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THE LOVE STORY OF ALISON BARNARD

BY KATHARINE TYNAN

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

CHAPTER XXIII. The Dance.

It was the evening of the dance at Kyline. For two or three days now Miss Rodney had been discontented, watching her nephew with the eyes of the mother who sees her child passed over for another.

"I always knew that Downe had it in him to be as mad as any other Englishman," she said. "And for the maddest of mad Englishmen commend me to him who has fallen under the Irish spell. To be sure Downe has a drop of Irish blood in him, but his forbears have been nearly all English, possessors by accident of an Irish estate. I only hope that the passion for restitution won't seize Downe, or he'll be remembering that Downe Castle was filched from Irishmen long ago, and will be forgiving it back again. You can't imagine what an uncomplacent person he is. He can only see straight. Honesty has put blinkers on him so that he can't look to either side, but only ahead. You've no idea of the things he is capable of."

"Indeed I think I have," said Alison, to whom the speech was addressed, and the manner in which she said it gave Miss Rodney the wildest impulse to fall upon her neck and ask her not to break Downe's generous young heart.

"I am as mad as Downe," she said to herself, repressing the impulse. "That would be a pretty thing for a woman who has knocked about the world for fifty years to do!"

"What has Downe got in his bonnet?" she asked herself later. "It is impossible that he doesn't see. All the world must see that Alison has only eyes for Sir Gerard. Yet Downe does not look as if his heart were broken. He follows Sir Gerard like a dog. Can it be that friendship is pushing out the other thing? We'll have Downe in politics before we know where we are—on a side his fathers never took."

Alison looked on well-pleased. "I have not broken his heart after all," she said, "and I am proud of it. I wish I were a dearest kinsman than Downe."

The thought of the dance at Kyline stirred her curiously. Oddly enough she had never met Gerard Molyneux at a dance, never danced with him. She hardly knew if he could dance. It was possible that he despised such things. Hitherto she had always met him on a serious plane, the bonds between them had been serious ones. Perhaps who knows?—there was something wanting as between man and woman, in the varied seriousness of their intercourse. No man could be always strenuous. So far she was his one woman of all the world. Supposing he were to meet a girl gay, laughing, lovely, who would reach him through his lighter, gayer feelings.

"I should not be hateful, I hope," she said. "But for the rest, it is the heroism of story-books. In real life one is nearly always disappointed in the wife of one's friend."

lieve Billy's the leggiest of us all; but, oh, a sweet thing! Wait till you see Billy!"

Perhaps that letter had influenced Alison ever so little in the altering of her attire. Twenty-seven! The clock of time did not stand still. It was for ever pushing forward. Already time began to fly for Alison, and time which is so slow in childhood and youth, and so accelerates its pace that in middle age the whirl and clatter of its wheels deafens the one who tries to listen to it. Supposing Billy were the young girl that should supply to Gerard Molyneux the complete life feeling for herself! Alison had always loved girls younger than herself. Of late she had begun to grow fearful of them; and which of them could she trust him with herself? There was not one who would not be more exacting than she, who would be as generous in god-speeding him on a way in which she could never be the ultimate object.

Her doubt as to whether Sir Gerard Molyneux was a dancer was soon dispelled. The Duchess received the guests at Kyline. Hard by her in the background the elder Bosanquet stood, with the real owner of the house between them.

"They are our guests, but they are yours too," the old man had said to him with exquisite courtesy.

"She saw the wonder, the delight in his eyes as she entered, and her lashes fell."

"You are late," he said with a certain impatience. "Everybody of any note is here. You dance the opening quadrille with me. See, they are going to form. Let us take our places."

The dance as originally intended had expanded itself almost to the dimensions of a ball. The hosts had been indefatigable in beating up dancing-men. There were a good many redcoats from garrison towns even ten miles away, and it was surprising where all the pretty girls came from. Even Ballygusha had sent some very charming and well-dressed maidens, many of them Barnards, of course, all rather jealous of Tessa in her frock of palest green chiffon and the rapture of a bride in her little dreamy face, and rather in awe of Miss Barnard of Castle Barnard.

The quadrille in which the principal guests danced was soon over. Waltz music struck up, and sitting on a round seat by the wall with Sir Gerard Molyneux standing between her and the world, Alison was conscious of an unfiled programme, and of a good many would-be partners who would come her way as soon as they discovered her. The ball-room at Kyline had a musicians' gallery running across one end of it. The gallery was continued round one side of the room. It was near the ceiling and dim in the shadow of the painted roof; beside where Alison sat, a little baize-covered door in the wall led to the gallery. Not one guest in fifty knew whither it led.

As the room cleared for the waltzers they were pressed closer to the wall.

"Let us escape," Sir Gerard said, laying his hand over Alison's. "Believe I—" she began.

"Refer him to me," Sir Gerard answered with a reckless gaiety which was something new in him.

though he could not trust himself to look further. "Let me be my own man for three months, four months longer," he said; and then added under his breath: "and after that yours for ever."

"She heard him in a placid joy. She was not the one to stand between him and his life-work. Three months' time, four months' time would not be long to wait. Why she could wait an eternity if need be, knowing what she knew now.

"I promised Downe to keep him some dances," she said.

"Ah! Let us go back, Alison. The next dance will be a waltz. Downe cannot have that. Why there is Downe going to dance; but who is his partner? She would make anyone but Downe look absurd. She must be over six feet high, and still growing, I should say."

Alison looked over the ledge of the gallery. Then she saw the slender, like a flower not yet unfolded from its sheath. She was head and shoulders above the other girls falling out of sight, taller than Mrs. Lang. She was standing with a hand on Lord Downe's arm, and looking very shy, evidently painfully aware that a good many people were staring at her and asking who she was.

"Why, it must be Billy," said Alison. "It can be nobody but Billy. Can you imagine that it takes ten yards of double width, twenty of single, to make a frock for that young creature? And Billy is one of nine girls of requirements as exacting!"

"I can perfectly well imagine it," he said, "although the mysteries of a single-width and double-width are beyond me. Billy is superb. And Alison, Downe seems to have eyes only for her. And by the way who is Billy?"

"It is quite true. Downe is looking at her as though she were something very pleasant. She is Miss Wilhelmina Maynard, Mrs. Lang's sister. Imagine six others growing to be like Wilhelmina!"

"No one, no man, could possibly object. If I had not a standard of height, of everything else feminine in my own mind, I should say that she was none too high, being—I beg her pardon—Billy."

Alison laughed happily. "I always said of Mrs. Lang, I said of Freddy when I saw her. I say now of Billy, that their height is the right one, and they make others look too small. They are so graceful."

"Are they, Alison?" he asked simply. "I know Mrs. Lang is charming, of course, and her sisters are good to look at, but I have very indefinite views about the things that constitute a woman's beauty—excepting only one woman. None of her beauties escape me."

"I want to go and talk to Billy—when Lord Downe gives her up," she said; and there Mrs. Lang in white. But where is Freddy? I must congratulate Mrs. Lang on the success of her labours."

"Downe?" he asked whimsically. "No, the frocks. Of course one frock may have played its part in enhancing Billy's loveliness; but Downe would be unconscious of it."

Indeed, if she had known, Downe's subjugation had begun by Billy's in the most hideous of waterproofs; but she did not know.



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ed at the Shelbourne, and Alison went about the streets oddly glad because she breathed the air of the same town with her beloved. Sir Gerard was coming and going a good deal between London and Dublin in these days; but Alison came and went without his knowing it, since he must have no distractions from the great work he had to do.

She wrote to him as she had always written, fully, frankly, affectionately, as though there were no new relations between them; and he sent her hasty notes with a suggestion of warmth in them which was perhaps only visible or palpable to the recipient. She, laying her cheek against the cream-laid official note, had a sense as of the South wind borne over forests of roses.

After her first visit to Dublin Mrs. Lang, coming to see her and asking her if she had brought back a whiff of the dear Dublin air with her, went home, rather depressed about Alison.

"She has not seen Gerard Molyneux," she said to the Archdeacon. "Was ever anything so aggravating? We must have taken too much for granted that night of those years. You ever such impracticable people!"

"I don't jump to conclusions as you do, my dear," the Archdeacon responded blandly, "and I don't really believe I was mistaken that night. Doubtless Alison is the woman to leave him to his work; by all accounts it is superhuman now."

"It is too great virtue for me," Mrs. Lang sighed. "I remember in the days when I was in love with you, before you had declared yourself, when I used to be in dear Dublin, how I used to walk along those wind-swept streets—there never was such a town for winds—hoping to meet you. I'm afraid I was rather a bold, young person, for although I used to make resolutions not to walk where I was likely to meet you—I didn't know of your hours—I used to do it all the same. Heavens how I used to feel I must sink into the earth when I saw you coming, as though I had not been willing you to come all the time!"

The Archdeacon answered her sigh, but his was one of happiness.

"You had to make it very apparent to me, my dear, or I had never dared to do such a thing. Your radiant youth and my more than fifty years! How could I think that they would meet? and yet there are those who disbelieve in miracles!"

The love affair between Downe and Miss Wilhelmina Maynard had progressed by leaps and bounds. Downe was not one to go slowly about anything in which his heart was greatly concerned, although his manner was rather slow than otherwise. In the wooing of Wilhelmina he had let no grass grow under his feet. Miss Rodney had been rather disappointed in him at first in the matter of the transfer of his affections from Alison to "that gawky child," as she called Billy in her first disappointment, knowing all the time in her just heart that Billy was as graceful as a daffodil, and in time would be nobly beautiful.

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