

CHAPTER XVII. DO YOU KNOW THAT SHE IS DYING?

IT had come at last,--the letter from Geneva, for which they all had waited with such anxious hearts and so much of dread. The postman, bringing it by the morning's delivery, and handing it through the opened door to Aimée, had wondered a little at her excited manner,--she was always excited when these letters came; and the moment she had entered the parlor, holding the hurriedly read note,--it was scarcely more than a note,--there was not one of them who did not understand all before she spoke.

Mrs. Phil burst into tears; Phil himself laid down his brush and changed color; Mollie silently clung to Tod as a refuge, and looked up with trembling lips.

Mrs. Phil was the first to speak.

"You may as well tell us the worst," she said; "but it is easy enough to guess what it is, without being told."

"It is almost the very worst," answered Aimée.

"Miss MacDowlas wants me to go to them at once. She is so ill that if a change does not take place, she will not live many weeks, and she has asked for me."

They all knew only too well that "she" meant Dolly.

"Then," said Phil, "you must go at once."

"I can go to-day," she answered. "I knew it would come to this, and I am ready to leave London at any moment."

There was no delay. Her small box was even then ready packed and corded for the journey. She had taken Miss MacDowlas's warning in time. It would not have been like this heavy-hearted wise one to disregard it. She would have been ready to go to Dolly at ten minutes' notice, if she had been in India. She was not afraid, either, of making the journey alone. It was not a very terrible journey, she said. Secretly, she had a fancy that perhaps Dolly would like to see her by herself first, to have a few quiet days alone with her, in which she could become used to the idea of the farewell the rest would come to say. And in her mind the poor little oracle had another fancy, too, and this fancy she confided to Mollie before bidding her good-by.

"Mollie," she said, "I am going to leave a charge in your hands."

"Is it anything about Dolly?" asked Mollie, making fruitless efforts to check her affectionate tears.

"I wish you would leave me something to do for Dolly, Aimée."

"It is something connected with Dolly;" returned Aimée. "I want you to keep constantly on the watch for Griffith."

"For Griffith!" Mollie exclaimed. "How can I, when I don't know whether he is in England or not?"

"He is in England," Aimée replied. "He is in London, for Mr. Gowan has seen him."

"In London--and Dolly in Switzerland, perhaps dying!"

"He does not know that, or he would have been with her before now," said Aimée. "Once let him know that she is ill, and he will be with her. I know him well enough to be sure of that. And it is my impression that if he went to her at the eleventh hour, when she might seem to us to be at the very last, he would bring her back to life. It is Grif she is dying for, and only Grif can save her."

"And what do you want me to do?" anxiously.

"To watch for him constantly, as I said. Don't you think, Mollie, that he might come back, if it were only into the street to look at the house, in a restless sort of remembrance of the time when they used to be so happy?"

"It would not be unlike him," answered Mollie, slowly. "He was very fond of Dolly. Oh, he was very fond of her!"

"Fond of her! He loved her better than his life, and does still, wherever he may be. Something tells me he will come, and that is why I want you to watch. Watch at the window as constantly as you can, but more particularly at dusk; and if you should see him, Mollie, don't wait a second. Run out to him, and make him listen to you. Ah, poor fellow, he will listen eagerly and penitently enough, if you only say to him that Dolly is dying."

"Very well," said Mollie, "I will remember." And thus the wise one took her departure.

It was twilight in Bloomsbury Place, and Mollie crouched before the parlor window, resting her chin upon her hands, and looking out, pretty much as Aimée had looked out on that winter evening months ago, when Mr.

Gerald Chandos had first presented himself to her mind as an individual to be dreaded.

Three days had passed since the wise one left London,--three miserable, dragging days they had seemed to Mollie, despite their summer warmth and sunshine. Real anxiety and sorrow were new experiences in Vagabondia; little trials they had felt, and often enough small unpleasantnesses, privations, and disappointments; but death and grief were new. And they

were just beginning to realize broadly the blow which had fallen upon them; hard as it was to believe at first, they were beginning slowly to comprehend the sad meaning of the lesson they were learning now for the first time. What each had felt a fear of in secret was coming to pass at last, and there was no help against it.

Phil went about his work looking as none of them had ever seen him look before. Mrs. Phil's tears fell thick and fast. Not understanding the mystery, she could blame nobody but Grif, and Grif she could not forgive. To Mollie the house seemed like a grave. She could think of nothing but Dolly,--Dolly, white and worn and altered, lying upon her couch, her eyes closed, her breath fluttering faintly. She wondered if she was afraid to die. She herself had a secret girlish terror of death and its strange solemnness, and she so pitied Dolly that sometimes she could not contain her grief, and was obliged to hide herself until her tears spent themselves.

She had been crying during all this twilight hour she had knelt at the window. She was so lonely that it seemed impossible to do anything else. It would have been bad enough to bear the suspense even if Aimée had been with her, but without Aimée it was dreadful. The tears slipped down her cheeks and rolled away, and she did not even attempt to dry them, her affectionate grief had mastered her completely. But she was roused at length. Some one crossed the street from the pavement opposite the house; and when this some one entered the gate and ascended the steps, she rose slowly, half-reluctant, half-comforted, and with a faint

thrill at her heart. It was Ralph Gowan, and she was not wise enough or self-controlled enough yet to see Ralph Gowan without feeling her pulses quicken.

When she opened the door he did not greet her as usual, but spoke to her at once in a low, hurried tone.

"Mollie, where is Aimée?" he asked.

Her tears began to flow again; she could not help giving way.

"You had better come in," she said, half turning away from him and speaking brokenly. "Aimée is not here. She left London three days ago. Dolly--"

"Dolly is worse!" he said, because she could not finish.

She nodded, with a heart too full for words.

He stepped inside, and, closing the door, laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"Then, Mollie," he said, "I must come to you."

He did not wait a moment, but led her gently enough into the parlor, and, blinded as she was by her tears, she saw that instant that he had

not come without a reason.

"Don't cry," he said. "I want you to be brave and calm now,--for Dolly's sake. I want your help,--for Dolly's sake, remember."

She recollected Aimée's words--"Mr. Gowan has seen him"--and a sudden light flashed upon her. The tears seemed to dry of their own accord all at once, as she looked up.

"Yes," she answered.

He knew, without hearing another word, that he might trust her.

"Can you guess whom I have just this moment seen?" he said.

"Yes," sprang from her lips, without a second's hesitation. "You have seen Grif."

"I have seen Grif," he answered. "He is at the corner of the street now. If I had attempted to speak to him he would have managed to avoid me; and because I knew that, I came here, hoping to find Aimée; but since Aimée is not here--"

"I can go," she interrupted him, all a-tremble with eagerness. "He will listen to me; he was fond of me, too, and I was fond of him. Oh! let me go now!"

That bright little scarlet shawl of Dolly's lay upon the sofa, and she snatched it up with shaking hands and threw it over her head and shoulders.

"If I can speak to him once, he will listen," she said; "and if he listens, Dolly will be saved. She won't die if Grif comes back. She can't die if Grif comes back. Oh, Dolly, my darling, you saved me, and I am going to try to save you."

She was out in the street in two minutes, standing on the pavement, looking up and down, and then she ran across to the other side. She kept close to the houses, so that she might be in their shadow, and a little sob broke from her as she hurried along,--a sob of joy and fear and excitement. At the end of the row of houses somebody was standing under the street lamp,--a man. Was it Grif,--or could Grif have gone even in this short time? Fate could never have been so cruel to him, to her, to them all, as to let him come so near and then go away without hearing that Dolly was lying at death's portals, and no one could save her but himself and the tender power of the sweet, old, much-tried love. Oh, no, no! It was Grif indeed; for as she neared the place where he stood, she saw his face in the lamp-light,--a grief-worn, pallid face, changed and haggard and desperate,--a sight that made her cry out aloud.

He had not seen her or even heard her. He stood there looking toward the house she had left, and seeing, as it seemed, nothing else. Only the

darkness had hidden her from him. His eyes were fixed upon the dim light that burned in Dolly's window. She had not meant to speak until she stood close to him; but when she was within a few paces of him her excitement mastered her.

"Grif," she cried out; "Grif, is it you?"

And when he turned, with a great start, to look at her, she was upon him,--her hands outstretched, the light upon her face, the tears streaming down her cheeks,--sobbing aloud.

"Mollie," he answered, "is it you?" And she saw that he almost staggered.

She could not speak at first. She clung to his arm so tightly that he could scarcely have broken away from her if he had tried. But he did not try; it seemed as though her touch made him weak,--weaker than he had ever been before in his life. Beauty as she was, they had always thought her in some way like Dolly, and, just now, with Dolly's gay little scarlet shawl slipping away from her face, with the great grief in her imploring eyes, with that innocent appealing trick of the clinging hands, she might almost have been Dolly's self.

Try as he might, he could not regain his self-control. He was sheerly powerless before her.

"Mollie," he said, "what has brought you here? Why have you come?"

"I have come," she answered, "for Dolly's sake!"

The vague fear he had felt at first caught hold upon him with all the fulness of its strength.

"For Dolly's sake!" he echoed. "Nay, Dolly has done with me, and I with her." And though he tried to speak bitterly, he failed.

She was too fond of Dolly, and too full of grief to spare him after that. Unstrung as she was, her reproach burst forth from her without a softened touch. "Dolly has done with earth. Dolly's life is over," she sobbed. "Do you know that she is dying? Yes, dying,--our own bright Dolly,--and you--you have killed her!"

She had not thought how cruel it would sound, and the next instant she was full of terror at the effect of her own words. He broke loose from her,--fell loose from her, one might better describe it, for it was his own weight rather than any effort which dragged him from her grasp. He staggered and caught hold of the iron railings to save himself, and there hung, staring at her with a face like a dead man.

"My God!" he said,--not another word.

"You must not give way like that," she cried out, in a new fright. "Oh,

how could I speak so! Aimée would have told you better. I did not mean to be so hard. You can save her if you will. She will not die, Grif, if you go to her. She only wants you. Grif,--Grif,--you look as if you could not understand what I am saying." And she wrung her hands.

And, indeed, it scarcely seemed as if he did understand, though at last he spoke.

"Where is she?" he said. "Not here? You say I must 'go' to her."

"No, she is not here. She is at Lake Geneva. Miss MacDowlas took her there because she grew so weak, and she has grown weaker ever since, and three days ago they sent for Aimée to come to her, because--because they think she is going to die."

"And you say that I have done this?"

"I ought n't to have put it that way, it sounds so cruel, but--but she has never been like herself since the night you went away, and we have all known that it was her unhappiness that made her ill. She could not get over it, and though she tried to hide it, she was worn out. She loved you so."

He interrupted her.

"If she is dying for me," he said, hoarsely, "she must have loved me,

and if she has loved me through all this,--God help us both!"

"How could you go away and leave her all alone after all those years?" demanded Mollie. "We cannot understand it. No one knows but Aimée, and Dolly has told her that you were not to blame. Why did you go?"

"You do not know?" he said. "You should know, Mollie, of all others. You were with her when she played that miserable coquette's trick,--that pitiful trick, so unlike herself,--you were with her that night when she let Gowan keep her away from me, when I waited for her coming hour after hour. I saw you with them when he was bidding her goodnight."

They had hidden their secret well all these months, but it was to be hidden no longer now. It flashed upon her like an electric shock. She remembered a hundred things,--a hundred little mysteries she had met and been puzzled by, in Aimee's manner; she remembered all she had heard, and all she had wondered at, and her heart seemed turned to stone. The flush of weeping died out of her face, her hands fell and hung down at her side, her tears were gone; nothing seemed left to her but blank horror.

"Was it because she did not come that night, that you left her to die?" she asked, in a labored voice. "Was it because you saw her with Ralph Gowan--was it because you found out that she had been with him, that you went away and let her break her heart? Tell me!"

He answered her, "Yes."

"Then," she said, turning to face him, still cold, and almost rigid, "it is I who have killed her, and not you."

"You!" he exclaimed.

She did not wait to choose her words, or try to soften the story of her own humiliation.

"If she dies," she said, "she has died for me."

And without further preface she told him all. How she had let Gerald Chandos flatter and gain power over her, until the climax of her folly had been the wild, wilful escapade of that miserable long-past day. How Ralph Gowan had discovered her romantic secret, and revealed it to Dolly. How they had followed and rescued her; even how Dolly had awakened her from her dangerous dream with that light touch, and had drawn her away from the brink of an abyss, with her loving, girlish hands; and she ended with an outburst of anguish.

"Why did n't she tell you?" she said. "For my sake she did not want the rest to know; but why did not she tell you? I cannot understand."

"She tried to tell me," he said, in an agony of self-reproach, as he

began to see what he had done,--"she tried to tell me, and I would not hear her."

All his bygone sufferings--and, Heaven knows, he had suffered bitterly and heavily enough--sank into insignificance before the misery of this hour. To know how true and pure of heart she had been; to know how faithful, unselfish, sweet; to remember how she had met him with a tender little cry of joy, with outstretched, innocent hands, that he had thrust aside; to remember the old golden days in which she had so clung to him, and brightened his life; to think how he had left her lying upon the sofa that night, her white face drooping piteously against the cushions; to have all come back to him and know that he only was to blame; to know it all too late. Nay, a whole life of future bliss could never quite efface the memory of such a passion of remorse and pain.

"Oh, my God!" he prayed, "have mercy upon me!" And then he turned upon Mollie. "Tell me where to go to; tell me, and let me go. I must go to her now without a moment's waiting. My poor, faithful little girl,--my pretty Dolly! Dying,--dying! No, I don't believe it,--I won't. She cannot die yet. Fate has been cruel enough to us, but it cannot be so cruel as that. Love will make her live."

He dashed down Mollie's directions in desperate, feverish haste upon a leaf of his memorandum-book, and then he bade her good-by.

"God bless you, dear!" he said. "Perhaps you have saved us both. I am

going to her now. Pray for me."

"I ought rather to pray for myself," she said; "but for me you would never have been separated. I have done it all."

And a few minutes after he had gone, Ralph Gowan, who had awaited her return before the window, turned to see her enter the room like a spirit and fling herself down before him, looking white and shaken and pale.

"I have found it all out now," she cried. "I have found it all out. I have done all this, Mr. Gowan; it is through me her heart is broken, and if she dies, I shall have caused her death, as surely as if I had killed her with my own hand. Oh, save me from thinking she will die,--help me to think she will live,--help me!"

There was no one else to help her, and the blind terror of the thought was so great that she must have help, or die. To have so injured Dolly, whom she so loved,--to have, by her own deed, brought that dread shadow of Death upon Dolly, who had saved her! Her heart seemed crushed. If Aimée had been there; but Aimée was not, so she stretched out her hands to the man she had so innocently loved. And as she so knelt before him,--so fair, in the childlike abandon of her grief, so guileless and trusting in her sudden, sweet appeal, so helpless against the world, even against herself,--his man's heart was touched and stirred as it had never been before,--as even Dolly herself had not stirred it.

"My poor child!" he said, taking her hands and drawing her nearer to himself. "My poor, pretty Mollie, come to me."

And why not, my reader? If one rose is not for us, the sun shines on many another as sweet and quite as fair; and what is more, it is more than probable that if we had seen the last rose first, we should have loved the first rose last. It is only when, like Dolly and Grif, we have watched our rose from its first peep of the leaf, and have grown with its growth, that there can be no other rose but one.

"Le roi est mort--Vive le roi!"