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## The TINDER BOX

by  
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"THE MELTING OF MOLLY"



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### CHAPTER 2—Continued.

And the next ten minutes was one of the most strenuous periods of time I ever put in in all my life. I longed, really longed, to go home with Sallie and Henrietta and sleep next the wall at Widegables with the rest of the Crag's collection. But I knew Glendale well enough to see plainly that if I thus once give myself up to the conventions that by Saturday night they would have me nicely settled with his relatives or in my home with probably two, elderly widows and a maiden cousin or so to look after me. And then by the end of the next week they would have the most suitable person in town fairly hunted by both spoken and mental influence to the moonlight end of my front porch with matrimonial intentions in his pocket. I knew

I had to take a positive stand and take it immediately. I must be masculinely firm. No feminine wiles would serve in such a crisis as this.

So I let Cousin James pack me into his low, prehistoric old surrey in the front seat at his side, while Sallie took Aunt Dilsie and one twin with her on the back seat. Henrietta scrouged down at my feet, and I fearfully, but accommodatingly, accepted the other twin. It was a perfect kitten of a baby and purred itself to sleep against my shoulder as soon as anchored.

The half mile from the station, along the dusty, quiet village streets, was accomplished in about the time it would take a modern vehicle to traverse Manhattan lengthwise, and at last we stopped at the gate of Widegables. The rambling, winged, wide gabled, tall columned old pile of time grayed

brick and stone sat-back in the moon-light, in its tangle of a garden, under its tall roof maples, with a dignity that went straight to my heart. There is nothing better in France or England, and I feel sure that there are not 200 houses in America as good. I'll paint it; just like I saw it tonight, for next spring's salon. A bright light shone from the windows of the dining room in the left wing, where the collection of clinging vines were taking supper, unconscious of the return of the left behinds that threatened.

And as I glanced at my own tall pillared, dark old house that stands just opposite Widegables, and is of the same period and style, I knew that if I did not escape into its emptiness before I got into Cousin Martha's comfortable arms, surrounded by the rest of the Crag's family, I would never have the courage to enter into the estate of freedom I had planned.

"Sallie," I said firmly, as I handed the limp kitten down to Aunt Dilsie, as Henrietta took the other one—"puppy" I suppose I will have to call the young animal—from her mother and started on up the walk in the lead of the return expedition. "I am going over to stay in my own home tonight. I know it seems strange, but—I must. Please don't worry about me."

"Why, dear, you can't stay by yourself, with no man on the place!" exclaimed Sallie in a tone of absolute panic. "I'll go tell Cousin Martha you are here while Cousin James unpacks your satchel and things." And she hurried in her descent from the ark and also hurried in her quest for the re-enforcement of Cousin Martha's authority.

"I'm going to escape before any of them come back," I said determinedly to the Crag, who stood there still, just looking at me. "I'm not up to arguing the question tonight, for the trip has been a long one, and this is the first time I have been home since— Just let me have tonight to myself, please." I found myself pleading to him as he held up his arms to lift me clear of the wheels.

His eyes were hurt and suffering for a second, then a strange light of comprehension came from them into mine, like a benediction, as he gently set me on my feet.

"Must you, Eve?"

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