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

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 XVI

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 Langton's 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

was 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 a 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 have 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 enough 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 to 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!"

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. Anthony 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, 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. I saw it on young Ashburn's face before I'd spoken a dozen words."

"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."

CHAPTER XVII

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