

Second Best

What Ann Said and What She Did

By LOUISE OLNEY

Ann Mark's eye flashed. Direct as her name, she refused to marry Henry Jasper. He stood before her a little awkwardly, but yet a man that most women would have considered kindly. He was not forty, well off for the simple community, highly respected, and his wife, Caroline, had been dead three years. Being a mere man, how could he know that Ann, his old schoolmate, had suffered agonies when as a young man he had courted and married her cousin?

No one knew why Ann had not married. She never wore her heart on her sleeve. Now, in spite of herself, her heart softened to him, noting how his hand ruffled his hair as it always did when he was puzzled and unhappy.

"I never did think I could be second best in any man's life," she went on rather cruelly. "And I don't see how at my age, thirty-five, and I don't care who knows it—I don't see how I can begin playing mother to another woman's child. The boy will hate me, as all children do a stepmother. No; ask some other woman." The man flushed angrily.

"Don't insult me, Ann. You know I don't want any other woman. I've always—you know I can't tell you what I always thought of you. It wouldn't seem fair to Caroline, who did her best by me."

The world knew she had been a weak, fretful, untidy woman, jealous, thriftless, her baby beauty gone in a few years. And it knew of his loyalty. He could not tell this woman how in the years she had been about his house helping Caroline his heart had gone out to Ann's cheery strength, her wholesome, healthy kindness. He tried one word more.

"Ann, if you knew how I needed you in every way you would come. Do you think I have forgotten how to love?" Still she shook her head. He turned slowly away, climbed into his buggy and drove to his own farm. Ann sat thinking, for she remembered many things. She finally rose and went into her sister Molly's house, where she was visiting.

In the crisp September morning Ann started out for a walk. She went over the hill where she used to play with Molly and with Henry and Caroline. Reaching the top of the hill, she sat down in the falling leaves, pushing the heavy dark hair back from her face.

Down in the valley she could see Henry Jasper's house and barnyard. He was hitching the bays to the buggy, and presently he drove away. A sudden temptation assailed her. She had heard Molly say his most recent housekeeper had left. Should she go and have a look at things? She did not see the boy about. Probably Jimmy was at his grandmother's. She rose and walked across the stubble.

The door was locked, but she found the key under the mat and entered. She could have groaned at sight of the kitchen—dishes unwashed, floor ditto, disorder rampant. The sitting room, the bedroom, everything was a sorry sight. Things had been bad enough in Caroline's time, but now they were impossible.

She had no compunction about entering. She had always been in and out before she went to the city. He would not care. She looked at the clock and calculated that he could not get back from town under two hours. Then she rolled up her sleeves and skirt and went to work—dishes first, then the floor, then sweeping, dusting and making beds. Before she knew it three hours had gone and it was noon. She found a bite to eat and decided to go on even if he caught her at it.

She had decided that she would keep at work as long as possible and then slide out the back way when she saw him coming, but it was not to be. About 4 she suddenly was aware of a wailing in the yard and from the door beheld Jimmy, fish pole in hand, limping along and crying at every step. He was a boy of

ten, like his father as one pea to another. She ran to meet him and saw that his foot was cut and bleeding. She picked him up and carried him in, washed his foot, dressed it and put him on the sofa, where she fed him. As she came to take away the plate he suddenly, in the most unbovlike fashion, snatched her about the neck and kissed her. Then he fell asleep.

By this time she had no thought of going back till the child's father came. She moved about the kitchen and dining room in her orderly, effective way—a way businesslike, eminently womanly and good. The waste apparent everywhere annoyed her thrifty soul. She set the table with a fresh cloth and put a good supper to cook on the stove she had blackened. It was nearing 6 o'clock.

After a little Jimmy awoke and without warning began to cry, refusing to tell what troubled him, but denying that it was his foot. Finally Ann got a low rocker, took the child in her arms and began to rock him. Great boy that he was, he snuggled to her, his unlabeled little heart accepting the comfort, trusting this soft voiced, smiling, mother armed woman who called herself Aunt Ann.

As she sat thus, her attention quite absorbed, Henry Jasper came wearily to the kitchen door, his arms loaded with groceries, his face hopeless. He had been wondering where to look for Jimmy, who had been allowed that morning to go to a neighbor's.

Then with unbelieving joy he saw the clean room, the spread table, the new air of comfort, and, best of all, in Ann Mark's kind arms he saw his sleeping motherless child—a child nearly as unmothered before his own mother's death as after it. She looked up at him and smiled.

"He cut his foot and came home crying. I came over, and when I saw so much to do I went to work. I knew you wouldn't mind, Henry."

Mind! The hard thing was that she should come just to go again; that she should give him a taste of this calm comfort, let him see her like this and deny him a continuance of it. He was very miserable in his gratitude.

"Put your packages on the sink," she commanded, "and when I have laid Jimmy down I will put them away. Will you open the oven door and look at the biscuit?" He obeyed her, then stood looking while she deftly put everything in its place. The milk pail shinningly waited for him to take it and go out to milk, but he lingered. And Jimmy awoke and wanted to tell his father about the enormous fish that nibbled at his hook and got almost caught and how he had cut his foot on the broken bottle and found Aunt Ann to bind it up.

"Supper is ready, and you had better eat before you do the rest of the chores, Henry," she said, helping the boy to limp to his place.

They ate joyfully, talking, laughing, the man wondering how many minutes would pass before she rose to go. The future yawned empty. She was asking him about his housekeepers, what he paid them, advising him what he should do. Finally when she rose he rose too. They stood facing each other, and her clear eyes smiled.

"You are— Oh, Ann, you have been good!" he said awkwardly. "Shall I hitch up and drive you home, or will you walk?" So he had taken her at her word. It was evident that he had no thought of anything permanent in all this. But the woman had. She saw here her place, her opportunity. The old hurt and anger had passed, and she was again at heart the simple girl who had loved in secret this man who was at last hers.

"I'll wash the dishes up first, and then after you have done the chores you can walk with me." Jimmy set up a sudden wail from his chair, where he still sat at the table.

"I don't want you to go away," he cried, "and I won't stay alone while papa goes with you!" Ann went behind his chair and put her arms around him. She did not look at the child's father.

"Listen, Jimmy. Auntie must go tonight, but if you will be good till papa comes back I will come again."

"When will you? How long will you stay?" he demanded, with the definiteness of childhood. No uncertainty for Jimmy! She did not hesitate.

"I will come back—in the morning—and I will stay always—if papa says that I may!"

Jimmy, forgetting his foot, jumped at her neck like a little boa constrictor. But his father set him down, wanting her himself just then.

"Are you going to let her stay, papa?" Then Henry Jasper laughed, and the burden of unhappy years rolled from his shoulders.

Drowned Fish.

They have a curious way of catching fish in some parts of Japan. Herbert E. Ponting in his book on "Lotus Land Japan" describes some traps which he found in one of the rivers of Fuji. "They were set in artificially dammed up narrows and consisted of long, conical bamboo baskets tied to poles. The fish bound down-stream rush headlong into these traps and, being unable to return or even turn around, are speedily drowned. Curious as this may seem, it is yet but a matter of a few minutes to drown a fish hold head downward to a swift current."

TODAY IS YOURS.

Prize It. For Yesterday Is Gone and Tomorrow May Never Come.

The best thing you have in this world is today. Here it is, a wonderful treasure, a marvelous jewel. It's yours; all yours. It's in your hands. What are you going to do with it?

Today you can be happy, not yesterday nor tomorrow. There is no happiness except today's.

Most of our misery is left over from yesterday or borrowed from tomorrow. Keep today clean. Make up your mind to enjoy your food, your work, your play, today anyhow.

Time is not divided into three parts, past, present and future. There is only one real time. It is now.

You can do anything if you'll only go at it a day at a time.

Don't let life pass against you. Attack it in detail and you can easily triumph.

"Oh, but I can't help thinking of the past! And one must plan for the future."

To be sure; only forget not that it is not the past that determines the present; it is the present that determines the past.

The past is what we make of it. It is the temper of the present that qualifies it. It all depends upon how you now consider it, whether it brings you despair or discouragement.

Suck out its wisdom, keep its lessons, utilize its experience, make of all those things elements of present power. But forget its septic qualities. Don't let the past unman you, benumb you with remorse, weaken you with self-contempt.

The poet says we rise by stepping on our dead selves, and, as for the future, the best preparation for it is an unafraid today.

Whatever hills you have to climb, whatever bridges you have to cross, whatever enemies are lying in wait for you, whatever crises are to be met, you can be no better equipped for them than by living this day soundly, cheerfully and free from fear.

Apprehensions, premonitions, worries, these are the poison gases of our foe, the future.

If you are to die tomorrow the best way to be ready is to discharge faithfully today's duties and to enjoy heartily today's simple pleasures.

Today is yours. God has given it to you. All your yesterdays he has taken back. All your tomorrows are still in his hands.

Today is yours. Take its pleasures and be glad. Take its pains and play the man.

Today is yours, just a little strip of light between two darknesses, just a bit of life between two sleep deaths.

Today is yours. Use it so that at its close you can say:

"I have lived and loved today!"—Dr. Frank Crane in Pictorial Review.

Getting an Autograph.

Thomas Bailey Aldrich once received a pathetic letter in a feminine hand announcing the death of a little daughter and asking if he would not send in his own handwriting a verse or two from "Babie Bell" to assuage the grief of the household. Aldrich sent the whole poem and not long after saw it displayed in the shop of an autograph dealer, with a good round price attached thereto.

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