ALICE ADAMS

-BY-

BOOTH TARKINGTON

THE STORY OF A GIRL WHO LOVED AND LOST

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Virgil Adams, convalescing from a serious illness, was importuned by his wife to embark upon a business venture of his own. His daughter, Alice, twenty-two, petted him, but secretly backed her mother. Alice, striving unsuccessfully to move in the "best circles," pictured herself as the adored heroine of many romances. Her brother Walter, twenty, neglected by his family, spent his leisure hours in questionable surroundings. At a dance given by Mildred Palmer, a wealthy acquaintance of Alice, Mildred's cousin and reported fiance danced with Alice. He found Walter for her—shooting dice with the colored attendants in the cloak room. Mr. Adams overheard Alice's hysterical weeping on her return. A week elapsed, and Mr. Adams told Alice he would not return to his former employment at J. A. Lamb & Co.'s. She met Mr. Russell on the street, and wove a fantastic tale concerning some tobacco she had bought for her father. Charmed with her whimsicality, Russell accompanied her home. But she refused to invite him in. Walter warned her against competing with Mildred for Russell. Mrs. Adams confided to Alice that her father knew a recipe for making an excellent liquid glue—said he had the right to use it because his fellow-inventor was dead, and insisted that Mr. Adams could make them all rich. His employer, old J. A. Lamb, called to see Mr. Adams, and Alice could not fail to see the esteem in which he held her father. Alice began to understand the pride and satisfaction her father took in his position at Lamb's. Russell spent an evening sitting with Alice on her front steps, and asked her to accompany him to Henrietta Lamb's dance. Alice, not invited, alleged her father's illness as an excuse, and enmeshed herself in a web of falsehood. Mrs. Adams, eavesdropping, fiercely berated her husband for causing his daughter's suffering and demanded that he start in the glue business, using the formula he made while in Lamb's employ. Alice told Russell that her father was about to start a glue factory.

CHAPTER IX.

(Continued.)

LATER, he went outdoors and walked up and down the small yard in the dusk; but now and then he stood still, with his head lifted, and sniffed the air suspiciously. "Can you smell it?" he called to Alice, who sat upon the veranda.

"Smell what, papa?"

"That glue-works."

She laughed and said, "No! How foolish! Why, papa, it's over two miles from here."

"You don't get it at all?" he insisted.

"The idea! The air is lovely tonight, papa." But to him the whole town seemed to smell of his glue-works.

Nevertheless, the glue was making, and his sheds were busy. "Guess we're stirrin' up this ole neighborhood," his foreman remarked one morning.

"How's that?" Adams inquired.

"That great big, enormous old dead butterine factory across the street from our lot," the man said. "That place is full o' carpenters."

Adams was pleased. He walked out over the dried mud of his deep lot and spoke genially to a workman.

"Here! What's all this howdy-do over here?"

"Goin' to fix her all up, I guess," the workman said. "Big job it is, too."

"Who's doing it?"

"Lord! I d'know. Some o' these here big manufacturing corporations, I guess."

"What's it going to be?"

"They tell me," the workman answered, "she's goin' to be a butterine factory again."

Adams went back to his sheds. "I did think some," he told his wife that evening, "that I might want to spread out and maybe get hold of that old factory myself; but there's room enough on the lot I got, if we need more buildings some day. Things are going about as fine as I could ask. We're getting to have really quite a little plant over there; yes, sir, quite a regular little plant!"

He chuckled, and at this cheerful sound his wife ventured to put her hand upon his arm. They had gone outdoors, after dinner, taking two chairs with them, and were keeping well away from the "front porch." Alice was in her room changing her dress.

"Well, honey," Mrs. Adams said, taking confidence to revive this disused endearment;—"it's grand to have you so optimistic."

"Well—I got to admit the proposition begins to look pretty good: I know the stuff'll sell, and if—if——" he laughed plaintively, "It's funny—well, it's mighty funny about that smell."

"Virgil!" She lifted her hand to strike his arm chidingly. "Do quit harping on that nonsense!"

"Well," he said, slowly, "it's a puzzle."

"What is?"

"Pretty much everything, I guess."

As he spoke, a song came to them as Alice went down through the house to wait on the little veranda. "Mi chiamo Mimi," she sang.

"My!" said her father. "How sweet she does sing! I don't know as I ever heard her voice sound nicer than it did just then."

"There's something that makes it sound that way," his wife told him.

"I suppose so," he said, sighing. "You think——"

"She's just terribly in love with him!"

"I expect that's the way it ought to be," he said. "It don't make things less of a puzzle, though, does it? Here we go through all this muck and mo'l to help fix things nicer for her at home, and it seems like she's just gone ahead the way she'd 'a' gone anyhow; and now, I suppose, getting ready to up and leave us! Ain't that a puzzle to you? It is to me."

She gave a little cry of protest. "Oh, they aren't engaged yet. Of course they will be; but——" she rose from her chair. "That reminds me, I don't believe he's actually ever been inside our house! I guess I'd better talk to Alice about it right now." And with that she walked away, leaving him to his puzzles.

CHAPTER X.

ALICE was softly crooning to herself as her mother turned the corner of the house and approached through the dusk.

"Isn't it the most beautiful evening?" the daughter said.

"Things seem pretty beautiful in spite of all I've done to spoil 'em."

"You?" Mrs. Adams cried incredulously. "What have you done to spoil anything?"

"Little things, Alice said. "He's so honestly what he is—just simple and good and intelligent. I don't see why he likes me; and sometimes I'm afraid he wouldn't if he knew me."

"He'd just worship you," said the fond mother.

Alice shook her head. "He's not the worshipping kind. He's more"——

But Mrs. Adams interrupted.

"I was thinking.—— Well, of course we could hardly put off asking him to dinner or something much longer."

"Oh, mamma, must we? Do you think so?"

"Suppose you ask him for to-morrow, Alice. Everything'll be very nice, I'm sure."

Alice assented. "Very well, I'll ask him. I'll go tell your father about it," and Mrs. Adams left.

But when she went back to her husband she found Walter standing before him in the darkness. Adams was almost shouting, so great was his vehemence.

"Do you want to know what this boy's asking me for?" he said harshly. "I thought he was going to ask me to take him into my plant. No, ma'am; that's not what he wants!"

"No, it isn't," Walter said. In the darkness he stood motionless, and he spoke quietly. "No," he repeated "that isn't what I want."

"You stay down at that place," Adams went on hotly, "instead of trying to be a little use to your family; and the only reason you're allowed to stay there is because Mr. Lamb's never happened to notice you are still there! You just wait"——

"You're off," Walter said in the same quiet way. "He spoke to me yesterday; he asked me how I was getting along with my work."

At this Adams was silent; and Walter, after a moment, said:

"Well, are you going to do anything about me?"

"What is it, Walter?" his mother asked.

Walter replied in a tone as quiet as that he had used before, though with a slight huskiness, "I got to have $350. You better get him to give it to me if you can."

"What in the world!" Mrs. Adams exclaimed. "What for, Walter?"

His quiet huskiness did not alter. "I got to have it."

"But can't you tell us"——

"I got to have it."

"That's all you can get out of him," Adams said. "He seems to think it'll bring him in $350!"

A faint tremulousness became evident in the husky voice. "Haven't you got it?"

"No, I haven't got it!" his father answered.

"All right," Walter said; and after standing a moment more in silence, he added impersonally, "I don't see as you ever did anything much for me, anyhow—either of you."

Then he walked away quickly, and was at once lost to their sight in the darkness.

"What in the world do you suppose he wants all that money for?" Mrs. Adams said wonderingly. "I wonder"—— She paused. "I wonder if he—could have bad—associates."

"God knows!" said Adams. "I don't! It just looks to me like he had something in him I don't understand. I couldn't hardly let him have three hundred and fifty cents, let alone dollars!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to let me have that much," his wife ventured timidly; and she told him of her plans for the morrow. "It really must be done, Virgil; you don't want him to think she's ashamed of us, do you?"

"Oh, I reckon, I reckon," he mumbled. "A girl like Alice is some comfort; she don't come around acting as if she'd commit suicide if she didn't get three hundred and fifty dollars in the next five minutes. I expect I can spare five or six dollars for your show-off if I got to."

However, she finally obtained fifteen before his bedtime; and the next morning "went to market" after breakfast. Walter had not yet come downstairs. "You had better call him," Mrs. Adams said to Alice.

Upon Alice's forehead were the little shadows of an apprehensive reverie, and her thoughts overlapped one another in a fretful jumble. "What will he think? I'm responsible for what he expects."

What did I want to pose so to him for—as if papa were a wealthy man and all that? Papa must wear evening clothes. But Walter"——

With that she recalled her mother's admonition, and went upstairs to Walter's door.

"Time to get up, Walter. You'll be late. Hurry down and I'll have some coffee and toast ready for you." There came no sound from within the room, so she went in. Walter was not there.

He had been there, however; had slept upon the bed, though not inside the covers; and Alice supposed he must have come home so late that he had been too sleepy to take off his clothes and had probably breakfasted downtown.

Emerging from the kitchen at noon, Mrs. Adams found her daughter on hands and knees scrubbing the bases of the columns between the hall and the "living-room."

"Now, dearie," she said, "you must not tire yourself out, and you'd better come and eat something."

"No," Alice said, dully, "I don't want anything."

Her mother came closer to her. "Why, what's the matter?" she asked briskly. "You seem kind of pale to me; and you don't look happy. "This is all just for you! You ought to be enjoying it. Why, dearie, aren't you looking forward to this evening?"

The girl looked up. "Oh, yes, of course," she said, and tried to smile. "We had to do it—I do think it'll be nice. Of course I'm looking forward to it."

Arthur Russell's summer evenings with Alice had been as secluded as if they two had drawn apart from the world. The little veranda was their glamorous nook, with a faint golden light falling through the glass of the closed door upon Alice. The back of the world was the wall and closed door behind them; and Russell always thought of her as sitting there. A glamour was about her thus, and a spell upon him; but he had a fearless anxiety for all the pictures of her in his mind stopped at the closed door.

He had another anxiety, and this was of her own creating. Lately, he had half confessed to her, "your'e getting me so upset that if I ever hear anybody so much as say the name 'Alice Adams' I'll run!" He laughed, but his nervousness was genuine.

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