

CHAPTER XVI. IF YOU SHOULD DIE.

THE postman paid frequent visits to Bloomsbury Place during these summer

weeks. At first Dolly wrote often herself, but later it seemed to fall to Miss MacDowlas to answer Aimée's weekly letters and Mollie's fortnightly ones. And that lady was a faithful correspondent, and did her duty as readily as was possible, giving all the news, and recording all Dolly's messages, and issuing regular bulletins on the subject of her health. "Your sister," she sometimes wrote, "is not so well, and I have persuaded her to allow me to be her amanuensis." Or, "Your sister is tired after a rather long drive, and I have persuaded her to rest while I write at her dictation." Or sometimes, "Dolly is rather stronger, and is in excellent spirits, but I do not wish her to exert herself at present." But at length a new element crept into these letters. The cheerful tone gave way to a more dubious one; Dolly's whimsical messages were fewer and farther between, and sometimes Miss MacDowlas seemed to be on the verge of hinting that her condition was a weaker and more precarious one than even she herself had at first feared.

Ralph Gowan, on making his friendly calls, and hearing this, was both anxious and puzzled. In a very short time after his return he had awakened to a recognition of some mysterious shadow upon the household. Vagabondia had lost its spirits. Mrs. Phil and her husband were almost thoughtful; Tod disported himself unregarded and unadmired,

comparatively speaking; Mollie seemed half frightened by the aspect affairs were wearing; and Aimee's wise, round face had an older look. And then these letters! Dolly "trying Switzerland" for her health, Dolly mysteriously ill and far away from home,--too weak sometimes to write. Dolly, who had never seemed to have a weakness; who had entered the lists against even Lady Augusta, and had come off victorious; who had been mock-worldly, and coquettish, and daring; who had made open onslaught upon eligible Philistines; who had angled prettily and with sinful success for ineligible Bohemians! What did it mean? And where was Donne? Certainly he was never to be seen at Bloomsbury Place or in its vicinity in these days.

But, deeply interested as he was, Gowan was not the man to ask questions; so he could only wait until chance brought the truth to light.

He came to the house upon one occasion and found Aimée crying quietly over one of Miss MacDowlas's letters in the parlor, and in his sympathy he felt compelled to speak openly to her.

Then Aimée, heavy of heart and full of despairing grief, handed him the letter to read.

"I have known it would be so--from the first," she sobbed. "We are going to lose her. Perhaps she will not live to come home again."

"You mean Dolly?" he said.

"Yes," hysterically. "Miss MacDowlas says--" But she could get no further.

This was what Miss MacDowlas said:--

"I cannot think it would be right to hide from you that your sister is very ill, though she does not complain, and persists in treating her increasing weakness lightly. Indeed, I am sure that she herself does not comprehend her danger. I am inclined to believe that it has not yet occurred to her that she is in danger at all. She protests that she cannot be ill so long as she does not suffer; but I, who have watched her day by day, can see only too plainly where the danger lies. And so I think it best to warn you to be prepared to come to us at once if at any time I should send for you hurriedly."

"Prepared to go to them!" commented Aimée. "What does that mean? What can it mean but that our own Dolly is dying, and may slip out of the world away from us at any moment? Oh, Grif! Grif! what have you done?"

Gowan closed the letter.

"Miss Aimée," he said, "where is Donne?"

Aimée fairly wrung her hands.

"I don't know," she quite wailed. "If I only did--if I only knew where I could find him!"

"You don't know!" exclaimed Gowan. "And Dolly dying in Switzerland!"

"That is it," she returned. "That is what it all means. If any of us knew--or if Dolly knew, she would not be dying in Switzerland. It is because she does not know, that she is dying. She has never seen him since the night you brought Mollie home. And--and she cannot live without him."

The whole story was told in very few words after this; and Gowan, listening, began to understand what the cloud upon the house had meant. He suffered some sharp enough pangs through the discovery, too. The last frail cords that had bound him to hope snapped as Aimée poured out her sorrows. He had never been very sanguine of success, but even after hoping against hope, his tender fancy for Dolly Crewe had died a very lingering death; indeed, it was not quite dead yet, but he was beginning to comprehend this old love story more fully, and he had found himself forced to do his rival greater justice. He could not see his virtues as the rest saw them, of course, but he was generous enough to pity him, and see that his lot had been a terribly hard one.

"There is only one thing to be done," he said, when Aimée had finished speaking. "We must find him."

"Find him! We cannot find him."

"That remains to be proved," he answered. "Have you been to his lodgings?"

"Yes," mournfully. "And even to the office! He left his lodgings that very night, paid his bills, and drove away in a cab with his trunk. Poor Grif! It was n't a very big trunk. He went to the office the next morning, and told Mr. Flynn he was going to leave London, and one of the clerks told Phil there was a 'row' between them. Mr. Flynn was angry because he had not given due notice of his intention. That is all we know."

"And you have not the slightest clew beyond this?"

"Not the slightest. He spent all his spare time with Dolly, you know; so there is not even any place of resort, or club, or anything, where we might go to make inquiries about him."

Gowan's countenance fell. He felt the girl's distress keenly, apart from his own pain.

"The whole affair seems very much against us," he said; "but he may--I say he may be in London still. I am inclined to believe he is myself. When the first passion of excitement was over, he would find himself

weaker than he fancied he was. It would not be so easy to cut himself off from the old life altogether. He would long so inexpressibly to see Dolly again that he could not tear himself away. I think we may be assured that even if he is not in London, at least he has not left England."

"That was what I have been afraid of," said Aimée, "that he might have left England altogether."

"I cannot think he has," Gowan returned.

They were both silent for a moment. Aimée sat twisting Miss MacDowlas's letter in her fingers, fresh tears gathering in her eyes.

"It is all the harder to bear," she said next, "because Dolly has always seemed so much of a reality to us. If she had been a pale, ethereal sort of girl, it might not seem such a shock; but she never was. She even used to say she could not bear those frail, ethereal people in books, who were always dying and saying touching things just at the proper time, and who knew exactly when to call up their agonized friends to their bedside to see how pathetically and decorously they made their exit. Oh, my poor darling! To think that she should be fading away and dying just in the same way! I cannot make it seem real. I cannot think of her without her color, and her jokes, and her bits of acting, and her little vanities. She will not be our Dolly at all if they have left her. There is a dress of hers up-stairs now,--a dress she couldn't bear.

And I remember so well how she lost her temper when she was making it, because it would n't fit. And when I went into the parlor she was crying over it, and Grif was trying so hard to console her that at last she laughed. I can see her now, with the tears in her eyes, looking half-vexed and half-comforted. And Tod, too,--how fond she was of Tod, and how proud of him! Ah, Tod," in a fresh burst, "when you grow up, the daisies may have been growing for many a year over poor little Aunt Dolly, and you will have forgotten her quite."

"You must not look at the matter in that desponding way," said Gowan, quite unsteadily. "We must hope for the best, and do what we can. You may rely upon me to exert myself to the utmost. If we succeed in finding Donne I am sure that he will do the rest. Perhaps, next summer Vagabondia will be as bright as ever,--nay, even brighter than it has been before."

All his sympathies were enlisted, and, hopeless as the task seemed, he had determined to make strenuous efforts to trace this lost lover. Men had concealed themselves from their friends, in the world of London, often before, and this, he felt sure, Griffith Donne was doing; and since this poor little impassioned, much-tried Dolly was dying in spite of herself for Griffith Donne's sake, and seemed only to be saved by his presence, he must even set himself the task of bringing him to light and clearing up this miserable misunderstanding. Having been Dolly Crewe's lover, he was still generous enough to wish to prove himself her friend; yes, and even her luckier lover's friend, though he winced a trifle at

the thought. Accordingly, he left the house that night with his mind full of half-formed plans, both feasible and otherwise.

During the remainder of that week he did not call at Bloomsbury Place again, but at the beginning of the next he made his appearance, bringing with him a piece of news which excited Aimee terribly.

"I know I shall startle you," he said, the moment they were alone together, "but you can scarcely be more startled than I was myself. I have been on the lookout constantly, but I did not expect to be rewarded by success so soon. Indeed, as it is, it has been entirely a matter of chance. It is as I felt sure it would be. Donne is in London still. I know that much, though that is all I have learned as yet. Late last night I caught a glimpse--only a glimpse--of him hurrying through a by-street. I almost fancied he had seen me and was determined to get out of the way."

"The pretty English girl," said the guests at the inn, "comes down no longer to the table d'hôte!" "The pretty English girl," remarked the wiseacres, "does not even drive out on these days, and the doctor calls every morning to see her."

"And sometimes," added one of the wisest, "again in the evening."

"Consumption," observed another.

"Plainly consumption," nodding significantly. "These English frauleins are so often consumptive," commented a third. "It is astonishing to remark how many come to 'try Switzerland,' as they say."

"And die?"

"And die,--as this one will."

"Poor little thing!" with a sigh and a pitying shrug of the shoulders.

And in the meantime up-stairs the basket chair had been taken away from the window, and a large-cushioned, chintz-covered couch had been pushed into its place, and Dolly lay upon it. But luxurious as her couch was, and balmy as the air was, coming through the widely opened window, she did not find much rest. The fact was, she was past rest by this time, she was too weak to rest. The hot days tried her, and her sleepless nights undermined even her last feeble relic of strength. Sometimes during the day she felt that she could not lie propped up on the pillows a moment longer; but when she tried to stand or sit up she was glad to drop back again into the old place. She lost her breath fearfully soon,--the least exertion left her panting.

"If I had a cough," she said once to Miss MacDowlas, "I could understand that I was ill--or if I suffered any actual pain, but I don't, and even the doctor admits that my lungs are safe enough. What is it that he says about me? Let me see. Ah, this is it: that I am 'below par--fearfully

below par,' as if I was gold, or notes, or bonds, or something. My ideas on the subject of the money market are indefinite, you see. Ah, well; I wonder when I shall be 'above par'!"

She never spoke of her ailments in any other strain. Even as she lay on her couch, too prostrate to either read or work, she made audacious satirical speeches, and told Miss MacDowlas stories of Vagabondia, just as she used to tell them to Grif himself, only that in these days she could not get up to flourish illustratively; and often after lying for an hour or so in a dead, heavy, exhausting day-sleep, she opened her eyes at last, to jest about her faithful discharge of her duties as companion. Only she herself knew of the fierce battles she so often fought in secret, when her sore, aching heart cried out so loud for Grif and would not--would not be comforted.

She saw Phemie frequently. The much-abused professor had proved himself a faithful friend to them. He had never been quite able to forget the little English governess, who had so won upon him in the past, even though this same young lady, in her anxiety to set Lady Augusta at defiance, had treated him somewhat cavalierly. Indeed, hearing that she was ill, he was so touched as to be quite overwhelmed with grief.

He gained Euphemia frequent leaves of absence, and sent messages of condolence and bouquets,--huge bunches of flowers which made Dolly laugh even while they pleased her. There was always a bouquet, stiff in form and gigantic in proportions, when Phemie came.

At first Phemie caught the contagion of Dolly's own spirit and hopefulness, and was sustained by it in spite of appearances; but its influence died out at the end of a few weeks, and even she was not to be deceived. An awful fear began to force itself upon her,--a fear doubly awful to poor, susceptible Phemie. Dolly was getting no better; she was even getting worse every day; she could not sit up; she was thinner and larger-eyed than ever. Was something going to happen? And at the mere thought of that possible something she would lose her breath and sit looking at Dolly, silent, wondering, and awe-stricken. She began to ponder over this something, as she tried to learn her lessons; she thought of it as she went to bed and she dreamed of it in the night. Sometimes when she came in unexpectedly and found Dolly in one of those prostrate sleeps, she was so frightened that she could have cried out aloud.

She came in so one evening at twilight,--the professor had brought her himself and had promised to escort her home,--and she found Dolly in one of these sleeps. So, treading lightly, she put the bouquet in water, and then drew a low chair to the girl's side and sat down to watch and wait until she should awaken. Miss MacDowlas was in her own room writing to Aimée; so the place seemed very quiet, and it was its quietness, perhaps, which so stirred Phemie to sorrowful thoughts and fear.

Upon her brightly flowered chintz cushions Dolly lay like the shadow of her former self. The once soft, round outlines of her face had grown clear and sharp-cut, the delicate chin had lost its dimple, the

transparent skin upon the temples showed a tracery of blue veins, the closed eyelids had a strange whiteness and lay upon her eyes heavily. She did not move,--she seemed scarcely to breathe. Phemie caught her own breath and held it, lest it should break from her in a sob of grief and terror.

This something awful was going to happen! She could not recover herself even when Dolly wakened and began to talk to her. She could not think of anything but her own anguish and pity for her friend. She could not talk and was so silent, indeed, that Dolly became silent too; and so, as the dusk fell upon them, they sat together in a novel quiet, listening to a band of strolling musicians, who were playing somewhere in the distance, and the sound of whose instruments floated to them, softened and made plaintive by the evening air.

At last Dolly broke the silence.

"You are very quiet, Phemie," she said. "Are you going to sleep?"

"No," faltered Phemie, drawing closer to her. "I am thinking."

"Thinking. What about?"

"About you. Dolly, do you--are you very ill--worse than you were?"

"Very ill!" repeated Dolly, slowly, as if in wonder. "Worse than I was!"

Why do you ask?"

Then Phemie lost self-control altogether. She left her seat and fell down by the couch, bursting into tears.

"You are so altered," she said; "and you alter so much every week. I cried over your poor, thin little hands when first I came to see you, but now your wrist looks as if it would snap in two. Oh, Dolly, darling, if--if you should die!"

Was it quite a new thought, or was it because it had never come home to her in such a form before, this thought of Death? She started as if she had been stung.

"If I should die!" she echoed. "Die!"

"Phemie, my dear," said Miss MacDowlas, opening the door, "the professor is waiting down-stairs."

And so, having let her sorrow get the better of her, Phemie had no time to stay to see if her indiscretion had done harm. If she did not go now, she might not be allowed fresh grace; and so she was fain to tear herself away.

"I ought n't to have said it!" she bewailed, as she kissed Dolly again and again. "Please forget it; oh, do, please, forget it! I did not mean

it, indeed! And now I shall be so frightened and unhappy!"

"Phemie," said Dolly, quietly, "you have not frightened me; so you haven't the least need to trouble yourself, my dear."

But she was not exactly sorry to be left alone, and when she was alone her thoughts wandered back to that first evening Phemie had called,--the evening she had gone to the glass to look at her changed face. She had sat in the basket-chair then,--she lay back upon her cushions now, and a crowd of new thoughts came trooping through her mind. The soft air was scented and balmy; the twilight sky was a dome of purple, jewel-hung; people's voices came murmuring from the gardens below; the far-off music floated to her through the window.

"If I should die!" she said, in a wondering whisper,--"I, Dolly Crewe! How strange it sounds! Have I never thought that I could die before, or is it strange because now it is so real and near? When I used to talk about death to Grif, it always seemed so far away from both of us; it seemed to me as if I was not good enough or unreal enough to be near to Death,--great, solemn Death itself. Why, I could look at myself, and wonder at the thought of how much I shall see and know if I should die. Grif, how much I should have to tell you, dear,--only that people are always afraid of spirits, and perhaps you would be afraid, too,--even of me! What would they say at home? Dear, old, broken-hearted fellow, what would you say, if I should die?"

She could not help thinking about those at home; about Aimée and Mollie and Phil and Toinette, sitting together in the dear old littered room at Bloomsbury Place,--the dear old untidy room, where she had sat with Grif so often! How would they all bear it when the letter came to tell them she was gone, and would never be with them and share their pleasures and troubles again! And then, strangely enough, she began to picture herself as she would look; perhaps, laid out in this very room, a dimly outlined figure, under a white sheet,--not her old self, but a solemn, wondrous marble form, before whose motionless, mysterious presence they would feel awed.

"And they would turn down the white covering and look at me," she found herself saying. "And they would wonder at me, and feel that I was far away. Oh, how they would wonder at me! And, at the very last, before they hid my face forever under the coffin-lid, they would all kiss me in that tender, solemn way,--all but Grif, who loved me best; and Grif would not be there!"

And the piteous rain of heavy tears that rolled down her cheeks, and fell upon her pillow, was not for herself,--not for her own pain and weariness and anguish,--not' for the white, worn face, that would be shut beneath the coffin-lid, but for Grif,--for Grif,--for Grif, who, coming back some day to learn the truth, might hear that she had died!