"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

necessary means, to set up a substantial and well-regulated household of their own. He had a large old-fashioned house in the neighbourhood of Russell Square, where he entertained rather frequently in a solid, unpretentious fashion. At his Sunday dinners especially, one or two of the minor celebrities of the day were generally to be met, and it was to one of these gatherings that Mark was invited, as one of the natural consequences of the success of "Illusion." He found himself, on arriving, in company with several faces familiar to him from photographs, and heard names announced which were already common property. There were some there who had been famous once, and were already beginning to be forgotten, others now obscure who were destined to be famous some day, and a few, and these by no means the least gifted, who neither had been nor would be famous at any time. There were two or three constellations of some magnitude on this occasion, surrounded by a kind of "milky way" of minor stars, amongst which the bar, the studios, and the stage were all more or less represented.

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

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

"Er—Mr. Ashburn," he began, "I want you to know a very clever young fellow here—known him from a boy—he's on the stage now, and going to surprise us all some of these days. You'll like him. Come along and I'll introduce him to you; he's very anxious to know *you*." And when Mark had followed him as he threaded his way across the room, he found himself hurriedly introduced to the man with the cold light eyes whom he had met at the Featherstones' on the day when he had recognised Mabel Langton's portrait. Mr. Fladgate had already bustled away again, and the two were left together in a corner of the room. Dolly's revelations of the terrorism this man had exercised over her had strengthened the prejudice and

dislike Mark had felt on their first meeting; he felt angry and a little uncomfortable now at being forced to come in contact with him, but there was no way of avoiding it just then, and Caffyn himself was perfectly at his ease.

"I think we have met before—at Grosvenor Place," he began blandly; "but I daresay you have forgotten."

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

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

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

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

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

"But you see," urged Caffyn, "as it is, the matter *has* dropped—on me, and really I do think that you, who I understand were the means—of course from the best possible motives—of exposing me as a designing villain, might give me an opportunity of defending myself. I took the liberty of getting Fladgate to bring us together, expressly because I can't be comfortable while I know you have your present impressions of me. I don't expect to persuade Miss Langton to have a little charity—she's a woman; but I hoped you at least would give me a hearing."

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

harshly. Perhaps, after all, they had been making a little too much of this business.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He rattled off a rollicking hunting song, full of gaiety and *verve*, and followed it up with a little pathetic ballad, sung with an accent of real feeling (he could throw more emotion into his singing than his acting), while, although it was after dinner, the room was hushed until the last notes had died away, and when he rose at length with a laughing plea of exhaustion, he was instantly surrounded by a buzz of genuine gratitude. Mark heard all this, and the last remnants of his dislike and distrust vanished; it seemed

impossible that this man, with the sympathetic voice, and the personal charm which was felt by most of those present, could be capable of finding pleasure in working on a child's terrors. So that when Caffyn, disengaging himself at length from the rest, made his way to where Mark was sitting, the latter felt this almost as a distinction, and made room for him with cordiality. Somebody was at the piano again, but as all around were talking, the most confidential conversations could be carried on in perfect security, and Caffyn, seating himself next to Mark, set himself to remove all prejudices.

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

"You know," he said, in the course of his arguments, "I'm not really an incarnate fiend in private life. Miss Langton is quite convinced I am. I believe I saw her looking suspiciously at my boots the other day; but then she's a trifle hard on me. My worst fault is that I don't happen to understand children. I'd got into a way of saying extravagant things; you know the way one does talk rubbish to children; well, of joking in that sort of way with little What's-her-name. She always seemed to understand it well enough, and I should have thought she was old enough to see the simpler kind of joke, at all events. One day I chanced to chaff her about a stamp she took off some envelope. Well, I daresay I said something about stealing and prisons, all in fun, of course, never dreaming she would think any more about it. A fortnight afterwards, suddenly there's a tremendous hullabaloo. You began it. Oh, I know it was natural enough, but you did begin it. You see the child looking pale and seedy, and say at once, something on her mind.' Well, I don't know, and she might have been such a little idiot as to take a chance word *au grand sérieux*; it might have been something else on her mind; or she mightn't have anything on her mind at all. Anyway, she tells you a long story about prisons, and how one Harold Caffyn had told her she would go there, and so on, and you, with that vivid imagination of yours, conjure up a fearful picture of a diabolical young man (me, you know) coldly gloating over the terrors of a poor little innocent ignorant child, eh? Well, then you go and impart some of your generous

indignation to Miss Langton ; she takes it in a very aggravated form, and gives it to me. Upon my word, I think I've had rather hard lines."

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

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

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

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

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

" Well, we'll say no more about it," said Caffyn ; " you understand me now, and that's all *I* cared about." (" You may be a great genius, my friend," he was thinking, " but it's not so very difficult to get round you, after all ! ")

" Look here," he continued, " will you come and see me one of these days—it would be a great kindness to me. I've got rooms in Kremlin Road, Bayswater, No. 72."

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

" Do you know Kremlin Road ? " he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mark felt himself flush.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Had he had such a pleasant evening? he asked himself, as he walked home alone in the warm night air. He had been well treated by everybody, and there had been men present whose attention was a distinction in itself, and yet he felt an uneasiness which he found it difficult to trace

back to any particular cause. He decided at last that he was annoyed to find that the casual mention of Holroyd's name should still have power to discompose him—that was a weakness which he must set himself to overcome.

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

CHAPTER XVIII

STRIKING THE TRAIL

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

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

And all this he owed to Mark Ashburn—a fact which Harold Caffyn was not the man to forget. He had been careful to cultivate him, had found out his address and paid him one or two visits, in which he had managed to increase the intimacy between them.

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

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

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

So when she found that her new lodger was "quite the gentleman, and that partickler about his linen, and always civil and pleasant-spoken, and going about as neat as a new pin, and yet with a way about him as you could see he

wouldn't stand no nonsense," her prejudices were entirely conquered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

" Drowned ! and me never to hear it till this day. It's quite took me aback. Poor dear gentleman, what an end for him—to go out all that way only to be drowned ! I do

seem to be told of nothing but deaths and dying this morning, for Binney's just 'eard that poor old Mr. Tapling, at No. 5 opposite, was took off at last quite sudden late last night, and he'd had a dropsy for years, and swell up he would into all manner o' shapes, as I've seen him doin' of it myself ! "

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

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

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

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

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

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

With that by his side he turned over the rest of Holroyd's papers, and found more traces of some projected

literary work; skeleton scenes, headings for chapters, and even a few of the opening pages, with some marginal alterations in red ink, all of which he eagerly compared with the printed work before him.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 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