CHAPTER VII. IN WHICH A SPARK IS APPLIED.

IT was several days before Bloomsbury Place settled down and became itself again after Dolly's departure. They all missed her as they would have missed any one of their number who had chanced to leave them; but Griffith, coming in to make his daily visits, was naturally almost disconsolate, and for a week or so refused to be comforted.

He could not overcome his habit of dropping in on his way to and from his lodgings, which were near by; it was a habit of too long standing to be overcome easily, and besides this, he was so far a part of the family circle that his absence from it would have been regarded by its other members as something rather like a slight, so he was obliged to pay them the delicate attention of presenting himself at least once a day. And thus his wounds were kept open. To come into the parlor and find them all there but Dolly, to see her favorite chair occupied by Mollie or Aimée or 'Toinette, to hear them talk about her and discuss her prospects,--well, there were times when he was quite crushed by it.

"If there was any hope of a better day coming," he said to Aimée, who, through being the family sage, was, of course, the family confidante, "if there was only something real to look forward to, but we are just where we were three years ago, and this sort of thing cannot go on forever. What right have I to hold her to her word when other men might make her happier?"

Ainice, sitting on a stool at his feet and looking reflective, shook her head.

"That is not a right view to take," she said, "and it is n't fair to Dolly. Dolly would be happier with you on a pound a week than she would be with any one else on ten thousand a year. And you ought to know that by this time, Griffith. It is n't a question of happiness at all."

"I don't mean--" he was beginning, but Aimée interrupted him. Her part of this love affair was to lay plans for the benefit of the lovers and to endeavor to settle their little difficulties in her own way.

"I am very fond of Dolly," she said.

"Fond of her!" echoed Griffith. "So am I. Who isn't?"

"I am very fond of Dolly," Aimée proceeded.

"And I know her as other people do not, perhaps. She does not show as much of her real self to outsiders as they think. I have often thought her daring, open way deceived people when it made them fancy she was so easy to read. She has romantic fancies of her own the world never suspects her of,--if I did not know her as I do, she is the last person on earth I should suspect of cherishing such fancies. The fact is, you are a sort of romance to her, and her love for you is one of her dreams, and she clings to it as closely as she would cling to life. It is a

dream she has lived on so long that it has become part of herself, and it is my impression that if anything happened to break her belief in it she would die,--yes, die!" with another emphatic shake of the pretty head. "And Dolly is n't the sort of girl to die for nothing."

Griffith raised his bowed head from his hands, his soft, dark, womanish eyes lighting up and his sallow young face flushing. "God bless her,--no!" he said. "Her life has not been free from thorns, even so far, and she has not often cried out against them."

"No," answered Aimée. "And when the roses come, no one will see as you will how sweet she finds them. Your Dolly is n't Lady Augusta's Dolly, or Mollie's, or Ralph Gowan's, or even mine; she is the Dolly no one but her lover and her husband has ever seen or ever will see. You can get at the spark in the opal."

Griffith was comforted, as he often found himself comforted, under the utterances of this wise one.

His desperation was toned down, and he was readier to hope for the best and to feel warm at heart and grateful,--grateful for Dolly and the tender thoughts that were bound up in his love for her. The tender phantom Aimée's words had conjured up, stirred within his bosom a thrill so loving and impassioned, that for the time the radiance seemed to emanate from the very darkest of his clouds of disappointment and discouragement. He was reminded that but for those very clouds the

girl's truth and faith would never have shone out so brightly. But for their poverty and long probation, he could never have learned how much she was ready to face for love's sake. And it was such an innocent phantom, too, this bright little figure smiling upon him through the darkness, with Dolly's own face, and Dolly's own saucy, fanciful ways, and Dolly's own hands outstretched toward him. He quite plucked up spirit.

"If Old Flynn could just be persuaded to give me a raise," he said; "it would n't take much of an income for two people to live on."

"No," answered the wise one, feeling some slight misgivings, more on the subject of the out-go than the income. "You might live on very little--if you had it."

"Yes," said Griffith, apparently struck by the brilliancy of the observation, "Dolly and I have said so often."

"Let me see," considered Aimée, "suppose we were to make a sort of calculation. Give me your lead-pencil and a leaf out of your pocket-book."

Griffith produced both at once. He had done it often enough before when Dolly had been the calculator, and had made a half-serious joke of the performance, counting up her figures on the tips of her fingers, and making great professions of her knowledge of domestic matters; but

it was a different affair in Aimée's hands. Aimée was in earnest, and bending over her scrap of paper, with two or three little lines on her white forehead began to set things down with an air at once business-like and vigorous, reading, the various items aloud.

"Rent, coals, taxes, food, wages,--you can't do your own washing, you know,--clothes, etceteras. There it is, Griffith," the odd, tried look settling in her eyes.

Griffith took the paper.

"Thank you," he remarked, resignedly, after he had glanced at it. "Just fifty pounds per annum more than I have any prospect of getting. But you are very kind to take so much interest in it, little woman." "Little woman" was his pet name for her.

She put her hand up to her forehead and gave the wrinkles a little rub, as if she would have liked to rub them away.

"No," she said, in distress. "I am very fond of calculating, so it isn't any trouble to me. I only wish I could calculate until what you want and what you have got would come out even."

Griffith sighed. He had wished the same thing himself upon several occasions.

He had one consolation in the midst of his tribulations, however. He had Dolly's letters, one of which arrived at "the office" every few days. Certainly they were both faithful correspondents. Tied with blue ribbon in a certain strong box, lay an immense collection of small envelopes, all marked with one peculiarity, namely, that the letters inside them had been at once closely written, and so much too tightly packed that it seemed a wonder they had ever arrived safely at their destination. They bore various postmarks, foreign and English, and were of different tints, but they were all directed in the one small, dashing hand, whose t's were crossed with an audacious little flourish, and whose capitals were so prone to run into whimsical little curls. Most of them had been written when Dolly had sojourned with her charges in Switzerland, and some of them were merely notes of appointment from Bloomsbury Place; but each of them held its own magnetic attraction for Griffith, and not one of them would he have parted with for untold gold. He could count these small envelopes by the score, but he had never received one in his life without experiencing a positive throb of delight, which held fresh pleasure every time.

Most of these letters, too, had stories of their own. Some had come when he had been discouraged and down at heart, and they had been so full of sunshine, and pretty, loving conceits, that by the time he had finished reading them he had been positively jubilant; some, I regret to say, were a trifle wilful and coquettish, and had so roused him to jealous fancies that he had instantly dashed off a page or so of insane reproach and distrust which had been the beginning of a lover's quarrel; some

of them (always written after he had been specially miserable and unreasoning) were half-pathetic mixtures of reproach and appeal, full of small dashes of high indignation, and outbursts of penitence, and with such a capricious, yet passionate ring in every line, that they had seemed less like letters than actual speech, and had almost forced him to fancy that Dolly herself was at his side, all in the flush and glow of one of her prettiest remorseful outbreaks.

And these letters from Brabazon Lodge were just as real, so they at least helped him to bear his trials more patiently than he could otherwise have done. She was far more comfortable than she had expected to be, she told him. Her duties were light, and Miss MacDowlas not hard to please, and altogether she was not dissatisfied.

"But that I am away from you," she wrote, "I should say Brabazon Lodge was better than the Bilberrys'. There is no skirmishing with Lady Augusta, at least; and, though skirmishing with Lady Augusta is not without its mild excitement, it is not necessary to one's happiness, and may be dispensed with. I wonder what Miss MacDowlas would say if she knew why I wear this modest ring on my third finger. When I explained to her casually that we were old friends, she succinctly remarked that you were a reprobate, and, feeling it prudent not to proceed with further disclosures, I bent my head demurely over my embroidery, and subsided into silence. I cannot discover why she disapproves of you unless it is that she has erratic notions about literary people. Perhaps she will alter her opinion in time. As it is, it can scarcely matter whether she

knows of our engagement or not. When a fitting opportunity arrives I shall tell her, and I don't say I shall not enjoy the spice of the denouement. In the meantime I read aloud to her, talk, work wonders in Berlin wool, and play or sing when she asks me, which is not often. In the morning we drive out, in the afternoon she enjoys her nap, and in the evening I sit decorously intent upon the Berlin wonders, but thinking all the time of you and the parlor in Bloomsbury Place, where Tod disports himself in triumphant indifference to consequences, and where the girls discuss the lingering possibilities of their wardrobes. You may-tell Mollie we are very grand,--we have an immense footman, who accompanies us in our walks or drives, and condescends to open and shut our carriage-door for us, with the air of a gentleman at leisure. I am rather inclined to think that this gentleman has cast an approving eye upon me, as I heard him observe to the housemaid the other day, that I was 'a reether hinterestin' young party,' which mark of friendly notice has naturally cheered me on my lonely way."

Among the people who felt the change in the household keenly, Ralph Gowan may assuredly be included. He missed Dolly as much as any of them did, but he missed her in a different manner. He did not call quite as often as he had been in the habit of doing, and when he did call he was more silent and less entertaining. Dolly had always had an inspiring effect upon him, and, lacking the influence of her presence, even Vagabondia lost something of its charm. So sometimes he was guilty of the impoliteness of slipping into half-unconscious reveries of a few minutes' duration, and, being thus guilty upon one particular occasion,

he was roused, after a short lapse of time, through the magnetic influence of a pair of soft eyes fixed upon him, which eyes he encountered the instant he looked up, with a start.

Mollie--the eyes were Mollie's--dropped her brown lashes with a quick motion, turning a little away from him; so he smiled at her with a sense of half-awakened appreciation. It was so natural to smile so at Mollie.

"Why, Mollie," he said, "what ails us? We are not usually so dull. We have not spoken to each other for ten minutes."

The girl did not look at him; her round, childish cheek was flushed, and her eyes were fixed on the fire, half proudly, half with a sort of innocently transparent indifference.

"Perhaps we have nothing worth saying to each other," she said. "Everybody is n't like Dolly."

Dolly! He colored slightly, though he smiled again. How did she know he was thinking of Dolly? Was it so patent a fact that even she could read it in his face? It never occurred to him for an instant that there could exist a reason why the eyes of this grown-up baby should be sharpened. She was such a very baby, with her ready blushes and her pettish, lovely face.

"And so you miss Dolly, too?" he said.

She shrugged her shoulders, as if to imply that she considered the question superfluous.

"Of course I do," she answered; "and of course we all do. Dolly is the sort of person likely to be missed."

She was so petulant about it that, not understanding her, he was both amused and puzzled, and so by degrees was drawn into making divers gallant, almost caressing speeches, such as might have been drawn from him by the changeful mood of a charming, wilful child.

"Something has made you angry," he said. "What is it, Mollie?"

"Nothing has made me angry," she replied. "I am not angry."

"But you look angry," he returned, "and how do you suppose I am to be interesting when you look angry?"

"It cannot matter to you," said Miss Mollie, "whether I am angry or not."

"Not matter!" he echoed, with great gravity. "It amounts to positive cruelty. Just at this particular moment I feel as if I should never smile again."

She reddened to her very throat, and then turned round all at once, flashing upon him such a piteous, indignant, indescribable glance as almost startled him.

"You are making fun of me," she cried out. "You always make fun of me. You would n't talk so to Dolly." And that instant she burst into tears.

He was dumbfounded. He could not comprehend it at all. He had thought of her as being so completely a child, that her troubles were never more than a child's troubles, and her moods a child's moods. He had admired her, too, as he would have admired her if she had been six years old, and he had never spoken to her as he would have spoken to a woman, in the whole course of their acquaintance. She was right in telling him that he would not have said such things to Dolly. He was both concerned and touched. What could he do but go to her and be dangerously penitent, and say a great many things easily said, but not soon to be forgotten! Indeed, her soft, nervous, passionate sobs, of which she was so much ashamed, her innocent tremor, and her pretty, wilful disregard of his remorse were such a new sensation to him, that it must be confessed he was not so discreet as he should have been.

"You never speak so to Dolly," she persisted, "nor to Aimée, either, and Aimée is only two years older than I am. It is not my fault," petulantly, "that I am only seventeen."

"Fault!" he repeated after her. "It is a very charming fault, if it is

one. Come, Mollie," looking down at her with a tender softness in his eyes, "make friends with me again,--we ought to be friends. See,--let us shake hands!"

Of course she let him take her hand and hold it lightly for a moment as he talked, his really honest remorse at his blunder making him doubly earnest and so doubly dangerous. She had swept even Dolly out of his mind for the time being, and she occupied his attention so fully for the rest of the evening that he had not the time to be absent-minded again. In half an hour all traces of her tears had fled, and she was sitting on her footstool near him, accepting with such evident delight his efforts at amusing her, that she quite repaid him for his trouble.

After this there seemed to be some connecting link between them. In default of other attractions, he made headway with Mollie, and was to some extent consoled. He talked to her when he made his visits, and it gradually became an understood thing that they were very good friends. He won her confidence completely,--so far, indeed, that she used to tell him her troubles, and was ready to accept what meed of praise or friendly blame he might think fit to bestow upon her.

It was a few weeks after the above-recorded episode that Griffith arrived one afternoon, in some haste, with a note from Dolly addressed to Aimée, and containing a few hurried lines. It had been enclosed in a letter to himself.

Somewhat unexpectedly Miss MacDowlas had decided upon giving a dinner-party, and Dolly wanted the white merino, which she had forgotten to put into her trunk when she had packed it. Would they make a parcel of it and send it by Mollie to Brabazon Lodge?

"You will have to go at once, Mollie," said Aimée, after reading the note. "It will be dark in an hour, and you ought not to be out after dark."

"It is a great deal nicer to be out then," said Mol-lie, whose ideas of propriety were by no means rigid. "I like to see the shop windows lighted up. Where is my hat? Does anybody know?" rising from the carpet and abandoning Tod to his own resources.

Nobody did know, of course. It was not natural that anybody should. Hats and gloves and such small fry were generally left to provide quarters for themselves in Bloomsbury Place.

"What is the use of bothering?" remarked Mrs. Phil, disposing of the difficulty of their non-appearance when required, simply; "they always turn up in time." And in like manner Mollie's hat "turned up," and in a few minutes she returned to the parlor, tying the elastic under her hair.

"Your hair wants doing," said Aimée, having made up her parcel.

"Yes," replied Mollie, contentedly, "Tod has been pulling himself up by it; but it would be such a trouble to do anything to it just now, and I can tuck it back in a bunch. It only looks a little fuzzy, and that 's fashionable. Does this jacket look shabby, Aimée? It is a good thing it has pockets in it. I always did like pockets in a jacket, they are so nice to put your hands in when your gloves have holes in them."

"Your gloves oughtn't to have holes in them," commented Aimée.

"But how can you help it if you have n't got the money to buy new ones?" asked Mollie.

"You ought to mend them," said the wise one.

"Mend them!" echoed Mollie, regarding two or three bare pink finger-tips dubiously. "They are not worth mending."

"They were once," said Aimée; "and you ought to have stitched them before it was too late. But that is always our way," wrinkling her forehead with her usual touch of old-young anxiousness. "We are not practical. There! take the parcel and walk quickly, Mollie."

Once on the street, Mollie certainly obeyed her. With the parcel in one arm, and with one hand thrust into the convenient pocket, she hurried on her way briskly, not even stopping once to look at the shop windows. Quite unconscious, too, was she of the notice she excited among the

passers-by. People even turned to look after her more than once, as indeed they often did. The scarlet scarf twisted round her throat to hide the frayed jacket collar, and the bit of scarlet mixed with the trimmings of her hat contrasted artistically with her brown eyes, and added brightness to the color on her cheeks. It was no wonder that men and women alike, in spite of their business-like hurry, found time to glance at her and even turn their heads over their shoulders to look backward, as she made her way along the pavement.

It was quite dark when she reached her destination, and Brabazon Lodge was brilliantly lighted up,--so brilliantly, indeed, that when the heavy front door was opened, in answer to her ring, she was a trifle dazzled by the flood of brightness in which Dolly's friend, the "gentleman at leisure," seemed to stand.

On stating her errand, she was handed over to a female servant, who stood in the hall.

"She was to be harsked in," she heard the footman observe, confidentially, to the young woman, "and taken to Miss Crewe's room immediate."

So she was led up-stairs, and ushered into a pretty bedroom, where she found Dolly sitting by the fire in a dressing-gown, with her hair about her shoulders.

She jumped up the moment Mollie entered, and ran to her, brush in hand, to kiss her.

"You are a good child," she said. "Come to the fire and sit down. Did you have any trouble in finding the house? I was afraid you would. It was just like me to forget the dress, and I never missed it until I began to look for it, wanting to wear it to-night. How is Tod?"

"He has got another tooth," said Mollie. "I found it to-day. Dolly," glancing round, "how nice your room is!"

"Yes," answered Dolly, checking a sigh, "but don't sigh after the fleshpots of Egypt, Mollie. One does n't see the dullest side of life at Bloomsbury Place, at least."

"Is it dull here?" asked Mollie.

Dolly shrugged her expressive shoulders.

"Berlin-wool work is n't exciting," she said. "How did you leave Griffith?"

"Low-spirited," replied Mollie. "I heard him tell Aimée this afternoon that he could n't stand it much longer."

Dolly began to brush her hair, and brushed it very much over her face,

perhaps because she wished to take advantage of its shadow; for most assuredly Mollie caught sight of something sparkling amongst the abundant waves almost like a drop of dew.

"Dolly," she said at last, breaking the awkward little sympathetic silence which naturally followed, "do you remember our reading the 'Vicar of Wakefield'?"

"Yes," said Dolly, in a mournful half-whisper; she could not trust herself to say more.

"And about the family being 'up,' and then being 'down'? I always think we are like they were. First it is 'the family up,' and then 'the family down.' It is down just now."

"Yes," said Dolly.

"It will be 'up' again, in time," proceeded Mollie, sagaciously. "It always is."

Dolly tried to laugh, but her laugh was a nervous little effort which broke off in another sound altogether. Berlin-wool work and Brabazon Lodge had tried her somewhat and--she wanted Griffith. It seemed to her just then such a far distant unreal Paradise,--that dream of the modest parlor with the door shut against the world, and the green sofa drawn near the fire. Were they ever to attain it, or were they to grow old and

tired out waiting, and hoping against hope?

She managed to rally, however, in a few minutes. Feeling discouraged and rebellious was not of much use,--that was one of Vagabondia's earliest learned lessons. And what good was there in making Mollie miserable? So she plucked up spirit and began to talk, and, to her credit be it said, succeeded in being fairly amusing, and made Mollie laugh outright half a dozen times during the remainder of her short stay. It was only a short stay, however. She remembered Aimée's warning at last, and rose rather in a hurry.

"I shall have to walk quickly if I want to get home in time for tea," she said, "so good-night, Dolly. You had better finish dressing."

"So I had," answered Dolly. "I am behind time already, but I shall not be many minutes, and Miss MacDowlas is not like Lady Augusta. Listen; I believe I hear wheels at the door now. It must be later than I fancied."

It was later than she fancied. As Mollie passed through the hall two gentlemen who were ascending the steps crossed her path, and, seeing the face of one who had not appeared to notice her presence, she started so nervously that she dropped her glove. His companion--a handsome, foreign-looking man--bent down and, picking it up, returned it to her, with a glance of admiring scrutiny which made her more excited than ever. She scarcely had the presence of mind to thank him, but rushed past him and out into the night in a passionate flutter of pain and

sudden childish anger, inconsistent enough.

"He never saw me!" she said to herself, catching her breath piteously. "He is going to see Dolly. It is n't the party he cares for, and it is n't Miss MacDowlas,--it is nobody but Dolly. He has tried to get an invitation just because--because he cares for Dolly."

She reached home in time for tea, arriving with so little breath and so much burning color that they all stared at her, and Aimée asked her if she had been frightened.

"No," she answered, "but I ran half the way because I wanted to be in time."

She did not talk at tea, and scarcely ate anything, and when Griffith came in, at about nine o'clock, he found her lying on the sofa, flushed and silent. She said she had a headache.

"I took Dolly her dress," she said. "They are having a grand party and--Does Miss MacDowlas know Mr. Gowan, Griffith?"

Griffith started and changed countenance at once.

"No," he answered. "Why?"

"He was there," she said, listlessly. "I met him in the hall as I came

out, but he did not see me. He must have tried to get an invitation because--well, you know how he likes Dolly."

And thus, the train having been already laid, was the spark applied.