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 XIX

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 fire-place 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 like 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 said 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:

"Fladgate 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 charity to employ him."

"So it was," 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's—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 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. 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 XX

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. He removed to more fashionable quarters in South Audley Street, and led the easy existence there he had long coveted.

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 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 cause, 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 of whom had crept inside the biggest silver helmets, preparing to execute a selection of airs.

"You look uncommonly serious about something, old 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 hope 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 around, 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 XXI

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