

Acting for the Best

By Edith Nesbit

I HAVE no patience with people who talk that kind of nonsense about marrying for love and the like. For my part I don't know what they mean, and I don't believe they know it themselves. It's only a sort of fashion of talking. I never could see what there was to like in one young man more than another, only, of course, you might favour some more than others if they was better to do.

My cousin Mattie was different. She must set up to be in love, and walk home from church with Jack Halibut Sunday after Sunday, the long way round, if you please, through the meadows; and he used to buy her scent and ribbons at the fair, and send her a big valentine of lacepaper, and satin ribbons and things, though Lord knows where he got the money from--honest, I hope--for he hadn't a penny to bless himself with.

When my uncle found out all this nonsense, being a man of proper spirit, he put his foot down, and says he--

'Mattie, my girl, I would be the last to say anything against any young man you fancied, especially a decent chap like young Halibut, if his prospects was anything like as good as could be expected, but you can't pretend poor Jack's are, him being but a blacksmith's man, and not in regular work even. Now, let's have no waterworks,' he went on, for Mattie had got the corner of her apron up and her mouth screwed down at the corners. 'I've known what poverty is, my girl, and you shan't never have a taste of it with my consent.'

'I don't care how poor I be, father,' said Mattie, 'it's Jack I care about.'

'There's a girl all over,' says uncle, for he was a sensible man in those days. 'The bit I've put by for you, lass, it's enough for one, but it's not enough for two. And when young Halibut can show as much, you shall be cried in church the very next Sunday. But, meantime, there must be no kisses, no more letters, and no more walking home from churches. Now, you give me your word--and keep it I know you will--like an honest girl.'

So Mattie she gave him her word, though much against her will; and as for Jack, I suppose, man-like, he didn't care much about staying in the village after there was a stop put to his philandering and kissing and scent and so on. So what does he do, but he ups and offs to America (assisted emigration) 'to make his fortune,' says he.

And never word nor sign did we hear of him for three blessed years. Mattie was getting quite an old maid, nigh on two-and-twenty, and I was past nineteen, when one morning there come a letter from Jack.

My father and mother were dead this long time, so I lived with uncle and Mattie at the farm. What offers I had had is neither here nor there. At any rate, whatever they were, they weren't good enough.

But Mattie might have been married twice over if she had liked, and to folks that would have been quite a catch to a girl like her getting on in years. She might have had young Bath for one, the strawberry grower; and what if he did drink a bit of a Saturday? He was taking his hundreds of pounds to the Bank every week in canvas bags, as all the world knew.

But no, she must needs hanker after Jack, and that's why I say it's such nonsense.

Well, when the letter come, I was up to my elbows in the jam-making--raspberry and currant it was,--and Mattie, she was down in the garden getting the last berries off the canes. My hands were stained up above the wrist with the currant juice, so I took the letter up by the corner of my apron and I went down the garden with it.

'Mattie,' I calls out, 'here's a letter from that good-for-nothing fellow of yours.'

She couldn't see me, and she thought I was chaffing her about him, which I often did, to keep things pleasant.

'Don't tease me, Jane,' she says, 'for I do feel this morning as if I could hardly bear myself as it is.'

And as she said it I came out through the canes close to her with the letter in my hand. But when she see the letter she dropped the basket with the raspberries in it (they rolled all about on the ground right under

the peony bush, for that was a silly, old-fashioned garden, with the flowers and fruit about it anyhow), and I had a nice business picking them up, and she threw her arms round my neck and kissed me, and cried like the silly little thing she was, and thanked me for bringing the letter, just as if I had anything to do with it, or any wish or will one way or another; and then she opened the letter, and seemed to forget all about me while she read it.

I remember the sun was so bright on the white paper that I could scarce see to read it over her shoulder, she not noticing me, nor anything else, any more. It was like this--

'DEAR MATTIE,--This comes hoping to find you well, as it leaves me at present.

'I don't bear no malice over what your father said and done, but I'm not coming to his house.

'Now Mattie, if you have forgot me, or think more of some other chap, don't let anything stand in the way of your letting me know it straight and plain. But if you do remember how we used to walk from church, and the valentine, and the piece of poetry about Cupid's dart that I copied for you out of the poetry-book, you will come and meet me in the little ash copse, you know where. I may be prevented coming, for I've a lot of things to see to, and I am going to Liverpool on Thursday, and if we are to be married you will have to come to me there, for my business won't bear being left, and I must get back to it. But if so I will put a note in your prayer-book in the church. So you had best look in there on your way up on Wednesday evening.

'I am taking this way of seeing you because I don't want there to be any unpleasantness for you if you are tired of me or like some other chap better.

'I mean to take a wife back with me, Mattie, for I have done well, and can afford to keep one in better style than ever your father kept his. Will you be her, dear? So no more at present from your affectionate friend and lover,

JACK HALIBUT.'

I am quicker at reading writing than Mattie, and I had finished the letter and was picking up the raspberries before she come to the end, where his name was signed with all the little crosses round it.

'Well?' says I, as she folded it up and unbuttoned two buttons of her dress to push it inside. 'Well,' says I, 'what's the best news?'

'He's come home again,' she says. And I give you my word she did look like a rose as she said it. 'He's come home again, Jane, and it's all right, and he likes me just as much as ever he did, God bless him.'

Not a word, you see, about his having made his fortune, which I might never have known if I hadn't read the letter which I did, acting for the best. Not that I think it was deceitfulness in the girl, but a sort of fondness that always kept her from noticing really important things.

'And does he ask you to have him?' says I.

'Of course he does,' she says; 'I never thought any different. I never thought but what he would come back for me, just as he said he would-- just as he has.'

By that I knew well enough that she had often had her doubts.

'Oh, well!' says I, 'all's well that ends well.'

I hope he's made enough to satisfy uncle--that's all.'

'Oh yes, I think so,' says Mattie, hardly understanding what I was saying. 'I didn't notice particular. But I suppose that's all right.'

She didn't notice particular! Now, I put it to you, Was that the sort of girl to be the wife of a man who had got on like Jack had? I for one didn't think so. If she didn't care for money why should she have it, when there was plenty that did? And if love in a cottage was what she wanted, and kisses and foolishness out of poetry-books, I suppose one man's pretty much as good as another for that sort of thing.

So I said, 'Come along in, dear, and we will get along with the jam-making, and talk it all over nicely. I'm so glad he's come back. I always say he would, if you remember.'

Not that I ever had, but she didn't seem to know any different, anyhow.

The next few days Mattie was like a different girl. I will say for her that she always did her fair share of the work, but she did it with a face as long as a fiddle. Only now her face was all round and dimply, and like a child's that has got a prize at school.

On Wednesday afternoon she said to me, 'I'm going to meet Jack, and don't you say a word to the others about it, Jane. I'll tell father myself when I come back, if you'll get the tea like a good girl, and just tell them I've gone up to the village.'

'I don't tell lies as a rule, especially for other people,' I says; 'but I don't mind doing it for you this once.'

And she kissed me (she had got mighty fond of kissing these last few days), and ran upstairs to get ready. When she come down, if you'll believe me, she wasn't in her best dress as any other girl would have been, but she had gone and put on a dowdy old green and white delaine that had been her Sunday dress, trimmed with green satin piping, three years before, and the old hat she had with all the flowers faded and the ribbons crumpled up, that was three year old too, and the very one she used to walk home from church with him on Sundays in. And her with a really good blue poplin laid by and a new bonnet with red roses in it, only come home the week before from Maidstone.

She come through the kitchen where I was setting the tea, and she took the key of the church off the nail in the wall. Our farm was full a mile from the village, and half way between it and the church. So we kept one key, and Jack's uncle, who was the sexton, he had the other.

'What time was you to meet Jack?' I says.

'He didn't say,' said she; 'but it used to be half-past six.'

'You're full early,' says I.

'Yes,' she says, 'but I've got to take the butter down to Weller's, and to call in for something first.'

And, of course, I knew that she meant that she had to call in for that note at the church.

Minute she was out of the way, I runs into the kitchen, and says to our maid--

'Poor Mrs. Tibson's not so well, Polly. I'm going over to see her. Give the men their tea, will you? there's a good girl.'

And she said she would. And in ten minutes I was dressed, and nicely dressed too, for I had on my white frock and the things I had had at a girl's wedding the summer before, and a pair of new gloves I had got out of my butter-money.

Then I went off up the hill to the church after Mattie, even then not making up my mind what I was going to do, but with an idea that all things somehow might work together for good to me if I only had the sense to see how, and turn things that way.

As I come up to the church I was just in time to see her old green gown going in at the porch, and when I come up the key was in the door, and she hadn't come out. Quick as thought, the idea come to me to have a joke with her and lock her in, so she shouldn't meet him, and next minute I had turned the key in the lock softly, and stole off through the church porch, and up to the ash copse, which I couldn't make a mistake about, for there's only one within a mile of the church.

Jack was there, though it was before the time. I could see his blue tie and white shirt-front shining through the trees.

When I locked her in I only meant to have a sort of joke--at least, I think so,--but when I come close up to him and saw how well off he looked, and the diamond ring on his fingers, and his pin and his gold chain, I thought to myself--

'Well, you go to Liverpool to-morrow, young man! And she ain't got your address, and, likely as not, if you go away vexed with her, you won't leave it with your aunt, and one wife is as good as another, if not better, and as for her caring for you, that's all affectation and silliness--so here goes.'

He stepped forward, with his hands held out to me, but when he saw it was me he stopped short.

'Why, Miss Jane,' he said, 'I beg your pardon. I was expecting quite a different person.'

'Yes, I know,' I says, 'you was expecting my cousin Mattie.'

'And isn't she coming?' he asks very quick, looking at me full, with his blue eyes.

'I hope you won't take it hard, Mr. Halibut,' says I, 'but she said she'd rather not come.'

'Confound it!' says he.

'You see,' I went on, 'it's a long time since you was at home, and you not writing or anything, and some girls are very flighty and changeable; and she told me to tell you she was sorry if you were mistaken in her feelings about you, and she's had time to think things over since three years ago; and now you're so well off, she says she's sure you'll find no difficulty in getting a girl suited to your mind.'

'Did she say that?' he said, looking at me very straight. 'It's not like her.'

'I don't mean she said so in those words, or that she told me to tell you so; but that's what I made out to be her mind from what she said between us two like.'

'But what message did she send to me? For I suppose she sent you to meet me to-day.'

Then I saw that I should have to be very careful. So to get a little time I says, 'I don't quite like to tell you, Mr. Halibut, what she said.'

'Out with it,' says he. 'Don't be a fool, girl!'

'Well, then,' I says, 'if it must be so, her words were these: "Tell Jack," she says, "that I shall ever wish him well for the sake of what's past, but all's over betwixt him and me, and--"'

'And what,' says he.

'There wasn't much besides,' says I.

'Good God, don't be such an idiot!' and he looked as if he could have shaken me.

'Well, then, if you must have it,' says I, 'she says, "Tell Jack there's at least one girl I know of as would make him a better wife than I should, and has been thinking of him steady and faithful these three years, while I've been giving my mind to far other things."'

'Confound her!' says he, 'little witch. And who is this other girl that she's so gracious to hand me over to?'

'I don't want to say no more,' says I. 'I'm going now, Mr. Halibut. Good-bye.'

For well I knew he wouldn't let me go at that.

'Tell me who it is,' says he. 'What! she's not content with giving me the mitten herself, but she must insult me and this poor girl too, who's got more sense than she has. Good Heavens, it would serve her right if I took her at her word, and took the other girl back with me.'

He was walking up and down with his hands in his pockets, frowning like a July thunderstorm.

'Wicked, heartless little--but there, thank God! all women aren't like her. Who's this girl that she's tried to set me against?'

'I can't tell you,' says I.

'Oh! can't you, my girl? But you shall.'

And he catches hold of both my wrists in his hands.

'Leave me go!' I cried, 'you're hurting me.'

'Who is it?'

I was looking down my nose very straight, but when he said that, I just lifted my eyes up and looked at him, and dropped them.

I've always practised looking like what I meant, or what I wanted people to think I meant--sort of matching your looks and words, like you match ribbon and a bit of stuff.

'So you're the girl, are you?' he cries. 'And she thought to put you to shame before me with her messages? Look here, I'm well off. I'm going to Liverpool to-night, and back to America next week. I want to take a wife with me, and she says you have thought of me while I've been away. Will you marry me, Jane?'

I just looked at him again, and he put his arm round me and gave me a good kiss. I had to put up with it, though I never could see any sense in that sort of stuff. Then we walked home together, very slow, his arm round me.

I daresay some people will think I oughtn't to have acted so, taking away another girl's fellow. But I was quite sure she would get plenty that would play love in a cottage with her, and she did not seem to appreciate her blessings in getting a man that was well off, and I didn't see how it could be found out, as he was going away next day.

Now, it would all have gone as well as well if I had had the sense to offer to see him off at the station, and I ought to have had the sense to see him well out of the place. But we all make mistakes sometimes. Mine was in saying 'Good-bye' to him at the corner of the four-acre and going home by myself, leaving him with three-quarters of an hour for 'Satan to find some mischief still for idle hands to do' in.

I said 'Good-bye' to him, and he kissed me, and gave me the address where to write, and told me what to do.

'For I shan't have no truck with your uncle,' says he. 'I marries my wife, and I takes her right away.'

It wasn't till I was going up the stairs, untying my bonnet-strings as I went, and smoothing out the ribbons with my finger and thumb, for it was my best, that it come to me all in a minute that I had left Mattie locked up in that church. It was very tiresome, and how to get her out I didn't

know. But I thought maybe she would be trying some of the other doors, and I might turn the key gently and away again before she could find out it was unlocked.

So up to the church I went, very hot, and a setting sun, and having had no tea or anything, and as I began to climb the hill my heart stood still in my veins, for I heard a sound from the church as I never expected to hear at that time of the day and week.

'O Lord!' I thought, 'she's tried every other way, and now she's ringing the bell, and she'll fetch up the whole village, and what will become of me?'

I made the best haste I could, but I could see more than one black dot moving up the hill before me that showed me folks on their way home had heard the bell and was going to see what it meant. And when I got up there they were trying the big door of the church, not knowing it was the little side one where the key was, and Jack, he come up almost the same moment I did, and I knew well enough he had come to get that note out of her prayer-book for fear some one else should see it.

'Here, I've got the key in my pocket,' says he, and with that he opened the door, the bell clang, clang, clanging from the tower all the time like as if the bellringer was drunk and had got a wager on to get more beats out of the bell in half an hour than the next man.

Whoever it was that was ringing the bell--and I could give a pretty good guess who it was--didn't seem to hear us coming, and they went up the aisle and pulled back the red baize curtain that hides the bottom of the tower where the ringers stand on Sundays, and there was Mattie with her old green gown on, and her hair all loose and down her back with the hard work of bellringing, I suppose, and her face as white as the bald-faced stag as is painted on the sign down at the inn in the village. And directly she saw Jack, I knew it was all over, for she let go the rope and it swung up like a live thing over our heads, and she made two steps to Jack and had him round the neck before them all.

'O Jack!' she cried, 'don't look like that.'

I came to fetch your letter, and somebody locked me in.'

Jack, he turned to me, and his face was so that I should have been afraid to have been along of him in a lonely place.

'This is your doings,' says he, 'and all that pack of lies you told me was out of your own wicked head.'

He had got his arm round her, and was holding on as if she was something worth having, instead of a silly girl in a frock three year old.

'I don't know what you mean, I'm sure,' I said; 'it was only a joke.'

'A joke!' says he. 'Lies, I call it, and I know they're lies by the very touch of her in my arm here.'

'Oh, well!' I said, 'if you can't take joking better than this, it's the last time I'll ever try joking with you.'

And I walked out of the church, and the other folks who had run up to see what was the matter come out with me. And they two was left alone.

I suppose it was only human nature that, as I come round the church, I should get on the top of a tombstone and look in to see what they was doing. It was the little window where a pane was broken by a stone last summer, and so I heard what they was saying. He was trying to tell her what I had told him--quite as much for her own good as for mine, as you have seen; but she didn't seem to want to listen.

'Oh, never mind all that now, Jack,' she says, with arms round his neck. 'What does it matter about a silly joke now that I have got you, and it's all right betwixt us?'

I thought it my duty to go straight home and tell uncle she was up in the church, kissing and cuddling with Jack Halibut; and he took his stick and started off after her.

But he met them at the garden gate, and Jack, he came forward, and he says--

'Mr. Kenworthy, I have had hard thoughts of you this three year, but I see you was right, for if I had never gone away, I should never have been able to keep my little girl as she should be kept, and as I can now, thanks

be! and I should never have known how dear she has loved me this three year.'

And uncle, like the soft-hearted old thing he is, he holds out his hands, and he says, 'God bless you, my boy, it was for your own good and hers.'

And they went in to supper.

As for me, I went to bed. I had had all the supper I wanted. And uncle has never been the same to me since, though I'm sure I tried to act for the best.