Mark looked after his friend's tall strong figure for a moment before it disappeared in the dark. "Well, I've seen the last of him," he thought. "Poor old Holroyd! to think of his having written a book—he's one of those unlucky beggars who never make a hit at anything. I expect I shall have some trouble about it by-and-by."

Holroyd walked on with a heavier heart. "He won't miss me," he told himself. "Will Mabel say good-bye like that?"

CHAPTER III

GOOD-BYE

ON the same afternoon in which we have seen Mark and Vincent walk home together for the last time, Mrs. Langton and her eldest daughter Mabel were sitting in the pretty drawing-room of their house in Kensington Park Gardens.

Mrs. Langton was the wife of a successful Q.C. at the Chancery Bar, and one of those elegantly languid women with a manner charming enough to conceal a slight shallowness of mind and character; she was pretty still, and an invalid at all times when indisposition was not positively inconvenient.

Mrs. Langton was leaning luxuriously back in a low soft chair, lazily watching the firebeams glisten through the glass screen, and Mabel was on a couch near the window trying to read a magazine by the fading light.

"Hadn't you better ring for the lamps, Mabel?" suggested her mother. "You can't possibly see to read by this light, and it's so trying for the eyes. I suppose no one else will call now, but it's very strange that Vincent should not have come to say good-bye."

"So do I," agreed Mabel. "It's not like Vincent, though he was always shy and odd in some things. He hasn't been to see us nearly so much lately, but I can't believe he will really go away without a word."

Mrs. Langton yawned delicately. "It would not surprise me, I must say," she said. "When a young man sets himself——" but whatever she was going to say was broken off by the entrance of her youngest daughter Dolly, with the German governess, followed by the man bearing rose-shaded lamps.

Dolly was a vivacious child of about nine, with golden locks which had a pretty ripple in them, and deep long-lashed eyes that promised to be dangerous one day. " We took Frisk out without the leash, mummy," she cried, " and when we got into Westbourne Grove he ran away. Wasn't it too bad of him ? "

" Never mind, darling, he'll come back quite safe—he always does."

" Ah, but it's his running away that I mind," said Dolly ; " and you know what a dreadful state he always *will* come back in. He must be cured of doing it somehow."

" Talk to him very seriously about it, Dolly," said Mabel.

" I've tried that—and he only cringes and goes and does it again directly he's washed. I know what I'll do, Mabel. When he comes back this time, he shall have a jolly good whacking ! "

And she ran off just as the door-bell rang.

" Mabel, I really think that must be some one else coming to call, after all. Do you know, I feel so tired and it's so late that I think I will leave you and Fraulein to talk to them. Papa and I are going out to dinner to-night, and I must rest a little before I begin to dress. I'll run away while I can."

Mrs. Langton fluttered gracefully out of the room as the butler crossed the hall to open the door, evidently to a visitor, and presently Mabel heard " Mr. Holroyd " announced.

" So you really have come after all," said Mabel, holding out her hand with a pretty smile of welcome. " Mamma and I thought you meant to go away without a word."

" You might have known me better than that," said Holroyd.

" But when your last afternoon in England was nearly over and no sign of you, there *was* some excuse for thinking so ; but you have come at last, so we won't scold you. Will you have some tea ? It isn't very warm, I'm afraid, but you are so late, you know. Ring, and you shall have some fit to drink."

Vincent accepted tea ; and then he talked to her and Fraulein Mozer, with a heavy sense of the unsatisfactory nature of this triangular conversation for a parting interview.

The governess felt this too.

"He is going away," she thought; "but he shall have his chance, the poor young man. You will not think it very rude, Mr. Holroyd," she said, rising: "it will not disturb you if I practise? There is a piece which I am to play at a school concert to-morrow, and do not yet know it."

"Vincent won't mind, Ottilia dear," said Mabel. "Will you, Vincent?" So the governess went to the further room where the piano stood, and was soon performing a conveniently noisy German march. Vincent sat still for some moments watching Mabel. He wished to keep in his memory the impression of her face as he saw it then, lighted up by the soft glow of the heavily shaded lamp at her elbow; a spirited and yet tender face, with dark grey eyes, a sensitive, beautiful mouth, and brown hair with threads of gold in it which gleamed in the lamplight as she turned her graceful head.

Mabel was the first to speak. "Are you *very* fond of music, Vincent?" she said a little maliciously. "Would you rather be allowed to listen in peace, or talk? You *may* talk, you know."

"I came late on purpose to see as much of you as possible," said poor Vincent. "This is the last time I shall be able to talk to you for so long."

"I know," said Mabel simply; "I'm very sorry, Vincent." But there was only a frank friendliness in her eyes as she spoke, nothing more, and Vincent knew it.

"So am I," he said. "Do you know, Mabel, I have no photograph of you. Will you give me one to take away with me?"

"Of course, if I have one," she said, as she went to a table for an album. "Oh, Vincent, I'm so sorry. I'm afraid there's not one left. But I can give you one of mother and father and Dolly, and I think Colin too."

"I should like all those very much," said Vincent, who could not accept this offer as a perfect substitute, "but can't you find one of yourself, not even an old one?"

"I think I can give you one after all," said Mabel; "wait a minute." And as she came back after a minute's absence she said, "Here's one I had promised to Gilda Featherstone, but Gilda can wait, and you can't. I'll give you an envelope to put them all in, and then we will talk. Tell me first how long you are going to be away."

"No longer than I can help," said Vincent, "but it depends on so many things."

"But you will write to us, won't you?"

"Will you answer if I do?"

"Of course," said Mabel. "Don't you remember when I was a little girl, and used to write to you at school, and at Trinity too? I was always a better correspondent than you were, Vincent. You will be sure to write and tell us all about yourself. What do you mean to do out there?"

"Turn coffee-planter, perhaps," he said gloomily.

"Oh, Vincent!" she said reproachfully, "you used to be so ambitious. Don't you remember how we settled once that you were going to be famous? You can't be very famous by coffee-planting, can you?"

"If I do that, it is only because I see nothing else to do. But I am ambitious still, Mabel. I shall not be content with that, if a certain venture of mine is successful enough to give me hopes of anything better. But it's a very big 'if' at present."

"What is the venture?" said Mabel. "Tell me, Vincent; "you used to tell me everything once."

Vincent had very few traces of his tropical extraction in his nature, and his caution and reserve would have made him disposed to wait at least until his book were safe in the haven of printer's ink before confessing that he was an author.

But Mabel's appeal scattered all his prudence. He had written with Mabel as his public; with the chief hope in his mind that some day she would see his work and say that it was well done. He felt a strong impulse to confide in her now, and have the comfort of her sympathy and encouragement to carry away with him.

If he had been able to tell her then of his book, and his plans respecting it, Mabel might have looked upon him with a new interest, and much that followed in her life might have been prevented. But he hesitated for a moment, and while he hesitated a second interruption took place. The opportunity was gone, and, like most opportunities in conversation, once missed was gone for ever. The irrepressible Dolly was the innocent instrument: she came in with a big portfolio of black and white papers, which she put down on a chair. "Oh, and, Vincent, I want your head for my album. May I cut it out ?"

"I want it myself, Dolly, please," said Vincent; "I don't think I can do without it just yet."

"I don't mean your real head," said Dolly, "I believe you know that—it's only the outline I want!"

"It isn't a very dreadful operation, Vincent," said Mabel. "Dolly has been victimising all her friends lately, but she doesn't hurt them."

"Very well, Dolly, I consent," said Vincent; "only be gentle with me."

"Sit down here on this chair against the wall," said Dolly imperiously. "Mabel, please take the shade off the lamp and put it over here." She armed herself with a pencil and a large sheet of white paper as she spoke. "Now, Vincent, put yourself so that your shadow comes just here, and keep perfectly still. Don't move, or talk, or anything, or your profile will be spoilt!"

"I feel very nervous, Dolly," said Vincent, sitting down obediently.

"What a coward you must be! Will you hold his head steady, Mabel, please?—no, you hold the paper up while I trace."

Vincent sat still while Mabel leaned over the back of his chair, with one hand lightly touching his shoulder, while her soft hair swept across his cheek now and then. Long after—as long as he lived, in fact—he remembered those moments with a thrill.

"Now I have done, Vincent," cried Dolly triumphantly, after some laborious tracing on the paper. "You haven't got *much* of a profile, but it will be exactly like you when I've cut it out. There!" she said, as she held up a life-size head cut out in curling black paper; "don't you think it's like you, yourself?"

"I don't know," said Vincent, inspecting it rather dubiously, "but I must say I hope it isn't."

At this point Mrs. Langton came rustling down, and Vincent rose to meet her, with a desperate hope that he would be asked to spend the whole of his last evening with them—a hope that was doomed to disappointment.

"My dear Vincent," she said, holding out both her hands, "so you've come after all. Really, I was quite afraid you'd forgotten us. Why didn't somebody tell me Vincent was here, Mabel ? I would have hurried over my dressing to come down. It's so provoking, Vincent, but I have to say good-bye in a hurry. My husband and I are going out to dinner, and he wouldn't come home to change, so he will dress at his chambers, and I have to go up and fetch him. And it's so late, and they dine so ridiculously early where we're going, and he's sure to keep me waiting such a time, I mustn't lose another minute. Will you see me to my carriage, Vincent ? Thanks ! Has Marshall put the footwarmer in, and is the drugget down ? Then we'll go, please ; and I wish you every success in—over there, you know, and you must be careful of yourself and bring home a nice wife—Lincoln's Inn, tell him, please—Good-bye, Vincent, good-bye ! "

And she smiled affectionately and waved her long-gloved hand behind the window as the carriage rolled off, and all the time he knew it would not distress her if she never saw him again.

He went slowly back to the warm drawing-room, with its delicate perfume of violets. He had no excuse for lingering there any longer—he must say his last words to Mabel and go. But before he could make up his mind to this another visitor was announced, who must have come up almost as Mrs. Langton had driven off.

" Mr. Caffyn," said Champion, imposingly, who had a graceful way of handing dishes and a dignified deference in his bow which in his own opinion excused certain attacks of solemn speechlessness and eccentricity of gait that occasionally overcame him.

A tall, graceful young man came in, with an air of calm and ease that was in the slightest degree exaggerated. He had short light hair, well-shaped eyes, which were keen and rather cold, and a firm, thin-lipped mouth ; his voice, which he had under perfect control, was clear and pleasant.

" Do you mean this for an afternoon call, Harold ? " asked Mabel, who did not seem altogether pleased at his arrival.

" Yes, we're not at home now, are we, Mabel ? " put in audacious Dolly.

" I was kept rather late at rehearsal, and I had to dine afterwards," explained Caffyn ; " but I shouldn't have come in if I had not had a commission to perform. When I have done it you can send me away."

Harold Caffyn was a relation of Mrs. Langton's. His father was high up in the consular service abroad, and he himself had lately gone on the stage, finding it more attractive than the Foreign Office, for which he had been originally intended. He had had no reason as yet to regret his apostasy, for he had obtained almost at once an engagement in a leading West-end theatre, while his social prospects had not been materially affected by the change.

Like Holroyd, he had known Mabel from a child, and as she grew up had felt her attraction too much for his peace of mind. His one misgiving in going on the stage had been lest it should lessen his chance of finding favour with her.

This fear proved groundless: Mabel had not altered to him in the least. But his successes as an amateur had not followed him to the public stage; he had not as yet been entrusted with any but very minor *rôles*, and was already disenchanted enough with his profession to be willing to give it up on very moderate provocation.

"Why, Holroyd, I didn't see you over there. How are you?" he said cordially, though his secret feelings were anything but cordial, for he had long seen reason to consider Vincent as a possible rival.

"Vincent has come to say good-bye," explained Dolly. "He's going to India to-morrow."

"Good-bye!" said Caffyn, his face clearing: "that's rather sudden, isn't it, Holroyd? Well, I'm very glad I am able to say good-bye too" (as there is no doubt Caffyn was). "You never told me you were off so soon."

Holroyd had known Caffyn for several years: they had frequently met in that house, and, though there was little in common between them, their relations had always been friendly.

"It was rather sudden," Holroyd said, "and we haven't met lately."

"And you're off to-morrow, eh? I'm sorry. We might have managed a parting dinner before you went—it must be kept till you come back."

"What was the commission, Harold?" asked Mabel.

"Oh, ah! I met my uncle to-day, and he told me to find out if you would be able to run down to Chigbourne one Saturday till Monday soon. I suppose you won't. He's a dear old boy, but he's rather a dull old pump to stay two whole days with."

"You forget he's Dolly's godfather," said Mabel.

"And he's my uncle," said Caffyn; "but he's not a bit the livelier for that, you know. You're asked too, Juggins." (Juggins was a name he had for Dolly, whom he found pleasure in teasing, and who was not deeply attached to him.)

"Would you like to go, Dolly, if mother says yes?" asked Mabel.

"Is Harold going?" said Dolly.

"Harold does not happen to be asked, my Juggins," said that gentleman blandly.

"Then we'll go, Mabel, and I shall take Frisk, because Uncle Anthony hasn't seen him for a long time."

Holroyd saw no use in staying longer. The governess read in his face that her well-meant services had been of no avail, and sighed compassionately as she shook hands. Dolly nestled against him and cried a little, and the cool Harold felt so strongly that he could afford to be generous now, that he was genial and almost affectionate in his good wishes.

His face clouded, however, when Mabel said, "Don't ring, Ottilia. I will go to the door with Vincent—it's the last time."

"I wonder if she cares about the fellow!" he thought uneasily.

"You won't forget to write to us as soon as you can, Vincent?" said Mabel, as they stood in the hall together. "We shall be thinking of you so often, and wondering what you are doing, and how you are."

Vincent felt a passionate impulse even then, at that eleventh hour, to tell Mabel something of what was in his heart.

He might have asked and obtained a kiss, as an almost brother who was going far away, but to him that would have been the hollowest mockery.

Suppressed emotion made him abrupt and almost cold, he let her hands drop suddenly, and with nothing more than a broken "God bless you, Mabel, good-bye, dear, good-bye!" he left the house hurriedly, and the moment after he was alone on the hill with his heartache.

"So he's gone!" remarked Caffyn, as Mabel re-entered the drawing-room after lingering a few moments in the empty hall. "What a dear, dull old plodder it is, isn't it? He'll do much better at planting coffee than he ever did at law—at least, it's to be hoped so!"

"You are very fond of calling other people dull, Harold," said Mabel, with a displeased contraction of her eyebrows. "Vincent is not in the least dull: you only speak of him like that because you don't understand him."

"I didn't say it disparagingly," said Caffyn. "I rather admire dullness; it's so restful. But as you say, Mabel, I dare say I don't understand him; he really doesn't give a fellow a fair chance. As far as I know him, I *do* like him uncommonly; but, at the same time, I must confess he has always given me the impression of being, don't you know, just a trifle heavy. But very likely I'm wrong."

"Very likely indeed," said Mabel, closing the subject. But Caffyn had not spoken undesignedly, and had risked offending her for the moment for the sake of producing the effect he wanted; and he was not altogether unsuccessful. "Was Harold right?" she thought later. "Vincent is very quiet, but I always thought there was power of some sort behind; and yet—would it not have shown itself before now? But if poor Vincent *is* only dull, it will make no difference to me; I shall like him just as much."

But for all that, the suggestion very effectually prevented all danger of Vincent's becoming idealised by distance into something more interesting than a brother—which was, indeed, the reason why Caffyn made it.

Vincent himself, meanwhile, was walking down Ladbroke Hill to spend the remainder of his last evening in England in loneliness at his rooms; for he had no heart for anything else.

It was dark by that time. Above him was a clear, steel-blue sky; in front, across the hollow, rose Campden Hill, a dim, dark mass, twinkling with lights. By the square at his side a German band was playing the garden music from "Faust," with no more regard for expression and tunefulness than a German band is ever capable of; but distance softened the harshness and imperfection of their rendering, and Siebel's air seemed to Vincent the expression of his own passionate, unrequited devotion.

"I would do anything for her," he said, half aloud, "and yet I dared not tell her then. . . . But if I ever come back to her again—before it is too late—she shall know all she is and always will be to me. I will wait and hope for that."

CHAPTER IV

So Near and Yet So Far

Mark had gone down to "The Woodbines," his uncle's villa at Chigbourne, in pursuance of an invitation given him; and Mr. Lightowler's repeated incitements to pursue his studies with unwearying ardour, only increased Mark's disgust wtih his future, as he walked along the lanes with his relative towards the little church beyond the village on the last Sunday in November.

Uncle Solomon had come out in broadcloth, and a large hat with such an ecclesiastical brim that it influenced his conversation, causing it to be more appropriate than Sunday talk will sometimes be, even amongst the best people. He discoursed of Ritualism, and deplored the hold it had acquired on the vicar and the secret manœuvres of his enemy Humpage in the vestry.

"When we get into the church," he said, "you give a look left of the chancel, close by the door where the shelf is with the poor-loaves. You'll see a painted winder there which that 'Umpage got put up to his aunt—that's his ostentation, that is. I don't believe he ever *had* an aunt; but I don't wish to judge him. Only you look at that window, and tell me how it strikes you afterwards. He's got the artist to do him as the Good Samaritan there! I call it scandalous!—there's no mistake about it; the hair's not the same colour, and the Eastern robes hide it a bit; but he's there for all that. I don't relish seeing 'Umpage figurin' away in painted glass and a great gaudy turban every time I look up, he's quite aggravating enough in his pew. If I chose to go to the expense, *I* could put up a winder too, and have myself done."

"As a saint?" suggested Mark.

"Never you mind. If I liked to be a saint on glass I could, I suppose—I'm a churchwarden, and there's no reason why 'Umpage should have all the painted winders to himself; but I shouldn't care to make myself so conspicuous. 'Umpage, now, he likes that sort of thing."

This brought them to the church, a perpendicular building with a decidedly " Early English " smell in it, and Uncle Solomon led the way to his pew, stopping to nudge Mark as they passed the memorial to his enemy's meretricious aunt ; he nudged him again presently, after he had retired behind the ecclesiastical hat and emerged again to deal out some very large prayer and hymn books as if they were cards.

" That's him—that's 'Umpage," he said in a loud whisper.

Mark looked up in time to see an old gentleman advance to the door of the pew in front of them—a formidable-looking old gentleman, with a sallow face, long iron-grey locks, full grey eyes, a hook-nose, and prominent teeth under a yellowish-grey moustache and beard.

He felt a sudden shame, for behind Mr. Humpage came a pretty child with long floating light hair, with a staid fresh-faced woman in grey, and last a girl of about nineteen or twenty, who seemed to have caught the very audible whisper, for she glanced in its direction as she passed in with the slightest possible gleam of amused surprise in her eyes and a lifting of her delicate eyebrows.

A loud intoned " Amen " came from the vestry just then, the organ played a voluntary, and the vicar and curate marched in at the end of a procession of little surpliced country boys, whose boots made a very undevotional clatter over the brasses and flagstones.

Mark heard little of the service ; he was dimly aware of his uncle singing all the psalms and responses with a lusty tunelessness, and coming to fearful grief in gallant attempts to follow the shrill little choristers over a difficult country of turns and flourishes. He explained afterwards that he liked to set an example of " joining in."

But Mark saw little else but the soft shining knot of hair against the dark sables of the hat and tippet of his beautiful neighbour, and a glimpse of her delicate profile now and then, as she turned to find the places for her little sister, who invariably disdained assistance as long as possible. He began to speculate idly on her probable character. Was she proud ?—there was a shade of disdain about her smile when he first saw her. Self-willed ?—the turn of her graceful head was slightly imperious. She could be tender with it all—he inferred that from the confidence with which the child nestled against her as the sermon began, and the gentle protecting hand that drew her closer still.

Mark had been in and out of love several times in his life; his last affair had been with a pretty, shallow flirt with a clever manner picked up at secondhand, and though she had come to the end of her *répertoire* and ceased to amuse or interest him long before they parted by mutual consent, he chose to believe his heart for ever blighted and proof against all other women, so that he was naturally in the most favourable condition for falling an easy victim.

He thought he had never seen anyone quite like this girl, so perfectly natural and unaffected, and yet with such an indefinable air of distinction in her least movement. What poems, what books might not be written, with such an influence to inspire them!

Would chance ever bring him within the sphere of his new-found divinity? Most probably not. Life has so many of these tantalising half-glimpses, which are never anything more.

When Mark awoke next morning the weather had undergone one of those sudden and complete changes which form one of the chief attractions of our climate; there had been a frost, and with it a thin white mist, which threw its clinging veil over the landscape; the few trees which were near enough to be seen were covered with a kind of thick grey vegetation, that gave them a spectral resemblance to their summer selves. Breakfast was early, as Mark had to be down at St. Peter's as soon after morning chapel as possible, and he came down shivering, to find his uncle already seated.

"The dog-cart will be round in five minutes," said the latter gentleman, with his mouth full; "so make the most of your time. You'll have a cold drive. I'll take you over to the station myself."

He gave Mark much good advice on the way, such as wealthy uncles seem to secrete and exude almost unconsciously, as toads yield moisture; but Mark paid only a moderate degree of attention to it as they spun past the low dim hedges; he hardly noticed what could be seen along the road even, which was not much—a gable-end or a haystack starting out for an instant from the fog, or a shadowy labourer letting himself through a gate—he was thinking of the girl whose eyes had met his the afternoon before.

He had dreamed of her all that night—a confused ridiculous dream, but with a charm about it which was lingering still; he thought they had met and understood one another at once, and he had taken her to the village church where he had first seen her. It was not particularly connected or reverent, but she had not been included in the general travesty—his sleeping brain had respected her image even in its waywardness, and presented it as vivid and charming as in life, so that the dream with all its absurdity seemed to have brought her nearer to him, and he could not resist the fancy that *she* might have some recollection of it too.

A low hum in the still air, and distant reports and choked railway whistles told them they were near the station, but the fog had grown so much denser that there was no other indication of it, until Mr. Lightowler brought up sharply opposite the end of an inclined covered staircase, which seemed to spring out of nothing and lead nowhere, where they left the dog-cart in charge of a flyman and went up to the platform.

"Sharp morning this to stand about in," said Uncle Solomon; "let's go into the waiting-room, there's a fire there." The waiting-room was the usual drab little room, with a bottle of water and tumblers on a bare stained table, and local advertisements on the dingy walls; the gas was lighted, and flickered in a sickly white fishtail flame, but the fire was blazing cheerfully, giving a sheen to the silver-grey fur coat of a child in a wide-brimmed felt hat who stood before it embracing a small round basket out of which a Skye terrier's head was peering inquisitively.

The firelight shone, too, on the graceful form of a girl, who was bending towards it holding out her slender hands to the blaze. Mark scarcely needed to glance at the face she turned towards the newcomers to recognise that fortune had allowed him one more chance; she and her little sister were evidently returning to town by the same train as himself.

Mark got into a compartment next to that in which were Mabel and her sister; it was as near as he dared to venture. He could hear Mabel's clear soft voice saying the usual last words at the carriage window, while Uncle Solomon was repeating his exhortations to study.

Then the train, after one or two false starts on the greasy rails, moved out.

Mark had no paper to amuse him, for the station was not important enough for a bookstall, and there was nothing to be seen out of the windows, which were silvered with frozen moisture. He had the compartment to himself, and lay back looking up rather sentimentally.

" I wonder," he thought, " if they are going all the way to town, and if I could offer to be of any use to them at King's Cross ? At all events, I shall see her once more then."

It was not a very long journey from Chigbourne to the terminus, but, as will be seen hereafter, it was destined to be a landmark in the lives of both Mark and Mabel, though the meeting he looked forward to at the end of it never took place.

CHAPTER V

IN THE FOG

MARK was roused from his reverie in the railway carriage by the fact that the train, after slackening speed rather suddenly, had come to a dead standstill. " Surely we can't be in already," he said to himself, wondering at the way in which his thoughts had outstripped the time. But on looking out he found that he was mistaken—they were certainly not near the metropolis as yet, nor did they appear to have stopped at any station, though from the blank white fog which reigned all around, and drifted in curling wreaths through the window he had let down, it was difficult to make very sure of this.

Along the whole length of the train conversation, no longer drowned by the motion, rose and fell in a kind of drone, out of which occasional scraps of talk from the nearer carriages were more distinctly audible, until there came a general lull as each party gave way to the temptation of listening to the other—for the dullest talk has an extraordinary piquancy under these circumstances, either because the speakers, being unseen, appeal to our imagination, or because they do not suppose that they are being so generally overheard.

But by-and-by it seemed to be universally felt that the stoppage was an unusual one, and windows went down with a clatter along the carriages, while heads were put out inquiringly. Every kind of voice demanded to be told where they were, and why they were stopping, and