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THE LOVE STORY OF ALISON BARNARD

BY KATHARINE TYNAN

(Author of "The Handsome Brander," &c.)

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

The Duchess and Lady Rose had arrived at Dalmain for a short stay of a week. They had arrived in the afternoon and been shown to their rooms where tea had been provided for them, and it was a rested and refreshed pair of ladies who entered the drawing room ten minutes before the dinner-bell.

All the men were assembled. They had been two or three weeks members of a bachelor establishment and were prepared to be pleased with the advent of ladies. The Duchess was wearing her grey moire and rose point, with her rubies, which had constituted full war-paint for Midham dinners and dances longer than people could remember. It was possible that the moire might have been renewed from time to time, but improbable since its fashion remained the same, and that dated itself for several years back. Lady Rose who could say things to the Duchess that no one else could, had once suggested to her that she should have a frock made in a newer fashion. The Duchess had responded in a flash of humour. "It is the fashion of the day before yesterday; those of the day before that are dowdy; presently the fashion will have travelled the circle and my moire will be her last cry."

However, Lady Rose made up for her aunt's lack of smartness. A genius had devised for her that frock of pink silk, not salmon, not faint rose, but the true pink from which her black head and eyes, her white skin, and pink cheeks, and pink lips rose radiantly, bewitchingly fresh. The frock was made in a round, bouffant, childish way, and her shoulders were like a baby's. One had an impulse to hug her as though she were a baby or a cabbage rose. The Duchess cast a glance over the party of men as they were introduced to her and approved. After dinner there was a whist table on her account. There was Bridge, there was billiards to draw the golden youth away from the whist-table. Lady Rose was at the piano, the centre of a group of admirers. With a longing glance her way Captain Denham volunteered for the whist-table.

In the cutting for partners he fell to the Duchess. Their opponents were Mr. Peter Bosanquet and Sir Gerard Molyneux. The Duchess was greedy about sixpences, and the sixpenny points mounted up. Captain Denham made no mistakes, never trumped his partner, led to her suits with miraculous intuition; he did not seem to notice when she trumped him; and congratulated her on play which was the simple and unscientific play of the paragon and country circles.

The Duchess, who was obviously pleased with him, drew Mr. Peter aside afterwards to remark on Captain Denham's excellent breeding, wondered if he was one of the Dedhams of Dedham Chase—Sir Elphinstone Dedham, you know, who married a daughter of the Earl of Bray. Mr. Peter thought of it, shaking his head in a mystified fashion; but agreed with the Duchess that the young man was pleasant and amiable. "I shall ask him to Forest," she said with a look through her lorgnette at the fair head with its lumpy pleasant honest face, surmounting a well-built, admirably tailored figure, that was hovering in the background of the group at the piano somewhat uneasily.

She returned to the matter of "Captain Denham" as soon as she and her niece were alone—their rooms opened out of each other, with a tiny room for their maid on the opposite side of a little corridor, which was entirely devoted to them, since the only other door opening from it was that of their bath-room. "An extremely pleasant young man that Captain Denham," she said. "Yes, Auntie." "My dear, don't say, 'Yes Auntie' with that note of interrogation at the end. I daresay you think him plain-looking. I think him much more distinguished in looks than that Mr. Levinge—who turned your music for you. A pretty man—I can't endure a pretty man. I shall ask Captain Denham to Forest."

"Oh, Auntie!" Lady Rose had an air of being overwhelmed. She was feeling that honor compelled her to speak up and say that Captain Denham was Captain Denham, the son of the self-made man to whom her aunt had once given such a chilling reception. But the Duchess snapped at her. "I suppose I can chuzzle my own guests," she said, "and I have taken a fancy to this young man. He knows how to treat a woman; and the Duchess has nothing at all to do with it."

Lady Rose went off meekly to bed, to avoid the immediate confession which her conscience was urging her to make. The Duchess liked "Captain Denham" better and better. With a half fearful joy Lady Rose found herself left to pair off with the young soldier as much as she liked and the other men would permit her. The other men found out very soon that Lady Rose and Captain Denham had an interest in each other, and retired graciously like men and gentlemen. "Oh, Percy, what am I to do?" panted Lady Rose the third day. "How am I to tell her? I have taken she carries me to this young man. There is so much time left us before we must tell. A few days more, and I believe she will be so infatuated with you that she will forgive us anything. Let us put it off a few days longer."

She imprinted a sudden kiss on his unresponsive, gay tweed shoulder, and ran away from him. She knew where she would find her aunt. The Duchess liked a sleep after lunch, with a cup of tea to waken her about four o'clock. Lady Rose intercepted the maid on the stairs with the tea and took the tray from her hand. She went into the darkened room with a beating heart. "I have brought you your tea, Auntie," she said in a quaking voice; "I met Elizabeth on the stairs and—"

The Duchess sat up on her sofa. "There, pull up the blind, child. Sit down and talk to me while I drink my tea. Why how cold your hand is! Are you not well, child?" Lady Rose suddenly burst into tears, and an incoherent confession at the same time. "We have always been in love with each other from the very beginning," she sobbed, "but we have felt that you never would consent, and I could not bear to do anything underhand or to distress you."

"H'm!" said the Duchess. "What about your young man gaining joy affections under a false name? You don't call that underhand—eh?" "I made him promise to leave it to me. He has been—most restive—under the promise. I wanted—to postpone—till next week. But he would not. He drove me—here—to you." "Hoity-toity!" said the Duchess. "Am I such a bore as all that to the child I've reared as my own? Very impertinent of the young man I call it."

Lady Rose hung her head miserably. "Perhaps we'd better leave, Auntie," she said in a humbled voice. "You see his father is coming next Tuesday and he adores his father. I couldn't bear that—that you should not be civil to his dear old father before his and—and these friends of him."

"And pray why should I be unwell, hussy?" asked the Duchess, with an amazing change of front. "Do you think that I can't recognize honest worth because it drops its hat? Oh, yes, I remember I was rather ill-natured. You see I didn't know at the time what an excellent sort of son he'd produced, and I confess I had other views for you."

"I daresay he's more of a Celt than I am. The Barnards must have been English some time or other." "Thanks be to goodness I belong to none of them," Mrs. Maguire finished up piously, "but am a plain north-of-Ireland woman, though no Orange-man. Didn't I come out of Tyrone, and my grandfather that was a black Presbyterian 'turn' at the last?"

It seemed easier, she confessed, to have to bend her neck to the yoke of Mr. Bosanquet's people. "If it is like him they'll be," she said, "it'll be asking for everything with them all as one. If they had no right to it at all. Let alone—she put Alison's secret thought into words—"the master 'll be coming and going as he wouldn't be if the house were given to strangers."

Alison was alone that afternoon. She had given Tessa to Mrs. Lang for the day. Mrs. Lang was the possessor of a baby daughter a month old who was a cause to her mother clean and spotless, all the old maboring every day. She had been everything, should feel himself pushed out. Tessa was not base about babies, although there were a good many up and down the ramifications of the Barnard family. To see Tessa sitting with the little red morsel of humanity upon her knees, her eyes full of a light of quiet, contemplative rapture, was to remember some of the paintings of the most innocent age of Italian art.

Alison must see the results of Mrs. Maguire's labours. The housekeeper confessed that she couldn't move but that every joint in her creaked; nevertheless, she seemed to take a martyr's delight in her sufferings. The house was still and bright in the September afternoon, radiantly clean and spotless, all the old maboring every day. She had been everything, should feel himself pushed out. Tessa was not base about babies, although there were a good many up and down the ramifications of the Barnard family. To see Tessa sitting with the little red morsel of humanity upon her knees, her eyes full of a light of quiet, contemplative rapture, was to remember some of the paintings of the most innocent age of Italian art.

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"Those dear old men would never know, one way or the other. I'll now what the room wanted before—it wanted a woman; I don't know that any other than you would have filled the bill." "I was just thinking that it wanted a man," said Alison, with frank, smiling eyes. "Ah, you are the perfection of a friend and a good comrade. Do you know why I have come here? I have a tolerably arduous time before me. I shall be kept pretty well to the grindstone till Christmas at least, and then I shall have a lot of work to do about the country. Carfax is an admirable fellow—as gracious as he is handsome. He wants to see for himself without any parade. We shall slip down to the West Inconito at Christmas. He will see all that is to be seen. If real understanding can get at the root of this Irish problem he is bound to settle it. I do not know when I can have a holiday again. This one I mean to spend with you."

Under her breath Alison sighed a little sigh of delight. "You will go really incognito?" she said. "No police escorts?" "Heaven forbid," he answered. "Except for the pleasure of looking at such fine fellows. Tell me all you have been doing. How does the little girl get along? Making company for you, eh?" "Tessa is delightful, like a dear, submissive child. Almost too ready to do one's will instead of her own. Always ready when one needs her; if one is absorbed in other matters quiet as a mouse in a corner with her books and papers. She is in the seventh heaven because she had a poem published in 'The Virtuoso.' They sent her three guineas for it. Mrs. George Barnard called on me the week after to express on me the greatness of the benefit she had done in giving me Tessa. As though I needed any assurance!"

Sir Gerard smiled a fine smile. He had just the faint touch of cynicism without which his optimism would have been too roseate. "Tessa is quite an important person to her family. They begin to look upon her as my successor at Castle Barnard—poor little Tessa!" Alison looked at him with brave eyes. "Moreover a faculty for coining guineas is a thing to be respected. By the way, I have been making acquaintance since I saw you with my cousin, Lord Downe."

The slightest, most imperceptible shade fell over Sir Gerard's face. "Ah, you told me. The golden youth." "A plain, homespun, honest, pleasant youth." "You liked him? I remember that you told me so." "He was a golden interlude in mine and Tessa's summer. He will come again and you will meet him."

"I am not very much interested in boys—unless, you think of marrying him, Alison." She blushed faintly. "He was very agreeable, but I confess my thoughts did not go as far as that." "Ah, well—let us gather roses while we may. Some day you will be taken away from me; and I shall have your sympathy no longer for all those plans and hopes of mine."

Mrs. Maguire came in with the tea. Excellent woman, in that short space of time she had prepared a tea to please a hungry man, sandwiches of two or three kinds, hot buttered toast, thin brown bread and butter, honey and cream. "I shall have to restrain my appetite or I shall do your dinner no credit," said the hungry man, as he drank cup after cup of tea while Alison plied him with one delicacy after another. "You will have to walk to create a fresh appetite," she answered. "By the way you are looking well. You are fatter, and you have gained color. You looked thin and tired before you went."

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