

# THE TINDER BOX

By  
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(Continued from page 14.)

lives teaching in crowded cities after leaving college and to start them in any profession they choose, with every chance of happiness, in the smaller cities of the south and middle west," said Mary Elizabeth gently, and somehow the tears rose in my eyes, as I thought how the poor dear had been teaching in the high school in Chicago the two glorious years I had been frolicking abroad. No time, and no men to have good times with.

And there were hundreds like her, I knew, in all the crowded parts of the United States. And as I had begun I thought further. Just because I was embarrassed at the idea of proposing to some foolish man, who is of no importance to me himself, or the world in general, down in Glendale, where they have all known me all my life and would expect anything of me anyway after I have defied tradition and gone to college, five lovely, lonely girls would have to go without any delightful suitors like Richard—or Folk Hayes forever.

And, still further, I thought of the other girls, coming under the influence of those five, who might be encouraged to hold up their heads and look around and at least help out their Richards in their matrimonial quest, and as I sat there with Jane's compelling and Mary Elizabeth's hungry eyes on me I felt that I was being besought by all the lovers of all the future generations to tear down some sort of awful barrier and give them happiness. And it was the thought of the men that was most appealing. It takes a woman who really likes them as I do and has their good really at heart to see their side of the question as Jane put it, poor dears. Suddenly I felt that all the happiness of the whole world was in one big, golden chalice and that I had to hold it steadily to give drink to all men and all women.

Then before I could stop myself I decided, and I hope the dear Lord—I say it devoutly, indeed I do—will help that poor man in Glendale if I pick out the wrong one. I'm going to do it.

"I accept your appointment and terms, Jane," I said quietly as I looked both those devout, if fanatic, women in the face. "I pledge myself to go back to Glendale, to live a happy, healthy, normal life as useful as I can. I shall work at my profession wholeheartedly, take my allotted place in the community and refuse to recognize any difference in the obligations and opportunities in my life and that of the men with whom I am thrown and to help all other women to take such a fearless and honest attitude—if Glendale blows up in consequence. I will seek and claim marriage in exactly the same fearless way a man does, and when I have found what I want I shall expect you to put \$100,000, \$20,000 to each, at the disposal of five other suitable young women to follow my example, as noted down in this book."

"Just record the agreement as a note in the book, and I will sign it," answered Jane in her crispest and most businesslike tone of voice, though I could see she was trembling with excitement, and poor Mary Elizabeth was both awestruck and hopeful.

I'll invite Mary Elizabeth down to Glendale as soon as I stake out my own claim, poor dear!

And here I sit alone at midnight with a huge steel bound, lock and keyed book that Jane has had made for me, with my name and the inscription, "In case of death send un-

opened to Jane Mathers, Boston, Massachusetts," on the back, committed to a cause as crazy and as serious as anything since the pilgrimages or the quest of the Knights for the Grail. It also looks slightly like trying to produce a modern Don Quixote, feminine edition, and my cheeks are flaming so that I wouldn't look at them for worlds. And to write it all too! I have always had my opinion of women who spill their souls out of an ink bottle, but I ought to pardon a nihilist that in the dead of night, cold with terror, confides some awful appointment he has had made him to his nearest friend. I am the worst nihilist that ever existed, and the bomb I am throwing may explode and destroy the human race. But, on the other hand, the explosion might be of another kind. Suppose that suddenly a real woman's entire nature should be revealed to the world, might not the universe be enveloped in a rose glory and a love symphony? We'll see!

Also could the time ever come when a woman wouldn't risk hanging over the ragged edge of heaven to hold on to the hand of some man? Never! Then, as that is the case, I see we must all keep the same firm grip on the creatures we have always had and haul them over the edge, but we must not do it any more without letting them know about it. It isn't honest.

But suppose I should lose all love for everybody in this queer quest for enlightenment I have undertaken? Please, God, let a good man be in Glendale, Tenn., who will understand and protect me—no, that's the wrong prayer! Protect him—no—both of us!

## CHAPTER II.

### The Maiden Lance.

**A** WOMAN may shut her eyes and put a man determinedly out of her heart, and in two minutes she will wake up in an agony of fear that he isn't there. Now, as I have decided that Glendale is to be the scene of this bloodless revolution of mine—it would be awful to carry out such an undertaking anywhere but under the protection of ancestral traditions—I have operated Richard Hall out of my inmost being with the utmost cruelty on an average of every two hours, for this week Jane and I have been in New York, and I have still got him with me.

I at last became determined and chose the roof garden at the Astor to tell him goodby and perform the final operation. First I tried to establish a plane of common citizenship with him by telling him how much his two years' friendship across the waters had meant to me while we studied the same profession under the same masters, drew at the same drawing boards and watched dear old Paris flame into her jeweled night fire from Montmartre together. I was frankly affectionate, and it made him suspicious of me.

Then I tried to tell him just a little, only a hint, of my new attitude toward his sex, and before he had had time even to grasp the idea he exploded.

"Don't talk to me as if you were an alienist trying to examine an abstruse case, Evelina," he growled, with extreme temper. "Go on down and rusticate with your relatives for the summer and fly the bats in your belfry at the old mossbacks while I am getting this Cincinnati and gulf stations commission under way. Then, when I can, I will come for you. Let's don't discuss the matter, and it's time I took you back to your hotel."

Not a very encouraging tilt for my maiden lance.

Considering the situation, and my intentions, I was a bit frightened as the huge engine rattled and roared its way along the steel rails that were leading me back, down into the Harpeth valley. But, when we crossed the Kentucky line, I forgot the horrors of my mission, and I thrilled gloriously at getting back to my hills. Old Harpeth had just come into sight, as we rounded into the valley and Providence Knob rested back against it, in a pink glow that I knew came from the honeysuckle in bloom all over it like a mantle. I traveled fast into the twilight and I saw all the stars smile out over the ridge, in answer to the hearth stars in the valley, before I got across Silver Creek. I hadn't let any one know that I was coming, so I couldn't expect any one to meet me at the station at Glendale. There was nobody there I belonged to—just an empty house. I suppose a man coming home like that would have whistled and held up his head, but I couldn't. I'm a woman.

Suddenly that long glowworm of a train stopped just long enough at Glendale to eject me and my five trunks; with such hurried emphasis that I felt I was being planted in the valley forever, and I would have to root myself here or die. I still feel that way.

And as I stood just where my feet were planted, in the dust of the road, instead of on the little ten-foot platform, that didn't quite reach to my sleeper steps, I felt as small as I really am in comparison to the universe. I looked after the train and groveled.

Then, just as I was about to start running down the track, away from nowhere and to nowhere, I was brought to my senses by a loud boo-hoo and then a snubby choke, which seemed to come out of my bag and steamer blanket that stood in a pile before me.

"Train's gone, train's gone and left us! I knew it would, when Sallie stopped to put the starch on her face all over again. And Cousin James, he's as slow as molasses, and I couldn't guess two twins in not time to button one baby. Oh, d—! Oh, d—!" And the sobs rose to a perfect storm of a wail.

Just at that moment, down the short platform an electric light was turned on, and my fellow sufferer stood revealed.

She was a slim, red haired bunch of galatea, stylish of cut as to upturned nose and straight little skirt, but wholly and defiantly unshod save for a dusty white rag around one pink toe. A cunning little straw bonnet, with an ecru lace jabot dangled in her hand, and her big brown eyes reminded me of Jane's at her most inquisitive moments.

"If you was on a train, what did you get often it here for?" she demanded of me, with scorn and curiosity in her positive young voice.

"I don't know why," I answered weakly, not at all in the tone of a young gallant home from the war, mood I had intended to assume toward the first inhabitant of my native town to whom I addressed a remark.

"We was all a-goin' down to Hillsboro to visit Aunt Bettie Pollard for a whole week, to Cousin Tom's wedding, but my family is too slow for nothing but a funeral. And Cousin James, he's worse. He come for us ten minutes behind the town clock, and Mammy Dilsie had phthisic, so I had to fix the two twins, and we're done left. I wish I didn't have no family!" And with her bare feet the young rebel raised a cloud of dust that rose and settled on my skirt.

"There they come now," she continued with the pained contempt still rising in her voice.

And around the corner of the station hurried the family party, with all the haste they would have been expected to use if they had not, just two minutes earlier, beheld their train go relentlessly on down the valley to Hillsboro and the wedding celebration. I hadn't placed the kiddie, but I might have known from her own description of her family to whom she belonged.

First came Sallie Carruthers, sailing along in the serene way that I remembered to have always thought like a swan in no hurry, and in her hands was a wet box from which rose stems protruded.

Next in the procession came Aunt Dilsie, huge and black and wheezing, fanning herself with a genteel turkey tail fan and carrying a large covered basket.

But the tail piece of the procession paralyzed all the home coming emotions that I had expected to be feeling save that of pure hilarity. James Hardin was carrying two bubbly, squirmy, tangle-headed babies on one arm and a huge suitcase in the other hand, and his gray felt hat set on the back of his shock of black hair at an angle of deep desperation, though patience shone from every line of his strong, gaunt body, and I could see in the half light that there were no lines of irritation about his mouth, which Richard had said looked to him like that of the prophet Hosea when I had shown him the picture that father had had snapped of himself and the Crag, with their great string of quail, on one of their hunting trips just before father died.

"Eve!" he exclaimed when he suddenly caught sight of me standing in the middle of the dusty road, with my impedimenta around me, and as he spoke he dropped both babies on the platform in a bunch and the small trunk on the other side. Then he just stood and looked, and I had to straighten on the roar that was arising in me at



Cousin James in the Midst of Sallie's Family and Baggage.

the sight of him into a conventional smile of greeting suitable to bestow on an enemy.

But before the smile was well launched Sallie bustled in and got the full effect of it.

"Why, Evelina Shelby, you darling thing, when did you come?" she fairly bubbled as she clasped me in the most hospitable of arms and bestowed a slightly powdery kiss on both my cheeks. I weakly and femininely enjoyed the hug, not that a man might not have—Sallie is a dear, and I always did like her gush shamefacedly.

"She got often that train that left us, and she ain't got a bit of sense or she wouldn't," answered the Blue Bunch for me in a matter of fact tone of voice.

"What for did you all unpack outen the surrey if you sawed the train go by?" she further demanded, with accusing practicality. "Don't you know when youse left?"

"Oh, Henrietta!" exclaimed Sallie, looking at the young philosopher with terrified helplessness. "Please don't mind her, Evelina. I don't understand her being my child, and nobody does unless it was Henry's grandmother on his mother's side. You had heard of my loss?"

If I hadn't heard of the death of Henry Carruthers, Sallie's elaborate black draperies, relieved by the flimsy exquisiteness of white crape niches at the neck and wrists, would have proclaimed the fact.

Suddenly something made me look at Cousin James as he stood calmly in the midst of Sallie's family and baggage, both animate and inanimate, and the laugh that had threatened for minutes fairly flared out into his placid young prophet face.

"I'm glad to see you, Evelina," said Cousin James gently, and I could see that the billows of my wrath had got entirely past him.

(To be continued.)



Nitwed—I suppose you have found your marriage to be a true partnership?

Fee-wee—Just that. I'm the silent partner.—New York Globe.