

CHAPTER IV. A LILY OF THE FIELD.

THIS was the significant and poetic appellation which at once attached itself to Ralph Gowan after his first visit to the studio in Bloomsbury Place, and, as might have been expected, it was a fancy of Dolly's, the affixing of significant titles being one of her fortes.

"The lilies of the field," she observed, astutely, "are a distinct class. They toil not, neither do they spin, and yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Yes, my young friends, Mr. Ralph Gowan is a lily of the field."

And she was not far wrong. Twenty-seven years before Mr. Ralph Gowan had been presented to an extended circle of admiring friends as the sole heir to a fortune large enough to have satisfied the ambitions of half a dozen heirs of moderate aspirations, and from that time forward his lines had continually fallen in pleasant places. As a boy he had been handsome, attractive, and thoroughbred, and consequently popular; his good looks made him a favorite with women, his good fortune with men; his friends were rather proud of him, and his enemies were powerless against him; he found it easy to be amiable because no obstacles to amiability lay in his path; and altogether he regarded existence as a comfortable enough affair.

At school his fellows had liked him just as boys as well as men are apt to like fortunate people; and as he had grown older he had always found

himself a favorite, it may be for something of the same reason. But being, happily, a gentleman by nature, he had not been much spoiled by the general adulation. Having been born to it, he carried himself easily through it, scarcely recognizing the presence of what would have been patent to men less used to popularity. He was fond of travelling, and so had amused himself by comfortably arranging uncomfortable journeys and exploring pleasantly those parts of the earth which to ordinary tourists would appear unattainable.

He was not an ordinary young man, upon the whole, which was evinced by his making no attempt to write a book of travels, though he might safely have done so; and really, upon the whole, "lily of the field" though chance had made him, he was neither useless nor purposeless, and rather deserved his good luck than otherwise.

Perhaps it was because he was not an ordinary individual that his fancy was taken by the glimpse he had caught of life in Vagabondia. It was his first glimpse of the inner workings of such a life, and its novelty interested him. A girl of twenty-two who received attention and admiration in an enjoyable, matter-of-fact manner, as if she was used to and neither over- nor under-valued it, who could make coffee and conversation bearable and even exciting, who could hold her own against patronage and slights, and be as piquant and self-possessed at home as in society, who could be dazzling at night and charming in the morning, was novelty enough in herself to make Bloomsbury Place attractive, even at its dingiest, and there were other attractions aside from this one.

Phil in the studio, taking life philosophically, and regarding the world and society in general with sublime and amiable tolerance, was as unique in his way as Dolly was in hers; his handsome girl-wife, who had come in to them with her handsome child in her arms, was unique also; Mollie herself, who had opened the door and quite startled him with the mere sight of her face,--well, Mollie had impressed him as she impressed everybody. And he was quite observant enough to see the element of matter-of-fact, half-jocular affection that bound them one to another; he could not help seeing it, and it almost touched him. They were not a sentimental assembly, upon the whole, but they were fond of each other in a style peculiar to themselves, and ready to unite in any cause which was the cause of the common weal. The family habit of taking existence easily and regarding misfortunes from a serenely philosophical standpoint, amused Ralph Gowan intensely. It had spiced Dolly's conversation, and it spiced Phil's; indeed, it showed itself in more than words. They had banded themselves against unavoidable tribulation, and it could not fail to be beautifully patent to the far-seeing mind that, taking all things together, tribulation had the worst of it.

They were an artistic study, Ralph Gowan found, and so, in his character of a "lily of the field," he fell into the habit of studying them, as an amusement at first, afterwards because his liking for them became friendly and sincere.

It was an easy matter to call again after the first visit,--people

always did call again at Bloomsbury Place, and Ralph Gowan was no exception to the rule. He met Phil in the city, and sauntered home with him to discuss art and look at his work; he invited him to first-class little dinners, and introduced him to one or two men worth knowing; in short, it was not long before the two were fond of each other in undemonstrative man fashion. The studio was the sort of place Gowan liked to drop into when time hung heavily on his hands, and consequently hardly a week passed without his having at least once or twice dropped into it to sit among the half dozen of Phil's fellow Bohemians, who were also fond of dropping in as the young man sat at his easel, sometimes furiously at work, sometimes tranquilly loitering over the finishing touches of a picture. They were good-natured, jovial fellows, too, these Bohemian visitors, though they were more frequently than not highly scented with the odor of inferior tobacco, and rarely made an ostentatious display in the matter of costume, or were conspicuously faultless in the matter of linen; they failed to patronize the hairdresser, and were prone to various convivialities, but they were neither vicious nor vulgar, and they were singularly faithful to their friendships for each other. They were all fond of Phil, and accordingly fraternized at once with his new friend, adopting him into their circle with the ease of manner and freedom of sentiment which seemed the characteristic of their class; and they took to him all the more kindly because, amateur though he was, he shared many of their enthusiasms.

Of course he did not always see Dolly when he went. During every other day of the week but Saturday she spent her time from nine in the morning

until five in the afternoon in the rather depressing atmosphere of the Bilberry school-room. She vigorously assaulted the foundations of Lindley Murray, and attacked the rules of arithmetic; she taught Phemie French, and made despairing but continuous efforts at "finishing" her in music. But poor Phemie was not easily "finished," and hung somewhat heavily upon the hands of her youthful instructress; still, she was affectionate, if weak-minded, and so Dolly managed to retain her good spirits.

"I believe they are all fond of me in their way," she said to Griffith,--"all the children, I mean; and that is something to be thankful for."

"They couldn't help being fond of you," returned the young man. "Did any human being ever know you without being fond of you?"

"Yes," said Dolly; "Lady Augusta knows me; and I do not think--no," with a cheerfully resigned shake of the head, which did not exactly express deep regret or contrition, "I really do not think Lady Augusta is what you might call overwhelmed with the strength of her attachment for me."

"Oh, Lady Augusta!" said Griffith. "Confound Lady Augusta!"

Griffith was one of the very few people who did not like Ralph Gowan, and perhaps charitably inclined persons will be half inclined to excuse his weakness. It was rather trying, it must be admitted, for a

desponding young man rather under stress of weather, so to speak, to find himself thrown into sharp contrast with an individual who had sailed in smooth waters all his life, and to whom a ripple would have been a by no means unpleasant excitement; it was rather chafing to constantly encounter this favorite of fortune in the best of humors, because he had nothing to irritate him; thoroughbred, unruffled, and débonnaire because he had nothing of pain or privation to face; handsome, well dressed, and at ease, because his income and his tastes balanced against each other accommodatingly. Human nature rose up and battled in the Vagabondian breast; there were times when, for the privilege of administering severe corporeal chastisement to Ralph Gowan, Griffith would have sacrificed his modest salary with a Christian fortitude and resignation beautiful to behold. To see him sitting in one of the faded padded chairs, roused all his ire, and his consciousness of his own weakness made the matter worse; to see him talking to Dolly, and see her making brisk little jokes for his amusement, was worse still, and drove him so frantic that more than once he had turned quite pale in his secret frenzy of despair and jealousy, and had quite frightened the girl, though he was wise enough to keep his secret to himself. It was plain enough that Gowan admired Dolly, but other men had admired her before; the sting of it was that this fellow, with his cool airs and graces and tantalizing repose of manner, had no need to hold back if he could win her. There would be no need for him to plan and pinch and despair; no need for faltering over odd shillings and calculating odd pence; he could marry her in an hour if she cared for him, and he could surround her with luxuries, and dress her like a queen, and make

her happy, as she deserved to be. And then the poor fellow's heart would beat fiercely, and the very blood would tremble in his veins, at the mere thought of giving her up.

One night after they had been sitting together, and Gowan had just left the room with Phil, Dolly glanced up from her work and saw her lover looking at her with a face so pale and wretched that she was thrown into a passion of fear.

She tossed her work away in a second, and, making one of her little rushes at him, was caught in his arms and half suffocated. She knew the instant she caught sight of his face what he was suffering, though perhaps she did not know the worst.

"Oh, why will you?" she cried out, in tears, all at once. "It is cruel! You are as pale as death, and I know--I know so well what it means."

"Tell me you will never forget what we have been to each other," he said, when he could speak; "tell me you don't care for that fellow,--tell me you love me, Dolly, tell me you love me."

She did not hesitate a moment; she had never flirted with Griffith in her life, and she knew him too well to try him when he wore that desperate, feverish look of longing in his eyes. She burst into an impetuous sob, and clung to him with both hands.

"I love you with all my soul," she said. "I will never let you give me up; and as to forgetting, I might die, but I could never forget. Care for Ralph Gowan! I love you, Griffith, I love you!"

"And you don't regret?" he said, piteously. "Oh, Dolly, just think of what he could give you; and then think of our hopeless dreams about miserable six-roomed houses and cheap furniture."

"You will make me hate him," cried Dolly, her gust of love and pity making her fierce. "I don't want anything anybody could give me. I only want you, dear old fellow,--darling old fellow," holding him fast, as if she would never let him go, and shedding a shower of impassioned, tender tears. "Oh, my darling, only wait until I am your own wife, and see how happy I will be, and how happy I will make you,--for I can make you happy,--and see how I will work in our little home for your sake, and how content I will be with a little. Oh, what must I do to show you how I love you! Do you think I could have cared for Ralph Gowan all these years as I have cared for you? No indeed; but I shall care for you forever, and I would wait for you a thousand years if I might only be your wife, and die in your arms at the end of it."

And she believed every word she said, too, and would have been willing to lay down her young life to prove it, extravagant as it may all sound to the discreet. And she quite believed, too, that she could never have so loved any other man than this unlucky, jealous, tempestuous one; but I will take the liberty of saying that this was a mistake, for, being

an impassioned, heart-ruled, unworldly young person, it is quite likely that if Ralph Gowan had stood in Mr. Griffith Donne's not exactly water-tight shoes, she would have clung to him quite as faithfully, and believed in his perfections quite as implicitly, and quite as scornfully would have depreciated the merits of his rival; but chance had arranged the matter for her years before, and so Mr. Griffith was the hero.

"Ralph Gowan!" she flung out. "What is Ralph Gowan, or any other man on earth, to me? Did I love him before I knew what love was, and scarcely understood my own heart? Did I grow into a woman loving him and clinging to him and dreaming about him? Have I ever had any troubles in common with him? Did we grow up together, and tell each other all our thoughts and help each other to bear things? Let him travel in the East, if he likes,"--with high and rather inconsistent disdain,"--and let him have ten thousand a year, if he will,--a hundred thousand millions a year wouldn't buy me from you--my own!" In another burst, "Let him ride in his carriage, if he chooses,"--rather, as if such a course would imply the most degraded weakness; but, as I have said before, she was illogical, if affectionate,"--"let him ride in his carriage. I would rather walk barefoot through the world with you than ride in a hundred carriages, if every one of them was lined with diamonds and studded with pearls."

There was the true flavor of Vagabondia's indiscretion and want of forethought in this, I grant you; but such speeches as these were Dolly Crewe's mode of comforting her lover in his dark moods; at least, she

was sincere,--and sincerity will excuse many touches of extravagance. And as to Griffith, every touch of loving, foolish rhapsody dropped upon his heart like dew from heaven, filling him with rapture and drawing him nearer to her than before.

"But," he objected,--a rather weak objection, offered rather weakly, because he was so full of renewed confidence and bliss,--"but he is a handsomer fellow than I am, Dolly, and it must be confessed he has good taste."

"Handsomer!" echoed Dolly. "What do I care about his beauty? He is n't you,--that is where he fails to come up to the mark. And as to his good taste, do you suppose for a second that I could ever admire the most imposing 'get-up' by Poole, as I love this threadbare coat of yours, that I have laid my cheek against for the last three years?" And she bent down all at once and kissed the shabby sleeve.

"No," she said, looking up the next minute with her eyes as bright as stars. "We have been given to each other, that is it. It was n't chance, it was something higher. We needed each other, and a higher power than Fate bound us together, and it was a power that is n't cruel enough to separate us now, after all these years have woven our lives in one chord, and drawn our hearts close, and taught us how to comfort and bear with each other. I was given to you because I could help to make your life brighter,--and you were given to me because you could help to brighten mine, and God will never part us so long as we are true."

The coat sleeve came into requisition again then, as it often did. Her enthusiastic burst ended in a gush of heart-full tears, and she hid her face on the coat sleeve until they were shed; Griffith in the mean time touching her partly bent head caressingly with his hand, but remaining silent because he could not trust himself to speak.

But she became quieter at last, and got over it so far as to look up and smile.

"I could n't give up the six-roomed house and the green sofa, Griffith," she said. "They are like a great many other things,--the more I don't get them the more I want them. And the long winter evenings we are to spend together, when you are to read and I am to sew, and we are both to be blissfully happy. I could n't give those up on any account. And how could I bear to see Ralph Gowan, or any one else, seated in the orthodox arm-chair?"

The very idea of this latter calamity occurring crushed Griffith completely. The long winter evenings they were to spend together were such a pleasant legend. Scarcely a day passed without his drawing a mental picture of the room which was to be their parlor, and of the fireside Dolly was to adorn. It required only a slight effort of imagination to picture her shining in the tiny room whose door closed upon an outside world of struggling and an inside world of love and hope and trust. He imagined Dolly under a variety of circumstances,

but nothing pleased and touched him so tenderly as this fireside picture,--its ideal warmth and glow, and its poetic placing of Dolly as his wife sitting near to him with her smiles and winsome ways and looks--his own, at last, unshared by any outsiders. Giving that long-cherished fancy up would have killed him, if he could have borne all the rest. And while these two experienced the recorded fluctuations of their romance in private, Ralph Gowan had followed Phil into the studio.

They found Mollie there on going into the room; and Mollie lying upon the sofa asleep, with her brown head upon a big soft purple cushion, was quite worthy a second glance. She had been rather overpowered in the parlor by the presence of Ralph Gowan, and, knowing there was a fire in the studio, and a couch drawn near it, she had retired there, and, appropriating a pile of cushions, had dropped asleep, and lay there curled up among them.

Seeing her, Gowan found himself smiling faintly. Mollie amused him just as she amused Dolly. It was so difficult a matter to assign her any settled position in the world; She was taller than the other girls, and far larger and more statuesque; indeed, there were moments when she seemed to be almost imposing in presence, but this only rendered her still more a charming incongruity. She might have carried herself like a royal princess, but she blushed up to the tips of her ears at a glance, and was otherwise as innocently awkward as a beauty may be. She was not fond of strangers either, and generally lapsed into silence when spoken

to. Public admiration only disconcerted her, and made her pout, and the unceremonious but friendly compliments of Phil's brethren in art were her special grievance.

"They stare at me, and stare at me, and stare at me," she complained, pettishly, to Dolly, "and some of them say things to me. I wish they would attend to their pictures and leave me alone."

But she had never evinced any particular dislike to Ralph Gowan. She was overpowered by a secret sense of his vast superiority to the generality of mankind, but she rather admired him upon the whole. She liked to hear him talk to Dolly, and she approved of his style. It was such a novel sort of thing to meet with a man who was not shabby, and whose clothes seemed made for him and were worn with a grace. He was handsome, too, and witty and polite, and his cool, comfortable manner reminded her vaguely of Dolly's own. So she used to sit and listen to the two as they chatted, and in the end her guileless admiration of Dolly's eligible Philistine became pretty thoroughly established.

When the sound of advancing footsteps roused her from her nap she woke with great tranquillity, and sat up rubbing her drowsy eyes serenely for a minute or so before she discovered that Phil had a companion. But when she did discover that such was the fact she blushed all over, and looked up at Ralph Gowan in some naïve distress.

"I did n't know any one was coming," she said, "and I was so comfortable

that I fell asleep. It was the cushions, I think."

"I dare say it was," answered Gowan, regarding her sleep-flushed cheeks and exquisite eyes with the pleasure he always felt in any beauty, animate or inanimate. "May I sit here, Mollie?" and then he looked at her again and decided that he was quite right in speaking to her as he would have spoken to a child, because she was such a very child.

"By me, on the sofa?" she answered. "Oh, yes."

"Are you going to talk business with Phil?" she asked him next, "or may I stay here? Griffith and Dolly won't want me in the parlor, and I don't want to go into the kitchen."

"I have no doubt you may stay here," he said, quite seriously; "but why won't they want you in the parlor?"

"They never want anybody," astutely. "I dare say they are making love,--they generally are."

"Making love," he repeated. "Ah, indeed!" and for the next few minutes was so absorbed in thought that Mollie was quite forgotten.

Making love were they,--this shabby, rather un-amiable young man and the elder Miss Crewe? It sounded rather like nonsense to Ralph Gowan, but it was not a pleasant sort of thing to think about. It is not to be

supposed that he himself was very desperately in love with Dolly just yet, but it must be admitted he admired her decidedly. Beauty as Mollie was, he scarcely gave her a glance when Dolly was in the room,--he recognized the beauty, but it did not enslave him, it did not even attract him as Dolly's imperfect charms did. And perhaps he had his own ideas of what Dolly's love-making would be, of the spice and variety which would form its characteristics, and of the little bursts of warmth and affection that would render it delightful. It was not soothing to think of all this being lavished on a shabby young man who was not always urbane in demeanor and who stubbornly objected to being propitiated by politeness.

As was very natural, Mr. Ralph Gowan did not admire Mr. Griffith Donne enthusiastically. In his visits to Bloomsbury Place, finding an ill-dressed young man whose position in the household he could not understand, he began by treating him with good-natured suavity, being ready enough to make friends with him, as he had made friends with the rest of Phil's compatriots. But influenced by objections to certain things, Griffith was not to be treated suavely, but rather resented it. There was no good reason for his resenting it, but resent it he did, as openly as he could, without being an absolute savage and attracting attention. The weakness of such a line of conduct is glaringly patent, of course, to the well-regulated mind; but then Mr. Griffith Donne's mind was not well-regulated, and he was, on the contrary, a very hot-headed, undisciplined young man, and exceedingly sensitive to his own misfortunes and shabbiness, and infatuated in his passion for the

object of his enemy's admiration. But Ralph Gowan could afford to be tolerant; in the matter of position he was secure, he had never been slighted or patronized in his life, and so had no shrinkings from such an ordeal; he was not disturbed by any bitter pang of jealousy as yet, and so, while he could not understand Griffith's restless anxiety to resent his presence, could still tolerate it and keep cool. Yet, as might be expected, he rather underrated his antagonist. Seeing him only in this one unfavorable light, he regarded him simply as a rather ill-bred, or, at least, aggressively inclined individual, whose temper and tone of mind might reasonably be objected to. Once or twice he had even felt his own blood rise at some implied ignoring of himself; but he was far the more urbane and well-disposed of the two, yet whether lie was to be highly lauded for his forbearance, or whether, while lauding him, it would not be as well to think as well as possible of his enemy, is a matter for charity to decide.

It had not occurred to him before that Griffith's frequent and unceremonious visits implied anything very serious. There were so many free-and-easy visitors at the house, and they all so plainly cultivated Dolly, if they did not make actual love to her; and really outsiders would hardly have been impressed with her deportment toward her betrothed. She was not prone to exhibit her preference sentimentally in public. So Ralph Gowan had been deceived,--and so he was deceived still.

"This sort of fellow," as he mentally put it with unconscious high-handedness, was not the man to make such a woman happy, however

ready she was to bear with him. It was just such men as he was, who, when the novelty of possession wore off, deteriorated into tyrannical, irritable husbands, and were not too well bred in their manners. So he became reflective and silent, when Mollie said that the two were "making love."

But at last it occurred to him that even to Mollie his preoccupation might appear singular, and he roused himself accordingly.

"Making love!" he said again. "Blissful occupation! I wonder how they do it. Do you know, Mollie?"

Mollie looked at him with a freedom from scruples or embarrassment at the conversation taking such a turn, which told its own story.

"Yes," she said. "They talk, you know, and say things to each other just as other people do, and he kisses her sometimes. I know that," with a decided air, "because I have seen him do it."

"Cool enough, that, upon my word," was her questioner's mental comment, "and not unpleasant for Donne; but hardly significant of a fastidious taste, if it is a public exhibition." "Ah, indeed!" he said, aloud.

"They have been engaged so long, you know," volunteered Mollie.

"Singularly enough, I did not know, Mollie," he replied. "Are you sure

yourself?"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Mollie, opening her eyes. "I thought everybody knew that. They have been engaged ever since they were ever so much younger. Dolly was only fifteen, and Griffith was only eighteen, when they first fell in love."

"And they have been engaged ever since?" said Gowan, his curiosity getting decidedly the better of him.

"Yes, and would have been married long ago, if Griffith could have got into something; or if Old Flynn would have raised his salary. He has only a hundred a year," with unabashed frankness, "and, of course, they couldn't be married on that, so they are obliged to wait. A hundred and fifty would do, Dolly says,--but then, they have n't got a hundred and fifty."

Ralph Gowan was meanly conscious of not being overpowered with regret on hearing this latter statement of facts. And yet he was by no means devoid of generous impulse. He was quite honest, however deeply he might be mistaken, in deciding that it would be an unfortunate thing for Dolly if she married Griffith Donne. He thought he was right, and certainly if there had been no more good in his rival than he himself had seen on the surface, he would not have been far wrong; but as it was he was unconsciously very far wrong indeed. He ran into the almost excusable extreme of condemning Griffith upon circumstantial evidence. Unfair

advantage had been taken of Dolly, he told himself. She had engaged herself before she knew her own heart, and was true to her lover because it was not in her nature to be false. Besides, what right has a man with a hundred a year to bind any woman to the prospect of the life of narrow economies and privations such an income would necessarily entail? And forthwith his admiration of Dolly became touched with pity, and increased fourfold. She was unselfish, at least, whatever her affianced might be. Poor little soul! (It is a circumstance worthy of note, because illustrative of the blindness of human nature, that at this very moment Miss Dorothea Crewe was enjoying her quiet tête-à-tête with her lover wondrously, and would not have changed places with any young lady in the kingdom upon any consideration whatever.)

It is not at all to be wondered at that, in the absence of other entertainment, Gowan drifted into a confidential chat with Mollie. She was the sort of girl few people could have remained entirely indifferent to. Her naïveté was as novel as her beauty, and her weakness, so to speak, was her strength. Gowan found it so at least, but still it must be confessed that Dolly was the chief subject of their conversation.

"You are very fond of your sister?" he said to the child.

Mollie nodded.

"Yes," she said, "I am very fond of her. We are all very fond of her."

Dolly 's the clever one of the family, next to Phil. She is n't afraid of anybody, and things don't upset her. I wish I was like her. You ought to see her talk to Lady Augusta, I believe she is the only person in the world Lady Augusta can't patronize, and she is always trying to snub her just because she is so cool. But it never troubles Dolly. I have seen her sit and smile and talk in her quiet way until Lady Augusta could do nothing but sit still and stare at her as if she was choked, with her bonnet strings actually trembling."

Gowan laughed. He could imagine the effect produced so well, and it was so easy to picture Dolly smiling up in the face of her gaunt patroness, and all the time favoring her with a shower of beautiful little stabs, rendered pointed by the very essence of artfulness. He decided that upon the whole Lady Augusta was somewhat to be pitied.

"Dolly says," proceeded Mollie, "that she would like to be a beauty; but if I was like her I should n't care about being a beauty."

"Ah!" said Gowan, unable to resist the temptation to try with a fine speech,--"ah! it is all very well for you to talk about not caring to be a beauty."

It did not occur to him for an instant that it was indiscreet to say such a thing to her. He only meant it for a jest, and nine girls out of ten even at sixteen would have understood his languid air of grandiloquence in an instant. But Mollie at sixteen was extremely

liberal-minded, and almost Arcadian in her simplicity of thought and demeanor.

Her brown eyes flew wide open, and for a minute she stared at him with mingled amazement and questioning.

"Me!" she said, ignoring all given rules of propriety of speech.

"Yes, you," answered Gowan, smiling, and looking down at her amusedly.

"I have been paying you a compliment, Mollie."

"Oh!" said Mollie, bewilderment settling on her face. But the next instant the blood rushed to her cheeks, and her eyes fell, and she moved a little farther away from him.

It was the first compliment she had received in all her life, and it was the beginning of an era.