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## My First Valentine

Having Treasured It, I Came Upon It In Middle Life.

By WILLARD BLAKEMAN

I remember the first valentine I ever received. I have good cause to remember it, for it marked an important feature in my life. But this is not the reason for my remembering it. The true cause was the impression made upon me at the time, and that impression has remained with me and will remain with me so long as I live.

In childhood one feels keenly little things that would be of trifling importance in maturity. Child loves are evanescent, but while they last they are of paramount importance. And disappointments! I can remember one day when I was a boy that I was to have been taken to a show. I was away from home at the time and delayed going back till it was too late. I locked myself in my room and bawled so loud that I could be heard all over the house.

But as to my valentine. I was past the age when children are interested in getting a great number of these missives, but not old enough to discard them. At any rate, I received a valentine and was very much affected by it. The filigree work, the bleeding hearts, the attachment, within which was a beautiful Cupid with a bow and a quiver full of arrows, all conspired to thrill me with a delight that I had never felt before. And I took it for a certainty that the little girl who sent it to me loved me as she said she did in the printed verses it contained.

And how my imagination pictured her in the flesh! She had mild blue eyes and golden hair that hung in shining wavelets down her back. I likened her to fairies I had seen in picture books dressed in spangles and holding a rod with a star on one end. There was nothing beautiful that I did not liken her to. And to think that this fair being loved me—not only loved me, but had sent this dainty missive to tell me so!

There was nothing in the valentine to indicate who sent it. Indeed, I think if I had known from whom it came it would have destroyed this vision of loveliness I created. Perhaps I was a boy of more than ordinary idealism. I needed a subject for my dreams. Whether it occurred to me to endeavor to discover my valentine I do not now remember. What I do remember is dwelling upon her as an imaginary creature.

Time did not cure me of my love. I grew to manhood, but I treasured my image, though it gradually faded into a fainter form, the whole leaving a delightful memory.

When I became a man I met a girl to whom I was drawn, not only on account of her physical attractions, but because she was one of those women possessing that which we call character. There is no other word that expresses what I mean, but what it stands for is a great deal.

Margaret Stanford and I became fast friends. Friendship—platonic friendship—is what I felt for her. There was another girl of my acquaintance who affected me very differently. Indeed, she was a very different girl. She was pliant, being also a bit of a flirt, and had brought her fascinations to bear upon me. I do not mean that she was to be blamed for that. It is a woman's province to flatter men, and there are times with every man, no matter how strong, when he needs to be flattered.

Lucy Tisdale's methods were very innocent. She was lovable, not only from a certain native feminine delicacy there was about her, but she had in her a certain romance. She loved poetry and pictures. The voice in a woman is an important factor, and Lucy Tisdale had a very feminine voice. My friend Margaret's voice was rich; Lucy's was like a child's. Another difference between the two girls was that when Margaret was displeased she showed her displeasure with a quiet dignity. Lucy, on the contrary, would cast down her eyes and seem rather hurt than offended.

Why I know not, but I sometimes associated Lucy with my imaginary valentine. I suppose it was that she was childlike. My valentine, being a creature of the imagination and perfect, had a great advantage over Lucy, who was a real being in the flesh. But, being now a man, a great deal of the reverence for the opposite sex that I had when a boy had dwindled. Alas, now that I am an old man, though it has not died out, it has greatly changed. A woman is not a creature to be placed under worship.

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Margaret and Lucy did not belong to the same social set and did not know each other. This enabled me to keep them apart and enjoy the companionship of each as I wanted it. I confess that I wanted Lucy's more than Margaret's. After a hard day's work I usually sought Lucy in the evening. Her sprightliness took the tired feeling out of me. When anything troubled me I turned to Margaret. I have given a reason why when tired I wanted Lucy, but I am unable to say why when troubled I wanted Margaret. I can only say that I needed each for what she supplied.

The world is becoming more strenuous every day. Lucy's disposition became more and more a necessity with me as time went on and care increased with me. The day came when I felt it essential to have her with me all the while, and I married her. She was by no means loath to accept me, and I was very happy with her. But I missed that stimulating influence I had drawn from Margaret. When I was simply tired I got from my wife what I wanted; when I wished for some one to consult, to thrash out plans by talking them over, she failed me. She would talk with me about them, but her suggestions did not tend to put me on the right track or draw me off a wrong one.

On this account I gradually refrained from consulting her about my affairs. Whether or not she noticed the change, she never took me to task for it. I rather fancied that such matters bored her. After my marriage my old friend Margaret became quite chummy with my wife. I think Margaret found in her that which acted as a sedative with me, a faculty for driving dull care away. Margaret was a frequent visitor at our house, and at times when she was with us and I needed some one with whom to thrash out a knotty question I would do so with our guest.

I think that Lucy realized that Margaret was a help to me in this way. At any rate, when she heard us talking over some matter of importance to me she had the good sense to leave us together without interruption. And I doubt if she was ever jealous. Indeed, I had strong proof that she was not as I am about to relate.

Lucy was delicate from a girl. When we had been married ten years a want of vitality set in, and after many trips and a surfeit of medicine I made up my mind that her health could not be restored. From this time on she sank gradually. Shortly before her death she told me that she had not long to live and that there was a matter of importance on which she wished to speak to me. I assented, and she said: "Frank, why did you not marry Margaret Stanford instead of me?"

"Because I loved you and did not love her."

"Why was that?"

"Because—well, because you appealed to me as she did not."

"How?"

"Well, your sentiment fitted in with mine. Margaret is not an especially sentimental woman."

"I'm not so sure of that. You made a mistake. Frank, you should have married Margaret. She would have been a better helpmeet for you than I."

I confess I was astonished to hear my wife tell me this. I was impressed with her nobility in thus putting another woman above herself. I took

her in my arms, but gave no verbal expression of my reverence for her.

"When I am gone," she said, "I want you to correct this mistake. I want you to marry Margaret."

"Oh, Lucy!" was all I could say.

"I always believed that you needed a stronger woman than I, both physically and mentally, but I could not give you up. Now that I must give you up you must let me choose a companion for you for what remains of your life."

I told her that I had no reason to suppose that Margaret would marry me.

"She has always loved you," said my wife.

"How, then, is it?" I said astonished, "that you have permitted me to see so much of her?"

"Because I knew you loved me and that she would never try to take you away from me."

My wife died, and in time I married Margaret. I was but thirty-three years old and had the prospect of as much again of life as I had already lived. Contrary to my expectation, I did not miss the sentiment that I had thought she lacked so much as I expected. As time wore on I found her companionship very satisfying, and from the time of our marriage our joint judgment guided our affairs.

One day Margaret said to me that she had, according to my wishes, been getting rid of a lot of accumulations of letters and papers that pertained to the past and were now only an encumbrance. She had brought down some of these to show me before burning them. Looking them over, I came upon a valentine. As I continued to look at it I became impressed with the fact that it was my first valentine, the one that had affected me so deeply. I had treasured it as a boy, but when I grew older had forgotten it.

"Here is something," I said, showing it to my wife, "that gave me a sensation which can never be repeated. The image I conjured up of the child who sent it to me remained with me when I had outgrown the valentine age."

"What was your imaginary sweetheart like?" asked Margaret.

I smiled and said I did not remember; it had faded twenty years ago.

"Was it anything like me?" she asked, looking at me with a quizzical expression.

"You? Oh, dear, no! It was a child, a fairytale little thing, with blue eyes and golden hair."

"More like Lucy?"

"Come," I said, putting the valentine away. "Let us not bring up the past."

Turning from the valentine to Margaret, I noticed a curious expression on her face.

"Why did you ask that?" I said.

"Because I was the fairytale child who sent it to you."

I stood looking at her in a bewildered condition of mind for some time without speaking. Was she in earnest? Something in her expression told me that she was. I folded her in my arms. There were no words to express my feelings.

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