



Charming

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Intermediate
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Alfred the sculptor—you know him? We all know him: he won the great gold medal, and got a travelling scholarship, went to Italy, and then came back to his native land. He was young in those days, and indeed he is young yet, though he is ten years older than he was then.

After his return he visited one of the little provincial towns on the island of Seeland. The whole town knew who the stranger was, and one of the richest persons gave a party in honour of him, and all who were of any consequence, or possessed any property, were invited. It was quite an event, and all the town knew of it without its being announced by beat of drum. Apprentice boys, and children of poor people, and even some of the poor people themselves, stood in front of the house, and looked at the lighted curtain; and the watchman could fancy that he was giving a party, so many people were in the streets. There was quite an air of festivity about, and in the house was festivity also, for Mr. Alfred the sculptor was there.

He talked, and told anecdotes, and all listened to him with pleasure and a certain kind of awe; but none felt such respect for him as did the elderly widow of an official: she seemed, so far as Mr. Alfred was concerned, like a fresh piece of blotting paper, that absorbed all that was spoken, and asked for more. She was very appreciative, and incredibly ignorant—a kind of female Caspar Hauser.

“I should like to see Rome,” she said. “It must be a lovely city, with all the strangers who are continually arriving there. Now, do give us a description of Rome. How does the city look when you come in by the gate?”

“I cannot very well describe it,” replied the sculptor. “A great open place, and in the midst of it an obelisk, which is a thousand years old.”

“An organist!” exclaimed the lady, who had never met with the word obelisk. A few of the guests could hardly keep from laughing, nor could the sculptor quite keep his countenance; but the smile that rose to his lips faded away, for he saw, close by the inquisitive dame, a pair of dark blue eyes—they belonged to the daughter of the speaker, and any one who has such a daughter cannot be silly! The mother was like a fountain of questions, and the daughter, who listened, but never spoke, might pass for the beautiful Naiad of the fountain. How charming she was! She was a study for the sculptor to contemplate, but not to converse with; and, indeed, she did not speak, or only very seldom.

“Has the Pope a large family?” asked the lady.

And the young man considerately answered, as if the question had been better put, “No, he does not come of a great family.”

“That’s not what I mean,” the widow persisted. “I mean, has he a wife and children?”

“The Pope is not allowed to marry,” said the gentleman.

“I don’t like that,” was the lady’s comment.

She certainly might have put more sensible questions; but if she had not spoken in just the manner she used, would her daughter have leant so gracefully on her shoulder, looking straight out with the almost mournful smile upon her face?

Then Mr. Alfred spoke again, and told of the glory of colour in Italy, of the purple hills, the blue Mediterranean, the azure sky of the South, whose brightness and glory was only surpassed in the North by a maiden’s deep blue eyes. And this he said with a peculiar application; but she who should have understood his meaning, looked as if she were quite unconscious of it, and that again was charming!

“Italy!” sighed a few of the guests. “Oh, to travel!” sighed others. “Charming, charming!” chorused they all.

“Yes, if I win a hundred thousand dollars in the lottery,” said the head tax-collector’s lady, “then we will travel. I

and my daughter, and you, Mr. Alfred; you must be our guide. We'll all three travel together, and one or two good friends more." And she nodded in such a friendly way at the company, that each one might imagine he or she was the person who was to be taken to Italy. "Yes, we will go to Italy! but not to those parts where there are robbers—we'll keep to Rome, and to the great high roads where one is safe."

And the daughter sighed very quietly. And how much may lie in one little sigh, or be placed in it! The young man placed a great deal in it. The two blue eyes, lit up that evening in honour of him, must conceal treasures—treasures of the heart and mind—richer than all the glories of Rome; and when he left the party that night he had lost his heart—lost it completely, to the young lady.

The house of the head tax-collector's widow was the one which Mr. Alfred the sculptor most assiduously frequented; and it was understood that his visits were not intended for that lady, though he and she were the people who kept up the conversation; he came for the daughter's sake. They called her Kala. Her name was really Calen Malena, and these two names had been contracted into the one name, Kala. She was beautiful; but a few said she was rather dull, and probably slept late of a morning.

"She has been always accustomed to that," her mother said. "She's a beauty, and they always are easily tired. She sleeps rather late, but that makes her eyes so clear."

What a power lay in the depths of these dark blue eyes! "Still waters run deep." The young man felt the truth of this proverb; and his heart had sunk into the depths. He spoke and told his adventures, and the mamma was as simple and eager in her questioning as on the first evening of their meeting.

It was a pleasure to hear Alfred describe anything. He spoke of Naples, of excursions to Mount Vesuvius, and showed coloured prints of several of the eruptions. And the head tax-collector's widow had never heard of them before, or taken time to consider the question.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed. "So that is a burning mountain! But is it not dangerous to the people round about?"

"Whole cities have been destroyed," he answered; "for instance, Pompeii and Herculaneum."

“But the poor people!—And you saw all that with your own eyes?”

“No, I did not see any of the eruptions represented in these pictures, but I will show you a picture of my own, of an eruption I saw.”

He laid a pencil sketch upon the table, and mamma, who had been absorbed in the contemplation of the highly coloured prints, threw a glance at the pale drawing, and cried in astonishment,

“Did you see it throw up white fire?”

For a moment Alfred’s respect for Kala’s mamma suffered a sudden diminution; but, dazzled by the light that illumined Kala, he soon found it quite natural that the old lady should have no eye for colour. After all, it was of no consequence, for Kala’s mamma had the best of all things—namely, Kala herself.

And Alfred and Kala were betrothed, which was natural enough, and the betrothal was announced in the little newspaper of the town. Mamma purchased thirty copies of the paper, that she might cut out the paragraph and send it to friends and acquaintances. And the betrothed pair were happy, and the mother-in-law elect was happy too; for it seemed like connecting herself with Thorwaldsen.

“For you are a continuation of Thorwaldsen,” she said to Alfred. And it seemed to Alfred that mamma had in this instance said a clever thing. Kala said nothing; but her eyes shone, her lips smiled, her every movement was graceful: yes, she was beautiful; that cannot be too often repeated.

Alfred undertook to take a bust of Kala and of his mother-in-law. They sat to him accordingly, and saw how he moulded and smoothed the soft clay with his fingers.

“I suppose it’s only on our account,” said mamma-in-law, “that you undertake this commonplace work, and don’t leave your servant to do all that sticking together.”

“It is highly necessary that I should mould the clay myself,” he replied.

“Ah, yes, you are so very polite,” retorted mamma; and Kala silently pressed his hand, still soiled by the clay.

And he unfolded to both of them the loveliness of nature in creation, pointing out how the living stood higher

in the scale than the dead creature, how the plant was developed beyond the mineral, the animal beyond the plant, and man beyond the animal. He strove to show them how mind and beauty become manifest in outward form, and how it was the sculptor's task to seize that beauty and to manifest it in his works.

Kala stood silent, and nodded approbation of the expressed thought, while mamma-in-law made the following confession:

"It's difficult to follow all that. But I manage to hobble after you with my thoughts, though they whirl round and round, but I contrive to hold them fast."

And Kala's beauty held Alfred fast, filled his soul, and seized and mastered him. Beauty gleamed forth from Kala's every feature—gleamed from her eyes, lurked in the corners of her mouth, and in every movement of her fingers. Alfred the sculptor saw this: he spoke only of her, thought only of her, and the two became one; and thus it may be said that she spoke much, for he and she were one, and he was always talking of her.

Such was the betrothal; and now came the wedding, with bridesmaids and wedding presents, all duly mentioned in the wedding speech.

Mamma-in-law had set up Thorwaldsen's bust at the end of the table, attired in a dressing-gown, for he was to be a guest; such was her whim. Songs were sung and cheers were given, for it was a gay wedding, and they were a handsome pair. "Pygmalion received his Galatea," so one of the songs said.

"Ah, that's your mythologies," said mamma-in-law.

Next day the youthful pair started for Copenhagen, where they were to live. Mamma-in-law accompanied them, "to take care of the commonplace," as she said, meaning the domestic economy. Kala was like a doll in a doll's house, all was so bright, so new, and so fine. There they sat, all three; and as for Alfred, to use a proverb that will describe his position, we may say that he sat like the friar in the goose-yard.

The magic of form had enchanted him. He had looked at the case, and cared not to inquire what the case contained, and that omission brings unhappiness, much unhappiness, into married life; for the case may be broken, and the gilt may come off; and then the purchaser may repent his bargain. In a large party it is very disagreeable to observe that one's buttons are giving way, and that there are no buckles to fall back upon; but it

is worse still in a great company to become aware that wife and mother-in-law are talking nonsense, and that one cannot depend upon oneself for a happy piece of wit to carry off the stupidity of the thing.

The young married pair often sat hand in hand, he speaking and she letting fall a word here and there—the same melody, the same clear, bell-like sounds. It was a mental relief when Sophy, one of her friends, came to pay a visit.

Sophy was not pretty. She was certainly free from bodily deformity, though Kala always asserted she was a little crooked; but no eye save a friend's would have remarked it. She was a very sensible girl, and it never occurred to her that she might become at all dangerous here. Her appearance was like a pleasant breath of air in the doll's house; and air was certainly required here, as they all acknowledged. They felt they wanted airing, and consequently they came out into the air, and mamma-in-law and the young couple travelled to Italy.

“Thank Heaven that we are in our own four walls again,” was the exclamation of mother and daughter when they came home, a year after.

“There's no pleasure in travelling,” said mamma-in-law. “To tell the truth, it's very wearisome—I beg pardon for saying so. I found the time hang heavy, though I had my children with me; and it's expensive work, travelling, very expensive! And all those galleries one has to see, and the quantity of things you are obliged to run after! You must do it for decency's sake, for you're sure to be asked when you come back; and then you're sure to be told that you've omitted to see what was best worth seeing. I got tired at last of those endless Madonnas; one seemed to be turning a Madonna oneself!”

“And what bad living you get!” said Kala.

“Yes,” replied mamma, “no such thing as an honest meat soup. It's miserable trash, their cookery.”

And the travelling fatigued Kala: she was always fatigued, that was the worst of it. Sophy was taken into the house, where her presence was a real advantage.

Mamma-in-law acknowledged that Sophy understood both housewifery and art, though a knowledge of the latter could not be expected from a person of her limited means; and she was, moreover, an honest, faithful girl; she showed that thoroughly while Kala lay sick—fading away.

Where the case is everything, the case should be strong, or else all is over. And all was over with the case—Kala died.

“She was beautiful,” said mamma, “she was quite different from the antiques, for they are so damaged. A beauty ought to be perfect, and Kala was a perfect beauty.”

Alfred wept, and mamma wept, and both of them wore mourning. The black dress suited mamma very well, and she wore mourning the longest. Moreover, she had to experience another grief in seeing Alfred marry again—marry Sophy, who had no appearance at all.

“He’s gone to the very extreme,” cried mamma-in-law; “he has gone from the most beautiful to the ugliest, and he has forgotten his first wife. Men have no endurance. My husband was of a different stamp, and he died before me.”

“Pygmalion received his Galatea,” said Alfred: “yes, that’s what they said in the wedding song. I had once really fallen in love with the beautiful statue, which awoke to life in my arms; but the kindred soul which Heaven sends down to us, the angel who can feel and sympathise with and elevate us, I have not found and won till now. You came, Sophy, not in the glory of outward beauty, though you are fair, fairer than is needful. The chief thing remains the chief. You came to teach the sculptor that his work is but clay and dust, only an outward form in a fabric that passes away, and that we must seek the essence, the internal spirit. Poor Kala! ours was but wayfarers’ life. Yonder, where we shall know each other by sympathy, we shall be half strangers.”

“That was not lovingly spoken,” said Sophy, “not spoken like a Christian. Yonder, where there is no giving in marriage, but where, as you say, souls attract each other by sympathy; there where everything beautiful develops itself and is elevated, her soul may acquire such completeness that it may sound more harmoniously than mine; and you will then once more utter the first raptured exclamation of your love, Beautiful—most beautiful!”

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