

THE DELEGATE.

SUSIE BOUCHELLE WIGHT IN YOUTH'S COMPANION.

Although grandmothers may be at a discount in some homes, they certainly were not at Alice Mason's, and they did not reside upon a shelf, either. The sunniest room in that beautiful new house, the coziest corner by the fire and the most inviting chair belonged by right of love and reverence to Grandmother Parker, and when that dear old white-haired lady spoke her gentle mind, she was sure of affectionate attention. So when young Mrs. Mason came in, flushed and excited, from a gay afternoon at a friend's reception, she paused with a smile at hearing Grandmother Parker's call from the library.

"Come here a minute, my dear, before you go up to change your dress. I have such lovely news for you! Soon after you went out the minister came in, all worried and anxious. He said things about the decline of hospitality in the city, and asked if we would not take delegates. You know the conference convenes tomorrow night, and although the list has been published in the paper, some of the people are making excuses, and he is sadly put to it to find homes for the preachers. He seemed timid about asking, because we were newcomers, but I told him that I was sure it was nothing but inadvertence that had kept you from asking for delegates, and that he might send you two, provided they were two of a kind, as you have only the one guest-chamber. Won't it be nice to have delegates, dear?"

"I don't know, grandma," faltered Alice, a little aghast. "I've never had the experience."

"To be sure—to be sure. I am always forgetting that you didn't know anything about real home-life, spending all your days wandering about over the world with parents that by rights should have been Gipsies. But when your mother was a little girl, and we lived in Brooksville, we used to have such exciting times when conventions and conferences would come our way. There is something so fascinating about entertaining any one whom the authorities may send you—quite like opening a prize box. Your dear grandpa and I have entertained as many as a dozen for more than a week at a time. We of the family would sleep upon pallets made of quilts on the floor, giving up our rooms to the visitors. And such preparations in the kitchen! Why, we would bake cakes and pies by the score, grandpa would kill bees and porkers, and the turkeys would be gobbling in my coops for weeks ahead of the time! Oh, I am so glad we are to have a little peep at old times again!"

Mrs. Parker sighed so happily that Alice Mason bent down and kissed her, compelling smoothness into a brow that was troubled. Then she slipped away to her husband's study to pour out her misgivings.

"O Ted," she cried, "I never would have taken them in all the world! I don't see how I am ever to manage! Just an afternoon tea makes Jane so cross that I am afraid to give her an order for a week afterward, and if my dearest friend drops in to dinner I feel like making the most abject apologies—and to think of two strangers for a whole week! Grandmother forgot the grocery bill, too, Ted, and it makes me sick and faint to think of it, for we must not let her feel that we don't do her justice."

"With our pretty new house and our carriage," she added, "they are sure to send us the bishop or some other important person, and I simply must rise to the occasion—but oh, I do hope grandma won't revert to old times this way again!"

"The bishop or some other important person!" repeated Ted Mason, vacantly. "Well, I love your grandmother, my dear, and I know that next to somebody else, she is the sweetest of women, but if they are going to quarter dignitaries upon us, I am called out of town—I can't rise to occasions like that!"

"O hush, Ted! You are going to do exactly as I shall—make the very best of it, and grandma is not to be made uncomfortable. I am going to cook up everything nice I can think of. I'll put an extra shine on the silver and cut glass, and this house will be spick and span by tomorrow night—you'll see!"

Soon the house was full of pleasant excitement. Mrs. Parker found things for her feeble hands to do, Alice flitted about busily. Jane was mollified by gifts and flattery, and soon the night came, and the family waited in the library for the bishop. There were American Beauty roses bending on their tall stems on the library table, there were violets scenting the entrance hall, and Alice felt a pleasurable glow of self-satisfaction.

"I believe, after all, that I am rather glad grandma took the delegates. I am not very much of a church woman, but I realize that these men are doing a great deal of good—and the bishops and the other leaders are always delightful men. I shall try to fulfill grandma's ideas. I shall drive them in the carriage to the church, and I'll have James wait there to bring them home after the sessions."

The looked-for ring at the door cut short her hospitable plans, and in another moment she was looking upon her delegates—but not upon a bishop. They very evidently were from the country. A tall, lank, white-bearded patriarch entered, and upon his arm was a chubby-faced young woman, hardly as old as Alice herself. The old man's clothes revealed the signs of long service and many careful

brushings and spongings. The wife was evidently a bride, for her ill-made, ill-fitting frock was of pearly gray with pink trimmings, and her hat was white, with a wealth of white flowers wandering over and under it. There was not a perceptible pause between Alice's frightened taking in of the situation and her greeting of her guests. Mrs. Parker rose from her chair to hold out her little wrinkled hands with her old-fashioned courtesy, and Ted Mason did his share of welcoming.

"You must be tired," said Alice, hospitably, after a moment, and then she led the way to the guest-chamber, and left them alone.

Her husband intercepted her on her return, and grinned as he shook her affectionately. "Don't you worry, Alice," he whispered. "I am so relieved! A bride and a groom will talk to each other, and my brilliant conversational powers will not be needed."

"That is true," agreed his wife, with flaming cheeks. "They will entertain each other, and I'll not need to go round with them. O Ted, isn't she awful! She looks like a pillow with a string tied about it—and he—Why did they send us such people?"

The old minister, Mr. Harvey, had a certain dignity which kept him from seeming embarrassed in the new splendors of Alice's dining-room, but the poor little bride was evidently ill at ease. Mrs. Parker devoted herself to them, and Alice was not far behind and before the first meal was concluded the conversation was general, if not very absorbing in its interest.

There followed an hour or two in the library, and then Mrs. Parker said to the minister:

"I am not strong enough for late hours, Mr. Harvey. Will you not have prayers now?"

This was another unexpected turn, for Alice had not entertained a minister before, and there ensued a flurried hunting for a Bible. Finally she brought, from Mrs. Parker's own room, the big family Bible. Alice deposited it, with an effort, upon the table at the minister's side, and mentally resolved that the next day she would buy one of more convenient size.

"The servant, sister?" asked Mr. Harvey. "Do you not have her come in for worship?" Then came a brief but energetic argument in the kitchen with Jane, who finally came in, with a sulky frown, to sit down by the library door. Things were taking a strange turn in the butterfly's nest, but Mrs. Parker lay back in her chair, and as Alice gazed at the sweet, placid old face, it seemed to her that she could see the golden light of past days dawning over it. The country bride sat still, regarding her husband's countenance reverently, and as Alice's eyes wandered, she met her husband's glance. His eyes held no laugh in them, although he smiled at her understandingly, and strangest of all, when the reading was finished, Jane's lowering face had cleared, and she slipped quietly out of the room without even a shake of her expressive shoulders.

"My granddaughter has made some pleasant plans for you, my dear," said Mrs. Parker the next morning to the bride. "We are so glad that our delegates are as they are. We had expected two gentlemen, but I always prefer a lady. One gets so much better acquainted, you know."

Alice bit her lip. She had ordered the carriage, and had intended putting it at the disposal of her guests, but she certainly had no idea of going out with them. There was nothing for it but to acquiesce, however, when Mrs. Parker told Mrs. Harvey that her hostess would take her to the church and remain there through the opening service with her. Alice considered that she would have to reason a little with her grandmother privately.

Alice pointed out the pastor's house as they drove by, and Mr. Harvey looked at it with interest.

"Well! Well!" he said. "The church is learning to take care of her servants these days. Such a fine house—and they tell me you pay your pastor two thousand dollars a year! I guess I was born fifty years too soon, Nannie," he said, jocularly, to the little bride. "The younger preachers don't have the struggles we older men had. Why, I have been preaching now for forty years, and my highest salary was five hundred dollars a year—that was when the boys and girls were young, and you know you have eight stepchildren, Nannie. Still, it is all right, and I am not the one to grumble. The rewards always did go to the deserving men, and I know I am not much of a preacher, so I am just grateful to be remembered by my old conference in the way I am."

It sounded strange to Alice Mason—five hundred dollars a year, for a whole family to live on! How could they do it? Her own little perplexities over ways and means seemed silly in comparison.

She led the visitors to the very forefront in the church. Mr. Harvey had said that he did not want to miss a word of the proceedings.

The conference was about to open. Alice had never seen the bishop, but she did not need to have him pointed out. A tall, lank-looking man, with keen eyes looking out from under a wide brow—she had already recognized him, even before he took his chair. Oh, if he could have been her delegate!

Alice had never cared much for the

old-fashioned church hymns; they had a sort of dolefulness to her, but the familiar lines had a different sound as he repeated them before the organ pealed out:

"Come, ye that love the Lord,
And let your joys be known;
Join in a song with sweet accord,
And thus surround the throne."

The country bride sang clearly, and the quivering voice of the old preacher rose triumphantly. Alice joined in.

For the first time the sense of strangeness between her and Mrs. Harvey seemed to disappear, and as Alice sat through the morning session, she watched the little woman by her side, looked at the shabby dress, and came to a conclusion.

She had at home a beautiful new black gown, just from the tailor. The cloth of it was smooth and shining, and the fashion of the coat was such that it would conceal the awkward lines of Mrs. Harvey's figure. There was a black hat to match it.

Clad in that, the young wife would look really dignified, and Alice determined that she should have it. But to manage it without hurting her feelings!

She set her mind to puzzle it out, and almost forgot what was going on about her before she finally concluded that in order to be able to make the gift she must get on very friendly, almost affectionate, terms with Mrs. Harvey.

Mrs. Harvey accepted the gift with perfect simplicity. She looked like a different creature in the new garments. Before noon of the next day Mr. Harvey assured Alice that in all his forty years he had never been treated so handsomely. Mrs. Harvey soon forgot her perplexity over the astounding number of spoons and forks that surrounded her plate at table, and was able to enter into a very quiet and demure enjoyment of the drollery of Mr. Mason and his young wife. Day after day Alice went with them to conference, and remained through the sessions.

One day she noticed how the old man's face always lighted up when the bishop began to speak. But nothing prepared her for what happened on a day when Mr. Harvey had been asked to conduct a devotional service. He did not do it very well. He showed that he was a little flustered, and his old hands quivered as he held the Bible. Alice felt sorry for him, and for his wife, who looked at her husband so appealingly; but after Mr. Harvey had taken his seat the bishop rose.

"Brethren," he said, "it has been a long time since I have seen this old friend, before this conference. Forty years—forty long years ago, he was just beginning his ministry, and was serving a pious-woods circuit away off in an out-of-the-way place. I was a young lawyer sent down to Florida upon a certain land case, and by accident, one hot summer day, I stopped at a brush arbor out in the woods, where he was preaching to a congregation that had gathered there in ox-carts, on horseback and afoot. I stopped, more to rest in the shade than because I felt any interest, but he had a message, and he delivered it from a full heart. It was for me—for me! I don't know how many others it came home to, but I went on my way thoughtful and more serious than I had ever been in my life before, only to come back and seek him out at night—like Nicodemus of old. And like Nicodemus of old—I was told the way—the only way—"

The bishop paused a moment, and some one out in the congregation began to sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," as that congregation had a way of doing upon all sorts of occasions. The bishop bent down and clasped hands with Mr. Harvey, whose uplifted face was radiant. Alice, with downcast eyes, saw the little bride's hands trembling on her lap, and she put her own soft fingers in between, and they sat there listening happily together through the rest of the service.

"Ted, darling," Alice said that afternoon, "we are entertaining something bigger than the bishop—we are taking care of the man who put him in the way of being what he is. Oh, wouldn't it have been awful if we had not been nice to them?"

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