CHAPTER VII

A Turning-Point

Mark came down to the little back parlour at Malakoff Terrace one dull January morning to find the family already assembled there, with the exception of Mrs. Ashburn, who was breakfasting in bed—an unusual indulgence for her.

"Mark," said Trixie, as she leaned back in her chair, and put up her face for his morning greeting, "there's a letter for you on your plate."

It was not difficult to observe a suppressed excitement amongst all the younger members of his family concerning this letter; they had finished their breakfast and fallen into some curious speculations as to Mark's correspondent before he came in. Now three pairs of eyes were watching him as he strolled up to his seat; Mr. Ashburn alone seemed unconscious or indifferent.

Of late Mark had not had very many letters, and this particular one bore the name of "Chilton & Fladgate" on the flap of the envelope. The Ashburns were not a literary family, but they knew this as the name of a well-known firm of publishers, and it had roused their curiosity.

Mark read the name too. For a moment it gave him a throb of excitement, the idea coming to him that, somehow, the letter concerned his own unfortunate manuscripts. It was true that he had never had any communication with this particular firm, but these wild, vague impressions are often independent of actual fact; he took it up and half began to open it.

Then he remembered what it probably was, and, partly with the object of preserving Vincent's secret still as far as possible, but chiefly, it must be owned, from malicious pleasure he took in disappointing the expectation he saw around him, put the letter still unopened in his pocket.

"Why don't you open it?" asked Trixie impatiently, who was cherishing the hope that some magnificent literary success had come at last to her favourite brother.

"Manners," exclaimed Mark laconically.

"Nonsense," said Trixie, "you don't treat us with such ceremony as all that."

"Not lately," said Mark; "that's how it is—it's bad

for a family to get lax in these little matters of mutual courtesy. I'm going to see if I can't raise your tone—this is the beginning."

"I'm sure we're very much obliged to you," from Martha; "I'm quite satisfied with my own tone, it's quite high enough for me, thank you."

"Yes, I forgot," said Mark, "I've heard it is very high indeed sometimes. I wronged you Martha. Still, you know, we might (all except *you*, Martha) be more polite to one another without causing ourselves any internal injury, mightn't we?"

"Well, Mark," said Trixie, "all you have to do is to ask our leave to open the letter, if you're really so particular."

"Is that in the Etiquette Book?" inquired Mark.

"Don't be ridiculous—why *don't* you ask our leave?"

"I suppose because I want to eat my breakfast—nothing is so prejudicial, my love, to the furtherance of the digestive process as the habit of reading at meals—any medical man will tell you that."

"Perhaps," suggested Martha, "Mark has excellent reasons for preferring to read his letter alone."

"Do you know, Martha," said Mark, "I really think there's something in that."

"So do I," said Martha, "more than you would care for us to know, evidently; but don't be afraid, Mark, whether it's a bill, or a love-letter, or another publisher's rejection, we don't want to know your secrets—do we Cuthbert?"

"Very amiable of you to say so," said Mark. "Then I shan't annoy you if I keep my letter to myself, shall I? Because I rather thought of doing it."

"Eh? Doing what? What is Mark saying about a letter?" broke in Mr. Ashburn. He had a way of striking suddenly like this into conversations.

"Somebody has written me a letter, father," said Mark. "I was telling Martha I thought I should read it—presently."

But even when he was alone he felt in no hurry to possess himself of the contents. "I expect it's the usual thing," he thought. "Poor Vincent is out of all that now. Let's see how they let him down!" and he read:

"DEAR SIR,—We have read the romance entitled

'Glamour,' which you have done us the honour to forward some time since. It is a work which appears to us to possess decided originality and merit, and which may be received with marked favour by the public, while it can hardly fail in any case to obtain a reception which will probably encourage its author to further efforts. Of course there is a certain risk attending its reception which renders it impossible for us to offer such terms for a first book as may be legitimately demanded hereafter for a second production by the same pen. We will give you . . . " (and here followed the terms, which struck Mark as fairly liberal for a first book by an unknown author). "Should you accept our offer, will you do us the favour to call upon us here at your earliest convenience, when all preliminary matters can be discussed.

"We are, etc.,

"CHILTON & FLADGATE."

Mark ran hurriedly through this letter with a feeling, first of incredulous wonder, then of angry protest against the bull-headed manner in which Fortune had dealt out this favour.

Vincent had been saved the dreary delays, the disappointments and discouragments, which are the lot of most first books; he had won a hearing at once—and where was the use of it? no praise or fame among men could reach him now.

If he had been alive, Mark thought bitterly, if a letter like this would have rescued him from all he detested, and thrown open to him the one career for which he had any ambition, he might have waited for it long and vainly enough. But he began by being indifferent, and, if Fortune had required any other inducement to shower her gifts on him, his death had supplied it.

He chafed over this as he went up to the City, for there was another holiday-class that day at St. Peter's; he thought of it at intervals during the morning, and always resentfully. What increased his irritation above everything was the fact that the publishers evidently regarded *him* as the author of the book, and he would have the distasteful task put upon him of enlightening them.

When the day's duties were over he set out to call at once and explain his position to Messrs. Chilton & Fladgate.

Mark, having sent up his name by one of the clerks behind the imposing mahogany counters, was shown through various swinging glass doors into a waiting-room, where the magazines and books symmetrically arranged on the table gave a certain flavour of dentistry to the place.

Mark turned them over with a quite unreasonable nervousness, but the fact was he shrank from what he considered the humiliation of explaining that he was a mere agent; it occurred to him for the first time, too, that Holroyd's death might possibly complicate matters, and he felt a vague anger against his dead friend for leaving him in such a position.

The clerk returned with a message that Mr. Fladgate would be happy to see Mark at once, and so he followed upstairs and along passages with glimpses through open doors of rooms full of clerks and desks, until they came to a certain room into which Mark was shown—a small room with a considerable litter of large wicker trays filled with proofs, packets and rolls of manuscripts of all sizes and piles of books and periodicals, in the midst of which Mr. Fladgate was sitting with his back to the light, which was admitted through windows of ground-glass.

He rose and came forward to meet Mark, and Mark saw a little reddish-haired and whiskered man, with quick eyes, and a curious perpendicular fold in the forehead above a short, blunt nose, a mobile mouth, and a pleasantly impulsive manner.

"How do you do, Mr. Beauchamp?" he said heartily, using the *nom de plume* with an air of implied compliment; "and so you've made up your mind to entrust yourself to us, have you? That's right. I don't think you'll find any reason to regret it, I don't indeed."

Mark said he was sure of that.

"Well, now, as to the book," continued Mr. Fladgate; "I've had the pleasure of looking through it myself, as well as Mr. Blackshaw, our reader, and I must tell you that I agree with him in considering that you have written a very remarkable book. As we told you, you know, it may or may not prove a pecuniary success, but, however that may be, my opinion of it will remain the same; it ought, in my judgment, to ensure you a certain standing at once—at once."

Mark heard this with a pang of jealousy. Long before,

he had dreamed of just such an interview, in which he should be addressed in some such manner—his dream was being fulfilled now with relentless mockery!

"But there is a risk," said Mr. Fladgate, "a decided risk, which brings me to the subject of terms. Are you satisfied with the offer we made to you? You see that a first book——"

"Excuse me for one moment," said Mark desperately, "I'm afraid you imagine that—that *I* wrote the book?"

"That certainly was my impression," said Mr. Fladgate, with a humorous light in his eye; "the only address on the manuscript was yours, and I came to the not unnatural conclusion that Mr. Ashburn and Mr. Beauchamp were one and the same. Am I to understand that is *not* the case?"

"The book," said Mark—what it cost him to say this—"the book was written by a friend of mine, who went abroad some time ago."

"Indeed? Well, we should prefer to treat with him in person, of course, if possible."

"It isn't possible," said Mark, "my friend was lost at sea, but he asked me to represent him in this matter, and I believe I know his wishes."

"I've no doubt of it; but you see, Mr.—Mr. Ashburn, this must be considered a little. I suppose you have some authority from him in writing, to satisfy us (merely as a matter of business) that we are dealing with the right person?"

"I have not indeed," said Mark; "my friend was very anxious to retain his incognito."

"He must have been—very much so," said Mr. Fladgate, coughing; "well, perhaps you can bring me some writing of his to that effect? You may have it among your papers, eh?"

"No," said Mark, "my friend did not think it necessary to give me one—he was anxious to——"

"Oh, quite so—then you can procure me a line or two perhaps?"

"I told you that my friend was dead," said Mark a little impatiently.

"Ah, so you did, to be sure, I forgot. I thought—but no matter. Well, Mr. Ashburn, if you can't say anything more than this—anything, you understand, which puts you in a position to treat with us, I'm afraid—I'm *afraid*

I must ask time to think over this. If your friend is really dead, I suppose your authority is determined. Perhaps, however, his—ahem—anxiety to preserve his incognito has led him to allow this rumour of his death to be circulated ? "

" I don't think that is likely," said Mark, wondering at an undercurrent of meaning in the publisher's tone, a meaning which had nothing sinister in it, and yet seemed urging him to contradict himself for some reason.

" That is your last word, then ? " said Mr. Fladgate, and there was a sharp inflection as of disappointment and irritation in his voice, and the fold in his forehead deepened.

" It must be," said Mark, rising, " I have kept you too long already."

" If you really *must* go," said Mr. Fladgate, not using the words in their conventional sense of polite dismissal. " But, Mr. Ashburn, are you quite sure that this interview might not be saved from coming to nothing, as it seems about to do ? Might not a word or two from you set things right again ? I don't wish to force you to tell me anything you would rather keep concealed—but really, this story you tell about a Mr. Vincent Beauchamp who is dead only ties our hands, you understand—ties our hands ! "

" If so," said Mark, uncomfortably, " I can only say I am very sorry for it—I don't see how I can help it."

He was beginning to feel that this business of Holroyd's had given him quite trouble enough.

" Now, Mr. Ashburn, as I said before, I should be the last man to press you—but really, you know, *really*—this is a trifle absurd ! I think you might be a little more frank with me, I do indeed. There is no reason why you should not trust me ! "

Was this man tempting him, thought Mark. Could he be so anxious to bring out this book that he was actually trying to induce him to fabricate some story which would get over the difficulties that had arisen ?

As a mere matter of fact, it may be almost unnecessary to mention that no such idea had occurred to worthy Mr. Fladgate, who, though he certainly was anxious to secure the book if he could by any legitimate means, was anything but a publishing Mephistopheles. He had an object, however, in making this last appeal for confidence, as will appear immediately ; but, innocent as it was, Mark's imagination conjured up a bland demon tempting him to

some act of unspeakable perfidy; he trembled—but not with terror. "What do you mean?" he stammered.

Mr. Fladgate gave a glance of keen amusement at the pale, troubled face of the young man before him. "What do I mean?" he repeated. "Come, I've known sensitive women try to conceal their identity, and even their sex, from their own publishers; I've known men even persuade themselves they didn't care for notoriety—but such a determined instance of what I must take leave to call the literary ostrich I don't think I ever *did* meet before! I never met a writer so desperately anxious to remain unknown that he would rather take his manuscript back than risk his secret with his own publisher. But don't you see that you have raised (I don't use the term in the least offensively) the mask, so to speak—you should have sent somebody else here to-day if you wished to keep me in the dark. I've not been in business all these years, Mr. Ashburn, without gaining a little experience. I think, I *do* think, I am able to know an author when I see him—we are all liable to error, but I am very much mistaken if this Mr. Vincent Beauchamp (who was so unfortunately lost at sea) is not to be recovered alive by a little judicious dredging. Do think if you can't produce him; come, he's not in very deep water—bring him up, Mr. Ashburn, bring him up!"

"You make this very difficult for me," said Mark, in a low voice; he knew now how greatly he had misjudged the man, who had spoken with such an innocent, amiable pride in his own surprising discernment; he also felt how easy and how safe it would be to take advantage of this misunderstanding, and what a new future it might open to him—but he was struggling still against the temptation so unconsciously held out to him.

"I might retort that, I think. Now, be reasonable, Mr. Ashburn. I assure you the writer, whoever he may be, has no cause to be ashamed of the book—the time will come when he will probably be willing enough to own it. Still, if he wishes to keep his real name secret, I tell him, through you, that he may surely be content to trust that to us. We have kept such secrets before—not very long, to be sure, as a general rule; but then that was because the authors usually relieved us from the trouble—the veil was never lifted by us."

" I think you said," began Mark, as if thinking aloud, " that other works by—by the same author would be sure of acceptance ? "

" I should be very glad to have an opportunity, in time, of producing another book by Mr. Vincent Beauchamp—but Mr. Beauchamp, as you explained, is unhappily no more. Perhaps these are earlier manuscripts of his ? "

Mark had been seized with the desire of making one more attempt, in spite of his promise to his uncle, to launch those unhappy paper ships of his—" Sweet Bells Jangled " and " One Fair Daughter." For an instant it occurred to him that he might answer this last question in the affirmative ; he had little doubt that if he did his books would meet with a very different reception from that of Messrs. Leadbitter and Gandy ; still, that would only benefit Holroyd—not himself, and then he recollected, only just in time, that the difference in handwriting (which was very considerable) would betray him. He looked confused, and said nothing.

Mr. Fladgate's patience began to tire. " We don't seem to be making any way, do we ? " he said, with rather affected pleasantry. " I'm afraid I must ask you to come to a decision on this without any more delay. Here is the manuscript you sent us. If the real author is dead we are compelled to return it with much regret. If you can tell me anything which does away with the difficulty, this is the time to tell it. Of course you will do exactly as you please, but after what you have chosen to tell us we can hardly see our way, as I said, to treat with you without some further explanation. Come, Mr. Ashburn, am I to have it or not ? "

" Give me a little time," said Mark faintly, and the publisher, as he had expected, read the signs of wavering in his face, though it was not of the nature he believed it to be.

Mark sat down again and rested his chin on his hand, with his face turned away from the other's eyes. A conflict was going on within him such as he had never been called upon to fight before, and he had only a very few minutes allowed him to fight it.

Perhaps in these crises a man does not always arrange the pros and cons to contend for him in the severely logical manner with which we find him doing it in print. The forces on the enemy's side can generally be induced to

desert. All the advantages which would follow if he once allowed himself to humour the publisher's mistake were very prominently before Mark's mind—the dangers and difficulties kept in the background. He was incapable of considering the matter coolly; he felt an over-mastering impulse upon him, and he had never trained himself to resist his impulses for very long. There was very little of logical balancing going on in his brain; it began to seem terribly, fatally easy to carry out this imposition. The fraud itself grew less ugly and more harmless every instant. He saw his own books, so long kept out in the cold by ignorant prejudice, accepted on the strength of Holroyd's "Glamour," and, once fairly before the public, taking the foremost rank in triumph and rapidly eclipsing their forerunner. He would be appreciated at last, delivered from the life he hated, able to lead the existence he longed for. All he wanted was a hearing; there seemed no other way to obtain it; he had no time to lose. How could it injure Holroyd? He had not cared for fame in life; would he miss it after his death? The publishers might be mistaken; the book might be unnoticed altogether; *he* might prove to be the injured person.

But, as Mr. Fladgate seemed convinced of its merit, as he would evidently take anything alleged to come from the same source without a very severe scrutiny, there was nothing for it but to risk this contingency.

Mark was convinced that publishers were influenced entirely by unreasoning prejudices; he thoroughly believed that his works would carry all before them if any firm could once overcome their repugnance to his powerful originality, and here was one firm at least prepared to lay that aside at a word from him. Why should he let it go unsaid?

The money transactions caused him the most hesitation. If he took money for another man's work, there was a name, and a very ugly name, for that. But he would *not* keep it. As soon as he learnt the names of Holroyd's legal representatives, whoever they might be, he would pay the money over to them without mentioning the exact manner in which it had become due. In time, when he had achieved a reputation for himself, he could give back the name he had borrowed for a time—at least he told himself he could do so.

He stood in no danger of detection, or, if he did, it was

very slight. Vincent was not the man to confide in more than one person; he had owned as much. He had been reticent enough to conceal his real surname from his publishers, and now he could never reveal the truth.

All this rushed through his mind in a hurried, confused form; all his little vanities and harmless affectations and encouragements of false impressions had made him the less capable of resisting now.

"Well?" said Mr. Fladgate at last.

Mark's heart beat fast. He turned round and faced the publisher. "I suppose I had better trust you," he said awkwardly, and with a sort of shame-faced constraint that was admirably in keeping with his confession, though not artificial.

"I think so. Then you are the man—this book Glamour' is your own work?"

"If you must have it—yes," said Mark desperately.

The words were spoken now, and for good or ill he must abide by them henceforth to the end.

CHAPTER VIII

Repente Turpissimus

No sooner had Mark declared himself the author of his dead friend's book than he would have given anything to recall his words, not so much from conscience (though he did feel he had suddenly developed into a surprisingly finished scoundrel), as from a fear that his lie might after all be detected. He sat staring stupidly at Mr. Fladgate, who patted him on the shoulder with well-meant encouragement; he had never seen quite so coy an author before.

"I'm very glad to make Mr. Vincent Beauchamp's acquaintance—at last," he said, beaming with honest pride at the success of his tactics, "and now we can come to terms again."

He did not find Mark more difficult to deal with than most budding authors, and in this case Mark was morbidly anxious to get the money part of the transaction over as soon as possible; he could not decide whether his conscience would be better or worse satisfied if he insisted on the best pecuniary terms he could obtain, so in his indecision he took the easier course of agreeing to everything.

" About the title now ? " said Mr. Fladgate, when the terms had been reduced to a formal memorandum. " I don't think I quite like your present one ; too moonshiny, eh ? "

Mark owned that it did sound a little moonshiny.

" I think, too, I rather think, there's something very like it out already, and that may lead to unpleasantness, you know. Now, can you suggest something else which will give a general idea of the nature of the book ? "

As Mark had absolutely no idea what the book was about, he could not.

" Well," Mr. Blackshaw suggested something like " Enchantment," or " Witchery."

" I don't care about either of those," said Mark, who found this sort of dissembling unexpectedly easy.

" No," said Mr. Fladgate, " No. I think you're right. Now, I had a notion—I don't think what you will think of it—but I thought you might call it ' A Modern Merlin,' eh ? "

" ' A Modern Merlin,' " repeated Mark, thoughtfully.

" Yes, it's not *quite* the right thing, perhaps, but it's taking, I think—taking."

Mark said it was taking.

" Of course *your* hero is not exactly a magician, but it brings in the ' Vivien ' part of the story, don't you see ? Of course Mark did not see, but he thought it best to agree. " Well," continued Mr. Fladgate, who was secretly rather proud of his title, " how does it strike you now ? it seems to me as good a title as we are like to hit upon."

After all, Mark thought, what did it matter ? it wasn't his book, except in names. " I think it's excellent," he said, " excellent ; and, by the way, Mr. Fladgate," he added, " I should like to change the *nom de plume* : it's a whim of mine, perhaps, but there's another I've been thinking lately I should like better."

" By all means," said the other, taking a pencil to make the necessary alteration of the manuscript, " but why not use your real name ? I prophesy you'll be proud of that book some day ; think over it."

" No," said Mark, " I don't wish my real name to appear just yet " (he hardly knew why ; perhaps a lingering sense of shame held him back from this more open dishonesty). " Will you strike out ' Vincent Beauchamp,' and put in

Cyril Ernstone,' please ?" For "Cyril Ernstone" had been the pseudonym which he had chosen long ago for himself, and he wished to be able to use it now, since he must not use his own.

"Very well, then, we may consider that settled. We think of bringing out the book as soon as possible, without waiting for the spring season; it will go to press at once, and we will send you the proofs as soon as we get them in."

"There's one thing, perhaps, I'd better mention," said Mark suddenly; after he had turned to go a new danger had occurred to him—"the handwriting of the manuscript is not mine. I—I thought it as well to tell you that beforehand; it might lead to mistakes. I had it copied out for me by—by a friend."

Mr. Fladgate burst out laughing. "Pardon me," he said, when he had finished, "but really I couldn't help it, you do seem to have been so bent on hoodwinking us."

"And yet you have found me out, you see," said Mark, with a very unmirthful smile.

Mr. Fladgate smiled too, making a little gesture of his hand, thinking very possibly that few precautions could be proof against his sagacity, and they parted.

Mark went down the stairs and through the clerks' room into the street with a dazed and rather awestruck feeling upon him.

At home that evening he took down his manuscript novels (which of course he had *not* burnt) and read them again carefully. Yes; there was power in them, he felt it, a copious flow of words, sparkling with and melting pathos. The white heat at which the lines were written surprised even himself. It was humiliating to think that without the subterfuge that had been forced upon him he might have found it impossible to find publishers who would appreciate these merits, for after Messrs. Leadbitter & Gandy's refusal he had recognised this to the full; but now, at least, they were insured against any such fate. A careful reading was absolutely necessary to a proper estimation of them, and a careful reading they had never had as yet, and would receive at last, or, if they did not, it would only be because the reputation he had appropriated would procure them a ready acceptance without any such preliminary ordeal. The great point gained was that they would be published, and after that he feared nothing.

Very soon his chief feeling was one of impatience for Holroyd's book to come out and make way for his own: then any self-reproach he might still feel would be drowned in a sense of triumph which would justify the means he had taken; so he waited eagerly for the arrival of the first proofs.

They arrived at last. As he came back one evening to Malakoff Terrace, Trixie ran to meet him, holding up two tightly rolled parcels, with a great curiosity in her eyes.

"They came this afternoon," she whispered, "and oh, Mark, I couldn't help it; I tore one end a little and peeped are they really part of a book—is it *yours?*"

Mark thought he had better accustom himself to this kind of thing as early as possible.

"Yes, Trixie," he said, "they're the first proofs of my book."

"O-oh!" cried Trixie, with a gasp of delight, "not Sweet Bells Jangled,' Mark?"

"No, *not* 'Sweet Bells Jangled,' it—it's a book you don't know about—a little thing I don't expect very much from, but my publishers seem to like it, and I can follow it up with the 'Bells' afterwards."

He was turning over the rough greyish pages as he spoke, and Trixie was peeping greedily at them, too, with her pretty chin dug into his shoulders.

"And did you really write all that?" she said; 'how interesting it looks, you clever boy! You *might* have told me you were doing it, though. What's it about?"

"'How can I tell you before I know myself," said Mark quite forgetting himself in his impatience. "I—I mean, Trixie, that I can't correct these proofs as they ought to be corrected while you stay here chattering."

"I'll go in a minute, Mark; but you won't have time to correct them before dinner, you know. When did you write it?"

"What *does* it matter when I wrote it!" said Mark irritably; "if it hadn't been written the proofs wouldn't be here, would they? Is there anything else you would like to know—*how* I wrote it, where I wrote it, why I wrote it? You seem to think it a most extraordinary thing that anything I write should be printed at all, Trixie."

"I don't know why you should speak like that, Mark," said Trixie, rather hurt; "you know a little while ago

you never expected such a thing yourself. I can't help wanting to know all I can about it. Ma won't like it," concluded Trixie, shaking her head wisely.

" No ; mother objects to that kind of thing, and, ahem, Trixie, it might be as well to say nothing about it to any of them just at present. There will only be a fuss about it, and I can't stand that."

Trixie promised silence. " I'm so glad about it, though, you can't think, Mark," she said ; " and this isn't one of your *great* books, either, you said, didn't you ? "

" No," said Mark ; " it's not one of *them*. I haven't put my best work into it."

" You put your best work into the two that came back, didn't you ? " asked Trixie naïvely. " But they won't come back any more, will they ? They'll be glad of them if this is a success."

" Fladgate will be glad of them, I fancy, in any case. I've got a chance at last, Trixie. A chance at last ! "

Later that night he locked himself in the room which he used as a sitting-room and bed-room combined, and set himself, not without repugnance, to go steadily through the proofs, and make the acquaintance of the work he had made his own.

Much has been said of the delight with which an author reads his first proofs, and possibly the sensation is a wholly pleasurable one to some ; to others it is not without its drawbacks. Ideas that seemed vivid and bright enough when they were penned have a bald, tame look in the new form in which they come back. The writer finds himself judging the work as a stranger's, and forming the worst opinions of it. He sees hideous gaps and crudities beyond all power of correction, and for the first time, perhaps, since he learned that his manuscript was accepted, his self-doubts return to him.

But Mark's feelings were much more complicated than this ; all the gratified pride of an author was naturally denied to him, and it was thoroughly distasteful to him to carry out his scheme of deception by such sordid details as the necessary corrections of printers' errors.

But he was anxiously eager to find out what kind of literary bantling was this which he had fathered so fraudulently ; he had claimed it in blind reliance on the publisher's evident enthusiasm. Had he made a mistake after all ?

What if it proved something which could do him no credit whatever—a trap into which his ambition had led him! The thought that this might be so made him very uneasy. Poor Holroyd, he thought, was a very good fellow—an excellent fellow, but not exactly the man to write a book of extraordinary merit—clever, perhaps, but clever in an unobtrusive way—and Mark's tendency was to judge, as he expected to be judged himself, by outsides.

With these misgivings crowded upon him, he sat down to read the opening chapters. He was not likely to be much overcome by admiration in any case, for his habitual attitude in studying even the greatest works was critical, as he felt the presence of eccentricities or shortcomings which he himself would have avoided.

But at least, as he read on, his greatest anxiety was set at rest—if he could judge by the instalment before him, the book was not in any danger of coming absolutely to grief—it would do his reputation no harm. It was not, to be sure, the sort of book he would have written himself, as he affected the cynical mode of treatment and the indiscriminate desire which a rather young writer feels instinctively that the world expects from him. Still, it was not so bad. It was slightly dreamy and mystical in parts, the work of a man who had lived more amongst books than in the world, but some of the passages glowed with the rich imagery of a true poet, and here and there were indications of a quiet and cultivated humour which would recommend itself to all who do not consider the humorous element in literature as uncanny, if not personally offensive. The situations were strong, too, and at least one of the characters was obviously studied from life with a true and tender observation.

All of this Mark did not see, nor was he capable of seeing, but he thought that, with a little "weeding" and "writing-up," the book would do, and set himself to supply what was wanting with a laudable self-devotion. His general plan of accomplishing this may be described here once for all.

He freshened up chapters with touches of satire, and gave them a more scholarly air by liberal allusions to the classics; he re-wrote some of the more descriptive and romantic passages, putting his finest and most florid epithets into them with what he felt was very like disinterestedness, and a reckless waste of good material. And he cut down the

dialogue in places, or gave it a more colloquial turn, so as to suit the tastes of the average reader, and he worked up some of the crises which struck him as inadequately treated.

After that he felt much easier; either considering that these improvements constituted a sort of atonement, or that they removed any chance of failure. As this book was to go forth and herald his own, it was vitally important that it should make as imposing an appearance as possible.

CHAPTER IX

REVOLT

DON'T talk to me in that ribald tone, Mark," Mrs. Ashburn was saying; " I have enough to bear as it is. Once for all I ask you, Is it true what my brother tells us, that you have returned to the mire like the sow in the Scriptures; that you are going to let your name be connected with—with a novel."

" Quite true," said Mark; " I hope to be connected with many novels."

" Mark," said his mother, " you know what I think about that. I implore you to pause while there's time still, before doing what you can never recall. It's not only from worldly motives that I ask it. Surely you can sacrifice a contemptible vanity to your duty towards your mother. I may be wrong in my prejudices, but still I have a right to expect you to regard them. I ask you to withdraw from this. Are you going to refuse me? "

Mrs. Ashburn's harsh tones carried a very genuine feeling and concern. She truly believed that the paths of fiction would lead to her son's spiritual as well as his material ruin, and Mark had sense enough to recognise the reality of this belief of hers, and drop the levity he had assumed for defensive purposes

His father had, as usual, taken no active part in the interview; he sat looking dolefully at the fire, as if anxious to remain neutral as long as possible.

So Mark addressed himself to his mother only. " I'm sorry if it grieves you, mother," he said, gently enough; " but you really must let me go my own way in this—it is no use at all asking me to withdraw now. . . . I have gone too far. . . . Some day you will see that I was not so very