MISS ALICIA: A CHRISTMAS STORY: BY LAURA SIMMONS

HATEVER his internal disabilities, Mr. T. Andrew, outwardly at least, typified that fatally expressive euphemism—"well-preserved." Gingerly, and with an apprehensive, hunted look, now fast becoming chronic, he sidled across America's finest avenue, in a dogged determination to bridge the gap between Sherry's and Delmonico's alive. "Sidled" is writ advisedly, for with every motion the old gentleman was acutely and fearfully conscious of his doctor's admonitions: "No haste, no worry, no excess in eating; no late hours—" and all the other formidable "Don'ts."

Miss G. Alicia (yes, it was indeed she, and none other) was just emerging from Del's, in haste to achieve Sherry's across the way—and that explains why the two friends of, say, thirty-five years, nearly collided at the corner of Forty-fourth street.

"Why, Andrew—!"
"God bless my soul—Miss Alicia!"
"But you were in Egypt—and India—"
"And you went prowling off to Rome and Japan—"

The gay holiday crush swept them into seats in the Delmonico lobby. Mournfully they watched the younger society set, dining and wining at the tea-tables; the contemplation seemed at once to inspire them with a fresh realization of their own pathological woes.

"Yes—just fairly comfortable, Miss Alicia; but such an infernal diet! I fancy there's no doubt but I'm in a pretty bad way," the poor old Brummel stifled a sepulchral groan—which gave a chance to the lady to break in, not to be outdone in any recital of misery:

"Shocking—perfectly tragic! But did you never hear, Andrew, about my being given up to die by my Italian doctor? I'd love to tell you about it some time. Diet! Why, everything I eat goes—"

"Straight to your stomach?"

They smiled wanly—a sort of seventh smile of a seventh smile; one
MISS ALICIA: A CHRISTMAS STORY

must have one's bit of factiae even in a suffering and despairing universe.

"If only these pillmen weren't so devilishly callous—and fallible—and opinionated, dear Miss Alicia!"

Miss G. Alicia’s cheeks, whipped pink by the December gale, took on a deeper hue, most becoming to near-sixty and to gray curls unexceptionally marcelled. "Fallible! Andrew, believe me—I haven't really had a day’s health since I consulted one thirty years ago! And now it's milk, that's simply poison to me—positively feeding my arthritis! What is one to believe?"

"Paxton calls it my heart, of late—the last symptom, you know; probably the end—" A certain melancholy triumph was discernible in Mr. Andrew's tones, somewhat surprising in view of his fast approaching doom.

"He tells me he won't answer for me in event of any undue exertion—"

"How awful! Are you sure there's no hope? Though I am nearly as badly off myself! It leaves little enough for us in life—don't you think?" murmured Miss Alicia, pathetically.

"You see, I can understand, because I, too, have suffered; whereas this heartless younger generation—" The old lady shuddered, shrugging her disdain at even attempting to express the inexpressible (in other words, the inhumanity and cold-blooded indifference of certain young folks she could mention).

Just at this moment T. Andrew hastily excused himself, only to reappear immediately with a single exquisite gardenia boutonniere, its thick white petals heavy with the ineffable scent of jasmine.

In his own lapel was twisted a tiny sprig of mistletoe. Certainly the old beau has lost none of his former chivalry—as he presented—nor the belle aught of her old-time grace as she accepted—the lovely tribute.

Friends of the neighboring tables smiled and nodded across to the old aristocrats. The old world, it seemed, was still pleasing, still kindly intentioned, after all!

"Er—I say, Miss Alicia, mightn't we just venture on a cup of tea and toast? I feel as though it might pick me up a bit—"

Listlessly—as befitting two people so soon to depart this vale of tears—they sipped the golden Pekoe and nibbled marmalade toast de luxe.

"It is so helpful, so comforting, to talk to one who speaks from experience; it means more to me than medicine, dear Alicia. You are so restful, so understanding!"

"Understanding is good, Andrew. Hearken to my wretched diary
for the opening of the glad New Year: Monday, foot doctor; Tuesday, electricity for my neuritis; Wednesday, massage; Thursday, a specialist on auto-intoxication with reference to my insomnia—"
"Insomnia! Now you have said it, Alicia! What I have endured—"
"I could write volumes!" burst forth the lady passionately, but checked herself at the sudden gleam of speculation in his eye.
"Gad! Isn’t that my scamp of a grandnephew over yonder—beneath those palms?"
"Truly—and with my grandniece, Andrew. We are—getting along, aren’t we?" The little lady dropped her lorgnette with a heavy sigh.
"Alicia, you’ve no idea what a moribund old fossil I am to that college kid! Believe me, if you could hear his comments upon ‘my day’—"
"My poor Andrew! And my grandnieces—" Miss Alicia dabbled her eyes furtively. "But never mind; life at our age is such a hold-up, anyhow—a veritable thug! I’ve come to believe it’s our craven fear, our secret shrinking from its brutalities, that keeps us ailing, and timorous, and half alive. This growing sense of isolation, the lack of decent human consideration—" The poor old lady’s voice faltered dangerously near a sob.
"Just plain damned loneliness, Alicia—er—by the way”—his truculent accents sank to a beseeching whisper of a sudden—"would you—could you take a chance with me on a morsel of squab and a thimble of claret?"
"Oh, Andrew," gasped Miss Alicia; "Paxton strictly forbids—"
"Paxton be—blowed! I know it’s on the list, but if you’re sport enough for just a shred—a mere shred—of guinea-hen—" His eyes glowed with a magnificent recklessness. She gazed at him adoringly, ecstatically.
"It might kill me. It’s been years and years—but, oh, it sounds just heavenly—"
That splendid superman, the head waiter, was already bending over them. Into the old gentleman’s face crept a curious mixture of craft and ferocious determination.
"Alicia, I ought to be on the Drive ’bus this very moment to see Paxton about a prescription—"
"Me, too—I must hurry along."
"I say, Alicia, let’s not! What do you say to a cabaret instead?"
Then as she stared at him speechlessly, twisting her small hands in rapturous indecision:
"We have such a mere fraction of life left at best, Alicia, dear—"
MISS ALICIA: A CHRISTMAS STORY

“Oh, Andrew! I was trying to remember—any excitement—any late hour. Oh, won’t it be perfectly gorgeous?” she finished in gleeful irrelevance.

“And you can tell me all about that time you were given up to die in India. You must have suffered perfect agony! I’d so love to hear it.”

“Yes, five years ago this Christmas week. And what about your breakdown in Rome? Must have been something frightful.”

“Oh, I’m crazy to tell you. Won’t it be grand?”

“And you know there’s a most entertaining new theory about nervous indigestion. It has been wonderful to meet you again, Alicia.”

It was eleven-thirty (nine was Paxton’s limit) before their taxi drew up in front of Miss Alicia’s sober old brownstone front in the East Thirties, just off Madison.

Radiant, but outwardly composed, she entered, followed by a stately, dignified old gentleman who beamed with unwonted but joyful agitation.

“Now, don’t forget the Poster Exhibit, Monday, and that Tapestry Auction, Tuesday—an event, I assure you, Alicia! We’ll have to cancel Paxton again. I say, Alicia”—he broke into a chuckle of the utmost contentment and derision—“that Tokay never touched me! What do you know?”

The lady giggled and shook a warning finger: “Your nephews—what if they send for an alienist?”

Mr. T. Andrew murmured something truly appalling about grand-nephews in general—his own in particular. His patrician features took on a deep mulberry hue: “Let them send; let them call it senile dementia or any other dope! I’m going again, or rather we are! My money’s my own yet, thank God. What’s Holiday Week good for? And as for your nieces, what they don’t know won’t hurt ’em. We should worry!”

Miss Alicia shivered.

“If they ever heard about the cabaret—and the guinea hen—it would be a sanitarium at least, Andrew,” faintly.

“Alicia”—with sudden terrific emphasis he brought his plump white fist down upon Miss Alicia’s frail Sheraton muffin table—“I’m going to have a snack of lobster stew tomorrow if it murders me in my bed. If I die, at any rate I die a hero’s death; ’tis a noble cause!”

“And—oh, Andrew—if I might just dare a bit of Benedictine omelette—and a creme Yvette—oh!”

“And coffee—”

“You used to like a dash of cognac in it, Andrew.” Miss Alicia’s
MISS ALICIA: A CHRISTMAS STORY

delicate near-sixty face glowed like a Killarney rose as she stooped to start the asbestos fire log.

"I hate to have to receive you like this, Andrew—and on Christmas Eve, too! Gas logs. Somehow they always seem typical of my life—always the husk—the imitation—with no real cheer or—or feeling. The next time you come we'll have driftwood, and dreams—a real, true fireplace."

Deftly Mr. Brummel had extracted the tiny mistletoe bough and slipped it amongst the pretty silver curls. He bent his handsome old head and ever so gently kissed the slim jeweled fingers.

"Listen, Alicia. Let's not die just yet, you and I; let's coöperate! Fire Paxton to begin with, and just try what chumming, and comforting, and sympathizing will do for us, Alicia, dearest. I challenge you!"

Miss Alicia sobbed upon his broadcloth bosom.

"Oh, Andrew, if you knew how tired I was of being just—just a gas log. I feel as though I'd just love to try you—like the guinea hen—Andrew, darling."

The glow from the hearth lit their tired faces into undying youth again as it burned on, prosaically, steadily indifferent to the extraordinary behaviour of these absurd juveniles.

For, gentle reader, know that a gas log may be ever so efficient and dependable—and well regulated—and well intentioned.

But it lacks temperament; it can never understand and never thrill. It is never anything but a gas log after all.