CHAPTER XIV. SEVEN LONG YEARS, BELOVED, SEVEN LONG YEARS.

AND so Grif disappeared from the haunts of Vagabondia, and was seen no more. And to Aimée was left the delicate task of explaining the cause of his absence, which, it must be said, she did in a manner at once creditable to her tact and affection for both Dolly and the unconscious cause of all her misery.

"There has been a misunderstanding," she said, "which was no fault of Dolly's, and scarcely a fault of Grif's; and it has ended very unhappily, and Grif has gone away, and just at present it seems as if everything was over,--but I can't help hoping it is not so bad as that."

"Oh, he will come back again--safe enough," commented Phil, philosophically, holding paint-brush No. 1 in his mouth, while he manipulated with No. 2. "He will come back in sackcloth and ashes; he is just that sort, you know,--thunder and lightning, fire and tow. And they will make it up ecstatically in secret, and pretend that nothing has been the matter, and there will be no going into the parlor for weeks without whistling all the way across the hall."

"I always go in backward after they have had a quarrel," said Mollie, looking up from a half-made pinafore of Tod's, which, in the zeal of her repentance, she had decided on finishing.

"Not a bad plan, either," said Phil "We all know how their differences

of opinion terminate. As to matters being at an end between them, that is all nonsense; they could n't live without each other six months. Dolly would take to unbecoming bonnets, and begin to neglect her back hair, and Grif would take to prussic acid or absinthe."

"Well, I hope he will come back," said Aimée; "but, in the meantime, I want to ask you to let the affair rest altogether, and not say a word to Dolly when she comes. It will be the kindest thing you can do. Just let things go on as they have always done, and ignore every thing new you may see."

Phil looked up from his easel in sudden surprise; something in her voice startled him, serenely as he was apt to view all unexpected intelligence.

"I say," he broke out, "you don't mean that Dolly is very much cut up about it?"

The fair little oracle hesitated; remembering Dolly's passionate despair and grief over that "dead letter," she could scarcely trust herself to speak.

"Yes," she answered at last, feeling it would be best only to commit herself in Phil's own words, "she is very much cut up."

"Whew!" whistled Phil; "that is worse than I thought!" And the matter

ended in his going back to his picture and painting furiously for a few minutes, with an almost reflective air.

They did not see anything of Dolly for weeks. She wrote to them now and then, but she did not pay another visit to Bloomsbury Place. It was not the old home to her now, and she dreaded seeing it in its new aspect,--the aspect which was desolate of Grif. Most of her letters came to Aimée; but she rarely referred to her trouble, rather seeming to avoid it than otherwise. And the letters themselves were bright enough, seeming, too. She had plenty to say about Miss MacDowlas and their visitors and her own duties; indeed, any one but Aimée would have been puzzled by her courage and apparent good spirits. But Aimée saw below the surface, and understood, and, understanding, was fonder of her than ever.

As both Dolly and herself had expected, Mollie did not keep her secret from the oracle many weeks. It was too much for her to bear alone, and one night, in a fit of candor and remorse, she poured out everything from first to last, all her simple and unsophisticated dreams of grandeur, all her gullibility, all her danger,--everything, indeed, but the story of her pitiful little fancy for Ralph Gowan. She could not give that up, even to Aimée, though at the close of her confidence she was unable to help referring to him.

"And as to Mr. Gowan," she said, "how can I ever speak to him again! but, perhaps, he would not speak to me. He must think I am wicked and

bold and hardened--and bad," with a fresh sob at every adjective. "Oh, dear! oh, dear!" burying her face in Aimée's lap, "if I had only stayed at home and been good, like you. He could have respected me, at least, couldn't he? And now--oh, what am I to do!"

Aimée could not help sighing. If she only had stayed at home, how much happier they all might have been! But she had promised Dolly not to add to her unhappiness by hinting at the truth, so she kept her own counsel.

It was fully three months before they saw Ralph Gowan again. He had gone on the Continent, they heard. A feeling of delicacy had prompted the journey. As long as he remained in London, he could scarcely drop out of his old friendly position at Bloomsbury Place, and he felt that for a while at least Mollie would scarcely find it easy to-face him. So he went away and rambled about until he thought she would have time to get over her first embarrassment.

But at the end of the three months he came back, and one afternoon surprised them all by appearing amongst them again. Mollie, sitting perseveringly at work over her penitential sewing, shrank a little, and dropped her eyelids when he came in, but she managed to behave with creditable evenness of manner after all, and the rest welcomed him warmly.

"I have been to Brabazon Lodge," he said at length to Aimée. "I spent Monday evening there, and was startled at the change I found in your

sister. I did not know she was ill."

Aimée started herself, and looked up at him with a frightened face.

"Ill!" she said. "Did you say ill?"

It was his turn to be surprised then.

"I thought her looking ill," he answered. "She seemed to me to be both paler and thinner. But you must not let me alarm you,--I thought, of course, that you would know."

"She has never mentioned it in her letters," Aimée said. "And she has not been home for three months, so we have not seen her."

"Don't let me give you a false impression," returned Gowan, eagerly. "She seemed in excellent spirits, and was quite her old self; indeed, I scarcely should imagine that she herself placed sufficient stress upon the state of her health. She insisted that she was well when I spoke to her about it."

"I am very glad you told me," answered Aimée. "She is too indifferent sometimes. I am afraid she would not have let us know. I thank you, very much."

He had other thanks before he left the house. As he was going out,

Mollie, in her character of porteress, opened the hall door for him, and, having opened it, stood there with Tod's new garment half concealed, a pair of timid eyes uplifted to his face, a small, trembling, feverish hand held out.

"Mr. Gowan," she said, in a low, fluttering voice. "Oh, if you please--"

He took the little hot hand, feeling some tender remorse for not having tried to draw her out more and help her out of her painful shyness and restraint.

"What is it, Mollie?" he asked.

"I want--I want," fluttering all over,--"I want to thank you better than I did that--that dreadful night. I was so frightened I could scarcely understand. I understand more--now--and I want to tell you how grateful I am--and how grateful I shall be until I die--and I want to ask you to try not to think I was very wicked. I did not mean to be wicked--I was only vain and silly, and I thought it would be such a grand thing to--to have plenty of new dresses," hanging her sweet, humble face, "and to wear diamonds, and be Lady Chandos, if--if Mr. Chandos came into the title. Of course that was wicked, but it was n't--I was n't as bad as I seemed. I was so vain that--that I was quite sure he loved me, and would be very glad if I married him. He always said he would." And the tears rolled fast down her cheeks.

"Poor Mollie!" said Gowan, patting the trembling hand as if it had been a baby's. "Poor child!"

"But," Mollie struggled on, penitently, "I shall never be so foolish again. And I am going to try to be good--like Aimée. I am learning to mend things; and I am beginning to make things for Tod. This," holding up her work as proof, "is a dress for him. It is n't very well done," with innocent dubiousness; "but Aimée says I am improving. And so, if you please, would you be so kind as not to think quite so badly of me?"

It was all so humble and pretty and remorseful that he was quite touched by it. That old temptation to kiss and console her made it quite dangerous for him to linger. She was such a lovable sight with her tear-wet cheeks, and that dubious but faithfully worked-at garment of Tod's in her hand.

"Mollie," he said, "will you believe what I say to you?"

"Oh, yes!" eagerly.

"Then I say to you that I never believed you wicked for an instant,--not for one instant; and now I believe it less than ever; on the contrary, I believe you are a good, honest little creature. Let us forget Gerald Chandos,--he is not worth remembering. And go on with Tod's pinafores and dresses, my dear, and don't be discouraged if they are a failure at first,--though to my eyes that dress is a most sumptuous affair. And

as to being like Aimée, you cannot be like any one better and wiser and sweeter than that same little maiden. There! I mean every word I have said."

"Are you sure?" faltered Mollie.

"Yes," he replied, "quite sure."

He shook hands with her, and, bidding her goodnight, left her standing in the narrow hall all aglow 'with joy. And he, outside, was communing with himself as he walked away.

"She is as sweet in her way as--as the other," he was saying. "And as well worth loving. And what a face she has, if one only saw it with a lover's eyes! What a face she has, even seeing it with such impartial eyes as mine!"

"My dear Dolly!" said Aimée.

"My dear Aimée!" said Dolly.

These were the first words the two exchanged when, the evening after Ralph Gowan's visit, the anxious young oracle presented herself at Brabazon Lodge, and was handed into Dolly's bedroom.

Visitors were expected, and Dolly had been dressing, and was just

putting the finishing touches to her toilet when Aimée came in, and, seeing her as she turned from the glass to greet her, the wise one could scarcely speak, and, even after she had been kissed most heartily, could only hold the girl's hand and stand looking up into her changed face, feeling almost shocked.

"Oh, dear me, Dolly!" she said again. "Oh, my dear, what have you been doing to yourself?"

"Doing!" echoed Dolly, just as she would have spoken three or four months ago. "I have been doing nothing, and rather enjoying it. What is the matter with me?" glancing into the mirror. "Pale? That is the result of Miss MacDowlas's beneficence, you see. She has presented me with this grand black silk gown, and it makes me look pale. Black always did, you know."

But notwithstanding her readiness of speech, it did not need another glance to understand what Ralph Gowan had meant when he said that she was altered. The lustreless heavy folds of her black silk might contrast sharply with her white skin, but they could not bring about that subtle, almost incomprehensible change in her whole appearance. It was such a subtle change that it was difficult to comprehend. The round, lissome figure she had always been so pardonably vain about, and Grif had so admired, had fallen a little, giving just a hint at a greater change which might show itself sooner or later; her face seemed a trifle more clearly cut than it ought to have been, and the slender throat, set in

its surrounding Elizabethan frill of white, seemed more slender than it had used to be. Each change was slight enough in itself, but all together gave a shadowy suggestion of alteration to affectionately quick eyes.

"You are ill," said Aimée. "And you never told me. It was wrong of you. Don't tell me it is your black dress; your eyes are too big and bright for any one who is well, and your hand is thinner than it ever was before. Why, I can feel the difference as I hold it, and it is as feverish as it can be."

"You good, silly little thing!" said Dolly, laughing. "I am not ill at all. I have caught a cold, perhaps, but that is all."

"No you have not," contradicted Aimée, with pitiful sharpness. "You have not caught cold, and you must not tell me so. You are ill, and you have been ill for weeks. The worst of colds could never make you look like this. Mr. Gowan might well be startled and wonder--"

"Mr. Gowan!" Dolly interrupted her. "Did he say that he was startled?"

"Yes, he did," Aimée answered. "And that was what brought me here. He was at Bloomsbury Place last night and told me all about you, and I made up my mind that minute that I would come and judge for myself."

Then the girl gave in. She sat down on a chair by the dressing-table

and rested her forehead on her hand, laughing faintly, as if in protest against her own subjugation.

"Then I shall have to submit," she said. "The fact is, I sometimes fancy I do feel weaker than I ought to. It is n't like me to be weak. I was always so strong, you know,--stronger than all the rest of you, I thought. Miss MacDowlas says I do not look well. I suppose," with a half-sigh, "that every one will see it soon. Aimée," hesitating, "don't tell them at home."

Aimée slipped an arm around her, and drew her head--dressed in all the old elaborateness of pretty coils and braids--upon her own shoulder.

"Darling," she whispered, trying to restrain her tears, "I must tell them at home, because I must take you home to be nursed."

"No, no!" said Dolly, starting, "that would never do. It would never do even to think of it. I am not so ill as that,--not ill enough to be nursed. Besides," her voice sinking all at once, "I could n't go home, Aimée,--I could not bear to go home now. That is why I have stayed away so long. I believe it would kill me!"

It was impossible for Aimée to hear this and be silent longer. She had, indeed, only been waiting for some reference to the past.

"I knew it was that," she cried. "I knew it the moment Mr. Gowan told

me. And I have feared it from the first. Nothing but that could have broken you down like this. Dolly, if Grif could see you now, he would give his heart's blood to undo what he has done."

The pale little hands lying upon the black dress began to tremble in a strange, piteous weakness.

"One cannot forget so much in so short a time," Dolly pleaded. "And it is so much,--more than even you think. One cannot forget seven years in three months,--give me seven months, Aimée. I shall be better in time, when I have forgotten."

Forgotten! Even those far duller of perception than Aimée could have seen that she would not soon forget. She had not begun in the right way to forget. The pain which had made the pretty figure and the soft, round face look faintly worn, was sharper to-day than it had been even three months before, and it was gaining in sharpness every day, nay, every hour.

"The days are so long," she said, plaiting the silk of her dress on-the restless hands. "We are so quiet, except when we have visitors, and somehow visitors begin to tire me. I scarcely ever knew what it was to be tired before. I don't care even to scatter the Philistines now," trying to smile. "I am not even roused by the prospect of meeting Lady Augusta tonight. I forgot to tell you she was coming, did n't I? How she would triumph if she knew how I have fallen and--and how miserable I

am! She used to say I had not a thought above the cut of my dresses. She never knew about--him, poor fellow!"

It was curious to see how she still clung to that tender old pitying way of speaking of Grif.

Aimee began to cry over her again.

"You must come home, Dolly," she said. "You must, indeed. You will get worse and worse if you stay here. I will speak to Miss MacDowlas myself. You say she is kind to you."

"Dear little woman," said Dolly, closing her eyes as she let her head rest upon the girl's shoulder. "Dear, kind little woman! indeed it will be best for me to stay here. It is as I said,--indeed it is. If I were to go home I should die! Oh, don't you know how cruel it would be! To sit there in my chair and see his old place empty,--to sit and hear the people passing in the street and know I should never hear his footstep again,--to see the door open again and again, and know he would never, never pass through. It would break my heart,--it would break my heart!"

"It is broken now!" cried Aimée, in a burst of grief, and she could protest no more.

But she remained as long as she well could, petting and talking to her.

She knew better than to offer her threadbare commonplace comfort, so she took refuge in talking of life at Bloomsbury Place,--about Tod and Mollie and Toinette, and the new picture Phil was at work upon. But it was a hard matter for her to control herself sufficiently to conceal that she was almost in an agony of anxiousness and foreboding. What was she to do with this sadly altered Dolly, the mainspring of whose bright, spirited life was gone? How was she to help her if she could not restore Grif,--it was only Grif she wanted,--and where was he? It was just as she had always said it would be,--without Grif, Dolly was Dolly no longer,--for Grif's sake her faithful, passionate girl's heart was breaking slowly.

Lady Augusta, encountering her ex-governess in the drawing-room that evening, raised her eyeglass to that noble feature, her nose, and condescended a questioning inspection, full of disapproval of the heavy, well-falling black silk and the Elizabethan frill.

"You are looking shockingly pale and thin," she said.

Dolly glanced at her reflection in an adjacent mirror. She only smiled faintly, in silence.

"I was not aware that you were ill," proceeded her ladyship.

"I cannot say that I am ill," Dolly answered. "How is Phemie?"

"Euphemia," announced Lady Augusta, "is well, and I trust" as if she rather doubted her having so far overcome old influences of an evil nature,--"I trust improving, though I regret to hear from her preceptress that she is singularly deficient in application to her musical lessons."

Dolly thought of the professor with the lumpy face, and smiled again. Phemie's despairing letters to herself sufficiently explained why her progress was so slow.

"I hope," said her ladyship to Miss MacDowlas, afterward, "that you are satisfied with Dorothea's manner of filling her position in your household."

"I never was so thoroughly satisfied in my life," returned the old lady, stiffly. "She is a very quickwitted, pleasantly natured girl, and I am extremely fond of her."

"Ah," waving a majestic and unbending fan of carved ivory. "She has possibly improved then. I observe that she is going off very much,--in the matter of looks, I mean."

"I heard a gentleman remark, a few minutes ago," replied Miss MacDowlas, "that the girl looked like a white rose, and I quite agreed with him; but I am fond of her, as I said, and you are not."

Her ladyship shuddered faintly, but she did not make any further comment, perhaps feeling that her hostess was too powerful to encounter.

At midnight the visitors went their several ways, and after they had dispersed and the rooms were quiet once again, Miss MacDowlas sent her companion to bed, or, at least, bade her good-night.

"You had better go at once," she said. "I will remain to give orders to the servants. You look tired. The excitement has been too much for you."

So Dolly thanked her and left the room; but Miss MacDowlas did not hear her ascend the stairs, and accordingly, after listening a moment or so, went to the room door and looked out into the hall. And right at the foot of the staircase lay Dolly Crewe, the lustreless, trailing black dress making her skin seem white as marble, her pretty face turned half downward upon her arm.

Half an hour later the girl returned to consciousness to find herself lying comfortably in bed, the chamber empty save for herself and Miss MacDowlas, who was standing at her side watching her.

"Better?" she said. "That is right, my dear. The evening was too much for you, as I was afraid it would be. You are not as strong as you should be."

"No," Dolly answered, quietly.

There was a silence of a few minutes, during which she closed her eyes again; but she heard Miss MacDowlas fidgeting a little, and at last she heard her speak.

"My dear," she said, "I think I ought to tell you something. When you fell, I suppose you must somehow or other have pressed the spring of your locket, for it was open when I went to you, and--I saw the face inside it."

"Grif," said Dolly, in a tired voice, "Grif."

And then she remembered how she had written to him about what this very dénouement would be when it came. How strange, how wearily strange, it was to think that it should come about in such a way as this!

"My nephew," said Miss MacDowlas. "Griffith Donne."

"Yes," said Dolly, briefly. "I was engaged to him."

"Was!" echoed Miss MacDowlas. "Did he behave badly to you, my dear?"

"No, I behaved badly to him--and that is why I am ill."

Miss MacDowlas blew her nose.

"How long?" she asked, at length. "May I ask how long you were engaged to each other, my dear? Don't answer me if you do not wish."

"I was engaged to him," faltered the girlish voice,--"we were all the world to each other for seven years--for seven long years."