CHAPTER XV. IN WHICH WE TRY SWITZERLAND.

IN the morning of one of the hot days in June, Mollie, standing at the window of Phil's studio, turned suddenly toward the inmates of the room with an exclamation.

"Phil!" she said, "Toinette! There is a carriage drawing up before the door."

"Lady Augusta?" said Toinette, making a dart at Tod.

"Confound Lady Augusta!" ejaculated Phil, devoutly. "That woman has a genius for presenting herself at inopportune times."

"But it is n't Lady Augusta," Mollie objected. "It is n't the Bilberry carriage at all. Do you think I don't know 'the ark'?"

"You ought to by this time," returned Phil. "I do, to my own deep grief."

"It is the Brabazon Lodge carriage!" cried Mollie, all at once. "Miss MacDowlas is getting out, and--yes, here is Dolly!"

"And Tod just washed and dressed!" said Mrs. Phil, picking up her offspring with an air of self-congratulation. "Miracle of miracles! The Fates begin to smile upon us. Phil, how is my back hair?"

"All right," returned Phil. "I suppose I shall have to present myself, too."

It was necessary that they should all present themselves, they found. Miss MacDowlas wished to form the acquaintance of the whole family, it appeared, and apart from this her visit had rather an important object.

"It is a sort of farewell visit," she explained, "though, of course, the farewell is only to be a temporary one. We find London too hot for us, and we are going to try Switzerland. The medical man thinks a change will be beneficial to your sister."

They all looked at Dolly then,--at Dolly in her delicate, crisp summer bravery and her pretty summer hat; but it was neither hat nor dress that drew their eyes upon her all at once in that new questioning way. But Dolly only laughed,--a soft, nervous laugh, however,--and played with her much-frilled parasol.

"Miss MacDowlas," she said, "is good enough to fancy I am not so well as I ought to be, Tod," bending her face low over the pretty little fellow, who had trotted to her knee. "What do you think of Aunt Dolly's appearing in the character of invalid? It sounds like the best of jokes, does n't it, Tod?"

They tried to smile responsively, all of them, but the effort was not a

success. Despite all her pretence of brightness and coquettish attire, there was not one of them who had not been startled when their first greeting was over. Under the triumph of a hat, her face showed almost sharply cut, her skin far too transparently colorless, her eyes much too large and bright. The elaborately coiled braids of hair seemed almost too heavy for the slender throat to bear, and no profusion of trimming could hide that the little figure was worn. The flush and glow and spirit had died away from her. It was not the Dolly who had been wont to pride herself upon ruling supreme in Vagabondia, who sat there before them making them wonder; it was a new creature, who seemed quite a stranger to them.

They were glad to see how fond of her Miss Mac-Dowlas appeared to be. They had naturally not had a very excellent opinion of Miss MacDowlas in the past days; but the fact that Dolly had managed to so win upon her as to bring out her best side, quite softened their hearts. She was not so grim, after all. Her antipathy to Grif had evidently been her most unpleasant peculiarity, and now, seeing her care for this new Dolly, who needed care so much, they were rather touched.

When the farewells had been said, the carriage had driven away, and they had returned to the studio, a silence seemed to fall upon them, one and all. 'Toi-nette sat in her chair, holding Tod, without speaking; Mollie stood near her with a wondering, downcast air; Phil went to the window, and, neglecting his picture wholly for the time being, looked out into the street, whistling softly.

At length he turned round to Aimée.

"Aimée," he said, abruptly, "how long has this been going on?"

"You mean this change?" said Aimée, in a low voice.

"Yes."

"For three months," she answered. "I did not like to tell you because I knew she would not like it; but it dates from the time Grif went away."

Mrs. Phil burst into an impetuous gush of tears, hiding her handsome, girlish face on Tod's neck.

"It is a shame!" she cried out. "It is a cruel, burning shame! Who would ever have thought of Grif's treating her like this?"

"Yes," said Phil; "and who would ever have thought that Dolly would have broken down? Dolly! By George! I can't believe it. If I am able to judge, it seems time that she should try Switzerland or somewhere else. Aimée, has she heard nothing of him?"

"Nothing."

The young man flushed hotly.

"Confound it!" he burst forth. "It looks as if the fellow was a dishonorable scamp. And yet he is the last man I should ever have fancied would prove a scamp."

"But he has not proved himself a scamp yet," said Aimée, in a troubled tone. "And Dolly would not like to hear you say so. And if you knew the whole truth you wouldn't say so. He has been tried too far, and he has been impetuous and rash, but it was his love for Dolly that made him so. And wherever he may be, Phil, I know he is as wretched and hopeless as Dolly herself could be at the worst. It has all been misunderstanding and mischance."

"He has broken Dolly's heart, nevertheless," cried Mrs. Phil. "And if she dies--"

"Dies!" cried out Mollie, opening her great eyes and turning pale all at once. "Dies! Dolly?"

"Hush!" said Aimée, trembling and losing color herself. "Oh, hush!--don't say such things. It sounds so dreadful,--it is too dreadful to think of!"

And so it came about that on another of these hot June days there appeared at the table à'hôte of a certain well-conducted and already

well-filled inn at Lake Geneva two new arrivals,--a tall, thin, elderly lady of excessively English exterior, and a young person who attracted some attention,--a girl who wore a long black dress, and had a picturesque Elizabethan frill about her too slender throat, and who, in spite of her manner and the clearness of her bright voice, was too whitely transparent of complexion and too finely cut of face to look as strong as a girl of one or two and twenty ought to be.

The people who took stock of them, after the manner of all unoccupied hotel sojourners on the lookout for sensations, noticed this. One or two of them even observed that, on entering the room after the slight exertion of descending the staircase, the girl was slightly out of breath and seemed glad to sit down, and that, her companion evidently making some remark upon the fact, she half laughed, as if wishing to make light of it; and they noticed, too, that her naturally small hands were so very slender that her one simple little ring of amethyst and pearls slipped loosely up and down her finger.

They were not ordinary tourists, these new arrivals, it was clear. Their attire told that at once. They had removed their travelling dresses, and looked as if they had quite made up their minds to enjoy their customary mode of life as if they had been at home. They had no courier, the wiseacres had ascertained, and they had brought a neat English serving-woman, who seemed to know her business marvellously well and be by no means unaccustomed to travelling.

"Aunt and niece!" commented one gentleman, surveying Dolly over his soup. "A nice little creature,--the niece." And he mentally resolved to cultivate her acquaintance. But it was not such an easy matter. The new arrivals were unlike ordinary tourists in other respects than in their settled mode of life. They did not seem to care to form chance acquaintance with their fellow guests. They lived quietly and, unless when driving out together or taking short, unfatiguing strolls, remained much in their own apartments. They appeared at the table d'hôte occasionally; but though they were pleasant in manner they were not communicative, and so, after a week or so, people tired of asking questions about them and lapsed into merely exchanging greetings, and looking on with some interest at any changes they observed in the pretty, transparent, though always bright face, and the pliant, soft young figure.

Thus Miss MacDowlas and her companion "tried Switzerland."

"It will do you good, my dear, and brace you up," the elder lady had said; and from the bottom of her heart she had hoped it would.

And did it?

Well, the last time Dolly had "tried Switzerland," she had tried it in the capacity of Lady Augusta's governess, and she had held in charge a host of rampant young Bilberrys, who secretly loathed their daily duties, and were not remarkable in the matter of filial piety, and were

only reconciled to existence by the presence of their maternal parent's greatest trial, that highly objectionable Dorothea Crewe. So, taking Lady Augusta in conjunction with her young charges, the girl had often felt her lot by no means the easiest in the world; but youth and spirit, and those oft-arriving letters, had helped her to bear a great deal, and so there was still something sweet about the memory. Oh, those old letters--those foolish, passionate, tender letters--written in the dusty, hot London office, read with such happiness, and answered on such closely penned sheets of foreign paper! How she had used to watch for them, and carry them to her small bedroom and read them again and again, kneeling on the floor by the open window, the fresh, soft summer breezes from the blue lake far below stirring her hair and kissing her forehead! How doubly and trebly fair she had been wont to fancy everything looked on that "letter day" of hers,--that red-letter day,--that golden-letter day!

The very letters she had written then lay in her trunk now, tied together in a bundle, just as Grif had brought them and laid them down upon the table when he gave her up forever. Her "dead letter" lay with them,--that last, last appeal, which had never reached his heart, and never would. She had written her last letter to him, and he his last to her.

And now she had been brought to "try Switzerland" and Lake Geneva as a Lethe.

But she had determined to be practical and courageous, and bear it as best she might. It would not have been like her to give way at once without a struggle. She did not believe in lovelorn damsels, who pined away and died of broken hearts, and made all their friends uncomfortable by so doing. She made a struggle, and refused to give up. She grew shadowy and fair; but it was under protest, and she battled against the change she felt creeping upon her so slowly but so surely. She showed a brave face to people, and tried to be as bright and ready-witted as ever; and if she failed it was not her own fault. She fought hard against her sleepless nights and weary days; and when she lay awake hour after hour hearing the clock strike, it was not because she made no effort to compose herself, it was only because the delicate wheels of thought would work against her helpless will, and it was worse than useless to close her eyes when she could see so plainly her lost lover's desperate, anguished face, and hear so distinctly his strained, strangely altered voice: "No, it is too late for that now,--that is all over!" And he had once loved her better than his life!

So it was that, try as she might, she could not make Switzerland a success. When she went down to the table d'hôte, people saw that instead of growing stronger she was growing more frail, and the exertion of coming down the long flight of stairs tried her more than it had seemed to do that first day. Sometimes she had a soft, lovely, dangerous color on her cheeks, and her eyes looked almost translucent; and then again the color was gone, her skin was white and transparent, and her eyes were shadowy and languid. When the hot July days came in, the ring of

pearls and amethyst would stay on the small worn hand no longer, and so was taken off and hung with the little bunch of coquettish "charms" upon her chain. But she was not conquered yet, and the guests and servants often heard her laughing, and making Miss MacDowlas laugh as they sat together in their private parlor.

The two were sitting thus together one Saturday early in July,--Dolly in a loose white wrapper, resting in a low basket chair by the open window, and fanning herself languidly,--when a visitor was announced, and the moment after the announcement a tall young lady rushed into the room and clasped Dolly unceremoniously in her arms, either not observing or totally ignoring Miss MacDowlas's presence.

"Dolly!" she cried, kneeling down by the basket chair and speaking so fast that her words tumbled over each other, and her sentences were curiously mingled. "Oh! if you please, dear, I know it was n't polite, and I never meant to do it in such an unexpected, awfully rude way; and what mamma would say, I am sure I cannot tell, unless go into dignified convulsions, and shudder herself stiff; but how could I help it, when I came expecting to see you as bright and lovely as ever, and caught a glimpse of you through the door, as the servant spoke, sitting here so white and thin and tired-looking! Oh, dear! oh, dear! how ever can it be!"

"My dear Phemie!" said Dolly, laughing and crying both at once, through weakness and sympathy,--for of course poor, easily moved Phemie had

burst into a flood of affectionate tears. "My dear child, how excited you are, and how pleasant it is to see you! How did you manage to come?"

"The professor with the lumpy face--poor, pale darling--I mean you, not him," explained the eldest Miss Bilberry, clinging to her ex-governess as if she was afraid of seeing her float through the open window. "The professor with the lumpy face, Dolly; which shows he is not so horrid as I always thought him, and I am very sorry for being so inconsiderate, I am sure--you know he cannot help his lumps any more than I can help my dreadful red hands and my dresses not fitting."

Dolly stopped her here to introduce her to Miss MacDowlas; and that lady having welcomed her good-naturedly, and received her incoherent apologies for her impetuous lack of decorum, the explanation proceeded.

"How could the professor send you here?" asked Dolly.

"He did not exactly send me, but he helped me," replied the luckless Euphemia, becoming a trifle more coherent. "I saw you at the little church, though you did not see me, because, of course, we sit in the most disagreeable part, just where we can't see or be seen at all. And though I only saw you at a distance, and through your veil, and half behind a pillar, I knew you, and knew Miss MacDowlas. I think I knew Miss MacDowlas most because she wasn't behind the pillar. And it nearly drove me crazy to think you were so near, and I gave one of the servants some money to find out where you were staying, and she brought

me word that you were staying here, and meant to stay. And then I asked the lady principal to let me come and see you, and of course she refused; and I never should have been able to come at all, only it chanced that was my music-lesson day, and I went in to the professor with red eyes,--I had cried so,--and when he asked me what I had been crying for, I remembered that he used to be fond of you, and I told him. And he was sorry for me, and promised to ask leave for me. He is a cousin of the lady principal, and a great favorite with her. And the end of it was that they let me come. And I have almost flown. I had to wait until to-day, you know, because it was Saturday."

It was quite touching to see how, when she stopped speaking, she clung to Dolly's hands, and looked at her with wonder and grief in her face.

"What is it that has changed you so?" she said. "You are not like yourself at all. Oh, my dear, how ill you are!"

A wistful shadow showed itself in the girl's eyes.

"Am I so much changed?" she asked.

"You do not look like our Dolly at all," protested Phemie. "You are thin,--oh, so thin! What is the matter?"

"Thin!" said Dolly. "Am I? Then I must be growing ugly enough. Perhaps it is to punish me for being so vain about my figure. Don't you remember

what a dread I always had of growing thin? Just to think that I should grow thin, after all! Do my bones stick out like the Honorable Cecilia Howland's, Phemie?" And she ended with a little laugh.

Phemie kissed her, in affectionate protest against such an idea.

"Oh, dear, no!" she said. "They could n't, you know. They are not the kind of bones to do it. Just think of her dreadful elbows and her fearful shoulder-blades! You couldn't look like her. I don't mean that sort of thinness at all. But you seem so light and so little. And look here," and she held up the painfully small hand, the poor little hand without the ring. "There are no dimples here now, Dolly," she said, sorrowfully.

"No," answered Dolly, simply; and the next minute, as she drew her hand away, there fluttered from her lips a sigh.

She managed to change the turn of conversation after this. Miss MacDowlas had good-naturedly left them alone, and so she began to ask Phemie questions,--questions about school and lessons and companions, about the lady principal and the under-teachers and about the professor with the lumpy face; and, despite appearances being against her, there was still the old ring in her girl's jests.

"Has madame got a new bonnet yet," she asked, "or does she still wear the old one with those aggressive-looking spikes of wheat in it? The

lean ears ought to have eaten up the fat ones by this time."

"But they have n't," returned Phemie. "They are there yet, Dolly. Just the same spikes in the same bonnet, only she has had new saffron-colored ribbon put on it, just the shade of her skin."

Dolly shuddered,--Lady Augusta's own semi-tragic shudder, if Phemie had only recognized it.

"Phemie," she said, with a touch of pardonable anxiety, "ill as I look, I am not that color, am I? To lose one's figure and grow thin is bad enough, but to become like Madame Pillet--dear me!" shaking her head. "I scarcely think I could reconcile myself to existence."

Phemie laughed. "You are not changed in one respect, Dolly," she said. "When I hear you talk it makes me feel quite--quite safe."

"Safe!" Dolly echoed. "You mean to say that so long as I preserve my constitutional vanity, your anxiety won't overpower you. But--but," looking at her curiously, "did you think at first that I was not safe, as you call it?"

"You looked so ill," faltered Phemie. "And--I was so startled."

"Were you?" asked Dolly. "Did I shock you?"

"A little--only just a little, dear," deprecatingly.

Then strangely enough fell upon them a silence. Dolly turned toward the window, and her eyes seemed to fix themselves upon some far-away point, as if she was pondering over a new train of thought. And when at last she spoke, her voice was touched with the tremulous unsteadiness of tears.

"Do you think," she said, slowly,--"do you think that any one who had loved me would be shocked to see me now? Am I so much altered as that? One scarcely sees these things one's self,--they come to pass so gradually."

All poor Phemie's smiles died away.

"Don't let us talk about it," she pleaded. "I cannot bear to hear you speak so. Don't, dear--if you please, don't!"

Her pain was so evident that it roused Dolly at once.

"I won't, if it troubles you," she said, almost in her natural manner. "It does not matter,--why should it? There is no one here to be shocked. I was only wondering."

But the shadow did not quite leave her face, and even when, an hour later, Euphemia bade her good-by and left her, promising to return again

as soon as possible, it was there still.

She was very, very quiet for a few minutes after she found herself alone. She clasped her hands behind her head, and lay back in the light chair, looking out of the window. She was thinking so deeply that she did not even stir for a while; but in the end she got up, as though moved by some impulse, and crossed the room.

Against the wall hung a long, narrow mirror, and she went to this mirror and stood before it, looking at herself from head to foot,--at her piteously sharpened face, with its large, wondering eyes, eyes that wondered at themselves,--at the small, light figure so painfully etherealized, and about which the white wrapper hung so loosely. She even held up, at last, the slender hand and arm; but when she saw these uplifted, appealing, as it were, for this sad, new face which did not seem her own, she broke into a little cry of pain and grief.

"If you could see me now," she said, "if you should come here by chance and see me now, my dear, I think you would not wait to ask whether I had been true or false. I never laid this white cheek on your shoulder, did I? Oh, what a changed face it is! I know I was never very pretty, though you thought so and were proud of me in your tender way, but I was not like this in those dear old days. Grif, Grif, would you know me,--would you know me?" And, turning to her chair again, she dropped upon her knees before it, and knelt there sobbing.