

BAITING THE TURTLE

By BETTY STEELE, in Illustrated Weekly.

MATCHMAKERS.

"There go the turtle doves down Lovers' Lane again this afternoon!" exclaimed Dolly disgustedly, as she set the fudge to cool on our broad dormitory window ledge. "Turtles," amended Prue thickly, as she cleaned the fudge spoon in ancient, if not honorable, fashion. "For of all stowpokes in the world, Lillian and Stella are positively the slowest!"

"He looks rawther like a turtle, I think," drawled Lillian Van Dusen of "N'Yawk." She shrugged her shoulders and threw out her hands expressively. "Little, smooth, pompadoured head, y'know—great big broad, black shoulders," her voice sounded a deep note here, "and a walk, well— She rose gracefully to her feet and essayed an awkward big man's slouching gait. Our shouts or laughter attested the cleverness of her mimicry.

"I wouldn't mind his being so slow in the body if he wasn't so maddeningly slow in the head!" cried little impetuous Dolly, slamming out one tin pan on the study table. "Here he's been coming to see Stella every afternoon for two whole, solid college years, and I'll bet my new blue satin pumps he isn't any nearer asking her than he was 1700 ages ago."

"Oh, but he's such a nice child," purred Lillian with manifest insincerity. "Every day, just as he reaches the corner of the dorm, he pulls out a nice clean handkerchief and conscientiously blows his little nose. Then he's ready to take Stella walking in Lovers' Lane!"

"Well," I blurted out, with a freshman's crudity (as I see it now.) "I don't think it's any of our business what they do, if they want to have a Platonic love affair, they've got a perfect right to!"

"Platonic!" How those girls howled! I could feel little bubbles of anger rising in me, as water does in the tea kettle, and for fear I should suddenly boil over, I flung out of the door toward my own room.

It was nice little preachermaker Prue who drew me, still protesting, back into the circle. "You shan't laugh at my darling, big, sweet freshman," she cried protectively, and, feeling rather ashamed of my pet, I subsided among the cushions of the couch.

"It is evident he is unable to bring himself to the point," Lillian was announcing in her best didactic manner. "It is equally evident that Stella is unable to assist him. There was a murmur of assent in this. "Therefore," concluded Lillian oratorically, "I urge we come to the rescue."

"We? How?"

"We'll write her a dear little proposal—on the typewriter."

"He uses a machine, I know," interpolated Prue.

Lillian went smoothly on in her velvety, mocking voice: "She will think it is from her own darling Julian, and will undoubtedly answer with joyful acceptance."

"But—" began Prue, ready with objections.

Lillian laid a cool, restraining hand on Prue's talkative little mouth. "Believe me, Prudence, he will be too shy ever to tell her he didn't write it."

"Hurray! They'll get engaged at last!" cried Dolly, flinging a soft cushion to the ceiling in glee.

"We'll give her a whole series of lovely showers," planned Prue happily.

"Sill—! doesn't seem quite on the square," I began, assailed with doubts.

"Oh, hush—!" cried Dolly, pinching my ear.

"Our dear little feminine Gawge Wash-ton," cooed Lillian patronizingly.

"I think we've got a perfect right to poke up such a turtle as Julian Ross," said Prue on the defensive. "He'll never get there without punching."

"Doesn't you've forgotten the fable of the 'Tortoise and the Hare,'" I reminded her perversely.

"Tortoise and Hare," jeered Dolly.

"What's that got to do with turtles?"

"Well, a tortoise," I began patiently.

"Is a comb," defined Dolly, with mischievous eyes, "and hair is something brought by the wind for the purpose of making puffs. Isn't that right, Miss Lillian Van Dusen of N'Yawk?"

"You girls don't care anything about literature!" I blurted out.

"Mon enfant!" reproved Lillian, giving my arm a playful tap. "Literature is no longer mentioned in polite circles, and as for your silly fables—puff!"

Lillian was my room-mate, and usually I admired her tremendously, but sometimes, as now, she made my warm young California blood boil. Indeed, I was raging at all our crowd at the moment when they seconded Lillian's words with cries of "Mama's 'Hile baby doll!" and "Back to the nursery!" and "Remember you're getting to be a big girl now, Freshie!"

Meantime, Dolly had flown to the typewriter and was noisily rolling the paper into position. She glanced out the date, April 17, 1906. "Say, who's going to compose this?" she demanded.

"Miss Freshman Betty, the authority on literature," suggested Lillian with mocking deference.

"Sure, let Freshie do it!" cried Dolly, voicing the slogan of upperclassmen the world over.

"Oh," said I, loftily unconscious of the dab of fudge on my nose, "I resign in favor of Miss Lillian Van Dusen, the authority on love. I'm judging, of course, by those fat epistles I bring her from the post-office every day or two. The blue ones, I mean, with 'Return to R. K., Jersey City,' in the corner." I was gratified to see Lillian start. She looked a little hurt, also, but I was too angry to stop then. "I guess she had to come out to our scrub western college for a year to find out if she could really love the poor man or not," I flung the words at random, not guessing how near I came to hitting the mark.

There was a moment of painful silence, then Dolly began chattering away at the machine. "Well, I've begun it 'Beloved'—how's that?" she inquired.

Prue thrust a pencil into Lillian's hand. "You write it," she commanded, "then we'll talk it over. Dolly shall copy it, and Freshie here, who's too young to give suggestions, shall run over to the post-office and mail it."

There was an interval of silence, then Dolly peeped over Lillian's shoulder. "Why, dearie, that's no proposal," she said. "You haven't said 'Will you marry me?' at all."

"Oh, really," remarked Lillian, "do you think that's necessary?"

Dolly looked puzzled. "Why, yes, I always thought so. If it isn't—why, Prue!" she cried, clutching her friend around the neck. "I'll bet I've had just bushels of offers and never knowed it. Isn't it awful. I'm going to resign my presidency of the 'Lemon Club' right away."

When the draft was finished, Dolly and Prue declared it was far too mild. "Why, it's a sort of a love letter all right," said Prue slowly, "but it might have been written by a girl to a man just as well. Of course, Julian is rather a slow proposition. But when I get his signature down at the bottom I guess it'll be all right," she decided. "I can imitate anybody's writing," she declared boastfully, "even the mummies in the museum!"

"You're hardly planning to forge a name, are you?" inquired Lillian, with worldly wisdom.

"Sure, what's the big?" inquired Prue blithely.

"Just some love name would incur far less risk," insisted Lillian, seizing the pen. So we let her have her way.

The letter was duly sealed, stamped and delivered into my unwilling hands. "Swear on your honor as a Lemon that you'll mail

it!" cried Dolly, a little fearful of my loyalty. So I swore.

But as I sped through the deserted quad I grumbled to myself. "They ought to get a good, sound shaking for this!" I stormed. Well, as it happened, they got the shaking all right, but please don't blame me for the San Francisco earthquake!

I am a little ashamed to confess that I must have slept through the first seconds of it, and possibly my capacity for sleep would have made me miss it all if Lillian hadn't awakened me with cold hands clutching my neck, and a quavering cry: "What is it, bet? Oh, what is it?"

"A real western earthquake, specially for y-you," I chattered, trying to grin. "Lie down. Won't last long."

But at the word, down bounced a great chimney knee. I felt myself sliding, and presto! I was in the parlor, a story below, amid a screaming, crazy lot of girls, some with bathrobes, some without. "Oh, oh! The quad's in ruins!" cried a girl at the window, who turned out to be Prue in her pink-flanneled nightie. "The church is gone! I saw the tower tumble!" wailed a maid in herbibbioned negligee whom I recognized as Dolly. But high and above these cries I heard the screaming of girls imprisoned in their rooms by the earthquake's lock-twisting powers. Quickly we formed rescue parties to help the frightened girls out over the transoms.

A few men students came from somewhere and battered down the locked doors. The matron appeared, fully clothed, and exerted her usual calming influence, then with one accord we flew to our rooms to "write home" about it. I think Lillian and I were the last persons to pass through the ruined quad to the telegraph office before the ropes were strung and guards stationed. For once, Lillian had no small talk. "It's so big and fierce and powerful!" she kept saying, with awe, and yet a sort of satisfaction, too. "Strange, isn't it, what a real satisfaction most of us take in a great calamity? Providing, of course, we ourselves are not bereaved nor greatly impoverished. Critical Lillian had been swept off her feet, for once."

Not many minutes passed before we learned that San Francisco was ruined, burning. All day long we heard the distant boom of dynamite with which—strange paradox—fire checked the march of the flames.

We met at professor's houses and joyfully packed clothing for the sufferers. We sped our brave college men on their way to aid the fire-fighters—all with an excited feeling that days of chivalry were back again and we were real heroines of romance. How we prided ourselves on being "same!" How loudly we urged the superiority of the college spirit in times of stress. A very self-conscious garbiness, as I see it now! But we were gloriously young.

Sleeping in the open was a lark, of course, and to a crowd of impressionable girls the fact that a volunteer student guard did sentry duty to protect us from possible harm was very thrilling.

But I—well, I was a healthy lump of a freshman, and on the third night I threw myself down on my mattress with the declared intention of sleeping immediately and forever. But Lillian turned and tossed persistently. After being awakened for the third time, my instantaneous heater of a temper began to buzz. "What on earth is the matter with you, Lil?" I growled.

"Don't be cranky, Betty dear," purred Lillian in a voice I had never before heard from her. "I—I'm feelin' rather mean, y'know, about that letter we faked up for Stella. We shouldn't have done it, Freshman."

"Gmp!" I chuckled to myself, but quite noiselessly. "I thought it was clever at the time," went on the penitent voice, "but now—well, this earthquake has just made me feel small and and mean. Freshie's dear. Oh, we shouldn't have done it," she mused on dreamily. "What are we, but mortals? What right have we to—"

"Attempt to usurp the divine preroga-

tive?" I finished cockily, just to show her I knew a few big words myself.

"Well," continued Lillian, drooping from ethical heights to a more familiar earthly foothold, "I have a feeling that somehow Stella found out who sent it, because she has very pointedly avoided me the last two days. Why, I haven't even seen her since that first morning."

"Oh," said I, with affected carelessness. "I understand they're living in Oakland since they're married."

"Married!"

"Why, yes," I went on in a matter-of-fact tone. "Roddy Hunter just came back from Frisco today, and he said they were married at his father's parsonage Wednesday evening."

"Quick work!" ploated Lillian. "Why, she couldn't possibly have got that note until Wednesday morning. That certainly was some letter, Freshman!"

I couldn't see Lillian's face, but I could fairly feel her smile of gratified vanity. "Oh, Stella didn't get the note, after all," I said languidly.

"Why not?"

"Julian rushed her up to San Francisco in a machine, early in the morning. Her folks live there, you know. They found her family all right, but their home was a wreck so gallant Julian married her right away and took them all to his father's house in Oakland."

"So she didn't get the letter," repeated Lillian. (I could tell from her tone that although she was relieved, she was somewhat disappointed as well.) "Well, anyway," she exulted, "it took an earthquake to make him tumble!"

"Oh, no," I contradicted her; "Roddy Hunter says they've been engaged for two solid years."

I waited confidently.

"What will they think when she gets that letter?" cried Lillian in consternation.

"She won't get it," said I sweetly.

"Of course she'll get it in time, Freshman." Lillian's tone was irritated and lofty.

"No, she won't."

I could feel Lillian's eyes searching my face. "You swore you'd mail it," she said accusingly.

"Did mail it," I retorted, "but I didn't put it in the local slot."

"Where, then?" Lillian's tone was suspicious.

"Eastern," said I, enjoying myself.

"What?"

"I put it in a nice clean envelope and sent it along to New York—or rather Jersey City."

"You dared!" began Lillian, raising her self on one elbow.

"I've always been taught to emulate the grave and reverend seniors," said I piously.

Lillian sank back weakly. "I—I really believe I'm glad to get it settled," she murmured to herself, quite happily. "I don't know what's come over me, but I—I think I'm going to like being—married."

I resolutely turned my back. "If we're ever going to get to sleep—" I began pettishly.

"Listen!" whispered Lillian, still in that dreamy tone of wonder.

The tramp of feet came nearer, passed us and retreated down Lovers' Lane. "Midnight, and a-all's well!" quavered a freshman's treble, and deep-throated, "A-all's well!" echoed over the quiet campus.

"Well, please do let's get to snoring now," said I, in a long-suffering tone, to forestall further sentimental maunderings.

"Good-night, Betty Steele, you dear, funny, old child, you!" breathed Lillian into my ear. "Some day you'll know all about it," she added, with innocent egotism.

I turned my back. I resolutely closed my eyes. But in spite of my vaunted will power, two hot tears crept down my cheeks, and I lay there thinking about that boy back home (in Milpitas) who was such an everlastingly slow turtle. He's a turtle yet, goodness knows. And I'm still signing myself

BETTY STEELE.