and tried hard to induce Martha at least to read the book.

Martha had coldly declined. She had something of her mother's hard, unimaginative nature, and read but little fiction; and besides, having from the first sided strongly against Mark, she would not compromise her dignity now by betraying so much interest in his performances. Cuthbert read the book, but in secret, and as he said nothing to its discredit, it may be presumed that he could find no particular fault with it. Mrs. Ashburn would have felt almost inclined, had she known the book was in the house, to order it to be put away from among them like an evil thing, so strong was her prejudice; and her husband, whatever he felt, expressed no interest or curiosity on the subject.

So at Mr. Lightowler's question, which was put more as a vent for him own outraged feelings than any real desire for information, Mrs. Ashburn's face assumed its grimmest and coldest expression as she replied—'No, Solomon. Mark has chosen his own road—we neither have nor expect to have any news of him. At this very moment he may be bitterly repenting his folly and disobedience somewhere.'

Upon which Cuthbert observed that he considered that extremely probable, and Mr. Ashburn found courage to ask a question.

'I—I suppose he hasn't come or written to *you* yet, Solomon?' he said.

'No, Matthew,' said his brother-in-law, 'he has not. I'd just like to see him coming to me; he wouldn't come twice, I can tell him! No, I tell you, as I told him, I've done with him. When a young man repays all I've spent on him with base ingratitude like that, I wash my hands of him—I say deliberately—I wash my 'ands. Why, he might have worked on at his law, and I'd 'a' set him up and put him in the way of making his living in a few years; made him a credit to all connected with him, I would! But he's chosen to turn a low scribbler, and starve in a garret, which he'll come to soon enough, and that's what I get for trying to help a nephew. Well, it will be a lesson to me, I know that. Young men have gone off since my young days; a lazy, selfish, conceited lot they are, all of 'em.'

'Not *all*, Solomon,' said his sister. 'I'm sure there are young men still who —— Cuthbert, *how* long was it you stayed at the office after hours to make up your books? Of his own free will, too, Solomon! And *he's* never had anyone to encourage him, or help him on, poor boy!'

Mrs. Ashburn was not without hopes that her brother might be brought to understand in time that the family did not end with Mark, but she might have spared her pains just then.

'Oh,' he said, with a rather contemptuous toss of the head, 'I wasn't hinting. I've nothing partickler against him—*he's* steady enough, I dessay. One of the other kind's enough in a small family, in all conscience! Ah, Jane, if ever a man was regularly taken in by a boy, I was by his brother Mark—a bright, smart, clever young chap he was as I'd wish to see. Give that feller an education and put him to a profession, thinks I, and he'll be a credit to you some of these days. And see what's come of it!'

'It's very sad—very sad for all of us, I'm sure,' sighed Mrs. Ashburn.

At this, Trixie, who had been listening to it all with hot cheeks and trembling lips, could hold out no longer.

'You talk of Mark—Uncle and all of you,' she said, looking prettier for her indignation, 'as if he was a disgrace to us all! You seem to think he's starving somewhere in a garret, and unknown to everybody. But he's nothing of the sort—he's famous already, whether you believe it or not. You ought to be proud of him.'

'Beatrix, you forget yourself,' said her mother; 'before your uncle, too.'

'I can't help it,' said Trixie; 'there's no one to speak up for poor Mark but me, ma, and I must. And it's all quite true. I hear all about books and things from—at the Art School where I go, and Mark's book is being talked about *everywhere!* And you needn't be afraid of his coming to you for money, Uncle, for I was told that Mark will be able to get as much money as ever he likes for his next books; he will be quite rich, and all just by writing! And nobody but you here seems to think the worse of him for what he has done! I'll show you what the papers say about him presently. Why, even *your* paper, ma, the "Weekly Horeb," has a long article praising Mark's book this week, so I should think it can't be so very wicked. Wait a minute, and you shall see!'

And Trixie burst impetuously out of the room to fetch the book in which she had pasted the reviews, leaving the others in a rather crestfallen condition, Uncle Solomon especially looking

straight in front of him with a fish-like stare, being engaged in trying to assimilate the very novel ideas of a literary career which had just been put before him.

Mrs. Ashburn muttered something about Trixie being always headstrong and never given to serious things, but even she was a little shaken by the unexpected testimony of her favourite oracle, the 'Horeb.'

'Look here, Uncle,' said Trixie, returning with the book and laying it down open before him. 'See what the —— says, and the ——; oh, and all of them!'

'*I* don't want to see 'em,' he said, sulkily pushing the book from him. 'Take the things away, child; who cares what they say? They're all at the same scribbling business themselves; o' course they'd crack up one another.'

But he listened with a dull glazed look in his eyes, and a grunt now and then, while she read extracts aloud, until by-and-by, in spite of his efforts to repress it, a kind of hard grin of satisfaction began to widen his mouth.

'Where's this precious book to be got?' he said at last.

'Are you so sure he's disgraced you, *now*, Uncle?' demanded Trixie triumphantly.

'Men's praise is of little value,' said Mrs. Ashburn, harshly. 'Your uncle and we look at what Mark has done from the Christian's standpoint.'

'Well, look here, y' know. Suppose we go into the matter now; let's talk it out a bit,' said Uncle Solomon, coming out of a second brown study. 'What 'ave you got against Mark?'

'What have I got against him, Solomon?' echoed his sister in supreme amazement.

'Yes; what's he done to set you all shaking your heads at?'

'Why, surely there's no need to tell you? Well, first there's his ingratitude to *you*, after all you've done for him!'

'Put me out of the question!' said Mr. Lightowler, with a magnanimous sweep of his hand, 'I can take care of myself, I should hope. What *I* want to get at is what he's done to *you*. What do *you* accuse the boy of doing, Matthew, eh?'

Poor little Mr. Ashburn seemed completely overwhelmed by this sudden demand on him.

'I? oh, I—well, Jane has strong views, you know, Solomon, decided opinions on these subjects, and—and so have I!' he concluded feebly.

''Um,' said Mr. Lightowler, half to himself, 'shouldn't 'a' thought that was what's the matter with *you!* Well, Jane, then I come back to you. What's he done? Come, he hasn't robbed a church, or forged a cheque, has he?'

'If you wish me to tell you what you know perfectly well already, he has, in defiance of what he knows I feel on this subject, connected himself with a thing I strongly disapprove of—a light-minded fiction.'

'Now you know, Jane, that's all your confounded—I'm speaking to you as a brother, you know—your confounded narrer-minded nonsense! Supposing he has written a "light-minded fiction," as you call it, where's the harm of it?'

'With the early training you received together with me, Solomon, I wonder you can ask! You know very well what would have been thought of reading, to say nothing of writing, a novel in our young days. And it cuts me to the heart to think that a son of mine should place another stumbling-block in the hands of youth.'

'Stumbling grandmother!' cried Mr. Lightowler. 'In our young days, as you say, we didn't go to playhouses, and only read good and improving books, and a dull time we 'ad of it! I don't read novels myself now, having other things to think about. But the world's gone round since then, Jane. Even chapel-folk read these light-minded fictions nowadays, and don't seem to be stumblin' about more than usual.'

'If they take no harm, their own consciences must be their guide; but I've a right to judge for myself as well as they, I think, Solomon.'

'Exactly, but not for them too—that's what *you're* doin', Jane. Who the dickens are you, to go about groaning that Mark's a prodigal son, or a lost sheep, or a goat, or one of those uncomplimentary animals, all because he's written a book that everyone else is praising? Why are you to be right and all the rest of the world wrong, I'd like to know? Here you've gone and hunted the lad out of the house, without ever consulting *me* (who, I think, Jane, I *do* think, have acted so as to deserve to be considered and consulted in the matter), and all for what?'

'I'm sure, Solomon,' said Mrs. Ashburn, with one or two hard sniffs which were her nearest approach to public emotion; 'I'm sure I never expected

this from you, and you were quite as angry with Mark as any of us.'

'Because I didn't know all—I was kep' in the dark. From what you said I didn't know but what he'd written some rubbish which wouldn't keep him in bread and cheese for a fortnight, and leave him as unknown as it found him. Naturally I didn't care about *that*, when I'd hoped he'd be a credit to me. But it appears he *is* being a credit to me—he's making his fortune, getting famous, setting the upper circles talking of him. I thought Sir Andrew, up at the Manor House, was chaffing me the other day when he began complimenting me on my nephew, and I answered him precious short; but I begin to think now as he meant it, and I went and made a fool of myself! All I ever asked of Mark was to be a credit to me, and so long as he goes and is a credit to me, what do I care how he does it? Not *that!*'

At sentiments of such unhoped-for breadth, Trixie was so far carried away with delight and gratitude as to throw her arms round her uncle's puffy red neck, and bestow two or three warm kisses upon him.

'Then you won't give him up after all, will you, Uncle?' she cried; '*you* don't think him a disgrace to you!'

Uncle Solomon looked round him with the sense that he was coming out uncommonly well.

'There's no narrer-mindedness about *me*, Trixie, my girl,' he said; 'I never have said, nor I don't say now, that I have given your brother Mark up; he chose not to take the advantages I offered him, and I don't deny feeling put out by it. But what's done can't be helped. I shall give a look into this book of his, and if I see nothing to disapprove of in it, why I shall let him know he can still look to his old uncle if he wants anything. I don't say more than that at present. But I do think, Jane, that you've been too 'ard on the boy. We can't be all such partickler Baptists as *you* are, yer know!'

'I'm glad to hear you say that, Solomon,' quavered Mr. Ashburn, 'because I said as much to Jane (if you recollect my mentioning it, my dear?) at the time; but she has decided views, and she thought otherwise.'

The unfortunate Jane, seeing herself deserted on all sides, began to qualify, not sorry in her inmost heart to be able to think more leniently, since the 'Weekly Horeb' sanctioned it, of her son's act of independence.

'I may have acted on imperfect knowledge,' she said; 'I may have been too hasty in concluding that Mark had only written some worldly and frivolous love-tale to keep minds from dwelling on higher subjects. If so, I'm willing to own it, and if Mark was to come to me——'

But Mr. Lightowler did not care to lose his monopoly of magnanimity in this way.

'That comes too late now, Jane,' he said; 'he won't come back to you now, after the way you've treated him. You've taken your line, and you'll have to keep to it. But he shan't lose by that while *I* live—or afterwards, for that matter—he was always more of a son to me than ever you made of him!'

And when he went to bed, after some elaboration of his views on the question, he left the family, with one exception, to the highly unsatisfactory reflection that they had cut themselves off from all right to feel proud and gratified at Mark's renown, and that the breach between them was too wide now to be bridged.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN WHICH MARK MAKES AN ENEMY AND RECOVERS A FRIEND.

Mark's fame was still increasing, and he began to have proofs of this in a pleasanter and more substantial form than empty compliment. He was constantly receiving letters from editors or publishers inviting him to write for them, and offering terms which exceeded his highest expectations. Several of these proposals—all the more tempting ones, in fact—he accepted at once; not that he had anything by him in manuscript just then of the kind required from him, but he felt a vague sense of power to turn out something very fine indeed, long before the time appointed for the fufilment of his promises.

But, so far, he had not done any regular literary work since his defection: he was still at St. Peter's, which occupied most of his time, but somehow, now that he could devote his evenings without scruple to the delights of composition, those delights seemed to have lost their keenness, and besides, he had begun to go out a great deal.

He had plenty of time before him,

however, and his prospects were excellent; he was sure of considerable sums under his many agreements as soon as he had leisure to set to work. There could be no greater mistake than for a young writer to flood the market from his inkstand—a reflection which comforted Mark for a rather long and unexpected season of drought.

Chilton and Fladgate had begun to sound him respecting a second book, but Mark could not yet decide whether to make his *coup* with 'One Fair Daughter' or 'Sweet Bells Jangled.' At first he had been feverishly anxious to get a book out which should be legitimately his own as soon as possible, but now, when the time had come, he hung back.

He did not exactly feel any misgivings as to their merits, but he could not help seeing that with every day it was becoming more and more difficult to put 'Illusion' completely in the shade, and that if he meant to effect this, he could afford to neglect no precautions. New and brilliant ideas, necessitating the entire reconstruction of the plots, were constantly occurring to him, and he set impulsively to work, shifting and interpolating, polishing and repolishing, until he must have invested his work with a dazzling glitter—and yet he could not bring himself to part with it.

He was engaged in this manner one Wednesday afternoon in his rooms, when he heard a slow heavy step coming up the stairs, followed by a sharp rap at the door of his bedroom, which adjoined his sitting-room. He shouted to the stranger to come in, and an old gentleman entered presently by the door connecting the two rooms, in whom he recognised Mr. Lightowler's irascible neighbour. He stood there for a few moments without a word, evidently overcome by anger, which Mark supposed was due to annoyance at having first blundered into the bedroom.

'It's old Humpage,' he thought. 'What can he want with *me?*'

The other found words at last, beginning with a deadly politeness.

'I see I am in the presence of the right person,' he began. 'I have come to ask you a plain question.' Here he took something from his coat-tail pocket, and threw it on the table before Mark—it was a copy of 'Illusion.' 'I am told you are in the best position to give me information on the subject. Will you kindly give me the name—the *real* name—of the author of this book? I have reasons, valid reasons for requiring it.'

And he glared down at Mark, who had a sudden and disagreeable sensation as if his heart had just turned a somersault. Could this terrible old person have detected him, and if so what would become of him?

Instinct rather than reason kept him from betraying himself by words.

'Th-that's a rather extraordinary question, sir,' he gasped faintly.

'Perhaps it is,' said the other; 'but I've asked it, and I want an answer.'

'If the author of the book,' said Mark, 'had wished his real name to be known, I suppose he would have printed it.'

'Have the goodness not to equivocate with me, sir. It's quite useless, as you will understand when I tell you that I happen to *know*'—(he repeated this with withering scorn)—'I happen to know the name of the real author of this—this precious production. I had it, let me tell you, on very excellent authority.'

'Who told you?' said Mark, and his voice seemed to him to come from downstairs. Had Holroyd made a confidant of this angry old gentleman?

'A gentleman whose relation I think you have the privilege to be, sir. Come, you see *I* know you, Mr.—Mr. Cyril Ernstone,' he sneered. 'Are you prepared to deny it?'

Mark drew a long sweet breath of relief. What a fright he had had! This old gentleman evidently supposed he had unearthed a great literary secret; but why had it made him so angry?

'Certainly not,' he replied, firm and composed again now. 'I *am* Mr. Cyril Ernstone. I'm very sorry if it annoys you.'

'It *does* annoy me, sir. I have a right to be annoyed, and you know the reason well enough!'

'Do you know,' said Mark languidly, 'I'm really afraid I don't.'

'Then I'll tell you, sir. In this novel of yours you've put a character, called—wait a bit—ah, yes, called Blackshaw, a retired country colicitor, sir.'

'Very likely,' said Mark, who had been getting rather rusty with 'Illusion' of late.

'*I'm* a retired country solicitor, sir! You've made him a man of low character; you show him up all through the book as perpetually mixing in petty squabbles, sir; on one occasion you actually allow him to get drunk. Now what do you mean by it?'

'Good heavens!' said Mark, with a laugh, 'you don't seriously mean to tell me you consider all this personal?'

'I do very seriously mean to tell you so, young gentleman,' said Mr. Humpage, showing his teeth with a kind of snarl.

'There are people who will see personalities in a proposition of Euclid,' said Mark, now completely himself again, and rather amused by the scene; 'I should think you must be one of them, Mr. Humpage. Will it comfort you if I let you know that I—that this book was written months before I first had the pleasure of seeing you?'

'No, sir, not at all. That only shows me more clearly what I knew already. That there has been another hand at work here. I see that uncle of yours behind your back here.'

'Do you, though?' said Mark. 'He's not considered literary as a general rule.'

'Oh, he's quite literary enough to be libellous. Just cast your eye over this copy. Your uncle sent this to me as a present, the first work of his nephew. I thought at first he was trying to be friendly again, till I opened the book. Just look at it, sir!' And the old man fumbled through the leaves with his trembling hands. 'Here's a passage where your solicitor is guilty of a bit of sharp practice—underlined by your precious uncle! And here he sets two parties by the ears—underlined by your uncle, in red ink, sir; and it's like that all through the book. *Now* what do you say?'

'What *can* I say?' said Mark, with a shrug. 'You must really go and fight it out with my uncle; if he is foolish enough to insult you, that's not exactly a reason for coming here to roar at *me*.'

'You're as bad as he is, every bit. I had him up at the sessions over that gander, and he hasn't forgotten it. You had a hand in that affair, too, I remember. Your victim, sir, was never the same bird again—you'll be pleased to hear that—never the same bird again!'

'Very much to its credit, I'm sure,' said Mark. 'But oblige me by not calling it *my* victim. I don't suppose you'll believe me, but the one offence is as imaginary as the other.'

'I *don't* believe you, sir. I consider that to recommend yourself to your highly respectable uncle, you have deliberately set yourself to blacken my character, which may bear comparison with your own, let me tell you. No words can do justice to such baseness as that!'

'I agree with you. If I had done such a thing no words could; but as I happen to be quite blameless of the least idea of hurting your feelings, I'm beginning to be rather tired of this, you see, Mr. Humpage.'

'I'm going, sir, I'm going. I've nearly said my say. You have not altered my opinion in the least. I'm not blind, and I saw your face change when you saw me. You were *afraid* of me. You know you were. What reason but one could you have for that?'

Of course Mark could have explained even this rather suspicious appearance, but then he would not have improved matters very much; and so, like many better men, he had to submit to be cruelly misunderstood, when a word might have saved him, although in his case silence was neither quixotic nor heroic.

'I can only say again,' he replied in his haughtiest manner, 'that when this book was written I had never seen you, nor even heard of your existence. If you don't believe me, I can't help it.'

'You've got your own uncle and your own manner to thank for it if I don't believe you, and I don't. There are ways of juggling with words to make them cover anything, and from all I know of you, you are likely enough to be apt to that sort of thing. I've come here to tell you what I think of you, and I mean to do it before I go. You've abused such talents as you've been gifted with, sir; gone out of your way to attack a man who never did you any harm. You're a hired literary assassin—that's my opinion of you! I'm not going to take any legal proceedings against you—I'm not such a fool. If I was a younger man, I might take the law, in the shape of a stout horsewhip, into my own hands; as it is, I leave you to go your own way, unpunished by me. Only, mark my words—you'll come to no good. There's a rough sort of justice in this world, whatever may be said, and a beginning like yours will bring its own reward. Some day, sir, you'll be found out for what you are! That's what I came to say!'

And he turned on his heel and marched downstairs, leaving Mark with a superstitious fear at his heart at his last words, and some annoyance with Holroyd for having exposed him to this, and even with himself for turning craven at the first panic.

'I must look up that infernal book again!' he thought. 'Holroyd may

have libelled half London in it for all I know.'

Now it may be as well to state here that Vincent Holroyd was as guiltless as Mark himself of any intention to portray Mr. Humpage in the pages of 'Illusion'; he had indeed heard of him from the Langtons, but the resemblances in the imaginary solicitor to Dolly's godfather were few and trivial enough, and, like most of such half-unconscious reminiscences, required the aid of a malicious dulness to pass as anything more than mere coincidences.

But the next day, while Mark was thinking apprehensively of 'Illusion' as a perfect mine of personalities, the heavy steps were heard again in the passage and up the staircase; he sighed wearily, thinking that perhaps the outraged Mr. Humpage had remembered something more offensive, and had called again to give him the benefit of it.

However, this time the visitor was Mr. Solomon Lightowler, who stood in the doorway with what he meant to be a reassuring smile on his face—though, owing to a certain want of flexibility in his uncle's features, Mark misunderstood it.

'Oh, it's you, is it?' he said bitterly. 'Come in, Uncle, *come* in. You undertook when I saw you last, never to speak to me again, but *I* don't mind if you don't. I had a thorough good blackguarding yesterday from your friend Humpage, so I've got my hand in. Will you curse me sitting down or standing? The other one stood!"

'No, no, it ain't that, my boy. I don't want to use 'ard words. I've come to say, let bygones be bygones. Mark, my boy, I'm *proud* of yer!'

'What, of a literary man! My dear uncle, you can't be well!'

'I'm much as usual, thanky, and—and I *mean* it, Mark, I've read your book.'

'I know you have—so has Humpage,' said Mark.

Uncle Solomon chuckled. 'You made some smart hits at 'Umpage,' he said. 'When I first saw there was a country solicitor in the book, I said to myself, "That's goin' to be 'Umpage," and you had him fine, I *will* say that. I never thought to be so pleased with yer.'

'You need not have shown your pleasure by sending him a marked copy.'

'I was afraid he wouldn't see it if I didn't,' explained Mr. Lightowler, 'and I owed him one over that gander, which he summoned me for, and got his summons dismissed for his trouble. But I've not forgotten it. P'r'aps it was going rather far to mark the places; but there, I couldn't 'elp it.'

'Well, I suppose you know that amounts to libel?' said Mark, either from too hazy a recollection of the law on the subject of 'publication' or the desire to give his uncle a lesson.

'Libel! Why, I never wrote anything—only underlined a passage 'ere and there. You don't call that libelling!'

'A judge might, and, any way, Uncle, it's deuced unpleasant for *me*. He was here abusing me all the afternoon—when I never had any idea of putting the hot-headed old idiot into a book. It's too bad—it really is!'

''Umpage won't law me—he's had enough of that. Don't you be afraid, and don't you show yourself poor-spirited. You've done me a good turn by showing up 'Umpage as what I believe him to be—what's the good of pretending you never meant it—to me? You don't know how pleased you've made me. It's made a great difference in *your* prospects, young man, I can tell yer!'

'So you told me at the "Cock,"' said Mark.

'I don't mean that way, this time. I dessay I spoke rather hasty then; I didn't know what sort of littery line you were going to take up with, but if you go on as you've begun, you're all right. And when I have a nephew that makes people talk about him and shows up them that makes themselves unpleasant as neighbours, why, what I say is, Make the most of him! And that brings me to what I've come about. How are you off in the matter o' money, hey?'

Mark was already beginning to feel rather anxious about his expenses. His uncle's cheque was by this time nearly exhausted, his salary at St. Peter's was not high, and, as he had already sent in his resignation, that source of income would dry up very shortly. He had the money paid him for 'Illusion,' but that of course he could not use; he had not sunk low enough for that, though he had no clear ideas what to do with it. He would receive handsome sums for his next two novels, but that would not be for some time, and meanwhile his expenses had increased with his new life to a degree that surprised himself, for Mark was not a young man of provident habits.

So he gave his uncle to understand that, though he expected to be paid

some heavy sums in a few months, his purse was somewhat light at present.

'Why didn't you come to me?' cried his uncle; 'you might a' known *I* shouldn't have stinted you. You've never found me near with you. And now you're getting a big littery pot, and going about among the nobs as I see your name with, why, you must keep up the position you've made—and you shall, too! You're quite right to drop the schoolmastering, since you make more money with your scribbling. Your time's valuable now. Set to and scribble away while you're the fashion; make your 'ay while the sun shines, my boy. I'll see yer through it. I want you to do me credit. I want everyone to know that you're not like some of these poor devils, but have a rich old uncle at your back. You let 'em know that, will yer?'

And, quite in the manner of the traditional stage uncle, he produced his cheque-book and wrote a cheque for a handsome sum, intimating that that would be Mark's quarterly allowance while he continued to do him credit, and until he should be independent of it. Mark was almost too astounded for thanks at first by such very unexpected liberality, and something, too, in the old man's coarse satisfaction jarred on him and made him ashamed of himself. But he contrived to express his gratitude at last.

'It's all right,' said Uncle Solomon; 'I don't grudge it yer. You just go on as you've begun.' ('I hope that doesn't mean "making more hits at Humpage,"' thought Mark.) 'You thought you could do without me, but you see you can't; and look here, make a friend of me after this, d'ye hear? Don't do nothing without my advice. I'm a bit older than you are, and p'r'aps I can give you a wrinkle or two, even about littery matters, though you mayn't think it. You needn't a' been afraid your uncle would cast you off, Mark—so long as you're doing well. As I told your mother the other day, there's nothing narrer-minded about me, and if you feel you've a call to write, why, I don't think the worse of you for it. I'm not *that* kind of man.'

And after many more speeches of this kind, in the course of which he fully persuaded himself, and very nearly his nephew, that his views had been of this broad nature from the beginning, and were entirely uninfluenced by events, he left Mark to think over this new turn of fortune's wheel, by which he had provoked a bitter foe and regained a powerful protector, without deserving one more than the other.

He thought lightly enough of the first interview now; it was cheaply bought at the price of the other. 'And after all,' he said to himself, 'what man has no enemies?'

But only those whose past is quite stainless, or quite stained, can afford to hold their enemies in calm indifference, and although Mark never knew how old Mr. Humpage's enmity was destined to affect him, it was not without influence on his fortunes.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DINNER PARTY.

Mrs. Langton did not forget Mark; and before many days had gone by since his call, he received an invitation to dine at Kensington Park Gardens on a certain Saturday, to which he counted the days like a schoolboy. The hour came at last, and he found himself in the pretty drawing-room once more. There were people there already: a stout judge and his pretty daughter, a meek but eminent conveyancer with a gorgeous wife, and a distinguished professor with a bland subtle smile, a gentle voice, and a dangerous eye. Other guests came in afterwards, but Mark hardly saw them. He talked a little to Mrs. Langton, and Mrs. Langton talked considerably to him during the first few minutes after his entrance, but his thoughts kept wandering, like his eyes, to Mabel as she moved from group to group in her character of supplementary hostess, for Mrs. Langton's health did not allow her to exert herself on these occasions.

Mabel was looking very lovely that evening, in some soft light dress of pale rose, with a trail of pure white buds and flowers at her shoulder. Mark watched her as she went about, now listening with pretty submission to the gorgeous woman in the ruby velvet and the diamond star, who was laying down some 'little new law' of her own, now demurely acknowledging the old judge's semi-paternal compliments, audaciously rallying the learned professor, or laughing brightly at something a spoony-looking, fair-haired youth was saying to her.

Somehow she seemed to Mark to be further removed than ever from him; he

was nothing to her amongst all these people; she had not even noticed him yet. He began to be jealous of the judge, and the professor too, and absolutely to hate the spoony youth.

But she came to him at last. Perhaps she had seen him from the first, and felt his dark eyes following her with that pathetic look they had whenever things were not going perfectly well with him. She came now, and was pleased to be gracious to him for a few minutes, till dinner was announced.

Mark heard it with a pang. Now they would be separated, of course; he would be given to the ruby woman, or that tall, keen-faced girl with the *pince-nez;* he would be lucky if he got two minutes' conversation with Mabel in the drawing-room later on. But he waited for instructions resignedly.

'Didn't papa tell you?' she said; 'you are to take me in—if you will? If he would! He felt a thrill as her light fingers rested on his arm; he could scarcely believe his own good fortune, even when he found himself seated next to her as the general rustle subsided, and might accept the delightful certainty that she would be there by his side for the next two hours at least.

He forgot to consult his *menu;* he had no very distinct idea of what he ate or drank, or what was going on around him, at least so long as Mabel talked to him. They were just outside the radius of the big centre lamp, and that and the talk around them produced a sort of semi-privacy.

The spoony young man was at Mabel's right hand, to be sure, but he had been sent in with the keen-faced young lady who came from Girton, where it was well known that the marks she had gained in one of the great Triposes under the old order, would—but for her sex—have placed her very high indeed in the class list. Somebody had told the young man of this, and, as he was from Cambridge too, but had never been placed anywhere except in one or two walking races at Fenner's, it had damped him too much for conversation just yet.

'Have you been down to Chigbourne lately?' Mabel asked Mark suddenly, and her smile and manner showed him that she remembered their first meeting. He took this opportunity of disclaiming all share in the treatment of the unfortunate gander, and was assured that it was quite unnecessary to do so.

'I wish your uncle, Mr. Humpage, thought with you,' he said ruefully, 'but he has quite made up his mind that I am a villain of the deepest dye'; and then, encouraged to confide in her, he told the story of the old man's furious entry and accusation.

Mabel looked very grave.

'How could he get such an idea into his head?' she said.

'I'm afraid *my* uncle had something to do with that,' said Mark, and explained Mr. Lightowler's conduct.

'It's very silly of both of them,' she said; 'and then to drag *you* into the quarrel, too. You know, old Mr. Humpage is not really my uncle—only one of those relations that sound like a prize puzzle when you try to make them out. Dolly always calls him Uncle Anthony—he's her godfather. But I wish you hadn't offended him, Mr. Ashburn, I do really. I've heard he can be a very bitter enemy. He has been a very good friend to papa; I believe he gave him almost the very first brief he ever had; and he's kind to all of us. But it's dangerous to offend him. Perhaps you will meet him here some day,' she added, 'and then we may be able to make him see how mistaken he has been.'

'How kind of you to care about it!' said he, and his eyes spoke his gratitude for the frank interest she had taken in his fortunes.

'Of course I care,' said Mabel, looking down as she spoke. 'I can't bear to see anyone I like and respect—as I do poor Uncle Anthony—persist in misjudging *anybody* like that.'

Mark had hoped more from the beginning of this speech than the conclusion quite bore out, but it was delightful to hear her talking something more than society nothings to him. However, that was ended for the present by the sudden irruption of the spoony young man into the conversation; he had come out very shattered from a desperate intellectual conflict with the young lady from Girton, to whom he had ventured on a remark which, as he made it, had seemed to him likely to turn out brilliant.

'You know,' he had announced solemnly, 'opinions may differ, but in these things I must say I don't think the exception's *always* the rule—eh? don't you find that?' And his neighbour replied that she thought he had hit upon a profound philosophical truth, and then spoilt it by laughing. After which the young man, thinking internally, it *sounded* all right, wonder if it was such bosh as she seems to think,' had fled to

Mabel for sanctuary and plunged into an account of his University disasters.

'I should have floored my "General" all right, you know,' he said, 'only I went in for too much poetry.'

'Poetry?' echoed Mabel, with a slight involuntary accent of surprise.

'Rhymes, you know, not regular poetry!'

'But, Mr. Pidgely, I don't quite see; why can't you floor generals with rhymes which are not regular poetry? Are they so particular in the army?'

'It isn't an army exam.; it's at Cambridge; and the rhymes are all the chief tips done into poetry—like "Paley" rhymes, y' know. Paley rhymes give you, for instance, all the miracles or all the parables right off in about four lines of gibberish, and you learn the gibberish and then you're all right. I got through my Little-go that way, but I couldn't the General. Fact is, my coach gave me too *many* rhymes!'

'And couldn't you recollect the—the tips without rhymes?'

'Couldn't remember *with* 'em,' he said. 'I could have corked down the verses all right enough, but the beggars won't take them. I forgot what they were all about, so I had to show up blank papers. And I'd stayed up all one Long too!'

'Working?' asked Mabel, with some sympathy.

'Well—and cricketing,' he said ingenuously. 'I call it a swindle.'

'He talks quite a dialect of his own,' thought Mabel surprised. 'Vincent didn't. I wonder if Mr. Ashburn can?'

Mr. Ashburn, after a short period of enforced silence spent in uncharitable feelings respecting fair-haired Mr. Pidgely, had been suddenly attacked by the lady on his left, a plump lady with queer comic inflections in her voice, the least touch of brogue, and a reputation for daring originality.

'I suppose, now,' she began, 'ye've read the new book they're talking so much about—this "Illusion"? And what's your private opinion? I wonder if I'll find a man with the courage to agree with me, for *I* said when I'd come to the last page, "Well, they may say what they like, but I never read such weary rubbish in all me life," and I never did!'

Mark laughed—he could not help it—but it was a laugh of real enjoyment, without the slightest trace of pique or wounded vanity in it.

'I'll make a confession,' he said. 'I do think myself that the book has been luckier than it deserves—only, as the—the man who wrote it is a—a very old friend of mine—you see, I mustn't join in abusing it.'

Mabel heard this, and liked Mark the better for it.

'I suppose he couldn't do anything else very well without making a scene,' she thought, 'but he did it very nicely. I hope that woman will find out who he is, though; it will be a lesson to her!' Here Mabel was not quite fair, perhaps, for the lady had a right to her opinion, and anything is better than humbug. But she was very needlessly pitying Mark for having to listen to such unpalatable candour, little dreaming how welcome it was to him, or how grateful he felt to his critic. When Mark was free again, after an animated discussion with his candid neighbour, in which each had amused the other and both were on the way to becoming intimate, he found the spoony youth finishing the description of a new figure he had seen in a *cotillon*.

'You all sit down on chairs, don't you know,' he was saying, 'and then the rest come through doors'; and Mabel said, with a spice of malice (for she was being excessively bored), that that must be very pretty and original.

Mr. Langton was chatting ponderously at his end of the table, and Mrs. Langton was being interested at hers by an account the judge's lady was giving of a *protégé* of hers, an imbecile, who made his living by calling neighbours who had to be up early.

'Perhaps it's prejudice,' said Mrs. Langton, 'but I do *not* think I should like to be called by an *idiot*; he might turn into a maniac some day. They do quite suddenly at times, don't they?' she added, appealing to the professor, 'and that wouldn't be *nice*, you know, if he did. What *would* you do?' she inquired generally.

And for some minutes that end of the table applied itself zealously to solving the difficult problem of the proper course to take on being called early by a raving maniac.

Meanwhile Mabel had succeeded in dropping poor Mr. Pidgely and resuming conversation with Mark; this time on ordinary topics—pictures, books, theatres, and people (especially people); he talked well, and the sympathy between them increased.

Then, as the dessert was being taken round, Dolly and Colin came in.

'*I've* had ices, Mabel,' said the latter

confidentially in her ear as he passed her chair on his way to his mother; but Dolly stole quietly in and sat down by her father's side without a word.

'Do you notice any difference in my sister Dolly?' Mabel asked Mark, with a little anxious line on her forehead.

'She is not looking at all well,' said Mark, following the direction of her glance. There certainly was a change in Dolly; she had lost all her usual animation, and sat there silent and constrained, leaving the delicacies with which her father had loaded her plate untouched, and starting nervously whenever he spoke to her. When good-natured Mr. Pidgely displayed his one accomplishment of fashioning a galloping pig out of orange-peel for her amusement, she seemed almost touched by his offering, instead of slightly offended, as the natural Dolly would have been.

'I don't think she is ill,' said Mabel, 'though I was uneasy about that at first. Fräulein and I fancy she must be worrying herself about something, but we can't get her to say what it is, and I don't like to tease her; very likely she is afraid of being laughed at if she tells anybody. But I do so wish I could find out; children can make themselves so terribly wretched over mere trifles sometimes.'

But the hour of 'bereavement,' as Mr. du Maurier calls it, had come; gloves were being drawn on, the signal was given. Mr. Pidgely, after first carefully barricading the path on his side of the table with his chair, opened the door, and the men, left to themselves, dropped their hypocritical mask of resigned regret as the handle turned on Mrs. Langton's train, and settled down with something very like relief.

Mark, of course, could not share this, though it is to be feared that even he found some consolation in his cigarette; the sound of Mabel's voice had not ceased to ring in his ears when her father took him by the arm and led him up to be introduced to the professor, who was standing before a picture. The man of science seemed at first a little astonished at having an ordinary young man presented to him in this way, but when his host explained that Mark was the author of the book of which the professor had been speaking so highly, his manner changed, and he overwhelmed him with his courtly compliments, while the other guests gathered gradually nearer, envying the fortunate object of so marked a distinction.

But the object himself was horribly uncomfortable; for it appeared that the professor in reading 'Illusion' had been greatly struck by a brilliant simile drawn from some recent scientific discoveries with which he had had some connection, and had even discovered in some passages what he pronounced to be the germ of a striking theory that had already suggested itself to his own brain, and he was consequently very anxious to find out exactly what was in Mark's mind when he wrote. Before Mark knew where he was, he found himself let in for a scientific discussion with one of the leading authorities on the subject, while nearly everyone was listening with interest for his explanation. His forehead grew damp and cold with the horror of the situation—he almost lost his head, for he knew very little about science. Thanks, however, to his recent industry, he kept some recollection of the passages in question, and without any clear idea of what he was going to say, plunged desperately into a long and complicated explanation. He talked the wildest nonsense, but with such confidence that everyone in the room but the professor was impressed. Mark had the mortification of seeing, as the great man heard him out with a quiet dry smile, and a look in his grey eyes which he did not at all like, that he was found out.

But the professor only said at the end, 'Well, that's very interesting, Mr. Ashburn, very interesting indeed—you have given me a really considerable insight into your—ah—mental processes.' And for the rest of the evening he talked to his host. As he drove home with his wife that night, however, his disappointment found vent: 'Never been so taken in in my life,' he remarked; 'I did think from his book that that young Ernstone and I would have something in common; but I tried him and got nothing out of him but rubbish; probably got the whole thing up out of some British Association speech and forgotten it! I hate your shallow fellows, and 'pon my word I felt strongly inclined to show him up, only I didn't care to annoy Langton!'

'I'm glad you didn't, dear,' said his wife; 'I don't think dinner-parties are good places to show people up in, and really Mr. Ernstone, or Ashburn, whatever his name is, struck me as being so very charming—perhaps you expected too much from him.'

'H'm, I shall know better another time,' he said.

But the incident, even as it was, left

Mark with an uncomfortable feeling that his evening had somehow been spoilt, particularly as he did not succeed in getting any further conversation with Mabel in the drawing-room afterwards to make him forget the unpleasantness. Vincent Holroyd's work was still proving itself in some measure an avenger of his wrongs.

CHAPTER XIX.

DOLLY'S DELIVERANCE.

About a week after the dinner recorded in the last chapter, Mark repaired to the house in Kensington Park Gardens to call as in duty bound, though, as he had not been able to find out on what afternoon he would be sure of finding Mrs. Langton at home, he was obliged to leave this to chance. He was admitted, however—not by the stately Champion, but by Colin, who had seen him from the window and hastened to intercept him.

'Mabel's at home, somewhere,' he said, 'but will you come in and speak to Dolly first? She's crying awfully about something, and she won't tell me what. Perhaps she'd tell you. And do come, sir, please; it's no fun when she's like that, and she's always doing it now!' For Colin had an unlimited belief, founded as he thought on experience, in the persuasive powers of his former master.

Mark had his doubts as to the strict propriety of acceding to this request—at all events until it had been sanctioned by some higher authority than Colin—but then he remembered Mabel's anxiety on the night of the dinner; if he could only set this child's mind at ease, would not that excuse any breach of conventionality—would it not win a word of gratitude from her sister? He could surely take a little risk and trouble for such a reward as that; and so, with his usual easy confidence, he accepted a task which was to cost him dear enough.

'You'd better leave me to manage this, young man,' he said at the door. 'Run off to your sister Mabel and explain things; tell her where I am and why, you know.' And he went into the library alone.

Dolly was crouching there in an armchair, worn out by sobbing and the weight of a terror she dared not speak of, which had broken her down at last. Mark, who was good-natured enough in his careless way, was touched by the utter abandonment of her grief; for the first time he began to think it must be something graver than a mere childish trouble, and, apart from all personal motives, longed sincerely to do something, if he could, to restore Dolly to her old childish self. He forgot everything but that, and the unselfish sympathy he felt gave him a tact and gentleness with which few who knew him best would have credited him. Gradually, for at first she would say nothing, and turned away in lonely hopelessness, he got her to confess that she was very unhappy; that she had done something which she must never, never tell to anybody.

Then she started up with a flushed face and implored him to go away and leave her.

'*Don't* make me tell you!' she begged piteously. 'Oh, I know you mean to be kind; I *do* like you now—only I can't tell you, really. Please, *please* go away—I'm so afraid of telling you.'

'But why?' said Mark. 'I'm not very good myself, Dolly—you need not be afraid of me.'

'It isn't that,' said Dolly, with a shudder; 'but *he* said if I told anyone they would have to send me to prison.'

'Who dared to tell you a wicked lie like that?' said Mark indignantly, all the manhood in him roused by the stupid cruelty of it. 'It wasn't Colin, was it, Dolly?'

'No, not Colin; it was Harold—Harold Caffyn. Oh, Mr. Ashburn,' she said, with a sudden gleam of hope, 'wasn't it *true?* He said papa was a lawyer, and would have to help the law to punish me——'

'The infernal scoundrel!' muttered Mark to himself, but he saw that he was getting to the bottom of the mystery at last. 'So he told you that, did he?' he continued; 'did he say it to tease you, Dolly?'

'I don't know. He often used to tease, but never like that before, and I *did* do it—only I never, never meant it.'

'Now listen to me, Dolly,' said Mark. 'If all you are afraid of is being sent to prison, you needn't think any more about it. You can trust me, can't you? You know I wouldn't deceive you. Well, I tell you that you can't have done anything that you would be sent to prison for—that's all nonsense. Do you understand? Harold Caffyn said that to frighten you. No one in the world would

ever dream of sending you to prison, whatever you'd done. Are you satisfied now?'

Rather to Mark's embarrassment, she threw her arms round his neck in a fit of half-hysterical joy and relief.

'Tell me again,' she cried; 'you're *sure* it's true—they can't send me to prison? Oh, I don't care now. I am so glad you came—so glad. I *will* tell you all about it now. I want to!'

But some instinct kept Mark from hearing this confession; he had overcome the main difficulty—the rest was better left in more delicate hands than his, he thought. So he said, 'Never mind about telling me, Dolly; I'm sure it wasn't anything very bad. But suppose you go and find Mabel, and tell her; then you'll be quite happy again.'

'Will *you* come too?' asked Dolly, whose heart was now completely won.

So Mark and she went hand-in-hand to the little boudoir at the back of the house where they had had their first talk about fairies, and found Mabel in her favourite chair by the window; she looked round with a sudden increase of colour as she saw Mark.

'I mustn't stay,' he said, after shaking hands. 'I ought not to come at all, I'm afraid, but I've brought a young lady who has a most tremendous secret to confess, which she's been making herself, and you too, unhappy about all this time. She has come to find out if it's really anything so very awful after all.'

And he left them together. It was hard to go away after seeing so little of Mabel but it was a sacrifice she was capable of appreciating.

CHAPTER XX.

A DECLARATION—OF WAR.

On the morning of the day which witnessed Dolly's happy deliverance from the terrors which had haunted her so long, Mabel had received a note from Harold Caffyn. He had something to say to her, he wrote, which could be delayed no longer—he could not be happy until he had spoken. If he were to call some time the next morning, would she see him—alone?

These words she read at first in their most obvious sense, for she had been suspecting for some time that an interview of this kind was coming, and even felt a little sorry for Harold, of whom she was beginning to think more kindly. So she wrote a few carefully worded lines, in which she tried to prepare him as much as possible for the only answer she could give, but before her letter was sent Dolly had told her story of innocent guilt.

Mabel read his note again and tore up her reply with burning cheeks. She *must* have misunderstood him—it could not be *that;* he must have felt driven to repair by confession the harm he had done. And she wrote instead—'I shall be very willing to hear anything you may have to say,' and took the note herself to the pillar-box on the hill.

Harold found her answer on returning late that night to his room, and saw nothing in it to justify any alarm.

'It's not precisely gushing,' he said to himself, 'but she couldn't very well say more just yet. I think I am pretty safe.'

So the next morning he stepped from his hansom to the Langtons' door, leisurely and coolly enough. Perhaps his heart was beating a little faster, but only with excitement and anticipation of victory, for after Mabel's note he could feel no serious doubts.

He was shown into the little boudoir looking out on the square, but she was not there to receive him—she even allowed him to wait a few minutes, which amused him.

'How like a woman!' he thought. 'She can't resist keeping me on the tenterhooks a little, even now.'

There was a light step outside; she had come at last, and he started to his feet as the door opened.

She stopped at some distance from him, with one hand lightly resting on a little table; her face was paler than usual; she seemed rather to avoid looking at him, while she did not offer to take his outstretched hand. Still he was not precisely alarmed by all this. Whatever she felt, she was not the girl to throw herself at any fellow's head; she was proud and he must be humble—for the present.

'You had something to say to me—Harold?'

With what a pretty shy hesitation she spoke his name now, he thought, with none of the sisterly frankness he had found so tantalising; and how delicious she was as she stood there in her fresh white morning dress. There wsa a delightful piquancy in this assumed coldness of hers—a woman's

dainty device to delay and heighten the moment of surrender! He longed to sweep away all her pretty defences, to take her to his arms and make her own that she was his for ever. But somehow he felt a little afraid of her; he must proceed with caution.

'Yes,' he said, 'there is something I must say to you—you will give me a hearing, Mabel, won't you?'

'I told you I would hear you. I hope you will say something to make me think of you differently.'

He did not understand this exactly, but it did not sound precisely encouraging.

'I hoped you didn't think me a very bad sort of fellow,' he said.

And then, as she made no answer, he plunged at once into his declaration. He was a cold lover on the stage, but practice had at least given him fluency, and now he was very much in earnest—he had never known till then all that she was to him; there was real passion in his voice, and a restrained power which might have moved her once.

But Mabel heard him to the end only because she felt unable to stop him without losing control over herself. She felt the influence of his will, but it made her the more thankful that she had so powerful a safeguard against it.

He finished and she still made no response, and he began to feel decidedly awkward; but when at last she turned her face to him, although her eyes were bright, it was not with the passion he had hoped to read there.

'And it really was that, after all!' she said bitterly. 'Do you know, I expected something very different.'

'I said what I feel. I might have said it better perhaps,' he retorted, 'but at least tell me what you expected me to say, and I will say that.'

'Yes, I will tell you. I expected an explanation.'

'An explanation!' he repeated blankly; 'of what?'

'Is there nothing you can remember which might call for some excuse if you found I had heard of it? I will give you every chance, Harold. Think—is there nothing?'

Caffyn had forgotten the stamp episode as soon as possible, as a disagreeable expedient to which he had been obliged to resort, and which had served its end, and so he honestly misunderstood this question.

'Upon my soul, no,' he said earnestly. 'I don't pretend to have been any better than my neighbours, but since I began to think of you, I never cared about any other woman. If you've been told any silly gossip——'

Mabel laughed, but not merrily. 'Oh, it is not *that*—really it did not occur to me to be jealous at any time—especially now. Harold, Dolly has told me everything about that letter,' she added, as he still looked doubtful.

He understood now at all events, and took a step back as if to avoid a blow. *Everything!* His brain seemed dulled for an instant by those words; he thought that he had said enogh to prevent the child from breathing a syllable about that unlucky letter, and now Mabel knew 'everything!'

But he recovered his power of thought almost directly, feeling that this was no time to lose his head.

'I suppose I'm expected to show some emotion,' he said lightly; 'it's evidently something quite too terrible. But I'm afraid I want an explanation this time.'

'I think not, but you shall have it. I know that you came in and found that poor child tearing off the stamp from some old envelope of mine, and had the wickedness to tell her she had been stealing. Do you deny it?'

'Some old envelope!' The worst of Caffyn's fear vanished when he heard that. She did not know that it contained an unread letter then; she did not guess—how could she, when Dolly herself did not know it—where the letter had come from. He might appease her yet!

Caffyn's first inference, it may be said, was correct; in Dolly's mind her guilt had consisted in stealing a marked stamp, and her hurried and confused confession had, quite innocently and unconsciously, left Mabel ignorant of the real extent and importance of what seemed to her a quite imaginary offence.

'Deny it!' he said, 'of course not; I remember joking her a little over something of the sort. Is *that* all this tremendous indignation is about—a joke?'

'A joke!' she said indignantly; 'you will not make anyone but yourself merry over jokes like that. You set to work deliberately to frighten her; you did it so thoroughly that she has been wretched for days and days, ill and miserable with the dread of being sent to prison. You *did* threaten her with a prison, Harold; you told her she must even be afraid of her own father—of all of us. . . . Who can tell what she has been suffering, all alone, my poor little

Dolly! And you dare to call that a joke!'

'I never thought she would take it all so literally,' he said.

'Oh, you are not stupid, Harold; only a cruel fool could have thought he was doing no harm. And you have seen her since again and again; you must have noticed how changed she was, and yet you had no pity on her! Can't you really see what a thing you have been doing? Do you often amuse yourself in that way, and with children?'

'Hang it, Mabel,' said Caffyn uneasily, 'you're very hard on me!'

'Why were you hard on my darling Dolly?' Mabel demanded. 'What had she done to you—how could you find pleasure in torturing her? Do you hate children—or only Dolly?'

He made a little gesture of impatient helplessness.

'Oh, if you mean to go on asking questions like that—' he said, 'of course I don't hate your poor little sister. I tell you I'm sorry she took it seriously—very sorry. And—and, if there's anything I can do make it up to her somehow; any—any amends, you know——'

The hardship, as he felt at the time, of his peculiar position was that it obliged him to offer such a lame excuse for his treatment of Dolly. Without the motive he had had for his conduct, it must seem dictated by some morbid impulse of cruelty—whereas, of course, he had acted quite dispassionately, under the pressure of a necessity—which, however, it was impossible to explain to Mabel.

'I suppose "amends" means caramels or chocolates,' said Mabel; 'chocolates to compensate for making a child shrink for days from those who loved her! She was fretting herself ill, and we could do nothing for her: a very little more and it might have killed her. Perhaps your sense of humour would have been satisfied by that? If it had not been for a friend—almost a stranger—who was able to see what we were all blind to, that a coward had been practising on her fears, we might never have guessed the truth till—till it was too late!'

'I see now,' he said; 'I thought there must be someone at the bottom of this; someone who, for purposes of his own, has contrived to put things in the worst light for me. If you can condescend to listen to slanderers, Mabel, I shall certainly not condescend to defend myself.'

'Oh, I will tell you his name,' she said, 'and then even you will have to own that he had no motive for doing what he did but natural goodness and kindness. I doubt even if he has ever met you in his life; the man who rescued our Dolly from what you had made her is Mr. Mark Ashburn, the author of "Illusion" (her expression softened slightly, from the gratitude she felt, as she spoke his name, and Caffyn noted it). 'If you think he would stoop to slander *you*—— But what is the use of talking like that? You have owned it all. No slander could make it any worse than it is!'

'If you think as badly of me as that,' said Caffyn, who had grown deadly pale, 'we can meet no more, even as acquaintances.'

'That would be my own wish,' she replied.

'Do you mean,' he asked huskily, 'that—that everything is to be over between us? Has it really come to that, Mabel?'

'I did not know that there ever was anything between us, as you call it,' she said. 'But, of course, after this, friendship is impossible. We cannot help meeting. I shall not even tell my mother of this, for Dolly's sake, and so this house will still be open to you. But if you force me to protect Dolly or myself, you will come here no more.'

Her scornful indifference only filled him with a more furious desire to triumph over it; he had felt so secure of her that morning, and now she had placed this immeasurable distance between them. He had never felt the full power of her beauty till then, as she stood there with that haughty pose of the head and the calm contempt in her eyes; he had seen her in most moods—playfully perverse, coldly civil, and unaffectedly gracious and gentle—and in none of them had she made his heart ache with the mad passion that mastered him now.

'It shall not end like this!' he said violently; 'I won't let you make a mountain of a molehill in this way, Mabel, because it suits you to do so. You have no right to judge me by what a child chooses to imagine I said!'

'I judge you by the effects of what you did say. I can remember very well that you had a cruel tongue as a boy—you are quite able to torture a child with it still.'

'It is your tongue that is cruel!' he retorted; 'but you shall be just to me. I love you, Mabel—whether you like it

or not—you shall not throw me off like this. Do you hear? You liked me well enough before all this! I will force you to think better of me; you shall own it one day. No, I'm mad to talk like this—I only ask you to forgive me—to let me hope still!'

He came forward as he spoke and tried to take her hands, but she put them quickly behind her.

'Don't dare to come nearer!' she said; 'I thought I had made you feel something of what I think of you. What can I say more? Hope! Do you think I could ever trust a man capable of such deliberate wickedness as you have shown by that single action?—a kind of malice that I hardly think can be human. No, you had better not hope for that. As for forgiving you, I can't even do that now; some day, perhaps, when Dolly has quite forgotten, I may be able to forget too, but not till then. Have I made you understand yet? Is that enough?'

Caffyn was still standing where she had checked his advance; his face was very grey and drawn, and his eyes were fixed on the Eastern rug at his feet. He gave a short savage laugh.

'Well, yes,' he said, 'I think perhaps I *have* had enough at last. You have been kind enough to put your remarks very plainly. I hope, for your own sake, I may never have a chance of making you any return for all this.'

'I hope so too,' she said; 'because I think you would use it.'

'Thanks for your good opinion,' he said, as he went to the door. 'I shall do my best, if the time comes, to deserve it.'

She had never faltered during the whole of this interview. A righteous anger had given her courage to declare all the scorn and indignation she felt. But now, as the front door closed upon him, the strength that had sustained her so long gave way all at once; she sank trembling into one of the low cushioned chairs, and presently the reaction completed itself in tears, which she had not quite repressed when Dolly came in to look for her.

'Has he gone?' she began; and then, as she saw her sister's face, 'Mabel! Harold hasn't been bullying *you?*'

'No, darling, no,' said Mabel, putting her arms round Dolly's waist. 'It's silly of me to cry, isn't it? for Harold will not trouble either of us again after this.'

. . . . . .

Meanwhile Harold was striding furiously down the other side of the hill in the direction of Kensal Green, paying very little heed where his steps might be leading him, in the dull rage which made his brain whirl.

Mabel's soft and musical voice, for it had not ceased to be that, even when her indignation was at its highest, rang still in his ears. He could not forget her bitter, scornful speeches; they were lashing and stinging him to the soul.

He had indeed been hoist with his own petard; the very adroitness with which he had contrived to get rid of an inconvenient rival had only served to destroy his own chances for ever.

He knew that never again would Mabel suffer him to approach her on the old friendly footing—it would be much if she could bring herself to treat him with ordinary civility—he had lost her for ever, and hated her accordingly from the bottom of his heart.

'If I can ever humble you as you have humbled me to-day, God help you, my charming Mabel!' he said to himself. 'To think that that little fool of a child should have let out everything, at the very moment when I had the game in my own hands! I have to thank that distinguished novelist, Mr. Mark Ashburn, for that, though; *he* must trouble himself to put his spoke in my wheel, must he? I shan't forget it. I owe you one for that, my illustrious friend, and you're the sort of creditor I generally *do* pay in the long run.'

Only one thing gave him a gleam—not of comfort, precisely, but gloomy satisfaction; his manœuvre with the letter had at least succeeded in keeping Holroyd apart from Mabel.

'He's just the fellow to think he's jilted, and give her up without another line,' he thought; 'shouldn't wonder if he married out there. Miss Mabel won't have *everything* her own way!'

He walked on, past the huge gasometers and furnaces of the Gas Company, and over the railway and canal bridges, to the Harrow Road, when he turned mechanically to the right. His eyes saw nothing—neither the sluggish barges gliding through the greasy black stream on his right, nor the doleful string of hearses and mourning coaches which passed him on their way to or from the cemetery. It was with some surprise that, as he began to take note of his surroundings again, he found himself in Bayswater, and not far from his own rooms. He thought he might as well return to them as not, and as he reached the terrace in which he had

taken lodgings, he saw a figure coming towards him that seemed familiar, and in whom, as he drew nearer, he recognised his uncle, Mr. Antony Humpage. He was in no mood to talk about indifferent topics just then, and if his respected uncle had only had his back instead of his face towards him, Caffyn would have made no great effort to attract his attention. As it was, he gave him the heartiest and most dutiful of welcomes.

'You don't mean to say you've actually been looking me up?' he began; 'how lucky that I came up just then—another second or two and I should have missed you. Come in, and let me give you some lunch?'

'No, my boy, I can't stay long. I was in the neighbourhood on business, and I thought I'd see if you were at home. I won't come up again now, I must get back to my station. I waited for some time in those luxurious apartments of yours, you see, thinking you might come in. Suppose you walk a little way back with me, eh? if you've no better engagement.'

'Couldn't have a better one,' said Caffyn, inwardly chafing; but he always made a point of obliging his uncle, and for once he had no reason to consider his time thrown away. For, as they walked on together in the direction of the Edgware Road, where the old gentleman intended to take the Underground to King's Cross, Mr. Humpage, after some desultory conversation on various subjects, said suddenly, 'By the way, you know a good many of these writing fellows, Harold—have you ever come across one called Mark Ashburn?'

'I've met him once,' said Caffyn, and his brows contracted. 'Wrote this new book, "Illusion," didn't he?'

'Yes, he did—confound him!' said the other warmly, and then launched into the history of his wrongs. 'Perhaps I oughtn't to say it at my age,' he concluded, 'but I hate that fellow!'

'Do you, though?' said Caffyn, with a laugh; 'it's a singular coincidence, but so do I.'

'There's something wrong about him, too,' continued the old man; 'he's got a secret.'

('So have most of us!' thought his nephew.) 'But what makes you think so?' he asked aloud, and waited for the answer with some interest.

'I saw it in the fellow's face; no young man with a clear record ever has such a look as he had when I came in. He was green with fear, sir; perfectly green!'

'Is that all?' and Caffyn was slightly disappointed. 'You know, I don't think much of that. He might have taken you for a dun, or an indignant parent, or something of that sort; he may be one of those nervous fellows who start at anything, and you came there on purpose to give him a rowing, didn't you?'

'Don't talk to me,' said the old man impatiently: 'there's not much nervousness about *him*—he's as cool and impudent a rascal as ever I saw when he's nothing to fear. It was guilt, sir, guilt. You remember that picture of the Railway Station, and the look on the forger's face when the detectives lay hold of him at the carriage door? I saw that very look on young Ashburn's face before I'd spoken a dozen words.'

'What were the words?' said Caffyn. 'Proceed, good uncle, as we say in our profession; you interest me much!'

'I'm sure I forget what I said—I was out of temper, I remember that. I think I began by asking him for the real name of the author of the book.'

Again Caffyn was disappointed. 'Of course he was in a funk then; he knew he had put you into it. So you say, at least; I've not read the book myself.'

'It wasn't that at all, I tell you,' persisted the old man obstinately; 'you weren't there, and I was. D'ye think I don't know better than you? He's not the man to care for that. When he found what I'd really come about he was cool enough. No, no, he's robbed, or forged, or something, at some time or other, take my word for it—and I only hope I shall live to see it brought home to him!'

'I hope it will *find* him at home when it is,' said Caffyn; 'these things generally find the culprits "out" in more senses than one, to use an old Joe Miller. He would look extremely well in the Old Bailey dock. But this is Utopian, Uncle.'

'Well—we shall see. I turn off here, so good-bye. If you meet that libelling scoundrel again, you remember what I've told you.'

'Yes, I will,' thought Caffyn as he walked back alone. I must know more of my dear Ashburn; and if there happens to be a screw loose anywhere in my dear Ashburn's past, I shall do my humble best to give it a turn or two. It's a charming amusement to unmask the perfidious villain, as I suppose I must call myself after to-day, but it was

"TRY TO GIVE ME AN ANSWER."

[*p*. 109.

hardly safe to do it if he has his reasons for wearing a domino himself. If I could only think that excellent uncle of mine had not found a mare's nest! And if I can only put that screw on!'

CHAPTER XXI.

A PARLEY WITH THE ENEMY.

Mr. Fladgate was one of those domestically inclined bachelors who are never really at ease in rooms or chambers, and whose tastes lead them, as soon as they possess the necessary means, to set up a substantial and well-regulated household of their own. He had a large old-fashioned house in the neighbourhood of Russell Square, where he entertained rather frequently in a solid, unpretentious fashion. At his Sunday dinners especially, one or two of the minor celebrities of the day were generally to be met, and it was to one of these gatherings that Mark was invited, as one of the natural consequences of the success of 'Illusion.' He found himself, on arriving, in company with several faces familiar to him from photographs, and heard names announced which were already common property. There were some there who had been famous once, and were already beginning to be forgotten, others now obscure who were destined to be famous some day, and a few, and these by no means the least gifted, who neither had been nor would be famous at any time. There were two or three constellations of some magnitude on this occasion, surrounded by a kind of 'milky way' of minor stars, amongst which the bar, the studios, and the stage were all more or less represented.

Mark, as a rising man who had yet to justify a first success, occupied a position somewhere between the greater and lesser division, and Mr. Fladgate took care to make him known to many of the leading men in the room, by whom he found himself welcomed with cordial encouragement.

Presently, when he had shifted for a moment out of the nearest focus of conversation, his host, who had been 'distributing himself,' as the French say, amongst the various knots of talkers, came bustling up to him.

'Er—Mr. Ashburn,' he began, 'I want you to know a very clever young fellow here—known him from a boy—he's on the stage now, and going to surprise us all some of these days. You'll like him. Come along and I'll introduce him to you; he's very anxious to know *you*.' And when Mark had followed him as he threaded his way across the room, he found himself hurriedly introduced to the man with the cold light eyes whom he had met at the Featherstones' on the day when he had recognised Mabel Langton's portrait. Mr. Fladgate had already bustled away again, and the two were left together in a corner of the room. Dolly's revelations of the terrorism this man had exercised over her had strengthened the prejudice and dislike Mark had felt on their first meeting; he felt angry and a little uncomfortable now at being forced to come in contact with him, but there was no way of avoiding it just then, and Caffyn himself was perfectly at his ease.

'I think we have met before—at Grosvenor Place,' he began blandly; 'but I dare say you have forgotten.'

'No,' said Mark, 'I remember you very well; and besides,' he added, with a significance that he hoped would not be thrown away, 'I have been hearing a good deal about you lately from the Langtons—from Miss Langton, that is.'

'Ah!' said Caffyn; 'that would be flattering to most men, but when one has the bad luck, like myself, to displease such a very impulsive young lady as Miss Langton, the less she mentions you the better.'

'I may as well say,' returned Mark coldly, 'that, as to that particular affair in which you were concerned, whatever my opinions are, I formed them without assistance.'

'And you don't care to have them unsettled again by any plea for the defence? That's very natural. Well, with Miss Langton's remarks to guide me, I think I can guess what your own opinion of me is likely to be just now. And I'm going to ask you, as a mere matter of fair play, to hear my side of the question. You think that's very ridiculous, of course?'

'I think we can do no good by discussing it any further,' said Mark; 'we had better let the matter drop.'

'But you see,' urged Caffyn, 'as it is, the matter *has* dropped—on me, and really I do think that you, who I understand were the means—of course from the best possible motives—of exposing me as a designing villain, might give me an opportunity of defending myself. I took the liberty of getting Fladgate to bring us together, expressly because I

can't be comfortable while I know you have your present impressions of me. I don't expect to persuade Miss Langton to have a little charity—she's a woman; but I hoped you at least would give me a hearing.'

Mark felt some of his prejudice leaving him already; Caffyn had not the air of a man who had been detected in a course of secret tyranny. There was something flattering, too, in his evident wish to recover Mark's good opinion; he certainly ought to hear both sides before judging so harshly. Perhaps, after all, they had been making a little too much of this business.

'Well,' he said at last, 'I should be very glad if I could think things were not as bad as they seem. I will hear anything you would like to say about it.'

'Quite the high moral censor,' thought the other savagely. 'Confound his condescension!'

'I was sure you would give me a chance of putting myself right,' he said, 'but I can't do it now. They're going down to dinner; we will talk it over afterwards.'

At dinner conversation was lively and well sustained, though perhaps not quite so sparkling as might have been expected from such an assembly. As a rule, those who talked most and best were the men who still had their reputation to make, and many of the great men there seemed content to expose themselves to such brilliancy as there was around them, as if silently absorbing it for future reproduction, by some process analogous to the action of luminous paint.

Caffyn was placed at some distance from Mark, and as, after dinner, he was entreated to sit down to the piano, which stood in a corner of the room to which they had adjourned for cigars and coffee, it was some time before their conversation was resumed.

Caffyn was at his best as he sat there rippling out snatches of operatic *morceaux*, and turning round with a smile to know if they were recognised. His performance was not remarkable for accuracy, as he had never troubled himself to study music, or anything else, seriously, but it was effective enough with a non-critical audience; his voice, too, when he sang, though scarcely strong enough to fill a room of much larger size, was pleasant and not untrained, and it was some time before he was permitted to leave the music-stool.

He rattled off a rollicking hunting song, full of gaiety and *verve*, and followed it up with a little pathetic ballad, sung with an accent of real feeling (he could throw more emotion into his singing than his acting), while, although it was after dinner, the room was hushed until the last notes had died away, and when he rose at length with a laughing plea of exhaustion, he was instantly surrounded by a buzz of genuine gratitude. Mark heard all this, and the last remnants of his dislike and distrust vanished; it seemed impossible that this man, with the sympathetic voice, and the personal charm which was felt by most of those present, could be capable of finding pleasure in working on a child's terrors. So that when Caffyn, disengaging himself at length from the rest, made his way to where Mark was sitting, the latter felt this almost as a distinction, and made room for him with cordiality. Somebody was at the piano again, but as all around were talking, the most confidential conversations could be carried on in perfect security, and Caffyn, seating himself next to Mark, set himself to remove all prejudices.

He put his case very well, without obsequiousness or temper, appealing to Mark as a fellow man-of-the-world against a girl's rash judgment.

'You know,' he said, in the course of his arguments, 'I'm not really an incarnate fiend in private life. Miss Langton is quite convinced I am. I believe I saw her looking suspiciously at my boots the other day; but then she's a trifle hard on me. My worst fault is that I don't happen to understand children. I'd got into a way of saying extravagant things; you know the way one does talk rubbish to children; well, of joking in that sort of way with little What's-her-name. She always seemed to understand it well enough, and I should have thought she was old enough to see the simpler kind of joke, at all events. One day I chanced to chaff her about a stamp she took off some envelope. Well, I dare say I said something about stealing and prisons, all in fun, of course, never dreaming she would think any more about it. A fortnight afterwards, suddenly there's a tremendous hullabaloo. You began it. Oh, I know it was natural enough, but you did begin it. You see the child looking pale and seedy, and say at once, "something on her mind." Well, I don't know, and she might have been such a little idiot as to take a chance word *au grand sérieux*; it might have been something else on

her mind; or she mightn't have anything on her mind at all. Anyway, she tells you a long story about prisons, and how one Harold Caffyn had told her she would go there, and so on, and you, with that vivid imagination of yours, conjure up a fearful picture of a diabolical young man (me, you know) coldly gloating over the terrors of a poor little innocent ignorant child, eh? (Miss Dolly's nearly ten, and anything but backward for her age; but that's of no consequence.) Well, then you go and impart some of your generous indignation to Miss Langton; she takes it in a very aggravated form, and gives it to me. Upon my word, I think I've had rather hard lines!'

Mark felt a little remorseful just then, but he made one more attempt to maintain his high ground.

'I don't know that I should have thought so much of the joke itself,' he said, 'but you carried it on so long; you saw her brooding over it and getting worse and worse, and yet you never said a word to undeceive the poor child!'

'Now, you know, with all respect to you, Ashburn,' said Caffyn, who was gradually losing all ceremony, 'that about seeing her brooding is rubbish—pure rubbish! I saw the child, I suppose, now and again; but I didn't notice her particularly, and if I had, I don't exactly know how to detect the signs of brooding. How do you tell it from indigestion? and how are you to guess what the brooding is about? I tell you I'd forgotten the whole thing. And *that* was what all your righteous wrath was based upon, was it? Well, it's very delightful, no doubt, to figure as a knight-errant, or a champion, and all that kind of thing—particularly when you make your own dragon—but when you come prancing down and spit some unlucky lizard, it's rather a cheap triumph. But there, I forgive you. You've made a little mistake which has played the very deuce with me at Kensington Park Gardens. It's too late to alter that now, and if I can only make you see that there has been a mistake, and I'm not one of the venomous sort of reptiles after all, why, I suppose I must be content with that!'

He succeeded in giving Mark an uneasy impression that he had made a fool of himself. He had quite lost the feeling of superiority under the tone of half-humorous, half-bitter remonstrance which Caffyn had chosen to take, and was chiefly anxious now to make the other forget his share in the matter.

'Perhaps I was too ready to put the worst construction on what I heard,' he said apologetically, 'but after what you've told me, why——'

'Well, we'll say no more about it,' said Caffyn; 'you understand me now, and that's all *I* cared about.' ('You may be a great genius, my friend,' he was thinking, 'but it's not so very difficult to get round you, after all!') 'Look here,' he continued, 'will you come and see me one of these days—it would be a great kindness to me. I've got rooms in Kremlin Road, Bayswater, No. 72.'

Mark changed countenance very slightly as he heard the address—it had been Holroyd's. There was nothing in that to alarm him, and yet he could not resist a superstitious terror at the coincidence. Caffyn noticed the effect directly.

'Do you know Kremlin Road?' he said.

Something made Mark anxious to explain the emotion he felt he had given way to.

'Yes,' he said, 'a—a very old friend of mine had lodgings at that very house. He was lost at sea, so when you mentioned the place I——'

'I see,' said Caffyn. 'Of course. Was your friend Vincent Holroyd, I wonder?'

'You knew him?' cried Mark; 'you!'

('Got the Railway Station effect *that* time!' thought Caffyn. 'I begin to believe my dear uncle touched a weak spot after all. If he *has* a secret, it's ten to one Holroyd knew it—knows it, by Jove!')

'Oh, yes, I knew poor old Holroyd,' he said; 'that's how I came to take his rooms. Sad thing, his going down like that, wasn't it? It must have been a great shock for you—I can see you haven't got over it even yet.'

'No,' stammered Mark, 'no—yes, I felt it a great deal. I—I didn't know you were a friend of his too; did—did you know him well?'

'Very well; in fact, I don't fancy he had any secrets from me.'

Like lightning the thought flashed across Mark's mind, what if Caffyn had been entrusted with Holroyd's literary projects? But he remembered the next moment that Holroyd had expressly said that he had never told a soul of his cherished work until that last evening in Rotten Row. Caffyn had lied, but with a purpose, and as the result confirmed his suspicions he changed the

subject, and was amused at Mark's evident relief.

Towards the end of the evening Mr. Fladgate came up in his amiable way and laid his hand jocularly on Caffyn's shoulder.

'Let me give you a word of advice,' he said laughing; 'don't talk to Mr. Ashburn here about his book.'

'Shouldn't presume to,' said Caffyn. 'But do you come down so heavily on ignorant admiration, Ashburn, eh?'

'Oh, it isn't that,' said Mr. Fladgate; 'it's his confounded modesty. I shall be afraid to tell him when we think about bringing out another edition. I really believe he'd like never to hear of it again!'

Mark felt himself flush.

'Come,' he said, with a nervous laugh, 'I'm not so bad as all that!'

'Oh, you're beginning to stand fire better. But it's such a good story you *must* let me tell it, Mr. Ashburn, particularly as it only does you credit. Well, he was so ashamed of having it known that he was the author of "Illusion," that he actually took the trouble to get the manuscript all copied out in a different hand! Thought he'd take me in in that way, but he didn't. No, no, as you young fellows say, I "spotted" him directly; eh, Mr. Ashburn?'

'I'm afraid it's time for me to be off,' said Mark, dreading further revelations, and too nervous to see that they could do him no possible harm. But the fact was, Caffyn's presence filled him with a vague alarm which he could not shake off.

Good-natured Mr. Fladgate was afraid he had offended him.

'I do hope you weren't annoyed at my mentioning that about the manuscript?' he said, as he accompanied Mark to the door. 'It struck me as so curious, considering the success the book has had, that I really couldn't resist telling it.'

'No, no,' said Mark, 'it's all right; I didn't mind in the least. I—I'm not ashamed of it!'

'Why, of course not,' said his host; 'it will be something for your biographer to record, eh? You won't have another cigar to take you home? Well, good-night.'

'Good-night,' said Mark, and added some words of thanks for a pleasant evening.

Had he had such a pleasant evening? he asked himself, as he walked home alone in the warm night air. He had been well treated by everybody, and there had been men present whose attention was a distinction in itself, and yet he felt an uneasiness which he found it difficult to trace back to any particular cause. He decided at last that he was annoyed to find that the casual mention of Holroyd's name should still have power to discompose him—that was a weakness which he must set himself to overcome.

At the same time no one could possibly discover his secret; there was no harm done. And before he reached his lodgings he decided that the evening had been pleasant enough.

CHAPTER XXII.

STRIKING THE TRAIL.

It was Sunday once more—a bright morning in June—and Caffyn was sitting over his late breakfast and the 'Observer' in his rooms at Bayswater. He was in a somewhat gloomy and despondent frame of mind, for nothing seemed to have gone well with him since his disastrous reception in Mabel's boudoir. His magnificent prospects in commerce had suddenly melted away into thin air, for his confiding friend and intending partner had very inconsiderately developed symptoms of a premature insanity, and was now 'under restraint.' He himself was in debt to a considerable extent; his father had firmly refused to increase what in his opinion was a handsome allowance; and Caffyn had been obliged to go to a theatrical agent with a view of returning to the boards, while no opening he thought it worth his while to accept had as yet presented itself.

Mabel had not relented in the least. He had met her once or twice at the Featherstones', and, although she had not treated him with any open coolness, he felt that henceforth there must be an impassable barrier between them. Now and then, even while she forced herself in public to listen to him, the invincible horror and repugnance she felt would be suddenly revealed by a chance look or intonation—and he saw it and writhed in secret. And yet he went everywhere that there was a possibility of meeting her, with a restless impulse of self-torture, while his hate grew more intense day by day.

And all this he owed to Mark Ashburn—a fact which Harold Caffyn was not

the man to forget. He had been careful to cultivate him, had found out his address and paid him one or two visits, in which he had managed to increase the intimacy between them.

Mark was now entirely at his ease with him. His air of superiority had been finally dropped on the evening of Mr. Fladgate's dinner, and he seemed flattered by the assiduity with which Caffyn courted his society. Still, if he had a secret, it was his own still. Caffyn watched in vain for the look of sudden terror which he had once succeeded in surprising. At times he began to fear that it was some involuntary nervous contraction from which his own hopes had led him to infer the worst, for he was aware that countenances are not always to be depended upon; that a nervous temperament will sometimes betray all the signs of guilt from the mere consciousness that guilt is suspected. If that was the case here, he felt himself powerless. It is only in melodramas that a well-conducted person can be steeped in crime, and he did not see his way very clearly to accomplishing that difficult and dangerous feat with Mark Ashburn.

So he hated Mark more intensely at that thought that, after all, his past might be a blameless one. But even if this were not so, and he really had a secret, it might be long enough before some fortunate chance gave Caffyn the necessary clue to it. Well, he would wait and watch as patiently as he might till then, and however long the opportunity might be in coming, when it came at last it should not find him too indifferent or reluctant to make use of it.

While he thought out his position somewhat to this effect, his landlady appeared to clear away the breakfast things; she was a landlady of the better class, a motherly old soul who prided herself upon making her lodgers comfortable, and had higher views than many of her kind on the subjects of cookery and attendance. She had come to entertain a great respect for Caffyn, although at first, when she had discovered that he was 'one of them play-actors,' she had not been able to refrain from misgivings. Her notions of actors were chiefly drawn from the ramping and roaring performers at minor theatres, and the seedy blue-chinned individuals she had observed hanging about their stage-doors; and the modern comedian was altogether beyond her experience.

So when she found that her new lodger was 'quite the gentleman, and that partickler about his linen, and always civil and pleasant-spoken, and going about as neat as a new pin, and yet with a way about him as you could see he wouldn't stand no nonsense,' her prejudices were entirely conquered.

'Good morning, Mr. Caffyn, sir,' she began; 'I come up to clear away your breakfast, if you're quite done. Sarah Ann she's gone to chapel, which she's a Primitive Methodist, she *says*, though she can't never tell me so much as the text when she comes back, and I tell her, "My good gal," I ses to her, "what *do* you go to chapel for?" and it's my belief that as often as not she don't go near it. But there, Mr. Caffyn, if a gal does her work about the 'ouse of a week, as I will say for Sarah Ann—'

Caffyn groaned. Good Mrs. Binney had a way of coming in to discourse on things in general, and it was always extremely difficult to get rid of her. She did not run down on this occasion until after an exhaustive catalogue, *à la* Mrs. Lirriper, of the manners and customs of a whole dynasty of maids-of-all-work, when she began to clear his breakfast-table. He was congratulating himself on her final departure, when she returned with a bundle of papers in her hand.

'I've been meanin' to speak to you about these, this ever such a time,' she said. 'Binney, he said as I'd better, seeing as you've got his very rooms, and me not liking to burn 'em, and the maids that careless about papers and that, and not a line from him since he left.'

'It would certainly be better not to burn the rooms, unless they're insured, Mrs. Binney, and I should be inclined to prefer their not being burnt while I'm in them, unless you make a point of it,' said Caffyn mildly.

'Lor, Mr. Caffyn, who was talking of burnin' rooms? You do talk so ridiklus. It's these loose papers of Mr. 'Olroyd's as I came to speak to you about, you bein' a friend of his, and they lyin' a burden on my mind for many a day, and litterin' up all the place, and so afraid I am as Sarah Ann 'll take and light the fire with 'em one of these mornings, and who knows whether they're not of value, and if so what should I say if he came and asked me for 'em back again?'

'Well, he won't do that, Mrs. Binney, if it's true that he was drowned in the "Mangalore," will he?'

'Drowned! and me never to hear it

till this day. It's quite took me aback. Poor dear gentleman, what an end for him—to go out all that way only to be drowned! I do seem to be told of nothing but deaths and dying this morning, for Binney's just 'eard that poor old Mr. Tapling, at No. 5 opposite, was took off at last quite sudden late last night, and he'd had a dropsy for years, and swell up he would into all manner o' shapes, as I've seen him doin' of it myself!'

'Well, I'll look over the papers for you, Mrs. Binney,' interrupted Caffyn. 'I don't suppose there's anything of much importance, but I can tell you what ought to be kept.'

He would have solved her difficulties by advising her to burn the whole of them, but for some vague idea that he might be able to discover something amongst all these documents which would throw some light upon Holroyd's relations with Mark.

So when Mrs. Binney was at last prevailed on to leave him in peace, he sat down with the sheaf of miscellaneous papers she had left him, and began to examine them without much hope of discovering anything to the purpose.

They seemed to be the accumulations of some years. There were rough drafts of Latin and Greek verses, outlines for essays, and hasty jottings of University and Temple lectures—memorials of Holroyd's undergraduate and law-student days. Then came notes scribbled down in court with a blunt corroded quill on borrowed scraps of paper, and elaborate analyses of leading cases and Acts of Parliament which belonged to the period of zeal which had followed his call to the Bar.

He turned all these over carelessly enough, until he came upon some sheets fastened together with a metal clip.

'This does not look like law,' he said half aloud. '"Glamour—romance by Vincent Beauchamp." Beauchamp was his second name, I think. So he wrote romances, did he, poor devil! This looks like the scaffolding for one, anyway; let's have a look at it. List of characters: Beaumelle Marston; I've come across that name somewhere lately, I know; Lieutenant-Colonel Duncombe; why, I know that gentleman too! Was this ever published? Here's the argument.' He read and re-read it carefully, and then went to a bookshelf and took down a book with the Grosvenor Library label; it was a copy of 'Illusion,' by Cyril Ernstone.

With that by his side he turned over the rest of Holroyd's papers, and found more traces of some projected literary work; skeleton scenes, headings for chapters, and even a few of the opening pages, with some marginal alterations in red ink, all of which he eagerly compared with the printed work before him.

Then he rose and paced excitedly up and down his room.

'Is *this* his secret?' he thought. 'If I could only be sure of it! It seems too good to be true . . . they might have collaborated, or the other might have made him a present of a plot, or even borrowed some notions from him. . . . And yet there are some things that look uncommonly suspicious. Why should he look so odd at the mere mention of Holroyd's name? Why did he get the manuscript recopied? Was it modesty—or something else? And why does one name only appear on the title-page, and our dear friend take all the credit to himself? There's something fishy about it all, and I mean to get at it. Job was perfectly correct. It *is* rash for an enemy to put his name to a book—especially some other fellow's book. Mr. Mark Ashburn and I must have a little private conversation together, in which I shall see how much I remember of the action of the common pump.'

He sat down and wrote a genial little note, asking Mark, if he had no better engagement, to come round and dine quietly with him at the house in Kremlin Road that evening, gave it to his landlord with directions to take a cab to Mark's rooms, and, if he could, bring back an answer, after which he waited patiently for his messenger's return.

Binney returned in the course of an hour or so, having found Mark in, and brought a note which Caffyn tore open impatiently.

'I have a friend coming to dinner to-night, Mr. Binney,' he said, turning round with his pleasant smile when he had read the answer. 'It's Sunday, I know, but Mrs. Binney won't mind for once, and tell her she must do her very best; I want to give my friend a little surprise.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

PIANO PRACTICE.

Caffyn was conscious of a certain excitement that Sunday evening as he waited for Mark Ashburn's arrival. He felt that he might be standing on the threshold of a chamber containing the

secret of the other's life—the key of which that very evening might deliver into his hands. He was too cautious to jump at hasty conclusions; he wished before deciding upon any plan of action to be practically certain of his facts; a little skilful manipulation, however, would most probably settle the question one way or the other, and if the result verified his suspicions he thought he would know how to make use of his advantage. There is a passage in the 'Autocrat of the Breakfast Table' where the author, in talking of the key to the side-door by which every person's feelings may be entered, goes on to say, 'If nature or accident has put one of these keys into the hands of a person who has the torturing instinct, I can only solemnly pronounce the words that justice utters over its doomed victim, "The Lord have mercy on your soul!"' There, it is true, the key in question unlocks the delicate instrument of the nervous system, and not necessarily a Bluebeard's chamber of guilt; but where the latter is also the case to some extent the remark by no means loses in significance, and if any man had the torturing instinct to perfection, Caffyn might be said to be that individual. There was nothing he would enjoy more than practising on a human piano and putting it hopelessly out of tune; but pleasant as this was, he felt he might have to exercise some self-denial here, at all events for the present, lest his instrument should become restive and escape before he had quite made up his mind what air he could best play upon it.

In the meantime Mark was preparing to keep the appointment in the pleasantest and most unsuspecting frame of mind. After answering Caffyn's note he had met the Langtons as they came out of church and returned with them to lunch. Dolly was herself again now, her haunting fears forgotten with the happy ease of childhood, and Mabel had made Mark feel something of the gratitude she felt to him for his share in bringing this about. He had gone on to one or two other houses, and had been kindly received everywhere, and now he was looking forward to a quiet little dinner with the full expectation of a worthy finish to a pleasant day. Even when he mounted the stairs of the house which had been once familiar to him, and stood in Holroyd's old rooms, he was scarcely affected by any unpleasant associations. For one thing, he was beginning to have his conscience tolerably well in hand; for another, the interior of the rooms was completely transformed since he had seen them last.

Then they were simply the furnished apartments of a man who cared but little for his personal well-being; now, when he passed round the handsome Japanese screen by the door, he saw an interior marked by a studied elegance and luxury. The common lodging-house fireplace was concealed by an elaborate oak over-mantel, with Persian tiles and blue china; the walls were covered with a delicate blue-green paper and hung with expensive etchings and autotype drawings of an æsthetically erotic character; small tables and deep luxurious chairs were scattered about, and near the screen stood a piano and a low stand with peacock's feathers arranged in a pale blue crackle jar. In spite of the pipes and riding-whips on the racks, the place was more like a woman's boudoir than a man's room, and there were traces in its arrangements of an eye to effect which gave it the air of a well-staged scene in a modern comedy.

It looked very attractive, softly lit as it was by shaded candles in sconces and a porcelain lamp with a crimson shade, which was placed on the small oval table near the fern-filled fireplace; and as Mark placed himself in a low steamer chair and waited for his host to make his appearance, he felt as if he was going to enjoy himself.

'I shall have my rooms done up something in this way,' he thought, 'when *my* book comes out.' The blinds were half drawn and the windows opened wide to the sultry air, and while he waited he could hear the bells from the neighbouring steeples calling in every tone, from harsh command to persuasive invitation, to the evening services.

Presently Caffyn lounged in through the hangings which protected his bedroom door.

'Sorry you found me unready,' he said; 'I got in late from the club somehow, but they'll bring us up some dinner presently. Looking at that thing, eh?' he asked, as he saw Mark's eye rest on a small high-heeled satin slipper in a glass case which stood on a bracket near him. 'That was Kitty Bessborough's once—you remember Kitty Bessborough, of course? She gave it to me just before she went out on that American tour, and got killed in some big railway smash somewhere, poor little woman! I'll tell you some day how she came to make me

a present of it. Here's Binney with the soup now.'

Mrs. Binney sent up a perfect dinner, at which her husband assisted in a swallow-tailed coat and white tie, a concession he would not have made for every lodger, and Caffyn played the host to perfection, though with every course he asked himself inwardly, 'Shall I open fire on him yet?' and still he delayed.

At last he judged that his time had come; Binney had brought up coffee and left them alone.

'You sit down there and make yourself at home,' said Caffyn genially, thrusting Mark down into a big saddle-bag armchair ('where I can see your confounded face,' he added inwardly). 'Try one of these cigars—they're not bad; and now we can talk comfortably. I tell you what I want to talk about,' he said presently, and a queer smile flitted across his face; 'I want to talk about that book of yours. Oh, I know you want to fight shy of it, but I don't care. It isn't often I have a celebrated author to dine with me, and if you didn't wish to hear it talked about you shouldn't have written it, you know. I want you to tell me a few facts I can retail to people on the best authority, don't you know; so you must just make up your mind to conquer that modesty of yours for once, old fellow, and gratify my impertinent curiosity.'

Mark was feeling so much at ease with himself and Caffyn that even this proposition was not very terrible to him just then.

'All right,' he said lazily; 'what do you want to know first?'

'That's right. Well, first, I must tell you I've read the book. I'd like to say how much I was struck by it if I might.'

'I'm very glad you liked it,' said Mark.

'Like it?' echoed Caffyn; 'my dear fellow, I haven't been so moved by anything for years. The thought you've crammed into that book, the learning, the passion and feeling of the thing! I envy you for being able to feel you have produced it all.' ('That ought to fetch him,' he thought.)

'Oh, as for that,' said Mark, with a shrug, and left his remark unfinished, but without, as the other noticed, betraying any particular discomposure.

'Do you remember, now,' pursued Caffyn, 'how the central idea first occurred to you?'

But here again he drew a blank, for Mark had long ago found it expedient to concoct a circumstantial account of how and when the central idea had first occurred to him.

'Well, I'll tell you,' he said. 'It shows how oddly these things are brought about. I was walking down Palace Gardens one afternoon. . . .' and he told the history of the conception of 'Illusion' in his best manner, until Caffyn raged internally.

'You brazen humbug!' he thought; 'to sit there and tell that string of lies to *me!*' When it was finished he remarked, 'Well, that's very interesting; and I have your permission to tell that again, eh?'

'Certainly, my dear fellow,' said Mark, with a wave of his hand. His cigar was a really excellent one, and he thought he would try another presently.

('We must try him again,' thought Caffyn; 'he's deeper than I gave him credit for being.')

'I'll tell you an odd criticism I heard the other day. I was talking to little Mrs. Bismuth—you know Mrs. Bismuth by name? Some fellow has just taken the "Charivari" for her. Well, she goes in for letters a little as well as the drama, reads no end of light literature since she gave up tights for drawing-room comedy, and she would have it that she seemed to recognise two distinct styles in the book, as if two pens had been at work on it.'

('Now I may find out if that really was the case after all,' he was thinking.) 'I thought you'd be amused with that,' he added, after a pause. Mark really did seem amused; he laughed a little.

'Mrs. Bismuth is a charming actress, he said, 'but she'd better read either a little more or a little less light literature before she goes in for tracing differences in style. You can tell her, with my compliments, that a good many pens were at work on it, but only one brain. Where do you keep your matches?'

'I can't draw him,' thought Caffyn. 'What an actor the fellow is! And yet, if it was all aboveboard, he wouldn't have said that! and I've got Holroyd's handwriting, which is pretty strong evidence against him. But I want more, and I'll have it.'

He strolled up to the mantelpiece to light a cigarette, for which purpose he removed the shade from one of the candles, throwing a stronger light on his friend's face, and then, pausing with the cigarette still unlighted between his fingers, he asked suddenly:

'By the way, Fladgate said some other

fellow wrote the book for you the other day!' That shot at least told; every vestige of colour left Mark's face, he half rose from his chair, and then sat down again as he retorted sharply:

'Flaagate said that! What the devil are you talking about . . . ? What fellow?'

'Why, you were there when he said it. Some amanuensis you gave the manuscript to.'

The colour came back in rather an increased quantity to Mark's cheeks. What a nervous fool he was!

'Oh, ah—*that* fellow!' he said; 'I remember now. Yes, I was absurdly anxious to remain unknown, you see, in those days, and—and I rather wanted to put something in the way of a poor fellow who got his living by copying manuscripts; and so, you see——'

'I see,' said Caffyn. 'What was his name?'

'His name?' repeated Mark, who had not expected this and had no name ready for such immediate use. 'Let me see; I almost forget. It began with a B I know; Brown—Brune—something like that—I really don't recollect just now. But the fact is,' he added, with a desperate recourse to detail, 'the first time I saw the beggar he looked so hard up, dressed in——' ('Buckram!' thought Caffyn, but he said nothing)—'in rags, you know, that I felt it would be quite a charitv to employ him.'

'So it is,' agreed Caffyn. 'Did he write a good hand? I might be able to give him some work myself in copying out parts.'

'Oh, he'd be useless for that!' put in Mark with some alarm; 'he wrote a wretched hand.'

'Well, but in the cause of charity, you know,' rejoined Caffyn, with inward delight. 'Hang it, Ashburn, why shouldn't *I* do an unselfish thing as well as you? What's the fellow's address?'

'He—he's emigrated,' said Mark; 'you'd find it rather difficult to come across him now.'

'Should I?' Caffyn returned; 'well, I dare say I should.'

And Mark rose and went to one of the windows for some air. He remained there for a short time looking idly down the darkening street. A chapel opposite was just discharging its congregation, and he found entertainment in watching the long lighted ground-glass windows, as a string of grotesque silhouettes filed slowly across them, like a shadow pantomime turned serious.

When he was tired of that and turned away from the blue-grey dusk, the luxurious comfort of the room struck him afresh.

'You've made yourself uncommonly comfortable here,' he said appreciatively, as he settled down again in his velvet-pile chair.

'Well, I flatter myself I've improved the look of the place since you saw it last. Poor Holroyd, you see, never cared to go in for this kind of thing. Queer reserved fellow, wasn't he?'

'Very,' said Mark; and then, with the perverse impulse which drives us to test dangerous ice, added: 'Didn't you say, though, the other evening that he had no secrets from you?' ('Trying to pump *me*, are you?' thought the other; 'but you don't!')

'Did I?' he answered, 'sometimes I fancied, now and then, that I knew less of him than I thought I did. For instance, he was very busy for a long time before he left England over something or other, but he never told me what it was. I used to catch him writing notes and making extracts and so on . . . *You* were a great friend of his, Ashburn, weren't you? Do you happen to know whether he was engaged on some work which would account for that, now? Did he ever mention to you that he was writing a book, for instance?'

'Never,' said Mark; 'did he—did he hint that to you?'

'Never got a word out of him; but I dare say you, who knew him best, will laugh when I tell you this, I always had my suspicions that he was writing a novel.'

'A novel?' echoed Mark; 'Holroyd! Excuse me, my dear fellow, I really can't help laughing—it does seem such a comic idea.'

And he laughed boisterously, overcome by the humour of the notion, until Caffyn said: 'Well, I didn't know him as well as you did, I suppose, but I shouldn't have thought it was so devilish funny as all that!' For Caffyn was a little irritated that the other should believe him to be duped by all this, and that he could not venture as yet to undeceive him. It made him viciously inclined to jerk the string harder yet, and watch Mark's contortions.

'He wasn't that sort of man,' said Mark, when he had had his laugh out; 'poor dear old fellow, he'd have been as amused at the idea as I am.'

'But this success of yours would have pleased him, wouldn't it?' said Caffyn.

For a moment Mark was cut as deeply by this as the speaker intended; he could give no other answer than a sigh, which was perfectly genuine. Caffyn affected to take this as an expression of incredulity.

'Surely you don't doubt that!' he said; 'why, Holroyd would have been as glad as if he had written the book himself. If he could come back to us again, you would see that I am right. What a meeting it would be, if one could only bring it about!'

'It's no use talking like that,' said Mark rather sharply. 'Holroyd's dead, poor fellow, at the bottom of the Indian Ocean somewhere. We shall never meet again.'

'But,' said Caffyn, with his eyes greedily watching Mark's face, 'even these things happen sometimes; he may come back to congratulate you still.'

'How do you mean? He's drowned, I tell you . . . the dead never come back!'

'The *dead* don't,' returned Caffyn significantly.

'Do you—you don't mean to tell me he's *alive!*'

'If I were to say *yes?*' said Caffyn, 'I wonder how you would take it.'

If he had any doubts still remaining, the manner in which Mark received these words removed them. He fell back in his seat with a gasp and turned a ghastly lead colour; then, with an evident effort, he leaned forward again, clutching the arms of the chair, and his voice was hoarse and choked when he was able to make use of it.

'You have heard something,' he said. 'What is it? Why can't you tell it? Out with it, man! For God's sake, don't—don't play with me like this!'

Caffyn felt a wild exultation he had the greatest difficulty in repressing. He could not resist enjoying Mark's evident agony a little longer.

'Don't excite yourself, my dear fellow,' he said calmly. 'I oughtn't to have said anything about it.'

'I'm not excited,' said Mark; 'see—I'm quite cool . . . tell me—all you know. He—he's alive, then . . . you have heard from him? I—I can bear it.'

'No, no,' said Caffyn; 'you're deceiving yourself. You mustn't let yourself hope, Ashburn. I have never heard from him from that day to this. You know yourself that he was not in any of the boats; there's no real chance of his having survived.'

For it was not his policy to alarm Mark too far, and least of all to show his hand so early. His experiment had been successful; he now knew all he wanted, and was satisfied with that. Mark's face relaxed into an expression of supreme relief; then it became suspicious again as he asked, almost in a whisper, 'I thought that—but then, why did you say all that about the dead—about coming back?'

'You mustn't be angry if I tell you. I didn't know you cared so much about him, or I wouldn't have done it. You know what some literary fellow—is it Tennyson?—says somewhere about our showing a precious cold shoulder to the dead if they were injudicious enough to turn up again; those aren't the exact words, but that's the idea. Well, I was thinking whether, if a fellow like poor Holroyd were to come back now, he'd find anyone to care a pin about him, and, as you were his closest friend, I thought I'd try how *you* took it. It was thoughtless, I know. I never dreamed it would affect you in this way; you're as white as chalk still—it's quite knocked you over. I'm really very sorry!'

'It was not a friendly thing to do,' said Mark, recovering himself. 'It was not kind, when one has known a man so long, and believed him dead, and then to be made to believe that he is still alive, it—it—— You can't wonder if I look rather shaken.'

'I don't,' said Caffyn; 'I quite understand. He is not quite forgotten after all, then? He still has a faithful friend in you to remember him; and he's been dead six months! How many of us can hope for that? You must have been very fond of him.'

'Very,' said Mark, with a sad self-loathing as he spoke the lie. 'I shall never see anyone like him—never!'

('How well he does it, after all!' thought Caffyn. 'I shall have plenty of sport with him.') 'Would it give you any comfort to talk about him now and then,' he suggested, 'with one who knew him too, though not as well perhaps as you did?'

'Thanks!' said Mark, 'I think it would some day, but not yet. I don't feel quite up to it at present.'

'Well,' said the other, with a wholly private grin, 'I won't distress you by talking of him till you introduce the subject; and you quite forgive me for saying what I did, don't you?'

'Quite,' said Mark. 'And now I think I'll say good-night!'

The horror of those few moments in

which he had seen detection staring him in the face still clung to him as he walked back to his lodgings. He cursed his folly in ever having exposed himself to such tremendous risks, until he remembered that, after all, his situation remained the same. He had merely been frightened with false fire. If he had not been very sure that the dead would never rise to denounce him, he would not have done what he had done. How could Vincent Holroyd have escaped? Still, it was an ugly thought, and it followed him to his pillow that night and gave him fearful dreams. He was in a large gathering, and Mabel was there too; he could see her at the other end of an immense hall, and through the crowd Holroyd was slowly, steadily making his way to her side, and Mark knew his object; it was to denounce *him*. If he could only reach him first, he felt that somehow he could prevent him from attaining his end, and he made frantic efforts to do so; but always the crowd hedged him in and blocked his way with a stupid impassibility, and he struggled madly, but all in vain. Holroyd drew nearer and nearer Mabel, with that stern set purpose in his face, while Mark himself was powerless to move or speak. And so the dream dragged itself on all through the night.

He had some thoughts, on waking, of setting his fears to rest for ever by making some further inquiries, but when he read once more the various accounts he had preserved of the shipwreck, he convinced himself willingly enough that nothing of the kind was necessary. He could dismiss the matter from his mind once for all, and by breakfast-time he was himself again.

Caffyn, now that his wildest hopes of revenge were realised, and he saw himself in a position to make terrible reprisals for the injury Mark Ashburn had done him, revelled in a delicious sense of power, the only drawback to his complete enjoyment of the situation being his uncertainty as to the precise way of turning his knowledge to the best account.

Should he turn upon Mark suddenly with the intimation that he had found him out, without mentioning as yet that Holroyd was in the land of the living? There would be exquisite pleasure in that, and what a field for the utmost ingenuity of malice in constant reminders of the hold he possessed, in veiled threats, and vague mocking promises of secrecy! Could any enemy desire a more poignant retribution? He longed to do all this, and no one could have done it better; but he was habitually inclined to mistrust his first impulses, and he feared lest his victim might grow weary of writhing; he might be driven to despair, to premature confession, flight—suicide, perhaps. He was just the man to die by his own hand and leave a letter cursing him as his torturer, to be read at the inquest and get into all the papers. No, he would not go too far; for the present he decided to leave Mark in happy ignorance of the ruin tottering above him. He would wait until he was even more prosperous, more celebrated, before taking any decisive steps. There was little fear that he would see his revenge some day, and meanwhile he must be content with such satisfaction as he could enjoy in secret.

'I must put up with the fellow a little longer,' he thought. 'We will go on mourning our dear lost friend together until I can arrange a meeting somehow. A telegram or letter to the Ceylon plantation will fetch him at any time, and I don't care about doing my charming Mabel such a good turn as bringing him back to her just yet. I wonder how my worthy plagiarist is feeling after last night. I think I will go round and have a look at him.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

A MEETING IN GERMANY.

The summer went by, and Mark's anticipations of happiness were as nearly borne out as such anticipations ever are. He and Mabel met constantly. He saw her in the Row with her father and Dolly—and sometimes had the bliss of exchanging a few words across the railings—at dances and tennis-parties, and in most of the less exclusive events of the season, while every interview left him more deeply infatuated. She seemed always glad to see and talk with him, allowing herself to express a decided interest in his doings, and never once throwing on him the burden of a conversational deadlift in the manner with which a girl knows how to discourage all but the dullest of bores. Now and then, indeed, when Mark's conversation showed symptoms of the occasional inanity common to most men who talk

much, she did not spare him; but this was due to a jealous anxiety on her part that he should keep up to his own standard, and if she had not liked him she would not have taken the trouble. He took her light shafts so patiently and good-humouredly too that she was generally seized by a contrition which expressed itself in renewed graciousness. Already she had come to notice his arrival on lawns or in drawing-rooms, and caught herself remembering his looks and words after their meeting.

He was still busy with 'Sweet Bells Jangled,' for he had now decided to make his *coup* with that, but in other respects he was unproductive. He had begun several little things in pursuance of his engagements, but somehow he did not get on with them, and had to lay them aside until the intellectual thaw he expected. Pecuniarily his position was much improved; his uncle had kept his word, and put an allowance at his disposal which made him tolerably easy about his future. He removed to more fashionable quarters in South Audley Street, and led the easy existence there he had long coveted. Still, Mr. Lightowler was an unpleasantly constant bluebottle in his ointment. He came up regularly from Chigbourne to inspect him, generally with literary advice and the latest scandal about his detested neighbour, which he thought might be 'worked up into something.' He had discovered the Row as an afternoon lounge where his nephew ought to show himself 'among the swells,' and he insisted, in spite of all Mark's attempts at evasion, in walking him about there. Mark was not perhaps exactly ashamed of the man whose favours he was accepting, at least he did not own as much even to himself, but there were times when, as he met the surprised glances of people he knew slightly, he could have wished that his loud-voiced and unpresentable relative had not got quite such a tight hold of his arm.

At a hint from Trixie he had tendered the olive-branch to his family, which they accepted rather as if it had been something he had asked them to hold for him, and without the slightest approach to anything like a scene. Trixie had, of course, been in communication with him from the first, and kept her satisfaction to herself; Mr. Ashburn was too timid, and his wife too majestic, to betray emotion, while the other two were slightly disappointed. The virtuous members of a family are not always best pleased to see the prodigal at any time, and it is particularly disconcerting to find that the supposed outcast has been living on veal instead of husks during his absence, and associating rather with lions than swine. Mark was not offended at his reception, however; he felt himself independent now; but his easy temper made him anxious to be at peace with them, and if they were not exactly effusive, they made no further pretence of disapproval, and the reconciliation was perfectly genuine as far as it went.

'I am going to see you to the gate, Mark,' Trixie announced, as he rose to go. It was not a long or a perilous journey, but she had an object in accompanying him down the little flagged path. 'I've got something to tell you,' she said, as they stood by the iron gate in the hot August night. 'I wish I knew how to begin. . . . Mark—how would you like a—a new brother, because I'm going to give you one?'

'Thanks very much, Trixie,' said Mark, 'but I think I can get along without another of them.'

'Ah, but Jack would be a *nice* one,' said Trixie.

Mark remembered then that he had noticed a decided improvement in her dress and appearance.

'And who is this Jack whom you're so disinterestedly going to make me a present of?' he asked.

'Jack is one of the masters at the Art School,' said Trixie; 'he's awfully handsome—not in your style, but fair, with a longer moustache, and he's too clever almost to live. He had one picture in the Grosvenor this year, in the little room, down by the bottom somewhere, but he hasn't sold it. And when I first went to the School all the girls declared he came round to me twice as much as he did to them, and they made themselves perfectly horrid about it; so I had to ask him not to come so often, and he didn't—for a time. Then one day he asked me if I would rather he never came to me at all, and—and I couldn't say yes, and so somehow we got engaged. Ma's furious about it, and so is Martha; but then, ma has never seen Jack——'

'And Martha *has?* I see!' put in Mark.

'Jack knows a lot about literature; he admires "Illusion" immensely, Mark,' added Trixie, thinking in her innocence that this would enlist his sympathy at once. 'He wants to know you dreadfully.'

'Well, Trixie,' said Mark paternally, 'you must bring him to see me. We mustn't have you doing anything imprudent, you know. Let me see what I think of him. I hope he's a good fellow?'

'Oh, he *is*,' said Trixie; 'if you could only see some of his sketches!'

A day or two later, Mark had an opportunity of meeting his intending brother-in-law, of whom he found no particular reason to disapprove, though he secretly thought him a slightly commonplace young man, and too inclined to be familiar with himself; and shortly after he started for the Black Forest, whither Caffyn had prevailed upon him to be his companion. He thought it would be amusing and serve to keep his vengeance alive to have his intended victim always at hand, but the result did not quite come up to his hopes. Mark had so lulled his fears to rest that the most artfully planned introduction of Holroyd's name failed to disturb him. He thought chiefly during their wanderings of Mabel, and her smile and words at parting, and in this occupation he was so pleasantly absorbed that it was impossible to rouse him by any means short of the rudest awakening. And by-and-by a curious change took place in Caffyn's feelings towards him; in spite of himself the virulence of his hatred began to abate. Time and change of scene were proving more powerful than he had anticipated; away from Mabel, his hatred, even of her, flagged more and more with every day, and he was disarmed as against Mark by the evident pleasure the latter took in his society, for the most objectionable persons become more bearable when we discover that they have a high opinion of us—it is such a redeeming touch in their nature. And besides, with all the reason Caffyn had for cherishing a grudge against Mark, somehow, as they became more intimate, he slid gradually into a half-contemptuous and half-affectionate tolerance. He began to think that he would find satisfaction in standing by and letting events work themselves out; he would let this poor fellow enjoy his fool's paradise as long as might be. No doubt the luxury of secretively enjoying the situation had a great deal to do with this generosity of his, but the fact remains that, for some reason, he was passing from an enemy to a neutral, and might on occasion even become an ally, if nothing occurred to fan his hatred to flame in the meanwhile.

Towards the end of their tour, they arrived at Triberg late one Saturday evening, and on the Sunday, Caffyn, having risen late and finding that Mark had breakfasted and gone out alone, was climbing the path by the waterfall, when, on one of the bridges which span the cascade, he saw a girl's figure leaning listlessly over the rough rail. It was Gilda Featherstone, and he thought he could detect an additional tinge in her cheeks and a light in her eyes as he came towards her. Her father and mother were in one of the shelters above, and Mrs. Featherstone's greeting when she recognised him was the reverse of cordial. This young man might not have followed them there, but it looked extremely like it, and if she could not order him out of the Black Forest as if she had taken it for the summer, she would at least give him no encouragement to stay.

Unfortunately, her husband behaved with an irritating effusiveness; he liked Caffyn, and besides, had not seen an Englishman to talk to familiarly for some days. They were going home next day, he had better come with them. Well, if he could not do that (Mrs. Featherstone having interposed icily, 'Mr. Caffyn has just told you, Robert, that he is with a friend!') he must come to them the moment he returned to England, and they would give him some shooting. Mrs. Featherstone had to hear this invitation and Caffyn's instant acceptance of it with what philosophy she might. It was useless to remonstrate with her husband on his blindness, he had democratic views which might even bear a practical test, and she could only trust to chance and her mother-wit to prevent any calamity; but she was unusually silent as they walked down the winding path back to the hotel where they were all staying.

There was a midday *table d'hôte*, where the proprietor, a most imposing and almost pontifical personage, officiated as at a religious ceremonial, solemnly ladling out the soup to devout waiters as if he were blessing each portion, after which he stood by and contented himself with lending his countenance (at a rather high rate of interest) to the meal. Caffyn's chair was placed next to Gilda's, and they kept up a continuous flow of conversation. Mark saw them both looking at him at one time, and wondered at the sudden change in Caffyn's face, which (unless his fancy misled him) had a frown on it that was

almost threatening. But he was not allowed much time to speculate on the causes, for Mrs. Featherstone (perhaps to emphasise her disapproval of his companion) distinguished Mark by engrossing his entire attention.

That afternoon Mark was sitting outside the hotel, taking his coffee at one of the little round iron tables, by the inevitable trio of scrubby orange trees in green tubs, when Caffyn, whom he had not seen since leaving the table, came up and sat down beside him without a word.

'Have you come out for some coffee?' asked Mark.

'No,' said Caffyn shortly, 'I came out to have a few words with you.'

The Featherstones had all gone off to attend the English afternoon service; there was no one very near them, though in the one broad street there was a certain gentle animation, of townspeople promenading up and down in Sunday array, spectacled young officers, with slender waists and neat uniforms, swaggering about; a portly and gorgeous crier in a green uniform, ringing his bell over a departed purse; little old walnut-faced women, sitting patiently by their fruitstalls, and a band of local firemen in very baggy tunics, the smallest men of whom had crept inside the biggest silver helmets, preparing to execute a selection of airs.

'You look uncommonly serious about something, the fellow,' said Mark, laughing lightly: 'what is it?'

'This,' said Caffyn, with a smouldering fire in his voice and eyes; 'I've just been told that you—*you* are engaged to Mabel Langton. Is it true?'

Mark was not displeased. This coupling of Mabel's name with his, even though by a mere rumour, sent a delicious thrill through him; it seemed to bring his sweetest hopes nearer realisation. The gay little street vanished for an instant, and he was holding Mabel's hand in the violet-scented drawing-room, but he came to himself almost directly with a start.

'Who told you that?' he said, flushing slightly.

'Never mind who told me. Is it true? I—I warn you not to trifle with me.'

'What on earth is the matter with you?' said Mark. 'No, it's not true; as far as I know at present, there is not the remotest possibility of such a thing coming to pass.'

'But you would make it possible if you could, eh?' asked Caffyn.

'I don't want to hurt your feelings, Caffyn,' said Mark, 'but really you're going a little too far. And even if I had been engaged to Miss Langton (which is very far from the case), I don't exactly see what right you have, after—under the circumstances, you know—to go in for the fire-eating business.'

'You mean I'm out of the running, whoever wins?' said Caffyn. 'I dare say you're right; I'm not aware that I ever entered for the prize. But never mind that. She has taken a dislike to me, but I may be allowed to feel an interest in her still, I suppose. I should like to see her happy, and if you could tell me that you were the man, why then——'

'Well?' said Mark, as the other paused with a curious smile.

'Why, then I should feel at ease about her, don't you know,' he said gently.

'I only wish I could ease your mind for you in that way,' said Mark, 'but it's too soon for that yet.'

'You *do* mean to ask her, then?' said Caffyn, with his eyes on the little brown-and-yellow imperial *postwagen* which had just rattled up to the hotel, and the driver of which, in his very unbecoming glazed billycock hat with the feather-brush plume, was then cumbrously descending from his box. Mark had not meant to confide in Caffyn at all; he had only known him a short time, and, although their intimacy had grown so rapidly, with a little more reflection he might have shrunk from talking of Mabel to one whom, rightly or wrongly, she held in abhorrence. But then Caffyn was so sympathetic, so subdued; the temptation to talk of his love to somebody was so strong that he did not try to resist it.

'Yes, I do,' he said, and his dark eyes were soft and dreamy as he spoke, 'some day . . . if I dare. And if she says what I hope she will say, I shall come to you, old fellow, for congratulations.'

He looked round, but Caffyn had started up abruptly, and he was alone. 'Very odd of him,' thought Mark, until he saw him meeting the Featherstones on their way back from the service.

Some minutes later, as Gilda and Caffyn were in a corner of the exhibition of carved work at the lower end of the town, she took advantage of the blaring of two big orchestral Black Forest organs, each performing a different overture, and of the innumerable cuckoo cries from the serried rows of

clocks on the walls, to go back to their conversation at the *table d'hôte*.

'Have you asked him yet? Mabel is not engaged to him after all?' (her face fell as she gathered this). 'It is all a mistake, then? Of course it was a great relief to *you* to hear that?'

'Was it?' was Caffyn's rejoinder; 'why?'

'Why? Because—oh, of course you would be relieved to hear it!' and Gilda made a little attempt to laugh.

'Shall I tell you something?' he said gravely. 'Do you know that I've just begun to think nothing would give me greater satisfaction now than to hear that the rumour you told me of was an accomplished fact.'

'And that Mabel was engaged to Mr. Ashburn? Do you really *mean* it?' cried Gilda, and her face cleared again.

'I really mean it,' said Caffyn, smiling; and it is just possible that he really did.

'Gilda, you're not helping me in the least!' said Mrs. Featherstone, coming up at this juncture; 'and there's your father threatening to get that big clock with a horrid cuckoo in it for the hall at the Grange. Come and tell him, if he *must* have one, to buy one of the long plain ones.' And Gilda went obediently, for she could feel an interest in clocks and carvings now.

CHAPTER XXV.

MABEL'S ANSWER.

The wet autumn had merged into a premature season of fog and slush, while a violent gale had stripped off the leaves long before their time. Winter was at hand, and already one or two of the hardier Christmas annuals, fresh from editorial forcing-houses, had blossomed on the book-stalls, and a few masks and Roman candles, misled by appearances, had stolen into humble shop-fronts long before November had begun. All the workers (except the junior clerks in offices, who were now receiving permission to enjoy their annual fortnight) were returning, and even idlers, who had no country-house hospitality to give or receive, were glad to escape some of their burden amidst the mild distractions of a winter in town. Mrs. Langton, who detested the country, had persuaded her husband to let their place 'Glenthorne' for the last two winters, and she and her daughter had already returned to Kensington Park Gardens after a round of visits, leaving Mr. Langton to enjoy a little more shooting before the Courts reopened.

Caffyn was now away at the Featherstones' country seat, somewhere in the Midlands, and Mark, who remained in town after their return from Germany, had taken the earliest opportunity of calling on the Langtons, when Mabel seemed more frankly glad to see him than he had dared to hope, and in one short half-hour the understanding between them had advanced several months. She showed the greatest interest in his wanderings, and he described the various petty adventures in his most effective manner, until even Mrs. Langton was roused to a little indulgent laughter. When Dolly came in later, Mark was embraced enthusiastically.

'I was so afraid you wouldn't be back in time for my party,' she said. 'You will come—now won't you? It's tomorrow week; my birthday, you know.' And of course Mark was delighted to promise to come, as Mabel seconded the invitation.

'We're quite at a loss to know how to amuse the children,' she said a little later. 'Perhaps you can help us to an idea?'

'We could have the Performing Pigmies,' said Mrs. Langton, 'but the boys might tread on them, and that would be so expensive, you know.'

'Don't have any performing things, mother,' pleaded Dolly; 'have only dancing.'

'Most of the boys hate dancing,' said Mabel.

'Some of them don't a bit,' urged Dolly, 'and those who do can stay away; *I* don't want them. But don't have entertainments; they always leave a horrid mess that takes hours to clear away after them.'

'It's all very well for you, Dolly,' said Mabel, laughing, 'but I shall have to keep the boys in order; and last time they played at robbers, tramping about all over the house, and when everyone had gone there was one of them left behind upstairs, Mr. Ashburn, howling to be let out of the cupboard!'

'Bobby Fraser, that was,' said Dolly; 'stupid little duffer. We won't have him this time. And, mother darling, I want to dance *all* the time; and it's my own party. Dancing is enough—it is *really*,' she pleaded in a pretty frenzy of

impatience. And Dolly got her own way as usual.

Mabel was a little surprised at her own pleasure in seeing Mark again. She had looked forward to meeting him, but without being prepared for the wild joy that sprang up in her heart as he pressed her hand, and with that unmistakable delight in his eyes at being in her presence. 'Do I care for him as much as that?' she asked herself, and the question answered itself as such questions do.

Mark was his own master now, for he had given up his appointment at St. Peter's, although Mr. Shelford strongly advised him to go in for some regular profession besides literature.

'There'll come a day,' he told him, 'when you've played out all your tunes and your barrel is worn smooth, and no one will throw you any more coppers. Then you'll want a regular employment to fall back upon. Why don't you get called?'

'Because I don't want to be tied down,' said Mark. 'I want to go about and study character. I want to enjoy my life while I can.'

'So did the grasshopper,' said Mr. Shelford.

'You don't believe in me, I know,' said Mark. 'You think I shall never do anything like "Illusion" again. Well, I believe in myself. I think my tunes will last out my life, at all events. I really work uncommonly hard. I have two novels ready for the press at this moment, which is pretty well for a mere grasshopper.'

'But wearing for a mere barrel-organ,' said the old gentleman. 'Be careful; don't write too much. The public never forgive a disappointment. Whatever you do, give them of your best.'

And shortly after this conversation Mark left his novel, 'Sweet Bells Jangled,' with Chilton and Fladgate, mentioning terms which even to himself seemed slightly exorbitant. He had a note from the firm in the course of a day or two, appointing an interview, and on going up to the publishing office found both of the partners waiting to receive him. Mr. Chilton was a spare, angular man, who confined himself chiefly to the purely financial department.

'We have decided to accept your terms, subject to a few modifications, which we can discuss presently,' he said.

'You think the book is likely to be a success?' asked Mark, unable to control his anxiety.

'Any work by the author of "Illusion" is sure to command attention,' said Mr. Chilton.

'But you like the subject?' pursued Mark.

Mr. Chilton coughed.

'I can express no opinion,' he said. 'I don't profess to be a judge of these matters. Fladgate has read the book; he will tell you what he thinks about it.'

But Mr. Fladgate remained silent, and Mark, much as he longed to press him, was too proud to do so. However, as the firm demanded a rather considerable reduction of the original terms, Mr. Fladgate, in explanation, admitted at length that he did *not* consider 'Sweet Bells Jangled' altogether up to the standard of Mark's first work, and intimated that it would not be advisable to risk bringing it out before the spring season.

'I see,' said Mark, nettled; 'you are not particularly hopeful about it.'

'Oh,' said Mr. Fladgate, with a wave of his hand, 'I wouldn't say that. Chance has a good deal to do with these affairs—a good deal to do. I confess I miss some of the qualities that charmed me in your "Illusion." It reads to me, if I may say so, like an earlier effort, a much earlier effort; but it may hit the popular taste for all that; and it is certainly in quite a different vein.'

Mark came away rather depressed, but he soon persuaded himself that a publisher was a not infallible judge of literary merit; and then, the firm had every object in depreciating the work whilst negotiations were proceeding. For all that he felt uncomfortable now and then, and he had not wholly got rid of his depression by the time of Dolly's birthday party.

On his arrival, he found that Dolly's wish had been gratified. Dancing was the main attraction, and in the principal room were the usual iron-fisted pianist and red-faced cornet-player, who should be such profound moralists with all their nightly experiences; and dainty little girls were whirling round with the fortunate boys who had elder sisters at home to bully them into acquiring the mysteries of the valse, while the less favoured stood in doorways gibing with the scornfulness of envy.

The least observing might trace the course of several naïve preferences and innocent flirtations during the earlier part of the evening. Big bright-faced boys in devoted attendance on shy and

unconscious small maidens many years their juniors, and, *en revanche*, determined little ladies triumphantly towing about smaller boys, who seemed sometimes elated, but mostly resigned, while one youthful misogynist openly rebelled and fled to Mabel for protection, declaring ungallantly that he would rather be 'at home in bed than bothered like that any longer.'

Dolly was enjoying herself amazingly, dancing chiefly, however, with her dearest girl friend for the time being, since none of the boys danced well enough to please either of them. And besides, boys rather bored Dolly, to whom dancing, as yet, was merely a particularly delightful form of exercise, and who had no precocious tendencies to coquetry. She deigned to dance once with Mark, after which he did his duty by trotting out a succession of calm and self-possessed little girls, who were as unchildlike as if they had been out for a season or two. Then he thought he might reward himself by going to look for Mabel, whom he found in one of the lower rooms endeavouring to amuse the smaller and non-dancing members of the company. She was standing under the centre lamp, flushed and laughing, with two or three children clinging to her dress, and met his amused and admiring eyes with a little gesture of comic despair.

'We've played all the games that were ever invented,' she said; 'and now some of them are getting rough and the rest cross, and there's half an hour before supper, and I don't in the least know what to do with them till then.'

'Shall I see what I can do with them?' said Mark, rather rashly.

'Oh, if you would it would be so kind of you. I'm afraid you don't know what you are exposing yourself to.'

Mark, not being devoted to children, felt more than a little dubious himself; but he wanted to be associated with her in something, and volunteered manfully.

'Look here,' he began, as they all stood about staring at him, 'Miss Langton's a little tired. I—I am going to play with you a little now. What shall we have, eh? Blind man's buff?'

But they had had that, and presently one small boy, bolder than the rest, said, 'Play at being Jumbo'—a proposal which seemed generally popular.

'Then may I leave you here?' said Mabel. 'I must go and speak to mother about something. Don't let them be too tiresome.'

This was by no means what Mark had bargained for; but he found himself deserted and reduced to 'play at being Jumbo' with the best possible grace. It was a simple but severe game, consisting in the performer of the principal *rôle*—who was Mark himself on this occasion—going down on his hands and knees and staggering about the carpet, while everyone else who could find room climbed on his back and thumped him on the head. At last, in self-defence, he was obliged to get rid of them by intimating that he had gone mad, when he had to justify his words by careering round the room trumpeting fiercely, while the children scuttled away before him in an ecstasy of sham terror. At first Mark was profoundly miserable, and even glad that Mabel had not remained to witness his humiliation; but by-and-by he began to enter into the spirit of the thing, and had entirely forgotten his dignity by the time Mabel reappeared. Caffyn (who had now returned from the Featherstones', and had received an invitation from Mrs. Langton in Mabel's absence: 'We've known him from a boy, my dear,' the former had said in justification, 'and he can recite some things to keep the children quiet, you know') stood in the doorway behind her, and looked on with a smile of pity, but she saw nothing ridiculous in Mark just then (and, as he was probably aware, he could stand such tests better than most men). She only thought that his willingness to sacrifice himself for others was a pleasant trait in his character.

'Don't get up, Ashburn; it's delightful to see you making yourself so hot, my dear fellow,' said Caffyn. 'One doesn't get the chance of seeing a successful author ramping about on all-fours every day.'

'I *can't* get up,' said Mark; and in fact a small but unpleasantly sturdy boy had pounced on him as he paused for breath, and, with the sense that he was doing something courageous, was in course of taming the elephant with a hearth-brush.

'What a shame!" cried Mabel. 'Tommy, you horrid boy, you're hurting Mr. Ashburn.' And the hearth-brush was certainly coming down with considerable vigour on the small of the amateur elephant's back.

'I think myself,' gasped Mark, 'that I could bear being shipped off to America now.'

'Yes, indeed,' she said compassionately; you mustn't be tormented any

more. Tommy, let the poor elephant alone; you've tamed him very nicely.'

'Jumbo had his hind legs tied,' urged Tommy, who had a taste for realism.

'I don't think that will be necessary,' objected Mark. 'I'm beautifully tame now, Master Tommy; observe the mildness of my eye.'

'The game's over now,' said Mabel with decision. 'There, Mr. Ashburn, your elephant life is over. Tommy, come and button my glove for me, like a dear fellow. How dreadfully hot you are! And now Mr. Caffyn is going to recite something; come upstairs, all of you, and listen.'

For Mrs. Langton had begged him to do something to amuse the children.

'I don't want them to dance too much,' she had said. 'If you could manage to cool them down before supper.'

'*I'll* cool them down!' said Caffyn to himself, with one of his peculiar impulses to safe and secret malevolence. 'If you will get them all together, dear Mrs. Langton,' he replied, 'I'll see what I can do.'

And accordingly he entertained them with a harrowing little poem about a poor child dying of starvation in a garret, and dreaming of wealthier and happier children enjoying themselves at parties, which made all the children uncomfortable, and some of the less stolid ones cry. And then he told them a ghost story, crammed with ingenious horrors, which followed most of them home to bed.

Mabel listened in burning indignation; she would have liked to stop him, but grown-up persons were beginning to filter in, and she was afraid of making anything like a scene by interfering. However, when he came up blandly after the performance she let him see her opinion of it.

'Oh, they like to have their flesh creep,' he said with a shrug; 'it's one of the luxuries of youth.'

'It isn't a wholesome one,' said she; 'but I know you have your own theories of the proper way to amuse a child.' She felt a revival of her disgust for the sly treachery he had revealed once before. He gave her a cold keen glance, and the lines round his mouth tightened for an instant.

'You haven't forgiven me, then?' he said.

'I can't forget,' she answered in a low voice.

'We both have good memories, it seems,' he retorted with a short laugh as he held up a curtain for her to pass, and turned away.

It was after supper, and most of the children had been weeded out to be replaced by children of a larger growth. Mark came up to Mabel as she stood by the doorway while the musicians were playing the first few bars of a waltz, and each couple was waiting for some other to begin before them.

'You promised me a dance,' he said, 'in reward for my agility as an elephant. Aren't your duties over now?'

'I think everybody knows everybody now, and no one is sitting out,' said Mabel. 'But really I would rather not dance just yet; I'm a little tired.' For Fräulein was still away with her family in Germany, and most of the work had fallen upon Mabel, who was feeling some need of a rest. Mark did not try to persuade her.

'You must be,' he agreed. 'Will you —do you mind sitting this dance out with me?'

She made no objection, and they were presently sitting together under the soft light of the ribbed Chinese lanterns in a fernery at the back of the rooms.

'When we go back,' said Mabel, 'I want to introduce you to a Miss Torrington, a great admirer of your book. But you don't care for such things, do you?'

'I wish with all my soul I might never hear of the book again,' said Mark gloomily. 'I—I beg your pardon! It sounds ungrateful. And yet—if you know—if you only knew!'

He was in one of his despondent moods just then, when his skeleton came out of the cupboard and gibbered at him. What right had he, with this fraud on his soul, to be admitted even to the ordinary friendship of a sweet and noble girl? What would she say to him if she knew? And for a moment he felt a mad impulse to tell her.

'I wish you would tell me,' she said gently, as if answering the impulse. But the suggestion, put into words, sobered him. She would despise him; she must. He could not bear to see his shame reflected in her eyes. So he told her half-truths only.

'It is only that I am so tired of being tied to a book,' he said passionately. 'Tied? I *am* a book. Everyone I meet sees in me, not a man to be judged and liked for himself, but something to criticise and flatter and com-

pare with the nature he revealed in print.'

Half truth as this was, it was more sincere than such confidences are apt to be.

'Your book is you, or a part of you,' said Mabel. 'It seems so absurd that you should be jealous of it.'

'I am,' he said. 'Not so much with others, but when I am with you it tortures me. When you show me any kindness I think, "She would not say that, she would not do this, if I were not the author of 'Illusion.' She honours the book, not you—only the book!"'

'How unjust!' said Mabel. She could not think it a perverted form of diseased vanity. He plainly undervalued his work himself, and its popularity was a real vexation to him. She could only be sorry for him.

'But I see proof of it in others every now and then,' continued Mark, 'people who do not connect me at first with "Cyril Ernstone." Only the other day some of them went so far as to apologise for having snubbed me "before they knew who I was." I don't complain of that, of course—I'm not such an idiot; but it does make me doubtful of the other extreme. And I cannot bear the doubt in your case!'

His eyes were raised pleadingly to hers. He seemed longing, and yet dreading, to speak more plainly. Mabel's heart beat quicker; there was a subtle, delicious flattery in such self-abasement before her of a man she admired so much. Would he say more then, or would he wait? As far as she knew her own mind, she hoped he would wait a little longer. She said nothing, being perhaps afraid of saying too much.

'Yet I know it will be so,' said Mark; 'the book will be forgotten with the next literary sensation, and I shall drop under with it. You will see me about less often, till one day you pass me in the street and wonder who I am, and if you ever met me at all.'

'I don't think I ever gave you the right to say that,' she said, wounded at his tone, 'and you ought to know that I should not do anything of the sort.'

'Will you tell me this,' he said, and his voice trembled with anxiety, 'if—if I had not written this book which was happy enough to give you some pleasure—if I had met you simply as Mark Ashburn, a man who had never written a line in his life, would you have been the same to me? Would you have felt even such interest in me as I like to think sometimes you do feel? Try to give me an answer. . . . You don't know how much it will mean to me.'

Mabel took refuge in the impersonal. 'Of course,' she said, 'one often likes a person one never saw very much for something he has done; but I think if you ever do meet him and then don't like him for himself, you dislike him all the more for disappointing you. It's a kind of reaction, I suppose.'

'Tell me this too,' Mark entreated, 'is—is that *my* case?'

'If it had been,' she said softly, 'do you think I should have said that?'

Something in her tone gave Mark courage to dare everything.

'Then you do care for me a little?' he cried. 'Mabel, I can speak now. I loved you ever since I first saw you in that old country church. I never meant to tell you so soon, but I can't help it. I want you—I can't live without you. Will you come to me, Mabel?'

She put both hands trustfully in his as she said, 'Yes, Mark,' and without any more words just then on either side, their troth was plighted. He was still holding the hands she had resigned to him, hardly daring as yet to believe in this realisation of his dearest hopes, when someone stepped quickly in through the light curtains. It was Caffyn, and he put up his eyeglass to conceal a slight start as he saw who were there.

'Sent to look for somebody's fan; told it was left on the folding chair. Ah, sorry to trouble you, Ashburn; that's it behind you; I won't say I found you sitting on it.' And he went out with his prize.

'I think, after that,' said Mabel with a little laugh, though she was annoyed too, 'you had better take me back again.'

And Mark obeyed, feeling that the unromantic interruption had effectually broken the spell. Fortunately it had happened after, and not before, his fate had been decided.

The evening was over, and he was waiting to recover his hat and overcoat when he was joined by Caffyn. 'Umbrella missing?' began the latter; 'mine is, like the departed Christians on the tombstones, you know, "not lost—but gone before." Are you going my way? Come on, then.'

When they were outside in the moon-

light, he took Mark's arm and said, 'You've got something to tell me, haven't you?'

'I told you I should come to you for congratulations when we were at Triberg,' said Mark, 'but I never hoped to be able to come so soon. She has said "Yes," old fellow. I can't trust myself to talk about it just yet, but I can't help telling you that.'

Caffyn clapped him on the back with a shout of rather wild laughter.

'What a fortunate beggar you are!' he said; 'fame, fortune—and now a charming girl to crown it all. You'll be rousing the envy of the gods soon, you know—unless you're careful!'

CHAPTER XXVI.

VISITS OF CEREMONY.

Mr. Langton, on being informed that Mark Ashburn proposed to become his son-in-law, took a painfully prosaic view of the matter: 'I can quite understand the fascination of a literary career to a young man,' he had observed to Mark in the course of a trying interview; 'indeed, when I was younger I was frequently suspected myself of contributing to "Punch"; but I always saw where that would lead me, and, as a matter of fact, I never did indulge my inclinations in that direction,' he added, with the complacency of a St. Anthony. 'And the fact is, I wish my son-in-law to have a more assured position: you see, at present you have only written one book—oh, I am quite aware that "Illusion" was well received—remarkably so, indeed; but then it remains to be proved whether you can follow up your success, and—and, in short, while that is uncertain I can't consent to any engagement; you really must not ask me to do so.' And in this determination he was firm for some time, even though secretly impressed on hearing of the sum for which Mark had already disposed of his forthcoming novel, and which represented, indeed, a very fair year's income. It was Uncle Solomon, after all, that proved the heavy piece of ordnance which turned the position at the crisis; he was flattered when his nephew took him into his confidence, and pleased that he should have 'looked so high,' which motives combined to induce him to offer his influence. It was a somewhat desperate remedy, and Mark had his doubts of the impression likely to be produced by such a relative, but it worked unexpectedly well. Mr. Lightowler was too cautious to commit himself to any definite promise, but he made it abundantly clear that he was a 'warm' man, and that Mark was his favourite nephew, for whom he was doing something as it was, and might do more if he continued to behave himself. After the interview in which this was ascertained, Mr. Langton began to think that his daughter might do worse than marry this young Ashburn after all. Mrs. Langton had liked Mark from the first in her languid way, and the fact that he had 'expectations' decided her to support his cause: he was not a brilliant *parti*, of course, but at least he was more eligible than the young men who had been exciting her maternal alarm of late. And under her grandfather's will Mabel would be entitled on her marriage or coming of age to a sum which would keep her in comfort whatever happened.

All these considerations had their effect, and Mr. Langton, seeing how deeply his daughter's heart was concerned, withdrew his opposition, and even allowed himself to be persuaded that there was no reason for a long engagement, and that the marriage might be fixed to take place early in the following spring. He only made two stipulations: one, that Mark should insure his life in the usual manner; and the other, that he should abandon his *nom de guerre* at once, and in the next edition of 'Illusion,' and in all future writings, use the name which was his by birth.

'I don't like *aliases*,' he said; 'if you win a reputation, it seems to me your wife and family should have the benefit of it;' and Mark agreed to both conditions with equal cheerfulness.

Mr. Humpage, as may be imagined, was not best pleased to hear of the engagement; he wrote a letter of solemn warning to Mabel and her father, and, this being disregarded, he nursed his resentment in offended silence. If Harold Caffyn was polite enough when in his uncle's company to affect to share his indignation to the full, elsewhere he accepted Mark's good fortune with cheerful indifference; he could meet Mabel with perfect equanimity, and listen to her mother's somewhat discursive eulogies of her future son-in-law with patience, if not entire assent. Since his autumn visit to the Feather-

stones, there had been changes in his position which may have been enough to account for his philosophy; he had gained the merchant's good opinion to such an extent that the latter, in defiance of his wife's cautions, had taken the unusual step of proposing that the young actor should give up the stage and occupy a recently vacated desk in Mr. Featherstone's own palatial City offices. Even if his stage ambition had not cooled long since, Caffyn was not the man to neglect such a chance as this; he accepted gratefully, and already the merchant saw his selection, unlikely as it had seemed at first, beginning to be justified by his *protégé's* clear head and command of languages, while Gilda's satisfaction at the change was at least equal to her father's. And so, whether Harold was softened by his own prosperity, and whether other hopes or distractions came between him and his former passion for revenge, he remained impassive throughout all the preparations for a marriage which he could have prevented had he chosen. At Triberg the thought that Mark (who had, as he considered, been the chief means of ruining his hopes of Mabel) was to be his successful rival had for an instant revived the old spirit; but now he could face the fact with positive contentment, and his feeling towards Mark was rather one of contemptuous amusement than of actual hostility.

Mark's introduction of Mabel to his family had not been altogether a success; he regretted that he had carelessly forgotten to prepare them for his visit as soon as he pulled the bell-handle by the gate, and caught a glimpse of scared faces at one or two of the windows, followed by sounds from within of wild scurry and confusion—'like a lot of confounded rabbits!' he thought to himself in disgust. Then they had been kept waiting in a chilly little drawing-room, containing an assortment of atrocities in glass, china, worsted, and wax, until Mark moved restlessly about in his nervous irritation, and Mabel felt her heart sink in spite of her love; she had not expected to find Mark's people in luxurious surroundings, but she was unprepared for anything quite so hideous as that room. When Mrs. Ashburn, who had felt that this was an occasion for some attention to toilette, made her appearance, it was hardly a reassuring one: she was not exactly vulgar perhaps, but she was hard, Mabel thought, narrow and ungenial; but the fact was that the consciousness of having been taken unawares robbed her welcome of any cordiality which it might otherwise have possessed. She inferred from her first glance at Mabel's pretty walking costume a fondness for dress and extravagance, which branded her at once as a 'worldling,' between whom and herself there could be nothing in common—in which last opinion she was most probably right, as all Mabel's efforts to sustain a conversation could not save it from frequent lapses. Martha, from shyness as much as stiffness, sat by in almost complete silence; and though Trixie, the only other member of the family who appeared, was evidently won at once by Mabel's appearance, and did all she could to cover the others' shortcomings, she was not sufficiently at her ease to break the chill; and Mark, angry and ashamed as he was, felt paralysed himself under its influence.

On the way back he was unusually silent, from a fear of the impression such an ordeal as she had gone through must have left upon Mabel; and the fact that she did not refer to the interview herself did not reassure him. He need not have been afraid, however; she was not in the least deterred by what she had seen. The sight of the home in which he had been brought up had filled her with a loving pity, suggesting as it did the petty constraints and miseries, the unloveliness of all surroundings, and the total want of appreciation which he must have endured there. And yet all this had not soured him; in spite of it he had produced a great book, strong, yet refined and tender, and free from any taint of narrowness or cynicism. As she thought of this and glanced at Mark's handsome face, so bright and animated in general, but clouded now with the melancholy which his fine eyes could express at times, she longed to say something to relieve it, and yet shrank from being the first to speak in her fear of jarring him.

Mark spoke at last.

'Well, Mabel,' he said, looking down at her with a rather doubtful smile, 'I told you that my mother was a—a little peculiar.'

'Yes,' said Mabel frankly; 'we didn't quite get on together, did we, Mark? We shall some day, perhaps; and even if not—I shall have you!' And she laid her hand on his sleeve with a look of perfect understanding and contentment which, little as he deserved it, chased away all his fears.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CLEAR SKY—AND A THUNDERBOLT.

'Has any one,' asks George Eliot, in 'Middlemarch,' 'ever pinched into its pilulous smallness the cobweb of pre-matrimonial acquaintance?' And, to press the metaphor, the cobweb, as far as Mark and Mabel were concerned, brilliantly as it shone in all its silken iridescence, would have rolled up into a particularly small pill. Mark was anxious that his engagement should be as short as possible, chiefly from an uneasy fear that his great happiness might elude him after all. The idea of losing Mabel became day by day, as he knew her better, a more intolerable torture, and he could not rest until all danger of that was at an end. Mabel had no fears of a future in which Mark would be by her side; and if she was not blind to some little weaknesses in his character, they did not affect her love and admiration in the least—she was well content that her hero should not be unpleasantly perfect. And the weeks slipped by, until Easter, which fell early that year, had come and gone; the arrangements for the wedding were all completed, and Mark began to breathe more freely as he saw his suspense drawing to a happy end.

It was a bleak day towards the end of March, and Mark was walking across the Park and Gardens from his rooms in South Audley Street to Malakoff Terrace, charged with a little note from Mabel to Trixie, to which he was to bring back an answer; for, although Mabel had not made much progress in the affections of the rest of the Ashburn household, a warm friendship had sprung up already between herself and Mark's youngest sister—the only one of them who seemed to appreciate and love him as he deserved. He felt buoyant and happy as he walked briskly on, with the blustering north-easter at his back seeming to clear his horizon of the last clouds which had darkened it. A very few days more and Mabel would be his own—beyond the power of man to sunder! and soon, too, he would be able to salve the wound which still rankled in his conscience—he would have a book of his own. 'Sweet Bells Jangled' was to appear almost immediately, and he had come to have high hopes of it; it looked most imposing in proof—it was so much longer than 'Illusion'; he had worked up a series of such overwhelming effects in it; its pages contained matter to please every variety of taste—flippancy and learning, sensation and sentiment, careful dissection of character and audacious definition and epigram—failure seemed to him almost impossible. And when he could feel able to lay claim legitimately to the title of genius, surely then the memory of his fraud would cease to reproach him—the means would be justified by the result. He amused himself by composing various critiques on the book (all, of course, highly eulogistic), and thus pleasantly occupied the way until he gained the cheerful Kensington High Street, the first half of which seems to belong to some bright little market town many miles further from Charing Cross. In the road by the kerbstone he passed a street singer, a poor old creature in a sun-bonnet, with sharp features that had been handsome once, and brilliant dark eyes, who was standing there unregarded, singing some long-forgotten song with the remnant of a voice. Mark's happiness impelled him to put some silver into her hand, and he felt a half-superstitious satisfaction as he heard the blessing she called down on him—as if she might have influence.

No one was at home at Malakoff Terrace but Trixie, whom he found busily engaged in copying an immense plaster nose.

'Jack says I must practise harder at features before I try the antique,' she explained, 'and so he gave me this nose; it's his first present, and considered a very fine cast, Jack says.'

'Never saw a finer nose anywhere,' said Mark—'looks as if it had been forced, eh, Trixie?'

'Mark, don't!' cried Trixie, shocked at this irreverence; 'it's *David's*—Michael Angelo's David!' He gave her Mabel's note. 'I can't write back because my hands are all charcoaly,' she explained; 'but you can say, "My love, and I will if I possibly can"; and, oh yes, tell her I had a letter from *him* this morning.'

'Meaning Jack?' said Mark. 'All right, and—oh, I say, Trixie, why won't the governor and mater come to my wedding?'

'It's all ma,' said Trixie; 'she says she should only feel herself out of place at a fashionable wedding, and she's better away.'

'It's to be a very quiet affair, though, thank Heaven!' observed Mark.

'Yes, but don't you see what she really wants is to be able to feel injured by

being out of it all—if she can, she'll persuade herself in time that she never was invited at all; you know what dear ma is!'

'Well,' said Mark, with considerable resignation, 'she must do as she pleases, of course. Have you got anything else to tell me, Trixie, because I shall have to be going soon?'

'You mustn't go till I've given you something that came for you—oh, a long time ago, when ma was ill. You see, it was like this: ma had her breakfast in bed, and there was a tray put down on the slab where it was, and it was sticky underneath or something, and so it stuck to the bottom, and the tray wasn't wanted again, and Ann, of course, didn't choose to wash it, so she only found it yesterday and brought it to me.'

'Trixie,' said Mark, 'I can't follow all those "its." I gather that I'm entitled to something sticky, but I haven't a notion what. Hadn't you better get it, whatever it happens to be?'

'Why, it's a letter, of course, goose!' said Trixie. 'I told you *that* the very first thing: wait here, and I'll bring it to you.'

So Mark waited patiently in the homely little back parlour, where he had prepared his work as a schoolboy in the old days, where he had smoked his first cigar in his first Cambridge vacation. He smiled as he thought how purely intellectual his enjoyment of that cigar had been, and how for the first time he had appreciated the meaning of 'the bitter end'; he was smiling still when Trixie returned.

'Whom do you know in India, Mark?' she said curiously; 'perhaps it's some admirer who's read the book. I hope it's nothing really important; if it is, it wasn't our fault that—Mark, you're not *ill*, are you?'

'No,' said Mark, placing himself with his back to the light, and stuffing the letter, after one hasty glance at the direction, unopened into his pocket. 'Of course not—why should I be?'

'Is there anything in the letter to worry you?' persisted Trixie. 'It can't be a bill, can it?'

'Never mind what it is,' said Mark; 'have you got the keys? I—I should like a glass of wine.'

'Ma left the keys in the cupboard,' said Trixie; 'how lucky! Port or sherry, Mark?'

'Brandy, if there is any,' he said, with an effort.

'Brandy! oh, Mark, have you taken to drinking spirits, and so early in the morning?' she asked, with an anxious misgiving that perhaps that was *de rigueur* with all literary men.

'No, no, don't be absurd. I want some just now; and quick, do you hear? I caught a chill walking across,' he explained.

'You had better try to eat something with it, then,' she advised; 'have some cake?'

'Do you want to make me ill in earnest?' he retorted peevishly, thrusting away the brown cake, with a stale flavour of cupboard about it, with which Trixie tried to tempt him; 'there, it's all right—there's nothing the matter, I tell you.' And he poured out the brandy and drank it. There was a kind of comfort, or rather distraction, in the mere physical sensation to his palate; he thought he understood why some men took to drinking. 'Ha!' and he made a melancholy attempt at the sigh of satisfaction which some people think expected of them after spirits. 'Now I'm a man again, Trixie; that has driven off the chill. I'll be off now.'

'Are you *sure* you're quite well again?' she said anxiously. 'Very well, then I shan't see you again till you're in church next Tuesday; and oh, Mark, I do so hope you'll be very, very happy!' He was on the door-step by this time, and made no reply, while he kept his face turned from her.

'Good-bye, then,' she said; 'you won't forget my message to Mabel, will you?'

'Let me see, what was it?' he said. 'Ah, I remember; your love, and you will if you can, eh?'

'Yes, and say I've had a letter from him this morning,' she added.

He gave a strange laugh, and then, as he turned, she saw how ghastly and drawn his face looked.

'Have you, though?' he said wildly; 'so have I, Trixie, so have I!' And before she could ask any further questions he was gone.

He walked blindly up the little street and into the main road again, unable at first to think with any clearness: he had not read the letter; the stamp and handwriting on the envelope were enough for him. The bolt had fallen from a clear sky, the thing he had only thought of as a nightmare had really happened—the sea had given up its dead! He went on; there was the same old woman in the

sun-bonnet, still crooning the same song; he laughed bitterly to think of the difference in his own life since he had last seen her—only a short half-hour ago. He passed the parish church, from which a wedding party was just driving, while the bells clashed merrily under the graceful spire—no wedding bells would ever clash for him now. But he must read that letter and know the worst. Holroyd was alive—that he knew; but had he found him out? Did that envelope contain bitter denunciations of his treachery? Perhaps he had already exposed him! He could not rest until he knew how this might be, and yet he dared not read his letter in the street. He thought he would find out a quiet spot in Kensington Gardens and read it there; alone—quite alone. He hurried on, with a dull irritation that the High Street should be so long and so crowded, and that everybody should make such a point of getting in the way; the shock had affected his body as well as his mind; he was cold to the bones, and felt a dull numbing pressure on the top of his head; and yet he welcomed these symptoms, too, with an odd satisfaction; they seemed to entitle him to some sympathy. He reached the Gardens at last, but when he had turned in at the little postern door near the 'King's Arms,' he could not prevail upon himself to open the letter—he tore it half open and put it back irresolutely; he must find a seat and sit down. He struck up the hill, with the wind in his teeth now, until he came to the Round Pond, where there was quite a miniature sea breaking on the south-western rim of the basin; a small boy was watching a solitary ship labouring far out in the centre, and Mark stood and watched it too, mechanically, till he turned away at last with a nervous start of impatience. Once he had sailed ships on those waters; what would he not give if those days could come back to him again, or even if he could go back these past few months to the time when his conscience was clear and he feared no man! But the past was irrevocable; he had been guilty of this reckless, foolish fraud, and now the consequences were upon him! He walked restlessly on under the bare tossing branches, looking through the black trunks and across the paths glimmering white in the blue-grey distance for a seat where he might be safe from interruption, until at last he discovered a clumsy wooden bench, scored and slashed with the sand-ingrained initials of a quarter of a century's idleness, a seat of the old uncomfortable pattern gradually dying out from the walks. He could wait no longer, and was hurrying forward to secure it, when he was hailed by some one approaching by one of the Bayswater paths, and found that he had been recognised by Harold Caffyn.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MARK KNOWS THE WORST.

To avoid Caffyn was out of the question, and so Mark waited for him with as much self-control as he could muster, as he strolled leisurely up. Caffyn's quick eye saw at once that something unusual had happened, and he resolved to find out what that was before they parted.

'Thought it must be you,' he began; 'so you've come out here to meditate on your coming happiness, have you? Come along and pour out some of your raptures; it will do you good, and you don't know what a listener I can be.'

'Not now,' said Mark uneasily; 'I—I think I would rather be alone.'

'Nonsense!' said Caffyn briskly; 'you don't really mean that, I know. Why, I'm going away to-morrow to the lakes. I must have a little talk with you before I go.'

'What are you going there for?' said Mark, without much show of interest.

'My health, my boy; old Featherstone has let me out for a fortnight's run, and I'm going to see what mountain air can do for me.'

'And where are you going now?' asked Mark.

'Now? Well, I *was* going across to see if the Featherstones would give me some lunch, but I'm in no hurry. I'll go wherever *you* want to go.'

'Thanks,' said Mark, 'but—but I won't take you out of your way.'

'It's not taking me out of my way a bit, I assure you, my boy, and we haven't had a talk together for ages, so come along.'

'I can't,' said Mark, more uncomfortably still. 'I have some—some business which I must see to alone.'

'Odd sort of place this for business! No, no, Master Mark, it won't do; I've got you, and I mean to stick to you; you know what a tactless beggar I can be when I like. Seriously, do you think