

# Meeting Mrs. Pierce

A Reading A-Z Level X Leveled Book

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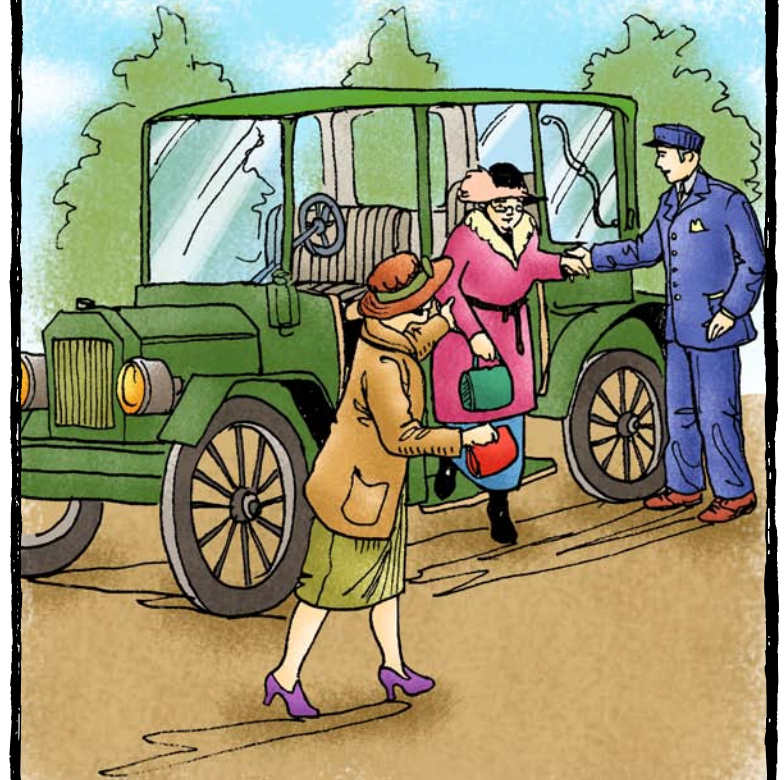


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LEVELED BOOK • X

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Level X Leveled Book  
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## Correlation

### LEVEL X

Fountas & Pinnell	S
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## About Women's Suffrage

Less than 100 years ago, women's lives were very different than they are today. Women were expected to obey their fathers until they were married, and then to obey their husbands. They

could not own property or sign contracts in their own names. They did not even have **suffrage**, which means the right to vote.



The struggle to change that second-class status began in 1848. On July 19 and 20, a group gathered in Seneca Falls, New York, for a Woman's Rights Convention. At the end of the meeting, one hundred people—68 women and 32 sympathetic men—signed a declaration stating the rights of women as human beings and citizens. This launched a movement that fought for women's right to vote, a movement known as the Women's Suffrage Movement.

The fight for the vote went on for seventy-two years. Women marched and demonstrated. They were insulted, pelted with everything from tomatoes to rotten eggs, and were even arrested, but they would not quit, and in fact, only increased their activity with time.

In 1919, Congress finally passed the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, giving women full suffrage. It went to the states for **ratification**, or approval, and on August 26, 1920, it became the law of the land. Of the 68 women who signed the declaration in Seneca Falls, only one lived long enough to vote. She was Charlotte Woodward, or Charlotte Pierce after marriage. She was still a teenager when she attended the convention and over 90 when she was able to vote in 1920. This is the Mrs. Pierce who appears in the story.



## Prologue

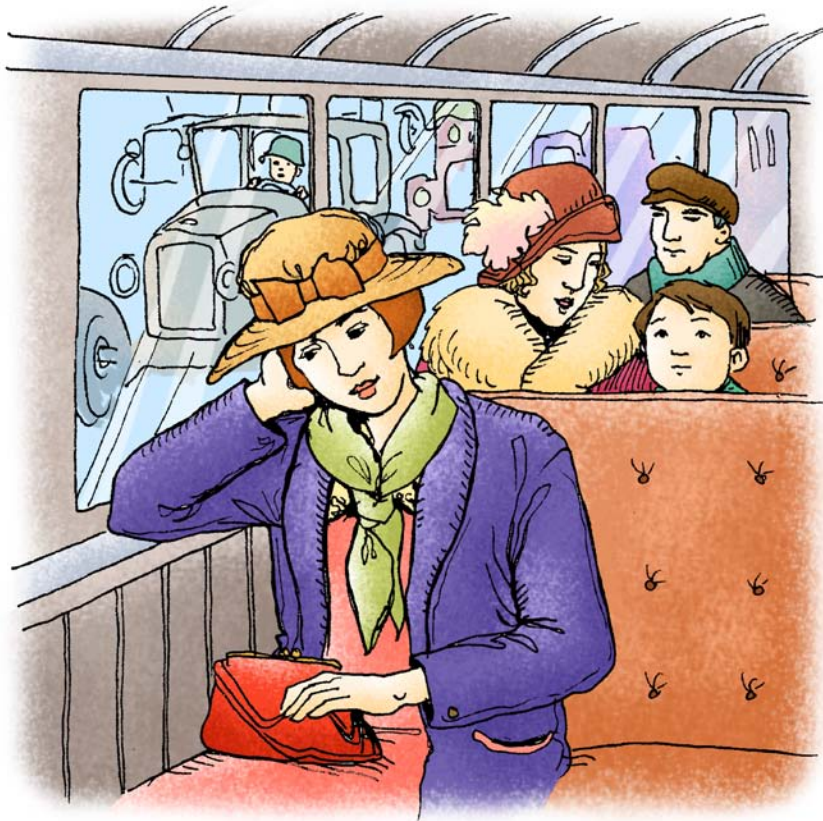
Charlotte Hartley dressed with special care on that crisp November morning in 1920. After all, it was a historic occasion; women had finally won the right to vote. Today, 21-year-old Charlotte would be one of thousands to cast her first ballot, and she wanted everything to be perfect.

Her parents were still in the breakfast room when she got downstairs. Father never looked up from his morning paper, but considering all that had happened, Charlotte didn't expect anything else. Mama wiped her hands on her apron and managed an uncertain smile. "You're going so early?"



"Mrs. Pierce's idea," said Charlotte. "I'm meeting her at the courthouse."

Mama nodded, blinking back tears. "Give her my best," she whispered. Mother and daughter embraced, and then Charlotte left without a backward glance. She caught a motorbus to the courthouse. The wheels clattered and the seats creaked, but Charlotte scarcely heard, because she was remembering the day ten years ago when it all started.



## Chapter 1

The summer Charlotte turned eleven, her life changed. It started one Saturday as she was curled on the couch reading *Little Women* for the third time, when a great, gusting sneeze startled her. Her father loomed in the parlor doorway, looking at her with red-rimmed eyes.

"Why is your mother out? Go fetch her, please," he said. "Tell her I have a rotten cold and I'm going up to bed." He took out a handkerchief and blew his nose. Charlotte closed her book without even bothering to mark the page. Of all the days for Father to come home early, this was the absolute worst. She started talking without knowing quite what she wanted to say. Father told her to stop babbling, but telling Father something he didn't like to hear was not an easy thing to do.

"Poor Elvira Foley wasn't feeling well," Charlotte finally stammered, "and Mama went to be with her." It wasn't exactly a lie—Mrs. Foley really was suffering one of her famous spells, but she had still come to walk with Mama to the secret meeting.

Father muttered something about women **gadding** everywhere in creation, and then he sneezed again. "Well, go get her, and be quick about it."

"Yes, sir," said Charlotte, and she was off. She took her bicycle and rode leaning into the wind, her auburn hair whipping behind her, pedaling as fast as she could. It was not the least bit ladylike, but she didn't care if anyone stared. This was an emergency. She raced down tree-lined streets of **brownstones**, past blocks of skinny row houses, and into the center of town. At the Methodist Church, she stopped in front of the social hall and rushed inside.

There were signs everywhere: VOTES FOR WOMEN; WOMEN ARE CITIZENS, TOO; WOMAN SUFFRAGE NOW. Charlotte spotted her mother talking to an old woman with skin like crumpled parchment. She remembered her manners just long enough to apologize for interrupting, and then she launched into her story.

By the time she finished, her mother's face was pasty pale. "Of all the times for him to come home early," she murmured, sounding scared. "If he finds out where I am, he'll be furious."

The old woman patted Mama's hand. "Now don't you worry, Edith; come along with me." The woman led the way outside to a green Ford Town Car, which was the prettiest, shiniest thing Charlotte had ever seen.

"The driver will take you home and come back for the rest of us," said the woman. "Your husband will never know where you were."

Tears welled in Mama's eyes. "Thank you, Mrs. Pierce," she said, and the two women embraced. Charlotte would have loved to ride in the Town Car, but there was no time for loading her bicycle. She followed, this time sitting erect and pedaling at a decidedly ladylike pace.





When Charlotte got home, Mama had everything under control. She had given Father hot tea with lemon juice and honey and rubbed his chest with **mentholatum**, and now he was sleeping peacefully. Mama sang to herself in the kitchen, stopping long enough to give Charlotte a big hug and to tell her how smart she had been. “If you hadn’t kept your head today, your father might have found me out, and that would have been the end of my suffrage work.”

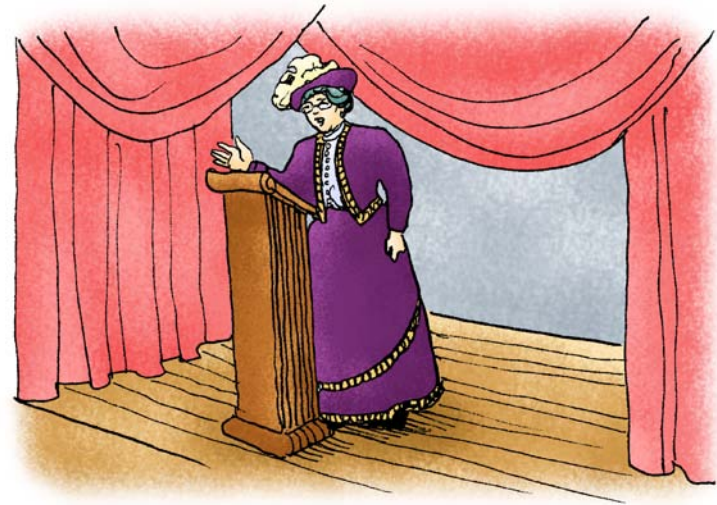
“But why?” The question had been bothering Charlotte for a long time. Mama went sneaking around as though she were robbing banks or something equally terrible, but the suffragists only wanted to vote, so why would anybody—even Father—object to that?

“They have a **serviceable** list of reasons,” said Mama. “Women have no head for politics or business . . . they don’t belong in public life. The husband’s job is to provide for the wife and family while the wife bears the children, raises them, cares for the home, and obeys her husband in all things.”

“Sounds dull,” said Charlotte.

Mama burst out laughing. “Daughter dear, I think it’s time you went to a suffrage meeting.”

That suited Charlotte just fine.



## Chapter 2

During the pleasant days of June through the steamy-hot ones of July, Mama hinted at a surprise. To Charlotte, “surprise” was one of the most magical words in the English language. She asked dozens of questions, **pestering** and probing, even trying to trick her mother into revealing something. Nothing worked.

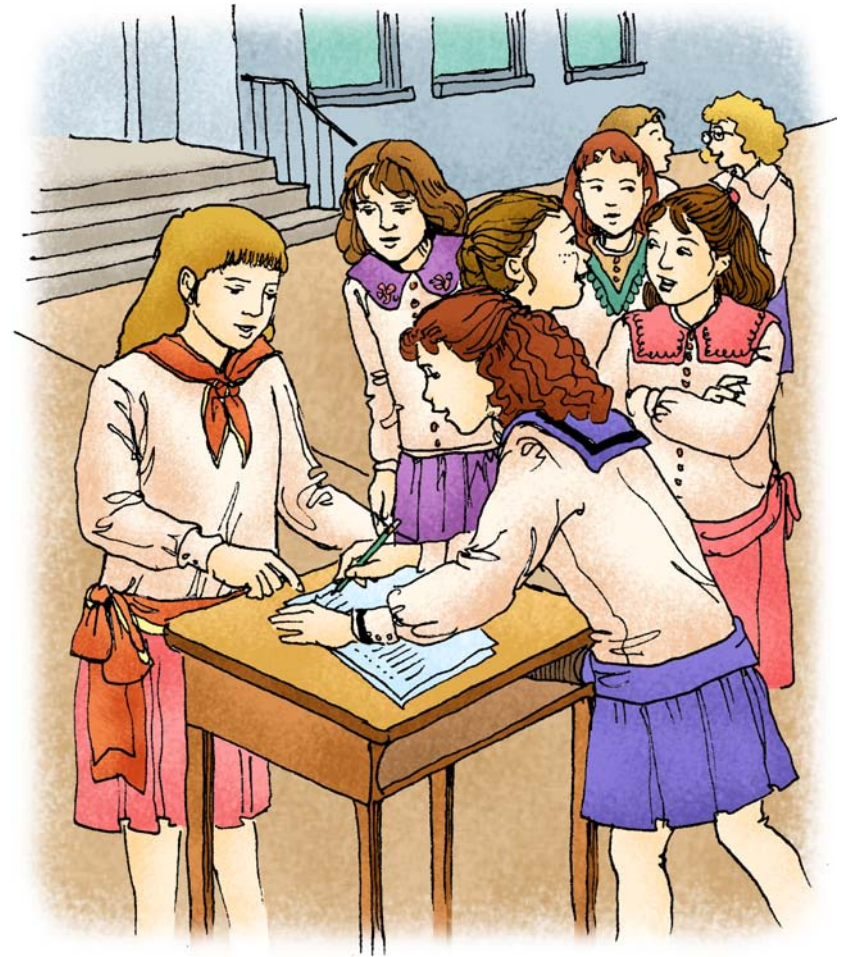
Then at the suffrage meeting, Charlotte knew something was **afoot** the minute she walked in the door. Mrs. Pierce was waiting with two saved seats in the front row. In spite of the midsummer heat, the meeting was well attended. The women dressed for comfort rather than fashion, most without gloves, and some had taken off their hats. They sat fanning themselves with the leaf-shaped pasteboard fans that churches had by the boxful.

The president called the meeting to order, and after the prayer and Pledge of Allegiance, she asked for introductions of guests and new members. Mrs. Pierce struggled to her feet, her wrinkled face made radiant by a broad smile. "Ladies," she said, "I'd like to introduce the fast-thinking little girl who rescued her mother last month."

The old woman motioned Charlotte to her feet. "I'm proud to say that she is my **namesake**. Everyone say hello to young Miss Charlotte Hartley."

The audience applauded. Charlotte was shaking so badly that she feared her knees would give way. She was named for a living piece of Suffrage Movement history, for Mrs. Pierce was none other than Charlotte Woodward, one of the founders. At the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, she was the thirty-seventh person to sign the Declaration of Women's Rights.

"So, do you like the surprise?" asked Mama, smiling. For once in her life, Charlotte couldn't think of a thing to say, so she swallowed hard and nodded. It was inspiring, finding out she was named for an honest-to-goodness pioneer, but it was also scary, and she wondered how an eleven-year-old could live up to the honor.



### Chapter 3

Come September, Charlotte realized that there was one place where being eleven was an advantage: at school. Charlotte decided to rally her classmates to the cause. She would start a Girls' Suffrage Society, or GSS, because after all, girls grew up to be women.



She started with girls whose mothers, and sometimes even fathers, were involved in the Suffrage Movement. Then she went to the tomboys, the bookworms, and the girls who could do long division in their heads. She hesitated before inviting the pretty, frilly girls, but to her surprise, many of them accepted. Mama called that a lesson in not judging people before you knew them. Such **prejudices** about women had doomed generations to second-class status, she said.

After recruiting twenty members and convincing a sympathetic teacher to let them meet in her classroom, Charlotte's first activity was to write a declaration of principles. They based it on the famous one that Mrs. Pierce had signed at the Seneca Falls Convention. The declaration wasn't just about voting. It was about dreams and hopes and wanting to be equal human beings. One girl wanted women to have the right to drive automobiles, while another wanted to ban **corsets**.

After Charlotte copied the declaration in her best penmanship, the members gathered to sign. Each girl stepped forward and wrote her name, and then Charlotte held up the document for all to see. The "Declaration of the Rights of Future Women Citizens" was indeed an impressive statement.

Before the ink was even dry, Charlotte found herself scrambling for new activities. The grownups at Mama's meetings had plenty of ideas; they were planning to take the cause out of church social halls and into the streets. It was time to sway the hearts and minds of the people with huge rallies, speeches, and suffrage songs, they said.

Charlotte loved the idea of public demonstrations, but Mama had nothing good to say about them. In one of their kitchen talks, she ranted against such **unseemly** behavior.



"Making a spectacle of ourselves like that . . . it's undignified. Neither you nor I shall act in such an unladylike fashion."

"But Mama, even Mrs. Pierce said it was time for action, remember?" Charlotte raised one finger skyward as Mrs. Pierce did when she had something important to say. "We must make noise, my friends," she said, in her best Mrs. Pierce imitation. "The battle for suffrage will be won in the court of public opinion."

Mama laughed, sputtering a bit as if she were trying to hold it back. "Very good, dear. You may just have a future for yourself in **vaudeville** theater."

That was the end of the conversation, and try as she might, Charlotte could not bring the subject back around. There was no understanding Mama's strange attitude. That night, Charlotte lay awake thinking about it and listening to the gloomy hooting of an owl.

But by morning, she had a perfect idea for a new activity. There was no reason the GSS couldn't do something at school, something dramatic, something that would shape public opinion, just as Mrs. Pierce had wanted.



## Chapter 4

Charlotte had visions of a rally—a big one. "We could have speeches, and maybe read our declaration," she told the GSS. From the murmur running through the room, she could tell that this idea was gaining support. "I don't know where we'd have it, exactly . . ."

"In the auditorium," Elyse Morrison squealed, cutting Charlotte off in midsentence. She was on her feet, practically bouncing up and down. "We could volunteer to do an assembly. It's perfect, and we don't have to worry about attendance, because every girl in school would have to be there." There was no need for more discussion. Everybody agreed at once.

That night, Charlotte stayed up way past her bedtime writing a proposal, and the next morning she took it to Assistant Headmistress Trotter.



When Charlotte entered the office, she found Mrs. Trotter sitting behind an impossibly huge carved mahogany desk that dwarfed everything else in the room, including Mrs. Trotter, who smiled without showing any teeth.

"I understand you have an idea for an assembly, Miss Hartley," she said. It was not a promising beginning, but Charlotte cleared her throat and handed over the proposal. When Mrs. Trotter saw the word "suffrage," she pushed the paper away as though the ink were poisoned.

"Suffrage is not an appropriate subject for an assembly. Parents do not send their little girls to school to have them learn such things."

The interview ended almost before it had begun. Charlotte stood outside the office door, caught between anger and humiliation.

Anger won.

She raced down the hallway and found Elyse Morrison getting ready to go into class.

"We're not going to have an assembly," Charlotte said, gasping for breath. She handed Elyse the proposal that Mrs. Trotter had refused to read. "We are going to have a sign-carrying, slogan-shouting protest march!"



## Chapter 5

On a damp and dreary Friday afternoon, the GSS members gathered in front of the school. As students poured out of the building after dismissal, the protesters began marching in a circle, chanting slogans and waving their signs: LEARN ABOUT SUFFRAGE; SUPPORT FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY; GIRLS: SPEAK YOUR MIND.

Some students laughed, some booed, and some scurried past with their eyes lowered, pretending not to see. But some stayed to watch, as if to lend support.

Mrs. Trotter marched out and announced that she was going to start calling every home that had a telephone. Charlotte's mother arrived less than an hour later, but she did not come alone. Three other suffragists, including Mrs. Pierce, came with her.

Charlotte had been afraid to tell Mama about the protest, and now she was afraid to look her in the eye. “Mama, I’m sorry. I know you said we shouldn’t do anything public, but we had to do this. We just had to.”

“I know that, dear,” Mama said. Her voice was perfectly calm, as if she had come to terms with something. “Now, do you have any extra signs that we might use?”

Charlotte could scarcely believe what she was seeing. To old Mrs. Trotter’s horror, one by one, Mama and the other suffragists picked up signs and fell into line with the girls. Some of the onlookers broke into applause. It was a wonderful moment, or at least it was until Mrs. Trotter called the police. They came with two squad cars and a **paddy wagon**.

A ruddy-faced sergeant tipped his cap to Mrs. Pierce. “Begging your pardon, ma’am, but you ladies are trespassing. Now, I don’t want to haul you off to jail . . .”

“That’s good to know, Sergeant,” said Mrs. Pierce. She didn’t break stride, nor did anyone else in the line.

The sergeant threw up his hands. “All right, all right, you ladies are under arrest. The children can go to the school detention room.”

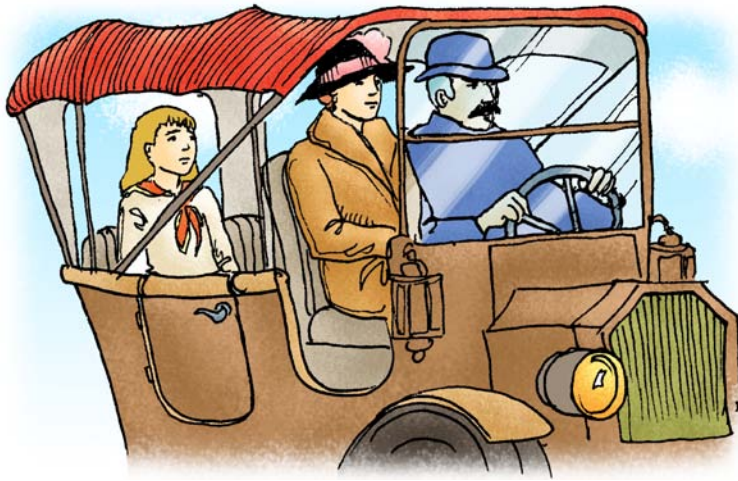
“No detention,” Charlotte shouted. “WE WANT JAIL! WE WANT JAIL!” The girls picked up the chant as if they had practiced for days, while Mama and the other suffragists laughed so hard they almost cried.

“That does it!” shouted the **beleaguered** sergeant. “Everybody into the wagon.”

Without breaking their line, the protesters marched to the paddy wagon. Charlotte led the way, with Mama and Mrs. Pierce behind her. Never in her life would Charlotte have thought that getting arrested could be such fun.







## Chapter 6

The fun ended when Father arrived at the police station. His eyes were cold, and he did not speak to Mama or Charlotte until they got home. Then he sent Charlotte to her room without dinner.

She lay ramrod straight in bed, holding the covers tight under her chin. Once or twice she thought she heard Father shouting, and once, a dish breaking, but mostly there was silence.

Charlotte woke to the morning light without knowing when she had fallen asleep. She waited until she was sure that Father had left for the day, and then she raced downstairs to the kitchen, only to find her mother calmly washing breakfast dishes.

"I saved you some oatmeal," she said. "You must be starved."

Over reheated cereal, Charlotte learned of her mother's sacrifice. She had promised Father she would quit suffrage work forever and she would never vote, even if it became legal.

"But Mama . . ."

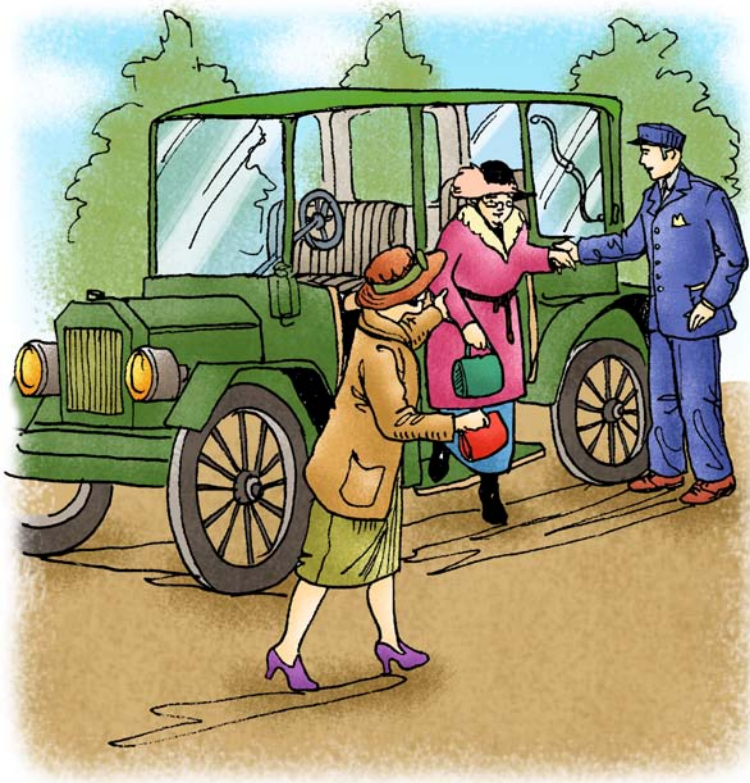
"It's all right, dear; I knew this was likely to happen when I picked up that protest sign."

Charlotte began to tremble. "That's why you were so against public demonstrations—because you didn't want Father to find out. Oh Mama, this is all my fault."

"Now, don't you start crying. It is not your fault. The movement is going public, and I just couldn't hide anymore."

Mama washed out the sink and dried her hands on a kitchen towel. "There is one good thing," she said. "This arrangement applies only to me—not to you."

Charlotte got the message; she would not quit. She would fight for a world like the one Mrs. Pierce described—where being a person came before being a woman, and she would vote. Someday, she would vote.



## Epilogue

Mrs. Pierce arrived at the courthouse in the same green Town Car. It was nicked in a few places, but otherwise had borne the years well, and so, for that matter, had its owner. Mrs. Pierce's hair was whiter and her wrinkles deeper, but her eyes still twinkled when she smiled.

"We made it, my little namesake," she said. "Now, let's hurry and vote. At my age, it's not wise to **dawdle**."

## Glossary

<b>afoot</b>	happening; going on (p. 12)
<b>beleaguered</b>	harassed; worn out (p. 22)
<b>brownstones</b>	city houses made of dark stone (p. 9)
<b>corsets</b>	stiff women's underwear made to pinch the waist; often very uncomfortable (p. 15)
<b>dawdle</b>	delay (p. 25)
<b>gadding</b>	wandering around for fun (p. 9)
<b>mentholatum</b>	old-fashioned ointment containing minty menthol, used for colds (p. 11)
<b>namesake</b>	person named for another person (p. 13)
<b>paddy wagon</b>	police wagon or van made for carrying prisoners (p. 21)
<b>pestering</b>	bothering (p. 12)
<b>prejudices</b>	feelings against something without or before understanding it (p. 15)
<b>ratification</b>	legal approval (p. 5)
<b>serviceable</b>	logical (p. 11)
<b>suffrage</b>	the right to vote (p. 4)
<b>unseemly</b>	improper; not polite (p. 16)
<b>vaudeville</b>	old-fashioned style of theater with comedy, dancing, and singing (p. 17)