CHAPTER IX. IN WHICH WE ARE UNORTHODOX.

"SOMETHING," announced Phil, painting away industriously at his picture,--"something is up with Grif. Can any of you explain what it is?"

Mollie, resting her elbows on the window-ledge, turned her head over her shoulder; 'Toinette, tying Tod's sleeves with red ribbon, looked up; Aimée went on with her sewing, the two little straight lines making themselves visible on her forehead between her eyebrows. The fact of something being "up" with any one of their circle was enough to create a wondering interest.

"There is no denying," Phil proceeded, "that he is changed somehow or other. He is not the same fellow that he was a few months ago,--before Dolly went away."

"It is Dolly he is bothering about," said Mollie, concisely.

Then Aimée was roused.

"I wish they were married," she said. "I wish they were married and--safe!"

"Safe!" put in Mrs. Phil. "That is a queer thing to say. They are not in any danger, let us devoutly hope."

The two wrinkles deepened, and the wise one sighed.

"I hope not," she answered, bending her small, round, anxious face over her sewing, and attacking it vigorously.

"They never struck me, you know," returned Mrs. Phil, "as being a particularly dangerous couple, though now I think of it I do remember that it has once or twice occurred to me that Griffith has been rather stupid lately."

"It has occurred to me," remarked Phil, dryly, "that he has taken a most unaccountable dislike to Gowan."

Mollie turned round to her window again.

"Not to put it too strongly," continued the head of the family, "he hates him like the deuce."

And he was not far wrong in making the assertion. The time had been coming for some time when the course of this unimposing story of true love was no longer to run smooth, and in these days Griffith was in a dangerous frame of mind. Now and then he heard of Gowan dropping in to spend a few hours at Brabazon Lodge, and now and then he heard of his good fortune in having found in Miss MacDowlas a positive champion. He was even a favorite with her, just as he was a favorite with many other

people. Griffith did not visit Brabazon Lodge himself, he had given that up long ago, indeed had only once paid his respects to his relative since her arrival in London. That one visit, short and ceremonious as it was, had been enough for him. Like many estimable ladies, Miss MacDowlas had prejudices of her own which were hard to remove, and appearances had been against her nephew.

"If he is living a respectable life, and so engaged in a respectable profession, my dear," commented Dolly's proprietress, in one of her after conversations on the subject, "why does he look shabby and out at elbows? It is my opinion that he is a very disreputable young man."

"She thinks," wrote Dolly to the victim, "that you waste your substance in riotous living." And it was such an exquisite satire on the true state of affairs, that even Griffith forgot his woes for the moment, and laughed when he read the letter.

Dolly herself was not prone to complain of Miss MacDowlas. She was not so bad as she looked, after all. She was obstinate and rigid enough on some points, but she had her fairer side, and Dolly found it. In a fashion of her own Miss MacDowlas was rather fond of her companion. A girl who was shrewd, industrious, and often amusing, was not to be despised in her opinion; so she showed her fair young handmaiden a certain amount of respect. She had engaged companions before, who being entertaining were not trustworthy, or being trustworthy were insufferably dull. She could trust Dolly with the most onerous of her

domestic or social charges, she found, and there was no fear of her small change disappearing or her visitors being bored. So the position of that "young person" became an assured and decently comfortable one.

But, day by day, Griffith was drifting nearer and nearer the old shoals of difficulty. He rasped himself with miserable imaginings, and was often unjust even toward Dolly. Hers was the brighter side of the matter, he told himself.

She was sure to find friends,--she always did, these people would make a sort of favorite of her, and she would be pleased because she was so popular among them. He could not bear the thought of her ephemeral happiness over trifles sometimes. He even fell so low as that at his worst moments, though to his credit, be it spoken, he was always thoroughly ashamed of himself afterward. There were times, too, when he half resented her little jokes at their poverty, and answered them bitterly when he wrote his replies to her letters. His chief consolation he found in Aimée, and the sage of the family found her hands fuller than ever. Quiet little body as she was, she was far-sighted enough to see danger in the distance, and surely she did her best to alter its course.

"If you are not cooler," she would say, "you will work yourself into such a fever of unhappiness, that you will be doing something you will regret."

"That is what I am afraid of," he would sometimes burst forth; "but you must admit, Aimée, that it is a pretty hard case."

"Yes," confessed the young oracle, "I will admit that, but being unreasonable won't make it any easier."

And then the fine little lines would show themselves, and she would set herself industriously to the task of administering comfort and practical advice, and she never failed to cheer him a little, however temporarily.

And she did not fail Dolly, either. Sage axioms and praiseworthy counsel reached Brabazon Lodge in divers small envelopes, addressed to Miss Crewe, and invariably beginning, "My dearest Dolly;" and more than once difficulty had been averted, and Dolly's heart warmed again toward her lover, when she had been half inclined to rebel and exhibit some slight sharpness of temper. Only a few days after the conversation with which the present chapter opens occurred, one of these modestly powerful missives was forwarded, and that evening Griffith met with an agreeable surprise. Chance had taken him into the vicinity of Miss MacDowlas's establishment, and as he walked down the deserted road in a somewhat gloomy frame of mind, he became conscious suddenly of the sound of small, light feet, running rapidly down the footpath behind him.

"Griffith!" cried a clear, softly pitched voice, "Griffith, wait for me."

And, turning, he saw in the dusk of the winter day a little figure almost flying toward him, and in a few seconds more Dolly was standing by him, laughing and panting, and holding to his arm with both hands.

"I thought I should never catch you," she said. "You never walked so fast in your life, I believe, you stupid old fellow. I could n't call out loud, though it is a quiet place, and so I had to begin to run. Goodness! what would Lady Augusta have said if she had seen me 'flying after you!"

And then, stopping all at once, she looked up at him with a wicked little air of saucy daring.

"Don't you want to kiss me?" she said. "You may, if you will endeavor to effect it with despatch before somebody comes."

She was obliged to resign herself to her fate then. For nearly two minutes she found herself rendered almost invisible, and neither of them spoke. Then half released, she lifted her face to look at him, and there were tears on her eyelashes, and in her voice, too, though she was trying very hard to smile.

"Poor old fellow," she half whispered. "Has it seemed long since you kissed me last?"

He caught her to his breast again in his old, impetuous fashion.

"Long!" he groaned. "It has seemed so long that there have been times when it has almost driven me mad. O Dolly! Dolly!"

She let him crush her in his arms and kiss her again, and she nestled against his shoulder for a minute, and, putting her warm little gloved hand up to his face, gave it a tiny, loving squeeze. But of course that could not last long. Miss Macdowlas's companion might be kissed in the dusk two or three times, but, genteelly sequestered as was the road leading to Brabazon Lodge, some stray footman or housemaid might appear on the scene, from some of the neighboring establishments, at any moment, so she was obliged to draw herself away at last.

"There!" she said, "you must let me take your arm and walk on now, and you must tell me all about things. I have a few minutes to spare, and I have so wanted you," heaving a weary little sigh, and holding his arm very tightly indeed.

"Dolly," he asked, abruptly, "are you sure of that?"

The other small hand clasped itself across his sleeve in an instant.

"Sure?" she answered. "Sure that I have wanted you? I have been nearly dying for you!" with some affectionate extravagance.

"Are you sure," he put it to her, "quite sure that you have not

sometimes forgotten me for an hour or so?"

"No," she answered, indignantly, "not for a single second;" which was a wide assertion.

"Not," he prompted her, somewhat bitterly, "when the MacDowlas gives dinner-parties, and you find yourself a prominent feature, 'young person,' as you are? Not when you wear the white merino, and 'heavy swells' admire you openly?"

"No," shaking her head in stout denial of the imputation. "Never. I think about you from morning until night; and the fact is," in a charming burst of candor, "I actually wake in the night and think about you. There! are you satisfied now?"

It would have been impossible to remain altogether unconsoled and unmoved under such circumstances, but he could not help trying her again.

"Dolly," he said, "does Gowan never make you forget me?"

Then she saw what he meant, and flushed up to her forehead, drawing her hand away and speaking hotly.

"Oh!" she said, "it is that, is it?"

"Yes," he answered her, "it is that."

Then they stopped in their walk, and each looked at the other,--Griffith at Dolly, with a pale face and much of desperate, passionate appeal in his eyes; Dolly at Griffith, with her small head thrown back in sudden defiance.

"I am making you angry and rousing you, Dolly," he said; "but I cannot help it. There is scarcely a week passes in which I do not hear that he--that fellow--has managed to see you in one way or another. He can always see you," savagely. "I don't see you once a month."

"Ah!" said Dolly, with cruel deliberation, "this is what Aimée meant when she told me to be careful, and think twice before I did things. I see now."

I have never yet painted Dolly Crewe as being a young person of angelic temperament. I have owned that she flirted and had a temper in spite of her Vagabondian good spirits, good-nature, and popularity; so my readers will not be surprised at her resenting rather sharply what she considered as being her lover's lack of faith.

"I think," she proceeded, opening her eyes wide and addressing him with her grandest air,--"I think I will walk the rest of my way alone, if you please."

It was very absurd and very tragical in a small way, of course, and assuredly she ought to have known better, and perhaps she did know better, but just now she was very fierce and very sharply disappointed. She positively turned away as if to leave him, but he caught hold of her arm and held her.

"Dolly," he cried, huskily, "you are not going away in that fashion. We never parted so in our lives."

She half relented,--not quite, but nearly, so very nearly that she did not try very hard to get away. It was Griffith, after all, who was trying her patience--if Gowan or any other man on earth had dared to imply a doubt in her, she would have routed him magnificently--in two minutes; but Griffith--ah, well, Griffith was different.

"Whose fault is it?" she asked, breaking down ignominiously. "Who is to blame? I never ask you if other people make you forget me. I wanted to--to see you so much that I--I ran madly after you for a quarter of a mile, at the risk of being looked upon as a lunatic by any one who might have chanced to see me. But you don't care for that. I had better have bowed to you and passed on if we had met. Let me go!"

"No," said Griffith, "you shall not go. God knows if I could keep you, you should never leave my arms again."

"You would tire of me in a week, if I belonged to you in real earnest,"

she said, not trying to get away at all now, however.

"Tire of you!" he exclaimed, in a shaken voice. "Of you!" And all at once he drew her round so that the light of the nearest lamp could fall on her face. "Look here!" he whispered, sharply; "Dolly, I swear to you, that if there lives a man on earth base and heartless enough to rob me of you, I will kill him as sure as I breathe the breath of life!"

She had seen him impassioned enough often before, but she had never seen him in as wild a mood as he was when he uttered these words. She was so frightened that she broke into a little cry, and put her hand up to his lips.

"Griffith!" she said, "Grif!--dear old fellow. You don't know what you are saying. Oh! don't--don't!"

Her horror brought him to his senses again; but he had terrified her so that she was trembling all over, and clung to him nervously when he tried to console her.

"It is n't like you to speak in such a way," she faltered, in the midst of her tears. "Oh, how dreadfully wrong things must be getting, to make you so cruel!"

It took so long a time to reassure and restore her to her calmness, that he repented his rashness a dozen times. But he managed to comfort her at

length, though to the last she was tearful and dejected, and her voice was broken with soft, sorrowful little catch-ings of the breath.

"Don't let us talk about Ralph Gowan," she pleaded, when he had persuaded her to walk on with him again. "Let us talk about ourselves,--we are always safe when we talk about ourselves," with an innocent, mournful smile.

And so they talked about themselves. He would have talked of anything on earth to please her then. Talking of themselves, of course, implied talking nonsense,--affectionate, sympathetic nonsense, but still nonsense; and so, for a while, they strolled on together, and were as tenderly foolish and disconnected as two people could possibly be.

But, in spite of her resolution to avoid the subject, Dolly could not help drifting back to Ralph Gowan. "Griffith," she said, plaintively, "you are very jealous of him."

"I know that," he answered.

"But don't you know," in desperate appeal, "that there is n't the slightest need for you to be jealous of anybody?"

"I know," he returned, dejectedly, "that I am a very wretched fellow sometimes."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Dolly.

"I know," he went on, "that seven years is a long probation, and that the prospect of another seven, or another two, for the matter of that, would drive me mad. I know I am growing envious and distrustful; I know that there are times when I hate that fellow so savagely that I am ashamed of myself. Dolly, what has he ever done that he should saunter on the sunny side, clad in purple and fine linen all his life? The money he throws away in a year would furnish the house at Putney."

"Oh, dear!" burst forth Dolly. "You are going wrong. It is all because I am not there to take care of you, too. Those are not the sentiments of Vagabondia, Grif."

"No," dryly; "they are of the earth, earthy."

Dolly shook her head dolefully.

"Yes," she acquiesced; "and they are a bit shabby, too. You are going down, Grif. You never used to be shabby. None of us were ever exactly that, though we used to grumble sometimes. We used to grumble, not because other people had things, but because we had n't them."

"I am getting hardened, I suppose," bitterly. "And it is hardly to be wondered at."

"Hardened!" She stopped him that moment, and stood before him, holding his arm and looking up at him. "Hardened!" she repeated. "Grif, if you say that again, I will never forgive you. What is the good of our love for each other if it won't keep our hearts soft? When we get hardened we shall love each other no longer. What have we told each other all these years? Have n't we said that so long as we had one another we could bear anything, and not envy other people? It was n't all talk and sentiment, was it? It was n't on my part, Grif. I meant it then, and I mean it now, though I know there are many good, kind-hearted people in the world who would not understand it, and would say I was talking unpractical rubbish, if they heard me. Hardened! Grif, while you have me, and I have you, and there is nothing on our two consciences? Why, it sounds,"--with another most dubious shake of her small head,--"it sounds as if you would n't care about the house at Putney!"

He was conquered, of course; before she had spoken a dozen words he had been conquered; but this figure of his not caring for the house at Putney broke him utterly. He did not look very hardened when he answered her.

"Dolly," he said, "you are an angel! I have told you so before, and it may be a proof of the barrenness of my resources to tell you so again, but it is true. God forgive me, my precious! I should like to see the man whose heart could harden while such a woman loved him."

It was a pretty sight to see her put her hands on his shoulders, and

stand on tiptoe to kiss him, in her honest, earnest way, without waiting for him to ask her.

"Ah!" she said, "I knew it wasn't true," and then, still letting her hands rest on his shoulders, she burst forth in her tender, impulsive way again. "Grif," she said, "I don't think I am very wise, and I know I am not very thoughtful. I do things often that it would be better to leave undone,--I am fond of making the Philistines admire me, and I sometimes tease you; but, dear old fellow, right deep down at the bottom of my heart," faltering slightly, "I do--do want to be a good woman; and there is never a night passes--though I never told you so before--that I do not pray to God to let me help you and let you help me to be tender and faithful and true."

It was the old story,--love was king. Wisdom to the winds! Practicality to the corners of the earth! Prudence, power, and grandeur, hide your diminished heads! Here were two people who cared nothing for you, and who flung you aside without a fear as they stood together under the trees in the raw evening air,--one a penniless little hired entertainer of elderly ladies, the other an equally impecunious bondsman in a dingy office.

They were quite happy,--even happy when time warned them that they must bid each other goodnight. They walked together to the gates of Barbazon Lodge, and parted in a state of bliss.

"Good-night," said Dolly. "Be good,--as somebody wise once said,--'Be good, and you will be happy.'"

"Good-night," answered Griffith; "but might n't he have put it the other way, Dolly, 'Be happy, and you will be good--because you can't help it'?"

He had his hand on her shoulder, this time, and as she laughed she put her face down so that her soft, warm cheek nestled against it.

"But he didn't put it that way," she objected. "And we must take wisdom as it comes. There! I must go now," rather in a hurry. "Some one is coming--see!"

"Confound it!" he observed, devoutly. "Who is it?"

"I don't know," answered Dolly; "but you must let me go. Good-night, again."

He released her, and she ran in through the gate, and up the gravel walk, and so he was left to turn away and pass the intruder with an appearance of nonchalance. And pass him he did, though whether with successful indifference or not, one can hardly say; but in passing him he looked up, and in looking up he recognized Ralph Gowan.

"Going to see her," he said, to himself, just as poor Mollie had said

the same thing, and just with the same heartburn. "The dev--But, no," he broke off sharply, "I won't begin again. It is as she says,--the blessed little darling!--it is shabby to be down on him because he has the best of it." And he went on his way, not rejoicing, it is true, but still trying to crush down a by no means unnatural feeling of rebellion.