CHAPTER XI. IN WHICH COMES A WIND WHICH BLOWS NOBODY GOOD.

THEEE weeks waited the wise one, keeping her eyes on the alert and her small brain busy, but preserving an owl-like silence upon the subject revolving in her mind. But at the end of that time she marched into the parlor one day, attired for a walk, and astonished them all by gravely announcing her intention of going to see Dolly.

"What are you going for?" said Mrs. Phil.

"Rather sudden, is n't it?" commented Mollie.

"I 'm going on business," returned Aimée, and she buttoned her gloves and took her departure, without enlightening them further.

Arriving at Brabazon Lodge, she found Miss Mac-Dowlas out and Dolly sitting alone in the parlor, with a letter from Griffith in her hand and tears in her eyes.

Her visitor walked to the hearth, her face wrinkling portentously, and kissed her with an air of affectionate severity.

"I don't know," she began, comprehending matters at a glance, "I am sure I don't know what I am to do with you all. You are in trouble now."

"Take off your things," said Dolly, with a helpless little sob,

"and--and then I will tell you all about it. You must stay and have tea with me. Miss MacDowlas is away, and I--am all alone, and--and, O Aimée!"

The hat and jacket were laid aside in two minutes, and Aimée came back to her and knelt down.

"Is there anything in your letter you do not want me to see?" she asked.

"No," answered Dolly, in despair, and tossed it into her lap.

It was no new story, but this time the Fates seemed to have conspired against her more maliciously than usual. A few days before Grif had found himself terribly dashed in spirit, and under the influence of impulse had written to her. Two or three times in one day he had heard accidental comments upon Gowan's attentions to her, and on his return to his lodgings at night he had appealed to her in a passionate epistle.

He was not going to doubt her again, he said, and he was struggling to face the matter coolly, but he wanted to see her. It would be worse than useless to call upon her at the Lodge, and have an interview under the disapproving eyes of Miss MacDowlas, and so he had thought they might meet again by appointment, as they had done before by chance. And Dolly had acquiesced at once. But Fortune was against her. Just as she had been ready to leave the house, Ralph Gowan had made his appearance, and Miss MacDowlas had called her down-stairs to entertain him.

"I would not have cared about telling," cried Dolly, in tears, "but I could not tell her, and so I had to stay, and--actually--sing--Aimée. Yes, sing detestable love-sick songs, while my own darling, whom I was dying to go to, was waiting outside in the cold. And that was not the worst, either. He was just outside in the road, and when the servants lighted the gas he saw me through the window. And I was at the piano"--in a burst--"and Ralph Gowan was standing by me. And so he went home and wrote that," signifying with a gesture the letter Aimée held. "And everything is wrong again."

It was very plain that everything was wrong again. The epistle in question was an impetuous, impassioned effusion enough. He was furious against Gowan, and bitter against everybody else. She had cheated and slighted and trifled with him when he most needed her love and pity; but he would not blame her, he could only blame himself for being such an insane, presumptuous fool as to fancy that anything he had to offer could be worthy of any woman.

What had he to offer, etc., for half a dozen almost illegible pages, dashed and crossed, and all on fire with his bitterness and pain.

Having taken it from Aimée, and read it for the twentieth time, Dolly fairly wrung her hands over it.

"If we were only just together!" she cried. "If we only just had the

tiniest, shabbiest house in the world, and could be married and help each other! He does n't mean to be unjust or unkind, you know, Aimée; he would be more wretched than I am if he knew how unhappy he has made me."

"Ah!" sighed Aimée. "He should think of that before he begins."

Then she regained possession of the letter, and smoothed out its creases on her knee, finishing by folding it carefully and returning it to its envelope, looking very grave all the time.

"Will you lend me this?" she said at last, holding the epistle up.

"What are you going to do with it?" asked Dolly, disconsolately.

"I am going to ask Griffith to read it again. I shall be sure to see him to-morrow night."

"Very well," answered Dolly; "but don't be too hard upon him, Aimée. He has a great deal to bear."

"I know that," said Aimée. "And sometimes he bears it very well; but just now he needs a little advice."

Troubled as she was, Dolly laughed at the staid expression on her small, discreet face; but even as she laughed she caught the child in her arms

and kissed her.

"What should we do without you!" she exclaimed. "We need some one to keep us all straight, we Vagabonds; but it seems queer that such a small wiseacre as you should be our controlling power."

The mere sight of the small wiseacre had a comforting effect upon her. Her spirits began to rise, and she so far recovered herself as to be able to look matters in the face more cheerfully. There was so much to talk about, and so many questions to ask, that it would have been impossible to remain dejected and uninterested. It was not until after tea, however, that Aimée brought her "business" upon the carpet. She had thought it best not to introduce the subject during the earlier part of the evening; but when the tea-tray was removed, and they found themselves alone again, she settled down, and applied herself at once to the work before her.

"I have not told you yet what I came here for this afternoon," she said.

"You don't mean to intimate that you did not come to see me!" said Dolly.

"I came to see you, of course," decidedly; "but I came to see you for a purpose. I came to talk to you about Mollie."

Dolly almost turned pale.

"Mollie!" she exclaimed. "What is the trouble about Mollie?"

"Something that puzzles me," was the answer. "Dolly, do you know anything about Gerald Chandos?"

"What!" said Dolly. "It is Gerald Chandos, is it? He is not a fit companion for her, I know that much."

And then she repeated, word for word, the conversation she had had with Ralph Gowan.

Having listened to the end, Aimée shook her head.

"I like Mr. Gowan well enough," she said, "but he has been the cause of a great deal of trouble among us, without meaning to be, and I am afraid it is not at an end yet."

They were both silent for a few moments after this, and then Dolly, looking up, spoke with a touch of reluctance.

"I dare say you can answer me a question I should like to ask you?" she said.

"If it is about Mollie, I think I can," Aimée returned.

"You have been with her so long," Polly went on, two tiny lines showing themselves upon her forehead this time, "and you are so quick at seeing things, that you must know what there is to know. And yet it hardly seems fair to ask. Ralph Gowan goes to Bloomsbury Place often, does he not?"

"He goes very often, and he seems to care more for Mollie than for any of the rest of us."

"Aimée," Dolly said next, "does--this is my question--does Mollie care for him?"

"Yes, she does," answered Aimée. "She cares for him so much that she is making herself miserable about him."

"Oh, dear!" cried Dolly. "What--"

Aimée interrupted her.

"And that is not the worst. The fact is, Dolly, I don't know what to make of her. If it was any one but Mollie, or if Mollie was a bit less innocent and impetuous, I should not be so much afraid; but sometimes she is angry with herself, and sometimes she is angry with him, and sometimes she is both, and then I should not be surprised at her doing anything innocent and frantic. Poor child! It is my impression she has about half made up her mind to the desperate resolve of making a grand

marriage. She said as much the other night, and I think that is why she encourages Mr. Chandos."

"Oh, dear," cried Dolly, again. "And does she think he wants to marry her?"

"She knows he makes violent love to her, and she is not worldly-wise enough to know that Lord Burleighs are out of date."

"Out of date!" said Dolly; "I doubt if they ever were in date. Men like Mr. Gerald Chandos would hesitate at marrying Venus from Bloomsbury Place."

"If it was Ralph Gowan," suggested Aimée.

"But Ralph Gowan is n't like Chandos," Dolly returned, astutely. "He is worth ten thousand of him. I wish he would fall in love with Mollie and marry her. Poor Mollie! Poor, pretty, headlong little goose! What are we to do with her?"

"Mr. Gowan is very fond of her, in a way," said Aimée. "If he did not care a little for you--"

"I wish he did not!" sighed Dolly. "But it serves me right," with candor. "He would never have thought of me again if I--well, if I had n't found things so dreadfully dull at that Bilberry clan gathering."

"'If,'" moralized Aimée, significantly. "'If' is n't a wise word, and it often gets you into trouble, Dolly. 'If you hadn't, it would have been better for Grif, as well; but what cannot be cured must be endured."

Their long talk ended, however, in Dolly's great encouragement. It was agreed that the family oracle was to bring Griffith to his senses by means of some slight sisterly reproof, and that she was to take Mollie in hand discreetly at once and persuade her to enter the confessional.

"She has altered a great deal, and has grown much older and more self-willed lately," said Aimée; "but if I am very straightforward and-take her by surprise, I scarcely think she will be able to conceal much from me, and, at least, I shall be able to show her that her fancies are romantic and unpractical."

She did not waste any time before applying herself to her work, when she went home. Instead of going to Bloomsbury Place at once, she stopped at Griffith's lodgings on her way, and rather scandalized his landlady by requesting to be shown into his parlor. Only the grave simplicity of the small, slight figure in its gray cloak, and the steadfast seriousness in the pretty face reconciled the worthy matron to the idea of admitting her without investigation. But Aimée bore her scrutiny very calmly. The whole family of them had taken tea in the little sitting-room with Griffith, upon one or two occasions, so she was not at all at a loss, although she did not find herself recognized.

"I am one of Mr. Crewe's sisters," she said; and that, of course, was quite enough. Mrs. Cripps knew Mr. Crewe as well as she knew Grif himself, so she stepped back into the narrow passage at once, and even opened the parlor door, and announced the visitor in a way that made poor Grif s heart beat.

"One of Mr. Crewe's sisters," she said.

He had been sitting glowering over the fire, with his head on his hands and his elbows on his knees, and when he started up he looked quite haggard and dishevelled. Was it--could it be Dolly? He knew it could not be, but he turned pale at the thought. It would have been such rapture, in his present frame of mind, to have poured out his misery and distrust, and then to have clasped her to his heart before she had time to explain. He was just in that wretched, passionate, relenting, remorseful stage.

But it was only Aimée, in her gray cloak; and as the door closed behind her, that small person advanced toward him, crumpling her white forehead and looking quite disturbed at the mere sight of him. She held up a reproachful finger at him warningly.

"I knew it would be just this way," she said. "And you are paler and more miserable than ever. If you and Dolly would just be more practical and reason more for each other, instead of falling headlong into

quarrels and making everything up headlong every ten minutes, how much better it would be for you! If I was not so fond of you both, you would be the greatest trials I have."

He was so glad to see the thoughtful, womanly little creature, that he could have caught her up in his arms, gray cloak and all, and have kissed her only a tithe less impetuously than he would have kissed Dolly. He was one of the most faithful worshippers at her shrine, and her pretty wisdom and unselfishness had won her many. He drew the easiest chair up to the fire for her, and made her sit down and warm her feet on the fender, while she talked to him, and he listened to her every word, as he always did.

"I have been to see Dolly," she said, "and I found her crying,--all by herself and crying." And she paused to note the effect of her words.

His heart gave a great thump. It always did give a hard thump when he thought of Dolly as she looked when she cried,--a soft, limp little bundle of pathetic prettiness, covering her dear little face in her hands, shedding such piteous, impassioned tears, and refusing to be kissed or comforted. Dolly sobbing on his shoulder was so different from the coquettish, shrewd, mock-worldly Dolly other people saw.

Aimée put her hand into her dress-pocket under the gray cloak and produced her letter,--took it out of its envelope, laid it on her knee, and smoothed out its creases again.

"She was crying over this letter," she proceeded,--"your letter; the one you wrote to her when I think you cannot have been quite calm enough to write anything. I think you cannot have read it over before sending it away. It is always best to read a letter twice before posting it. So I have brought it to you to read again, and there it is," giving it to him.

"He burst forth with the story of his wrongs, of course, then. He could not keep it in any longer. Things had gone wrong with him in every way before this had happened, he said, and he had longed so for just one hour in which Dolly could comfort him and try to help him to pluck up spirits again, and she had written to him a tender little letter, and promised to give him that hour, and he had been so full of impatience and love, and he had gone to the very gates and waited like a beggar outside, lest he should miss her by any chance, and the end of his waiting had been that he had caught a glimpse of the bright, warm room, and the piano, and Dolly with Gowan bending over her as if she had no other lover in the world. He told it all in a burst, clenching his hand and scarcely stopping for breath; but when he ended he dashed the letter down, pushed his chair round, and dropped his head on his folded arms on the table, with a wild, tearing sob.

"It is no fault of hers," he cried, "and it was only the first sting that made me reproach her. I shall never do it again. She is only in the right, and that fellow is in the right when he tells himself that he

can take better care of her and make her happier than I can. I will be a coward no longer,--not an hour longer. I will give her up to-night. She will learn to love him--he is a gentleman at least--if I were in his place I should never fear that she would not learn in time, and forget--and forget the poor, selfish beggar who would have died for her, and yet was not man enough to control the jealous rage that tortured her. I 'll give her up. I'll give it all up--but, oh! my God! Dolly, the--the little house, and--and the dreams I have had about it!"

Aimée was almost in despair. This was not one of his ordinary moods; this was the culminating point,--the culmination of all his old sufferings and pangs. He had been working slowly toward this through all the old unhappiness and self-reproach. The constant droppings of the bygone years had worn away the stone at last, and he could not bear much more. Aimée was frightened now. Her habit of forethought showed her all this in a very few seconds. His nervous, highly strung, impassioned temperament had broken down at last. Another blow would be too much for him. If she could not manage to set him right now and calm him, and if things went wrong again, she was secretly conscious of feeling that the consequences could not be foreseen. There was nothing wild and rash and wretched he might not do.

She got up and went to him, and leaned upon the table, clasping her cool, firm little hand upon his hot, desperate one. A woman of fifty could not have had the power over him that this slight, inexperienced little creature had. Her childish face caught color and life and

strength in her determination to do her best for these two whom she loved so well. Her small-boned, fragile figure deceived people into undervaluing her reserve forces; but there was mature feeling and purpose enough in her to have put many a woman three times her age to shame. The light, cool touch of her' hand soothed and controlled Griffith from the first, and when she put forth all her powers of reasoning, and set his trouble before him in a more practical and less headlong way, not a word was lost upon him. She pictured Dolly to him just as she had found her holding his letter in her hand, and she pictured her too as she had really been the night he watched her through the window,--not staying because she cared for Gowan, but because circumstances had forced her to remain when she was longing in her own impetuous pretty way to fly to him, and give him the comfort he needed. And she gave Dolly's story in Dolly's own words, with the little sobs between, and the usual plentiful sprinkling of sweet, foolish, loving epithets, and--with innocent artfulness--made her seem so charming and affectionate, a little centre-figure in the picture she drew, that no man with a heart in his breast could have resisted her, and by the time Aimée had finished, Grif was so far moved that it seemed a sheer impossibility to speak again of relinquishing his claims.

But he could not regain his spirits sufficiently to feel able to say very much. He quieted down, but he was still down at heart and crushed in feeling, and could do little else but listen in a hopeless sort of way.

"I will tell you what you shall do," Aimée said at last. "You shall see Dolly yourself,--not on the street, but just as you used to see her when she was at home. She shall come home some afternoon. I know Miss MacDowlas will let her,--and you shall sit in the parlor together, Grif, and make everything straight, and begin afresh."

He could not help being roused somewhat by such a prospect. The cloud was lifted for one instant, even if it fell upon him again the next.

"I shall have to wait a week," he said. "Old Flynn has asked me to go to Dartmouth, to attend to some business for him, and I leave here to-morrow morning."

"Very well!" she answered. "If we must wait a week, we must; but you can write to Dolly in the interval, and settle upon the day, and then she can speak to Miss MacDowlas."

He agreed to the plan at once, and promised to write to Dolly that very night. So the young peacemaker's mind was set at rest upon this subject, at least, and after giving him a trifle more advice, and favoring him with a few more sage axioms, she prepared to take her departure.

"You may put on your hat and take me to the door; but you had better not come in if you are going to finish your letter before the post closes," she said; "but the short walk will do you good, and the night-air will cool you."

She bade him good-night at the gate when they reached Bloomsbury Place, and she entered the house with her thoughts turning to Mollie. Mollie had been out, too, it seemed. When she went up-stairs to their bedroom, she found her there, standing before the dressing-table, still with her hat on, and looking in evident preoccupation at something she held in her hand. Hearing Aimée, she started and turned round, dropping her hand at her side, but not in time to hide a suspicious glitter which caught her sister's eye. Here was a worse state of affairs than ever. She had something to hide, and she had made up her mind to hide it. She stood up as Aimée approached, looking excited and guilty, but still half-defiant, her lovely head tossed back a little and an obstinate curve on her red lips. But the oracle was not to be daunted. She confronted her with quite a stern little air.

"Mollie," she began at once, without the least hesitation,--"Mollie, you have just this minute hidden something from me, and I should n't have thought you could do it."

Mollie put her closed hand behind her.

"If I am hiding something," she answered, "I am not hiding it without reason."

"No," returned Dame Prudence, severely, "you are not. You have a very good reason, I am afraid. You are ashamed of yourself, and you know you

are doing wrong. You have got a secret, which you are keeping from me, Mollie," bridling a little in the prettiest way. "I didn't think you would keep a secret from me."

Mollie, very naturally, was overpowered. She looked a trifle ashamed of herself, and the tears came into her eyes. She drew her hand from behind her back, and held it out with a half-pettish, half-timid gesture.

"There!" she said; "if you must see it."

And there, on her pink palm, lay a shining opal ring.

"And," said Aimée, looking at it without offering to touch it, and then looking at her,--"and Mr. Gerald Chandos gave it to you?"

"Yes, Mr. Gerald Chandos did," trying to brave it out, but still appearing the reverse of comfortable. "And you think it proper," proceeded her inquisitor, "to accept such presents from a gentleman who cares nothing for you?"

Care nothing for her! Mollie drew herself upright, with the air of a Zenobia. She had had too few real love affairs not to take arms at once at such an imputation cast upon her prowess.

"He cares enough for me to want me to marry him," she said, and then stopped and looked as if she could have bitten her tongue off for

betraying her.

Aimée sat down in the nearest chair and stared at her, as if she doubted the evidence of her senses.

"To do what?" she demanded.

There was no use in trying to conceal the truth any longer. Mollie saw that much; and besides this, her feelings were becoming too strong for her from various causes. The afternoon had been an exciting one to her, too. So, all at once, so suddenly that Aimée was altogether unprepared for the outbreak, she gave way. The ring fell unheeded on to the carpet, slipped from her hand and rolled away, and the next instant she went down upon her knees, hiding her face on her arms on Aimée's lap, and began to cry hysterically.

"It--it is to be quite a secret," she sobbed. "I would not tell anybody but you, and I dare not tell you quite all, but he has asked me to marry him, Aimée, and I have--I have said yes." And then she cried more than ever, and caught Aimée's hand, and clung to it with a desperate, childish grasp, as if she was frightened.

It was very evident that she was frightened, too. All the newly assumed womanliness was gone. It was the handsome, inexperienced, ignorant child Mollie she had known all her life who was clinging to her, Aimée felt,--the pretty, simple, thoughtless Mollie they had all admired and

laughed at, and teased and been fond of. She seemed to have become a child again all at once, and she was in trouble and desperate, it was plain.

"But the very idea!" exclaimed Aimée, inwardly; "the bare idea of her having the courage to engage herself to him!"

"I never heard such a thing in my life," she said, aloud. "Oh, Mollie! Mollie! what induced you to give him such a mad answer? You don't care for him."

"He--he would not take any other answer, and he is as nice as any one else," shamefacedly. "He is nicer than Brown and the others, and--I do like him--a little," but a tiny shudder crept over her, and she held her listener's hand more tightly.

"As nice as any one else!" echoed Aimée, indignantly. "Nicer than Brown! You ought to be in leading-strings!" with pathetic hopelessness. "That was n't your only reason, Mollie."

The hat with the short crimson feather had been unceremoniously pushed off, and hung by its elastic upon Mollie's neck; the pretty curly hair was all crushed into a heap, and the flushed, tear-wet face was hidden in the folds of Aimée's dress. There was a charming, foolish, fanciful side to Mollie's desperation, as there was to all her moods.

"That was not your only reason," repeated Aimée.

One impetuous, unhappy little sob, and the poor simple child confessed against her will.

"Nobody--nobody else cared for me!" she cried.

"Nobody?" said Aimée; and then, making up her mind to go to the point at once, she said, "Does 'nobody' mean that Ralph Gowan did not, Mollie?"

The clinging hand was snatched away, and the child quite writhed.

"I hate Ralph Gowan!" she cried. "I detest him! I wish--I wish--I wish I had never seen him! Why could n't he stay away among his own people? Nobody wanted him. Dolly doesn't care for him, and Grif hates him. Why could n't he stay where he was?"

There was no need to doubt after this, of course. Her love for Ralph Gowan had rendered her restless and despairing, and so she had worked out this innocent romance, intending to defend herself against him. The heroines of her favorite novels married for money when they could not marry for love, and why should not she? Remember, she was only seventeen, and had been brought up in Vagabondia among people who did not often regard consequences. Mr. Gerald Chandos was rich, made violent love to her, and was ready to promise anything, it appeared,--not that she demanded much; the Lord Burleighs of her experience invariably

showered jewels and equipages and fine raiment upon their brides without being asked. She would have thought it positive bliss to be tied to Ralph Gowan for six or seven years without any earthly prospect of ever being married; to have belonged to him as Dolly belonged to Grif, to sit in the parlor and listen to him while he made love to her as Grif made love to Dolly, would have been quite enough steady-going rapture for her; but since that was out of the question, Mr. Gerald Chandos and diamonds and a carriage would have to fill up the blank.

But, of course, she did not say this to Aimée. In fact, after her first burst of excitement subsided, Aimée could not gain much from her. She cried a little more, and then seemed vexed with herself, and tried to cool down, and at last so far succeeded that she sat up and pushed her tangled hair from her wet, hot face, and began to search for the ring.

"It has got a diamond in the centre," she said, trying to speak indifferently. "I don't believe you looked at it. The opals are splendid, too."

"Are you going to wear it?" asked Aimée.

She colored up to her forehead. "No, I am not," she answered. "I should have worn it before if I had intended to let people see it. I told you it was a secret. I have had this ring three or four days."

"Why is it a secret?" demanded Dame Prudence. "I don't believe in

secrets,--particularly in secret engagements. Is n't Phil to know?"

She turned away to put the ring into its case.

"Not yet," she replied, pettishly. "Time enough when it can't be helped. It is a secret, I tell you, and I don't care about everybody's talking it over."

And she would say no more.