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BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

BY M. CORBET-SYMOUR

Linda Latimer stood looking at the reflection of her own lovely face in the glass, and seemed dissatisfied with it. On that day of all days in her life she almost hated the delicate pink of her cheeks, the soft beauty of a pair of brown eyes, the wavy luxuriance of her fair hair, because it was just the combination of personal advantages which made Fred Sinclair resolved to win her for his wife.

So Linda thought. She would not credit the young man with the possession of any great love for her. His parents had resolved on the match, and now Fred was waiting in the drawing room for her to say yes to him.

Again and again the subject was under discussion, the girl had declared that she did not wish to be married till she was at least five and twenty, and even then she should not wish to become Mrs. Sinclair.

But to such words neither her father nor mother would pay any heed. Early marriages, they said, were always the happiest, and two young people who had known each other from almost babyhood would make an ideal married couple.

Then there came an evening when Mr. Latimer was more angry with his only daughter than ever she could remember.

"You have been flirting with Guy Luttrell, whose income is not large enough to keep himself, much less a wife," he said. "There must be an end of this, and to-morrow you will accept Sinclair. I have told him to be here early."

"I can't accept him," Linda had answered. "I have not the least love for him."

"Pooh! That will come," cried her father. "Or at any rate you will agree well enough without it."

"But if I married I might get to hate him," and then came a few tears.

"Might" might!—don't talk to me of might, and Mr. Latimer spoke with a suppressed fury unusual to him. "You are to do what I tell you, and by luncheon to-morrow Fred Sinclair and you will be engaged. Now to bed with you."

Linda had wept through a wakeful night. When it was her usual time to rise she ordered her breakfast brought to her, and then fell asleep, until very nearly the time when that momentous visit must be expected.

However, when she was dressed and taking a last glance at her face and figure in the mirror, Linda was convinced of her own attractiveness.

"Well, I must go down," and here she sighed heavily.

On her way to this meeting with the man she did not want to marry, an idea came to Miss Latimer, upon which she based a plan of action.



Her father was obstinate. Sinclair and she had always been friends. She would tell him how she hated the idea of any closer relationship, and ask him to give her her liberty by declaring that he did not want her for his wife.

"And I am only nineteen, so I need not be any one's wife yet," she reflected as she walked into the room where her former playmate waited for her.

He was a tall, well-made man of two-and-twenty or thereabouts. His face was pleasant rather than handsome, but every look and movement indicated good birth and breeding.

"Hope you enjoyed yourself last night at the Ferris dance," he said. Linda pouted slightly, thereby looking prettier than before.

"Indeed I did—very much. But when I came home father took it into his head to be horribly disagreeable; in fact we were too angry with each other to exchange a civil good night afterwards, and I wouldn't go down to breakfast this morning because I did not want to see him."

Sinclair laughed. "What special sin had you been guilty of?"

"Well, first," and now Linda had almost forgotten her fears in the growing conviction that this old acquaintance could be persuaded into anything. "It was about Guy Luttrell. Do you think it flirting if you dance rather often with a man whose step suits yours so beautifully?"

"Well, no; not a very serious case in my opinion. And you and Mr. Latimer quarreled about Luttrell?"

"That was only the beginning. He went on to say that I was to marry you and we were to become engaged this morning."

"And you?"

"I tried everything," and Linda extended both hands with a half-serious, half-comic gesture of despair. "Persuasion, argument, anger—and I even cried a little, but it was of no use!"

"Finally?"

"Well, finally I went to bed, and instead of crying myself to sleep as we read in stories, I cried myself so wide awake that I heard the old grandfather clock strike every hour till I had some breakfast; and then I made up for my bad night."

"You look pretty fit," and Sinclair smiled. "Might I know what subject of thought kept your eyes open?"

"They were not open; the tears kept them from opening," and Linda smiled charmingly. "The subject, Fred, was you and the idea of our being married. You don't want to have me as a wife and I don't want you for my husband—indeed I would rather not have any husband at all for a few years longer. Fred, you will let me off, won't you? You must not tell father that I asked you; you must say you have quite made up your mind that I am not suited to be your wife. Do that for me—for 'auld lang syne'—and I'll be everlastingly grateful."

"There was no smile on Fred Sinclair's face. He rose and walked to and fro in the long room before he said: "Do not ask me to marry you."



"Do not ask me to marry you," "My dear Linda," he said, "I cannot say what you wish. I have asked Mr. Latimer to accept me for a son-in-law, everything is arranged."

"I know. All the same you might change your mind at the last minute. You don't care one bit more for me than for other girls."

"But I do," interrupted Sinclair, smiling now. "Do you suppose now, that I regard you just as I regard May Barton?"

"Oh, May Barton is so odiously disagreeable—your aversion, I know. You understand exactly what I mean, and you will say you don't mean to marry me, won't you, like a dear, Fred?"

Her childishness reminded Sinclair so forcibly of their long intimacy, the quarrels and the makings up in many a game of nursery days, that he began to pity her intensely. "Lin," and he unconsciously used the abbreviated name she had liked best as a little girl, "you and I are to be married in two months. It has got to be, dear, and you must try no to mind very much. After all, queens cannot do as they would in these things, so why not try and submit like a queen to the inevitable? There are reasons for our marriage; take them on trust. Be only sure as my wife I will do everything I can to make you happy."

The plink color was all gone from the girl's cheeks now. She looked terrified by some unexplained danger.

"I must! There is no getting off for you and for me!" she gasped.

Sinclair inclined his head, and taking her hand slipped the diamond ring upon her finger which bound her to him as a promised bride; the next moment she lay fainting at his feet. This was their betrothal.

"It must be a love match," said the gossip, "for they have always been together from children. But to look at Linda, one would say that she was not happy."

One of the boldest put the question to her, watching her face with keenly inquisitive eyes.

"Are any changes quite happy?" was Linda's answer. "I think not. Even to be married to the best of husbands. There is one's home to leave; and it is a good by to one's childhood's days."

So on the eve of the wedding, when she was alone with Sinclair, he seemed absorbed in thought, and almost depressed.

"I know you are wretched," he said when she asked him what was amiss, "but some day—yes, I do believe you will be a happy wife, Linda, even with me for a husband. And when I can tell you—but no, I must not think of what it will be when there is a perfect understanding between us. There is one thing, however, to be said to-day. Do you remember, dear, how, when we were quite small children, we played at being married—with a curtain ring for your tiny finger and a boy

wrapped in a sheet as an imitation clergyman?"

"Yes, I remember," and a smile crept over the sad face. "More than once we acted that little play, you and I. Most children do. I wonder why?"

"I am thinking of it, dear," and now Sinclair's manner seemed more fatherly than lover-like, "and I want you to look on the ceremony to-morrow as something—he hesitated—something which is real yet not so very different to our childish play after all. I mean, that you shall be just the girl you are now, and free of me, excepting when the force of other eyes requires us to appear united. Will that make you happier?"

The grateful glance answered him; then he added,—

"Until you can say 'My husband, love has come at last.'"

Linda shook her head. "It will never come—at least I think not. But as my friend, I do like you, Fred."

...

An entire year had gone by since that marriage—a year in which Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair had completely satisfied society as to their union though, privately, they each lived their life, and met only as friends, and not too often.

One day Linda was sent for to go to her father. He had met with a serious accident and his recovery was very doubtful. It was while taking up the duties of amateur nursing that Mrs. Latimer and her married daughter grew more confidential than they had ever been.

"Your husband—I hope you know how fortunate you are to have a man like Sinclair," said the mother one night.

"I think I do know. He is very good to me."

"And yet you would have thrown it all over if you had been allowed your own will!"

"Mother," and Mrs. Sinclair spoke with cold decision. "I think it is almost always best to let bygones be bygones. Whatever I did, or wished to do in the past, is of little consequence now."

"But I often wonder if you do value Sinclair as you ought," persisted the elder lady. "Oh, I know that to the world you may seem a model wife, but I see deeper, and it troubles me. Has he ever told you—yet not let you know the circumstances of that hurried marriage?"

Just then the invalid stirred in his sleep, as soon as he was settled again Linda came very near to her mother with one hand on her shoulder.

"There was some secret then? I might have guessed it. But tell me now, tell me everything; I insist on hearing all there is to hear. No, my father will not be disturbed," this, in answer to Mrs. Latimer's glance; "he hears nothing. Make haste."

"I can put in a few words," said her mother in a low tone. "Your father was under some heavy obligation to Sinclair the elder. Money, of course. And there had been something irregular, so that exposure would have meant not only ruin but disgrace. It was to prevent that, to keep things quiet, that Fred Sinclair married you. His father was too proud a man to drag the name of his son's wife in the mud; it was hushed up, and gradually made light. But I shall always feel that these young fellows would have thought of a way out of the trouble, and have been so nice about it as Fred was."

Mr. Sinclair was sitting over the fire trying to feel interested in a newspaper when his wife appeared. Instead of walking toward him with her usual cold, impassive manner, she stood just within the doorway, smiling and flushed.

"Better news of the old gentleman, I see by your face," and Sinclair rose. "Doctors always take the pessimistic view of their patients, I dare say Mr. Latimer will be out and about before we are many weeks older."

But Linda did not come nearer, did not answer by one word.

"What is it? Why don't you—yo—look, well as if you had something to say, and did not quite know how to say it!" exclaimed Sinclair, his perplexity only increased by his wife suddenly coming to him and twining both arms round his neck.

"I have something to say," he whispered. "It is so sudden, but it is true, it has come at last, come to stay and—"

"But now, Sinclair had disengaged himself from her hold, and with his hands clasping hers was looking into her face.

"Do you really mean that you can say at last that which I have waited to hear so long?" he said. "I have kept my word, I have left you free as air. I have not wearied you with my company, have I? All the same I have felt very lonely; growing rather hopeless lest you never would tell me love has won at last. Is it that now?"

And then with head nesting on his breast, Linda told her story.

"It has come late, but better late than never," said her husband.

Last Words.

"We frequently hear of the last words of Napoleon' or of the last words of Washington' or of some other great men. People always seem to be interested in the last words of men; but we never hear anything about the last words of women. Why is that, I wonder?"

"There are no such words," replied Mr. Honpeck after he had looked around to assure himself that there would be no danger of saying it.—Chicago Herald.

THE MARRIAGE

Was Not a Girl For Me? Set in New York.

"Got anything for me?" at the girl behind the counter with Christmas torn.

"How old a girl?" was asked.

"She'll be 20 next spring, if she doesn't get married before. Doctor says she's gained in every way."

"And do you want to have Christmas present?"

"I dew, I'm goin' to marry her. May if sumthin' don't bust, and I want to make her a mighty nice present. Poor! Hanner! She jest lugs her hair and moans and sighs and gets the measles, and I want to prove her wrong."

"How would something in jewelry do?" asked the girl.

"She don't keer fur jewelry. She might buy her an umbrella. A lady's umbrella always makes a nice present."

"She never uses one, except to lean the dog or cat with. She's no use to put on style."

"An album or some book would be a suitable present."

"Yes, but she don't keer fur 'em. Bought her an album once, and she used it to prop up the leg of the kitchen stove. She's no reader, either. When she ain't workin' she likes to sit and hold hands and eat candy. I'd rather not buy anything 'till them git sumthin' she don't want."

"How would a comb for the hair do? queried the girl, as she looked about.

"She don't use 'em," replied the young man, as he fondled a ready-made elephant which could serve as a trunk. "She jest makes her hair all frisky and let's it go at that. That comb'd be used as a pin cushion."

"She could fix it for a cushion, but you wouldn't buy a comb for a young woman, would you?"

"I dunno. Mewie ar' not ain't they?"

"I think so."

"Well, that's the way with Mewie. She gits not every week or two, and it's the hardest kind of work to make her. What's the price?"

"Twenty cents."

"That's about my sugar. She kin fix it up and stand it on her back. Whenever she sees it she'll think o' me and her sotness."

"It don't seem to me that you are selecting the right thing," returned the salesgirl.

"That's 'cause you don't know Mewie," he replied. "While she has the measles she kin keep it on her pillar and pull the string and make him hok. That'll take her mind off her sickness. When she gets well she kin make it into a pin cushion or stand it on the parlor organ fur Mewie to play. I'll take the comb. He looks not so yit he looks humble. Maybe his business will melt her heart a little."

"You evidently love your Mewie very much!"

"You've hit the bullseye, and I stood by Mewie through sickness, poor, whoopin' cough and sore throat, and I'm with her four times a day while she's down with the measles. Love her! You bet your life I do, and though she's not in her ways she needs now teeth, she retards my work and is in me again, the world. Mewie your'cash and give me the comb, and sumthin' tells me I've struck it. The 'blamed thing is goin' to bring two-lovin' hearts so close together that they won't be room for ribs and vest buttons between."

"Nobuddy," answered the girl. "The average small boy's opinion of himself is none too high, but there's a lot of a small stable-boy in Chicago who's nearly as taken as the average woman whose husband kept the best nag horse in one of the many 'bigging stables' in the city, before the other day to have the horse's carriage brought to the door. A strange voice answered the call. 'Is this So & So's stable?' queried the woman.

"Yes," came the answer.

"Well, who is that?"

"Aw, taint nobuddy. Wait a moment and I'll call somebody," called the answer.

Opportunity.

"What is its name?" asked a visitor when shown the statue with its face concealed and wings on its feet.

"Opportunity," replied the sculptor. "Why is its face hidden?" "Be cause men seldom recognize it." "Why has it wings on its feet?" "Be cause if it's soon gone, and gone, cannot be overtaken."

A Job at Home.

"Oh, my!" complained Mrs. Diaz. "I never had such an unsatisfactory day's shopping."