CHAPTER VIII. THE BEGINNING OF THE ENDING.

IT was some time before Griffith recovered from the effects of this simple announcement of Mollie's.

Though he scarcely confessed as much to himself, he thought of it very much oftener than was conducive to his own peace of mind, and in thinking of it he found it assuming a greater importance and significance than he had at first recognized in it, and was influenced accordingly. He went home to his lodgings, depressed and heavy of spirit; in fact, he left Bloomsbury Place earlier than usual, because he longed to be alone. He could think of nothing but Dolly,--Dolly in the white merino, shining like a stray star among her employer's guests, and gladdening the eyes of Ralph Gowan. He knew so well how she would look, and how this fellow would follow her in his easy fashion, without rendering himself noticeable, and manage to be near her through the evening and hold his place as if he had a right to it, and he knew, too, how natural it would be for Dolly's eyes to light up in her pleasure at being saved from boredom, and how her innocent gladness would show itself in a score of pretty ways. And it was as Mollie said,--it was for Dolly's sake that Ralph Gowan was there to-night.

"She must know that it is so herself," he groaned, dropping his head upon the table; "but she cannot help it. She would if she could. Yes, I 'll believe that. She could never be false to me. I must hold fast to that in spite of everything. I should go mad if I did n't. I could never

lose you, Dolly,--I could never lose you!"

But he groaned again the next moment from the bottom of his desperate heart. He had become tangled in yet another web of misery.

"It is only another proof of what I have said a thousand times," he cried out. "My claim upon her is so weak, that this fellow does not think it worth regarding. He thinks it may be set aside,--they all think it may be set aside. I should not wonder," clenching his hand and speaking through his teeth,--"I should not wonder if he has laughed many a time at his fancy of how it will end, and how easy it will be to thrust the old love to the wall!"

At this moment-, in the first rankling sting of humiliation and despair, he could almost have struck a murderous blow at the man whom fortune had set on such a pinnacle of pride and insolence, as it seemed to his galled fancy. He was not in the mood to be either just or generous, and he saw in Ralph Gowan nothing but a man who had both the power and will to rival him, and rob him of peace and hope forever. If Dolly had been with him, in all probability his wretchedness would have evaporated in a harmless outburst, which would have touched the girl's heart so tenderly that she would have withheld nothing of love and consolation which could reassure him, and so in the end the tempest would have left no wound behind. But as it was left to himself and his imaginings, every thought held its bitter sting. He was, as it were, upon the brink of an abyss.

And while this danger was threatening her, Dolly was setting herself steadfastly to her task of entertaining her employer's guests, though it must be confessed that she found it necessary to summon all her energies. She was thinking of Griffith, but not as Griffith was thinking of her. She was picturing him looking desolate among the group round the fire at Bloomsbury Place, or else working desperately and with unnecessary energy amidst the dust and gloom of the dimly lighted office; and the result was that her spirit almost failed. It was quite a relief to encounter Ralph Gowan, as she did, on entering the room: he had seen them all latterly, and could enter into particulars; and so, in her pleasure, it must be owned that her face brightened, just as Griffith had fancied it would, when she shook hands with him.

"I did not hear that you were coming," she said. "How glad I am!" which was the most dangerous speech she could have made under the circumstances, since it was purely on her account that he had diplomatized to obtain the invitation.

He did not find it easy to release her hand all at once, and certainly he lighted up also.

"Will you let me tell you that it was not Miss MacDowlas who brought me here?" he said, in a low voice; "though I appreciate her kindness, as a grateful man ought. Vagabondia is desolate without you."

She tried to laugh, but could not; her attempt broke off in the

unconscious sigh, which always touched him, he scarcely knew why.

"Is it?" she said, looking up at him without a bit of the old brightness. "Don't tell them, Mr. Gowan, but the fact is I am desolate without it. I want to go home."

He felt his heart leap suddenly, and before he could check himself he spoke.

"I wish--I wish," he said, "that you would let me take you home." And the simply sounding words embodied a great deal more of tender fancy than a careless observer would have imagined; and Dolly, recognizing the thrill in his voice, was half startled.

But she shook her head, and managed to smile.

"That is not wisdom," she said. "It savors of the lilies of the field. We cannot quarrel with our bread and butter for sentiment's sake in Vagabondia. Did you know that Mollie had paid me a visit this evening?--or perhaps you saw her; I think she went out as you came in."

"Mollie!" he said, surprisedly; and then looking half annoyed, or at least a trifle disturbed, he added, as if a sudden thought had occurred to him, "then it was Mollie, Chandos spoke of."

"Chandos!" echoed Dolly. "Who is Chandos--and what did Chandos say about

Mollie?"

He glanced across the room to where a tall, handsome man was bending over a fussy little woman in pink.

"That is Chandos," he said; "and since you spoke of Mollie's visit, I recollect that, as we came into the house, Chandos was behind me and lingered a moment or so, and when he came to me afterward he asked if I had seen the face that passed us as we entered. It had roused his enthusiasm as far as it can be roused by anything."

"It must have been Mollie," commented Dolly, and she looked at the man on the opposite side of the room, uneasily. "Is he a friend of yours?" she asked, after scrutinizing him for a few seconds.

Gowan shrugged his shoulders.'

"Not a friend," he answered, dryly. "An acquaintance. We have not much in common."

"I am glad to hear it," was Dolly's return. "I don't like Chandos."

She could not have explained why she did not like him, but certainly she was vaguely repelled and could not help hoping that he would never see

Mollie again. He was just the man to be dangerous to Mollie; handsome, polished, ready of speech and perfect in manner, he was the sort of man to dazzle and flatter any ignorant, believing child.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, half aloud, "I could not bear to think that he would see her again."

She uttered the words quite involuntarily, but Gowan heard them, and looked at her in some surprise, and so awakened her from her reverie.

"Are you speaking of Mollie?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, candidly, "though I did not mean to speak aloud. My thoughts were only a mental echo of the remark I made a moment ago,--that I don't like Chandos. I do not like him at all, even at this distance, and I cannot resist feeling that I do not want him to see anything more of Mollie. We are not very discreet, we Vagabonds, but we must learn wisdom enough to shield Mollie." And she sighed again.

"I understand that," he said, almost tenderly, so sympathetically, in fact, that she turned toward him as if moved by a sudden impulse.

"I have sometimes thought since I came here," she said, "that perhaps you might help me a little, if you would. She is so pretty, you see, and so young, and, through knowing so little of the world and longing to know so much, in a childish, half-dazzled way, is so innocently wilful

that she would succumb to a novel influence more readily than to an old one. So I have thought once or twice of asking you to watch her a little, and guard her if--if you should ever see her in danger."

"I can promise to do that much, at least," he returned, smiling.

She held out her hand impetuously, just as she would have held it out to Griffith, and, oh, the hazard of it,--the hazard of so throwing aside her mock airs and graces, and showing herself to him just as she showed herself to the man she loved,--the Dolly whose heart was on her lips and whose soul was in her eyes.

"Then we will make a 'paction' of it," she said. "You will help me to take care of her."

"For your sake," he said, "there are few things I would not do."

So from that time forward he fell into the habit of regarding unsuspecting Mollie as his own special charge. He was so faithful to his agreement, indeed, that once or twice Griffith was almost ready to console himself with the thought that perhaps, after all, the child's beauty and tractability would win its way, and Gowan would find himself seriously touched at heart. Just now he could see that his manner was scarcely that of a lover, but there most assuredly was a probability that it might alter and become more warm and less friendly and platonic. As to Mollie herself, she was growing a trifle incomprehensible; she

paid more attention to her lovely hair than she had been in the habit of doing, and was even known to mend her gloves; she began to be more conscious of the dignity of her seventeen years. She complained less petulantly of the attentions of Phil's friends, and accepted them with a better grace. The wise one even observed that she tolerated Brown, the obnoxious, and permitted him to admire her--at a distance. In her intercourse with Gowan she was capricious and had her moods. Sometimes she indulged in the weakness of tiring herself in all her small bravery when he was coming, and presented herself in the parlor beauteous and flushed and conscious, and was so delectably shy and sweet that she betrayed him into numerous trifling follies not at all consistent with his high position of mentor; and then, again, she was obstinate, rather incomprehensible, and did not adorn herself at all, and, indeed, was hard enough to manage.

"You are growing very queer, Mollie," said Miss Aimée, wonderingly.

To which sage remark Mollie retorted with a tremulous, sensitive flush, and most unnecessary warmth of manner.

"I 'm not queer at all I wish you would n't bother so, Aimée!"

That very afternoon she came into the room with a card in her hand, after going out to answer a summons at the door-bell.

"Phil," she said, "a gentleman wants you. Chan-dos, the card says."

"Chandos!" read Phil, rising from the comfort of his couch, and taking his pipe out of his mouth. "Who knows Chandos?--I don't. It must be some fellow on business."

And so it proved. He found the gentleman awaiting him in the next room, and in a very short time learned his errand. Chandos introduced himself--Gerald Chandos, of The Pools, Bedfordshire, who, hearing of Mr. Crewe through numerous friends, not specified, and having a fancy--quite the fancy of an uncultured amateur, modestly--for pictures and an absorbing passion for art in all its forms, had taken the liberty of calling, etc. It was very smoothly said, and Chandos, of The Pools, being an imposing patrician sort of individual, and free from all fopperies or affectations, Phil met his advances complacently enough. It was no unusual thing for an occasional patron to drop in after this manner. He had no fault to find with a man who, having the good fortune to possess money, had the good taste to know how to spend it. So he made friends with Chandos, pretty much as he had made friends with Gowan,--pretty much as he would have made friends with any other sufficiently amiable and well-bred visitor to his modest studio. He showed him his pictures, and talked art to him, and managed to spend an hour very pleasantly, ending by selling him a couple of tiny spirited sketches, which had taken his fancy. It was when he was taking down these sketches from the wall that he heard a sort of smothered exclamation from the man, who stood a few feet apart from him, and, turning to see what it meant, he saw that he had just discovered the

fresh, lovely, black-hooded head, with the trail of autumn leaves clinging to the loose trail of hair,--the picture for which Mollie had sat as model. It was very evident that Chandos, of The Pools, was admiring it.

"Ah!" said he, the next minute. "I know this face. There can scarcely be two faces like it."

Phil left his sketches and came to him, the pleasure he felt on the success of his creation warming him up. This picture, with Mollie\s face and head, was a great favorite of his.

"Yes," he said, standing opposite to it, with his hands in his pockets, and critical appreciation in his eyes. "You could not very well mistake it. Heads are not my exact forte, you know; but that is Mollie to a tint and a curve, and I am rather proud of it."

Chandos regarded it steadfastly.

"And well you may be," he answered. "Your sister, I believe?"

"Mollie!" exclaimed Phil, stepping a trifle aside, to get into a better light, and speaking almost abstractedly. "Oh, yes, to be sure! She is my sister,--the youngest. There are three of them. That flesh tint is one of the best points."

And in the meantime, while this apparently trivial conversation was being carried on in the studio, Mollie, in the parlor, had settled herself upon a stool close to the fire, and, resting her chin on her hand and her elbow on her knee, was looking' reflective.

"That Chandos is somebody new," 'Toinette remarked. "I hope he has come to buy something. I want some gold sleeve-loops for Tod. I saw some beauties the other day, when I was out."

"But you could n't afford them if Phil sold two pictures instead of one," said Aimée. "There are so many other useful things you need."

"He is n't a stranger to me," put in Mollie, suddenly. "I have seen him before."

"Who?" said 'Toinette. She was thinking more of Tod's gold sleeve-loops than of anything else.

"This Mr. Chandos," answered Mollie, without looking up from the fire. "I saw him at Brabazon Lodge the night I went to take Dol her dress. He was with Mr. Gowan, and I dropped my glove, and he picked it up for me. I was coming out as they were going in."

"I wonder," said Aimée, "whether Mr. Gowan goes to Brabazon Lodge often?"

"I don't know, I 'm sure," answered Mollie, shrugging her shoulder. "How is one to learn? He would n't be likely to tell us. I should think, though, that he does. He is too fond of Dolly"--with a slight choke in her voice--"to stay away, if he can help it."

"It's queer," commented 'Toinette, "how men like Dolly. She is n't a beauty, I 'm sure; and for the matter of that, when her hair is n't done up right, she is n't even pretty."

"It isn't queer, at all," said Mollie, rather crossly; "it's her way. She can make such a deal out of nothing, and she does n't stand at trouble when she wants to make people like her. She says any one can do it, and it is only a question of patience; but I don't believe her. See how frantic Griffith is about her. He is more desperately in love with her to-day than he was at the very first, seven years ago."

"And she cares more for him, I'm sure," said Aimée.

Mollie's shoulder went up again. "She flirts with people enough, if she does," she commented.

"Ah!" returned Aimée, "that is 'her way,' as you call it, again. Somehow, it seems as if she can't help it. It is as natural to her as the color of her hair and eyes. She can't help doing odd things and making speeches that rouse people and tempt them into liking her. She has done such things all her life, and sometimes I think she will do

them even when she is an old woman; though, of course, she will do them in a different way. Dolly would n't be Dolly without her whimsicalness, any more than Dick there, in his cage, would be a canary if he did n't twitter and sing."

"Does she ever do such things to women?" asked Miss Mollie, shrewdly. She seemed to be in a singular mood this afternoon.

"Yes," Aimée protested, "she does; and what is more, she is not different even with children. I have seen her take just as much trouble to please Phemie and the little Bilberrys as she would take to please Griffith or--or Mr. Gowan. And see how fond they were of her. If she had cared for nothing but masculine admiration, do you think Phemie would have adored her as she did, and those dull children would have been so desolate when she left them? No, I tell you. Dolly's weakness--and it isn't such a very terrible weakness, after all--lies in wanting everybody to like her,--men, women, and children; yes, down to babies and dogs and cats. And see here, Mollie, ain't we rather fond of her ourselves?"

"Yes," owned Mollie, staring at the fire, "we are. Fond enough."

"And is n't she rather fond of us?"

"Yes, she is--for the matter of that," acquiesced Mollie.

"Yes," began 'Toinette, and then, the sound of footsteps upon the staircase interrupting her, she broke off abruptly to listen. "It is Phil's visitor," she said.

Mollie got up from her seat, roused into a lazy sort of interest.

"I am going to look at him," she said, and went to the window.

The next minute she drew back, blushing.

"He saw me," she said. "I did n't think he could, if I stood here in the corner."

But he had; and more than that, in his admiration of her dimples and round fire-flushed cheeks, had smiled into her face, openly and without stint, as he passed.

After tea Gowan came in. Mollie opened the door for him; and Mollie, in a soft blue dress, and with her hair dressed to a marvel, was a vision to have touched any man's fancy. She was in one of her sweet acquiescent moods, too, having recovered herself since the afternoon; and when she led him into the parlor, she blushed without any reason whatever, as usual, and as a consequence looked enchanting.

"Phil has gone out," she said. "'Toinette is putting Tod to bed, and Aimée is helping her; so there is no one here but me."

Gowan sat down--in Dolly's favorite chair.

"You are quite enough," he said; "quite enough--for me."

She turned away, making a transparent little pretence of requiring a hand-screen from the mantelpiece, and, having got it, she too sat down, and fell to examining a wretched little daub of a picture upon it most minutely.

"This is very badly done," she observed, irrelevantly. "Dolly did it, and made it up elaborately into this screen because it was such a sight. It is just like Dolly, to make fun and joke at her own mistakes. She has n't a particle of talent for drawing. She did this once when Griffith thought he was going to get into something that would bring him money enough to allow of their being married. She made a whole lot of little mats and things to put in their house when they got it, but Griffith did n't get the position, so they had to settle down again."

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated Gowan.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

He moved a trifle uneasily in his chair. He had not meant to speak aloud.

"An unintentional outburst, Mollie," he said. "A cheerful state of affairs, that."

"What state of affairs?" she inquired. "Oh, you mean Dolly's engagement. Well, of course, it has been a long one; but then, you see, they like each other very much. Aimée was only saying this afternoon that they cared for each other more now than they did at first."

"Do they?" said Gowan, and for the time being lapsed into silence.

"It's a cross-grained sort of fortune that seems to control us in this world, Mollie," he said, at length.

Mollie stared at the poor little daub on her hand-screen and met his philosophy indifferently enough.

"You ought n't to say so," she answered. "And I don't know anything about it."

He laughed--quite savagely for so amiable a young man.

"I!" he repeated. "I ought not to say so, ought n't I? I think I ought. It is a cross-grained fortune, Mollie. We are always falling in love with people who do not care for us, or with people who care for some one else, or with people who are too poor to marry us, or--"

"Speak for yourself," said Mollie, with a vigor quite wonderful and new in her. "I am not."

And she held her screen up between her face and his, so that he could not see her. She could have burst into a passionate gush of tears. It was Dolly he was thinking about,--it was Dolly who had the power to make him unhappy and sardonic,--always Dolly.

"Then you are a wise child, Mollie," he said. "But you are a very young child yet,--only seventeen, is n't it? Well, it may all come in good time."

"It will not come at all," she asserted, stubbornly.

Dolly's little wretch of a hand-screen was quite trembling in her hand, it made her so desperate to feel, as she did, that she was of such small consequence to him that he could treat her as a child, and make a sort of joke of his confidence. But he did not see it.

"Ah! well, you see," he went on, "I thought so once, but it has come to me nevertheless. The fact is, I am crying for the moon, Mollie, as many a wiser and better man has done before me."

She did not answer, so he rose and walked once or twice across the room. When he came back to the fire, she had risen too, and was standing up, biting the edge of her screen, all flushed, and with a brightness in

her eyes he did not understand. Poor little soul! she was suffering very sharply in her childish way.

He laid a hand on either of her shoulders, and spoke to her gently enough.

"Mollie," he said, "let us sit down together and condole with each other. You are not in a good humor to-night, something has rasped you again; and as for me, I am about as miserable, my dear, as it is possible for a man with a few thousand a year to be."

She tried to answer him steadily, and, finding she could not, rushed into novel subterfuge. Subterfuge was a novelty to Mollie.

"Yes," she said, lifting the most beauteous of tear-wet eyes to his quite eagerly. "Yes, I am crossed, and--and something has vexed me. I am getting bad-tempered, I think. Suppose we do sit down."

And then when they did sit down--she on the hearth-rug at his feet, he in Dolly's chair again--she broke out upon him in a voice like a sharp little sob.

"I know what you are miserable about," she said. "You are miserable about Dolly."

They had never spoken about the matter openly before, though he had

always felt that if he could speak openly to any one, he could to this charming charge of his. Such is the keenness of masculine penetration. And now he felt almost relieved already. The natural craving for sympathy of some kind or other was to satisfy itself through the medium of pretty, much-tried Mollie.

"Yes," he answered, half desperately, half reluctantly. "Dolly is the moon I am crying for,--or rather, as I might put it more poetically, 'the bright particular star.' What a good little thing you are to guess at it so soon!"

"It did n't need much guessing at," she said, curving her innocent mouth in a piteous effort to smile.

He, leaning against the round, padded back of his chair, sighed, and as he sighed almost forgot the poor child altogether, even while she spoke to him. Having all things else, he must still cry for this one other gift, and really he felt very dolorous.

Mollie, pulling her screen to pieces, looked at him with a heavy yet adoring heart. She was young enough to be greatly moved by his physical beauty, and just now she could not turn away from him. His long-limbed, slender figure (which, while still graceful and lithe enough, was not a model of perfection, as she fondly imagined), his pale, dark face, his dark eyes, even his rather impolite and uncomplimentary abstraction, held fascination for her. Not having been greatly smiled upon by

fortune, she had fallen to longing eagerly and fearfully for this one gift which had been so freely vouchsafed to Dolly, who had neither asked nor cared for it. Surely there was some cross-grained fate at work.

She was very quiet indeed when he at length recollected himself and roused from his reverie. He looked up to find her resting her warm, rose-leaf colored cheek on her hand, and concentrating all her attention upon the fire again. She was not inclined to talk when he spoke to her, and indeed had so far shrunk within herself that he found it necessary to exert his powers to their utmost before he could move her to anything like interest in their usual topics of conversation. In fact, her reserve entailed the necessity of a little hazardous warmth of manner being exhibited on his part, and in the end a few more dangerous, though half-jocular, speeches were made, and in spite of the temporary dissatisfaction of his previous mood, he felt a trifle reluctant to leave the fire and the sweet, unwise face when the time came to go.

"Good-night," he said to her, a few minutes before he went out. And then, noticing for the twentieth time how becoming the soft blue of her dress was and how picturesque she was herself even in the unconsciousness of her posture, he was tempted to try to bring that little, half-resentful glow into her upraised eyes again.

"I have often heard your sister make indiscreetly amiable speeches to you, Mollie," he said. "Did she ever tell you that you ought to have been born a sultana?"

She shook her head and pouted a little.

"I should n't like to be a sultana," she said.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Not a sultana in spangled slippers and gorgeous robes!"

"No," she answered, with a spice of Dolly in her speech. "The slippers are great flat things that turn up at the toes, and the sultan might buy me for so much a pound, and--and I care for other things besides dress."

"Nevertheless," he returned, "you would have made a dazzling sultana."

Then he went away and left her, and she sat down upon her stool before the fire again and began to pull her hair down and let it hang in grand disorder about her shoulders and over her face.

"If I am so--so pretty," she said slowly, to herself, "people ought to like me, and," sagaciously, "I must be pretty or he would not say so."

And when she went to her room it must be confessed that she crept to the glass and stared at the reflection of the face framed in the abundant, falling hair, until Aimée, wondering at her quietness, raised her head from her pillow, and, seeing her, called her to her senses.

"Mollie," she said, in her quietest way, "you look very nice, my dearr and very picturesque, and I don't wonder at your admiring yourself; but if you stand there much longer in your bare feet you will have influenza, and then you will have to wear a flannel round your throat, and your nose will be red, and you won't derive much satisfaction from your looking-glass for a week to come."