

The  
Sentimental  
Story  
Of a Lady

By  
Mazo de la  
Roche

*Who Discovered  
That Half-Past Fifty  
Is Not Too Late  
For Sentiment*

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**T**he time that she had so long been dreading had come at last. For so long it had been just ahead of her, just leering round the corner, that she had become accustomed to the thought of it, had almost ceased to believe in its inevitability. Now it was no longer round the corner but standing on her doorstep hammering on the knocker, clanging at the bell.

Now, turn her head this way or that, she could not avoid seeing it. She was at the end of her tether. She had only six shillings in the world.

For years there had been that charming little Queen Anne house in Westminster where she had lived with her two maids and her Skye terrier, Mops. Then she had let one of the maids go, and there had followed the period of one servant and Mops. When the time came when she could no longer support such an establishment, she had moved into a nice little flat in Ebury Street and had got along with the help of a woman by the day. That had lasted two years. Then her dividends had still further declined. Mops, too, had declined and died. She had moved into two rooms, quite pleasant ones with a southern exposure, and done her own work. That had lasted for three years, during which time all her friends had seemed to lose sight of her, and her hair had gone quite gray.

At the end of the three years her resources, which she believed to have dwindled as much as possible, suddenly collapsed still further, almost reaching the disappearing point. Now her income was not sufficient for her to live on. Every now and again she had to draw on her capital. She could not keep the two rooms, so she rented a small dingy one above a second-hand bookshop owned by a Mr. Bagshot. She had lived here just eighteen months, but she was very adaptable and had become so used to the life that she felt that she had lived in the small room in the shabby street for years.

Mr. Bagshot was a handsome old man with an invalid wife. Ethel Maynard was just the quiet sort of tenant they had been looking for. She was a lady, and they appreciated that. She was gracious, and she was cheerful. They often said to each other that she was like a sunbeam in the house. Every day she went into Mrs. Bagshot's room and chatted cheerfully with her for a little while, but she never talked of her past.

She had never cared much for reading. Her earlier life had been filled with other things—hunting, dogs, theatres, dances, charitable affairs, and visits abroad. Even when all these things were taken from her she had not turned to reading. It was an undiscovered pleasure. She had walked in the parks or strolled through the shops, where she had occasional glimpses of friends of far-off days; she had done fancy work and had gone to sit in the church to listen to the organist practice.

But from the time she had come to live with the Bagshots she had taken to reading books. She read all sorts of books—novels, biography, travel. As soon as she had finished with one lot Mr. Bagshot would supply her with another. She kept two or three going at a time. She found that she could get through more books in this way, and the change of print rested her eyes. She

wondered if she could ever read enough to make up for not having begun earlier in her life. And here was a whole shopful of books at her command.

Every time she appeared in the shop with an armful of books to exchange, she brought a feeling of exhilaration to Mr. Bagshot, as if she were an affluent customer, and he doing a good business. A tranquil radiance seemed to enter with her. She had a beautiful figure with full flowing lines, aristocratic features, deep blue eyes, and a color that had once been like the wild rose but had now become somewhat pale, for she did not feed herself too well. She had a beautiful smile with no sadness in it—just a happy parting of the lips and a pleased lighting of the whole face, as a child's face lights. Yet she was fifty-eight and looked her years.

Now Ethel Maynard had only six shillings in the world, and she gravely considered what she should do with it. She was a little behind with her rent, but her few bits of furniture, when they were sold, would make that up. The Bagshots must lose nothing. It was a bright Sunday afternoon in February, there was a stirring of spring in the air, and she decided that she would like to go out to tea in some luxurious hotel such as she had not entered for years.

She had an impersonal feeling about herself, a kind of tolerant pity; she thought she would like to give this poor old creature a little treat before the end came! Her lips parted in her gracious smile, and she took the six shillings out of her purse and laid them on the table in front of her. A bright new half-crown, a florin, a shilling, and a sixpence. There was enough for a luxurious tea, a tip for the waiter, and her bus fare. A little thrill of anticipation ran through her. She would go to a hotel where there was a good orchestra. She would hear beautiful music, be in a crowd of well-dressed people once more. She had not had anything pleasant to look forward to for so long that her spirits, which had been sunk much deeper in melancholy than she had realized, rose tremulously, like a poor caged bird offered a moment's freedom.

She shrank from facing the world she had so long left behind, but she shrank still more from sitting alone in her little room waiting for the moment when she must acknowledge that she had nothing left to live on. Now that she had only six shillings left, she wanted nothing so much as to get rid of them. She hated the thought of trying to eke them out over another few days.

She looked at the clock and saw that she must dress at once if she was to reach the Melchester in good time for tea. She took out her best clothes, which only a year ago would have looked grotesquely old-fashioned but

which now appeared almost chic, brushed them, and laid them on the bed. She took off her knitted jumper and at the washstand washed her face, her shapely shoulders, and arms with water and cheap soap, and dried them on a worn towel in one corner of which her mother's monogram was woven. She brushed out her long wavy hair and arranged it. It almost arranged itself, for it had been twisted into these same curves and coils for almost forty years.

She was pleased with her reflection and experienced a moment's wonder that she could have such an air and yet be so absolutely down-and-out. She stopped at the door of the Bagshot sitting room to tell them that she was going out to tea. They looked at her with expressions of astonishment and pleasure. Once more she brought to Mr. Bagshot the illusion of well-being, the feeling that he was doing a prosperous business. He escorted her through the shop and bowed her out into the street.

**S**he had a moment's panic when she found herself inside the glittering doors of the Melchester. The liveried attendants and brilliant lights confused her, even frightened her. What was she doing here? Oh, what was she doing here! This was no place for her. Surely it was no place for any one who had only six shillings in the world!

But the attendant bowed her on toward the lounge. She gathered herself together and moved with dignity past the orchestra and threaded her way among the crowded tables. The air was vibrating with music, a brilliant golden light was diffused from the ceiling, the soft carpet glowed before her azaleas bloomed about the pillars. She walked on and on till a waiter indicated a small table standing in front of a couch against the wall. She sank into it with a gasp. She felt that she could not have walked a step farther.

It was a curious thing that her entrance into the lounge had made almost as deep an impression on the people there as its atmosphere had made on her. Every head turned to look at her. She had entered, gracious, hesitating, like a being from other times. Yet in that flattering light her clothes did not look shabby, her worn ermine scarf and her way of wearing it were perfect. Her walk alone and the carriage of her head set her apart from the other women. And the expression of her face, at once magnanimous and trustful, made every man look at her a second time, with a wistful feeling as for something he had lost or never had.

An agreeable young waiter placed the menu before her, glancing deferentially into the face whose expression was so different from the faces

to which he was accustomed. She ordered buttered toast, China tea, and some iced cakes. She drew a cigarette from her case and lighted it. Now she felt more at ease and looked confidently about the room, anxious to get full value for her last six shillings, to miss no item of luxury and ease.

The music vibrated sensuously through her nerves, the flowers delighted her eyes. Like an explorer returned from long years of traveling over dreary wastes, she felt restored to her own. She smiled, and those who were still watching her were conscious of an extraordinary charm about her. Her face was much less bold, less hard, than the faces of the other women, and there was about it a dignity which none of them possessed.

**T**hree people on a couch opposite were immensely interested in her, and after a little she began to notice them. There were two thin, smart young women and a mediocre youth with a flat face and pudgy hands. He was perched on the arm of the couch, his short legs dangling awkwardly. All three were making fun of some absent fourth person. It seemed that they could never have enough of this gibing and sneering. Each in turn mimicked some saying or gesture of hers, while the other two would double up with laughter, the youth almost rolling from his perch. Frequently he cast a sidelong glance at Ethel Maynard, as though to claim her admiration and approval.

On her part she wished that the three might not have been there. But for them she would have been almost isolated and could have enjoyed the scene before her and her deliciously buttered toast in peace. She had forgotten that such toast could be—delicate, piping hot in its silver dish, spread so thickly with good butter that it oozed through to the other side. And the China tea and the tray of cakes and French pastries that were so difficult to choose from! The young waiter was not impatient at her delay in making her choice. He assisted her with gently murmured advice. Seldom, he thought, did a lady of her age show such a childlike disregard for her figure.

With her third cup of tea she lighted another cigarette and relaxed against the deep cushions of the couch. She would not let her mind look forward into her future—if future she had any—but persuaded it to go back into the past. She saw herself thirty years ago at a dance in this very spot, when the old mansion which had been torn down to make way for the Melchester still stood in its strength and grandeur. What a lovely gown she had worn that night! Men had crowded round her asking for dances, exchanging the badinage of the day. She recalled some of their faces and

tried to recall what had become of them. Most of them had been killed in the War. All had long ago passed out of her life.

She wondered why she had not married. Perhaps it had been that she had liked them all so well, had been so happy in her own life, in her own home, and had desired no hampering bonds. Perhaps it was that she had desired too much, that their light and restrained love-making had roused no response in her. She could have loved Freddy Bland, she thought, but he had been five years younger than she, and it had been necessary for him to find a rich wife. Nothing more had passed between them than a special kind of glowing friendship. Something of that glow came back to her at the thought of him, tall, fair, with that laugh that always made her laugh, too.

A cackle came from the youth opposite, and her slow blue eyes moved to a scornful contemplation of his person. He beamed across at her, taking her into his confidence.

“And then she said: ‘Oh, my dear, it’s the same old complex! I guess I’m just made that way!’ ”

He wriggled on the arm of the couch, and his companions gave voice to admiring laughter.

Ethel Maynard closed her eyes and sank into thought.

Now, try as she would, she could not quite push the ugly present and still uglier future out of her thoughts. What was to become of her? What did become of middle-aged women who had nothing to live on and could find nothing to do? She had tried, indeed she had tried hard, to find something to do. There was almost no kind of work she would not have undertaken—if only she could have found it!

She recalled some of her efforts, the advertisements she had answered, the agencies where she had registered for employment. No one had wanted her. She had had no training. What education she had was of no use to her. She had tried to get a position as mannequin, to exhibit clothes for the middle-aged, but her lines were too flowing for these days. She could not have got herself into the costumes. Several opportunities offered for small enterprises with other women, but always more capital was needed than she had. She could not get work as governess or nurse, for she knew nothing about children.

nce she had applied to a friend of the old days, a man of sixty-five who held a position of power in the financial world; but he had just married a film star



And could talk of nothing else. He promised to let her know if anything turned up for her, but she never heard from him. This discouraged her.

She read of women who sealed up their windows and turned on the gas in such circumstances, but it seemed a messy thing to do, and she so disliked the smell of gas that the thought of being forced to take gulps of it, until she could take no more, was repellent. The thought of suicide in any form was repellent. She could picture herself washing dishes in an almshouse, but she could not picture herself taking her own life.

What a waste of time such thoughts were! Here she was in the very lap of luxury thinking such ignoble thoughts! She shook them from her strongly, as a large dog shakes the water from him as he emerges from the sea. She emptied the teapot and turned her eyes toward the orchestra. According to a fad of the time they were playing dance music that had been popular years ago. Now came a slow, lovely waltz, one that she remembered dancing with Freddy Bland in the house that had once stood here. It came so suddenly into her consciousness, drawing her from the dark thoughts that had oppressed her, that she felt dazed. She scarcely knew where she was nor who she was. Was she a girl again? Her large eyes filled with tears. Through her tears her gaze moved down the room and rested at last on the figure of the head waiter standing by a pillar mounded with azaleas.

He had a fine figure and an air of distinction. He looked infinitely more a gentleman, she thought, than the young man perched on the arm of the couch opposite, still giggling with his friends, still mimicking the absent one!

The waiter turned his head and looked in her direction. Something in the movement troubled her. She knitted her brows and looked hard at him. A man went up to him and spoke, and, in answering, he smiled. Surely she knew that smile! He was coming toward her down the room.

He glanced at her as he passed, then hesitated. He came to her side.

“Would Madam like anything more?”

“Nothing more—thank you.”

“Everything was quite all right?”

He looked searchingly into her face. An electric shock passed between them.

“All right!” she gasped. “No, no, no, everything is all wrong! You are Freddy Bland, aren’t you? Oh, how terrible this is!”

Pity for herself was submerged by a great wave of compassion for him. She did not know how to face him, but she could not look away. His gray eyes looked steadily into hers. The three on the couch opposite were staring at them, open-mouthed. Again and again the orchestra repeated phrases of the old waltz. She was dazed. She was frightened. "My poor old brain," she thought, "is simply going to pieces!" She would not have been surprised now if Freddy Bland had asked her for a dance.

But he only said in his quiet deep voice: "I am going off duty now. I shall be outside the door in five minutes. Will you meet me there?"

She stared at him blankly, but her lips formed an affirmative. She bowed her head and pressed her hands together. She could not watch him go down the room—a waiter—past these insufferable people!

Now she saw that the room had become almost empty. The music had stopped, and the players were putting away their instruments. The young man on the couch opposite gave her a long, admiring look as she rose in her height, paid her bill, laid down her last shilling as a tip, and drew on her gloves.

A sense of tragedy that she had never known before dragged at her limbs as she moved slowly toward the door. Outside it was almost dark and beginning to drizzle.

He was waiting for her beside the door of a car.

"I wonder," he said, "if you will mind coming for a little drive with me? It has been so long since we have met. Things have changed with me, as you see. I don't know how you will feel about going driving with a waiter." A smile flickered across his face. He looked searchingly into her eyes.

"I should like to talk with you," she murmured, and he helped her into the car.

As they glided over the wet pavement, the lights coming out in the park, and above it a dusky yellow sunset cloud, she gave him a swift sidelong glance. She had said she would like to talk to him, but what was there to say? There was nothing in his bearing that asked for sympathy. Almost certainly he would shrink from that. Yet she had a feeling of gladness that they had been thrown together again in such ironically luxurious surroundings. She must say something.

“What a nice car!”

“Yes. Not bad,” he agreed.

“I suppose—of course, it belongs to the hotel.”

“Oh, no. It’s mine.”

“Yours!”

“Yes. Why not?”

“But—I thought—”

He looked round at her, puzzled.

“Then—things are not so—well, your circumstances—”

He laughed comfortably. “Why, I can’t complain. I’m well placed. It’s a good job.”

Her expression was almost horrified, but she said quietly: “I am so glad you like it. I was afraid—”

“Afraid of what?”

She spoke almost sharply. “Why, Freddy, you know very well that it’s not the sort of position I had expected to find you in!”

“I suppose it does seem odd to you. But when I consider my friends and the fix most of them are in, I feel fortunate. Military and naval men eking out a pension in the country! Fellows in business expecting to crash at any moment! Some with nothing at all to live on.”

“I had no idea the salary was good.” She felt more and more mystified.

They were in a quiet street now. The car moved more quickly.

“Oh, the salary’s not much. It’s the tips.”

“The tips! Oh, Freddy, how awful!”

He laughed, that gay infectious laugh of his which came back to her like the brightness of morning sunshine from the past. She could not help laughing, too.

“I can imagine,” he said, “how you feel about such things in your position. But women like you don’t really know anything about life and how it is changing. You cherish the same ideas you held thirty years ago. You’ve never roughed it, you see. You’ve had no experience of its ups and downs.”

“No experience of its ups,” she said. “Just its downs!”

Something in her voice startled him. “Aren’t things going well with you?” he asked sympathetically.

“Don’t let us talk about me. I want to hear more of you. You can’t think what a relief it is to me to find—to feel—that you like your—job.”

“But I’m frightfully sorry that you have had bad luck. Did you marry, Ethel?”

“No. But you did, didn’t you?”

“Yes. And was divorced long ago. She’s dead.”

“Where do you live?”

“Oh, I’ve a couple of quite decent rooms. I’d like to show them to you. But perhaps—”

“I’d love to see them, but—”

“Of course, I’m not in your set now. I’m not a proper sort of acquaintance for you, I know. But still—for old times’ sake—I say, Ethel, do you remember some of the dances in the old house, just where the hotel stands?”

“Meeting you has brought it all back.”

“Will you really come to see my rooms?”

“I’d like nothing so well. But if you knew all about me, perhaps you wouldn’t think *me* a proper sort of acquaintance any more.”

There was in her voice a little tremor, either of laughter or tears, he could not decide which.

“What about you?” There was tenderness in his tone.

“Why, I live in one dingy little room above a dingy second-hand bookshop in a horrible street, and the money I paid for my tea tonight is the very last I have in the world!”

With a jerk he brought the car to a standstill at the side of the curb.

“You’ve knocked me flat,” he said. “I can’t go on.”

After a silence she said, “I suppose it is a surprise to you, after thinking of me as always going on in the same old way.”

“A surprise! That scarcely expresses it. I’ve always thought of you as being so beautifully safe and sheltered! And you still have the look. No one

in that lounge had such a look of distinction and well-being as you.”

“And none of the men equaled you, Freddy!”

“Oh, I’ve never had really hard luck. My worst piece of luck was my marriage. We should have married, you know, Ethel.”

“Yes. I’ve sometimes thought that.”

“You know, I was pushed into my marriage.”

“Perhaps—but you never loved me, Freddy.”

He gave a half-petulant grunt and started the car. She felt herself in a dream from which she would awake in her room above the bookshop, with her six shillings gone.

They stopped before an apartment house and ascended in the lift. He led the way into a comfortably-furnished sitting room. Still with the feeling of a dream she examined his furniture, the various devices for his comfort in which he took a boyish pride. In a framed photograph of a house party she was delighted to find herself as a girl in an enormous floppy hat.

“Oh, how funny I was then, and how nice!” she exclaimed.

“You’re funny and nice now,” he declared.

“Funny, but not nice. I’m a battered old woman.”

“That mirror gives you the lie.”

She looked in it and saw their two reflections.

He showed her his large airy bedroom with a four-poster bed which he said he had kept for sentiment.

“Now,” he said, turning on the electric fire in the sitting room, “shall we sit down and talk? Shall you mind telling me about yourself?”

She told him all there was to tell in her slow, melodious voice. As he listened, the compassion in his eyes deepened to tenderness. He talked then of himself, telling her almost all there was to tell. Reluctantly she looked at the clock.

“I must be going!” she exclaimed.

“Not till I have given you some supper. You’ve no idea what a good supper I can cook in my chafing dish.”

She watched him cook it, enthralled. Before such deftness, such efficiency, she felt clumsy, impractical. He quickly set a small table. Then in

front of her, he placed the omelet garnished with mushrooms.

With a napkin over his arm he bowed deferentially. "Supper is served, Madam," he said, with his air of a waiter.

"Oh, don't," she cried. "It hurts me!"

She began to laugh hysterically. Her laughter sounded so strange in her ears that she was frightened. She could not stop until he had spoken to her almost sternly.

"Sh," he said. "Some one will hear you. There's nothing to laugh or cry about either—and the omelet will fall if we let it wait too long."

The omelet was delicious. They talked naturally, gayly, as in the old days.

At last she said regretfully, "It is getting late."

"Yes," he agreed, "it's getting late. But—Ethel—it's not too late. I'm thankful to say it's not too late."

Something in his eyes startled her—even frightened her. She rose and picked up her gloves. Her lips trembled.

"Good-bye," she said, "and thank you so much."

He stood up beside her. "It's not good-bye! I refuse to say good-bye."

She gave a little broken laugh. "What else is there left to say?"

"A thousand things!" he said eagerly. "We've only just begun. We've wasted a lot of time. Ethel, I don't want you to leave me. I want you to marry me. God knows we should have done it long ago!"

"Freddy, you're not in earnest!"

"I have never been more in earnest in my life! The very sight of you makes me young and happy. If I could have you with me always—Ethel, say yes! Won't you say yes?"

She was in his arms.

But then she stood away a little—erect, looking handsome and rather haughty.

He laughed bitterly. "It's because I'm a waiter! You can't face that!"

She said, "Now you are being ridiculous."

“Then why? Tell me your reason!”

“I have no reason. I’m only afraid—”

“Then don’t be afraid!”

“Freddy, I shall love to marry you.”

She beamed at him. She was like a fine tall rose tree in full maturity. He held her closer and kissed her till she kissed him back. Then he laughed in the infectious way he had.

“Supper,” he said, “is the most delightful and confidential meal of our day. One has time then to relax and enjoy one’s self.”

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Sentimental Story of a Lady* by Mazo de la Roche]