

FAMILY CIRCLE.

St. Valentine's Day.

Ah, yes, I see—
These roses, wet as with the morning dew,
And rivaling your dimpled cheeks in hue,
Convey to me
Some hint of what your happy heart has read
From out their sweetness. Nay, droop not your head—
Nor any maid
Need blush at lover's token. Since the day
That Adam saw his Eve it's been the way
To love and love again. So brief a space
It seems since I bent down my girlish face
To catch the perfume of some blossomed thing—
A sheaf of lilies, breathing of the spring
And bearing Love's own message—it were mine
To bless that day, the good St. Valentine.
And yet to you,
Sweet maid, it seems it hardly can be true
That this old woman, with her locks of snow
And thoughts that linger in the long ago,
Could ever have loved as you are loving now
While yet no care has lined your pretty brow.
But time—ah! time will teach you, maiden mine,
That even old hearts love St. Valentine.
—Good Housekeeping.

A St. Valentine Mission.

BY MISS DEKIN SPAVIN.

"Saphrona Maria," exclaimed Dekin Spavin, impatiently, as he burst in on me, without no ceremony, just as I was tying my bonnet strings, "how much longer be you going to keep Miss Van Syckle waiting in that cold—"

"My sakes!" says I, all in a flutter, as my eyes caught a dissolving view of the glitter of the gold-plated harness on the Van Syckle grays, "what's Miss Van Syckle want of me, Peletire?"

"Why," replied the Dekin, stiffly, "she's the 'voluntary,' to go with you to call on that case of distress, in Staley court."

For an instant I was breathless, and then the words came tumbling over each other.

"Lurline Van Syckle don't care no more for the church poor than she does for the church mouse; it's just another of her schemes to snare that new organist—what's his name—that awful good man, that faints away so easy."

"Which goes to prove," commented Peletire, reflectively, "that a man that's born with sad brown eyes, a long brown moustache, and an air of total indifference, is away ahead of the man who is born with a coal breaker in his pocket."

"Dekin Spavin!" says I, with asperity.

"I was saying," resumed the Dekin, "that you might be mistaken, Saphrona; anyway, Miss Lurline is all dressed in black, and she looks as forlorn as—as you do."

True enough! For I found Miss Van Syckle awaiting me, robed in black from head to foot. But such black—ah me! And she was forlorn enough, too; evidently she felt herself already in Poverty's lane.

That forlorn look was still on her face when we came to a halt, before an open doorway in Staley court, and at the foot of a long, narrow flight of stairs, that ended away up out of sight in the darkness.

Says she, as she glanced uneasily about her,

"Haden't we better get a policeman?"

"Policeman, granny!" sniffed I, contemptuously, as I piloted her up the stairs ahead of me. "Ain't no whole team, all by ourselves?"

"What's that?" says she, as she obeyed my prompting hand reluctantly.

"Why, you ain't afraid of no mortal woman, be you?"

"Of course not," severely, "but we might meet—"

"Very well, then," interrupted I, grimly, as we set our foot down on the landing, which was only a breathing spot to a second flight of narrow stairs, which were dark to begin with. "I ain't afraid of no mortal woman."

Miss Lurline sighed heavily, as she glanced from the darkness about her feet into the darkness above her head, ere she remarked,

"Just as like as not they haven't got no telephone up there, if anything happens."

"Just as like as not they haven't," returned I.

Again Miss Lurline sighed, as she queried,

"I wonder why—"

"Same reason why," interrupted I, as I began a hasty ascent of those stairs, that were softened by the deposit of ages only, "same reason why there ain't no cloth of gold on these steps, I suppose."

Close at my heels kept Miss Van Syckle, and not another word was said till we reached the second landing, and found ourselves face to face with a faint streak of light, that indicated the threshold of a door—and the silence beyond that door was the silence of death.

Tapping gently, I turned the knob, and immediately we found ourselves within a small room, the four walls of which were as white and cold as marble—as white and cold as the floor. The only chair in the room, an old wooden rocker, was draped about with a piece of an old counterpane, while the narrow window was curtained with the remainder of that same old spread. On the floor, near the dilapidated old stove, which contained a handful of embers, was a pile of shavings, covered neatly with the fragments of an old white blanket, and upon this improvised mattress, is the only part of the room containing any suggestion of warmth, lay sleeping a child of two years.

The flaxen curls of the infant, as they caught and held the rays of the sun that fell through the small window and athwart the bed of shavings, were the only color relief of that sombre, tomb-like place.

The only other article of furniture was a rickety old bedstead, occupying the centre of the room, and as spotless white as all its surroundings.

Says I, softly, as I stepped up to the side of the bed, and laid a gentle hand on the shoulder of the girlish creature, who was sitting on its edge, with heavy, devouring eyes steadily fixed on the wrinkled face, that lay propped up with the pillows.

"Have you had anything to eat to-day, Marguerite?"

The great sorrowful eyes never left their vigil, as the soft sweet voice answered,

"I—I don't know; I am not hungry. Do you think," with a quick appealing gesture toward the dear face before her, "do you think mother can see me?"

I bent over and looked pityingly into the wide open eyes, that were covered with the film of death, ere I replied, quietly,

"She is not looking at you, my dear; I just think the precious mother is so near home that she has forgotten all about earth."

"Oh!" sobbed the girl, as she clasped the clammy, unresponsive hands in her own, "and can't she hear?"

"Hear!" repeated I, with a thrill of exaltation, as I noted a faint, fleeting smile that crossed the blue lips, "Oh, yes; she can hear what neither you nor I can hear; she can hear the peans of Heaven."

"At this instant a little impatient movement of the rocker drew my attention to Miss Van Syckle, and I noted simultaneously that she had her watch in her hand, also that the baby had silently awakened, and as silently lay regarding Miss Lurline, with her great solemn, dark eyes.

Says I, hastily and in a whisper to Marguerite,

"I'm going home to get Dekin Spavin; I'll be right back."

Outside the door Miss Van remarked, tersely,

"The length of that call was a fearful breach of etiquette, Miss Dekin, and the eyes of that young one, on the floor, have given me nervous tremors—she looked just like a horrid owl, so she did."

"Poor child!" sighed I. "Poor children both, for that matter."

"Huh!" sniffed Miss Lurline, contemptuously, "if you wasn't from the country, you'd see through that; it's transparent enough."

"What?" says I, kind of awkward.

"Why," continued Miss Van, impatiently, "didn't you see that plant that stood in the window? It had thirty buds and blossoms on it—worth ten dollars at the very least. And then I don't suppose you noticed," insinuatingly, "that ring Marguerite wore on her left hand?" It looked some like a diamond, but—

Miss Lurline's sentence ended with an upward toss of the head, and again I says, says I, hesitatingly,

"W-h-a-t!"

Miss Van looked at me with a world of disgust in both steel gray eyes, as she inquired, suggestively,

"Did you ever see that creature's husband?"

"Why not?" answered I, bewildered. "But what of that?"

My, my! What a scornful glance Miss Van did give me, as she smiled a cold, cold smile, while she inquired, sarcastically,

"And did you ever hear her speak of him?"

"Never," returned I, placidly, as uncomprehending as before.

The cold smile turned into a softly, scoffing laugh, and accompanied the hateful words,

"Just what I thought; and what's more—"

"Miss Van Syckle," interrupted I, with severe dignity, as I turned up the steps of our landlord's house, "this is where I live, you know; good afternoon."

When we and the Dekin got back to Number Nine, with a pair of coal and some bread and milk, twilight was just falling, and those two long flights of stairs were doubly dark—so dark I almost fell headlong over an obstacle on that second landing.

Says I, with a shiver, as my finger tips convinced me what that obstacle was,

"I like presents dreadfully much, but if I was dead I wouldn't thank the poor board for no such a present as this."

The Dekin stooped and ran his hand along the box in differently, as he commented,

"It don't feel no worse to be dead in this, Saphrona, than it would to be dead in a velvet. The soul that is walking the streets of the New Jerusalem is not thinking about coffins."

But that tired soul was not in the New Jerusalem, quite. The faint breath still fluttered through the thin lips at lengthened intervals—but it seemed to me, as I stooped beside Marguerite, to look into the unconscious eyes, that 'twas Marguerite's weak grasp alone that held her feet from that other shore—that shore she was striving so hard to reach.

And I think the same thoughts were in Peletire's mind, for almost simultaneously he bent over and gently unclasped Marguerite's cold fingers from those other cold fingers, as he says, reverently, with upraised eyes,

"Let her go, my dear; Heaven's glories are all before her—and you are keeping Heaven's messenger's waiting."

Strange, wasn't it? But that very moment that weary soul seemed to struggle back to earth. The film covered eyes flew wide open, the thin trembling arms reached up and clasped themselves lovingly about Marguerite's neck, as the quivering voice murmured faintly, betokening,

"God bless you Marguerite—you have been a good daughter to me—when my own had all forsaken me—and I will send the Comforter—"

The arms relaxed—the "dead" eyes closed—there was one long shivering, quivering breath—the drawn features settled into a calm smile—and the weary, weary soul had reached home.

Marguerite? I can't tell you anything about it—ah me! The girl had lost the only friend she had on earth—'twas no wonder that it was a whole hour before she could think connectedly.

I will never forget how ghost-like she looked, when between sighs and tears, she drew that ring from her finger that Miss Van said looked like a diamond, and laying it in Peletire's palm, said,

"Please get as much for it as you can; I could never," with a fleeting glance toward the door, "lay mother—his mother, away in that."

Out on the landing I whispered to the Dekin,

"It isn't no use taking that ring nowhere; it isn't nothing but glass; Miss Van said so."

"Don't worry, Saphrona," interrupted the Dekin; and the next minute he had disappeared in the pitch darkness of them long, narrow stairs.

Fifteen minutes later he re-entered the dim cold light of that silent room, holding in his extended hand, four ten dollar gold pieces—and directly it flashed into my mind, that was exactly the amount given into his care, that very morning, by the men's guild.

Says I, softly, as I laid the money quietly in Marguerite's lap.

"I'm afraid we shall need at least ten dollars more, my dear."

Marguerite aroused, with a start, from the stupor that had seemed to paralyze her ever since she had parted with the ring, and as her eyes wandered aimlessly around the dreary apartment, the plant upon the window sill arrested her attention, and she says, as she arose, and passed her hands caressingly over its glossy leaves and snowy blossoms,

"Roses are expensive in the winter—would you mind trying to sell this?"

The only answer I could make was to hold out my hands silently.

Without a word Marguerite severed two of the choicest buds, and placed them, wet with tears, between the stiff fingers that were folded on a cold breast, and then—true as I live—if she didn't bend her pretty face down to every bud and blossom that was left, and leave a kiss and a tear in the fragrant heart of each, ere she placed the fancy jar in my careful hands, with the farewell words,

"It came to me a valentine."

"And," says I, impulsively, "this is St. Valentine's day again."

"Saphrona," exclaimed the Dekin, brusquely, as he turned strangely glittering eyes toward the child, sleeping so peacefully on its bed of shavings—his overcoat unwrapping warmly—

"that baby will get its death of cold here, in spite of the angels; I'm going to take it home."

And so we went out of the door once more—Dekin Spavin, in his shirt sleeves, carrying the baby, still sleeping soundly, in his arms; I, the precious rose bush.

Down on the street the Dekin spoke but once, and that was to say, briefly,

"They'll buy those roses at Cupid's fair, in the Rescue Chapel, Saphrona."

At the corner of Bedford square we parted company, and I, mixing in with the crowd of merry makers, bound for the fair, soon found myself being pushed and crowded, with the rest, up the wide stairs, leading into the chapel—that chapel was all "sweetness and light," all music and flowers, all laughter and glee.

Just inside the door, I came face to face with Miss Van Syckle, trailing her diamonds and laces after the new organist I guess his name was Mortimer—who, with his grave eyes and absent minded air, was making out the list of things contributed to the fair.

The instant Miss Lurline's steady eyes fell on my burden, she says, in softest voice that conveyed keenest dagger,

"Has Miss Marguerite's gratitude reached the point of a contribution to the conscience fund?"

"No," says I, coldly, as I hugged my treasure closer.

"Marguerite don't owe this society no gratitude, nor nothing, and this ain't no contribution; it's to be sold for the benefit of the owner."

"Really!" Miss Van's accents were as steel as her eyes.

"Perhaps you mean to auction it off yourself?"

"Why, of course," responded I, bravely, while my heart quaked within me; "I've no time to wait for the auctioneer to get around."

Mr. my! Nobody knows how I shivered and shook, as I pushed my way on through that gaily dressed crowd, and

began the ascent of the six steps, leading into that pulpit, all fixed up with flowers and flags and Cupids. I hadn't never thought how bad it would feel to be a minister, all the time, before.

By the time I had reached the little railed-in desk, and fallen into position, with that great, beautiful white rose bush extended out over the desk, in both hands, I had the breathless attention of every individual in that immense audience. Even Mr. Mortimer came to himself, so to speak, turned around, and let his solemn eyes fall on me inquiringly.

Some way I thought I must have reminded that man of his mother or somebody, for the minute he see me, he leaned back against an evergreen arch, shut his eyes, and breathed deep.

And as I stood there, facing that great smiling crowd, silent as the grave, I could feel my very hair turning white.

I Guess I'd been standing there yet, silent as the grave, only some one down by the door, called out,

"Want your picture took, old lady?"

"Good land!" exclaimed I, before I thought, as a vision of my old shawl and hat danced before my eyes, and I dodged behind the roses. "No I don't; I want to sell this valentine, so as a beautiful young lady, who ain't got nothing else in all this wide world, but a dear sweet baby, and a dear precious dead mother, can buy a nice casket, same as we bought for our dear mothers."

I didn't finish that sentence, for the looks of me, or something, operated on that new organist so that at just this instant he gave a stifled groan, and went off into one of his faint spells.

Now I ain't no sympathy with such weak, sentimental men, but I waited a minute, and by that time the vast room was resounding with cries of,

"Five dollars!" "Ten!" "Fifteen!" "Twenty!"

And would you believe it! That pretty rose bush went up to ninety dollars, and I hadn't said another word. Just at this crisis, that tall organist came to again, and come forward at the same time, Miss Van close at his elbow, as usual.

Says he, when he got near by, as he reached into his pocket, and brought out a purse, that looked as if it was netted out of a mesh of golden hair, which he laid on the cushion before me,

"I'll give you my purse for it, madam."

My! But wasn't I glad I reminded that man of his mother, or somebody?

Says I, gratefully, as I closed one hand on that mesh of gold,

"Thank you, mister; and here is the rose."

Mr. Mortimer looked at me, not at the rose, as he replied,

"I want you to return it to the lady."

"Can't," interrupted I, decisively, as I thrust the jardiniere into his nervous grasp; there isn't a bit of fire there, and it would freeze to death before morning."

"Dekin Spavin must be out of coal, then."

There couldn't nobody mistake the sarcasm in Miss Lurline's voice at this juncture, but I retorted, indifferently—holding that purse in my hand made me feel, as Peletire says, "mighty independent."

"No, Dekin Spavin ain't out of coal, neither; and if he was he'd borrow an axe and split up our only bedstead before he'd let that pretty girl freeze; it isn't that, but the health officer wouldn't let her keep the dear mother until to-morrow on any other condition."

When I paused Miss Lurline glanced up, uneasily, into the preoccupied countenance so near her own, and yet so far, and evidently she thought she could safely make another thrust, under the guise of apparent charity.

"We might get that baby into the Foundling Ward of the Good Shepherd, if its mother would put it out on the side-walk, and let it be found."

Oh, but Miss Lurline had mistaken that man by her side. Like a flash came the dark flush to his cheek, and the danger signal to his eye, and I hastened to say, half derisively,

"P-o-o-h! that baby don't ask no odds of the Foundling Ward, I thank you. Dekin Spavin will sell his best suit of clothes, and adopt it to-morrow, if Marguerite will let him."

Seemed as if that Mr. Mortimer couldn't take his eyes off me, all the time I was giving it to Miss Lurline, and just as soon as I stopped, he says, kind of eagerly—such was his interest in poor people always—

"How old is that baby, Miss Dekin?"

"Two years old to-day; and her name is Frances Mizpah or Beulah, or something," says I, looking straight into them mournful eyes. "She is named part after her grandma, and part after somebody else—President Cleveland's wife, I guess."

At this epoch I happened to notice that Kodak man, bobbing up serenely near at hand, and without no farther ceremony I made my company curtsy, slipped hastily down them steps, and as hastily lost myself in the jam.

Just as I was going out of the door—out of the sweetness and the light—who should I walk into but that same Mr. Mortimer, his overcoat on his arm and his high hat in his hand.

Says he, as he turned the battery of them appealing eyes on me,

"May I go—"

"Oh, but," interrupted I, evasively, and hurriedly, "I'm not going right back; I've got to go home first, and see that Dekin Spavin doesn't kill that child, with mince pie and pickles."

At the end of my sentence, and before that man could put forth a detaining hand, I dropped into the darkness, and went swiftly off toward Bedford Square.

You see I wanted to tell the Dekin how we could get a casket, now, with a nice satin mattress and a soft satin pillow, and fluffy satin festoons all around, to lay that poor, tired mother to rest in. And we wouldn't have to bury her in the red clay of the Potter's Field, neither; we had money enough to take her up among the evergreens and myrtle of our own little lot, in Bugbee county, and get her a nice white stone, beside.

But I didn't tell the Dekin, after all. For the minute I got into our landlord's house, I was struck square in the face with the odor of burnt molasses—and the first thing I see was them two, the baby and the Dekin, comfortably disposed upon my elegant crazy-quilt, which was spread out on the floor, in front of the open grate. The Dekin's arm was thrown protectively around the child, and her little sticky hands were tightly interlocked behind the Dekin's neck—and they were both sound asleep, with a smile of perfect content all over their two faces, not to mention no end of promiscuous taffy smeared.

So, as I said, I didn't think it was worth a while to disturb Dekin Spavin; and quietly locking the door on the outside, I sped on to Staley Court, in the shadow of a policeman going that way.

When I opened the door of Number Nine I found the room just as I left it, white, cold, silent and semi-light from the slanting rays of the electric at the corner.

In the old rocker sat Marguerite, the Dekin's undercoat around her shoulders, one of my old shawls across her lap. Her cheek was pressed against the old, frayed counterpane, her face turned toward the long rigid object beneath the window, and there were frozen teardrops, actually frozen teardrops, upon her heavy lashes—and oh, how still she was.

I hardly dared to bend my ear to her face, and when I straightened up I nearly screamed aloud, for my strained attention had caught the click of the door latch. Slowly the door swung open, and as slowly I drew back into the shadow of the dark corner—but I didn't scream, for as the intruder stepped into the dim, white light I could see that white rose bush, standing out in bold relief, against a dark coat, and I knew Mr. Mortimer had had his own way, just like a man always does, and had followed me, as I had followed the policeman.

What did he want?

Why, he didn't want nothing. At least he didn't ask for nothing. He just set them roses—them blessed roses—down on the floor, and went and dropped himself upon his knees beside that old rocker, and it seemed as if he took that whole great chair, occupant and all, into his encircling arms, as his voice fairly wailed through that tomb-like apartment.

"Marguerite! Oh, Marguerite!"