

CHAPTER XII. IN WHICH THERE IS AN EXPLOSION.

"It is my impression," said Dolly, "that something is going to happen."

She was not in the best of spirits. She could not have explained why. Griffith was safe, at least, though he had been detained a week longer than he had anticipated, and consequently their meeting would have to be deferred; but though this had been a disappointment, Dolly was used to such disappointments, and besides the most formidable part of the waiting was over, for it was settled now that he would be home in two days. It was Tuesday now, and on Thursday he was to return, and she was going to Bloomsbury Place in the afternoon, and he was to join the family tea as he had used to do in the old times. But still she did not feel quite easy. She was restless and uncomfortable in spite of herself, and was conscious of being troubled by a vague presentiment of evil.

"It is not like me to be blue," she said to herself; "but I am blue to-day. I wonder what is going on at home."

Then, as was quite natural, her thoughts wandered to Mollie, and she began to ponder upon what Aimée had told her. How were matters progressing, and what was going to be the end of it all? The child's danger was plainer to her than it was to Aimée; and, fond as she was of Mollie, she had determined to improve the occasion of her visit home, by taking the fair delinquent aside and administering a sound lecture to her. She would tell her the truth, at least, and try to open her

innocent eyes to the fact that Mr. Gerald Chandos was not a man of the King Cophetua stamp, and that there was neither romance nor poetry in allowing such a man to amuse himself at her expense.

Poor Mollie! It would be a humiliating view to take of a first conquest, but it would be the best thing for her in the end. Dolly sighed over the mere prospect of the task before her. She remembered what her first conquest had been, and how implicitly she had believed in her new power, and how trustingly she had swallowed every sugared nothing, and how she had revelled in the field of possible romance which had seemed spread before her, until she had awakened one fine day to find the first flush of her triumph fading, and her adorer losing his attractions and becoming rather tame. That had been long ago, even before Griffith's time, but she had not forgotten the experience, and she knew it would have been a severe shock to her innocent self-love and self-gratulation, if any one had hinted to her that there was a doubt of her captive's honesty. She was roused from her reverie by a message from Miss MacDowlas. It was only a commonplace sort of message. There were some orders to be left at the poulterer's and fruiterer's, and some bills to be paid in town, and, these affairs being her business, Miss MacDowlas had good-naturedly ordered the carriage for her, as she had a long round to make.

Dolly got up and laid her work aside. She was not sorry for the opportunity of going out, so she ran up-stairs with some alacrity to put on her hat, and, having dressed, went to Miss MacDowlas for more

particular instructions.

"You are looking rather pale and the drive will do you good," said that lady. "Call at Pullet's and pay his bill, and order the things on his list first. By the way, it was when I drove round to give orders to Pullet the other day, that I saw your pretty sister with Gerald Chandos. She is too pretty, far too pretty, and far too young and inexperienced, to be giving private interviews to such people as Gerald Chandos," sharply.

"Private!" repeated Dolly, with some indignation. "I think that is a mistake. Mr. Gerald Chandos has no need to make his interview private. The doors are open to him at Bloomsbury Place so long as he behaves himself."

"The more is the pity," answered Miss MacDowlas; "but that this was a private interview I am certain. My pretty Miss Innocence came up the street slowly with her handsome baby-face on fire, and two minutes later Gerald Chandos followed her in a wondrous hurry, and joined her and carried her off, looking very guilty and charming, and a trifle reluctant, I must admit."

Dolly's cheeks flushed, and her heart began to beat hotly. If this was the case it was simply disgraceful, and Miss Mollie was allowing herself to be led too far.

"I am sorry to hear this," she said to Miss Mac-Dowlas, "but I am indebted to you for telling me. I will attend to it when I go home on Thursday, and," with a flash of fire, "if it is needful I will attend to Mr. Gerald Chandos himself."

She entered the carriage, feeling hot with anger and distress. She had not expected such a blow, even though she had told herself that she was prepared to hear of any romantic imprudence. And then in the midst of her anger she began to pity Mollie, as it seemed natural to pity her always when she was indiscreet. Who had ever taught her to be discreet, poor child? Had she herself? No, she had not. She had been fond of her and proud of her beauty, but she had laughed at her unsophisticated, thoughtless way with the rest, and somehow they had all looked upon her as they looked upon Tod,--as rather a good joke. Dolly quite hated herself as she remembered how she had related her own little escapades for the edification of the family circle, and how Mollie had enjoyed them more than any one else. She had never overstepped the actual bounds of propriety herself, but she had been coquettish and fond of admiration, and had delighted to hold her own against the world.

"I was n't a good example to her!" she cried, remorsefully. "She ought to have had a good, wise mother. I wish she had. I wish I had one myself."

And she burst into tears, and leaned her head against the cushioned carriage, feeling quite overcome by her self-reproach and consciousness.

Their mother had died when Mollie was born, and they had been left to fight their own battles ever since.

She was obliged to control herself, however. It would never do to present herself to Pullet in tears. So she sat up and dried her eyes with her handkerchief, and turned to the carriage window to let the fresh air blow upon her face. But she had not been looking out two minutes when her attention was attracted by something down the street,--a bit of color,--a little tuft of scarlet feathers in a hat, and then her eyes, wandering lower, recognized a well-remembered jacket and a well-remembered dress, and then the next instant she uttered an exclamation in spite of herself.

"It is Mollie!" she cried. "It is Mollie, and here is Gerald Chandos!"

For at the door of a bookseller's she was just near-ing stood the gentleman in question, holding a periodical in his hand, and evidently awaiting an arrival.

He caught sight of Mollie almost as soon as she did herself, and the instant he saw her he hurried toward her, and by the time Miss MacDowlas's carriage rolled slowly up to them, in its usual stately fashion, he was holding the small disreputable glove Mollie had just taken out of the convenient jacket pocket, and the fair culprit herself was listening to his eager greeting with the old, bright, uncontrollable blushes, and the old dangerous trick of drooping brown-fringed eyelids,

and half-shy, half-wilful air. Dolly instinctively called to her almost aloud. She could not resist the impulse.

"Mollie!" she said. "Mollie!"

But, of course, Mollie did not hear her, and the carriage passed her, and Dolly sank back into her corner catching her breath.

"It was not a mistake," she said; "it was true. It is worse than I thought. Miss MacDowlas was right. It was no accident which brought them both here. He is a cowardly scoundrel and is playing upon her ignorance. If I had believed in him before, I should know that he is not to be trusted now. She is walking on the edge of a precipice, and she thinks she is safe and never dreams of its existence. Oh, Mollie! Mollie! the world means nothing to you yet, and it is we who have to show you all the thorns!"

She finished her errands and drove homeward as quickly as possible. She could think of nothing but Mollie, and by the time she reached Barbrazon Lodge her head ached with the unpleasant excitement. The servant who opened the door met her with a piece of information. Mr. Gowan had called to see her on some special business, and was awaiting her arrival in the drawing-room. He had been there almost an hour.

She did not go to her room at all, but ran up-stairs to the drawing-room quickly, feeling still more anxious. It was just possible that somebody

was ill, and Ralph Gowan had come to break the news to her because no one else had been at liberty. With this idea uppermost, she opened the door and advanced toward him, looking pale and troubled.

He met her half-way, and took her outstretched hand, looking troubled himself.

"You are not very well," he said at once. "I am sorry to see that." And his voice told her immediately that he had not come with good news.

She smiled faintly, but when she sat down she put her hand to her forehead.

"Am I pale, then?" she answered. "I suppose I must be. It is nothing but a trifle of headache, and," with a hesitant laugh, "that I half fancied you had come to tell me something unpleasant."

He was silent for a moment,--so silent that she looked up at him with a startled face.

"It is something unpleasant!" she exclaimed. "You have come with ill news, and you are afraid to begin."

"Not so bad as that,--not afraid, but rather reluctant," he answered.

"It is not pleasant news; and but that I felt it would be wisest to warn you at once, I would rather any one else had brought it. I have

stumbled upon a disagreeable report."

"Report!" Dolly echoed, and her thoughts flew to Mollie again.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "It is only a disagreeable one because the subject of it has managed to connect himself with some one whose happiness we value."

Dolly rose from her chair and stood up, turning even paler than before.

"This some one whose happiness we value is Mollie," she said. "And the report you have heard is about Mr. Gerald Chandos. Am I not right?"

"Yes," he returned, "you are right. The hero of the report is Gerald Chandos."

"What has he been doing?" she asked, 'sharply. "Don't hesitate, please. I want to know."

He was evidently both distressed and perplexed. He took two or three hurried steps across the room, as if to give himself a little extra time to settle his words into the best form. But Dolly could not wait.

"Mr. Gowan," she said, "what has that man been doing?"

He turned round and answered her.

"He has been passing himself off to your brother as an unmarried man," he said.

She slipped back into her chair again, and wrung her hands passionately.

"And he is married?" she demanded. "Oh! how was it you did not know this?"

"Not one in ten of Mr. Gerald Chandos's friends know it," he returned.

"And I am only a chance acquaintance. It is not an agreeable story to tell, if what report says is true. Remember, it is only report as yet, and I will not vouch for it. It is said that the marriage was the end of a boyish folly, and that the happy couple separated by mutual consent six months after its consummation. The woman went to California, and Chandos has not seen her since, though he hears of her whereabouts occasionally."

"And you are not quite sure yet that the report is true?" said Dolly.

"Not quite sure," he replied; "but I wish I had greater reason to doubt it."

Recurring mentally to the little scene she had witnessed on the street only an hour or so previously, and remembering Mollie's blushes and drooping eyes, and the look they had won from Mr. Gerald Chandos as he

took her half-reluctant hand in his, Dolly bit her lips hard, feeling her blood grow hot within her. She waited just a minute to cool herself, and then spoke.

"Mr. Gowan," she said, "in the first place I ought to thank you."

"Nay," he said, "I promised to help you to care for Mollie."

"I ought to thank you," she repeated. "And I do. But in the second place I am going to ask you to do something for me which may be disagreeable."

"You may be sure," he replied, "that I shall not hesitate."

"Yes," she said, "I think I am sure of that, or I should not ask you. I am so eager about the matter, that I could not bear to waste the time. I want you to help me. On Thursday afternoon I am going home. Can you trace this report to its source before then, and let me know whether it is a true or a false one?"

"I can try."

She clasped both her gloved hands together on the small table before her, and lifted to his such a determined young face and such steadfast eyes, that he was quite impressed. She would rise in arms against the world for poor, unwise Mollie, it was plain. It was not so safe a matter to trifle in Vagabondia, it would seem,--that Gerald Chandos would find

to his cost.

"If you bring word to me that what you have heard is a truth," she said, "I can go to Mollie with my weapon in my hand, and I can end all at one blow. However wilful and incredulous she may have been heretofore, she will not attempt to resist me when I tell her that. It is a humiliating thing to think he has insulted her by keeping his secret so far; but we meet with such covert stings now and then in Vagabondia, and perhaps it will prove a blessing in disguise. If we had used our authority to make her dismiss him without having a decided reason to give her, she might only have resented our intervention as being nothing but prejudice. As it is, she will be frightened and angry."

So it was agreed upon that he should take in hand the task of sifting the affair to the bottom. His time was his own, and chance had thrown him among men who would be likely to know the truth. As soon as he had gained the necessary information, Dolly would hear from him, or he would call upon her and give her all particulars.

"You have a whole day before you,--nearly two whole days, I may say, for I shall not be likely to leave here until five or six o'clock on Thursday," Dolly said, when their rather lengthened interview terminated.

"I will make the most of my time," he replied.

Dolly stood at the window and watched him go down the walk to the gates.

"This is the something which was going to happen," she commented.

"Having set matters straight with Grif, I suppose it is necessary, for the maintenance of my self-control, that I should have a difficulty about Mollie; but I think I could have retained my equilibrium without it."

The two days passed quietly enough up to Thursday afternoon. Whatever Ralph Gowan had discovered, he was keeping to himself for the present. He had not written, and he had not called. Naturally, Dolly was impatient. She began to be very impatient indeed, as the afternoon waned, and it became dusk. Worse still, her old restlessness came upon her. She could not make up her mind to leave Brabazon Lodge until she had either seen or heard from Gowan, and she was afraid that if she lingered late Griffith would arrive before her, and would be troubled by her non-appearance. Since the night they had met in the street she had not seen him, and she had much to say to him. She had looked forward anxiously to this evening, and the few quiet hours they were to spend together in the dear old disreputable parlor at Blooms-bury Place. They had spent so many blissful evenings in that parlor, that the very thought of it made her heart beat happily. Nobody would be there to interfere with them. The rest of the family would, good-naturedly, vacate and leave them alone, and she would take her old chair by the fire, and Grif would sit near her, and in ten minutes after they had sat so together, they would have left all their troubles behind them, and

wandered off into a realm of tender dreams and sweet unrealities. But, impatient as she was to be gone, Dolly could not forget Mollie's interest. It was too near her heart to be forgotten. She must attend to Mollie's affairs first, and then she could fly to Grif and the parlor with an easy conscience. So she waited until five o'clock before dressing to go out, and then, after watching at the window for a while, she decided to go to her room and put on her hat and make all her small preparations, so that when her visitor arrived she might be ready to leave the house as soon as he did.

"It won't do to keep Grif waiting too long, even for Mollie's sake," she said. "I must consider him, too. If Mr. Gowan does not come by six or half-past, I shall be obliged to go."

She purposely prolonged her toilet, even though it had occupied a greater length of time than usual in the first instance. There had been a new acquisition in the shape of a dress to don, and one or two coquettish aids to appearance, which were also novelties. But before six o'clock she was quite ready, and, having nothing else to do, was reduced to the necessity of standing before the glass and taking stock of herself and her attire.

"It fits," she soliloquized, curving her neck in her anxiety to obtain a back view of herself. "It fits like a glove, and so Grif will be sure to like it. His admiration for clothes that fit amounts to a monomania. He will make his usual ecstatic remarks on the subject of figure, too. And

I must confess," with modest self-satisfaction,--"I must confess that those frills are not unbecoming. If we were only rich--and married--how I would dress, to please him! Being possessed of a figure, one's results are never uncertain. Figure is a weakness of mine, also. With the avoirdupois of Miss Joliboy, life would appear a desert. Ten thousand per annum would not console me. And yet she wears sables and seal-skin, and is happy. It is a singular fact, worthy of the notice of the philosopher, that it is such women who invariably possess the sable and seal-skin. Ah, well!" charitably, "I suppose it is a dispensation of Providence. When they attain that size they need some compensation."

Often in after time she remembered the complacent little touch of vanity, and wondered how it had been possible that she could stand there, making so thoughtless and foolish a speech when danger was so near, and so much of sharp, passionate suffering was approaching her.

She had waited until the last minute, and finding, on consulting her watch, that it was past six, she decided to wait no longer. She took up her gloves from the dressing-table and drew them on; she settled the little drooping plume in her hat and picked up her muff, and then, giving a last glance and a saucy nod to the piquant reflection in the glass, she opened her bedroom door to go out.

And then it was, just at this last moment, that there came a ring at the hall-door bell,--evidently a hurried ring, and withal a ring which made her heart beat, she knew not why.

She stood at the head of the staircase and listened. A moment later, and the visitor was speaking to the servant who had admitted him.

"Mr. Gowan," she heard. "Miss Crewe--wish to see her at once--at once."

She knew by his voice that something was wrong, and she did not wait for the up-coming of the servant. She almost flew down the staircase, and entered the parlor an instant after him; and when he saw her he met her with an exclamation of thankfulness.

"Thank God!" he said, "that you are ready!" He was pale with excitement, and fairly out of breath. He did not give her time to answer him. "You must come with me," he said. "There is not a moment to lose. I have a cab at the door. I have driven here at full speed. The report is true, and I have found out that to-night Chandos leaves London. But that is not the worst,--for God's sake, be calm, and remember how much depends upon your courage,--he intends taking your sister with him."

Terrible as the shock was to her, she was calm, and did remember how much might depend upon her. She forgot Grif and the happy evening she had promised herself; she forgot all the world but Mollie,--handsome, lovable, innocent Mollie, who was rushing headlong and unconsciously to misery and ruin. A great, sharp change seemed to come upon her as she turned to Ralph Gowan. She was not the same girl who, a minute or so before, had nodded at her pretty self in the glass; the excited blood

tingled in her veins; she was full of desperate, eager bravery,--she could not wait a breath's space.

"Come!" she exclaimed, "I am ready. You can tell me the rest when we are in the cab."

She did not even know where they were going until she heard Gowan give the driver the directions. But, as they drove through the streets, she learned all.

In spite of his efforts, it was not until the eleventh hour that he had succeeded in obtaining positive proof of the truth of the report, though he had found less cause to doubt it each time he made fresh inquiries. In the end he had been driven to the necessity of appealing to a man who had been Chandos's confidential valet, and who, rascal though he was, still was able to produce proofs to be relied on. Then he had been roused to such indignation that he had driven to the fellow's lodgings with the intention of confronting him with his impudent guilt, and there he had made the fearful discovery that he had just left the place with "a pretty, childish-looking girl,--tall, and with a lovely color," as the landlady described her; and he had known it was Mollie at once.

The good woman had given him all particulars. They had come to the house together in a cab, and the young lady had not got out, but had remained seated in it while her companion had given his orders to his servant indoors. She--his housekeeper--had heard him say something about

Brussels, and, having caught a glimpse of the charming face in the vehicle outside, she had watched it from behind the blinds, suspecting something out of the common order of things.

"Not that he did not treat her polite and respectful enough," she added; "for he did and she--pretty young thing--seemed quite to expect it, and not to be at all ashamed of herself, though she were a trifle shy and timid. I even heard him ask her if she would rather he rode outside, and she said she 'thought so, if he pleased,' And he bowed to her and went, quite obedient. That was what puzzled me so; if he 'd ha' been freer, I could have understood it."

"It does not puzzle me!" cried Dolly, clenching her hands and fairly panting for breath when she heard it. "He knows how innocent she is, and he is too crafty to alarm her by his manner. Oh, cannot we make this man drive faster?--cannot we make him drive faster?"

Gowan drew out his watch and referred to it.

"There is no danger of our losing their train," he said. "It does not leave the station until nearly seven, and it is not yet half-past six. If they leave London to-night, we shall meet them; if they do not, I think I can guess where we shall find them. Re-member, you must not allow yourself to become excited. We have only our coolness and readiness of action to rely upon. If we lose our presence of mind, we lose all."

He did not lose his presence of mind, at least.

Even in the midst of her distress, Dolly found time to feel grateful to him beyond measure, and to admire his forethought. He never seemed to hesitate for a moment. He had evidently decided upon his course beforehand, and there was no delay. Reaching the station, he assisted Dolly to descend from the cab and led her at once to a seat where she could command a view of all who made their appearance upon the platform. Then he left her and went to make inquiries from the officials. He was not absent long. In a few minutes he returned with the necessary information. The train was not due for twenty minutes, and as yet no lady and gentleman answering to his description had been seen by any one in the place.

He came to Dolly and took a seat by her, looking down at her upturned, appealing face pityingly, but reassuringly.

"We are safe yet," he said. "They have not arrived, and they can have taken passage in no other train. We will watch this train leave the station, and then we will drive at full speed to the hotel Chandos is in the habit of visiting when he makes a flying journey. I know the place well enough."

The next half-hour was an anxious one to both. The train was behind time, and consequently they were compelled to wait longer than they had

expected. A great many people crowded into the station and took tickets for various points,--workingmen and their wives, old women with bundles, and young ones without, comfortable people who travelled first-class and seemed satisfied with themselves, shabbily attired little dressmakers and milliners with bandboxes, a party of tourists, and a few nice girls; in fact, the usual samples of people hurrying or taking it easy, losing their temper or preserving it; but there was no Mollie. The last moment arrived, the guards closed the carriage doors with the customary bang, and the customary cry of "All right;" there were a few puffs and a whistle, and then the train moved slowly out of the station. Mollie was not on her way to Brussels yet; that was a fact to be depended upon.

Dolly rose from her seat with a sigh which was half relief.

"Now for trying the hotel," said Gowan. "Take my arm and summon up your spirits. In less than a quarter of an hour, I think I may say, we shall have found our runaway, and we shall have to do our best to reduce her romantic escapade to a commonplace level. We may even carry her back to Bloomsbury Place before they have had time to become anxious about her. Thank Heaven, we were so fortunate as to discover all before it was too late!"

Bloomsbury Place! A sudden pang shot through Dolly's heart. She recollected then for the first time that at Bloomsbury Place Griffith was waiting for her, and that it might be a couple of hours before she could see him and explain. She got into the cab and leaned back in one

corner, with the anxious tears forcing themselves into her eyes. It seemed as if fate itself was against her.

"What will he think?" she exclaimed, unconsciously. "Oh, what will he think?" Then, seeing that Gowan had heard her, she looked at him piteously.

"I did not mean to speak aloud," she said. "I had forgotten in my trouble that Grif will be waiting for me all this time. He has gone to the house to meet me, and--I am not there."

Perhaps he felt a slight pang, too. For some time he had been slowly awakening, to the fact that this otherwise unfortunate Grif was all in all to her, and shut out the rest of the world completely. He had no chance against him, and no other man would have any. Still, even in the face of this knowledge, the evident keenness of her disappointment cut him a little.

"You must not let that trouble you," he said, generously. "Donne will easily understand your absence when you tell him where you have been. In the meantime, I have a few suggestions to make before we reach the hotel."

It was Mollie he was thinking of. He was wondrously tender of her in his man's pity for her childish folly and simplicity. If possible, they must keep her secret to themselves. If she had left no explanation

behind her, she must have given some reason for leaving the house, and if they found her at the hotel it would not be a difficult matter to carry her back home without exciting suspicion, and thus she would be saved the embarrassment and comment her position would otherwise call down upon her. Griffith might be told in confidence, but the rest of them might be left to imagine that nothing remarkable had occurred. These were his suggestions.

Dolly agreed to adopt them at once, it is hardly necessary to say. The idea that it would be possible to adopt them made the case look less formidable. She had been terribly troubled at first by the thought of the excitement the explanation of the escapade would cause at Bloomsbury Place. Phil would have been simply furious,--not so much against Mollie as against Chandos. His good-natured indifference to circumstances would not have been proof against the base betrayal of confidence involved in the affair. And then even in the after-time, when the worst was over and forgotten, the innumerable jokes and thoughtless sarcasms she would have had to encounter would have been Mollie's severest punishment. When the remembrance of her past danger had faded out of the family mind, and the whimsical side of the matter presented itself, they would have teased her, and Dolly felt that such a course would be far from safe. So she caught at Ralph Gowan's plan eagerly.

Still she felt an excited thrill when the cab drew up before the door of the hotel. Suppose they should not find her? Suppose Chandos had taken precautions against their being followed?

But Gowan did not seem to share her misgivings, though the expression upon his face was a decidedly disturbed one as he descended from the vehicle.

"You must remain seated until I come back," he said. "I shall not be many minutes, I am sure. I am convinced they are here." And then he closed the cab door and left her.

She drew out her watch and sat looking at it to steady herself. Her mind was not very clear as to how she intended to confront Mr. Gerald Chandos and convince Mollie. The convincing of Mollie would not be difficult, she was almost sure, but the confronting of Gerald Chandos was not a pleasant thing to think of.

She was just turning over in her mind a stirring, scathing speech, when the cab door opened again, and Gowan stood before her. He had not been absent five minutes.

"It is as I said it would be," he said. "They are here,--at least Mollie is here. Chandos has gone out, and she is alone in the private parlor he has engaged for her. They have evidently missed their train. They intended to leave by the first in the morning. I have managed to give the impression that we are expected, and so we shall be shown on to the scene at once without any trouble."

And so they were. A waiter met them at the entrance and led them up-stairs without the slightest hesitation.

"It is not necessary to announce us," said Gowan. And the man threw open the door of No. 2 with a bow.

They crossed the threshold together without speaking, and when the door closed behind them they turned and looked at each other with a simultaneous but half-smothered exclamation.

It was a pretty room, bright with a delicate gay-hued carpet and thick white rugs, numerous mirrors and upholstering of silver-gray and blue. There was a clear-burning fire in the highly polished steel-grate, and one of the blue and silver-gray sofas had been drawn up to it, and there, upon this sofa, lay Mollie with her hand under her cheek, sleeping like a baby.

They were both touched to the heart by the mere sight of her. There was something in the perfect repose of her posture and expression that was childish and restful. It was a difficult matter to realize that she was sleeping on the brink of ruin and desolation. Something bright gathered on Dolly's lashes and slipped down her cheek as she looked at her.

"Thank God, we have found her!" she said. "Just to think that she should be sleeping like that,--as if she was at home. If she was two years old she might wear just such a look."

Gowan hardly liked to stand by as she went toward the sofa. The girl's face, under the coquettish hat, seemed to grow womanly, her whole figure seemed to soften as she knelt down upon the carpet by the couch and laid her hand upon Mollie's shoulder, speaking to her gently.

"Mollie," she said, "dear, waken."

Just that, and Mollie started up with a faint cry, dazzled by the light, and rubbing her eyes and her soft, flushed cheeks, just as she had done the night Gowan surprised her asleep in the parlor.

"Dolly," she cried out, when she saw who was with her,--"Dolly," in a half-frightened voice, "why did you come here?"

"I came to take you home," answered Dolly, tremulously, but firmly.

"Thank God! I am not too late! Oh, Mollie, Mollie, how could you?"

Mollie sat up among her blue and gray cushions and stared at her for a moment, as if she was not wide enough awake to realize what she meant. But the next instant she caught sight of Ralph Gowan, and that roused her fully, and she flushed scarlet.

"I don't know what you mean," she said. "I don't know what you mean by coming here in this way. And I don't know what Mr. Gowan means by bringing you,--for I feel sure he has brought you. I am not a baby,

to be followed as if I could not take care of myself. I am going to be married to Mr. Gerald Chandos to-morrow, and we are going on the Continent for our wedding tour."

She was in a high state of rebellion. It was Gowan's presence she was resenting, not Dolly's. To tell the truth, she was rather glad to see Dolly. She had begun to feel the loneliness of her position, and it had half intimidated her. But the sight of Gowan roused her spirit. What right had he to come and interfere with her, since he did not care for her and thought she was nothing but a child? It made her feel like a child. She turned her back to him openly as she spoke to Dolly.

"I am going to be married in the morning," she repeated; "and we are going to Brussels."

Then, in her indignation against Mr. Gerald Chandos, Dolly fired a little herself.

"And has it never occurred to you," she said, "that it is rather a humiliating thing this running away, as if you knew you were doing something disgraceful? May I ask what reason Mr. Gerald Chandos gives for asking you to submit to such an insult, for it is an insult?"

"He has very good reasons," answered Mollie, beginning to falter all at once, as the matter was presented to her in this new and trying light.

"He has very good reasons,--something about business and--and his

family, and he does not intend to insult me. He is very fond of me and very proud of me, and he is going to try to make me very happy. He--he has bought me a beautiful trousseau--" And then, seeing the two exchange indignant yet pitying glances, she broke off suddenly and burst forth as if she was trying to hide in anger the subtle, mysterious fear which was beginning to creep upon her. "How dare you look at each other so!" she cried. "How dare you look at me so! I have done nothing wrong. He says many other people do the same thing and--and I won't be looked at so. I shall not tell you another word. You--you look as if I was going to do something wicked and dreadful." And she flung herself face downward upon the sofa cushions and broke into a passionate, excited sob.

Then Dolly could control herself no longer. She flashed out into a storm of wrath and scorn against this cool, systematic scoundrel, who would have wrought such harm--against such simple ignorance of the world. What had they not saved her from, poor, foolish child? She clenched her little, gloved hand and struck it against the sofa arm, the hot color flaming up on her cheeks and the fire lighting in her eyes.

"Mollie!" she exclaimed, "that is what is true! You are going to do something that is dreadful to think of, though you do not think so because you do not know the truth. And we have come to tell you the truth and save you. That man is a villain,--he is the worst of villains. He does not intend to marry you,--he cannot marry you, and, knowing he cannot, he has been laying traps for months to drag you down into a horrible pit of shame. Yes, of the bitterest grief and shame,--poor,

simple child as you are,--for I must tell you the whole dreadful truth, though I would far rather hide it from you, if I could. There are some wicked, wicked men in the world, Mollie, and Gerald Chandos is one of the worst, for he has got a wife already."

It did not seem to be Mollie who sprang up from her cushions and confronted them with wide-opened eyes. Every bit of color had died out of her cheeks and lips, and she turned from one to the other with a wild, appealing look.

"It is n't true," she insisted, desperately; but her voice was broken, and she sobbed out her words in her fright. "It is n't true! It is n't true! You want to frighten me." And all at once she ran to Ralph Gowan like a child, and caught hold of his arm with her pretty, shaking hands. "Mr. Gowan," she said, "you know, don't you? and you won't--you won't--Oh, where is Aimée? I want Aimée! Aimée is n't like the rest of you! She would have made me go home without being so cruel as this." And the next minute she turned so white and staggered so, that Dolly ran to her, and Gowan was obliged to take her in his arms.

"Tell her that what I have said is true," said Dolly, crying. "She will begin to understand then."

And so, while he held her, panting and sobbing and clinging to him, Gowan told her all that he had learned. He was as brief as possible and as tender as a woman. His heart so warmed toward the pretty, lovable,

passionately frightened creature, that his voice was far from steady as he told his story.

She did not rebel an instant longer, then. Her terror, under the shock, rendered her only helpless and hysterical. She had so far lost control over herself that she would have believed anything they had chosen to tell her.

"Take me away," she cried, whitening and shivering, all her bright, pretty color gone, all her wilful petulance struck down at a blow. "Take me home,--take me home to Aimée. I want to go away from here before he comes. I want to go home and die."

How they got her down-stairs and into the carriage, Dolly scarcely knows. It was enough that they got her there and knew she was safe. Upon the table in the room above they had left a note directed to Mr. Gerald Chandos,--Dolly had directed it and Dolly had written it.

"Is there pen and ink here?" she had asked Gowan; and when he had produced the articles, she had bent over the table and dashed a few lines off with an unsteady yet determined hand.

"There!" she had said, when she closed the envelope. "Mr. Chandos will go to Brussels, I think, and he will understand why he goes alone, and, for my part, I incline to the belief that he will not trouble us again."

And in five minutes more they were driving toward Bloomsbury Place.

But now the first excitement was over, Dolly's nerve began to fail her. Now that Mollie was safe, she began to think of Griffith. It seemed a cruel trick of fortune's to try his patience so sharply just at this very point. She knew so well what effect his hours of waiting would have upon him. But it was useless to rebel now; so she must bear it as well as she could, and trust to the result of her explanation. Yet despite her hope, every minute of the long drive seemed an age, and she grew feverish and restless and wretched. What if he had not waited, and was not there to listen to what she had to say? Then there would be all the old trouble to face again,--perhaps something worse.

"It is nine o'clock," she said, desperately, as they passed a lighted church tower. "It is nine o'clock." And she leaned back in her corner again, with her heart beating strongly. Her disappointment was so keen that she could have burst into a passion of tears. Her happy evening was gone, and her dream of simple pleasure had fled with its sacrificed hours. She could not help remembering this, and being quite conquered by the thought, even though Mollie was safe.

They had settled what to do beforehand. At the corner of the street Gowan was to leave them, and the two girls were to go in together, Mollie making her way at once to her room upon pretext of headache. A night's rest would restore her self-control, and by the next morning she would be calm enough to face the rest, and so her wild escapade would

end without risk of comment if she was sufficiently discreet to keep her own counsel. At present she was too thoroughly upset and frightened even to feel humiliation.

"Nearly half-past nine," said Gowan, as he assisted them to descend to the pavement at their journey's end.

The light from an adjacent lamp showed him that the face under Dolly's hat was very pale and excited, and her eyes were shining and large with repressed tears as she gave him her hand.

"I cannot find words to thank you just yet," she said, low and hurriedly. "I wish I could; but--you know what you have helped me to save Mollie from to-night, and so you know what my gratitude must be. The next time I see you, perhaps, I shall be able to say what I wish, but now I can only say goodnight, and--oh, God bless you!" And the little hand fairly wrung his.

Mollie shook hands with him, trembling and almost reluctantly. She was pale, too, and her head drooped as if it would nevermore regain the old trick of wilful, regal carriage.

"You have been very kind to take so much trouble," she said. "You were kinder than I deserved,--both of you."

"Now," said Dolly, when he sprang into the cab, and they turned away

together,--"now for getting into the house as quietly as possible. No," trying to speak cheerily, and as if their position was no great matter, "you must n't tremble, Mollie, and you mustn't cry. It is all over now, and everything is as commonplace and easy to manage as can be. You have been out, and have got the headache, and are going to bed. That is all. All the rest we must forget. Nothing but a headache, Mollie, and a headache is not much, so we won't fret about it. If it had been a heartache, and sin and shame and sorrow--but it isn't. But, Mollie," they had already reached the house then, and stood upon the steps, and she turned to the girl and put a hand on each of her shoulders, speaking tremulously, "when you go up-stairs, kneel down by your bedside and say your prayers, and thank God that it is n't,--thank God that it is n't, with all your heart and soul." And she kissed her cheek softly just as they heard Aimée coming down the hall to open the door.

"Dolly!" she exclaimed when she saw them, "where have you been? Griffith has been here since five, and now he is out looking for you. I had given you up entirely, but he would not. He fancied you had been delayed by something."

"I have been delayed by something," said Dolly, her heart failing her again. "And here is Mollie, with the headache. You had better go to bed, Mollie. How long is it since Grif left the house?"

"Scarcely ten minutes," was the answer. "It is a wonder you did not meet him. Oh, Dolly!" ominously, "how unlucky you are!"

Dolly quite choked in her effort to be decently composed in manner.

"I am unlucky," she said; and without saying more, she made her way into the parlor.

She took her hat off there and tossed it on the sofa, utterly regardless of consequences, and then dropped into her chair and looked round the room. It did not look as she had pictured it earlier in the day. Its cheerfulness was gone, and it looked simply desolate. The fire had sunk low in the grate, and the hearth was strewn with dead ashes;--somehow or other, everything seemed chilled and comfortless. She was too late for the brightness and warmth,--a few hours before it had been bright and warm, and Grif had been there waiting for her. Where was he now? She dropped her face on the arm of her chair with a sob of disappointed feeling and foreboding. What if he had seen them leave Ralph Gowan, and had gone home!

"It's too bad!" she cried. "It is cruel! I can't bear it! Oh, Grif, do come!" And her tears fell thick and fast.

Ten minutes later she started up with a little cry of joy and relief. That was his footstep upon the pavement, and before he had time to ring she was at the door. She could scarcely speak to him in her excitement.

"Oh, Grif!" she said; "Grif--darling!"

But he did not offer to touch her, and strode past her outstretched hands.

"Come into this room with me," he said, hoarsely; and the simple sound of his voice struck her to the heart like a blow.

She followed him, trembling, and when they stood in the light, and she saw his deathly, passion-wrung face, her hand crept up to her side and pressed against it. 9

He had a package in his hand,--a package of letters,--and he laid them down on the table.

"I have been home for these," he said. "Your letters,--I have brought them back to you."

"Grif!" she cried out.

He waved her back.

"No," he said, "never mind that. It is too late for that now, that is all over. Good God! all over!" and he panted for breath. "I have been in this room waiting for you," he struggled on, "since five o'clock.

I came with my heart full to the brim. I have dreamt about what this evening was to be to us every night for a week. I was ready to kneel and

kiss your feet. I waited hour after hour. I was ready to pray--yes, to pray, like a fool--that I might hold you in my arms before the night ended. Not half an hour ago I went out to see if you were coming. And you were coming. At the corner of the street you were bidding good-night to--to Ralph Gowan--"

"Listen!" she burst forth. "Mollie was with me--"

"Ralph Gowan was with you," he answered her; "it does not matter who else was there. You had spent those hours in which I wanted you with him. That was enough,--nothing can alter that." And then all at once he came and stood near her, and looked down at her with such anguish in his eyes that she could have shrieked aloud. "It was a poor trick to play, Dolly," he said; "so poor a one, that it was scarcely like you. Your coquetries had always a fairer look. The commonest jilt might have done such a thing as that, and almost have done it better. It is an old trick, too, this playing the poor fool against the rich one. The only merit of your play has been that you have kept it up so long."

He was almost mad, but he might have seen that he was trying her too far, and that she would break down all at once. The long strain of the whole evening; his strange, unnatural mood; her struggle against wretchedness--all were too much for her to bear. She tried to speak, and, failing, fought for strength, sobbed thrice, a terrible, hysterical sob, like a child's, and then turned white and shivered, without uttering a word.

"Yes," he said, "a long time, Dolly"--but his sentence was never ended, for that instant she went down as if she had been shot, and lay near his feet quivering for a second, and then lying still.

He was not stayed even then. He bent down and lifted her in his arms and carried her to the sofa, pale himself, but not relenting. He seemed to have lived past the time when the pretty, helpless figure, in all its simple finery, would have stirred him to such ecstasy of pain. He was mad enough to have believed even her helplessness a lie, only that the cruel, ivory pallor was so real. He did not even stoop to kiss her when he turned away. But all the treasure of faith and truth and love had died out of his face, the veriest dullard could have seen; his very youth had dropped away from him, and he left the old, innocent dreams behind, with something like self-scorn.

"Good-by," he said; "we have lost a great deal, Dolly--or I have lost it, I might say. And even you--I believe it pleased even you until better fortune came; so, perhaps, you have lost something, too."

Then he went to the bell and touched it, and, having done so, strode out into the narrow hall, opened the front door and was gone; and when, a few minutes later, Aimée came running down to answer the strange summons, she found only the silent room, Dolly's white, piteous face upon the sofa-cushion, and the great package of those old, sweet, foolish letters upon the table.