The TINDER BOX

by MARIA THOMPSON DAVIESS

AUTHOR OF "THE MELTING OF MOLLY"

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CHAPTER III.

A Flint Spark.

THE greatest upheavals of nature are those that arrive suddenly without notifying the world days beforehand of their intentions of splitting the crust of the universe wide open. One is coming to Glendale by degrees, but the town hasn't found out about it yet. I'm the only one who sees it, and I'm afraid to tell.

When Old Harpeth, who has been looking down on a nice, peaceful, man ordained, built and protected world, woke Glendale up the morning after my arrival and found me defiantly alone in the home of my fathers—also of each of my foremothers by the courtesy of dower—he muttered and drew a veil of mist across his face. Slight showers ensued, but he had to come out in less than an hour from pure curiosity. I found the old garden heavenly in its riot of neglected buds, shoots and blossoms, wet and welcoming with the soft odors of heaven itself.

It was well I was out early to enjoy it, for that was to be the day of my temptation and sore trial. I am glad I have recorded it all, for I might have forgotten some day how wonderfully my very pliant, feminine attitude rubbed in my masculine intentions as to my life on the blind side of all the forces brought to bear on me to put me back into my predestined place in the scheme of the existence.

"Your Cousin James' home is the place for you, Evelina, and until he explained to me how you felt last night I was deeply hurt that you hadn't come straight with Sallie, to me and to him," said Cousin Martha, in as severe a voice as was possible for such a placid individual to produce. Cousin Martha is completely lovely, and the Moss back gets his beauty from her. She is also such a perfect dear that her influence is something terrific, even if negatively expressed.

"I have come to help you get your things together so you can move over before dinner," she continued with gentle force. "Now, what shall we put in the portmanteau first? I see you have unpacked very little, and I am glad of it, feeling that the night your coming—[illegible] ment for your unmaiden Basement [illegible]

tomb as Aunt Augusta Shelby stood in the doorway with reproof on her lips and sternness on her brow. "Peter and I will have Evelina move down immediately with us. James Hardin has as much in the way of a family as he can very well stand up under now."

And as she spoke Aunt Augusta glared at Sallie with such ferocity that even Sallie's sunshiny presence was slightly dimmed.

"Are you ready, Evelina? Peter will send the surrey for your baggage," she continued, and for a moment I quailed, for Aunt Augusta's determination of mind is always formidable, but I summoned my woman's wit and man's courage and answered quickly before she fairly snatched me from under my own roof-tree.

"That would be lovely, Aunt Augusta, and how are you?" I answered and asked in the same breath, as I drew near enough to her to receive a businesslike peck on my cheek. "I expect to have you and Uncle Peter to look after me a lot, but somehow I feel that father would have liked—liked for me to live here and keep my home—his home—open. Some way will arrange itself. I haven't talked with Cousin James yet." I felt white feathers sprouting all over me, as I thus invoked the masculine dominance I had come to lay.

"You'll have to settle that matter with your Uncle Peter, then, for, following his dictates of which I did not approve, I have done our duty by the orphan. Now, Evelina, let me say in my own person that I thoroughly approve of your doing just as you plan." And as she uttered this heresy she looked so straight and militant and altogether commanding that both Cousin Martha and Sallie quailed. I felt elated, as if my soul were about to get sight of a kindred personality, or, rather, a soul relative of yours, Jane.

"Oh, she would be so lonely, Mrs. Shelby, and she"— Sallie was venturing to say with trepidation, when Aunt Augusta cut her short without ceremony.

"Lonely nonsense! Such a busy woman as I now feel sure Evelina is going to be, will not have time to be lonely. I wish I could stay and talk with you further about your plans, but I must hurry back and straighten out Peter's mind on that question of the [illegible] in the meeting of the city council today. He let it be presented all wrong last time, and they got things so muddled that it was voted on incorrectly. I will have to write it out for him so he can explain it to them. I will need you in many ways to help me help Peter be mayor of Glendale, Evelina. I am wearied after ten years of the drain of his office. I shall call on you for assistance often in the most important matters," with which promise that sounded like a threat she proceeded to march down the front path, almost stepping on Henrietta, who was coming up the same path, with almost the same emphasis. There was some sort of an explosion, and I hope the kind of words I heard buried after the train were not used.

"That old black crow is a going to get in trouble with me some day, Marfy," Henrietta remarked as she settled herself on the arm of Cousin Martha's chair after bestowing a smudgy kiss on the little white curl that wrapped around one of the dear old lady's pink little ears. "I had felt that way about Cousin Martha myself at the Bunch's age, and we exchanged a sympathetic smile on the subject.

"Well, what are you going to do, Evelina?" asked Sallie, and she turned such a young, helpless, wondering face up to me from the center of her cluster of baubles, that my heart almost failed me at the idea of pouring what seemed to me at that moment the poison of insecurity into the calm waters of her and Cousin Martha's primitive placidity.

"You'll have to live some place where there is a man," she continued, with worried conviction.

My time had come and the fight was on. "Oh, Jane!

"I don't believe I really feel that way about it," I began in the gentlest of manners and slowly, so as to feel my way. "You see, Sallie dear, and dearest Cousin Martha, I have had to be out in the world so much alone, that I am used to it. I—I haven't had a man's protection for so long that I don't need it, as I would if I were like you two blessed sheltered women."

"I know it has been hard, dear," said Cousin Martha gently looking her sympathy at my lorn state, over her glasses.

"I don't see how you have stood it at all," said Sallie, about to dissolve in tears. "The love and protection and sympathy of a man are the only things in life worth anything to a woman. Since my boy I don't know what I would have done without Cousin James. You must come into his kind care, Evelina."

"I must learn to endure loneliness," I answered sadly, about to begin to gulp from force of example, and the pressure of long hereditary influence.

I'm glad that I did not dissolve, however, before what followed happened, for in the twinkling of two bare feet I was smothered in the embrace of Henrietta, who in her rush brought either the pup or the kit, I can't tell which yet, along to help her infold me.

"I'll come stay with you forever, and we don't need no men; don't like 'em nohow!" she was exclaiming down my back, when a drawl from the doorway made us all turn in that direction.

"Why, Henrietta, my own, can it be you who utter such cruel sentiments in my absence?" And Polk Hayes lounged into the room with the same daring listlessness that he had used in trying to hold me in his arms out on the porch the night I had said goodby to him and Glendale four years ago.

Henrietta's chubby little body gave a wriggle of delight, and much sentiment beamed in her rugged, small face as she answered him with enthusiasm, though not stopping to couch her reply in exactly complimentary terms.

"You don't count, Pokie!" she exclaimed as she made a good natured face at him.

"That's what Evelina said four years ago, and she has proved it," he answered her, looking at me just exactly as if he had never left off doing it since that last dance.

"How lovely to find you in the same exuberant spirits in which I left you, Polk, dear!" I exclaimed as I got up to go and shake hands with him, as he had sunk into the most comfortable chair in the room without troubling to bestow that attention upon me.

Some men's hearts beat with such a strong rhythm that every feminine heart which comes within hearing distance immediately catches step and goes to waltzing. It has been four years since mine swung around against his at that dance, but I'm glad Cousin Martha was there and interrupted us enough to make me drag my eyes from his as he looked up and I looked down.

"Please help us to persuade Evelina to come and live with James and me, Polk, dear," she said, glancing at him with the deepest confidence and affection in her eyes. There is no age limit to Polk's victims, and Cousin Martha had always adored him.

"All women do, Evelina, why not you—live with James?" he asked, and I thought I detected a mocking flicker in his big, hazel, dangerous eyes.

"If I ever need protection it will be James—and Cousin Martha I will run to for it—but I never will," I answered him very simply, with not a trace of the defiance I was fairly flinging at him in either my voice or manner.

Paris and London and New York are nice safe places to live in in comparison with Glendale, Tenn., in some respects. I wonder why I hadn't been more scared than I was last night as the train whirled me down into proximity to Polk Hayes. But then I had had four years of forgetting him stored up as a bulwark.

"But what are you going to do, Evelina?" Sallie again began to question, with positive alarm in her voice, and I saw that it was time for me to produce some sort of a protector then and there or capitulate.

And I record the fact that I wanted to go home with Sallie and Cousin Martha and the babies and live under the roof of the mossback forever. All that citizenship feeling I had got poured into me from Jane and had tried on Dickie, good old Dickie, had spilled out of me at the first encounter with Polk.

There is a great big hunt going on in this world, and women are the ones only a short lap ahead. Can we turn and make good the flight—or won't we be torn to death? It has come to this in Glendale. Women must either be weak and cling so close to man that she can't be struck, keep entirely out of the range of his fists and arms, or develop biceps equal to his. Jane ought to have had me in training longer, for I'm discovering that I'm weak—of biceps.

"Are you coming—are you coming to live with us, Evelina? Are you coming?" Answer," questioned the small Henrietta as she stood commandingly in front of me.

"Please, Evelina," came in a coax from Sallie, while the kit crawled over and caught at my skirt as Cousin Martha raised her eyes to mine with a gentle echo of the combined woolings.

Then suddenly into Polk's eyes flamed still another demand that something told me I would have to answer later. I had capitulated and closed this book forever when the deliverance came.

CHAPTER IV.

Jasper and Petunia.

JASPER, a little older, but as black and pompous as ever, stood in the doorway and a portly figure with yellow, shining face on the step behind him.

"Why, Uncle Jasper, how did you know I was here?" I exclaimed as I fairly ran to hold out my hand to him.

"Mas James sent me word last night, and I would er been here by daybreak missis, cept I had to hunt dis yere suitable woman to bring along with me. Make your 'beysence to Miss Evelina, Lucy Petunia," he commanded.

"You needn't to bother to show her anything, child," he continued calmly. "I'll learn her all she needs to know to suit us. Then if in a week she have shown suitable ability to please us both my word is out to marry her next Sunday night. Ain't that the understanding, Tuny?" he this time demanded.

"Yes, sir," answered the Petunia, with radiant but modest hope shining from her cosmely yellow face.

"I've kept everything ready for you, child, since old mas' died, and I ain't never stayed offen the place a week at a time. I was just visiting out Petunia's way when I heard you'd come and gittin' a wife to tend to us and back to you quick was the only thing that concerned me. Now we can all settle down comf'table while I has Tuny knock up some dinner, a company one, I hopes. If Miss Martha and the rest will stay with us." Jasper's manner is an exact copy of my father's courtly grace, done in sepia, and my eyes misted for a second as I reciprocated the invitation, taking acceptance for granted.

"Of course they will stay, Uncle Jasper."

"Well," remarked Sallie, with a gasp, "you've gone to housekeeping in two minutes, Evelina."

"Jasper has always been a very forceful personality," said Cousin Martha. "He managed everything for your father at the last, Evelina, and I don't know how the whole town would have been easy about the colonel unless they had trusted Jasper."

"I like the terms on which he takes unto himself a wife," drawled Polk as he lighted a cigarette without looking at me. "Good for Jasper!"

"However, it does take a 'forceful personality' to capture a 'suitable woman' in that manner," I answered, with just as much unconcern, and then we both roared, while even Sallie, in all her anxiety, joined in.

The commanding, black old man and the happy faced, plump, little yellow woman had saved one situation—and forced another, perhaps.

Jasper's home coming dinner party was a large and successful one. Two of the dear little old Horton lady cousins got so impatient at Cousin Martha's not bringing me back to Widegables that they came tottering over to see about it, heavily accompanied by Mrs. Hargrove, whose son had been Cousin James' best friend at the University of Virginia and died and left her to him since I had been at college. The profundosity of her mind was only equaled by that of her body. I must say Petunia made a hit with the dear old soul by the seasoning of her chicken gravy.

Sallie wanted to send the children home, but Jasper wouldn't let her, and altogether we had eleven at table.

Polk maneuvered for a seat at the head of my festive board, with a spark of the devil in his eyes, but Jasper's sense of the proprieties did not fail me, and he seated Cousin Martha in father's chair with great ceremony.

And as I looked down the long table, bright with all the old silver Jasper had had time to polish, gay with roses from my garden that he had coaxed Henrietta into gathering for him, which nodded back and forth with the bubbling babies, suddenly my heart filled to the very brim with love of it all—and for mine own people.

But, just as suddenly, a vision came into my mind of the long table across the road at Widegables, with the moss back seated at one end with only two or three of his charges stretched along the empty sides to keep him company.

I wanted him to be here with us. I wanted him badly, and I went to get him. I excused myself suddenly, telling them all just why. I didn't look at Polk, but Cousin Martha's face was lovely as she told me to run quickly.

I found him on the front porch, smoking his pipe alone, while the two little relics whom he had had left to dine with him were taking their two respective naps. Our dinner was late on account of the initiation of Petunia and he had finished before we began.

"I stole most of your family today," I plunged headlong into my errand, "but I want you, too, most of all."

"You've got me even if you do prefer to keep me across the road from you," he answered, with the most solemn expression on his face, but with a crinkle of a smile in the corners of his deep eyes.

I can't remember when I didn't look with eagerness for that crinkle in his eyes, even when I was a child and he what I at that time considered a most glorious grownup individual, though he must have been the most helpless hobbledehoy that ever existed.

"You don't need another vine," I answered mutinously.

"You know I want you, but Jasper's is the privilege of looking after you," he answered calmly. "I want you to be happy, Evelina, and I knew as I raised my eyes to his that I could consider myself settled in my own home.

"Well, then, come and have dinner No. 2 with me," I answered with a laugh that covered a little happy sigh that rose from my heart at the look in the kind eyes bent on mine.

I felt, Jane, you would have approved of that look. It was so human to human.

He came over with me, and that was one jolly party in the old dining room. They all stayed until almost sunset, and almost everybody in town dropped in during the afternoon to welcome me home and ask where I was going to live. Jasper and Petunia hovering in the background, the tea tray out on the porch set with the silver and damask all of them knew of old and the appearance of having been installed with the full approval of Cousin Martha and James and the rest of the family, stopped the questions on their lips, and they spent the afternoon much enlivened, but slightly puzzled.

Time doesn't do much to people in a place like the Harpeth valley, that is out of the stream of modern progress, and most of my friends seem to have just been sitting still, rocking their lives along in the greatest ease and comfort.

"You don't need another vine."

Still, Mamie Hall has three more kiddies, which added to the four she had when I left makes a slightly high, if charming, set of stair steps. Mamie also looks decidedly worn, though pathetically sweet. Ned was with her and as fresh as any one of the buds. Maternity often wilts women, but paternity is apt to make men bloom with the importance of it. Ned showed off the bunch as if he had produced them all, while Mamie only smiled like an angel in the background.

A slight bit of temper rose in a flush to my cheeks as I watched Caroline Lellyett sit on the steps and feed cake to one twin and two stair steps with as much hunger in her eyes for them as there was in theirs for the cake. Lee Greenfield is the responsible party in this case, and she has been loving him hopelessly for fifteen years. Lots of other [illegible] wanted to marry her but Lee [illegible] pinned her in the psyche spot and [illegible] watching her flutter.

Polk departed in the trail of [illegible] Kirkland's fluffy muslin skirts, smoldering dangerously. I felt Neil has grown up into a most lovely individual, and I felt uneasy about her under Polk's administrations. Her eyes follow him rather persistently. On the whole, I am glad Jane committed me to this woman's cause. I'll have to begin to exercise the biceps of Neil's heart as soon as I get some strength into my own.

And after they had all gone I sat for an hour out on the front steps of my big, empty old house and enjoyed my own loneliness, if it could be called enjoying. I could hear the Petunia's happy giggle answering Jasper's guttural pleasantries, out on the cabin porch behind the row of lilac bushes. I do hope that Petunia gets much and the right sort of courting during this week that Jasper has allowed her.

With the last rays of the sun I had found time to read a long, dear letter from Richard Hall, and though I had transferred it from my pocket to my desk while I dressed for the afternoon, its crackle was still in my mind. I wondered what it all meant, this dissatisfied longing that human beings send out across time and distance, one to and for another.

If a woman's heart were really like a great big golden chalice, full to the brim with the kind of love she is taught God wants her to have in it for all mankind, both men and women, why shouldn't she offer drafts of it to every one who is thirsty, brothers as well as sisters? I wonder how that would solve Jane's problem of emotional equality. I do love Dicky—and—and I do love Polk—with an inclination to dodge. Now, if there were enough of the right sort of love in me I ought to be able to get them to see it and drink it for their comforting, and have no trouble at all with them about their wanting to seize the cup, drain all the love there is in it, shut it away from the rest of the world, and then neglect it.

Yes, why can't I love Polk as I love you, Jane, and have him enjoy it?

I think if I had Dicky off to myself for a long time, and very gently led him up to the question of loving him hard in this new way, he might be persuaded to sip out of the cup just to see if he liked it, and it might be just what he craved for the time being, but I doubt it. He would storm and blunder at the idea.

Of course the Crag would let a woman love him in any old kind of new or experimental way she wanted to if it made her happy. He would take her cup of tenderness and drink it as if it were sacramental wine on his knees. But he doesn't count. He has to be man to so many people that there is danger of his becoming a kind of superman.

I wonder if Sallie will marry him.

And as I sat and thought and pursued the moonlight got richer and more glowing, and it wooed open the throats of the thousand little honeysuckle bugles clinging to the vine on the trellis until they poured out a perfect symphony of perfume to mingle in a halo hush from the lilacs and roses that ascended to the very stars themselves.

I had dropped my head on my arms and let my eyes go roaming out to the dim hills that banked against the radiant sky when somebody seated himself beside me and a whiff of tobacco blew across my face sweet with having joined in the honeysuckle chorus. Nobody said a word for a long time, and then I looked up and laughed into the deep, star eyes looking tenderly down into mine. With a thrill I realized that there was one man in the world I could offer the chalice to and trust him to drink moderately.

"Jasper," I said in a voice as young as it used to be when I trailed at his heels, "thank you for letting me be contrary and independent and put aloof. I have been busy adventuring with life in other places and with people not like us. Now I want a little of real living and to think and feel. May I?"

"You may, dear," the Crag answered in a big, comfortable voice that was a benediction in itself. "I understood last night when you told me that you wanted to come home alone. I can trust Jasper with you, and I am going to sleep down at the lodge room, right across the road here, so I can hear you if you even think out loud. No one shall worry you about it any more. Now will you promise to be happy?"

I could not answer him, I was so full of a deliciousness of peace. I just laid my cheek against the sleeve of his queer old gray coat to show him what I could not say. He let me do it and went on smoking without nothing me.

Then, after a little while, he began to tell me all about father and his death, that had come so suddenly while he seemed as well as ever, and how he had worried about my probably not wanting to be left to him and that he wanted me to feel independent, but to please let him do all that I would to help me and not to feel that I was alone with nobody to love me, that he was always there and would be forever and ever.

And he did stay so late that Jasper had to send him home!

There is such a thing as a man's being a father and mother and grown sister and brother and a college chum and a preacher of the gospel and a family physician to a woman—with no possibility of being her husband either. She wouldn't so drag such a man from his high estate as to think of such a worldly relation in connection with him.

I have certainly collected some phenomena in the reaction of a woman's heart this day. Did you choose me wisely for these experiments, Jane?

It takes a woman of nerve to go to housekeeping in a tinder box when she isn't sure she even knows what flint is when she sees it and might strike out a spark without intending it at all.

(To be continued)

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Treasurer's Notice

To the Taxpayers of Queen Anne's County

Notice is hereby given to the Taxpayers of Queen Annes County that I have in my possession the tax books of said county for the levy of 1915. Section 133 B. of Chapter 235 of the Code of Public Laws, passed at the Session of the General Assembly 1898 reads that taxes levied are due and payable on

SEPTEMBER 1, 1915

LAST AND FINAL SITTINGS FOR 1915

and I am now ready to receive payment at my office, in the Court House, Centreville, from 10 A. M. to 4 P. M. every Tuesday. Interest will be charged from September 1st, if not paid before January 1st, 1916.

During the month of November I will sit one day in the several election districts of the county, from 10 A. M. to 2 P. M., as follows:

Centreville, Third District, at Treasurer's Office, every Tuesday.

Stevensville, Fourth District, at Lowery's Hotel, Monday, November 22nd, from 10 A. M. to 2 P. M.

Queenstown, Fifth District, at W. C. McConnor's Store, Wednesday, November 24th, from 1 to 3 P. M.

Winchester, Fifth District, at James B. Rhodes' Store, Wednesday, November 24th, from 10 to 12 A. M.

Queen Anne, Sixth District, at D. H. Knotts' Store, Friday, November 26th, from 10 A. M. to 2 P. M.

Crumpton, Seventh District, at Bradley's Store, Monday, November 29th, from 10 A. M. to 2 P. M.

My office in Centreville will be open every Tuesday, and all other days when not officially attending my advertised sittings.

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