

CHAPTER X. IN SLIPPERY PLACES.

THE wise one sat at the window and looked out. The view commanded by Bloomsbury Place was not a specially imposing or attractive one. Four or five tall, dingy houses with solitary scrubby shrubs in their small front slips of low-spirited looking gardens, four or five dingy and tall houses without the scrubby shrubs in their small front slips of low-spirited looking gardens, rows of Venetian blinds of various shades, and one or two lamp-posts,--not much to enliven the prospect.

The inhabitants of the houses in Bloomsbury Place were not prone to sitting at their front windows, accordingly; but this special afternoon, the weather being foggy, Aimée finding herself alone in the parlor, had left the fire just to look at this same fog, though it was by no means a novelty. The house was very quiet. 'Toinette was out, and so was Mollie, and Tod was asleep, lying upon a collection of cushions on the hearth-rug, with two fingers in his mouth, his round baby face turned up luxuriously to catch the warmth.

The wise one was waiting for Mollie, who had gone out a few hours before to execute divers commissions of a domestic nature.

"She might have been back in half the time," murmured the family sage, who sat on the carpet, flattening her small features against the glass.

"She might have done what she has to do in less than half the time, but I knew how it would be when she went out. She is looking in at the

shop windows and wishing for things. I wish she would n't. People stare at her so, and I don't wonder. I am sure I cannot help watching her myself, sometimes. She grows prettier every day of her life, and she is beginning to know that she does, too."

Five minutes after this the small face was drawn away from the window-pane with a sigh of relief.

"There she is now. What a time she has been! Who is with her, I wonder? I cannot see whether it is Phil or Mr. Gowan, it is getting so dark. It must be Mr. Gowan. 'Toinette would be with them if it was Phil."

"Why, Mollie," she exclaimed, when the door opened, "I saw somebody with you, and I thought it was Mr. Gowan. Why did n't he come in? Don't waken Tod."

Mollie came in rather hurriedly, and going to the fire knelt down before it, holding out her hands to warm them. Her cheeks were brilliant with color and her eyes were bright; altogether, she looked a trifle excited.

"It was n't Mr. Gowan," she answered. "Ugh! how cold it is,--not frosty, you know, but that raw sort of cold, Aimée. I would rather have the frost myself, would n't you?"

But Aimée was not thinking of the weather.

"Not Mr. Gowan!" she ejaculated. "Who was it, then?"

Mollie crept nearer to the fire and gave another little shudder.

"It was--somebody else," she returned, with a triumphant little half-laugh. "Guess who!"

"Who!" repeated Aimée. "Somebody else! It was not any one I know."

"It was somebody Phil knows."

The wise one arose and came to the fire herself.

"It was some one taller than Brown!"

"Brown!" echoed Mollie, with an air of supreme contempt. "He is twice as tall. Brown is only about five feet high, and he wears an overcoat ten times too big for him, and it flaps--yes, it flaps about his odious little heels. I should think it wasn't Brown. It was a gentleman."

The wise one regarded her pretty, scornful face dubiously.

"Brown is n't so bad as all that implies, Mollie," she said. "His coat is the worst part of him. But if it was n't Brown and it was n't Mr. Gowan, who was it?"

Mollie laughed and shrugged her shoulders again, and then looked up at her small inquisitor charmingly defiant.

"It was--Mr. Chandos!" she confessed.

Aimée gazed at her for a moment in blank amazement.

"But," she objected, "you don't know him any more than I do. You have only seen him once through the window, and you have never been introduced to him."

"I have seen him twice," said Mollie. "Don't you recollect my telling you that he picked up my glove for me the night I carried Dolly's dress to Bra-bazon Lodge, and," faltering a little and dropping her eyes, "he introduced himself to me. He met me in town. I was passing through the Arcade, and he stopped to ask about Phil. He apologized, of course, you know, for doing it, but he said he was very anxious to know when Phil would be at home, and--and perhaps I would be so kind as to tell him. He wants to see him about a picture. And--then, you know, somehow or other, he said something else, and--and I answered him--and he walked to the gate with me."

"He took a great liberty," said Aimée. "And it was very imprudent in you to let him come. I don't know what you could be thinking of. The idea of picking up people in the street like that, Mollie; you must be crazy."

"I could n't help it," returned Mollie, not appearing at all disturbed.

"He knows Phil and he knows Dolly--a little. And he is very nice. He wants to know us all. And he says Mr. Gowan is one of his best friends. I liked him myself."

"I dare say you did," despairingly. "You are such a child. You would like the man in the moon or a Kaffre chief--"

"That is not true," interposed the delinquent. "I don't know about the man in the moon. He might be well enough--at any rate, he would be travelled and a novelty, but Kaffre chiefs are odious. Don't you remember those we saw last winter?"

"Mollie," said Aimée, "you are only jesting because you are ashamed of yourself. You know you were wrong to let that man come home with you."

Then Mollie hung her head and made a lovely rebellious move.

"I don't care," she said; "if it was n't exactly correct, it was nice. But that is always the way," indignantly, "nice things are always improper."

Here was a defection for you. The oracle quite shuddered in her discreet disapproval.

"If you go on in that way," she said, "you will be ending by saying that improper things are always nice."

"Never mind how I end," observed the prisoner at the bar. "You have ended by wakening Tod;" which remark terminated the conversation somewhat abruptly.

A day or so later came Chandos--upon business, so he said, but he remained much longer than his errand rendered necessary, and by some chance or other it came to pass that Phil brought him into the parlor, and introduced him to their small circle, in his usual amiable, informal manner. Then he was to be seen fairly, and prepossessing enough he was. Mollie, sitting in her corner in the blue dress, and looking exquisite and guileless, was very demurely silent at first; but in due time Aimée began to see that she was being gradually drawn out, and at last the drawing out was such a success, subtle as it was, that she became quite a prominent feature in the party, and made so many brilliant speeches without blushing, that the family eyes began to be opened to the fact that she was really a trifle older than she had been a few years ago, after all. The idea had suggested itself to them faintly on one or two occasions of late, and they were just beginning to grasp it, though they were fully as much startled as they would have been if Tod had unexpectedly roused himself from his infantile slumbers, and mildly but firmly announced his intention of studying for the ministry or entering a political contest.

Aimée was dumbfounded. She had not expected this. She was going to have her hands full, it was plain. She scarcely wondered now at her discovery of two evenings before. And then she glanced slyly across the room again, and took it all in once more,--Mollie, bewitching in all the novelty of her small effort at coquetry; Chandos, leading her on, and evidently enjoying the task he had set himself intensely.

It was quite a new Mollie who was left to them after their visitor was gone. There was a touch of triumph and excitement in the pretty flushed face, and a ghost of defiance in the brown eyes. She was not quite sure that young Dame Prudence would not improve the occasion with a short homily.

So she was a trifle restless. First she stood at the window humming an air, then she came to the table and turned over a few sketches, then she knelt down on pretence of teasing Tod.

But impulse was too much for her. She forgot Tod in a few minutes and fell into a sitting position, folding her hands idly on the blue garment.

"I knew he would come," she said, abstractedly. Then Dame Prudence addressed her.

"Did you?" she remarked. "How did you?"

She started and blushed up to her ears.

"How?" she repeated. "Oh, I knew!"

"Perhaps he told you he would," put in Dame P. "Did he?"

"Aimée," was the rather irrelevant reply, rather suddenly made, "do you like him?"

"I never judge people," primly enunciated, "upon first acquaintance. First impressions are rarely to be relied upon."

"That 's a nice speech," in her elder sister's most shockingly flippant manner, "and it sounds well, but I have heard it before--thousands of times. People always say it when they want to be specially disagreeable, and would like to cool you down. There is the least grain of Lady Augusta in you, Aimée."

"And considering that Lady Augusta is the most unpleasant person we know, that is a nice speech," returned the oracle.

"Oh, well, I only said 'a grain,' and a grain is not much."

"It is quite enough."

"Well," amiably, "suppose we say half a grain."

"Suppose we say you are talking nonsense."

Mollie's air was Dolly's own as she answered her,--people always said she was like Dolly, despite the fact that Dolly was not a beauty at all.

"There may be something in that," she said.

"Suppose we admit it and return to the subject Do you think he is nice, Aimée?"

"Do you?"

"Yes, I do," but without getting rose-colored this time.

Aimée looked at her calmly, but with some quiet scrutiny in her glance.

"As nice," she put it to her,--"as nice as Ralph Gowan?"

She grew rose-colored then in an instant up to her ears again and over them, and she turned her face aside and plucked at the hearth-rug with nervous fingers.

"Well?" suggested Aimée.

"He is as handsome and--as tall, and he dresses as well."

"Do you like him as well?" said Aimée.

"Ye-es--no. I have not known him long enough to tell you."

"Well," returned Aimée, "let me tell you. As I said before, I do not think it wise to judge people from first impressions, but this I do know, I don't like him as I like Mr. Gowan, and I never shall. He is not to be relied upon, that Gerald Chandos; I saw it in his eyes."

And she set her chin upon her hand, and her small, round, fair face covered itself all at once with an anxious cloud.

She kept a quiet watch upon Mollie after this, and in the weeks that followed she was puzzled, and not only puzzled, but baffled outright many a time. This first visit of Mr. Gerald Chandos was not his last. His business brought him again and again, and when the time came that he had no pretence of business, he was on sufficiently familiar terms with them all to make calls of pleasure. So he did just as Ralph Gowan had done, slipped into his groove of friend and acquaintance unobtrusively, and was made welcome as other people were,--just as any sufficiently harmless individual would have' been under the same circumstances. There was no dragon of high renown to create social disturbances in Vagabondia.

"As long as a man behaves himself, where's the odds?" said Phil; and no

one ever disagreed with him.

But Mr. Gerald Chandos had not been to the house more than three times before Aimée found cause to wonder. She discovered that Ralph Gowan was not so enthusiastically attached to him, after all; and furthermore she had her reasons for thinking that Gowan was rather disturbed at his advent, and would have preferred that he had not been adopted so complacently.

"If Dolly was at home," she said to herself, "I should be inclined to fancy he was a trifle jealous; and if he cared just a little more for Mollie, I might think he was jealous; but Dolly is away, and though he is fond of Mollie, and thinks her pretty, he does n't care for her in that way exactly, so there must be some other reason. He is not the sort of person to have likes or dislikes without reason."

In her own sage style she approved of Ralph Gowan just as she approved of Griffith. And then, as I have said, Mollie puzzled her. It was astonishing how the child altered, and how she began to bloom out, and adopt independent, womanly airs and graces. She took a new and important position in the household. From her post of observation the wise one found herself looking on with a smile sometimes, there was such a freshness in her style of enacting the rôle of beauty. She struck Phil's friends dumb now and then with her conscious power, and the unhappy Brown suffered himself to be led captive without a struggle.

"Her 'prentice han' she tried on Brown," Dolly had said, months before, in a wretched attempt at parody; and certainly the tortures of Brown were prolonged and varied. But it was her manner toward Chandos that puzzled Aimée. Perhaps she was a trifle proud of his evident admiration; at all events, she seemed far from averse to it, and the incomprehensible part of the affair was that sometimes she allowed him to rival even Ralph Gowan.

"And yet," commented Aimée, "she likes Ralph Gowan better. She never can help blushing and looking conscious when he comes or when he talks to her, and she is as cool as Dolly when she finds herself with Chandos. It is very odd."

It was not so easy to manage her as it used to be, Ralph Gowan discovered. She was growing capricious and fanciful, and ready to take offence. If they were left alone together, she would change her mood every two minutes. Sometimes she would submit to his old jesting, gallant speeches quite humbly and shyly for a while, and then she would flame out all at once in anger, half a woman's and half a child's. He was inclined to fancy now and then that she had never forgiven him for his first interference on the subject of Gerald Chandos, for at the early part of the acquaintance he did interfere, as he had promised Dolly he would.

"I am not glad to see that fellow here, Mollie," he had said, the first night he met him at the house.

She stood erect before him, with her white throat straight, and a spark in her eyes.

"What fellow?" she asked.

"Chandos," he answered, coolly and briefly.

"Oh!" she returned. "How is it that when one man dislikes another he always speaks of him as 'that fellow'? I know some one who always refers to you as 'that fellow.'"

"Do you?" dryly, as before. He knew very well whom she meant.

"I am glad to see 'that fellow' here," she went on. "He is a gentleman, and he is n't stupid. No one else comes here who is so amusing. I am tired of Brown & Company."

"Ah!" he answered, biting his lip. He felt the rebuff, if it was only Mollie who gave it. "Very well then, if you are tired of Brown & Company, and would prefer to enter into partnership with Chandos, it is none of my business, I suppose. I will give you one warning, however, because I promised your sister to take care of you." Her skin flamed scarlet at that. "That fellow is not a gentleman exactly, and he is a very dangerous acquaintance for any woman to make."

"He is a friend of yours," she interrupted.

"That is a natural mistake on your part," he replied,--"natural, but still a mistake. He is not a friend of mine. As I before observed, he is not exactly a gentleman--not to put too fine a point upon it--from a moral point of view. We won't discuss the matter further."

They had parted bad friends that night. Mollie was restive under his cool decisiveness for various reasons; he was irritated because he felt he had failed, and had lost ground instead of gaining it. So sometimes since, he had fancied that she had not wholly forgiven him, and yet there were times when she was so softly submissive that he felt himself in some slight danger of being as much touched and as fairly bewitched as he was when Dolly turned her attention to him. Still she was frequently far from amiable, and upon more than one occasion he found her not precisely as polite as she might have been.

"You are not as amiable, Mollie," he said to her once, "as you used to be. We were very good friends in the old days. I suppose you are outgrowing me. I should be afraid to offer you a bunch of camellias now as a token of my affection."

He smiled down at her indolently as he said it, and before he had finished he began to feel uncomfortable. Her eyelids drooped and her head drooped, and she looked sweetly troubled.

"I know I am not as good as I used to be," she admitted. "I know it without being told. Sometimes," very suddenly, "I think I must be growing awfully wicked."

"Well," he commented, "at least one must admit that is a promising state of mind, and augurs well for future repentance."

She shook her head.

"No, it doesn't," she answered him, "and that is the bad side of it. I am getting worse every day of my life."

"Is it safe," he suggested, cynically,--"is it safe for an innocent individual to cultivate your acquaintance? Would it not be a good plan to isolate yourself from society until you feel that the guileless ones may approach you without fear of contamination? You alarm me."

She lifted up her head, her eyes flashing.

"You are safe," she said; "so it is rather premature to cry 'wolf' so soon."

"It is very plain that you are outgrowing me," he returned. "Dolly herself could not have made a more scathing remark."

But, fond as he was of tormenting her, he did not want to try her

too far, and so he endeavored to make friends. But his efforts at reconciliation were not a success. She was not to be coaxed into her sweet mood again; indeed she almost led him to fear that he had wounded her irreparably by his jests. And yet, when he at last consulted his watch, and went to the side-table for his hat and gloves, he turned round to find her large eyes following him in a wistful sort of way.

"Are you going?" she asked him at length, a half-reluctant appeal in her voice.

"I am due at Brabazon Lodge now," he answered.

She said no more after that, but relapsed into silence, and let him go without making an effort to detain him, receiving his adieus in her most indifferent style.

But she was cross and low-spirited when he was gone, and Aimée, coming into the room with her work, found her somewhat hard to deal with, and indeed was moved to tell her so.

"You are a most inexplicable girl, Mollie," she said. "What crotchet is troubling you now?"

"No crotchet at all," she answered, and then all at once she got up and stood before the mantel-glass, looking at herself fixedly. "Aimée," she said, "if you were a man, would you admire me?"

Aimée gave her a glance, and then answered her with sharp frankness.

"Yes, I should," she said.

She remained standing for a few minutes, taking a survey of herself, front view, side view, and even craning her pretty throat to get a glimpse of her back; and then a pettish sigh burst from her, and she sat down again at her sister's feet, clasping her hands about her knees in a most unorthodox position.

"I should like to have a great deal of money," she said after a while, and she frowned as she said it.

"That is a startling observation," commented Aimée, "and shows great singularity of taste."

Mollie frowned again, and shrugged one shoulder, but otherwise gave the remark small notice.

"I should like," she proceeded, "to have a carriage, and to live in a grand house, and go to places. I should like to marry somebody rich." And having blurted out this last confession, she looked half ashamed of herself.

"Mollie," said Aimée, solemnly dropping her hands and her work upon her lap, "I am beginning to feel as Dolly does; I am beginning to be afraid

you are going to get yourself into serious trouble."

Then this overgrown baby of theirs, who had so suddenly astonished them all by dropping her babyhood and asserting herself a woman, said something so startling that the wise one fairly lost her breath.

"If I cannot get what I want," she said, deliberately, "I will take what I can get."

"You are going out of your mind," ejaculated Aimée.

"It does n't matter if I am," cried the romantic little goose, positively crushing the oracle by breaking down all at once, and flinging herself upon the hearthrug in a burst of tears,--"it does n't matter if I am. Who cares for me?"