

Delia's Bachelors

Turning Time Backwards
for the Rest of
One's Life

By MADGE MACBETH

Illustration by
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THE sun leaped up until it had cleared the big oak and was free to peep in at Delia's half-closed shutters, then it seemed to pause and proceed upon its course with more deliberation. Inside the room Sol turned his attention to the wall where a fine old portrait had once hung. A dizzying succession of pictures had followed, resulting to-day, in a valueless French thing combining masses of ribbons, frills and legs, entitled "La Coquette." He passed unheeding over the dark rim about the frame (an evidence that the last art treasure to occupy that space, had possessed superior quantity, at least) and on to the flimsy dressing table which had superseded a substantial walnut bureau. Next, he lighted up the swinging clusters of programs and cards, the college flags and banners, then went round to a wire rack which fairly oozed photographs of callow youths. Some of these wore cap and gown, some football or gymnasium togs, and a few, sagging under the weight of their own importance, wore the conventional garb of the embryonic man.

Presently, a shaft of merciless brilliance fell athwart Delia as she lay asleep and it showed her, like her surroundings, to be marred by a feverish effort toward rejuvenation, toward a modernizing of that which might have been beautiful and dignified with age, but which was cheap and tawdry glossed by the superficial finger of ultra 'up-to-dateness.

Changes had transpired outside, too, but not the sort that Delia made. Nature had attended to the decaying pillars of the driveway, to the growth of weeds between two rows of stately poplars where, in years gone by, Judge Chesley had rolled his luxurious way to the musical clatter of prancing bays; Nature and her faithful henchman, Time, had smeared the grounds of Chesleyvale with their thumb-prints and ugly blotches, spreading untidiness and waste where order and beauty once had flourished.

Delia stirred, groaned and stretched herself awake. She lay a moment blinking in the dancing sunbeams and marshalling her scattered faculties. Then, of a sudden, she bounded into the middle of the floor and rushed across to her flimsy dressing table.

In appearance the woman who stared back at her was certainly not attractive. Wisps of rather colorless hair were tightly wrapped around appliances which, according to their advertisement, were infallible for imparting a natural wave, overnight; eyebrows and lashes were covered with a glutinous, yellow substance claiming a stimulation of their growth. The eyes, themselves, were those of a woman so tired that eight hours' sleep had failed to vivify her, and beside this, various plasters and adhesions clung to her face—these purported by their inventors to obliterate the marks left by Time's fingers, if properly and faithfully applied. Her hands were encased in a large pair of gentleman's soiled evening gloves.

"Put me in the battle front," observed Delia, critically, to the woman in the mirror, "Put me in the battle front, and I guarantee to check the advance of the oncoming legions. Indeed, I have every confidence that I could put them to flight! Um-hum. . . here's a good beginning—I have stopped the clock!"

She laid aside the soiled gloves and made a rasping noise with the winder. When it would turn no further, she looked absently at the face of the clock and continued her monologue.

"I wish I could have stopped it twenty years ago—or, perhaps, I ought to wish I could turn it back that length of time and live it over again." A frightened sort of look crossed her face. "I wish I could hold it still!" she cried. "In another twenty years, I will be OLD."

Slowly she pulled the plasters from her face and removed the yellowish paste. Then taking her hair from its curlers, Delia made a little parcel of these First Aids to Beauty, and consigned them to the grate in her room. Their burning was conducted as solemnly as though it had been a religious rite.

After that she felt better.

She had hardly breakfasted before callers began to arrive. It was the usual thing in the small college town for the frivolous and unoccupied to run in to Delia's. She was not surprised, therefore, or unprepared to receive six of the season's buds. She was always a particular friend of debutantes, who never felt unsophisticated in her presence. She never criticised them or gave them advice, indeed she she often went so far as to ask it of them, thus increasing their self-esteem and her own popularity.

"Well, what's new?" they asked, disposing themselves about the spacious verandah. Delia always had the very latest news.

"Something which will surprise you beyond the power of speech. Briefly, I am going to—"

"Be married!" they shrieked in chorus. "I knew it—I've just expected it for ages, but—er—who is the lucky man?"

Half a dozen names were suggested upon the instant, but Delia shook her head. The girls did not notice that her smile was almost grim.



To equalize matters the boys presented her with half a cartload of lilies.

"If you will permit me to finish, my dears," she said, "I may add that I am going to restore my ancestral estate, replace the family heirlooms and antiques, renounce the life of the giddy butterfly—in a word, I am going to take boarders."

The girls were too overpowered to speak. Finally, Muriel voiced the natural query,

"But why?"

"For many reasons." Then with apparent irrelevance, "I am not going to the Senior hop."

"Delia!"

"No, and for a reason you will never guess—I have not been asked."

The girls were embarrassed. Refined natures are apt to feel embarrassed for one who, accustomed to victory, has to acknowledge defeat.

"Of course you will be," some one murmured. "And anyway, I don't see what that has to do with your taking boarders. Why, gradually, you will drop out of everything and be just like—"

"Beside," Muriel hesitated and blushed, "a girl like you won't be able to take—er—every sort of person."

Delia laughed outright.

"No," she confessed. "I shan't. I am going to take college students and bachelors. No others need apply!"

The girls were aghast. Their Delia outraging the conventions!

"I will keep you on tenderhooks no longer, my children, but will tell you all about it; to begin with—to-day is my birthday. I am forty years old—forty!"

The maidens were shocked. Youth is apt to be shocked at the sudden appearance of the withering hand of Age. Of course people hinted that Delia—but they were not sure.

"It happens, too," she went on, "that to-day is Thursday, the first Thursday for five years upon which I have not gone on a hair hunt."

"A what?"

"A hair hunt. That means that I sat for an hour in a strong light and plucked out all the gray hairs I could find. A somewhat thinning process I admit, but on the whole not unsatisfactory."

No one said anything, so Delia continued,

"This is the day upon which Delia is to be born again!—not the usual sort of birth which presupposes something inordinately helpless and young, but a bursting into middle age and womanliness and sincerity and I trust—use."

Muriel broke the pause which followed by remarking, "Well, I can't see anything particularly laudable in a person deliberately putting on the garments of age. It is like our great grandmothers who took to caps and knitting as soon as they were married. One is only as old as one feels and looks and acts."

"Precisely, dear child. But it has been many a year since I felt twenty-five and only by dint of constant struggle have I succeeded in looking it without being grotesque. As for acting it—she sighed, "it is an awful strain for thirty-nine to act like twenty, to be always 'the life of the party,' to keep not only abreast with, but ahead of, the times. And oh, the aches and pains of the aged body! I think it goes to the back and the feet, first. To be able to wear old lady's shoes—that will compensate for so much!"

"But the dances," said one of the girls. "You won't be happy left out of things."

"Perhaps not just at first. But habit is only a treadmill, after all; once started you have to go on, until you are willing to give a wrench and get off. The day will come—has come, when I must be left out of things, anyway; that's the reward one gets for descending from generation to generation like somebody's fur coat. . . made over to fit each season. Beside, I have lived for years in dread of the day when I would be chaperoned by my own god-daughter. Behold, I frustrate the designs of Fate! I drop out now."

"Don't be ridiculous," scowled Muriel.

Of course Delia wasn't just out. Indeed, none of the girls present remembered exactly when her debut had been made. But she was as much one of them, she was as much a part of the youthful social life of the little town as were the students, themselves. She always set the pace in entertainments, fashions and fads. She always knew and did the correct thing. Her idiotic idea of sinking down in a cedar chest with a pound of camphor for the rest of her life, so to speak, was too utterly absurd.

"The men won't hear of your dropping out," argued one of the other girls. "You have always had more attention than the debs. Why, look at Hodgetts and Clayton and Barnes—"

"You poor blind dear!" replied Delia, a trifle sadly. "No wonder Barnum said the public wanted to be fooled. It actually frightens me to think how successfully I have hoodwinked this town for years! You all probably thought they were crazed with love of me—and I meant you to—when in reality the whole lot of them looked upon me merely as a sympathetic well-dressed ear into which they could pour confidences about Her, whom they had left back home." Having told me about her and feeling assured that I was content to be a sister to them, they could see no reason why they should not enjoy my sprightly company and take me to the college functions. That's the way I have managed for the past three years. But I want to read you this letter. . . ."

She took it from the window sill and picked out certain passages evidently marked for them.

"It is from a girl who used to live here—Amy Spencer; your mothers will remember her. She was my greatest friend. Amy married Bob Hardy, one of the wildest boys at the University and went off to New Mexico with him. It has been years and years since I heard from her. She was distinctly a girls' girl, and not very popular with the college men. None of us understood why Bob was attracted by her. I urged her not to marry when she did, but she pointed out with perfect frankness that she might never have another chance. 'You know, Delia,' I remember her saying, 'we get older every year. Now we are the contemporaries of the students; tomorrow we will be their older sisters; and after that we will be their mothers and grandmothers. Not only do I really love Bob, but I am too lazy to be try to skittish when I should be at home on the shelf.'"

Delia twisted the letter around her finger and looked back through a misty passage of twenty years.

"I scoffed at her. I always had heaps of beaux and I never dreamed that I should be—forty. At that time I had too many chances; now I have not enough. . . . Amy wants to send her son to college. I blush to realize that I might have taken him up and tried to make a beau of him! Think of that, during the next five years, you precious young things! But the letter—she says, Dearest Delia,

I write this to bridge the silence of many, many years hoping to find you still in the old town—perhaps even in that grand old house. (How I love to look back upon its dignity and simplicity in these days of unsubstantial gimcracks!) Hoping that you are now a happily married woman with children of your own, hoping that you will let me throw myself upon our close friendship forgetting that it was followed by such a silence—a silence which I would have been glad to break had I been able to do so,

I am about to ask you a favor.

Briefly I have a son,—he is, now, all that is left to me. And I want to send him to the University that he may sit

(Continued on page 33)