

AUNT DIANA

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Aunt Diana by Rosa Nouchette Carey

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AUNT DIANA



ALISO WATCHED, HALF-FASCINATED BY HORROR.

AUNT DIANA

BY

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STORY,' ETC.*

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AUNT DIANA.

CHAPTER I.

ALISON DROPS HER ROSES.

THERE are conflicts in most lives—real hand-to-hand combats, that have to be fought, not with any fleshly weapons, but with the inner forces of the being—battles wherein the victory is not always to the strong, where the young and the weak and the little ones may be found abiding nearest to the standards.

Such a conflict had come to Alison Merle, breaking up the surface of her smooth outer life, and revealing possible shoals and quicksands, in which many of her brightest hopes might be wrecked, when Duty with its sternest face seemed to beckon to her on one side, and Inclination whispered tenderly into her ear on the other, 'You are too young for such a piece of self-sacrifice; no one in their senses would ask such a thing of you.'

'It is hard. I do not know that even if Aunt Di think it right I shall ever have the heart to do it,' murmured Alison, talking to herself in her agitation, after the manner of older folk. 'I have just rooted myself in this dear place, and the soil suits me. I could not flourish anywhere else; and,' finished Alison, with a quaint little smile, 'sickly plants are worth nothing.'

To any ordinary spectator the interior of that little room would have presented a picture of perfect serenity and absolute comfort. Even the young creature comfortably seated in a chair by the window, with an open letter and a cluster of deep red roses lying amongst the folds of her white gown, presented no disturbing image, though the cheek had lost its wonted fresh colour, and the dark, dreamy eyes had a look of doubt that was almost pain in them.

It was a still, drowsy afternoon in June; down in the pleasant

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garden below all the winged creatures in nature were holding high revel; a butterflies' feast seemed to be held among the roses; gnats and dragon-flies moved in giddy circles over the lawn; two or three solemn brown bees had met in conclave over one flower-bed; while the insects danced airily and boomed through their tiny trumpets, a shrill concert sounded from the trees overhead; through the thick foliage one could catch the silvery gleam of water; the splash of an oar sounded in the distance, then another, slow, measured, rhythmic; surely an afternoon for an idle mood, when one's thoughts might cull sweets like the bees.

The low bay window at which Alison was sitting was framed in roses, the long sprays tapped softly against the glass; the greenery had transformed it into an old-fashioned bower, and many a wandering bee found its way inside, in curious investigation of the flower-filled vases.

How Alison had grown to love that room! She looked round it now with half-regretful, appreciative eyes, that noted every trifle—the white tent bed, the wardrobe that Aunt Di had so tastefully painted with her own hand (a marvellous work of art in Alison's eyes), the hanging book-cases, the little writing-table, the snug couch with its nest of pillows, the simply framed landscapes on the wall, all the work of the same skilful hand; the tame canary pluming its yellow coat fussily after its bath. Surely an ideal girl's room! And Alison did so love the beauty and fitness of things—anything that was ugly or disorderly gave her positive pain.

'You are a little Sybarite,' Aunt Diana said once, with a chiding laugh. 'A crumpled rose-leaf would disturb your slumbers. What a comfort that I have transplanted you from The Holms! The atmosphere of Moss-side, old-maidish as it is, suits you much better. A constitution like Roger's can stand it, but hardly you, Ailie.'

Alison remembered this speech; it had pained her a little at the time; it was just one of Aunt Diana's shrewd speeches that brought one suddenly face to face with oneself, like one's image reflected in an over-true looking-glass.

Was that true of her? Was she really as indolent and luxury-loving as Aunt Diana's words seemed to imply?

The discomforts of her home life had been very great. Looking back through the glamour of these two happy years, during which she had lived at Moss-side, her life seemed to her almost unbearable, and yet she had shared it with those she dearly loved. Was not

Roger part of it, and Rudel and her father, not to mention Missie and Poppie? Was it not an unnatural thing that she should be blooming here, a petted exotic, instead of abiding in the rougher home soil?

Two years ago—she had been sixteen then, and, oh, how discontented and ill and unhappy she had been! It was not only the loss of her mother, it was her own incapacity for responsibility, her morbid dislike to her surroundings, that had fretted all her fine colour away. Perhaps her health may have been partly the cause, but surely she need not have been so disagreeable, so captious, so miserable, so disposed to look on the dark side of everything, that even Roger, with all his sweet temper, gave her a wide berth, and her father—well, thought Alison, with a shadowed brow, her father had never quite understood her. Change of air would do her good, and then Aunt Diana had come down upon them with the freshness of a moorland breeze.

'You must give your eldest girl to me, Ainslie,' she had said to Alison's father; 'she wants care and cherishing more than Miss Leigh has time to give her. She looks overgrown and sickly; and,' finished Aunt Diana, with a funny little laugh, 'I am a neat sort of person, and I do hate to see a round thing trying to fit itself into a square hole; it leaves all the corners empty and ready for dust.' And, of course, Aunt Diana had her way.

Instead of the whirr of machinery—for her father's saw-mills were just behind their house—Alison had now only to listen to the soft flow of the river that glided below the green lawns and shrubberies of Moss-side; instead of waking up in the morning to look across the dusty shrubs and trees to the vast wood piles and masses of un-sawn timber, that seemed endlessly between her and the blue sky, Alison's eyes had now the finest prospect: one shaded garden seemed to run into another, and when the willows were thinned or bare in winter-time, what a view of the river and green meadows on the opposite side!

The moral surroundings were almost as much changed. Instead of Miss Leigh's dry method of instruction—her laboured and hackneyed phrases, suggestive of the bare bones of wisdom—Aunt Diana had placed within her reach many a pleasant short cut to knowledge, had suggested all sorts of enviable accomplishments; money was not stinted where Alison's talents could be turned to account. Lavish by nature, Aunt Diana showed herself liberal in all

that concerned her niece's welfare. What she could teach herself she taught without regarding time or pains; when she left it to others, she surrounded Alison with a certain wise oversight that made itself felt; faults were rebuked smilingly, little errors of judgment commented on by a passing word. Aunt Diana could be abrupt, critical, keen as a sea breeze, but her censure never hurt or stung or corroded, as some people's sharp speeches did. Alison always heard her humbly, owned her right, and set herself to do better.

In this pleasant but bracing atmosphere Alison had thriven and grown. She was still a tall slim girl, somewhat youthful in look, but with plenty of warm life and energy about her; and though the dark eyes had still their old trick of dreaming, they seemed to dream more happily, and the shadow did not lie so deep in them—not, at least, until the June afternoon, when Alison sat sighing and visibly disturbed with her lap full of roses. It was evident at last that she found her thoughts too painful, for after another half-hour's intense brooding she suddenly jumped up from her seat, scattering the flowers where they lay unheeded on the Indian matting, and walked abruptly to the door.

She had dropped her letters, too; but she went back and picked them up, not replacing them in their envelopes, and then she went out into the passage.

A dark oak staircase led into a little square hall, fitted up with book-cases like a library, with a harmonium on one side; a glass door opened into a conservatory, through which one passed into the garden.

Alison turned the handle of a door just opposite the staircase, and stood for a moment hesitating on the threshold.

What a pleasant room that was, half studio and half drawing-room, full of cross lights, and artistically littered with an odd jumble of mediæval and modern furniture—oak chairs and cabinets, basket-work lounges, tiny tea-tables, fit for Lilliputian princesses, and hanging cupboards of quaint old china that gave warm colouring to the whole. A wiry brown terrier with bright eyes jumped up with a welcome bark; a small black kitten, about the size of a moderate piece of coal, followed him gingerly. Alison stooped down to caress them, but her eyes were still fixed on a lady who stood with her back towards her, painting at an easel.

'Well, child, what now?' The voice was nicely modulated, clear,

and musical, but the manner slightly abrupt. Alison lifted up Jetty in her arms while Trip rolled over at her feet, in a vain attempt to testify his joy. 'I have come to see you, Aunt Di,' she returned, in an hesitating way.

'And I suppose you prefer my profile to my front face,' remarked Miss Carrington drily, as she painted a troublesome little piece of foliage. 'Alison,' in a more animated manner, 'my special muse is cross-grained to-day; I cannot woo her with these blues and greens at all; this tree does not please me; I wanted an effect of shadowy brightness, such as one sees when the wind plays through the leaves, and the road is flecked with a sort of lattice work of moving lights and shades, but this is far too sombre.'

Alison came forward at once, and inspected the picture. 'It is very pretty, Aunt Di,' she said, forgetting her own worries in a moment. 'It is one of your best. I think I see what you mean, but to me it is all beautiful; that old man—a pensioner, is he not? and that poor, tired sheep, that seems to have dropped down by the way, left behind by the flock, is so suggestive of the title "Noontide rest."'

'That is what I intended. You are an intelligent child, Ailie; both the man and the sheep must be old; it is not for young creatures to rest at noontide; my old pensioner has already borne the burthen and heat of the day.'

'Of course, I see what you mean, Aunt Di.'

'My parable is not hard to read,' replied Miss Carrington with a smile; but as Alison studied the picture with increased interest and admiration, a pair of shrewd, kindly eyes were studying the girl's face.

'Go and put yourself in that easy chair opposite, and tell me all about it,' she said at last, rousing her by a good-humoured little push. 'I must finish this branch if I am to enjoy my night's rest, but I can listen to any amount of lettered woes,' with a suggestive glance at Alison's hand.

'Oh! Aunt Di, how do you find out things so?' stammered Alison; then, as though used to obedience, she moved to the chair that was always reserved for Miss Carrington's visitors, whom she was wont to entertain after a fashion of her own.

People always got on with Miss Carrington, but they found it difficult to describe her; no one knew her age exactly, and certainly no one would have ventured to put such a question.

As some one once said of her, 'she was made up of negatives,'