

The TINDER BOX

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"THE MELTING OF MOLLY"



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"I feel sure that it was just my own frivolous streak that called out the frivolous in Polk, Jane dear." I answered, with trepidation, hoping and praying that the inquisition would not go much further and trying to remember just what I had written her about Polk.

"It may have been that," Jane answered in a most naively relieved tone of voice. "But you don't know how happy I am, dear, to see that that streak is only an occasional charming vein that shows in you, but that you are now settling down steadily to your profession. I feel sure that when these garden drawings are done you and Mr. Hall will have found your correct places in each other's lives, and it will be just a glorious example of how superbly a man and woman can work together at the same profession. Mr. Hardin and I were talking about it just last night out on the side porch, and, though he said very little, I could see how gratified he was at the honors that had come to you and how much he likes Mr. Hall."

That settled it, and I made up my mind that when the harvest lady left us tonight to sink behind old Harpeth she wasn't going to leave me weakly lonesome. She doesn't set until 2 o'clock, and I'm going to take all the time I need.

And as serious and solemn as I feel over taking such a step for two as I am deciding on I can't help looking forward to scribbling a terse and impersonal account of my having proposed to the man of my choice in this strong minded book, adding a few words of sage advice for the five, locking it and handing it, key and all, to Jane, with a dramatic demand that she put her \$100,000 in the trust company and begin to choose the five from those she has had in mind.

Then before she has had time to read it I am going sneakily to get it back and blot or tear out some of the things I have written. I can decide later what will be data and what will be dangerous to the cause.

"And you will be glad to have me—come and live for a time in your home life, dear?" Jane recalled me to the question in hand by saying wistfully. "I feel that I have never had such good friends before, anywhere, as these of yours are to me, Evelina," she added.

That's one time I got Jane completely in my arms and showed her what a really good hugging means south of Mason and Dixon's line. From later developments I am glad she had that slight initiation. It must have been serviceable to her New England disposition.

Then, just as I was going to ask some of the plans she—and Polk—had made, over came Cousin Jasmine, with Cousin Annie and Mary, with Mrs. Hargrove puffing along behind them. They had come to see Jane, but I was allowed to stay and have my breath knocked out by their mission.

It seems Jane had got a great big book from some firm in New York that tells all about herb growing and how difficult it is to get the ones needed for condiments and perfumes and offering to buy first class lavender and thyme and bergamot and sweet fern and things of that kind in any quantities at a good price. She had shown it to the little ladies, who had been secretly grieving at the separation from their garden out on their poorly rented farm, and the leaven had worked—on Mrs. Hargrove also. They go back to the farm and she with them. She had decided on raising mint to both dry and ship fresh because he of

the girl pajamas always liked to have it strong and fresh for the julep of his ancestors. I hope she won't forget to take that pattern of Japanese extraction with her and make some for Crag now and then, for it will save time. Horrors!

"We have fully decided on our course of action, Jane, and Evelina, dears," said Cousin Jasmine in a positive little manner that she would have been as incapable of a month ago as is a pet kitten of barking at the family dog, "but we do so dread to break it to dear James, because we feel that he may think we are not happy under his roof and be distressed. Do you believe we shall be able to make him see that we must pursue our independent life, though always needing the support of his affection and interest?"

"I believe you will, Cousin Jasmine," I said, wanting to both laugh and cry to see the Crag's burdens begin to roll off his shoulders like this. And the tears that didn't rise would have been real ones, too, for I found that down in the corner of my heart I had adored the picture of my oak with the tender little old vines clinging around him. It was the producing gourd I had most objected to, and I couldn't see but she would be there until I unclasped her tendrils.

But I was forgetting that in the modern theory of thought waves it is the simplest minds that get the ripples first and hardest. Sallie came over just as soon as the other delegation had got home to take the twins off her hands. Jane had gone upstairs to make more calculations on our reconstruction, and I was trying to get a large, deep breath.

"Evelina," she said as she sank in a chair near me and fastened her large, very young-in-soul eyes on mine, "were you just joking, Nell, or did you mean it when you said the other day that you thought it would be cowardly of a woman not to show a man that she loved him if he for any reason was not willing to make the first advances to her?" Sallie is perfectly lovely in the faint lavender and pink things that Jane made her decide to get in one conversation, whereas while Nell and Caroline and I had been looking up and bringing her surreptitious samples of all colors from the store all summer.

"Well, I don't know that I exactly meant Nell to take it all to heart," I answered without the slightest suspicion of what was coming. "But I do think, Sallie, it would be no more than honest, fearless and within a woman's own greater rights."

"Mr. Haley was saying the other evening that a woman's sweet dependence was a man's most precious heritage," Sallie gently mused on the atmosphere that was beginning to be pretty highly charged.

"Doesn't a woman have to depend on her husband's tenderness and care all of the time—time she is bearing a child, Sallie, even up to the asafetida spoon crisis?" I asked, with my cheeks in a flame, but determined to stand my ground. "It does seem to me that nature puts her in a position to demand so much support from him in those times that she ought to rely on herself when she can, especially as she is likely to bring an indefinite number of such crises into their joint existence."

Sallie laughed, for she remembered the high horse I had mounted on the subject of Mamie and Ned Hall the day after the assembly dance.

And as I laughed suddenly a picture I had seen down at the Hall's flashed across my mind. I had gone down to tell Mamie something Aunt Augusta wanted her to propose next day at a

meeting of the Equality league about drinking water in the public school building. Mamie has learned to make, with pink cheeks and shining eyes, the quaintest little speeches that always carry the house and even made one at a public meeting when we invited the men to hand over our \$50 for the monument. Ned's face was a picture as he held a ruffle of her muslin gown between his fingers while she stood up to do it.

But the picture that flashed through my mind was dearer than that, and I put it away in that jewel box that I am going to open some day for my own man.

Both Mamie's nurse and cook had gone to the third funeral of the season, and Mamie was feeding the entire family in the back yard. The kiddies were sitting in a row along the top of the back steps, eating cookies and milk, with bibs around their necks, from the twelve-year-old Jennie, who had tied on hers for fun, down to the chubby-kins next to the baby—and Mamie was sitting flat on the grass in front of them nursing little Ned, with big Ned sitting beside her with his arm around both her and the baby. He was looking first down into her face, and then at the industrious kiddie getting his supper from the maternal fount, and then at the handsome bunch on the steps, as he alternately munched a bite of his cookie and fed Mamie one, to the delight of the children. The expression on his face as he looked at them and her and ate and laughed is what is back of all that goes to make the American nation the greatest on earth. Amen!

"Sallie," I said as I reached out and took her plump white hand in mine, "our men are the most wonderful in the world, and they are ours any way we get them. They don't care how it is done, and neither do we, just so we belong in the right way."

"Then you don't think it would be any harm for me to tell Mr. Haley I think I could live on \$1,800 a year until he gets sent to a larger church?" was the bomb that, thus encouraged, Sallie exploded in my face.

I'm awfully glad that I didn't get a chance to answer, for I don't want to be responsible for the future failure or success of Mr. Haley's ministry. Just then Henrietta burst into the room with the kitten in her arms.

"Keep her for me, Evelina, please, ma'am," she said, with the dearest little chuckle, but not forgetting the polite "please," which Jane had had to suggest to her just once. What you've done for that wayward, unmanageable genius of a child, Jane, dear, makes you deserve ten of your own. That is—help!

"Cousin Augusta and Nell and Dickie and me is a-going out to watch the man put the dynamite in the hole to blow the creek right up, and Glendale too, so they can see if they is enough clean water to put in the waterworks," she continued to explain. "Nell is a-going to take Dickie in her car, and Cousin Augusta is a-going to take me and Uncle Peter in her buggy. Dislie have got the kit, and Cousin Marfy is a-watching to see she don't do nothing wrong with her. Oh, may I go, Sallie? Jane said I must always ask you."

"Yes, dearest," answered Sallie, immensely flattered by the deference thus paid her.

"How wonderful an influence the little talks Mr. Haley has had with Henrietta have had on her!" she said, with such a happy glow on her face as the reformed one departed that I succeeded in suppressing the laugh that rose in me at the memory of Henrietta's account of the first one of the series.

Men need not fear that the time will ever come when they will cease to get the credit for making earth's wheels go around from the female inhabitants thereof. So I smiled to myself and buried my face in the fragrance under the bubbly puppy girl's chin and coaxed her arms to clasp around my neck.

They are the holy throb of a woman's life—babies. Less than ten wouldn't satisfy me unless well scattered in ages, Jane. On some questions I am not modern.

"Still I do feel so miserable leaving Cousin James so alone all winter," Sallie continued, with the most beautiful sympathy in her voice as she looked out of the window toward Widegables. "I wonder if I ought to make up my mind to stay with him? He loves the children so, and you know the plans of Cousin Jasmine and the others to go back to their farm."

"But he'll have his mother left," I said quietly, but very encouragingly. I seemed to see the little green tendril

that had unclasped from the oak turning on its stem and winding tight again.

"Miss Mathers was encouraging Cousin Martha to go to Colorado to see Elizabeth and her family for a long visit this winter. She hasn't seen Elizabeth since her mother died, and she was so much interested in the easy way of traveling these days, as Miss Mathers described it, that she asked her to write for a time table and what a ticket costs, just this morning. I really ought not to desert Cousin James."

"But think how lonely Mr. Haley is down in the parsonage and of his influence on Henrietta," I urged.

"Yes, I do feel drawn in both ways," sighed the poor tender gourd. "And then you will be here by yourself, so you can watch over Cousin James as much as your work will allow you, can't you, Evelina?"

"Yes, I'll try to keep him from being too much alone," I answered with the most deceitful unconcern.

"I see him coming to supper and I must go, for I want to be with him all I can, if I am to leave him so soon. I may not make up my mind to it," with which threat Sallie departed and left me alone in the gloaming, a situation which seems to be becoming chronic with me now.

If I had it I'd give another \$100,000 to the cause to hear that interview between Sallie and the dominie. I wager he'll never know what happened and would swear it didn't, if confronted with a witness.

And also I felt so nervous with all this asking in marriage surging in the atmosphere that it was with difficulty that I sat through supper and listened to Jane and Polk, who had come in with her, plan town sewerage. Tomorrow night I knew the moon wouldn't rise until 11 o'clock, and how did I know anyway that Sallie's emancipation might not get started on the wrong track and run into my Crag? His chivalry would never let him refuse a woman who proposed to him, and he'll be in danger until I can do it and tell the town about it.

Jane and Polk had promised Dickie and Nell to motor down Providence road as far as Cloverbend in the moonlight, and I think Caroline and Lee were going too. Polk looked positively agonized with embarrassed sorrow at leaving me all alone, and it was with difficulty that I got them off. I pleaded the greatest fatigue, and my impatience amounted to crossness.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Eve" and "Adam."

AFTER Jane and Polk had gone I dismissed Jasper and Petunia and locked the back doors, put out all the lights in the house and retired to the side steps, determined to be invisible no matter who called—and wait.

And for one mortal hour there I sat alone in that waning old moonlight that grew colder and paler by the minute, while the stiff breeze that poured down from Old Harpeth began to be vicious and icy as it nipped my ears and hands and nose and sent a chill down to my very toes.

Nobody came, and there I sat. Finally, with the tears tangling icily in my lashes, I got up and went into the house and lighted the fat pine under the logs in the hall. They had lain all ready for the torch for a whole year, just as I had lain for a lifetime until a few weeks ago. Then suddenly they blazed—as I had done.

(To be continued.)

It Is Possible?—The ceremony was over when an elderly friend of the bride waddled up to extend his good wishes and congratulations. Unfortunately he could not distinguish between the bridegroom and an unsuccessful suitor and congratulated the latter.

Witnessing the young man's embarrassment, the bride turned quickly, saying:

"Oh, I'm so sorry he isn't the man to be congratulated, Mr. B—. Here is my husband over here."

Doesn't Have to Talk.—"Does the baby talk yet?" inquired the friend of the family of the little brother.

"Naw," said that disgusted youth. "He don't have to talk. I have to wait for Christmas to get anything, but all he has to do is yell and he gets everything in the house."