

"THE TINDER BOX"

(Continued from first page)

"It's lovely of you, Nell, to want to do more for the babies after all the beautiful things you and Evelina have made them, and I may be able to get another white dress apiece for them after I give Cousin James the bills that are awful already, but this is some ruffling that I just forced Mamie Hall to let me bring up to you girls to do for her baby. The poor little dear is two months old, and Mamie is just beginning on his little dress for him. He has been wearing the plainest little slips. Mamie says Ned remarked on the fact that the baby was hardly presentable when you girls stopped in with him to see it the other day. Nell, I urged her to get right to work fixing him up. It is wrong for children not to be kept as daintily as their father likes to see them."

How any woman that is as spiritually minded as I am and who has so much love for the whole world in her heart and such a deep purpose always to offer it to her fellow men according to their need of it can have the vile temper I possess I cannot see.

"And the sight that would please me better than anything else I have even thought up to want to see." I found myself saying when I became conscious—I hope I didn't use any of the oaths of my forefathers which must have been tempting my refined foremothers for generations and which I secretly admire Henrietta for indulging in on occasions of impatience with Sallie—"would be Ned Hall left entirely alone with that squirming baby that looks exactly like him when it is having a terrible spell of colic and Ned is in the midst of a sick headache, with all the other children cold, hungry and cross, the cook gone to a funeral and the nurse in a grouch because she couldn't go and—and he knowing that Mamie was attired in a lovely, cool muslin dress, sitting up here on the porch with us sipping a mint julep and smoking a ten cent cigar, resting and getting up an appetite for supper. I want him to have about five years of such days, and then he would deserve the joys of parenthood that he now does not appreciate."

"Oh, Mamie wouldn't smoke a cigar!" was the exclamation that showed how much Sallie got of the motif of my eruption.

"Glorious!" exclaimed Nell, with shining eyes.

I must be careful about Nell. She is going this new gait too fast for one so young. Women must learn to fletcherize freedom if it is not to give them indigestion of purpose.

"Still Ned provides everything in the world he can think of to help Mamie," said Caroline, who had come up the walk just in time to fan the flame in me by her sweet wistfulness, with a soft judiciousness in her voice and eyes. "And Mamie adores the children and him."

If one man is unattainable to a woman all the other creatures take on the hue of being valuable from the reflection. Caroline is pathetic!

"It would be robbing a woman of a privilege not to let her trot the colic out of her own baby," Sallie got near enough in sight of the discussion to shout softly from the rear.

I have often seen Cousin Martha on one side of the fire trotting the pup and Cousin Jasmine on the other ministrating likewise to the kit, so Sallie could take a good nap, which she didn't at all need, on the long sofa in the living room at Widegables.

"Ned is a delightful man, and, of course, Mamie adores him," Nell agreed with an attitude of mind like to the attitude of a body sustained on the

top rail of a shaky fence.

"He doubtless would be just as delightful to Mamie standing by dropping asafetida into a spoon to administer to the baby as he is dancing with you at the assembly. Nell," I said, still frothy around the temper.

"He'll never do it again," was the prompt result I got from my shot.

"The trouble with you, Evelina," said Sallie, with ruminative reflectiveness in her eyes, "is that you have never been married and do not understand how noble a man can be under"—

"Yes, I should say that you had hit Evelina's trouble exactly on the head, Sallie," came in Polk's drawl as he came over the rose hedge from the side street and seated himself beside Caroline on the steps.

"Well, if I ever have a husband he'll prove his nobility by being competent to make the correct connection between the asafetida spoon and his own baby," was the answer that came with so much force that I couldn't stop it after I fully realized Polk's presence and sex.

"Help!" exclaimed Polk weakly, while Nell blushed into the fold of her ruffle. Caroline looked slightly shocked and Sallie wholly scandalized at my lack of delicacy.

I felt that the place had been reached, the audience provided and the time ripe for the first gun in my general revolution planned for Glendale. I spoke calmly in a perfect panic of fear.

"I am glad Polk is here to speak for the masculine side of the question," I said, looking all the three astonished women straight in the face. "Polk, do you or do you not think that a man with a wife and seven children ought to assume at least some of the domestic strain resulting therefrom, like dropping the asafetida in the spoon for her while she is wrestling with the youngest-born's colic?"

"Do I have to answer?" pleaded Polk, with desperation.

"Yes!"

"Then under the circumstances I think the man ought to say, 'To — with the spoon,' grab a gun, go out and shoot up a bear and a couple of wild turkeys for breakfast, throttle some coin out of some nearby business corporation, send two to five trained nurses back to the wigwam, stfy downtown to lunch and then go home with a tender little kiss for the madame who meets him fluffy and smiling at the door. That's my idea of true connubial bliss. Applications considered in the order of their reception. Nell, you are sweet enough to eat in that blue muslin. I'm glad I asked you to get one just that shade."

And the inane chorus of pleased laughs that followed Polk Hayes' brainless disposal of the important question in hand made me ashamed of being a woman, though it was funny. Still I bided my time, and Polk saw the bidding. I could tell by the expression in the corners of his eyes that he kept turned away from me.

And in less than a half hour he was left to my mercies, anything but tender. Sallie took Nell and Caroline over home to help her decide how wide a band of white it would be decorous for her to sew in the neck of her new black meteor crape. I see it coming that we will all have to unite in getting Sallie out of mourning and into the trappings of frivolity soon, and I dread it. It takes so many opinions on any given subject to satisfy Sallie that she ought to keep a tabulated advice book.

"Evelina," said Polk experimentally after he had seen them safely across the street, and he moved along the steps until he sat against my skirts. "are your family subject to colic?"

"No, they have strong brains instead," I answered icily.

"Said brains subject to colic, though."

he mused in an impudent undertone.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. One of the dangerous things about Polk is that he gets you comfortable and



"Are your family subject to colic?"

warm of heart whenever he gets near you. It wouldn't matter at all to him if you should freeze later for lack of his warmth, just so he doesn't know about it.

"Polk," I began to say in a lovely, serious tone of voice, looking him square in the eyes and determined that as we were now on the subject of basic things, like infantile colic, I would have it out with him along all lines. "there is an awful shock coming to you when you realize that"—

"That in the heat of this erudite and revolutionary discussion, which an evil fate let me drop in on, I have forgotten to give you this telegram that came for you while I was down at the station shipping some lumber. Be as easy as you can with me, Evelina, and remember that I am your childhood's companion when you decide between us." With which he handed me a blue telegram.

I opened it hastily and found that it was from Richard:

Am coming down to Bolivar with C. and G. commission. Be deciding about what I wrote you. Must RICHARD.

I sat perfectly still for several seconds, because I felt that a good, strong hand had reached out of the distance and gently grabbed me. Dickie had bossed me strenuously through two years of the time before I had awakened to the fact that for his good I must take the direction of the affairs of him and his kind on my and my kind's shoulders.

I suppose a great many years of emancipation will have to pass over the heads of women before they lose the gourd kind of feeling at the sight of a particularly broad, strong pair of shoulders. My heart sparkled at the idea of seeing Dickie again and being browbeaten in a good old, methodical tender way. I suppose the sparkle in my heart showed in my eyes, for Polk sat up quickly and took notice of it very decidedly.

"Wire especially impassioned?" he asked, with a smolder in his eyes.

"Not especially," I answered serenely. "One of my friends' father is a director in the C. and G., and he is coming down with him for the conference over at Bolivar between the

two roads next week."

"Good," answered Polk heartily, as the flare died out of his eyes.

I was glad he didn't have to see the wire for I wanted to use Polk's brain awhile if I could get his emotions to sleep in my presence. It is very exasperating for a woman to be offered flirtation when she is in need of common sense from a man.

"Polk, do you see any logical, honest or dishonest way to get that road to take the Glendale bluff line?" I asked, with trepidation, for that was the first time I had ever even begun to discuss anything intelligently with Polk.

"None in the world, Evelina," he answered with a nice, straight, intellectually showing over his whole face and even his lazy, posing figure. "I remonstrated with James and Henry Carruthers both when they used their influence to have the bonds voted and I told James it was madness to invest in all that field and swamp property with just a chance of the shops. The trouble was that James had always left all his business to Henry, along with the firm's business, for a man can't be the kind of lawyer James is and carry the details of the handling of filthy lucre in the same mind that can make a speech like the one he made down in Nashville last April, on the exchange of the judiciary. James can be the governor of this good state any time he wants to, or could, if Henry hadn't turned toes and left him such a bag to hold—no reference to Sallie's figure intended, which is all to the good if you like that kind of curves!"

CHAPTER IX.

"I wanted you."

I TOOK a moment to choose my words.

"The C. and G. is going to take that bluff route," I answered calmly from somewhere inside me that I had never used to speak from before.

"Do you know anything of the character of Mrs. Joshua?" asked Polk admiringly, but slipping down from his intellectual attitude of mind and body and edging an inch nearer. "Bet she had a strong mind or Joshua never could have pulled off that sun and moon stunt."

"Do you know, Polk, there is one woman in the world who could—could handle you?" I said as a sudden vision of what Jane would do if Polk sat on her skirts as he did on mine flashed across my troubled brain.

"I'd be mighty particular as to who handles me," he answered impudently. "Want to try?" And with the greatest audacity he laid his head gently against my knee. I let it rest there a second and then tipped it back against the arm of the rocker.

"It does hurt me to see a man like Cousin James fairly throttled by women as he is being," I said as I looked across the street and noted that the porch of Widegables was full to overflowing with the household of women.

"Evelina," said Polk as he stood up suddenly in front of me, "that old mossback is the finest man in this commonwealth, but from his situation nobody can extract him, unless it is a woman with the willness of the devil himself. Poison the whole bunch and I'll back you. But we'll have to plot it later on. I see his reverence coming tripping along with a tract in his hand for you, and I'll be considerate enough to sneak through the kitchen, get a hot muffin cake that has been tantalizing my nose all this time you have been sentimentalizing over me and return anon when I can have you all to myself in the melting moonlight in the small hours after all religious folk are in bed. Until then!" And as he went back through the front hall Mr. Haley came down the front walk.

(To be continued)

The Cloverdale Courier \$1 a year,