

# Belinda's Orphan

She Brought Happiness to a Lonely Home

By CLARISSA MACKIE

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"No, I don't want no orphan," said Miss Belinda, with a decisive shake of her head. "I've got my hands full now with chickens and young turkeys coming on and bees and currant bushes without bothering with a high flying youngster that'll scare the chicks and get stung by the bees, although they're warranted stingless, mind you, and to trample on my berry bushes. No, ma'am—no orphans for me!" This time Miss Belinda's lips clicked together with a little sound of finality.

"I'm sorry, Belinda, because the home is just about running over with 'em. I was telling the matron this morning that I knew there were plenty of folks in Little River who could give a good home to some of those youngsters if they wasn't so mean and stingy. Of course I don't mean you," added the local member of the visiting committee of the Riverview Orphans' home. "But sometimes when I think of all the spare beds, all made up clean and white, in the empty homes around here it makes my blood bile to look upon them poor orphans so crowded for room that Mrs. Hill says they'll have to sleep in rows crosswise of the beds pretty soon."

"I want to know!" ejaculated Belinda, with a startled glance at Emeline Brown. "I think you better stick to the truth, Emeline, and not exaggerate. Now, honest and true, how many orphans too many have they got up there?"

"Ten," replied Mrs. Brown flatly.

"Humph!" snorted Belinda.

In and out of the scarlet wool went her big wooden knitting needles as she rapidly constructed a shawl to comfort some shivering shoulders when the summer was over. Mrs. Brown watched her neighbor expectantly. With a family of seven sons and daughters under her own roof she was safe in the condemnation of the uncrowded homes of Little River. Here was Belinda Downs, now a handsome, well-preserved spinster of forty-two, of independent means, possessing a snug home, a tiny income sufficient for her modest wants, a little shaggy pony and a rusty phaeton to carry her about the countryside. There was neither man, woman nor child to call upon Belinda for service, for she was without relatives, having outlived them all.

"I should think this was just the place for an orphan to be happy in," suggested Mrs. Brown, throwing an admiring glance around the small domain where orchard and garden were green and thrifty in spring bloom.

"I've got orphans enough as it is," snapped Belinda shortly.

Mrs. Brown smiled as she saw the fatherless and motherless strays which the lonely woman had gathered about her. There was a tame duck which Belinda had rescued after a hunter had brought it down with a glancing shot; a carrier pigeon which had dropped exhausted on her doorstep; a mongrel dog of many colors which had been faithfully scrubbed by Miss Belinda and was now much cleaner if not happier than in his soiled state; there was also a fine collection of homeless cats. Indeed, Miss Belinda's place might have been another orphanage, so thickly was it populated with waifs.

"Would you rather have a toy or a girl?" asked Mrs. Brown craftily. But Miss Belinda was not to be caught that way.

"I'd rather have a cat," she said.

"You ought to be ashamed, Belinda Downs, the way you do talk! If you could see them poor young ones looking so wistful every time a visitor comes, hoping it's somebody to offer a home, you'd harness up Dolly this very instant and go and fetch one away."

"Might as well bring two while I was about it," remarked Miss Belinda ironically. "I've heard it said that it's cheaper for two to live than one. Ain't you heard that?"

"No, indeed. If that's the case, nine people ought to live for nothing, and I know we don't do that." Mrs. Brown jerked on her sunbonnet, shrugged her fat shoulders and without another word waddled down the path that led to the gate between the two places.

"Take an orphan, indeed!" sniffed Belinda for the hundredth time since the Riverview home had been erected. "Humph!" she ejaculated, also for the hundredth time.

Nevertheless, as soon as dinner was over Belinda did harness up shaggy little Dolly, and, climbing into the phaeton and holding the lines very high in her mittened hands, she drove through the pine woods down to the Riverview home.

"I'd like to look at some orphans," said Belinda to the matron when she was seated in the darkened parlor of the home. "What kind have you?" she added, just as if orphans were vegetables or fruit in the market.

Mrs. Hill smiled in spite of the summer heat that nearly overpowered her bulk of flesh. "We have all kinds, even if we haven't got all colors," she said. Thereupon there ensued a period of trying ordeals for tender hearted Belinda Downs.

Black hair and brown, red hair and tow, flaxen and pure gold all passed in review, and when it was all over there remained in the parlor a soft, round faced damsel of five years, with a soft mop of golden brown hair and a pair of eyes like brown velvet pansies lashed thickly with black. Belinda's heart was thumping rapidly while she interviewed the little girl for the last moment before giving her decision. The child was shy and gave timid, breathless little whispering answers, and Belinda loved her the more.

"Her name is Bessie Carson. Her mother died in the city hospital last March, and their records say that the child's father is dead. You can keep her for a while, and if you are satisfied you can take out full papers of adoption if you wish to, Miss Brown."

"I guess I'll want to do that," said Miss Belinda as she arose to go. "When will Bessie be ready?" she asked, with a delightful sense of ownership in the dainty morsel of babyhood before her.

"This afternoon," said Mrs. Hill. "You won't find her much trouble. She's a quiet little thing and speaks of her mother and the little baby that died, and, strangely enough, she asks for her father. Where's your father Bessie, dear?" asked the matron, bending down.

"He'll be back in a little while," said Bessie, running to the window. "I guess I better look for him, hadn't I?"

"Quaint, isn't she?" whispered Mrs. Hill as she let Miss Belinda out.

"Very nice little girl," said Miss Belinda, trying to keep the happy sparkles out of her eyes, for it did not seem right to grasp so much happiness as was promised in the possession of little Bessie Carson. "I'll drive down after Bessie just before supper."

All the rest of the day she was very busy preparing for her orphan visitor. There was a small bed to drag down from the attic and place beside her own, and it had to be made up with all the miniature bedclothing which she had used as a child. There were old fashioned dolls and other toys to be resurrected from hair trunks and brushed and refurbished, and there was a batch of delicious ginger cookies to be made so that she might fashion a dozen gingerbread men and elephants with currant eyes for the delectation of little Bessie.

At last when all was in readiness and the little girl had been happily transferred to the phaeton and allowed to drive the gentle pony home there was never such unalloyed bliss as shone in the faces of Miss Belinda and her little orphan. The child loved Miss Belinda and clung to her with affection when she had a chance, and Miss Belinda was almost ashamed of the opportunities she afforded Bessie for showing her affection.

"It certainly can't harm anybody to enjoy being loved," protested Miss Belinda to her sterner self as she brushed away a tear.

"Is you crying, Miss Linda?" asked Bessie wistfully.

"Just a teeny bit, dear, because you love me so much," smiled Belinda, bending to kiss her charge.

"I smile when you love me," confided Bessie. "It makes me feel so good here." She placed a tiny hand on her heart. Miss Belinda kissed her again.

That happened after Bessie had been there three months. The adoption papers had all been made out and filed and Bessie Carson had become Bessie Downs when one afternoon the gate latch clicked sharply, and a tall man strode up the path and looked strangely down at little Bessie playing with her dolls at Miss Belinda's feet.

From her chair on the veranda Miss Belinda arose with a sinking feeling at her heart. This man was not from the home, although there was a strange familiarity in his tall, lean figure, his tanned cheeks, with the firm, beardless lips and chin. He did not look at Miss Belinda, but he pushed back his hat and held out his hands to little Bessie.

"Bess! Darling little Bess! Don't you know daddy?" he asked hoarsely.

With a startled cry the child looked at him earnestly and then ran straight to his arms with the unflinching instinct of the child for its parent.

Then the man looked up and saw Miss Belinda standing, white and shaking, before him. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but it's my little girl, and—Mercy! Linda Downs, what are you doing here with my Bessie?"

In the long, cool twilight there was time to relate how James Stearns had married the girl he had been engaged to when Belinda Downs met him in the west so many years ago and they had both fallen in love in spite of his previous engagement, but he had

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been true to his promise and married the girl who had been Bessie's mother; how one of the devastating floods of the west had separated the little family for months, and at last the wife and child had gone east in the hope of finding some of Mrs. Stearns' relatives. She had been taken in New York, registered by mistake under the name of Carson, had died and left the homeless little Bessie to the care of stranger hands.

In the meantime the distracted father had been hunting high and low for his family. He had traced them to New York, had proof of his wife's death and now had come to Little River to find that an all-wise Providence had brought his little daughter into the empty, longing arms of the one woman in the world who could be his wife now.

When Emeline Brown heard of it she chuckled audibly. "Don't never sniff at orphans again, Belinda Downs," she admonished the bride. "You're under a debt of gratitude to me for pressing of you to take one."

But Belinda and her orphan-phaned no longer smiled contentedly at the man they both loved best in the world.

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