

# The Best Thing in the World

## B. MIRIAM MICHELSON (Author of "The Bishop's Carriage" etc.)

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"I can write, you know. I have written poems for our town paper. Would you like to read them?"

Bowman looked up. She was still there, standing by his desk, a slender open-eyed creature, with a spray of peach blossoms rising and falling on a narrow, childish breast, with the crude perfume of rusticity about her and—yes, the enveloping glory of innocence, despite the direct look of her eyes and the persistence with which she had fought her way to him and refused now to be discouraged.

"There's nothing, I tell you—nothing for you," the city editor repeated impatiently.

He twitched his green shade to a pugnacious angle and deliberately turned his back upon her. He was a heavy-faced, black-clad hunter of news and driver of men. He hated a weakling when it was masculine and, if he could, he would have crucified anything in petticoats rather than weaken his staff and make himself ridiculous by accepting what he called the prevailing contemptible fashion of freak femininity as legitimate journalism.

"I don't see why you won't give me a chance," the girl said, appealingly. The office boy, peeping in just the half apprehensive for his own safety since he had permitted this applicant to evade him, yet betraying a malicious delight that the unsuspecting lamb should make straight for the lion's very jaws, saw Bowman lift his head suddenly. Upon the city editor's face there came an expression very like that which lighted his own small, implish face.

"Ah—hem!" Bowman cleared his throat deliberately. "If believe I will, Miss—eh—Bowman, you are so determined. I believe I will give you a chance. There's to be a big funeral today, Senator Hollingsworth, you know, millionaire, politician, philanthropist, old family—all that sort of thing. Suppose—he passed his hand over his smiling, big mouth—suppose you get me the names of all who attend, Miss—eh—Peachblossoms."

A stifled titter came from the office boy before he rushed to assist his laugh outside. He knew that detail well; it was a stock pons assonium of the profession. There were others over which the unit might be made to stumble and fall, but this was Bowman's favorite. He had never yet presented it to a woman, however.

The girl bent clear, childish eyes upon the man at the desk, gravely, gratefully. "Thank you, sir, I will. My name is Pettinelli, though—Theresa Pettinelli," she added distinctly.

She turned then and walked composedly, primly, out of the room.

Bowman's grim mouth did not relax, but above his angry, dark eyes that followed her, there came a perplexed frown. No novice had yet received that particular detail in just that way; there was still a part of the comedy unexplained.

He turned again to his desk and savagely thrust his blue pencil at a proof, as though merely to elude were not sufficient; he came a moment later, when the girl's voice came to him, and he said, "Thank you, sir, I will. My name is Pettinelli, though—Theresa Pettinelli," she added distinctly.

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can't see the noose that's already dangling over his head. But we can talk it over later." He rose, glancing at the girl, who stood patiently waiting, the delicate bloom of her country-bred face coming and going as she listened, open-eyed.

"Eh—what? Oh! What d'ye bring these things to me now for?" the city editor demanded of the girl, with an intonation that was almost a blow.

She looked down on him puzzled, "I thought you wanted them, sir. Didn't you say—"

"There's nothing, I tell you—nothing for you," the city editor repeated impatiently.

He twitched his green shade to a pugnacious angle and deliberately turned his back upon her. He was a heavy-faced, black-clad hunter of news and driver of men. He hated a weakling when it was masculine and, if he could, he would have crucified anything in petticoats rather than weaken his staff and make himself ridiculous by accepting what he called the prevailing contemptible fashion of freak femininity as legitimate journalism.

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ing anew the intoxicating draught of notoriety. Manlyoyd knew she counted on a verdict of not guilty, but had given an oblique vision, the thing looks as delectable to a murderer as to a martyr.

A martyr—there was nothing more alien to Manlyoyd's nature than this. And yet in the rare moments when confidence deserted him he had faced the improbable alternative of conviction, at night once or twice, when he had waked in his cell and missed the tense, upholding strength of the crowd and the loathing in the men's eyes.

"Why do you stare at him so?" Drake asked the girl, irritably. Despite the horror at such an experience for a woman he had helped her to a seat beside his own when he heard her inquire for the reporter's table.

"Why?" she stammered, blinking, as though the suddenness of being called upon for speech had staggered her. "Why was I staring?"

He looked down upon the shell pink of her childish face, with its quivering pointed chin, its thin, sensitive nose, and eyes lifted still toward the prisoner, who had moved his chair farther to the right and bent forward, watching her curiously. To Drake she looked repugnantly inhuman, yet, like some old-world saint, so detached from the world, so mediocrally ignorant of life, so capable of touching pity yet miraculously escaping defilement, so adorably trustful and confident in her attitude of faith and before such an altar.

"Have you read any of the evidence?" Drake asked. A confused sense of helpless disgust came over him. "Of the awful things they say about him—you don't believe them? Think how terrible to say such things of an innocent man! And he's so young—so!"

The reporter turned to his work; but in a moment he had put down his pen again.

"You are also—do you also approve?" "What do you think of his mother?" he demanded.

A burning blush swept in an agony of shame over her face. Her wordless repudiation of the woman comforted him; there was something so loathsome about innocence such as this joined even by a common sentiment with such a pervert as Manlyoyd.

"That mother of his has the sort of spirit to express which the Orientals invent a belief in ghouls. She'd pick her son's dead bones if there were money or notoriety to be got out of it," he growled.

The girl beside him drew in her breath, as at some sharp, internal pain.

"Doesn't it?" she laid a timid hand for a moment on the edge of his sleeve, "doesn't it make you long to do something—something anything to make up to him for it? Don't you feel you just must?"

Drake looked at her. In a second he had mentally marshalled all the facts to lay before her, what he knew about this man and had written, what he knew and could not print. Then resolutely he turned "to his work. There could be no thoroughfare between such a mind and his own.

Yet, once, toward the end of the day, an irritated sense of her helplessness and his own responsibility—the noblest of obligations—craftsmanship toward inexperience—prompted him to speak again to her.

"What line are you going to take?" he asked kindly. "I write a general sort of story, you know, covering the whole thing. There's a shorthand report that goes, besides. Don't you think it might be well for you to specialize? You might roast the moth-

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They were lucent, shining gray, crystal pools that had nothing to reflect, for behind them was a soul as clear and shallow as glass, and of all it—elevated him, if only temporarily—to a pinnacle where no man's hand dared touch him, though every man's hand ached to get at him—all this Manlyoyd felt. It is the consciousness of greatness of impersonal greatness of infamy, but its manifesta-

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cating him, that Manlyoyd had looked into them for a long moment before they became conscious and wavered. And even then it seemed to be only because the reporter, whose name Manlyoyd knew to be Drake, had deliberately thrust his shoulder between shutting out their view.

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