asked for his address, with a view to an invitation at no distant time. A young man, already a sort of celebrity, and quite presentable on other accounts, would be useful at dances, while he might serve to leaven some of her husband's slightly heavy professional dinners.

Mabel gave him her hand at parting with an air of entire friendliness and good understanding which she did not usually display on so short a probation. But she liked this Mr. Ashburn already, who on the last time she had met him had figured as a kind of hero, who was the "swell" master for whom, without having seen him, she had caught something of Colin's boyish admiration, and who, lastly, had stirred and roused her imagination through the work of his own.

As for Mark, he left the house thoroughly and helplessly in love. As he walked back to his rooms he found a dreamy pleasure in recalling the different stages of the interview. Mabel's slender figure as she stood opposite him by the mantelpiece, her reserve at first, and the manner in which it had thawed to a frank and gracious interest; the suspicion of a critical but not unkindly mockery in her eye and tone at times—it all came back to him with a vividness that rendered him deaf and blind to his actual surroundings. He saw again the group in the dim, violet-scented drawing-room, the handsome languid woman murmuring her pleasant commonplaces, and the pretty child lecturing the prodigal dog, and still felt the warm light touch of Mabel's hand as it had lain in his for an instant at parting.

This time, too, the parting was not without hope; he might look forward to seeing her again after this. A summer of golden dreams and fancies had indeed begun for him from that day, and as he thought again that he owed these high privileges to "Illusion," events seemed more than ever to be justifying an act which was fast becoming as remote and unreproachful as acts will, when the dread of discovery—that great awakener of conscience—is sleeping too.

CHAPTER XIII

HAROLD CAFFYN MAKES A DISCOVERY

HAROLD CAFFYN had not found much improvement in his professional prospects since we first made his acquaintance: his disenchantment was, in fact, becoming complete. He

had taken to the stage at first in reliance on the extravagant eulogies of friends, forgetting that the standard for amateurs in any form of art is not a high one, and he was very soon brought to his proper level. A good appearance and complete self-possession were about his sole qualifications, unless we add the voice and manner of a man in good society. He had obtained one distinct success, and one only—at a *matinée*, when a new comedy was presented in which a part of some consequence had been entrusted to him. He was cast for a cool and cynical adventurer, with a considerable dash of the villain in him, and played it admirably, winning very favourable notices from the press, although the comedy itself resulted, as is not infrequent with *matinées*, in a dismal fiasco. However, the *matinée* proved for a time of immense service to him in the profession, and even led to his being chosen by his manager to represent the hero of the next production at his own theatre—a poetical drama which had excited great interest before its appearance—and if Caffyn could only have made his mark in it, his position would have been assured from that moment. But the part was one of rather strained sentiment, and he could not, rather than would not, make it effective. After that unlucky first night the part was taken from him, and his engagement, which terminated shortly afterwards, was not renewed.

Caffyn was not the man to overcome his deficiencies by hard and patient toil; he had counted upon an easy life with immediate triumphs, and the reality baffled and disheartened him. He might soon have slid in to the lounging life of a man about town, with a moderate income, expensive tastes, and no occupation, and from that perhaps even to shady and questionable walks of life. But he had an object still in keeping his head above the social waters, and the object was Mabel Langton.

He had long felt that there was a secret antagonism on her side towards himself, which at first he had found amusement in provoking to an occasional outburst, but was soon piqued into trying to overcome and disarm, and the unexpected difficulty of this had produced in him a state of mind as nearly approaching love as he was capable of.

He longed for the time when his wounded pride would be salved by the consciousness that he had at last obtained

the mastery of this wayward nature, when he would be able to pay off the long score of slights and disdains which he had come to exaggerate morbidly; he was resolved to conquer her sooner or later in defiance of all obstacles, and he had found few natures capable of resisting him long after he had set himself seriously to subdue them.

But Mabel had been long in showing any sign of yielding. For some time after the loss of the "Mangalore," she had been depressed and silent to a degree which persuaded Caffyn that his old jealousy of Holroyd was well grounded, and when she recovered her spirits somewhat, while she was willing to listen and laugh or talk to him, there was always the suggestion of an armistice in her manner, and any attempt on his part to lead the conversation to something beyond mere badinage was sure to be adroitly parried or severely put down, as her mood varied.

Quite recently, however, there had been a slight change for the better; she had seemed more pleased to see him, and had shown more sympathy and interest in his doings. This was since his one success at the *matinée*, and he told himself triumphantly that she had at last recognised his power; that the long siege was nearly over.

He would have been much less complacent had he known the truth, which was this. At the *matinée* Mabel had certainly been at first surprised almost to admiration by an unexpected display of force on Caffyn's part. But as the piece went on, she could not resist an impression that this was not acting, but rather an unconscious revelation of his secret self; the footlights seemed to be bringing out the hidden character of the man as though it had been written on him in sympathetic ink.

As she leaned back in the corner of the box he had sent them, she began to remember little traits of boyish malice and cruelty. Had they worked out of his nature, as such strains sometimes will, or was this stage adventurer, cold-blooded, unscrupulous, with a vein of diabolical humour in his malevolence, the real Harold Caffyn?

And then she had seen the injustice of this and felt almost ashamed of her thoughts, and with the wish to make some sort of reparation, and perhaps the consciousness that she had not given him many opportunities of showing her his better side, her manner towards him had softened appreciably.

Caffyn only saw the effects, and argued favourably from them. "Now that fellow Holroyd is happily out of the way," he thought, "she doesn't care for anybody in particular. I've only to wait."

There were considerations other than love or pride which made the marriage a desirable one to him. Mabel's father was a rich man, and Mabel herself was entitled independently to a considerable sum on coming of age. He could hardly do better for himself than by making such a match, even from the pecuniary point of view.

And so he looked about him anxiously for some opening more suitable to his talent than the stage-door, for he was quite aware that at present Mabel's father, whatever Mabel herself might think, would scarcely consider him a desirable *parti*.

Caffyn had been lucky enough to impress a business friend of his with a firm conviction of his talents for business and management, and this had led to a proposal that he should leave the stage and join him, with a prospect of a partnership should the alliance prove a success.

The business was a flourishing one, and the friend a young man who had but recently succeeded to the complete control of it, while Caffyn had succeeded somehow in acquiring a tolerably complete control of him. So the prospect was really an attractive one, and he felt that now at last he might consider the worst obstacles to his success with Mabel were disposed of.

He had plenty of leisure time on his hands at present, and thought he would call at Kensington Park Gardens one afternoon, and try the effect of telling Mabel of his prospects. She had been so cordial and sympathetic of late that it would be strange if she did not express some sort of pleasure, and it would be for him to decide then whether or not his time had come to speak of his hopes.

Mrs. and Miss Langton were out, he was told at the door. "Miss Dolly is in," added Champion, to whom Caffyn was well known.

"Then I'll see Miss Dolly," said Caffyn, thinking that he might be able to pass the time until Mabel's return. "In the morning room is she? All right,"

He walked in alone, to find Dolly engaged in tearing off the postage-stamp from a letter.

" Hallo, Miss Juggins, what mischief are you up to now ? " he began, as he stood in the doorway.

" It's not mischief at all," said Dolly, hardly deigning to look up from her occupation. " What have you come in for, Harold ? "

" For the pleasure of your conversation," said Caffyn. " You know you always enjoy a talk with me, Dolly." (Dolly made a little mouth at this). " But what are you doing with those scissors and that envelope, if I'm not indiscreet in asking ? "

" Do you know about stamps—is this a rare one ? " she said, and brought the stamp she had removed to Caffyn. The post-mark had obliterated the name upon it.

" Let's look at the letter," said Caffyn ; and Dolly put it in his hand.

He took it to the window, and gave a slight start.

" When did this come ? " he said sharply.

" Just now," said Dolly ; " a minute or two before you came. I heard the postman, and I ran out into the hall to see the letters drop into the box, and then I saw this one with the stamp, and the box wasn't locked, so I took it out and tore the stamp off. Why do you look like that, Harold ? It's only for Mabel, and she won't mind."

Caffyn was still at the window ; he had just received a highly unpleasant shock, and was trying to get over it, and adjust himself to the facts revealed by what he held in his hand.

The letter was from India, bore a Colombo postmark, and was in Vincent Holroyd's hand, which Caffyn happened to know ; if further proof were required he had it by pressing the thin paper of the envelope against the inclosure beneath, when several words became distinctly legible, besides those visible already through the gap left by the stamp. Thus he read, " Shall not write again till you——" And lower down Holroyd's full signature.

And the letter had that moment arrived. He saw no other possible conclusion than that, by some extraordinary chance, Holroyd had escaped the fate which was supposed to have befallen him. He was alive ; a more dangerous rival after this than ever. Why the deuce couldn't he stay in the sea ? It was just his infernal luck !

As he thought of the change this letter would work in his prospects, and his own complete powerlessness to

prevent it, the gloom and perplexity on his face deepened. He had been congratulating himself on the removal of this particular man as a providential arrangement made with some regard to his own convenience. And to see him resuscitated, at that time of all others, was hard indeed to bear. And yet what could he do?

As Caffyn stood by the window with Holroyd's letter in his hand, he felt an insane temptation for a moment to destroy or retain it. Time was everything just then, and even without the fragment he had been able to read, he could, from his knowledge of the writer, conclude with tolerable certainty that he would not write again without having received an answer to his first letter. "If I was only alone with it!" he thought impatiently. But he was a prudent young man, and perfectly aware of the consequences of purloining correspondence; and besides, there was Dolly to be reckoned with—she alone had seen the thing as yet. But then she *had* seen it, and was not more likely to hold her tongue about that than any other given subject. No, he could do nothing; he must let things take their own course, and be hanged to them!

His gloomy face filled Dolly with a sudden fear; she forgot her dislike, and came timidly up to him and touched his arm. "What's the matter, Harold?" she faltered. "Mabel, won't be angry. I—I haven't done anything *wrong*, have I, Harold?"

He came out of his reverie to see her upturned face raised to his—and started; his active brain had in that instant decided on a desperate expedient, suggested by the sight of the trouble in her eyes. "By Jove, I'll try!" he thought; "it's worth it—she's such a child—I may manage it yet!"

"Wrong!" he said impressively, "it's worse than that. My poor Dolly, didn't you really know what you were doing?"

"N—no," said Dolly; "Harold, don't tease me—don't tell me what isn't true . . . it—it frightens me so!"

"My dear child, what can I tell you? Surely you know that what you did was stealing?"

"Stealing!" echoed Dolly, with great surprised eyes. "Oh, no, Harold—not *stealing*. Why, of course I shall tell Mabel, and ask her for the stamp afterwards—only if I hadn't torn it off first, she might throw it away before I could ask, you know!"

" I'm afraid it was stealing all the same," said Caffyn, affecting a sorrowfully compassionate tone ; " nothing can alter that now, Dolly."

" Mabel won't be angry with me for that, I know," said Dolly ; " she will see how it was really."

" If it was only Mabel," said Caffyn, " we should have no reason to fear ; but Mabel can't do anything for you, poor Dolly ! It's the *law* that punishes these things. You know what law is ?—the police, and the judges."

The piteous change in the child's face, the dark eyes brimming with rising tears, and the little mouth drawn and trembling, might have touched some men ; indeed, even Caffyn felt a languid compunction for what he was doing. But his only chance lay in working upon her fears ; he could not afford to be sentimental just then, and so he went on, carefully calculating each word.

" Oh, I won't believe it," cried Dolly, with a last despairing effort to resist the effect his grave pity was producing ; " I can't. Harold, you're trying to frighten me. I'm not frightened a bit. *Say* you are only in fun ! "

But Caffyn turned away in a well-feigned distress. " Do I look as if it was fun, Dolly," he asked, with an effective quiver in his low voice ; he had never acted so well as this before. " Is that this morning's paper over there ? " he asked, with a sudden recollection, as he saw the sheet on a little round wicker table. "Fetch it, Dolly, will you ? "

" I must manage the obstinate little witch somehow," he thought impatiently, and turned to the police reports, where he remembered that morning to have read the case of an unhappy postman who had stolen stamps from the letters entrusted to him.

He found it now, and read it aloud to her. " If you don't believe me," he added, " look for yourself—you can read. Do you see now—those stamps were marked, Well, isn't *this* one marked ? "

" Oh, it is ! " cried Dolly, " marked all over ! Yes, I do believe you now, Harold. But what shall I do ? I know—I'll tell papa—he won't let me go to prison ! "

" Well, papa's a lawyer—you know that," said Caffyn ; " he has to *help* the law—not hinder it. Whatever you do, I shouldn't advise you to tell him, or he would be obliged to do his duty. You don't want to be shut up for years all alone in a dark prison, do you, Dolly ? And yet, if

what you've done is once found out, nothing can help you —not your father, not your mamma—not Mabel herself—the law's too strong for them all ! "

This strange and horrible idea of an unknown power into whose clutches she had suddenly fallen, and from which even love and home were unable to shield her, drove the poor child almost frantic ; she clung to him convulsively, with her face white as death, terrified beyond tears. " Harold ! " she cried, seizing his hand in both hers, " you won't let them ! I—I can't go to prison, and leave them all. I don't like the dark. I *couldn't* stay in it till I was grown up, and never see Mabel or Colin or anybody. Tell me what to do—only tell me, and I'll do it ! "

Again some quite advanced scoundrels might have hesitated to cast so fearful a shadow over a child's bright life, and the necessity annoyed Caffyn to some extent, but his game was nearly won—there would not be much more of it.

" I mustn't *do* anything for you," he said ; " if I did my right duty, I should have to give you up to—— No, it's all right, Dolly, I should never dream of doing that. But I can do no more. Still, if you choose, you can help *yourself*—and I promise to say nothing about it."

" How do you mean ? " said Dolly ; " if—if I stuck it together and left it ? "

" Do you think that wouldn't be seen ? It would, though ! No, Dolly, if anyone but you and I catches sight of that letter, it will be found out—must be ! "

" Do you mean ?—oh, no, Harold, I couldn't *burn* it ! "

There was a fire in the grate, for the morning, in spite of the season, had been chilly.

" Don't suppose *I* advise you to burn it," said Caffyn. " It's a bad business from beginning to end—it's wrong (at least, it isn't right) to burn the letter. Only—there's no other way, if you want to keep out of prison. And if you made up your mind to burn it, Dolly, why you can rely on me to keep the secret. *I* don't want to see a poor little girl shut up in prison if I can help it, *I* can tell you. But do as you like about it, Dolly ; I mustn't interfere."

Dolly could bear it no more ; she snatched the flimsy foreign paper, tore it across and flung it into the heart of the fire. Then, as the flames began to play round the edges, she repented, and made a wild dart forward to recover the letter.

"It's Mabel's," she cried; "I'm afraid to burn it—I'm afraid!"

But Caffyn caught her, and held her little trembling hands fast in his cool grasp, while the letter that Holroyd had written in Ceylon with such wild secret hopes flared away to a speckled grey rag, and floated lightly up the chimney.

"Too late now, Dolly!" he said, with a ring of triumph in his voice. "You would only have blistered those pretty little fingers of yours, my child. And now," he said, indicating the scrap of paper which bore the stamp, "if you'll take my advice, you'll send that thing after the other."

For the sake of this paltry bit of coloured paper Dolly had done it all, and now that must go!—and this last drop in her cup was perhaps the bitterest. She dropped the stamp guiltily between two red-hot coals, watched that too as it burnt, and then threw herself into an arm-chair and sobbed in passionate remorse.

"Oh, why did I do it?" she wailed; "why did you make me do it, Harold?"

"Come, Dolly, I like that," said Caffyn, who saw the necessity of having this understood at once. "*I* made you do nothing, if you please—it was all done before I came in. I may think you were very sensible in getting rid of the letter in that way—I do—but you did it of your own accord—remember that."

"I was quite good half an hour ago," moaned the child, "and now I'm a wicked girl—a—a thief! No one will speak to me any more—they'll send me to prison!"

"Now don't talk nonsense," said Caffyn, a little alarmed, not having expected a child to have such strong feelings about anything. "And for goodness' sake don't cry like that—there's nothing to cry about *now* . . . You're perfectly safe as long as you hold your tongue. You don't suppose I shall tell of you, do you?" (and it really was highly improbable). "There's nothing to show what you've done. And—and you didn't mean to do anything bad; I know *that*, of course. You needn't make yourself wretched about it. It's only the way the law looks at stealing stamps, you know. Come, I must be off now; can't wait for Mabel any longer. But I must see a smile before I go—just a little one, Juggins—to thank me for

helping you out of your scrape, eh ? " (Dolly's mouth relaxed in a very faint smile.) " That's right—now you're feeling jolly again ; cheer up, you can trust me, you know." And he went out, feeling tolerably secure of her silence.

" It's rough on her, poor little thing ! " he soliloquised as he walked briskly away ; " but she'll forget all about it soon enough—children do. And what the deuce could I do ? No, I'm glad I looked in just then. Our resuscitated friend won't write again for a month or two—and by that time it will be too late. And if this business comes out (which I don't imagine it ever will) *I've* done nothing anyone could lay hold of. I was very careful about that. I must have it out with Mabel as soon as I can now—there's nothing to be gained by waiting ! "

Would Dolly forget all about it ? She did not like Harold Caffyn, but it never occurred to her to disbelieve the terrible things he had told her. She was firmly convinced that she had done something which, if known, would cut her off completely from home and sympathy and love ; she, who had hardly known more than five minutes' sorrow in her happy innocent little life, believed herself a guilty thing with a secret. Henceforth in the shadows there would lurk something more dreadful even than the bogeys with which some foolish nursemaids people shadows for their charges—the gigantic hand of the law, ready to drag her off at any moment from all she loved. And there seemed no help for her anywhere—for had not Harold said that if her father or anyone were to know, they would be obliged to give her up to punishment ?

Perhaps if Caffyn had been capable of fully realising what a deadly poison he had been instilling into this poor child's mind, he might have softened matters a little more (provided his object could have been equally well attained thereby), and that is all that can be said for him. But, as it was, he only saw that he must make as deep an impression as he could for the moment, and never doubted that she would forget his words as soon as he should himself.

But if there was some want of thought in the evil he had done, the want of thought in this case arose from a constitutional want of heart.

CHAPTER XIV

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.

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 XV

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!"

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?

"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 arm-chair, 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