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

foolish after all. I promise you that. Wouldn't you rather think of me as living the life I could be happy in—being famous, perhaps, even, some day—than dragging out my days in a school or slaving at a profession I can never care for? Of course you would! And a novel isn't such an awful thing, if you could only bring yourself to think so. You never will read one, you know, so you can't be a very impartial judge."

Mrs. Ashburn read very little of any literature; what she did read being chiefly the sermons and biographies of Dissenting divines, and she had never felt any desire to stimulate her imagination by anything much more exciting, especially by accounts of things that never happened, and were consequently untruthful. Her extreme horror of fiction was a form of bigotry now almost extinct, but she had grown up in it and retained it in all the old Puritan vigour.

She showed no signs of being at all impressed by Mark's remonstrance; her eyes were severely cold, and her voice measured and loud as she replied, without looking at him:

"You won't make me change my opinion in the least, Mark, if you were to talk till daylight. If you set yourself against my wishes in this, we have quite made up our minds how to act, have we not, Matthew?"

"Yes, quite," said Mr. Ashburn, uneasily, "quite; but I hope, Mark, my boy, I hope you won't cross your mother in this, when you see how strongly she feels about it. I want to keep my children about me while I can; I don't wish any one to go if it can be arranged—if it can be arranged."

"Do you mean, mother, that if I don't do as you wish, I am to go?" asked Mark.

"I do," said his mother. "I won't encourage any son of mine against my conscience and my principles. If you choose to live a life of frivolity and idleness, you shall not lead it under my roof; so you know what to expect if you persist in disobeying me—us, I mean."

"I think I had better go," said Mark; "I don't quite see what enormity I have been guilty of, but if you look at things in that light, there is no more to be said. I have chosen my life, and I don't mean to go back from it. I will see about finding lodgings as soon as I can, and you shall not be troubled with me any longer than I can help."

"Mark, don't be headstrong—don't let your passion get the better of you!" cried his mother.

"I'm not in the least angry," he said; "I don't wish to go, if you wish me to stay; but if you meant what you said just now, I have no choice."

His mother was much too proud to weaken her authority by retracting. She still hoped that he would yield if she remained firm, but yielding was out of the question with Mark then, and, besides, independence had its charms, though he would not have been the first to loosen the tie.

"Blame your wicked pride and selfishness, Mark, not your mother, who is only anxious for your good. Go, if you will, but don't dare to expect a blessing on your disobedience."

"Do you say go, too, father?" said Mark.

"You hear what your mother says. What else can I say?" he answered feebly; "it's very painful to me—all this—but you must take your own course."

"I see I must," said Mark, and left the room.

"You've been very hard with the boy, Jane," said her husband, when they were alone, and she had sat for some time with a book open but unread before her; "I really do think you've been very hard."

"Do you want to encourage him against his mother?" she asked.

"No, no, you know I don't, Jane. Anything you think right—but I think you were hard."

"If I was, it was for his good," she said; "I have done what I thought right, and we have sat up long enough. We can do no good by talking over it any more, Matthew. Perhaps Mark will think differently to-morrow."

Trixie had been waiting for Mark in the adjoining room, into which she beckoned him as he passed the door.

"How did it end?" she whispered. "You were very quiet in there; is it settled?"

"Yes, it's settled," he said, "I'm to go, Trixie; I shall have to shift for myself. They won't have me here any longer!"

"Oh, Mark!" cried Trixie. "Take me with you, do, it will be so horrid at home with only Martha and Cuthbert. You and I always got on together; let me come too!"

"I can't," said Mark, "not yet—by-and-by, perhaps, Trixie, when I'm a rich man, you know, we can manage it—just now I shall hardly be able to keep myself."

" I'll work hard at my drawing and get into the Academy. I've begun features already, and I shall soon get into the antique—then we can be famous together, you know."

" We shall see," said Mark ; " in the meantime, Trixie, I think we had better both go to bed."

When he was alone again and had time to think over the day which had proved so eventful, he could not find it in him to regret what had happened. He had no sentimental feelings about his banishment, the bosom of his family had not been a very appreciative or sympathetic one, and he had always intended to go forth from it as soon as he could afford it.

If he had really committed the offence for which he was to be driven from home, he could have considered himself a most interesting martyr ; he did his best to do so as it was, but not with complete success. Betraying a dead man's trust is scarcely heroic, and even Mark felt that dimly, and could not dwell on his ill-treatment as he would dearly like to have done.

But there was something exciting for him, notwithstanding, in the future ; he was to go out into the world and shift for himself, and conquer ; he would have a part, and it might be a difficult one, to play for a season ; but after that he could resume his own character and take the place he meant to fill in the world, feeling at last the applause he won was his by right.

Vincent Holroyd had been unselfish in life ; Mark had always recognised that trait in his character, though the liking he had for the man had not been much the stronger on that account—if now Vincent could see any brief and fleeting fame which his book might gain used as the stepping-stone to his friend's advancement, surely, Mark told himself, he would scarcely grudge it.

But he hardly cared to justify to himself what he had done by any casuistry of this kind ; he preferred to shut his eyes resolutely to the morality of the thing ; he might have acted like the basest scoundrel, very likely he had. Still, no one did, no one need, suspect him. All he had to do was to make the best use of the advantage he had snatched ; when he could feel that he had done that, then he would feel justified ; meanwhile he must put up with a few natural twinges of conscience now and then, when he was not feeling well.

The next morning breakfast passed without any reference to the scene of the night before; Martha and Cuthbert both knew of what had happened, but kept silence, and if Mrs. Ashburn had any hopes that Mark would recant, she was disappointed.

That evening he informed them that he had taken rooms, and should not remain at Malakoff Terrace for more than a few days longer; his announcement being met by a grim "Very well, Mark, just as you please," from his mother; and though her heart sank at his words, and her last hope of prevailing died away, she never returned to the charge in any way, recognising that it was useless.

When the day for his departure came, there were no scenes; even Trixie, who felt it most, was calm, for after all, Mark would not be so very far away; he had said she might come and see him sometimes; the other two were civil, and cold, there being that curious latent antipathy between them and him which sometimes exists between members of a family.

Mr. Ashburn had mumbled his good-byes with a touch of emotion and even shame in his manner as he shuffled away to his office.

"I don't want you to feel we've cast you off," he said nervously. "Your mother says rather more than she exactly feels at times; but it's better for you to go, my boy, better for all parties concerned. Only, if you find yourself in—in any difficulties, come back to us, or—that is," he amended, "write, or come to me at the office, that will be better, perhaps."

But Mrs. Ashburn's last words were, "Good-bye, Mark. I never thought to part with a son of mine in anger; we may never meet again, but you may live to be sorry for the grief you have caused your mother, when you stand one day over her grave."

This would have been more impressive if Mrs. Ashburn had not been so much addicted to indulging in such doleful predictions on less adequate occasions that she had discounted much of the effect that properly belonged to them; even as it was, however, they cut Mark for the moment; he half offered to embrace his mother, but she made no response, and after waiting for a while, and finding that she made no sign, he went out with a slight shrug of expostulation.

When he had left the room, she half rose as if to follow, but stopped half way irresolute, while the cab which he had engaged to take himself and his luggage to his new quarters, drove off and then she went upstairs and shut herself in her bedroom for half-an-hour, and the maid, who was "doing the rooms" hard by, reported afterwards to the cook that she had "heard missus takin' on awful in there, a-sobbin', and groanin', and prayin' she was, all together like, it quite upset her to 'ear it."

There were no traces of emotion on her face, however, when she came down again, and only an additional shade of grimness in her voice and manner to tell of the half-hour's agony in which her mother's heart had warred against her pride and her principles.

CHAPTER X

LAUNCHED

MARK had now cut himself adrift and established himself in rooms in one of the small streets about Connaught Square, where he waited for his schemes to accomplish themselves. He still retained his mastership at St. Peter's, although he hoped to be able to throw that up as soon as he could do so with any prudence, and the time that was not occupied by his school duties he devoted to the perfecting of his friend's work. It was hardly a labour of love, and he came to it with an ever-increasing weariness; all the tedious toiling through piles of proofs and revised proofs, the weeding out of ingenious perversions which seemed to possess a hydra-like power of multiplication after the first eradication, began to inspire him with an infinite loathing of this book which was his and not his own.

It had never interested him; he had never been able to feel the slightest admiration for any part of it, and at time he ceased to believe in it altogether, and think that, after all, he had transgressed to no purpose, and that his own book would have been a stronger staff to lean upon than this reed he had borrowed. But he had to go on with it now, and trust to his good-luck for the consequences; but still there were moments when he trembled at what he had done, and could not bear to be so constantly reminded of it.

There was a little story in the book which one of the subordinate characters told to a child, the distressing history of a small sugar prince on a Twelfth-cake, who believed himself to be a fairy, and was taken tenderly away from a children's party by a little girl who, as the prince supposed, would restore him somehow to his proper position inFairyland ; instead of which, however, she took him to an ordinary nursery and ate him.

Mark was doubtful of the wisdom of retaining this story in the book at all—it seemed to him out of place there—but as he had some scruples about cutting it out, he allowed it to remain, a decision which was not without after-effect upon his fortunes.

The title of the book underwent one more change, for Mr. Fladgate's mind misgave him at the last moment as to his own first suggestion, and it was finally settled that the book should be called " Illusion," which suited Mark quite as well as anything else.

And so in due time Mark read, with a certain curious thrill, the announcement that " Illusion," a romance by Cyril Ernstone, was " now ready at all libraries " ; he sent no presentation copies, not even to Trixie—he had thought of doing so, but when it came to the point he could not.

It was early one Saturday afternoon in March ; Mark had walked back by a long round from the school to his lodgings. When he ran up to his rooms to change his hat and coat, he saw that on his table which made him forget everything else. It was a packet enclosed in a wrapper which bore the name of his publishers on the outside, and he knew at once before opening it that it contained reviews. He tore off the wrapper eagerly, for now at last he would learn whether he had made a bold and successful stroke, or only a frightful mistake.

Beginners have taken up reviews before now, cowering in anticipation before the curse of Balaam, to receive an unexpected benediction ; but perhaps no one could be quite so unprepared for this pleasant form of surprise as Mark, for others have written the books that are criticised, and though they may have worked themselves up into a ferment of doubt and humility, deep down in their hearts there is a wonderfully calm acceptance, after the first shock, of the most extravagant eulogy.

The opening paragraphs of the first critique were enough to relieve Mark's main anxiety; Holroyd's book was not a failure—there could be no doubt of that—it was treated with respectful consideration as the work of a man who was entitled to be taken seriously; if reviews had any influence (and it can scarcely be questioned that a favourable review has much) this one alone could not fail to bring "Illusion" its fair share of attention.

Mark laid down the first paper with a sense of triumph. If a very ordinary book like poor Holroyd's was received in this way, what might he not expect when he produced his own!

Then he took up the next. Here the critic was more measured in his praise. The book he pronounced to be on the whole a good and very nearly a great one, a fine conception fairly worked out, but there was too strong a tendency in parts to a certain dreamy mysticism (here Mark began to regret that he had not been more careful over the proofs), while the general tone was a little too metaphysical, and the whole marred by even more serious blemishes.

"The author," continued the reviewer, "whose style is for the most part easy and dignified, with a praiseworthy absence of all inflation or bombast, seems at times to have been smitten by a fatal desire to 'split the ears of the groundlings' and produce an impression by showy parades of a not overwhelmingly profound scholarship; and the effect of these contrasts would be grotesque in the extreme, were it not absolutely painful in a work of such high average merit. What, for instance, will be thought of the taste of a writer who could close a really pathetic scene of estrangement between the lovers by such a sentence as the following? . . ."

The sentence which followed was one of those which Mark had felt it due to himself to interpolate. This was but one example, said the inexorable critic; there were other instances more flagrant still—and in all of these the astonished Mark recognised his own improvements!

To say that this was for the moment an exceedingly unpleasant shock to his self-satisfaction is to state a sufficiently obvious fact; but Mark's character must have been very imperfectly indicated if it surprises anyone to hear that it did not take him long to recover from the blow.

Perhaps he had been wrong in grafting his own strong individuality on an entirely foreign trunk—he had not been careful enough to harmonise the two styles—it was merely an odd coincidence that the reviewer, struck naturally enough by the disparity, should have pitched upon *him* as the offender. By-and-by he grew to believe it a positive compliment that the reviewer (no doubt a dull person) had simply singled out for disapproval all the passages which were out of his depth—if there had been nothing remarkable about them, they would not have been noticed at all.

And so, as it is a remarkable peculiarity in the mind of man that it can frequently be set at ease by some self-structed theory which would not bear its own examination for a minute—as if a quack were to treat himself with his own bread-pills and feel better—Mark, having convinced himself that the reviewer was a crass fool whose praise and blame were to be read conversely, found the wound to his self-love begin to heal from that moment.

That same Saturday afternoon Mabel was sitting in the little room at the back of the house in which she received her own particular friends, wrote her letters, and read; just then she was engaged in the latter occupation, for the books had come in from the library that day, and she had sat down after luncheon to skim them through before selecting any which seemed worth more careful reading.

Mabel had grown to be fastidious in the matter of fiction, the natural result of a sense of humour combined with an instinctive appreciation of style. There had been a time, of course, when, released from the strict censorship of a boarding-school under which all novels on the very lengthy *index expurgatorius* had to be read in delicious stealth, she had devoured eagerly any literature which was in bright covers—but that time was past now.

She could not cry over cheap pathos, or laugh at second-hand humour, or shudder at sham cynicism any longer—desperate escapes and rescues moved her not, and she had wearied of beautiful wicked fiends and effeminate golden-haired guardsmen, who hold a Titanic strength in reserve as their one practical joke; but the liberty she had enjoyed had done her no particular harm, even if many mothers might have thought it their duty to restrict it,

which Mrs. Langton was too languid or had too much confidence in her daughter to think of attempting.

Mabel had only returned to the works of the great masters of this century with an appreciation heightened by contrast, and though her new delight in them did not blind her—as why should it ?—to the lesser lights in whom something may be found to learn or enjoy, she now had standards by which she could form her opinions of them.

Amongst the books sent in that week was " Illusion," a romance by Cyril Ernstone, and Mabel had looked at its neat grey-green covers and red lettering with a little curiosity, for somebody had spoken of it to her the day before, and she took it up with the intention of reading a chapter or two before going out with her racket into the square, where the tennis season had already set in on the level corner of the lawn.

But the afternoon wore on, and she remained by the window in a low wicker chair, indifferent to the spring sunshine outside, to the attractions of lawn tennis, or the occasional sounds of callers, reading on with parted lips and an occasional little musical laugh or involuntary sigh, as Holroyd had once dreamed of seeing his book read by her.

His strong and self-contained nature had unfolded all its deepest tenderness and most cherished fancies in that his first book, and the pages had the interest of a confession. Mabel felt that personal affection for the unknown writer which to have aroused must be the crown of crowns to those who love their art.

The faults of style and errors of taste here and there which jarred upon her were still too rare or too foreign to the general tone of the book to prejudice her seriously, and she put down the book half finished, not from weariness, but with an unusual desire to economise the pleasure it gave her.

" I wonder what ' Cyril Ernstone ' is like," she thought, half unconsciously.

While Mabel was speculating on the personal appearance of the author of " Illusion," Dolly darted in suddenly.

" Oh, there you are, Mabel," she said, " how lazy of you ! Mother thought you were playing tennis, and some people have called, and she and I had to do all the talking to them ! "

" Come and rest, then, Dolly," said Mabel, putting an arm up and drawing her down to a low stool by her chair.

" I've got my new sash on," said Dolly warningly.

" I'll be careful," said Mabel, " and I've found a little story in this book I am going to read to you, Dolly, if you care about it."

" Not a long story, is it, Mab ? " inquired Dolly, rather dubiously. But she finally settled herself comfortably down to listen, with her bright little face laid against Mabel's side, while she read the melancholy fate of the sugar fairy prince.

Dolly heard it all out in silence, and with a growing trouble in her eyes. When it was all over, and the heartless mortal princess had swallowed the sugar prince, she turned half away and said softly, " Mabel, that was *me*."

Mabel laughed. " What *do* you mean, Dolly ? " she said.

" I thought he was plain sugar," Dolly protested piteously ; " how was I to know ? I never heard of sugar fairies before. And he did look pretty at first, but I spilt some tea over him, and the colours got all mixed up, just as the story says it did, and so I ate him."

" It's only a story, Dolly, you know ; you needn't make yourself unhappy about it—it isn't true really."

" But it must be true, it's all put down exactly as it happened. . . . And it was me . . . I've eaten up a real fairy prince. . . . Mabel, I'm a greedy pig. If I hadn't done it, perhaps we could have got him out of the sugar somehow, and then Colin and I would have had a live fairy to play with. That's what he expected me to do, and I ate him instead. I know he was a fairy, Mabel, he tasted so nice. . . . Poor, poor little prince ! "

Dolly was so evidently distressed that Mabel tried hard to convince her that the story was about another little girl, the prince was only a sugar one, and so on ; but she did not succeed, until the idea struck her that a writer whose book seemed to indicate a sympathetic nature would not object to the trouble of removing the childish fears he had aroused, and she said : " Listen, Dolly ; suppose you write a letter to Mr. Ernstone—at his publishers', you know—I'll show you how to address it, but you must write the rest yourself, and ask him to tell you if the sugar prince was really a fairy, and then you will know all about it ; but my own belief is, Dolly, that there aren't any fairies —now, at any rate."

" If there weren't," argued Dolly, " people wouldn't write books about them. I've seen pictures of them lots of times."

"And they dance in rows at the pantomime, don't they, Dolly?" said Mabel.

"Oh, I know *those* aren't fairies—only thin little girls," said Dolly contemptuously. "I'm not a baby, Mabel, but I *would* write to Mr.—what you said just now—only I hate letter-writing so—ink is such blotty, messy stuff—and I dare say he wouldn't answer after all."

"Try him, dear," said Mabel.

Dolly looked obstinate and said nothing just then, and Mabel did not think it well to refer to the matter again. But the next week, from certain little affectations of tremendous mystery on Dolly's part, and the absence of the library copy of "Illusion" from the morning-room during one whole afternoon, after which it reappeared in a state of preternatural inkiness, Mabel had a suspicion that her suggestion was not so disregarded as it had seemed.

And a few days afterwards Mark found on his breakfast table an envelope from his publisher, which proved to contain a letter directed to "Mr. Cyril Ernstone," at the office. The letter was written in a round, childish hand, with scrapings here and there to record the fall of a vanquished blot.

"DEAR MR. CIRIL ERNSTONE," it ran, "I want you to tell me how you knew that I ate that sugar prince in your story, and if you meant me really. Perhaps you made that part of it up, or else it was some other girl, but please write and tell me who it was and all about it, because I do so hate to think I've eaten up a real fairy without knowing it.

"DOROTHY MARGARET LANGTON."

This poor little letter made Mark very angry. If he had written the story he would, of course, have been amused if not pleased by the naïve testimony to his power; but, as it was, it annoyed him to a quite unreasonable extent.

He threw Dolly's note pettishly across the table. "I wish I had cut that sugar prince story out; *I* can't tell the child anything about it. Langton, too—wonder if it's any relation to my Langton—sister of his, perhaps—*he* lives at Notting Hill somewhere. Well, I won't write; if I do I shall put my foot in it somehow. . . . It's quite likely that Vincent knew this child. She can't be seriously unhappy about such a piece of nonsense, and if she is, it's not *my* fault."

Mark had never quite lost the memory of that morning in the fog, his brief meeting with Mabel, and the untimely parting by the hedge. Subsequent events had naturally done something to efface the impression which her charm and grace had made upon him then; but even yet he saw her face at times as clearly as ever, and suffered once more the dull pain he had felt when he first knew that she had gone from him without leaving him the faintest hope of being ever privileged to know her more intimately or even see her again.

Sometimes, when he dreamed most wildly of the brilliant future that was to come to him, he saw himself, as the author of several famous and successful works (amongst which "Illusion" was entirely obscured), meeting her once more, and marking his sense of her past ingratitude by a studied coldness. But this was a possibility that never, even in his most sanguine moments, was other than remote.

But he did not know, and let the appeal lie unanswered that was due to Mabel's suggestion—"the moral of which," as Alice's Duchess might say, "is that one should never neglect a child's letter."

CHAPTER XI

A "THORN AND FLOWER PIECE"

"ILLUSION" had not been very long published before Mark began to have uncomfortable anticipations that it might be on the way to achieve an unexpected success, and he was nearer the truth in this than he himself believed as yet. It might not become popular in the wider and coarser sense of the word, being somewhat over the heads of the large class who read fiction for the "story"; it might never find its way to railway bookstalls (though even this, as will appear, befell it in time), but it was already gaining recognition as a book that people of any culture should, for their own sakes, at least assume to have read and appreciated.

Mark was hailed by many judges of such things as a new and powerful thinker, who had chosen to veil his theories under the garb of romance, and if the theory was dissented from in some quarters, the power and charm of the book were universally admitted. At dinner parties, and in all