"Beautiful"

Alfred the sculptor - yes, you know him, don't you? We all know him; he was awarded the gold medal, traveled to Italy, and came home again. He was young then; in fact, he is still young, though he is ten years older than he was at that time.

After he returned home, he visited one of the little provincial towns on the island of Zealand. The whole village knew who the stranger was, and in his honor one of the richest families gave a party. Everyone of any importance or owning any property was invited. It was quite an event, and all the village knew about it without its being announced by the town crier. Apprentice boys and the children of poor people, and even some of their parents, stood outside the house, looking at the lighted windows with their drawn curtains; and the watchman could imagine that he was giving the party, there were so many people in his street. There was an air of festivity everywhere, and inside the house, too, for Mr. Alfred the sculptor was there.

He talked and told stories, and everybody listened to him with pleasure and enthusiasm, but none more so than the elderly widow of a state official. As far as Mr. Alfred was concerned, she was like a blank sheet of gray blotting paper, absorbing everything that was said and demanding more. She was highly susceptible and unbelievably ignorant-a sort of female Kaspar Hauser.

"I should love to see Rome!" she said. "It must be a wonderful city, with all the many strangers continually arriving there. Now, do tell us what Rome is like. How does the city look when you come in by the gate?"

"It is not easy to describe it," said the young sculptor. "There's a great open place, and in the middle of it there is an obelisk that is four thousand years old."

"An organist!" cried the lady, who had never heard the word "obelisk."

Some of the guests could hardly keep from laughing, among them the sculptor, but the smile that rose to his lips quickly faded away, for he saw, close by the lady, a pair of dark-blue eyes; they belonged to the daughter of the lady who had been talking, and anyone with such a daughter could not really be silly! The mother was like a fountain of questions, and the daughter, who listened silently, might pass for the naiad of the fountain. How beautiful she was! She was something for a sculptor to look at, but not to speak with, for indeed she talked but very little.

"Has the Pope a large family?" asked the lady.

And the young man answered considerately, as if the question had been put differently, "No, he doesn't come of a very great family."

"That's not what I mean," said the lady. "I mean, does he have a wife and children?"

"The Pope isn't allowed to marry," he replied.

"I don't approve of that," said the lady.

She might well have talked and questioned him more intelligently, but if she hadn't said and asked what she did, would her daughter have leaned so gracefully on her shoulder, looking straight before her with an almost melancholy smile on her lips?

And Mr. Alfred told them of the glorious colors of Italy, the purple of the mountains, the blue of the Mediterranean, the blue of the southern skies, a beauty that could only be surpassed in the North by the deep-blue eyes of a maiden. This he said with peculiar meaning, but she who should have understood it looked quite unconscious, and that, too, was charming!

"Ah, Italy!" sighed some of the guests.

"Traveling!" sighed others.

"Charming, charming!"

"Well," said the widow, "if I win fifty thousand dollars in the lottery, we'll travel! My daughter and I. You Mr. Alfred, must be our guide. We'll all three go, with just one or two good friends with us." Then she smiled in such a friendly manner at the company that each of them could imagine he was the person who would accompany them to Italy. "Yes, we'll go to Italy! But not to the parts where the robbers are; we'll stay in Rome and only travel by the great highways where we'll be safe."

And the daughter sighed very gently. And how much may lie in one little sigh or be read into it! The young man read a great deal into it. Those two blue eyes, bright that evening in his honor, must conceal treasures of heart and mind rarer than all the glories of Rome! When he left the party, he had lost his heart-lost it completely-to the young lady.

Now, the widow's house was where Mr. Alfred the sculptor could most frequently be found. It was understood that his calls were not for the lady herself,

though he and she did all the talking; he really came for the sake of the daughter. They called her Kala. Her real name was Karen Malene, but the two names had been contracted into the single name Kala. She was extremely, but some people said she was rather dull and probably slept late in the mornings.

"She has been accustomed to that since childhood," said her mother. "She is as beautiful as Venus, and a beauty always tires easily. She does sleep rather late, but that's what makes her eyes so bright."

What a power there was in these clear eyes, these deep blue eyes! "Still waters run deep." The young man felt the truth of that proverb, and his heart sank into the depths. He spoke of his adventures, and Mamma always asked the same naïve and pertinent questions she had asked at their first meeting.

It was a delight to hear Mr. Alfred speak. He told them of Naples, of trips to Mount Vesuvius, and showed them colored prints of some of the eruptions. The widow had never heard of such things before, much less taken time to think about them.

"Mercy save us!" she said. "So that's a burning mountain! But isn't it dangerous for the people who live there?"

"Entire cities have been destroyed," he answered. "For example, Pompeii and Herculaneum."

"Oh, the poor people! And you saw all that yourself?"

"Well, no, I didn't see any of the eruptions shown in these pictures, but I'll show you a drawing I made of an eruption I did see."

He laid a pencil sketch on the table, and when Mamma, who had been studying the highly colored prints, glanced at the black-and-white drawing, she cried in amazement, "When you saw it did it throw up white fire?"

For a moment Alfred's respect for Kala's mamma nearly vanished; but then, dazzled by the light from Kala, he decided it was natural for the old lady to have no eye for color. After all, it didn't matter, for Kala's mamma had the most wonderful thing of all-she had Kala herself.

And Alfred and Kala were engaged, which was inevitable, and the engagement was announced in the town newspaper. Mamma brought thirty copies of the paper, so she could cut out the announcement and send it to her friends. The betrothed couple were happy, and the mamma-in-law-to-be was happy, too; she said it seemed like being related to Thorvaldsen himself.

"At any rate, you are his successor," she told Alfred.

And it seemed to Alfred that Mamma had this time really said something clever. Kala said nothing, but her eyes sparkled; her every gesture was graceful. Yes, she was beautiful; that cannot be repeated too often.

Alfred made busts of Kala and his future mamma-in-law; they sat for him and watched how he molded and smoothed the soft clay between his fingers.

"I suppose it's only for us that you do this common work," said Mamma-in-law-to-be, "and don't have your servant do all that dabbing together."

"No, I have to mold the clay myself," he explained.

"Oh, yes, you're always so exceedingly polite," said Mamma, while Kala silently pressed his hand, still soiled by the clay.

Then he unfolded to both of them the loveliness of nature in creation, explaining how the living stood higher in the scale than the dead, how the plant was above the mineral, the animal above the plant, and man above the animal, how mind and beauty are united in outward form, and how it was the task of the sculptor to seize that beauty and imprison it in his works.

Kala sat silent and nodded approval of the thought, while Mamma-in-law confessed, "It's hard to follow all that. But my thoughts manage to hobble slowly along after you; they whirl around, but I try to hold them fast."

And the power of Kala's beauty held Alfred fast, seizing him and mastering him and filling his whole soul. There was beauty in Kala's every feature; it sparkled in her eyes, lurked in the corners of her mouth and even in each movement of her fingers. The sculptor saw this; he spoke only of her, thought only of her, until the two became one. Thus it might be said that she also spoke often, for he was always talking of her, and they two were one.

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

Mamma-in-law had set up a bust of Thorvaldsen, attired in a dressing gown, at one end of the table, for it was her whim that he was to be a guest. There were songs and toasts, for it was a gay wedding and they were a handsome pair. "Pygmalion gets his Galatea," one of the songs said.

"That is something from mythology!" said Mamma-in-law.

Next day the young couple left for Copenhagen, where

they were to live. Mamma-in-law went with them, "to give them a helping hand," she explained-which meant to take charge of the house. Kala was to live in a doll's house. Everything was so bright, new, and fine. There the three of them sat, and as for Alfred, to use a proverb that describes his circumstances, he sat like the bishop in the goose yard.

The magic of form had fascinated him. He had regarded the case and had no interest in learning what the case contained, and that is unfortunate, very unfortunate, in married life! If the case breaks and the gilding rubs off, the purchaser may repent of his bargain. It is very embarrassing to discover in a large party that one's suspender buttons are coming off and that one has no belt to fall back on; but it is still worse to realize at a great party that one's wife and mother-in-law are talking nonsense and that one cannot think of a clever piece of wit to cover up the stupidity of it.

The young couple often sat hand in hand, he speaking and she letting drop a word now and then-with always the same melody, like a clock striking the same two or three notes constantly. It was really a mental relief when one of her friends, Sophie, came to visit them.

Sophie wasn't pretty. To be sure, she was not deformed; Kala always said she was a little crooked, but no one but a female friend would have noticed that. She was a very levelheaded girl and had no idea that she might ever become dangerous here. Her visits brought a fresh breath of air into the doll's house, air that they all agreed was certainly needed there. But they felt they needed more airing, so they came out into the air, and Mamma-in-law and the young couple traveled to Italy.

"Thank heaven we are back in our own home again!" said both mother and daughter when they and Alfred returned home a year later.

"Traveling is no fun," said Mamma-in-law. "On the contrary, it's very tiring; pardon me for saying so. I found the time dragged, even though I had my children with me; and it is expensive, very expensive, to travel. All those galleries you have to see, and all the things you have to look at! You must do it for self-protection, because when you get back people are sure to ask you about them; and then they're sure to tell you that you've missed the most worth-while things. I got so tired at last of those everlasting Madonnas; I thought I would turn into a Madonna myself!"

"And the food one gets!" said Kala.

"Yes," agreed Mamma. "Not even a dish of honest meat soup! It is awful the way they cook!"

And Kala had become tired from traveling; she was always tired; that was the trouble. Sophie came to live with them, and her presence was a real help.

Mamma-in-law had to admit that Sophie understood both housekeeping and art, though you would hardly have expected a knowledge of the last from a person of her modest background. Moreover, she was honest and loyal; she showed that clearly when Kala lay sick, fading away.

If the case is everything, that case should be strong, or it is all over. And it was all over with the case-Kala died.

"She was so beautiful," said Mamma. "She was very different from the antiques, because they're all so damaged. Kala was completely perfect, just as a beauty should be."

Alfred wept and the Mother wept, and both went into mourning. The black dresses became Mamma very well, so she wore her mourning the longer. Moreover, she soon experienced another grief, when she saw Alfred marry again. And he married Sophie, who had no looks at all!

"He has gone from one extreme to the other!" said Mamma-in-law. "Gone from the most beautiful to the ugliest! How could he forget his first wife! Men have no constancy. Now, my husband was entirely different, and he died before I did."

"Pygmalion got his Galatea," said Alfred. "Yes, that's what the wedding song said. I really fell in love with a beautiful statue, which came to life in my arms, but the soul mate that heaven sends down to us, one of its angels who can comfort and sympathize with and uplift us, I have not found or won till now. You came to me, Sophie, not in the glory of superficial beauty - but fair enough, prettier than was necessary. The most important thing is still the most important. You came to teach a sculptor that his work is only clay and dust, only the outward form in a fabric that passes away, and that we must seek the spirit within. Poor Kala! Ours was but a wayfarer's life. In the next world, where we shall come together through sympathy, we shall probably be half strangers to each other.

"That was not spoken kindly," said Sophie, " not like a true Christian. In the next world, where there is no marriage, but where, as you say, souls find each other through sympathy, where everything beautiful is developed and elevated, her soul may attain such

completeness that it may resound far more melodiously than mine. Then you will again utter the first exciting cry of your love, 'Beautiful, beautiful!'"

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