

Alice and May

BY GEORGIA WOOD PANGBORN



IT was the very last study-hour of the school year, so discipline in the old academy chapel was relaxed—since there was never to be any more discipline for most of the students except that especial rod which nature keeps in pickle for all young and tender things.

Some day we may learn mercifully to receive these immature creatures from their Commencement with the same care and pity we give to other newborn infants: wrap them in blankets, lay them softly by the fire, and nourish them with specially prepared pap. As it is now, they come out of the ordered days of school, address themselves confidently to the complicated business of running their own affairs, and—well, *I* should not care to live again through that bewilderment. Of course if one is going directly to college, the evil day of meeting oneself all alone, with no one to explain phenomena, is put off four years or more—though it is not made less disconcerting by the delay.

Discipline, then, in the old academy chapel was relaxed. But indeed there were no more than four pupils in the room, and of these only two had books open. They were the two boys who were to go to college; and this fact gave them a serenity, a distinction, so that they calmly, even haughtily, prepared their Greek and Latin, quite as though a full term were before them.

Extraordinary boys! *They* would never stay in the old town that had borne and reared them. The city would take them with the rest of the cream of everything. Oh, it would take them! Add them to its crowd of doctors and lawyers, and think well of them—perhaps very well, indeed.

Two hundred empty yellow desks intervened between this model pair and the girls at the other side of the room. Two

girls only, whispering—whispering. Miss Brown, from her dais, looked reprov-ingly down. They were very nice girls. Miss Brown twiddled the pen with which she had been about to jot down a demerit against them. Very nice girls. Whispering—they were not looking openly at the boys, yet Miss Brown, wise in the ways of youth, divined some subtle kind of communication between them, and hesitated for pitying remembrance of her own youth, gone now long ago with its wildness of heart. Had she not been preceptress of this academy, lo! these twenty years? And once again her face grew very grave over the problems of coeducation as they had been presented to her shrewd eyes during that time. She regarded the oblivious lads with exasperation.

For two years she had watched the cheeks of these two girls redden and pale at the coming and going of these two boys. It had begun while their hair was down their backs and their dresses above their shoe-tops. Now, hair up and skirts of woman's length, they were at it still. Yet so far as Miss Brown knew—and she was a woman who missed little—they had scarcely exchanged a dozen words with these youths during the whole high-school course.

But to-day, unless it was a trick of light and shade, they were no longer blushing, but pale. And while they incessantly whispered, their eyes shyly turning now and then toward the complacent and indifferent youths, there seemed to lie upon their young faces a film of old age and wisdom—and of suffering.

“Is it only for the stage Juliets that we weep?” thought Miss Brown.

She leaned her chin upon her hand, quite openly reading the young faces, all unconscious of her.

“Bless ’em!” she thought; “if only I could marry ’em off out of hand, each

to her own lover! Those wretched boys! I wonder if they really *don't* know!"

She put down the demerit pen, and resumed her lonely and ambitious study of Italian.

"*Nel mezzo del cammin . . .*" she read for the hundredth time, but now for the first time a shiver of comprehension as to its meaning ran over her. "The middle of the way—?" and she fell into a muse as to what a wilderness of a place the middle of one's life can be, the size and gloom of the forest there, and the beasts which are said to frequent it. For Miss Brown, in spite of her fine brain, was welcoming her becoming gray hair with no greater enthusiasm than other women welcome it.

A ray of sunlight fell upon her book.

Glancing up, she saw that the same ray touched the heads of the studious boys, making haloed young angels of them, handsome beyond all reason. Across the room the girls were in shadow. They had stopped whispering, and sat with their arms about each other's shoulders, looking across at those remote and glowing faces, and all their tragic young hearts were in their eyes.

"Oh, I can't stand that!" thought Miss Brown, feeling the sting of indignant tears under her eyelids. She could at least remove those nimbuses, and did so by going over to the shade and pulling it down.

One of the boys rose quickly to do it for her, and in her soul, as she thanked him, she cursed the pleasant manners that did but rivet the chains upon a girl's heart.

And so the boys went away—to college, then to the city. Yes. Just as they had intended. And they became, the brown one a doctor and the fair one a lawyer; and then, perhaps not quite so successful as they had intended—not quite, but well enough for the old town to be vastly proud of them—they came back, now and then, while they were working it out, each time a little leaner, a little more subdued, with a little less of the halo, a little more of the world outside about them.

And the girls—they stayed right in the town (barring a two-years' course at a normal school) and taught. They made very good teachers. But May stayed in the primary grades and was enormously popu-



TWO GIRLS ONLY, WHISPERING—WHISPERING

lar with all the little children, and grew plump, while Alice followed up a hectic tendency to fine phrases rather deplored by Miss Brown in her English work at the high-school, published a poem called "Love and Death" in a very good magazine (these accidents will happen now and then), and was forthwith taken on as Miss Brown's assistant in the high-school.

And every year there was a function called "the alumni reunion," and the two "rising young men," as the local paper called them, occasionally appeared there, thus giving Miss Brown opportunity to watch the young teachers' faces, to see how the quiet pain stayed in their eyes and how the color and light swept over them and made them lovely when some chance brought either of the revered twain into actual conversation with them; and while she watched (kind and lonely lady!) her own heart raged and strained against its leash in sympathy with all other poor bound things.

A few such years and the girls were just settling down into an early but more or less comfortable old-maidhood, when suddenly Alice began to appear in the magazines in earnest, threw up her position in the high-school, and went to the city. And Miss Brown, reading her published stories, with illustrations of lovers in attitudes, cried a little and laughed a little—not that the stories of themselves compelled emotion, but because as love-stories they were so exactly what she should have expected. For always it was Alice or May or both together who stood, perpetually young and lovely, in the heroine's spot-light. And always, just as the beautifying sunlight had played that day about the boys' handsome heads, her words were caressing their etherealized images in her tales. And it was because Alice knew, yet did not *quite* know of her own experience, what real love was like, that she was able so to illuminate her stories with that effulgence known to advertisers as "love-interest." Had she known more about it, her colors would perhaps have been less alluring. For things, to look their best, should be just a little out of focus (as any good photographer will bear witness), and light rays must be made crooked to show their rainbow colors.

So Alice became famous and made what seemed to the meager-salaried teachers an enormous amount of money, and (though this is a matter of least importance) did actually meet and become well acquainted with those two who had gone to the city, found that they were not greatly different from other men, and thereupon undertook to write wittily instead of romantically, and so became even more famous.

But still she cared a great deal for May and came back when she could to the old town, spending sometimes a week at a time hanging wistfully around May's school-room. She became exceedingly friendly, too, with Miss Brown, now grown very gray indeed and silent and receptive—something like an old village doctor. At length, seeming much worried, Alice confided that she feared May was going to make an unfortunate marriage. She wanted Miss Brown to assist in some conspiracy for getting her friend away from the threatened catastrophe. If she were only in the city; if she would only study stenography, Alice thought she could get her a good office position—she knew some very nice people. Miss Brown, making calm inquiries, discovered that the object of baleful interest was an oldish young "grocer's boy" who for at least ten years had unobtrusively attended to the delivery business of the town's chief store and had but recently been taken into a small partnership. He had never completed the high-school course, Alice said with distaste, and he used double negatives, never read any fiction but the most sentimental, and thought when she spoke of Meredith that she meant Owen Meredith and *Lucile*; he had never heard of the Meredith of *The Egoist*.

"Oh!" said Alice, pacing the floor (Miss Brown's floor) and wringing her hands, "it does seem as if I couldn't bear to see May thrown away on that kind of a man. There's something so fine about May. Oh, it would be a martyrdom! She would never have thought of it if she hadn't been so deadly tired of teaching. She wants a home, I suppose . . . a wicked reason for marrying!"

But Miss Brown hardly seemed so excited as Alice could have wished. She lit the alcohol flame under her samovar

and made tea, as though no vital problem were under violent discussion; and when Alice put in three lumps she smiled; and when Alice chose sweet biscuit instead of salt, she smiled again—like the old physician over some detail of a diagnosis.

"Youth!" she murmured.

"Yes," said Alice, "she's still so young. She's had no chance to develop—to know the difference. And she won't listen to me. She doesn't realize how much older I really am than she is."

It was not of May's youngness that Miss Brown had been thinking, but she did not correct Alice's interpretation of her meaning. She merely took her tea with half a lump, and salt biscuit instead of sweet, and smiled at Alice over the rim of the cup with a smile of many wrinkles. Yet she, too, sighed with Alice at the prospect of this marriage. Oh, that dewy, tragic farewell look in the school-room! And she sighed for Alice, also. They should have come back, those indifferent young Romeos . . . and roses should not fade and the light of sunrise should hang longer—much longer—in the sky.

"If only I hadn't gone away," mourned Alice. "It shows what loneliness will do."

Miss Brown inspected a tea-leaf that had somehow strayed past the tea-ball, and turned the liquid amber about in the polished spoon as though reading augury there.

"Doesn't she seem happy?"

"Oh yes," said Alice, swabbing her eyes; "*seems!*" and muttered something further about "fool's paradise."

After May's marriage Alice came back less frequently to the old town. The old-young grocer, having decidedly come up in the world, took a most respectable house on a most respectable street, which, as it happened, brought his windows just opposite Miss Brown's. And as Miss Brown had given up her position in the high-school on account of a dreary lameness, and spent long days among her books at her own window, the pageant of domesticity across the way became an important factor of her daily life. May's windows, shining or dark, with faces or flowers showing at them,

with voices and laughter sounding from them, became the windows of life itself—all that part of life into which the lonely lady had never entered, and which was now forever barred and locked against her. She saw the grocer's boy come speeding up the walk, no longer a slow young man; she saw May watching for his coming, and straining her eyes after his departure. Moreover, they were reprehensibly careless about kissing with the curtains up—they knew, of course, that there was only old Miss Brown to see. And old Miss Brown did see; but if there was ever any discussion over the two Merediths, or any confusion resulting from double negatives, it did not fall under her observation.

And then on a day while Miss Brown was observing that May sat longer and longer over her sewing at the window, May looked over at her and waved her hand; then with a sudden impulse and a rush of rosy color and a smile—a wonderful smile!—she held up the garment she was making. Whereupon Miss Brown rose to her crutches with a kind of wildness in her fragile face and made the difficult journey across the street. And there May met her, and, having no mother, was very glad of her kind old shoulder to weep upon.

Alice came back briefly the next spring and was Miss Brown's guest for a day and a night. From Miss Brown's window she looked upon the veiled baby-carriage standing among the crocuses on the lawn opposite, and heard the sounds, pleasant and otherwise, issuing therefrom; watched May moodily from the window as she hastened out with foolish words and nursing-bottles, and went over to spend a scant hour when the grocer-boy was away at the store, which was already, people said, as good as his very own.

During this visit, it was afterward remarked, she said but little of herself or of literature in general. And when she went away she left behind her a distinct impression of personal disaster, so that when she had said good-by Miss Brown took to her bed with a nervous headache, spent a night of unhappy dreams in which Alice was the center, and woke much lamer and older and sadder, and condemned to a week in bed.

Then Alice stopped writing to them. After the courtesy note there was no other word all summer long. May took occasion to ask, as well as she could for the lusty squirming upon her lap and the violent if cheerful monologue, whether Miss Brown had heard, and when Miss Brown answered "no," looked very grave and kissed the baby's bald spot passionately.

Summer went and autumn came, and still there was nothing from Alice. It went on to Christmas and another spring. The baby was standing alone, but even May's letter containing this joyous information brought no reply from Alice; "and if she can't answer *that*," said May to Miss Brown with tears, "she must either have changed into somebody else or be sick"; and Miss Brown quite agreed.

May was terribly busy these days. The grocer's elder brother, Jim (the unsuccessful one), had returned from multitudinous Western wanderings and been taken into partnership, and incidentally into the Baby's house. Not that he made any trouble at all, and he was perfectly splendid about minding the Baby; still, it *was* one more in the family, and there was the servant problem, always and always *that!* with their silly objections to families where there were children—"as if," commented May fiercely, "we'd give up our children for *them!*"

The baby was teething, too, and making a great circumstance of it; still, she found time to write further unavailing letters to

Alice, until the day came when the grocer-boy found May weeping about it, and said he was going to the city, anyway, on business, and would look her up.

Before going he came over for a talk with Miss Brown, and there must have been, after all, something rather nice about that grocer-boy, for at parting Miss Brown kissed him on both cheeks, so of course he had to kiss her back, after which, with very red ears, he went back to his wife.

Among dwellers in Bohemia the Carson houses are not considered so bad. Old brown-stone rookeries that *were* houses once—yes, indeed, the best of



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their kind, and look it still if you do not come too close; then, of course, you see the cheap dentist signs, and the "Robes" and the palmist. Bohemia, or at least one of its important principalities, lies at the top of these buildings. There you will find the most space with the fewest conveniences in the city. There, indeed, you can most beautifully mind your own business: be very comfortable or starve to death, as you prefer, and still be perfectly respectable.

The grocer-boy, however, ascending those dank stairs, was of a soul so dead to the artistic fitness of things as to be smitten with a pitying horror. His

red country cheeks grew pale, and he thought of his wife and the standing-alone baby playing upon his fine, broad lawn among the crocuses, with timid and grateful wonder at his own good fortune—and theirs. Any shyness he had felt about his errand to this lady of brilliant reputation, and of the poorest opinion of himself, was now dissolved in chivalrous pity. And when she opened the door (after a disconcertingly long wait) he found nothing to disturb the idea given him by the stairs—the idea, to put it baldly, of squalor and despair.

"Hungry!" was his appalled thought, as he uttered cheerful and mendacious commonplaces. With careful nonchalance he suggested that they could talk better at dinner, if—and here he grew awkward—she would thus honor him.

The room was so small that, with a typewriter, a narrow couch, and a case of books, it seemed uncomfortably crowded. She looked at him and about the narrow cell with a smile of languid humor.

"I should have to dress. If you will be back in half an hour?"

So he withdrew to a near-by moth-eaten park, and waited tensely with his eyes upon his watch. And when he returned he was overwhelmed with confusion, so gay she seemed and prosperous. Once more she was the envied and wonderful friend of his wife—not that haggard slattern who had opened the door to him. He fell shy and silent and conscious of his grammar. And yet, let her cheeks be ever so red, there was no concealing their thinness when a cross-light struck across their hollows. His slow masculine mind reached a conclusion:

"Chuckling a great big bluff! Well, I won't call it . . . at least . . ." and he fell into Machiavellian meditation.

Disregarding her superior knowledge of the city, he asked for no advice as to their dining-place, but calmly steered for a harbor of his own, one not known to New-Yorkers, but greatly affected by people like himself. A wise little hotel, intelligible to such as like dinner in the middle of the day, arrange their napkin in the way that will do the most good, and want their coffee (with cream) brought on to the table with the soup. But they'll stand for no inferior cooking, not they! And for no dabs of things. There must be plenty. They are fine critics in their way, and finicky, and whoever else looks down upon them, this wise little hotel doesn't. A respectable hotel, oh, be very sure of that! They bring their wives there for the yearly New York treat . . . and go afternoons to see "The Old Homestead."

Poor Alice's pretty dress and haggard cheeks came in for sharp scrutiny there. If the grocer-boy had not been an old and valued friend of the manager . . . but he was, and there was a look in his eye as he adjusted his bulk to his chair, which creaked under him (but most chairs did) that brought him even more instant service than usual. And then the marked respect and grave deference which he paid Alice—any unfavorable impression which she had made was soon dispelled.

He found plenty to talk about. This was a relief and a surprise to him. Always before he had been so tongue-tied in the presence of this superior lady. But now, whether it was that the little mocking smile was gone—that hateful sidelong glance that wrote him down a boor—or whether he had an absorbing subject of conversation, in which he need never pause for thoughts or for phrases in which to clothe them, he could not be sure. At any rate, he talked ahead like a master of language, and she listened or appeared to, and so did the people at the near-by table.

"How's that for a kid of thirteen months?" he would vaingloriously conclude, and go straight on. "Strong in the arms, too, now let me tell you!

Hands with a grip like a bull-dog's jaws . . ." and so on, and so on.

Yet the lady's stare, if no longer mocking, was still disconcerting. Her eyes seemed too large, and the color of her cheeks too bright for the whiteness of the rest of her face. When the soup was taken away she let her head droop upon her hand. There used to be rings on that hand, he remembered. And then—over the bare fingers ran a tear.

"Oh, I must tell you another," he began loudly, but while he told it he was sharply beckoning a waiter, and presently stopped his strident narrative to say, gently: "Better take that cognac. Good appetizer."

The lady took away her thin hands from her eyes, blinked at the little glass which had silently appeared beside her plate, and said, with a choking laugh as she drank it: "To the baby's health!"

And after that the red of her cheeks stood out less prominently against the rest of her face, and she began to do her share of the talking.

But it was not of herself that she spoke. Formerly she had been ready enough on that subject, but now she seemed to dodge the most ordinary questions like a frightened rabbit. Instead she asked minutely of Miss Brown and May—how they looked, what they were wearing, thus throwing the poor man into great perplexity. But he brightened presently with, "Oh, I'll tell you! I've got to get May a hat. Can't you help me out with it to-morrow? And I say, why can't you go back with me? May was all broken up about your not coming all winter and not writing and all. I was to ask you most particularly if you couldn't make us a good long visit. We got a dinky little room where you wouldn't hear the kid much if you wanted to write. May's terribly keen on it," he concluded, earnestly.

"To-morrow . . . why, to-morrow," she began, in the tone of one about to plead a previous engagement; then went on as if to herself: "to go back . . . to those people . . . Is it spring there?" she asked, suddenly.

"It is spring there," he answered, gravely. "There's a bluebird building its nest just outside the kid's window. It'll be done by now."

The baby was asleep, the stars out, the winds still and the warmth of the day still drowsing in the young leaves above their heads. His pipe was in his mouth and one shirt-sleeved arm lay snugly about his wife's waist. They were sitting on a rustic bench which the unsuccessful brother had made for a surprise against the successful one's return—for successful he had been, bringing Alice back with him as he had planned.

"Guess the literary game was played out," he said.

"Gee!" he went on meditatively, "I don't see why folks live in the city!"

"Well," said May, "I guess she's had all she wants of it for a while."

"Where'd she go?" he asked, suddenly. "I ain't seen her since supper. Over to Miss Brown's?"

May was peculiarly silent for a moment, then said, carelessly: "Why, she was going to walk down the road a piece with Jim when he went to the store."

Without removing his arm, the grocer-boy drew back far enough to look down into his wife's face with a most penetrating and suspicious manner. Her

profile was placidly uplifted toward the window, near which the baby was diligently sleeping, yet he saw, or fancied he saw, a tremor of meaning.

"What you up to?" he exploded joyfully; and she answered, without any change of expression:

"Well, why not?"

"Why, she wouldn't look at *him!*" said the grocer's boy.

"I look at you, don't I?" said May, tartly. "Anyway, she's going to have the chance!"

Miss Brown, sitting by her window, partaking of the fragrant spring night, saw dimly the two upon the bench, sitting long in their contented married silence. The phrase with which they finally rose was a bit of the grocer-boy's cumbrous humor which never seemed to grow thin by repetition:

"Well," said he, with a sound like a yawning lion, "let's go and see if the kid's still there."

So they went in, and Miss Brown had a glimpse of both faces dimly glowing in the night light as they bent down cheek



HE BECKONED SHARPLY TO THE WAITER



IT DID NOT SEEM THAT THE LISTENER BETRAYED ANY WEARINESS

by cheek to make sure that their possession of the most desirable thing in the world was in truth no dream.

And after an interval another two came slowly up the faintly moonlit street—with this difference from the first pair: that they seemed to have much to say. Chiefly it was the man's voice.

"Well," he was saying, reflectively, "once when I was up in Alaska . . ." And the tale that followed, though most of it was lost to the gentle eavesdropper, seemed to savor of high action and of a kind of unconscious nobility. There was length to it, also, as well as the other Homeric virtues, yet it did not seem to her that the listener betrayed any weariness. At the end, indeed (though clearly it was an end artificially made and as skilfully framed for indefinite continuance as the *Arabian Nights*), Miss Brown saw Alice lean toward him with a quick, characteristic lifting of the shoulders that meant enthusiasm, and speak rapidly for some time. Miss Brown wondered:

"Is it just that he's literary material, or . . ."

And she hoped, as the others had done, for the alternative.

It seemed a vast space of time since she had pitied those girls in the school-room. Alas for those who only watch the world from their windows, without the power to enter in—ghosts tapping at the pane; disregarded.

She lit her green-shaded reading-lamp and moved her hands restlessly among the many papers upon her desk. It occurred to her that a long time ago she had begun to study Italian by herself, and then, for some reason, had neglected it. The books were still upon their shelf. She took them down, daintily wiping away the dust, and spread them out for study.

"*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita.*" She read the tremendous stave with a thrill of satisfaction, and settled cosily in her big chair.

"This time," she announced aloud to herself—"this time I'll really go through with it."