

CHAPTER XIII A DEAD LETTER.

IT was all over,--all over at last. Dolly's first words had said this much when she opened her eyes, and found Aimée bending over her.

"Has he gone?" she had asked. "Did he go away and leave me?"

"Do you mean Grif?" said Aimée.

She made a weak gesture of assent.

"Yes," Aimée answered. "He must have gone. I heard the bell ring, and found you lying here when I came to see what it meant."

"Then," said Dolly, "all is over,--all is over at last." And she turned her face upon the cushion and lay so still that she scarcely seemed to breathe.

"Take another drink of water, Dolly," said Aimée, keeping back her questions with her usual discretion. "You must, dear."

But Dolly did not stir.

"I don't want any more," she said. "I am not going to faint again. You have no need to be afraid. I don't easily faint, you know, and I should not have fainted just now only--that the day has been a very hard one

for me, and somehow I lost strength all at once. I am not ill,--only worn out."

"You must be very much worn out, then," said Aimée; "more worn out than I ever saw you before. You had better let me help you up-stairs to bed."

"I don't want to go to bed yet!" in a strange, choked voice, and the next moment Aimée saw her hands clench themselves and her whole frame begin to shake. "Shut the door and lock it," she said, wildly. "I can't stop myself. Give me some sal volatile. I can't breathe." And such a fit of suffocating sobbing came upon her that she writhed and battled for air.

Aimée flung herself upon her knees by her side, shedding tears herself.

"Oh, Dolly," she pleaded, "Dolly, darling, don't. Try to help yourself against it. I know what the trouble is. He went away angry and disappointed, and it has frightened you. Oh, please don't, darling. He will come back to-morrow; he will, indeed. He always does, you know, and he will be so sorry."

"He has gone forever," Dolly panted, when she could speak. "He will never come back. To-night has been different from any other time. No," gasping and sobbing, "it is fate. Fate is against us,--it always was against us. I think God is against us; and oh, how can He be? He might pity us,--we tried so hard and loved each other so much. We did n't ask

for anything but each other,--we did n't want anything but that we might be allowed to cling together all our lives and work and help each other. Oh, Grif, my darling,--oh, Grif, my dear, my dear!" And the sobs rising again and conquering her were such an agony that Aimée caught her in her arms.

"Dolly," she said, "you must not, you must not, indeed. You will die, you can't bear it."

"No," she wailed, "I can't bear it,--that is what it is. I can't bear it. It is too hard to bear. But there is no one to help me,--God won't. He does not care for us, or He would have given us just one little crumb out of all He has to give. What can a poor helpless girl be to Him? He is too high and great to care for our poor little powerless griefs. Oh, how wicked I am!" in a fresh burst. "See how I rebel at the first real blow. It is because I am so wicked, perhaps, that all has been taken from me,--all I had in the world. It is because I loved Grif best. I have read in books that it was always so. Oh, why is it? I can't understand it.. It seems cruel,--yes, it does seem cruel,--as cruel as death, to give him to me only that I might suffer when he was taken away. Oh, Grif, my darling! Grif, my love, my dear!"

This over again and again, with wild, heart-broken weeping, until she was so worn out that she could cry no more, and lay upon Aimée's arm upon the cushion, white and exhausted, with heavy purple rings about her wearied, sunken eyes. It was not until then that Aimée heard the whole

truth. She had only been able to guess at it before, and now, hearing the particulars, she could not help fearing the worst.

It was just as she had feared it would be; another blow had come upon him at the very time when he was least able to bear it, and it had been too much for him. But she could not reveal her forebodings to Dolly. She must comfort her and persuade her to hope for the best.

"You must go to bed, Dolly," she said, "and try to sleep, and in the morning everything will look different. He may come, you know,--it would be just like him to come before breakfast. But if he does not come--suppose," hesitatingly,--"suppose I was to write to him, or--suppose you were to?"

She was half afraid that pride would rise against this plan, but she was mistaken. Seven years of love had mastered pride. Somehow or other, pride had never seemed to come between them in their little quarrels, each had always been too passionately eager to concede, and too sure of being met with tenderest penitence. Dolly had always known too confidently that her first relenting word would touch Grif's heart, and Grif had always been sure that his first half-softened reproach would bring the girl to his arms in an impetuous burst of loving repentance. No, it was scarcely likely that other people's scruples would keep them apart. So Dolly caught at the proposal almost eagerly.

"Yes," she said, "I will write and tell him how it was. It was not his

fault, was it, Aimée? How could I have borne such a thing myself? It would have driven me wild, as it did him. It was not unreasonable at all that he should refuse to listen, in his first excitement, after he had waited all those hours and suffered such a disappointment. And then to see what he did. My poor boy! he was not to blame at all. Yes, yes," feverishly, "I will write to him and tell him. Suppose I write now--don't you think I had better do it now, and then he will get the letter in the morning, and he will be sure to come before dinner,--he will be sure to come, won't he?"

"He always did," said Aimée.

"Always," said Dolly. "Indeed, I never had to write to him before to bring him. He always came without being written to. There never was any one like him for being tender and penitent. You always said so, Aimée. And just think how often I have tried his patience! I sometimes wish I could help doing things,--flirting, you know, and making a joke of it. He never flirted in his life, poor darling, and what right had I to do it? When he comes to-morrow I will tell him how sorry I am for everything, and I will promise to be better. I have not been half so good as he has. I wish I had. I should not have hurt him so often if I had."

"You have been a little thoughtless sometimes," said Aimée. "Perhaps it would have been better if you could have helped it."

"A little thoughtless," said Dolly, restlessly. "I have been wickedly thoughtless sometimes. And I have made so many resolutions and broken them all. And I ought to have been doubly thoughtful, because he had so much to bear. If he had been prosperous and happy it would not have mattered half so much. But it was all my vanity. You don't know how vain I am, Aimée. I quite hate myself when I think of it. It is the wanting people to admire me,--everybody, men and women, and even children,--particularly among Lady Augusta's set, where there is a sort of fun in it. And then I flirt before I know; and then, of course, Grif cannot help seeing it. I wonder that he has borne with me so long."

She was quite feverish in her anxiety to condemn herself and exculpate her lover. She did not droop her face against the pillow, but roused herself, turning toward Aimée, and talking fast and eagerly. A bright spot of color came out on either cheek, though for the rest she was pale enough. But to Aimée's far-seeing eyes there was something so forced and unnaturally strung in her sudden change of mood that she felt a touch of dread. Suppose something should crush her newly formed hopes,--something

terrible and unforeseen! She felt a chill strike her to the heart at the mere thought of such a possibility. She knew Dolly better than the rest of them did,--knew her highly strung temperament, and feared it, too. She might be spirited and audacious and thoughtless, but a blow coming through Grif would crush her to the earth.

"You--you mustn't set your heart too much upon his getting the letter

in the morning, Dolly," she said. "He might be away when it came, or--or twenty things, and he might not see it until night, but--"

"Well," said Dolly, "I will write it at once if you will give me the pen and ink. The earlier it is posted the earlier he will get it."

She tried to rise then; but when she stood up her strength seemed to fail her, and she staggered and caught at Aimee's arm. But the next minute she laughed.

"How queer that one little faint should make me so weak!" she said. "I am weak,--actually. I shall feel right enough when I sit down, though."

She sat down at the table with her writing materials, and Aimée remained upon the sofa watching her. Her hand trembled when she wrote the first few lines, but she seemed to become steadier afterward, and her pen dashed over the paper without a pause for a few minutes. The spot of color on her cheeks faded and burned by turns,--sometimes it was gone, and again it was scarlet, and before the second page was finished tears were falling soft and fast. Once she even stopped to wipe them away, because they blinded her; but when she closed the envelope she did not look exactly unhappy, though her whole face was tremulous.

"He will come back," she said, softly. "He will come back when he reads this, I know. I wish it was to-morrow. To-morrow night he will be here, and we shall have our happy evening after all. I can excuse myself to

Miss MacDowlas for another day."

"Yes," said Aimée, a trifle slowly, as she took it from her hand. "I will send Belinda out with it now." And she carried it out of the room.

In a few minutes she returned. "She has taken it," she said. "And now you had better go to bed, Dolly."

But Dolly's color had faded again, and she was resting her forehead upon her hands, with a heavy, anxious, worn look, which spoke of sudden reaction. She lifted her face with a half-absent air.

"I hope it will be in time for to-night's post," she said. "Do you think it will?"

"I am not quite sure, but I hope so. You must come to bed, Dolly."

She got up without saying more, and followed her out into the hall, but at the foot of the staircase she stopped. "I have not seen Tod," she said. "Let us go into 'Toinette's room and ask her to let us have him to-night. We can carry him up-stairs without wakening him. I have done it many a time. I should like to have him in my arms to-night."

So they turned into Mrs. Phil's room, and found that handsome young matron sitting in her dressing-gown before the fire, brushing out her great dark mantle of hair.

"Don't waken Tod," she cried out, as usual; and then when she saw Dolly she broke into a whispered volley of wondering questions. Where in the world had she been? What had she been doing with herself until such an hour? Where was Grif? Was n't he awfully vexed? What had he said when she came in? All of which inquiries the two parried as best they might.

As to Tod--well, Tod turned her thoughts in another direction. He was a beauty, and a king, and a darling, and he was growing sweeter and brighter every day,--which comments, by the way, were always the first made upon the subject of the immortal Tod. He was so amiable, too, and so clever and so little trouble. He went to sleep in his crib every night at seven, and never awakened until morning. Aunt Dolly might look at him now with those two precious middle fingers in his little mouth. And Aunt Dolly did look at him, lifting the cover slightly, and bending over him as he lay there making a deep dent in his small, plump pillow,--a very king of babies, soft and round and warm, the white lids drooped and fast closed over his dark eyes, their long fringes making a faint shadow on his fair, smooth baby cheeks, the two fingers in his sweet mouth, the round, cleft chin turned up, the firm, tiny white pillar of a throat bare.

"Oh, my bonny baby!" cried Dolly, the words rising from the bottom of her heart, "how fair and sweet you are!"

They managed to persuade Mrs. Phil to allow them to take possession

of him for the night; and when they went up-stairs Dolly carried him, folded warmly in his downy blanket, and held close and tenderly in her arms.

"Aunt Dolly's precious!" Aimée heard her whispering to him as she gave him a last soft good-night kiss before they fell asleep. "Aunt Dolly's comfort! Everything is not gone so long as he is left."

But she evidently passed a restless night. When Aimée awakened in the morning she found her standing by the bedside, dressed and looking colorless and heavy-eyed.

"I never was so glad to see morning in my life," she said. "I thought the day would never break. I--I wonder how long it will be before Grif will be reading his letter?"

"He may get it before nine o'clock," answered Aimée; "but don't trouble about it, or the day will seem twice as long. Take Tod down-stairs and wash and dress him. It will give you something else to think of."

The wise one herself had not slept well. Truth to say, she was troubled about more matters than one. She was troubled to account for the meaning of Dolly's absence with Gowan. Even in her excitement, Dolly had not felt the secret quite her own, and had only given a skeleton explanation of the true state of affairs.

"It was something about Mollie and Gerald Chan-dos," she had said; "and if I had not gone it would have been worse than death to Mollie. Don't ask me to tell you exactly what it was, because I can't. Perhaps Mollie will explain herself before many days are over. She always tells you everything, you know. But it was no real fault of here; she was silly, but not wicked, and she is safe from Gerald Chandos now forever. And I saved her, Aimée."

And so the wise one had lain awake and thought of all sorts of possible and impossible escapades. But as she was dressing herself this morning, the truth flashed upon her, though it was scarcely the whole truth.

"She was going to elope with him," she exclaimed all at once; "that was what she was going to do. Oh, Mollie, Mollie, what a romantic goose you are!"

And having reached this solution, she closed her small, determined mouth in discreet silence, resolving to wait for Mollie's confession, which she knew was sure to come sooner or later. As to Mollie herself, she came down subdued and silent. She had slept off the effects of her first shock, but had by no means forgotten it. She would never forget it, poor child, as long as she lived, and she was so grateful to find herself safe in the shabby rooms again, that she had very little to say; and since she was in so novel a mood, the members of the family who were not in the secret decided that her headache must have been a very severe one indeed.

"Don't say anything to her about Grif," Dolly cautioned Aimée, "it would only trouble her." And so the morning passed; but even at twelve o'clock there was no Grif, and Dolly began to grow restless and walk to and fro from the window to the hearth at very short intervals. Dinner-hour arrived, too, but still no arrival; and Dolly sat at the table, among them, eating nothing and saying little enough. How could she talk when every step upon the pavement set her heart bounding? When dinner was over and Phil had gone back to the studio, she looked so helpless and woe-begone that Aimée felt constrained to comfort her.

"It may have been delayed," she whispered to her, "or he may have left the house earlier than usual, and so won't see it until to-night. He will be here to-night, Dolly, depend upon it."

And so they waited. Ah, how that window was watched that afternoon! How often Dolly started from her chair and ran to look out, half suffocated by her heart-beatings! But it was of no avail. As twilight came on she took her station before it, and knelt upon the carpet for an hour watching; but in the end she turned away all at once, and, running to the fire again, caught Tod up in her arms, and startled Aimée by bursting into a passion of tears.

"Oh, Tod!" she sobbed, "he is not coming! He will never come again,--he has left us forever! Oh, Tod, love poor Aunt Dolly, darling." And she hid her face on the little fellow's shoulder, crying piteously.

She did not go to the window again. When she was calmer, she remained on her chair, colorless and exhausted, but clinging to Tod still in a queer pathetic way, and letting him pull at her collar and her ribbons and her hair. The touch of his relentless baby hands and his pretty, tyrannical, restless ways seemed to help her a little and half distract her thoughts.

She became quieter and quieter as the evening waned; indeed, she was so quiet that Aimée wondered. She was strangely pale; but she did not start when footsteps were heard on the street, and she ceased turning toward the door when it opened.

"He--he may come in the morning," Aimée faltered as they went up-stairs to bed.

"No, he will not," she answered her, quite steadily. "It will be as I said it would,--he will never come again."

But when they reached their room, the unnatural, strained quiet gave way, and she flung herself upon the bed, sobbing and fighting against just the hysterical suffering which had conquered her the night before.

It was the very ghost of the old indomitable Dolly who rose the next morning. Her hands shook as she dressed her hair, and there were shadows under her eyes. But she must go back to Brabazon Lodge, notwithstanding.

"I can say I have a nervous headache," she said to Aimée. "Nervous headaches are useful things."

"If a letter comes," said Aimée, "I will bring it to you myself."

The girl turned toward her suddenly, her eyes hard and bright and her mouth working.

"I have had my last letter," she said. "My last letters came to me when Grif laid that package upon the table. He has done with me."

"Done with you?" cried Aimée, frightened by her manner. "With you, Dolly?"

Then for the first time Dolly flushed scarlet to the very roots of her hair.

"Yes," she said, "he has done with me. If there had been half a chance that he would ever come near me again, the letter I wrote to him that night would have brought him. A word of it would have brought him,--the first word. But he is having his revenge by treating it with contempt. He is showing me that it is too late, and that no humility on my part can touch him. I scarcely could have thought that of him," dropping into a chair by the toilet-table and hiding her face in her hands.

"It is not like Grif to let me humble myself for nothing. And I did humble myself,--ah, how I did humble myself! That letter,--if you could have seen it, Aimée,--it was all on fire with love for him. I laid myself under his feet,--and he has trodden me down! Grif--Grif, it was n't like you,--it was n't worthy of you,--it was n't indeed!"

Her worst enemy would have felt herself avenged if she had heard the anguish in her voice. She was crushed to the earth under this last great blow of feeling that he had altered so far. Grif,--her whilom greatest help and comfort,--the best gift God had given her! Dear, old, tender, patient fellow! as she had been wont to call him in her fits of penitence.

Grif, whose arms had always been open to her at her best and at her worst, who had loved her and borne with her, and waited upon her and done her bidding since they were both little more than children. When had Grif ever turned from her before? Never. When 'had Grif ever been cold or unfaithful in word or deed? Never. When had he ever failed her? Never--never--never--until now! And now that he had failed her at last, she felt that the bitter end had come. The end to everything,--to all the old hopes and dreams, to all the old sweet lovers' quarrels and meetings and partings, to all their clinging together, to all the volumes and volumes of love and trust that lay in the past, to all the world of simple bliss that lay still unrevealed in their lost future, to all the blessed old days when they had pictured to each other what that future was to be. It had all gone for nothing in the end. It must all

have gone for nothing, when Grif--a new Grif--not her own true, stanch, patient darling--not her own old lover--could read her burning, tender, suffering words and pass them by without a word of answer. And with this weight of despair and pain upon her heart, she went back to the wearisome routine of Brabazon Lodge,--went back heavy with humiliation and misery which she scarcely realized,--went back suffering as no one who knew her--not even Grif himself--could ever have understood that it was possible for her to suffer. No innocent coquetries now, no spirit, no jests; for the present at least she had done with them, too.

"You are not in your usual spirits, my dear," said Miss MacDowlas.

"No," she answered, quietly, "I am not."

This state of affairs continued for four days, and then one morning, sitting at her sewing in the breakfast-room, she was startled almost beyond self-control by a servant's announcement that a visitor had arrived.

"One of your sisters, ma'am," said the parlor-maid. "Not the youngest, I think."

She was in the room in two seconds, and flew to Aimée, trembling all over with excitement.

"Not a letter!" she cried, hysterically. "It is n't a letter,--it can't

bel!" And she put her hand to her side and fairly panted.

The poor little wise one confronted her with something like fear. She could not bear to tell her the ill news she had come to break.

"Dolly, dear!" she said, "please sit down; and--please don't look at me so. It isn't good news. I must tell you the truth; it is bad news, cruel news. Oh, don't look so!"

They were standing near the sofa, and Dolly gave one little moan, and sank down beside it.

"Cruel news!" she cried, throwing up her hand. "Yes, I might have known that,--I might have known that it would be cruel, if it was news at all. Every one is cruel,--the whole world is cruel; even Grif,--even Grif!"

Aimée burst into tears.

"Oh, Dolly, I did my best for you!" she said. "I did, indeed; but you must try to bear it, dear,--it is your own letter back again."

Then the kneeling figure seemed to stiffen and grow rigid in a second. Dolly turned her deathly face, with her eyes aflame and dilated.

"Did he send it back to me?" she asked, in a slow, fearful whisper.

Her expression was so hard and dreadful a one that Aimée sprang to her side and caught hold of her.

"No,--no!" she said; "not so bad as that! He would never have done that. He has never had it. He has gone away; we don't know where. It came from the dead-letter office."

Dolly took the letter from her and opened it slowly, and there, as she knelt, read it, word for word, as if it had been something she had never seen before. Then she put it back into the envelope and laid it down.

"A dead letter!" she said. "A dead letter! If he had sent it back to me, I think it would have cured me; but now there is no cure for me at all. If he had read it, he would have come,--if he had only read it; but it is a dead letter, and he is gone."

There were no tears, the blow had been too heavy. It was only Aimée who had tears to shed, and it was Dolly who tried to console her in a strained, weary sort of way.

"Don't cry," she said, "it is all over now. Perhaps the worst part of the pain is past. There will be no house at Putney, and the solitary rose-bush will bloom for some one else; they may sell the green sofa, now, as cheap as they will, we shall never buy it. Our seven years of waiting have all ended in a dead letter."