

THE PECULIAR CHOICE OF PERSIS.

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By Harriet Lummis Smith.

MRS. ARMITAGE reached a well-shaped hand across the back of the pew; "I'm glad to see you," she exclaimed. "I felt sure that Grace Church would claim you as soon as I heard that you had moved to Twentieth street. Not that it is so very near," she added, "but the street cars make it very convenient."

The morning service was just over. The rich tone of the organ rose jubilant and compelling above the voices of the congregation, decorously exchanging greetings. Persis looked about her with frank appreciation of the charm of the scene, the harmonious tints of the frescoes, the kaleidoscope beauty of the well-dressed people, moving leisurely down the aisles. It was a bright Sunday and the pews were full. The atmosphere of the place was that of peace and prosperity.

Persis fell into step with Mrs. Armitage and made answer to the lady's cordial greeting. "O, I don't mind being at a little distance from the church I attend. I'd rather have a bracing walk, than only be a block or two away. But I haven't quite made up my mind yet where I shall take my letter. You see that the First Church is at about the same distance from us as Grace."

"My dear child!" The expression of Mrs. Armitage's face indicated amusement and consternation in about equal parts. "Have you attended service there yet?" she queried.

"Not yet," said Persis wondering.

"Then I won't expostulate," the lady laughed. "One visit will decide the

question. You see, my dear," she went on, apparently unable in spite of her assurance to leave the matter to Persis herself. "The days of usefulness for the First Church are over. It is situated in that boarding-house section where people come and go, and nobody stays long enough to get a real interest in anything. I'm sorry for the pastor, poor man, but it is only a question of time when they will have to give up. Our church is very fortunately situated, and we have a splendid class of people. You'll enjoy them."

"I'm sure I should be happy here," Persis answered warmly. Her family had just moved into the city from the suburbs, and this was her first Sunday. Her new home was midway between two churches of the denomination to which she belonged, and she had made up her mind to visit both at least once before deciding with which one she would cast her lot. It was characteristic of Persis that she adhered to this determination, even after Mrs. Armitage had revealed to her the true conditions of things at the First Church.

That the picture she had drawn was not an exaggerated one was plain to Persis as she sat the following Sunday in the congregation of the old down-town church which was striving so valiantly to live up to its past reputation. The absence of the "family pew," the occupants ranging from the substantial business man at one end down to the juvenile member of the household but recently promoted to the dignity of church-

going, was noticeable. Nine-tenths of the congregation were young people, clerks, students, stenographers, the majority of them with that air of restless alertness characteristic of the semi-homeless element of the great cities.

The sermon was an earnest one, simple and straightforward, of the sort to appeal to the shifting, changing audience which met at the First Church Sunday after Sunday. Yet the attention of Persis wandered more than once. Mrs. Armitage's words came back to her. "The First Church has outlived its usefulness." She looked about at the rows of uplifted youthful faces, the faces of young people, many of them without the restraint of home influence, far from the help of a father's counsel or a mother's care, and she caught herself wondering what greater responsibility rested on the church than that of ministering to needs such as these. The First Church still had a work to do. But though the harvest was plentiful the laborers were few.

Two girls in the pew in front of her spoke to each other hurriedly as the benediction was finished. "Mamie, do try to speak to that girl in the red jacket before she gets out. I've invited her here twenty times and she never came before. Ask her to the young people's meeting to-night."

"All right, Maggie." Mamie hurried away in pursuit of the girl in the red jacket, who was making for the door with as much directness as if she had been an evil-doer bent on escape. The other greeted Persis cordially and invited her to come again, evidently assuming her to belong to the changing population of the neighborhood.

But the minister knew better. He stood by the door when she went out, shaking hands, recognizing with extraordinary quickness faces he had seen before, throwing into his brief question the cordiality and warmth which he hoped might help to make his church something of a home for these hurrying hundreds of young people, with only the influence of a cheap boarding-house to stand between them and the world's temptations. But when Persis's turn came he looked at her hard as he held her hand, recognizing at once that she was a representative of a different environment.

"You are a stranger here, are you not?" he said. "We shall be glad to see you often." He was not prepared, this careworn, overworked man struggling with his tremendous problem, for her answer.

"You will see me very often," she answered. "I shall bring you my church letter sometime this week, and I shall want you to put me to work." She would have needed to be in the minister's place to have understood the expression that flitted across his tired face.

"A very peculiar choice," was the verdict of Mrs. Armitage when she learned of the decision, and the majority of the acquaintances of Persis agreed with her. But to Persis herself the strange, perplexing thing was that youth and vigor and loyalty should be contented to be at ease, while near at hand God's work languished for lack of workers.

Baltimore, Md.