

Mr. Todd's Valentine

"HUSH, dear, whisper!" Mrs. Beck held up a warning finger. "Don't let father hear you; he isn't so well to-day."

She got up, and tip-toeing across the floor, softly shut the bedroom door. Her sweet face looked worried. "Are you sure it is as bad as that, Faithie?" she asked.

"Badder, mother—badder!" Faith said gloomily. "It couldn't be beaten for badness. He's a bad man."

"Hush, hush, dear. We mustn't judge him."

"Well, I must!" the girl exclaimed hotly. "I say he's a bad man! Doesn't he know father's sick, and we're working our fingers to the bones to pay him? What's he in such a hurry for? Hasn't he got farms enough besides ours? He's rich, rich—and we're poor, poor, poor." The shrill, indignant whispered words suddenly ended in a husky little sob.

Faith buried her face in the bright sheets of paper and tinsel on the table, to Cupid's dismay. His fat, round, cheeks reddened with acute anxiety, and the corners of his mouth curved down. But he only sat up straighter and held his breath, till Faith's head came up again. How funny it was for Faithie to cry! Of course some of her tears would spot the blue sheet, and maybe the gold one, too—O, my shole! but he wasn't going to cry, too. He and papa were men folks, and men folks never cried.

Faith lifted her head with a little jerk of defiance. "Well?"

"Well, dear?"

"We must say it, mother—we must!"

"We can't pay it, dear." Mrs. Beck's gentle voice wavered over the words, but she went on. "The time is almost up, and we have no money, Faith. If we had any, I should spend it for father, first for medicines."

"But I'll kill father, if we're turned out of house and home—evicted like so many Irish peasants! He's too sick to be moved, and where could we move him to?" Faith's voice rose out of a whisper, shrilly. "Sh! rest. We must have courage."

"Mother Beck, have you got any courage left?"

"Yes, dear, and something better still. I have—faith."

Cupid sat on the floor among his blocks and watched mother and Faithie hug each other a great long while. He sighed a little, softly, behind his little pudgy hand, and wondered pessimistically if there would ever be any valentine, anyway. For Faith was making a valentine for Cupid. At first it had been a secret, till Cupid's active little nose somehow sniffed it in the air. Then he was even allowed to choose his own colored paper, and make suggestions. But the present prospects for valentines were poor.

"There's one way, Faithie," Mrs. Beck said after awhile, running her thin fingers through and through Faith's hair. The hesitation in her voice was significant. "I've thought and thought, dear, and prayed over it, and there's just one way for us to keep the farm for poor, sick father—"

"O, no, no, no, mother, not that way!" Faith interrupted quickly. "We can't beg off again. I can't go to Mr. Todd again, and ask charity. I can't! I can't!"

"Not charity, Faithie, only patience for a little longer. He must be a just man, and surely he can wait. Father was always so prompt to pay him. And there's such a little left to pay—why it's almost our own home now!"

"I can't do it," Faith said shortly.

"Then I will do it, Mrs. Beck answered with gentle decision.

"No, no, NO," said Faithie.

Cupid had got up, and came over now, and stood eyeing the forgotten valentine wistfully. It wasn't all done yet. The gold angel had only one wing, and that was on crooked. And there sat Faithie, absently rolling up one corner between her thumb and forefinger. Something would have to be done. Cupid decided to try a little modest hinting.

"Do you s'pose that bad man ever had a valentine, Faithie," he asked. "Cause, you see, if he didn't ever, I shouldn't be so astonished at his badness."

Cupid looked down into the solemn little face at her elbow, and took the hint instantly. For a minute or two there was only the snipping sound of the scissors and the faint crack of the snipping papers, in the room. The gold angel's other wing was appended properly, and the crooked one straightened. It really looked like a good valentine season, after all!

"It's so lovely!" murmured Cupid, warmly. "O, what an awful thing it would be never never to have a valentine! I don't truly b'lieve that poor bad man ever had one, no honest, Faithie, and so he's had." He watched the deft, finishing touches in the little unsteady little toes made little uneasy taps on the floor. "I guess I like the gold angel the most," he murmured.

"That isn't an angel, that's a dear, little, round, Cupid-like you," Faith said, suddenly, butting him. "You're a valentine, Cupid! Mother where are my bow and arrows I had years ago? Don't you know, there was a cunning quiver, too, to hold the arrows?"

"Up in the old sea-chest, dear," Mrs. Beck answered absently.

Faith found them and hung the little quiver of arrows over Cupid's shoulder.

"There!" she cried softly. "Take the bow in your hands, so. Now you are a little valentine, your own self!"

"A live valentine!" echoed the little fellow in delight. "Where'll you send me to, Faithie? Who'll have me?"

Faith was gathering together the scraps of paper, and already the little flash of girlish fun had faded out of her face. It was careworn and worried again. She hardly seemed to hear the child's question or to notice again his Cupid's equipment. The old trouble faded her stubbornly, refusing to be answered.

There was no answer at all, unless, yes, of course she could try going to the old man and asking for more time, "begging off," she called it. But that was dreadful. What would become of her?

Bliss the girl, there was a "Lance" in it then. A tall, straight lance with honest, blue eyes that looked into Faith's and told her beautiful things. What would Lance think if he went—begging to his uncle, just as if they hadn't any more at all? For it was Lance's uncle who held the mortgage and who wanted the money right away. O, dear, how things mixed up in this world! A sick fa-

ther, a bad old man who threatened to disinherit his only heir because of the beautiful things his blue eyes said to a poor little girl named Faith! Tangled enough things seemed to that little girl just now. She drew a long, quivering breath over her thoughts.

"I believe he's doing it just on purpose!" she said to herself, cutting off the words spitefully with the little sharp scissors of her scorn. "Just because he's bound Lance shan't have anything to do with m—w—us. So he's going to turn us out of house and home, is he?"

"Faithie, where you got to send me to, 'cause I'm a valentine now, you know," persisted a wistful whisper at her elbow. Cupid stood there poking her gently with his bow's end. What was the matter with Faithie, 'cause she wouldn't answer little boys when they asked, and kept on asking? She was asleep, with her eyes open—that's what!

"Where'll you send me to, Faithie?"

"Oh!—Why, I don't know. You mustn't bother me, Cupid. I'm busy thinking."

"But you mustn't make a valentine out of me 'bout you send me to somewhere, so there now!" Faithie laughed, and cuddled him to her lovingly. "Well, you little priggish, go and be the mayor's valentine, or the president's, or anybody's, but don't tease Faithie."

The little fellow roared away, and sat down outside, on the hall stairs, possessed of a sudden, splendid idea. It grew bigger, and splendid. It took possession of his whole small soul, and sent his short legs hurrying sturdily out of sight down the road, towards the village.

"She said the president's valentine, but he ain't the president. Ho, I guess, I know who the president is!" Cupid was thinking as he trudged. "Maybe he's the vice-president, 'cause he's a bad man. Faithie said so, an' and mama said what was like bad. So I guess that's what."

His quiver buckled monotonously against his shoulder blades, and the arrows in it rattled and crowded each other. He had forgotten his hat and his curls were at the mercy of the breeze that came blowing briskly up from the river. Altogether he made a queer enough little figure, and no wonder he left astonishment and admiration in his wake.

Not so very long after this, when old Basil Todd heard his door-bell ring—once, twice, three times unsteadily—he twitched his shoulders under his soft gown, with vexation. Must a man be waked out of his napping by that everlasting—it was not everlasting—Basil Todd said—tinkle-tinkle-tinkle—bouldin' a body take a minute's comfort in his own house? Confound it, where was Marie? The rascal was at it again!

Tinkle-tinkle-tinkle-tinkle-tinkle! Marie, busy with a caller at the back, remained innocently oblivious to her duty, and the gentle, quavery ringing went on.

Basil Todd could stand it no longer. He thrust his feet further into his slippers, and drew together his dressing gown.

At the door he confronted—was it an elf, a fairy, a very spiteful out of No Man's Land, or only a breathless, round-eyed little child? By all the gods, was it Cupid, himself, then?

"They always tuck 'em in under the door, you know, but I couldn't tuck me under," apologized the elf eagerly.

"So I had to be untucked. I'm a live valentine." He laughed de-

lightedly. "Yours, you know—your valentine."

"The dickens you are!"

"No, if you please, no, I ain't, I'm Cupid."

"So it wasn't Cupid, after all. Basil Todd stood staring at him through his glasses, then over, then under them. Was it a flaw in the glass that made his eyes deepest under shaggy brows, look as if they might be twinkling?"

"If you ain't 'spectin' to 'vite me to come in, I guess I'll be goin' now," Cupid said, hinting politely.

"The dick—won't you come in, Cupid?"

"Old Basil Todd held the door wide open and bowed profoundly. The 'flaw' in both glasses of his spectacles was very pronounced.

Cupid established himself on the edge of a high chair, balancing himself skillfully, and promptly re-opened the conversation.

"Faithie did it, you know," he said cheerfully, "she made a valentine out of me. I didn't s'pose you'd ever had one before, so I came. That's what."

"The dickens, it is!" muttered Basil Todd behind his beard.

"Are you the vice-president?" the child chatted on inquiringly.

"Well, not yet, Cupid."

"Oh! I thought maybe you was, 'cause you're so bad, so vice you you know—"

"O ahead," he said, shortly, in consternation, blushing all over his little face with shame. "O, please 'cuse me!" he murmured contritely.

Now the spectacles came off altogether, and old Basil Todd's astonished eyes regarded the small, swaying figure on the chair's edge.

But Cupid, still disconcerted, was crossing one brief, black-stockinged leg carefully over the other, and the

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