

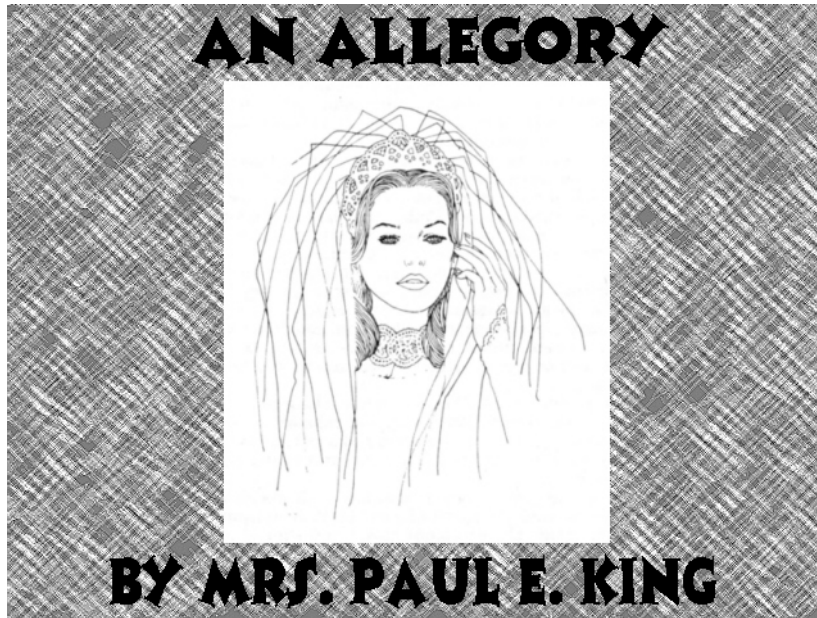
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**AN ALLEGORY**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

Alisa lifted the overlay of lace over satin on her wedding gown, then let it fall neatly back in place before carefully pulling the muslin covering down over the elegant creation and sliding the doors to the closet shut. Three years. Yes, for three years she had had the beautiful gown. She bought it shortly after Philip proposed to her and right after he had left her to go abroad. To where? She hadn't the faintest idea. Nor what his secret mission-

errand was either. All she recalled and remembered was his avowal of love to her and his words about "doing important business for the kingdom," making it impossible for him to contact her in any way or through any medium . . . neither by telephone nor letter, and his fervent, almost startling admonition to "Be ready for my return, Alisa. We will be married as soon after I return as possible. Be ready."

The tall, slender, dark eyed brunette sighed. Three years, and not a hint, even, of his existence or his where-about. If only he would write. But he had told her he couldn't. He had, instead, left her a long love-letter, one which he had admonished her to read often, especially when and if doubts assailed her as to the validity of his promised return and the veracity of his affection and love to her.

For a year, she had read the letter every day. Long and lengthy though it was, she had been faithful to her vow that she would read it. What beautiful words of love it contained! But what strange admonitions. Little matter; she had read it. Memorized parts of it even. Still he did not come.

The second year she had become a bit negligent in her reading of the much-worn missive, she recounted now as she stood facing the dresser in her bedroom. With remembering, a wave of shame washed over her, for she realized that this third year had found her even less interested in the letter than she had been in the previous year. Philip had no doubt forgotten all about her. Why, he may even have found another sweetheart in this mysterious, far-away, distant land. She should have pressed him into telling her more. But Philip was never one for over detail, not in any of his conversations. Always he was precise and to the point, leaving no doubt as to what he meant nor where he stood on a matter but saying little beside.

Alisa's eyes fell on the religious calendar hanging near the dresser. Why this was the exact date and the very month that she and Gregory had had their first date five years ago! she thought, recalling Greg's words: "We'll meet here in this very same restaurant, Alisa dear, each year of our lives. Same date and month and same table. I love you so."

Alisa found her heart racing with the memory. They had met there, too, exactly like Gregory had said they would, for the next year. And, until she had become converted and met Philip, they had seen a lot of each other those days. Gregory wanted to marry but she had felt each should wait a while

longer, till their college years were past. Meantime, she had gone with a friend to a camp meeting and was converted. Naturally, she knew Gregory could no longer be a part of her dating life, He was not a Christian, and declared he had no intentions of becoming one either. Then Philip came into her life. Dear, sweet, gentle, wonderful Philip . . . .

Alisa shook herself. Three years was a long time to wait for a man who left suddenly and refused to tell you when he'd return for the wedding, she rationalized, brushing her long hair back and securing it neatly on the top of her head.

She would go to the restaurant, she decided quickly as she took the palest of pale blue dresses from its hanger inside the enormous closet and slipped it over her head. Gregory's favorite, she remembered, feeling suddenly gay and flippant and light. Would he remember? she wondered. And had he, perhaps, come back year after year, waiting for her, expecting her?

She parked the car, walked into the building, wended her way to where the dimly-lighted restaurant snuggled cozily up against and around the inside of the enormous Palais-Royale. An attendant approached her, ready to seat her. "The table in the far, far corner, please," Alisa said softly.

The lithe young figure smiled and led the way to the corner, Alisa following, feeling a bit foolish but happy and excited.

"Your waitress will be here to take your order shortly," the slender attendant said.

Checking her wrist watch, Alisa said, "A cup of tea now, please. "I'll order later. I am expecting a friend."

The attendant nodded and moved away as gracefully as a swan, Alisa observed, wondering if Gregory would remember and come.

She looked around her. Surprisingly few changes were made in the past three-four years, she noticed, fingering the cup of hot tea which the waitress had set in front of her. Tall palms and hanging ferns still decorated the corners, the windows and various areas of the thickly-carpeted dining room adding a very real touch of life and greenery to the pleasant interior and

making it even more beautiful and inviting. She took a sip of the tea and discovered to her glad surprise that it was still just the same as it had been when she used to order it so regularly with Gregory. Immediately she was filled with sweet nostalgia. Memories with Gregory washed over her and suddenly, with all her heart, she hoped he would remember today.

Outside her window, the sea pounded away on the rocks below the promenade. Gulls swooped and glided, crying plaintively as they rode the gusts of wind. No sailing boats out today, she realized, seeing the red flag flying and the beach deserted.

"Are you ready to order?"

Alisa jumped with fright. She hadn't heard the waitress glide across the carpet to her secluded table. "N . . . not yet. Thank you," she stammered. "In another ten minutes perhaps . . . ."

Apologizing, the slender wisp of a girl left. Alisa was once more alone to think and to dream. Gregory had forgotten, she was sure. And why not? She was engaged, for three years to be exact. For all she knew, Gregory may even have married by now. He hadn't been a year ago, a friend had told her in a conversational manner. But many changes could occur and take place in a year's time, she knew. In a few month's time even; or overnight.

She lifted the cup to her lips when a glad voice cried, "Alisa! Oh my dearest Alisa! You've come! You . . you've come. At last!"

Like it was the most natural thing to do, Gregory pulled his chair beside hers and caught her hands in his. "I knew you'd come," he whispered close to her ear.

Instead of wanting to flee, like one who waits for her bridegroom would and should do, Alisa found herself extremely happy and thrilled. "I was afraid you'd forgotten, " she whispered, leaning close to him and his waiting arm.

"Alisa, no! NO! YOU know better. I've never ceased loving you. Tell me, are you no longer engaged to Philip? Have you seen your mistake -- finally?"

Alisa trembled. " I am still engaged, " she admitted faintly. "But sometimes I . . . I . . . ."

"You're not sure if you love him; is that it, Alisa?"

Turning the cup 'round and 'round between her trembling fingers, she said, "Philip's such a fine man, Greg. But three years! And not a single word from him that he still loves me, nor when he's returning from abroad. Well, I . . . I guess it's beginning to 'wear thin,' as the saying goes."

"Do you love him?" Gregory asked, watching her, making a study of her face.

"I . . . I . . . well, I did that first year. Very deeply. But well, I . . . I guess I'm confused. Frankly, I wish I knew. I wish my love for him today were as strong and as sure and enduring as when I first met him."

In a flippant, light manner, Gregory said, "Let's forget about Philip and concentrate on us. We're together; this is all that's important. Now, what shall I order for you? The usual oriental dish?"

"Oh, Gregory, you remembered even that! Thanks. Yes. By all means everything will be relived and put together again today. If but for a day. A treasured day, I might add."

As soon as the waitress left with their order, they lapsed back into pleasant conversation of times past, when their love blossomed and flourished. It was so painfully-sweet that Alisa found herself more than once wondering how she could have thought she was in love with Philip. But her honest heart told her that she had been in love with Philip, very much so. So long as the holy fire had burned red-hot on the altar of her heart, her love for this holy man had never once been doubted. It was real and genuine. She couldn't deny this. Never. Only since she had lapsed into spiritual coolness were the doubts present to niggle and bother her.

"Are you living in the same apartment?"

Gregory's words brought her suddenly and abruptly out of her thoughts. "I think," she said, "from all the information you have on me, that you know the answer to the question." She touched his fingers and smiled up into his handsome face.

Squeezing her hand, he nodded. "I've kept close tabs on you, Alisa. Like I said, I have not stopped loving you."

The petite waitress came with their order then and the conversation ceased.

Long after the delicious meal was over, they sat and talked. Alisa marveled at the ease she had in Gregory's presence for one engaged and awaiting the return of her bridegroom. She felt little if any conviction regarding the wrongness of her actions . . . her flirtations and all-too-obvious and revealing enjoyment over being in the company of her former lover. There was a time when the mere thought, or the mention of his name even, would have filled her heart with fear and horror. She knew he was working against the kingdom which Philip was striving to build up. Philip had told her this much shortly after she was converted. But Gregory was such a congenial and personable man, she thought. Surely, Philip was wrong.

"I am taking you home this time, my dear Alisa." Gregory's voice floated in through in her reverie.

"I came down in my car, Greg . . ."

"I'll still take you home . . . in your car then. I can get a cab back."

Smiling, they walked hand in hand to her car.

"How about a drive along the beach?" Gregory asked. "We can always go home later . . ."

"I'd love it, Greg. This is so much like old times that I don't want to turn lose of this day."

"You could have this forever, my dear Alisa," he said, looking down on her with that look which she remembered from the past.

She said nothing. She was thinking and wondering why she felt so terribly confused.

They drove along the deserted beach slowly and deliberately, enjoying each-other's company, loathe to part when the time would come. Late into

the night he parked her car, saw her safely inside the foyer-lobby of the apartment complex, bade her a fond goodnight and strode away to hail an approaching taxi.

Alisa watched from inside the building until the taxi, with Greg, disappeared. Then she walked toward the elevator to go up to her floor.

She would have passed without noticing him had he not stepped out from behind the enormous planter with its dense foliage and trees. "Philip!" she cried, rushing toward him. "You're home! Oh Philip."

He gave her a look of such hurt and pain that she felt her heart would burst; she rushed toward him.

"I told you to be ready," he said, brushing past her and out the door.

"Philip! Philip!" she cried, sobbing brokenly and running toward the door. "Come back! Come back! Please! I'm sorry! Sorry . . . ."

She ran outside, searching for him. But he was gone. Gone! He had returned; she was not ready. Her "lamp had gone out."

"Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh." Matt. 24:44