

"And, in point of fact, you listened!" he said.

"Yes, I did," she retorted, "and I shall be glad of it all my life. I heard enough to save me from you!"

She left him there and went towards Mabel with a half-reluctant air. "I have not behaved very nicely to you lately, have I?" she said in a low voice. "I suppose I ought to have known better. Never mind. I do now." And before Mabel could reply, Gilda was gone.

Mr. Featherstone tapped Caffyn lightly on the shoulder.

"Well, Master Harold," he said, "have you got anything to say? With all this suppressing, and plotting, and bullying, and threatening, and the rest of it—it strikes me you have made a d——d fool of yourself!"

The same idea had already occurred to Caffyn. He had been admirably cool and cautious; he had devoted all his energies to securing Mabel's marriage to Mark; he had watched and waited and sprung his mine with every precaution—and he was the only person it had blown up! His schemes had failed exactly like a common fool's—which was painful to reflect upon.

"If I haven't," he said with a slight grimace, "I've been made to look very like one."

"You're more rogue than fool, after all," observed the merchant, with distressing candour; "and, by the way, I'm rather particular about getting all my correspondence, and I invariably prefer to burn my own letters. I don't think my offices are quite the place for such a gifted young fellow as you seem to be."

"You mean I'm to go?" said Caffyn.

"I do," was the reply. "I never will have anyone about me I can't trust. I did think once—but that's over—you heard what my girl said to you!—we'd better part now. I won't deny I'm sorry!"

"Not sorrier than I am, I'll swear!" said Caffyn, with a short laugh. "Good-bye, Mrs. Featherstone," he added to that lady, who stood by. "*You're* not sorry, are you? Gilda will be a duchess after all—now!"

And he left the house, feeling as he passed out that the very footmen by the entrance knew of his discomfiture, and carrying away with him for a lasting recollection Mabel's look of radiant happiness as she heard Mark so completely vindicated.

"Revenge is sweet," he thought bitterly, "but I kept mine too long, and it's turned devilish sour!"

"Well, my dear," said Mr. Featherstone to his wife, "you've been leaving your other young people to their own devices all this time. Wouldn't it be as well to go and look after them?"

The dancing had been going on in the adjoining room while all this was taking place; now and then the doors had been tried by couples in search of a cool retreat between the waltzes, but no one suspected what important revelations were being made within.

Mrs. Featherstone was deeply mortified. It was true she had got rid of a hated presence, but her play—which she had meant to make the closing event of the season, and by which she had hoped to conquer one or two of the remaining rungs of the social ladder—her play was rendered impossible; this affair would get into the society papers, with every perversion which wit or malice could supply—she would be made thoroughly ridiculous!

"I'll go," she said. "I must get rid of everybody as soon as I decently can—this shocking business has completely upset me."

Mark and Vincent were standing together at the door, and as she passed out she visited some of her pent-up displeasure upon them.

"Well, Mr. Ashburn and Mr. Holroyd," she said, in tones that were intended to sound playful, "I hope you are quite contented with your little mystification? Such a very original idea on both your parts, really. How it must have amused you both to see me making such an absurd exhibition of myself all this time. Seriously, though, I do consider I have been very, *very* shabbily treated—you might have warned me as a friend, Mr. Ashburn, without betraying any one's confidence! No, don't explain, either of you: I could not bear any more explanations just now!"

Mr. Langton, as he followed her, took Mark out with him, and as soon as they were alone gave full vent to his own indignation.

"I don't understand your conceptions of honour," he said. "Whatever your duty might be to Vincent, you clearly had duties towards my daughter and myself. Do

you suppose I should have given her to you if I had known? It just comes to this, and no sophistry can get over it—you obtained my consent under false pretences?"

For he was naturally intensely humiliated by the difference these disclosures must make in his daughter's position, and did not spare his son-in-law. He said much more to the same effect, and Mark bore it all without attempting a defence: he still felt a little stunned by the danger he had passed through, and, after all, he thought, what he had heard now was nothing to what might have been said to him!

Obeying a glance from Mabel, as the others followed Mrs. Featherstone back to the music-room, Vincent had remained behind.

"When will you allow this to be generally known?" she asked, and her voice had a strange new coldness which struck him with terror. Had she seen through his device? Was it all useless?

"As soon as possible," he answered gently. "We shall see the publishers to-morrow, and then all the details will be arranged."

"And your triumph will come," she said bitterly. "I hope you will be able to enjoy it!"

"Mabel," he said earnestly, "Harold Caffyn forced me to speak to-night—surely you saw that? I—I did not intend to claim the book yet."

"Why didn't you claim it long ago?" she demanded. "Why must you put this burden on Mark at all? Surely your secret could have been kept without that! But you came home and knew what a success Mark's (*your* book, I beg your pardon—it is strange at first, you know)—what a success your book had been, and how hard it was making his life for him—he begged you then, you said, to take back his promise, and you—you would not. Oh, it was selfish, Vincent, cruelly selfish of you!"

His sole concern in making that hasty explanation had been to give it an air of reasonable probability; he had never given a thought till that moment of the light in which he was presenting his own conduct. Now, in one terrible instant, it rushed upon him with an overwhelming force.

"I—I acted for the best," he said; and even to himself the words sounded like a sullen apology.

"For *your* best!" she said. "The book will be talked of more than ever now. But did you never think of the false position in which you were placing Mark? What will become of him after this? People might have read his books once—they will never read them now—they may even say that—that Harold Caffyn may have been right. And all that is your work, Vincent!"

He groaned within him at his helplessness; he stood before her with bowed head, not daring to raise his eyes, lest he should be tempted to undo all his work.

"I was proud of Mark," she continued, "because I thought he had written 'Illusion.' I am prouder now—it is better to be loyal and true, as Mark has been, than to write the noblest book and sacrifice a friend to it. There are better things than fame, Vincent!"

Even his devotion was not proof against this last injustice; he raised his head, and anger burnt in his eyes.

"You tell me that!" he cried passionately. "As if I had ever cared for Fame in itself! Mabel, you have no right to say these things to me—do you hear?—no right! Have some charity, try and believe that there may be excuses even for me—that if you could know my motives you might feel you had been unjust!"

"Is there anything I don't know?" she asked, somewhat moved by this outburst, "anything you have kept from me?"

"No. You have heard all I have to say—all there is to tell," he admitted.

"Then I am not unjust!" she said; "but if you feel justified in acting as you have done, so much the better for you, and we shall do no good by talking any more about it."

"None whatever," he agreed.

When he was alone that night he laughed fiercely to himself at the manner in which his act of devotion had been accepted. All his sacrifices had ended in making Mabel despise him for calculating selfishness; he had lost her esteem for ever.

If he had foreseen this, he might have hesitated, deep and unselfish as his love was; but it was done, and he

had saved her. Better, he tried to think, that she should despise him, than lose her belief in her husband, and, with it, all that made life fair to her.

But altruism of this kind is a cold and barren consolation. Men do good by stealth now and then, men submit to misconstruction, but then it is always permitted to them to dream that, some day, an accident may bring the good or the truth to light. This was a hope which, by the nature of the case, Vincent could never entertain, and life was greyer to him even than before.

CHAPTER XXXVI

The Effects of an Explosion

Mrs. Featherstone made no attempt to detain Mark and Mabel as they took leave of her shortly after that scene in the Gold Room, though her attitude at parting was conceived in a spirit of frosty forgiveness.

In the carriage Mark sat silent for some time, staring straight before him, moodily waiting for Mabel's first words. He had not to wait long; she had laid her hand softly upon his, and, as he turned, he saw that her eyes were wet and shining.

"Mark," she said, "it is you I love, not that book; and now, when I know all it has cost you—oh, my dear, my dear—did you think it would make me love you less?"

He could not answer her by words, but he drew her nearer to him till her head rested upon his shoulder, and so they sat, silent with hands clasped, until they reached home.

Seldom again, and only under strong compulsion, did Mabel make any reference to "Illusion," nor was it till long after that he suspected the depth and reason of her resentment against Vincent—he was content to feel that her love for himself was unchanged.

But though she strove, and successfully, to hide it from her husband, this lowering of her ideal caused her a secret anguish; it had always been difficult to reconcile Mark as his nature seemed revealed in private life, with the Mark who had written "Illusion." One of her dreams had been that, as their intimacy grew, all reserve would vanish, and he would speak to her of his inmost thoughts and

fancies, which it seemed almost as if he thought her unable to appreciate as yet.

Now all this was over, there were no hidden depths to fathom in his mind, no sublime heights to which she could rise; such as she knew him now, he was and must remain—not a strong and solitary genius with lofty thoughts of which he feared to speak freely, not a guide on whom she could lean unquestioning through life, only a man with a bright but shallow nature, impulsive and easily led. Even the Quixotic honour which had led him to entangle himself in complications at another's bidding showed a mind incapable of clear judgment—or he would have renounced the rash promise when it began to involve others. Sadly enough she realised the weakness implied in this, and yet it only infused a new element of pity and protection in the love she felt for him, and she adapted herself bravely to the changed conditions of her life.

After Holroyd had spoken, she had never questioned that his version was the true one, and Caffyn's charge and infamous fabrication—whatever she might have been driven to think in that one instant of sickening doubt.

To a more suspicious nature, perhaps, some of the facts connected with Vincent's visit to Laufenburg might even then have presented difficulties, but if Mabel had remembered all that had occurred there more clearly than she did, she would have attached but little importance to it. The loyal faith she had in her husband's honour would have accepted as obvious a far less plausible explanation.

On the day following the rehearsal Messrs. Chilton and Fladgate were made aware of the facts relating to the authorship of "Illusion," whereupon they both expressed a not unnatural annoyance at having been, as they considered, made the victims of a deception. Mr. Fladgate, especially, who had always prided himself immensely upon the sagacity which had led him to detect Mark at once, and who had never wearied of telling the story, indulged in some strong observations.

Vincent vindicated as well as he could the scheme in which he was the most guiltless of accessories after the fact, and Mark kept in the background and said as little as possible; he felt distinctly uncomfortable, however, when Mr. Chilton dryly inquired whether the same mystification

attached to " Sweet Bells Jangled," and on being reassured as to this, observed that it was a little unfortunate that the matter had not been explained before the latter book had been brought out.

" If you think you are prejudiced in any way," Mark said, flushing angrily, " we can easily come to some other arrangement ! "

" Oh," said Mr. Chilton " I was not thinking of it from a pecuniary point of view exactly—we shall not lose much, as far as money is concerned, I dare say ! "

" My partner," explained Mr. Fladgate, " was thinking of the results this will have upon our reputation in the trade " ; on which Vincent tried to appease him by promising to make it abundantly clear that the firm were no parties to the concealment, and as soon as the partners understood that it was not proposed to disturb any existing arrangements respecting " Illusion," beyond disclosing the truth, and having some necessary revisions inserted in any future edition, they parted amicably enough, though Mark was made to understand his altered standing in the most unmistakable manner.

And in a few days, by means which it is not necessary to particularise here, the version of the affair given by Vincent at Grosvenor Gardens was made known to all those who might find it of interest.

The announcement, when it became generally known, caused a certain amount of surprise and remark, but not nearly so much as might have been expected. Hawthorne, in his preface to " The Scarlet Letter," has remarked the utter insignificance of literary achievements and aims beyond the narrow circle which recognises them as important and legitimate, and the lesson the discovery of this is to the man who dreams of literary fame. If Vincent needed to learn that lesson, he learnt it then ; no fresh laurels were brought out for him—and the old ones had withered already ; people were beginning to feel slightly ashamed of their former raptures over " Illusion," or had transferred them to a newer object, and they could not be revived in cold blood, even for the person legitimately entitled. Jacob had intercepted the birthright, and for this Esau there was not even the *réchauffé* of a blessing.

The people who had lionised Mark were enraged now,

and chiefly with Holroyd; the more ill-natured hinted that there was something shady on both sides—or why should all that secrecy have been necessary?—but the less censorious were charitably disposed to think that Ashburn's weak good-nature had been unscrupulously abused by his more gifted friend.

Vincent's conduct, if it showed nothing more than a shrinking from notoriety, was sufficiently offensive, such distaste being necessarily either cynical or hypocritical. So upon the whole, the reaction which attends all sudden and violent popularity, and which had already set in here, was, if anything, furthered by the disclosure.

But this did not greatly distress him. Neglect and fame were alike to him, now that his lady had withdrawn her countenance from him. He had resigned himself to the loss of the fairest dream of his life, but it had been a consolation to him in his loneliness to feel that he might be her friend still, that he might see her sometimes, that although she could never love him, he would always possess her confidence and regard—not much of a consolation, perhaps, to most men, but he had found a sort of comfort in it. Now that was all over, and his solitude was left more desolate still; he knew there was no appeal for him, and that, so long as Mabel believed that he had sacrificed her husband to his deliberate selfishness, she would never relent towards him. There were times when he asked himself if he was bound to suffer all this misconception from the one woman he had ever loved—but he knew always that in clearing himself he would lay her happiness in ruins, and resolved to bear his burden to the end, sustained by the conviction, which every day became clearer, that he would not have to bear it much longer.

As for Mark, the announcement of the true authorship of "Illusion" brought him nothing short of disaster, social and financial. It produced a temporary demand for "Sweet Bells Jangled" at the libraries, but now that things had been explained to them, the most unlikely persons were able to distinguish the marked inferiority of the later book.

Those reviews which had waited at first from press of matter or timidity now condemned it unanimously, and several editors of periodicals who had requested works

from Mark's pen wrote to say that, as the offer had been made under a misapprehension, he would understand that they felt compelled to retract the commissions.

Mark's career as a novelist was ended, he had less chance than ever of getting a publisher's reader to look at his manuscript, the affair had associated his name with ridicule instead of the scandal which is a marketable commodity, and might have launched him again; his name upon a book now would only predestine it to obscurity.

Mabel was made aware in countless little ways of her husband's descent in popular estimation; he was no longer forced into a central position in any gathering they happened to form part of, but stood forlornly in corners, like the rest of humanity. Perhaps he regretted even the sham celebrity he had enjoyed, for his was a disposition that rose to any opportunity of self-display—but in time the contrast ceased to mortify him, for most of the invitations dropped; he was only asked to places now as the husband of Mabel, and in the height of the season most of their evenings were passed at home, to the perfect contentment of both, however.

Mrs. Featherstone had given up her theatricals, in spite of Vincent's attempt to dissuade her; she had lost some of the principal members of her little company, and it was too late to recruit them; but her chief reason was a feeling that she would only escape ridicule very narrowly as it was, and that the safest course was to allow her own connection with the affair to be forgotten as speedily as possible.

But she could not forgive Mark, and would have dropped the acquaintance altogether, if Gilda had not, in the revivial of her affection for Mabel, done all in her power to keep it alive.

Mr. Langton, deeply as he had resented the misrepresentation which had cost him his daughter, was not a man to do anything which might give any opening for gossip; he repressed his wife's tendency to become elegiac on her daughter's account, and treated Mark in public as before. But on occasions when he dined there *en famille*, and sat alone with his father-in-law over dessert, there was no attempt to conceal from him that he was only there on sufferance, and those were terrible after-

dinner sittings to the unfortunate Mark, who was catechised and lectured on his prospects until he writhed with humiliation and helpless rage.

At Malakoff Terrace the feeling at the discovery of Mark's true position was not one of unmixed sorrow—the knowledge that he was, after all, an ordinary being, one of themselves, had its consolations, particularly as no lustre from his glorification had shone on them. Mr. Ashburn felt less like an owl who had accidentally hatched a cherub than he had done lately, and his wife considered that a snare and a pitfall had been removed from her son's path. Cuthbert thought his elder brother a fool, but probably had never felt more amiable towards him, while Martha wondered aloud how her sister-in-law liked it—a speculation which employed her mind not unpleasantly. Only Trixie felt a sincere and unselfish disappointment; she had been so proud of her brother's genius, had sympathised so entirely with his early struggles, had heard of his triumphs with such delight, that it was hard for her to realise that the book which had done so much for him was not his work after all. But the blow was softened even to Trixie, for "Jack" had been making an income lately, and in the autumn they were going to be married and live in Bedford Park. And of course Mark had done nothing wrong, she told herself, and he knew all the time what was coming, so she need not pity him so very much, and she was sure "Sweet Bells" was nicer than "Illusion," whatever people chose to say, and ever so much easier to understand.

Mark now found it necessary to consider seriously how he was to support himself for the future. Literature, as has been said, was now out of the question; in fact, its fascination for him had faded. Mabel had a fair income settled upon her, but in ordinary self-respect he could not live upon that, and so he sought about for some opening. Then he heard by accident that old Mr. Shelford was about to resign his post at St. Peter's, and it occurred to him that it might be worth his while to go and see him, and find out if the vacancy was unfilled, and if there was any chance for himself. It was not a pleasant thing to do, for he had not seen the old gentleman lately, and dreaded equally innocent congratulations and brusque irony, according to

the state of his information. He went up to St. Peter's, timing his arrival after school, when the boys would all have left, except the classes which remained an hour longer for extra subjects. Mr. Shelford always lingered for some time, and he would be very certain to find him. Mark went along the dark corridors, rather shrinking as he did so from the idea of being recognised by a passing member of the staff, till he came to the door he knew.

Mr. Shelford was still in cap and gown, dictating the week's marks to his monitor, who was entering them, with a long-suffering expression on his face, into a sort of ledger.

"Now we come to Robinson," the old gentleman was saying; "you're sure you've got the right place, eh? Go on, then. *Latin repetition*, thirty-eight; Latin prose, thirty-six—if you don't take care, Master Maxwell, Robinson 'll be carrying off the prize this term, he's creeping up to you, sir, creeping up; Roman history "—and here he saw Mark, and dismissed the monitor unceremoniously enough.

He evidently knew the whole story of "Illusion," for his first words after they were alone together were, "And so you've been a sort of warming-pan all this time, eh?"

"That's all," said Mark, gloomily.

"Well, well," the old gentleman continued, not unkindly, "you made a rash promise and kept it like a man, even when it must have been uncommonly disagreeable. I like you for that, Ashburn. And what are you thinking of turning to now?"

Mark explained his errand not very fluently, and Mr. Shelford heard him out with his mouth working impatiently, and his eyes wrinkled till Mark thought how much he had aged lately.

"Well," he said, pushing back his cap and leaning back in his chair, "have you thought this out, Ashburn? You were rid of this life a short time back, and I was glad of it, for you never were fit for it. And now you're coming back again! I make no doubt they'll be very willing to have you here, and if a word from me to the Council—but is there really nothing else but this? Why, I'm counting the days to my own deliverance now, and it's odd to find someone asking me to recommend him for my oar and chain! No, no, a dashing young fellow like you, sir, can do better for himself than a junior mastership for his final

goal. Take warning by me, as I used to tell you—do you want to come to this sort of thing? sitting from morn to noon in this stifling den, filled with a rabble of impudent boys—d'ye think they'll have any respect for your old age and infirmities? not they—they'll call you 'Old Ashes,' for they're a humorous race, boys are; they'll call you 'Old Ashes,' or 'Cinders' to your nose, as soon as they think you're old enough to stand it. Why, they don't put any more kittens in my desk now—they've found out I like cats. So they put black-beetles—do you like black-beetles, eh? Well, you'll come to beetles in time. It's a mistake, Ashburn, it's a mistake for impulsive, hot-tempered men like you to turn schoolmaster—leave it to cold, impassive fellows who don't care enough about boys to be sensitive or partial—they're the men to stand the life!"

Here a demon voice shrilled, "'Ullo, Shellfish, Old Shells, yah!" through the keyhole, and his footsteps were heard down the flags outside running for dear life. The old gentleman, crimson with rage, bounded to the door:

"Stop that scoundrel, that impident boy, bring him back!" But the boy had gone, and he came back panting and coughing: "That's a commentary on what I've been saying," he said: "I'm an old fool to show I care—but I can't help it, and they know it, confound 'em! Well, to come back to you, Ashburn, you're married now, I hear; you won't find a mastership much support as time goes on, unless you started a boarding-house—the idea of never escaping from these young ruffians, ugh! No, no; didn't you tell me once you were called to the Bar?"

"Not called," corrected Mark, "I have passed the examination, though; there is only the ceremony to be gone through."

"Why not go through it, and try your fortune as a barrister, then; you're just the man for a jury? We shall have you taking silk in ten years."

Mark laughed bitterly. "How am I to live till I get a practice?" he said; "I've only a couple of hundred or so left in the world, and that would scarcely pay for my fees and chambers for more than a year."

"Ah, is that so? I see," said the old gentleman, "yes yes—but, see here, Ashburn, start all the same with what

you've got, who knows how soon you may get work—can't your father-in-law do anything for you? And while you're waiting, why not take some pupils under the rose, eh? I was asked the other day to recommend a coach to two young rascals who want to be forked into the Civil Service. You could do that for them if you liked, and they'd bring you others. And—and I'm going to take a liberty very likely, but I've put by a little money in the course of my life, and I've no one to leave it to. I don't know how it is, but I feel an interest in you, Ashburn; perhaps I want somebody to be sorry for me when I'm gone, anyway, I—I wish you'd let me see you through any money difficulties till you're fairly started—it won't be long now, I'll wager. You can treat it as a loan if you prefer it. I want you to give yourself a chance at the Bar. Don't refuse me, now, or I shall take it unkindly."

Mark was deeply touched, he had not suspected Mr. Shelford of really caring about him, and the kindness and sympathy of this offer made him feel how little he deserved such friendship; and then the familiar class-rooms, dusty and stuffy at the close of a summer day, had brought back all his old weariness of school routine. He had outlived his yearning for literary fame, but he still wished to make a figure somewhere, somehow—why might not he do so at the Bar, in some line where solid learning is less necessary than the fluent tongue and unfailing resource which he felt he could reckon upon?

He shook the other's hand gratefully. "I don't know how to thank you," he said, "you've put some heart in me again. I will try my luck as you advise; perhaps, with coaching and the money I have by me, I need not take advantage of all your kindness, but there is no one I would come to for help like you when I can keep up no longer. I'll take my call at Michaelmas!"

And they walked out together, Mr. Shelford taking his arm affectionately through the streets. Mark, as has been said already, had a certain knack of attracting interest and liking without doing anything to excite or deserve them in the slightest, and the old gentleman felt now almost as if he had gained a son.

He was anxious to prevent Mark from returning to the old life, because he had observed his unfitness for it; he

himself, however, in spite of his diatribes against boys and scholastic life, was far fonder of both than he would have confessed, and would miss them as a few who knew him best would miss him when the time came for parting.

From that day be became a frequent visitor at Campden Hill, where he found with Mabel the appreciation and tender regard which he had never expected to meet again on this side of the grave.

Mark carried out his resolve, of which his father-in-law approved, allowing him to use his chambers during the Long Vacation. The pupils came there, and the coach's manner captivated them from the first, and made the work easy for both; they came out high on the list, and were succeeded by others, whose fees paid the rent of the chambers he took in the Temple shortly after. Call-night came, and as he stood with the others at the Benchers' table and listened to the Treasurer's address, he felt an exultant confidence in himself once more; he had been promised a brief, and he had read hard lately, with better results. He knew he should be at no loss for words or self-possession; he had been a brilliant and effective speaker, as the Union debates had frequently proved, and he looked forward now to entering the legal arena as the field for retrieving his lost name. Mabel should be proud of him yet!

He was deceiving no one now, Vincent was not injured by the fraud—for he had his book back; it was true that Mabel did not suspect the real history of the transaction, but it would do her no good to know that he had once made a false step. Caffyn was over in America, and harmless wherever he might see fit to go—his sting was drawn for ever.

No wonder, then, that he seemed to look round upon a cloudless horizon—but that had been the case with him so many times since he had first complicated his life by that unhappy act of his, and each time the small cloud, the single spy of serried battalions, had been slowly creeping up all the while.

He forgot that—he generally did forget unpleasant reminiscences—it never occurred to him that the cloud might be rising yet again above the level haze of the skyline, and the hurricane burst upon him once more.