

SECOND BEST

(By M. E. Colman)

Neva was at the telephone:

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Beeman, but it's quite impossible . . . My sister? I'll ask her . . ."

"Joy-oo, oh, Joyce!"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Beeman would like you to sing at the Club luncheon on Tuesday."

"You mean she asked you to sing, and since you have another engagement she asks me."

"Well, yes, that's it."

"Then you can just tell her I won't."

"Oh, Joyce please . . ."

"I don't care how it sounds, I simply won't. I'm sick and tired of being forever 'second best.' Folks want you to sing, or play, or grace a dinner-party, and if you can't go, 'Joyce will do.' Even your beaux try to court me when you give them the mitten. I tell you I won't stand it another day."

Neva made a polite excuse to the worried Mrs. Beeman and stood looking in amazement at her usually gracious sister.

"Why, Joyce, whatever has got into you?"

Joyce tossed her head with a wilful air.

"You don't need to go into a fit and forty fevers, Miss Neva, just because I say I'm not merely a pocket edition of you. I'm going to . . . There's that telephone again. You go, its probably some one wanting you to sing, and if you can't go I won't so you can save your breath asking me."

"It's for you," called Neva and Joyce came forward reluctantly.

"Yes . . ."

"Yes . . ."

"This afternoon? . . . at three? all right."

"No, no, it's a pleasure."

She hung up the receiver.

"That's the one place in all the world where I'm wanted for myself and not as a substitute for 'your brilliant sister,'" she announced.

"Yes . . ." murmured Neva tentatively. This new mood of Joyce's was so unexpected and incomprehensible that she hardly knew just how to take it. But Joyce was all her sunny self again, and at the sound of that dubious "Yes," turned impulsively to her sister, all sweet contrition.

"You poor old darling, did I scare the wits out of you? Never mind, old Dame, with all your faults, I mean my faults, I love you still. I know you can't help being so clever and charming, but oh, I am so sick of being told in word and deed 'Be good, sweet child, and let who can be clever.' You've no idea, Neva dear, how trying it is to one's soul to be 'the brilliant Miss Carr's younger sister!' Only that, and nothing more! The Orphanage is the only place where I'm me, where I'm wanted for something I can do, and not as a poor makeshift for you. They do love my stories, the blessed little tads."

Her face glowed and a tender smile curved her lips as she spoke.

"There's the Children's Hospital, Joy, and the Settlement Kindergarten and the Children's Orthopedic, I don't know what they'd do without you."

"So there are, you darling. I'm a perfect pig, nothing but a jealous pig. I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself. I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll telephone Mrs. Beeman, and tell her I'll sing for her."

But the rebellious mood was upon her again as she trudged home from the Orphanage in the spring twilight.

"Telling stories to kids, that's absolutely the only thing I can do that Neva can't do infinitely better. It's my one talent. If only I could turn it to account."

She looked aimlessly about as though she expected inspiration to drop down at her feet. And so it did, or rather it jumped up and fairly hit her in the eye. There it was, a great, glaring, red and green road-sign:

"IT PAYS TO ADVERTISE"

Joyce gasped.

"You bet it does," she exclaimed with forceful if slangy emphasis. She continued her way with a suddenly purposeful air, and stopped to leave an order at the engraver's on her way home.

Three or four days later a small parcel was delivered for her, and she shut herself in her room with it for the afternoon. When it was darkling she left the house furtively, pockets bulging, and sped to the nearest post-box. Into its capacious maw she dropped a hundred elegant, square envelopes, each addressed in her pretty, sloping hand to some wealthy resident of her own or the adjoining town. One thing all the women so honored had in common, they were all mothers.

Her letters posted Joyce stood for a moment beside the box, hands clasped, earnestly murmuring,

"Do, do!"

For the next few days Joyce was a puzzle to her family. She watched eagerly for the postman and examined all the letters before allowing anyone else to see them; she was willing, nay, anxious to answer the telephone, even when it was Neva's turn. Peter accused her of having written a story, and Neva thought she was in love. At last she received a letter in a strange handwriting which seemed to give her great satisfaction. She was out the next afternoon, and came in late to dinner.

All the family were at the table when she came in eager and glowing, still in her street clothes.

"Look!" she exclaimed dramatically, waving a five-dollar bill rather the worse for wear.

"What have you been doing? Robbing the bank?" asked her father quizzically.

"No, sir! I earned it, telling stories."

"Telling stories!" it was a family chorus.

"Yes," explained Joyce eagerly, "It's the one thing I can do. So I had cards engraved like this," she held one up to view.

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