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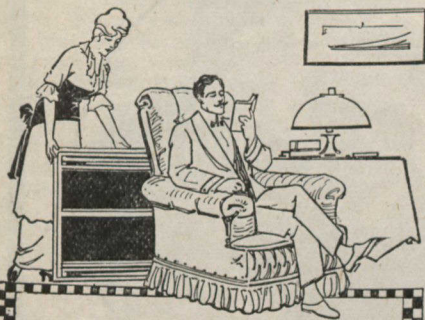
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Delia's Bachelors

(Continued from page 8)

in the same class room where Bob studied, play on the same field, lie in the same infirmary, perhaps; pray in the same Chapel. Only, Delia, dearest, how can I write it? I can't subject Robert to the same temptations which proved so strong for Bob—I dare not! Residence life is all right for some boys; even the wretched places which are called lodging houses (and which in many cases are managed by women who have no more thought for the boys under their roof than if they were so many dogs) may do some no harm. But neither will answer for me. I want Robert to live in a home, to feel the uplifting, inspiring influence of a good woman for we are most of us, thank heaven, more responsive to good than evil. Robert is an affectionate, impulsive, thoughtless boy who has already been taught to love the 'Aunt Delia' he hopes soon to see, and if you will only take him in I know that he will escape the pitfalls which yawned for Bob. He will revel in your sunshineness, your unquenchable brightness, but he needs your woman's tenderness as well,....."

She stopped abruptly, her eyes and voice full of tears. Muriel rushed impulsively to her and smothered her with hugging. The others followed suit. For a while it looked as though they were having a jolly little weeping party all to themselves. "You're splendid," cried the girls, "perfectly splendid! We see it all! You're giving up all this, you're being beautifully forty, so that you can take this Robert boy into your house and be a—oh, Delia dearest, have you got to be a mother to him?"

Delia nodded, smiling through her tears.

"As soon as Amy's letter came, I took it to the dean," said she. "I opened my heart to him just as I have to you. Oh, how ashamed he made me feel by saying that he thought I was just the woman for the work! Then he set himself at getting me six more boys and a professor—a new man who is taking Dr. Jamieson's place. They come on Monday, upon which auspicious date the boarding house opens. You see, I haven't much time for the restoration of the ancestral—"

"We'll help!" cried all the girls, enthusiastically. "Come on, Delia, let's get to work right now!"

Thus it happened that old Sol peeping into the house one morning felt as though he had come into his own, again. Gone were the flimsy gimcracks which had destroyed the dignity and beauty of Chesleyvale, gone was the jarring effort at modernity which struck as alien a note as would a gas-stove in the home of an Arawak.

Instead, there was a welcome substantiality about the place. Its rooms and their furniture invited use and gave comfort and homey-ness in return. The older residents, away from whom Delia had willfully drifted, learned of her venture and flocked to express their approbation. Whereas they had murmured—half enviously, half contemptuously, "Isn't she a wonder?" they now remarked that she was lucky. The words of praise had a sincere ring. The younger residents hardly gave her time to sleep so assiduous were they in their attention, and so bent on making her boarding house a success.

Then, of course there was the matter of her clothes.

"Not that I want to wear dull black and spectacles, a kerchief and cap," she admitted, "but I never expect to be seen again in that sort of trash."

She pointed scornfully at her 'girlish' wardrobe.

So the tailor, the dressmaker and the milliner had distinct shocks when Delia curtly refused garments because they made her look young. They gasped when she had gone and said,

"It's no use to try and put spring leaves on fall trees. Never looks right. But autumn leaves on autumn trees—is there anything that can beat it? Same with Miss Delia. I declare, you should have seen her in that violet hat..... she made as pretty a picture as I ever want to see."

A strange fact remained; Delia looked younger in her 'suitable' clothes than she had before. They threw her delicacy and prettiness into relief; her youthful modish garments had eclipsed them.

"You look just like your photograph," said Robert, holding her at arms length from his towering self, "only—only—"

"Older," she laughed, proudly.

"I wasn't going to say that," returned the boy, flushing as boys will in paying an honest compliment. "I was going to say that you have the look a fellow likes to see—isn't afraid of, you know—"

when he is in a scrape and needs help to get out of it."

She ran her fingers through his curly hair and pretended to pull it warning him that she would assume a very different look if he got into any scrapes. But it was glorious to be forty, to have a young man look at you with nothing but affection and to be able to pull his hair! She treated Robert with an intimacy which set him apart from the rest of the boys, she took him into her confidence much as she had done with the girls, and she urged him to lead the rest and be an example for them to follow.

"If you men do not respect me and my house," she said, "I will be a greater failure than I was before. Therefore, I ask you to be my friend. Help me to make this experiment a success. At the first sign of carousing, the townfolk will say, 'Well, what else did you expect of Delia?' Don't let them, Bobbie—don't let them!"

He didn't. The boys would no more have thought of behaving like Apaches in Chesleyvale than they would have thought of behaving like gentlemen in one of the lodging houses of which Amy had such a horror. And they were not unusual boys, either. It was Delia herself. All the thought and energy she had hitherto put into the drugging of that unloved parent, Time, she now put into the making of a Home for her bachelors. They were not often lured out in the evenings for Delia always had some of her girl friends at the house and the impromptu parties at Chesleyvale were far more enjoyable than the premeditated ones elsewhere. She was the gracious hostess, chaperoning them as forty should chaperone twenty and she was more truly one of them now, than in the other days when such a condition was practically her only object in life.

The boys loved her to distraction; they bullied her and teased her and showed her their honest young affection in all of the violent ways known to College men, and they were furiously jealous of one another.

As they were jealous as of one another, so was Professor Ellery jealous of them, and of their riotous spirits and their frank affection for Delia. With total inconsideration, he thought, they made constant demands upon Delia. These demands, had they been analyzed, showed that she had too little time left to devote to him. She merely kept his clothes in order, his books dusted, and provided his favorite food at least twice a day.

He often felt a keen resentment against her; she was absurdly young. He was fifty-two.

"You will probably always be young," he grumbled musingly one night when, as it happened, all the bachelors were absent at a gym. contest.

"Heaven forbid," she cried, "Don't cheat me of the blissful serenity which comes with age. I am positively looking forward to it!"

She drew a small smoking stand toward him, and put the ash tray near. (But this attention was no more than she would have paid the boys, he remarked.)

"Age is not synonymous with serenity," he said. "Age is bad enough, but youth is worse. I don't like young people. They are cruel, all of them—they hurt me."

Delia looked at him with her newfound tenderness.

"You mistake them, I am sure," she said. "Youth may ridicule age—I did, myself, a few months ago, but it does not mean to be cruel. One does not expect a yearling to bear fruit; one must not expect youth to behave like anything else. Look at those dear boys of mine—"

"Senseless nincompoops," he muttered into the stem of his pipe. But when Delia asked him to repeat the remark, he made some excuse and changed the subject. Entirely unconvinced, however; it was too evident that she admired and preferred youth to age.

At Easter, he sent her a modest bunch of violets, whereat Robert went into a paroxysm of rage.

"Such impertinence, the old fossil!" he stormed. "He is encroaching on our rights. You are not his adopted Aunt. If I told the boys, they would take him out in the grounds and give him fifty lashes. I won't have him thrusting his imbecile attentions on you! He shan't annoy my own old Auntie!"

To equalize matters, the boys presented her with a half cart-load of glorious lilies. They dwarfed the disgruntled professor's gift and seemed to mock it. He forgot to note that Delia wore his violets and decorated with the lilies, so he nursed

(Continued on page 35)

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