

## "THE TINDER BOX"

(Continued from first page)

out on, and I lay in wait to capture him and the chips. This morning I waited behind the old purple lilac at the gate, which immediately got into the game by sweeping its purple plumed arms all around me, so that not a tag of my dimity alarmed him as he came slowly down the street.

"Uncle Peter," I said as I stepped out in front of him suddenly; "please, Uncle Peter, won't you come in and talk to me?"

"Hey? Evelina?"

"Yes, Uncle Peter; it's Evelina," and I hesitated with terror at the snap in his dear old eyes back under their white brows. Then I let my eyes uncover my heart full of the elixir I had prepared for him and offered him as much as he could drink.

"I'm lonely," I said, with a little catch in my voice.

"Lonely, hey?" he grumbled, but his feet hesitated opposite my gate.

In about two and a half minutes I had him seated in a cushioned rocker on the south side of the porch. Jasper had given us both a mint julep, and Uncle Peter was much less thirsty than he had been for a long time. Aunt Augusta is as temperate in all things as a steel ramrod.

"You see, Uncle Peter, I needed you so that I just had to kidnap you," I said to him as he wiped his lips with a pocket handkerchief as stiffly starched as was his wife herself.

"Why didn't you go over and live in James' henery—live with James—hey?" he snapped, with the precision of a pistol cap.

To be just, I suppose Aunt Augusta's adamant disposition accounts to some extent for Uncle Peter's explosive way of thinking and speaking. A husband would have to knock Aunt Augusta's nature down to make any impression whatever on it. Uncle Peter always has the air of firing an idea and then ducking his head to avoid the return shot.

"His house is so full, and I need a lot of space to carry on my work," I answered him, with the words I have used so often in the last two weeks that they start to come when the Petunia asks me if I want waffles or batter cakes for supper.

"Well, Sallie Carruthers will get him and then there'll be a dozen more to run the measure over—children—hey? All girls! A woman like Sallie would not be content with producing less than a dozen of her kind, hey?"

His chuckle was so contagious that I couldn't help but join him, though I didn't like it so very much. But why shouldn't I? Sallie is such a gorgeous woman that a dozen of her in the next generation will be of value to the state. Still, I didn't like it. I didn't enjoy thinking of Cousin James as so serving his country.

"Carruthers left her to James. He'll have to take care of her. Henry turned toes in good time. Piled rotten old business and big family on to James' shoulders, and then died—good time—hey? Get a woman on your hands, only thing to do is to marry or kill her. Poor James—hey?" He peered at me with a twinkle in his eyes that demanded assent from me.

"Why, Uncle Peter, I don't know that Sallie has any such idea. She grieves dreadfully over Mr. Carruthers, and I don't believe she would think of marrying again," I answered, trying to put enough warmth in my defense to convince myself.

"Most women are nothing but gourd vines, grow all over a cornstalk, kill it, produce gourds until it frosts and begin all over again in the next generation. James has to do the hoeing around Sallie's roots and feed her. Might as well marry her, hey?"



"Let Sallie have him since you don't need him."

"Does—does Cousin James have to support Sallie and the children, Uncle Peter?" I asked, coming with reluctance down to the rock bed of the discussion.

"Thinks he does, and it serves him right—serves him right for starting out to run a widow ranch in the first place. It's like making a collection of old shoes. He let Henry Carruthers persuade him to mortgage everything and buy land on the river for the car shops of the new railroad, which just fooled the town out of \$100,000 and is going by on the other side of the river with the shops up at Bolivar. If James didn't get all the lawing in Alton county they would all starve to death, which would be hard on the constitution of old lady Hargrove and her two hundredweight."

"Oh, has Cousin James really lost all of his fortune?" I asked, and I was surprised at the amount of sympathetic dismay that rose in me at the information.

"Everything but what he carries around under that old gray hat of his. Not so bad a fortune at that, hey?"

I feel I am going to love Uncle Peter for the way he disdainfully admires Cousin James.

"And—and all of his—his guests are really dependent on him?" I asked again as the stupendous fact filtered into my mind.

"All the flock, all the flock," answered Uncle Peter, with what seemed under the circumstances a heartless chuckle. "They each one have little dabs of property about as big as a handful of chicken feed, and as they have each one given it all to James to manage they expect an income in return and get it—all they ask for. A lot of useless old live stock—all but Sallie, and she's worse—worse, hey?"

I agreed with his question, but I didn't say so.

"Glad your money is safe in public town bonds and city securities, Evelina. If James could he might lose it, and you'd have to move over. It would then be nip and tuck between you and Sallie which got James—nip and tuck, hey?"

"Oh, Uncle Peter!" I exclaimed with positive horror that was flavored with a large dash of indignation.

"Well, yes; a race between a widow and a girl for a man is about like one between a young duck and a spring chicken across a mill pond—girl and chicken lose—hey? But let Sallie have him since you don't need him. I've got to go home and listen to Augusta talk about my business that she knows nothing in the world about or I won't be ready for town meeting this afternoon. Women are all fools, hey?"

"Will you come again, Uncle Peter?" I asked eagerly. I had set out to offer Uncle Peter a cup of nicely affection, and I had got a good, stiff bracer to arouse me in return.

"I will whenever I can escape Augusta," he answered, and there was such a kindly crackle in his voice that I felt that he had wanted and needed what I had offered him. "I'll drop in often and analyze the annals of the town with you. Glad to have you home, child, good young blood to stir me up—hey?"

And as I sat and watched the mayor go sauntering down the street, with his crustiness carried like a child on his shoulder, which it delighted him to have knocked off, so that he could philosophize in the restoring of it to its position, suddenly a realization of the relation of Glendale to the world in general was forced upon me, and I quailed.

Glendale is like a dozen other small towns in the Harpeth valley. They are all drowsy princesses who have just waked up enough to be wondering what did it. The tentative kiss has not yet disclosed the presence of the prince of revolution, and they are likely to doze for another century or two. I think I had better go back into the wide world and let them sleep on. One live member is likely to irritate the repose of the whole body.

Their faint stirrings of progress are pathetic.

They have an electric plant; but, as I have noted before, the lights therefrom show a strong trace of their pine knot heredity and go out on all important occasions, whether of festivity or tragedy. Kerosene lamps have to be kept filled and cleaned if a baby or a revival or a lawn festival is expected.

They have a lovely, wide concrete pavement in front of six of the stores around the public squares, but no two stretches of the improvement join each other, and it makes a shopping progression around the town somewhat dangerous on account of the sudden change of grade of the sidewalk about every sixty feet. Aunt Augusta wanted Uncle Peter to introduce a bill in the city council forcing all of the property owners on the square to put down the pavement in front of their houses at small payments per annum, the town assuming the contract at 6 per cent. Uncle Peter refused, because he said that he felt a smooth walk around the square would call out what he called "a dimity parade" every afternoon.

They have a water system that is supplied by so much mud from the river that it often happens that the town has to go unwashed for a week, while the pipes are cleaned out. There is a wonderful spring that could be used with a pump to supply the town, Aunt Augusta says.

The city council tied up the town for a \$100,000 subscription to the new railroad and failed to tie the shops down in the contract. They are to be built in Bolivar. A great many of the rich men have lost a lot of money thereby, Cousin James the most of all, and everybody is sitting up in bed blinking.

There are still worse things happening in the emotional realm of Glendale.

Lee Greenfield has been in the state of going to ask Caroline Lellyett to marry him for fifteen years and has never done it. Caroline has been beautiful all her life, but she is getting so

thin and faded at thirty that she is a tragedy. Lee goes to see her twice a week, and on Sunday afternoon takes her out in his new and rakish run-about that is as modern as his behavior is obsolete. Caroline knows no better and stands it with sublime patience and lack of character. That is a situation I won't be able to keep my hands off of much longer.

Ned Hall's wife has seven children with the oldest one not twelve, and she looks fifty. Ned goes to all the dances at the Glendale hotel dining room and looks thirty. He dresses beautifully, and Ned and all the girls like to dance with him. Just ordinary torture wouldn't do for him.

Polk Hayes wouldn't be allowed to run loose in London society.

Sallie Carruthers is a great big husky woman, with three children that she is responsible for having had. She and her family must consume tons of green groceries every month and a perfectly innocent man pays for them.

Mrs. Dodd, the carpenter and contractor's wife, is a Boston woman who came down here. Before I could write all about that Boston girl so that Jane could understand perfectly the situation Polk came around from the side street and seated himself on the railing of the porch so near the arm of my chair that I couldn't rock without inconveniencing him.

I am glad he found me in the mood I was in and I am glad to record the strong minded—it came near being the strong armed—contest in which we indulged.

"Me for a woman that has a lot of spirit! She is so much sweeter when tamed, Evelina!" was one of the gentle remarks with which he precipitated the riot. "I think it has been spunkily fascinating of you to come and live by yourself in this old barn. It keeps me awake nights just to think of you over here—alone. How long is the torture to go on?"

Jane, I tried, but if I had frankly and courageously shown Polk Hayes what was in my heart for him at that moment I couldn't have answered for the results.

From the time I was eighteen until I was twenty the same sort of assault and battery had been handed out to me from him. He had beaten me with his love. He didn't want me. He doesn't want any woman except so long as he is uncertain that he can get her. Just because I had been firm with him when even a child and denied him, he has been merciless. And now that I am a woman and armed for the combat, it will be to the death.

Shall I double and take refuge in a labyrinth of subterfuge or turn and fight? So I temporized today.

"It is lonely—but not quite torture" to me with the family so close across the street," I answered him, and I went on whipping the lace on a piece of fluff I am making to discipline myself because I loathe a needle so. "Please don't you worry over me, dear." I raised my eyes to his, and I tried the common citizenship look. It must have carried a little way, for he flushed—the first time I ever saw him do it—and his hand with the cigarette in it shook.

"Evelina, are you real or a—farce?" he asked after a few minutes of peace.

"I'm trying to be real, Polk," I answered, and this time I raised my eyes with perfect frankness. "If you could define a real woman, Polk, in what terms would you express her?" I asked him straight out from the shoulder.

"Hell fire and a hallelujah chorus if she's beautiful," he answered me promptly.

I laughed. I thought it was best under the circumstances.

(To be continued)



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