

## CHAPTER XVIII. GRIF!

THERE was a hush upon the guests at the pretty little inn. Most of them were not sojourners of a day, who came and went, as they did at the larger and busier hotels,--they were comfortable people who enjoyed themselves in their own quiet way and so had settled down for the time being. Accordingly they had leisure to become interested in each other; and there were few of them who did not feel a friendly interest in the pretty, pale English girl, who, report said, was fading silently out of life in her bright room up-stairs. When Aimée arrived, the most sympathetic shook their heads dubiously.

"The sister is here," they said; "a thoughtful little English creature with a child's face and a woman's air. They sent for her. One can easily guess what that means."

Any one but Aimée would have been crushed at the outset by the shock of the change which was to be seen in the poor little worn figure, now rarely moved from its invalid's couch. But Aimée bore the blow with outward quiet at least. If she shed tears Dolly did not see them, and if she mourned Dolly was not disturbed by her sorrow.

"I have come to help Miss MacDowlas to take care of you, Dolly," she said, when she gave her her greeting kiss, and Dolly smiled and kissed her in return.

But it was a terribly hard matter to fight through at first. Of course, as the girl had become weaker she had lost power over herself. She was restless and listless by turns. Sometimes she started at every sound, and again she lay with closed eyes for hours, dozing the day away. The mere sight of her in this latter state threw poor Phemie into an agony of terror and distress.

"It is so like Death," she would say to Aimée. "It seems as if we could never rouse her again."

And then again she would rally a little, and at such times she would insist upon being propped up and allowed to talk, and her eyes would grow large and bright, and a spot of hectic color would burn on her cheeks. She did not even mention her trouble during the first two days of Aimée's visit, but on the third afternoon she surprised her by broaching the subject suddenly. She had been dozing, and on awakening she began to talk.

"Aimée," she said, "where is Miss MacDowlas?"

"In her room. I persuaded her to go and lie down."

"I am very glad," quietly. "I want to do something particular. I want Grif's letters, Aimée."

"Where are they?" Aimée asked.

"In a box in my trunk. I should like to have them now."

Aimée brought them to her without comment. The box had not been large enough to hold them all, and there was an extra packet tied with that dear old stereotyped blue ribbon.

"What a many there are!" said Dolly, when she came to the couch with them. "You will have to sit down by me and hold some of them. One can write a great many letters in seven years."

The wise one sat down, obediently holding the box upon her knee. There were so many letters in it that it was quite heavy.

"I am going to look them over and tie them in packages, according to their dates," said Dolly. "He will like to have them when he comes back."

It would not have been natural for her to preserve her calmness all through the performance of her task. Her first glance at the first letter brought the tears, and she cried quietly as she passed from one to the other. They were such tender, impetuous letters. The very headings--"My Darling," "My pretty Darling," "My own sweetest Life"--impassioned, youthful-sounding, and Grif-like, cut her to the heart. Ah! how terrible it would be for him to see them again, as he would see them! She was pitying him far more than she was pitying

herself.

It was a work not soon over, but she finished it at length. The packets were assorted and tied with new ribbon, and she lay down for a few minutes to rest.

"You will give them to him, Aimée?" she said. "I think he will come some day; but if he does not, you must keep them yourself. I should not like people to read them--afterwards. Love-letters won't stand being read by strangers. I have often laughed and told him ours would n't. I am going to write a last one, however, this afternoon. You are to give it him, with the 'dead' letter--but they are all dead letters, are they not?"

"Dolly," said Aimée, with a desperate effort, "you speak as if you were sure you were--going."

There was a silence, and then a soft, low, tremulous laugh,--the merest echo of a laugh. Despite her long suffering Dolly was Dolly yet. She would not let them mourn over her.

"Going," she said, "well--I think I am. Yes," half reflectively, "I think I must be. It cannot mean anything else,--this feeling, can it? It was a long time before I quite believed it myself, Aimée, but now I should be obliged to believe it if I did not wish to."

"And do you wish to, now?"

That little silence again, and then--

"I should like to see Grif,--I want Grif,--that is all."

She managed to write her last love-letter after this, and to direct it and tie it with the letter which had returned to her,--the "dead" letter. But the effort seemed to tire her very much, and when all was done and her restless excitement had died out, she looked less like herself than ever. She could talk no more, and was so weak and prostrate that Aimée was alarmed into summoning Miss MacDowlas.

But Miss MacDowlas could only shake her head. "We cannot do anything to rouse her," she said. "It is often so. If the end comes, it will come in this way. She feels no pain."

That night Aimée wrote to those at home. They must come at once if they wanted to see Dolly. She watched all night by the bedside herself; she could not have slept if she had gone to her own room, and so she remained with Dolly, watching her doze and waken, starting from nervous sleeps and sinking into them again.

"There will not be many nights through which I can watch," she said to herself. "Even this might be the last." And then she turned to the window, and cried silently, thinking of Grif, and wondering what she should say to him, if they ever met again.

How could she say to him, "Dolly is dead! Dolly died because you left her!"

Another weary day and night, and then the old change came again. The feverish strength seemed to come once more. Dolly would be propped up, and talk. Before very long Aimée began to fancy that she had something she wished to say to Miss Mac-Dowlas. She followed her movements with eager, unsatisfied eyes, and did not seem at ease until she sat down near her. Then when she had secured her attention the secret revealed itself. She had something to say about Grif.

Gradually, during the long weary weeks of her illness she had learned to place much confidence in Miss MacDowlas. Her affectionate nature had clung to her. In telling anecdotes of life in Vagabondia, she had talked of Grif,--Vagabondia would not have been Vagabondia without Grif,--and there was always a thrill of faithful love in her simplest mention of him. Truly, Miss MacDowlas beheld her reprobate nephew in a new light, surrounded by a halo of innocent romance and unselfish tenderness. This poor little soul, who was breaking her heart for his sake, showed him sinned against but never sinning, unfortunate but never to blame, showed him honest, sweet of nature, true, and faultless. Where were his faults in the eyes of his first and last love? The simple, whimsical stories of their loves and lovers' quarrels, of their small economies and perfect faith in the future,--a faith so sadly wrecked, as it seemed, by cruel Fate,--brought tears into Miss MacDowlas's eyes. Eloquent, affectionate

Dolly won her over before she knew what she was thinking about. He could not have been such a reprobate, after all,--this Griffith Donne, who had so often roused her indignation. Perhaps he could not help being literary and wearing a shabby coat and a questionable hat. And Dolly had in the end begun to see how her long-fixed opinion had softened and changed. So she had courage to plead for Grif this afternoon. She wanted to be sure that if he should ever come back, there would be a hand outstretched to help him.

"He only wanted help," she said; "and no one has ever helped him, though he tried so hard and worked so. Aimée knows how hard he worked, don't you, Aimée?"

"Yes," answered Aimée, turning her working face away.

"I should like you to promise," said Dolly, wistfully, to Miss MacDowlas. "It would make me so much happier. You have been so kind to me,--I am sure you will be kind to him,--poor Grif,--poor fellow!"

Miss MacDowlas bent over her, touched to the heart.

"My dear," she said, "he shall never want help again. He must have been worthy of so much love, or he would never have won it. I owe him some recompense, too. If I had not been so stupidly blind I might have saved you both all this pain. I have grown very fond of you, Dolly," she ended; and then, being quite overcome, she kissed the pretty hair

suddenly, gave the thin hand an almost motherly squeeze, and made the best of her way out of the room.

"Aimée," said Dolly, "do you remember how often I have made fun of her, when we were all so happy together? We made a good many mistakes, even in Vagabondia, did n't we?" And then she closed her eyes and lay silent, with wet lashes resting on her cheek.

In speaking of this afternoon, long afterwards, Aimée said it seemed the longest and weariest she had ever known. It was extremely hot, and the very air seemed laden with heavy languor. The sun beat down upon the outer world whitely, and scarcely a leaf stirred. Miss MacDowlas did not return, and Dolly, though she was not asleep, lay quite still and did not open her eyes again. So Aimée sat and watched at her side, wondering how the day would end,--wondering if Phil and 'Toinette and Mollie would arrive before it was too late,--wondering what that strange last hour would be like, and how Dolly would bear it when it came, and how they themselves would bear to think of it when it was over.

She was not quite sure how long she sat watching so, but she fancied that it must have been two or three hours, or even more. She got up at last and drew down the green blinds as noiselessly as possible, and then went back to her place and rested her head upon the pillow near Dolly's, feeling drowsy and tired,--she had slept so little during the past few nights.

Dolly moved restlessly, stretching out her hand to Aimée's and opening her eyes all at once--ah! what large, hollow, shadowy eyes they were!

"I am very tired," she murmured, "so tired and so weak, Aimée," dreamily. "I suppose this is what you would call dying of a broken heart. It seems so queer that I should die of a broken heart." "Oh, Dolly--Dolly!" Aimée whispered, "our own dearest dear, we never thought such pain could come to you."

But even the next moment Dolly seemed to have lost herself, her eyes closed again and she did not speak. So Aimée lay holding her hand, until the in-door silence, the shadow of the room, and the sound of the droning bees outside lulled her into a sort of doze, and her own eyelids fell wearily.

A minute, was it, five or ten, or more than that?

She could not say. She only remembered her own last words, the warmth, the shadow, the droning of the bees, and the gradual losing consciousness, and then she was wide awake again,--awakened by a strange, wild cry, which, thrilling and echoing through the room, made her start up with a beating heart and look towards the door.

"Grif!"

That was all,--only this single rapturous cry, and Dolly, who had before

seemed not to have the strength of a child, was sitting up, a white, tremulous figure, with outstretched arms and fluttering breath, and Grif was standing upon the threshold.

Even when she had blamed him most, Aimée had pitied him also; but she had never pitied him as she did when he strode to the couch and took the weak, worn, tremulous little figure in his arms. He could not speak,--neither spoke. Dolly lay upon his breast crying like a little child. But for him--his grief was terrible; and when the loving hand was laid upon his cheek and Dolly found her first words, they only seemed to make it worse.

"Don't cry," she said. "Don't cry, dear. Kiss me!" He kissed her lips, her hands, her hair. He could not bear it. She was so like, yet so fearfully unlike, the winsome, tender creature he had loved so long.

"Oh, my God!" he cried, in his old mad way, "you are dying, and if you die it will be I who have murdered you!"

She moved a little nearer, so that her pretty face rested against his shoulder and she could lift her streaming eyes to his, her old smile shining through her tears.

"Dear old fellow," she said, "darling old fellow, whom I love with all my soul! I shall live just to prove that you have done nothing of the kind!"

It was only Grif she wanted,--only Grif, and Grif had come.