

A Child of the Rain

By Elia W. Peattie

It was the night that Mona Meeks, the dressmaker, told him she didn't love him. He couldn't believe it at first, because he had so long been accustomed to the idea that she did, and no matter how rough the weather or how irascible the passengers, he felt a song in his heart as he punched transfers, and rang his bell punch, and signalled the driver when to let people off and on.

Now, suddenly, with no reason except a woman's, she had changed her mind. He dropped in to see her at five o'clock, just before time for the night shift, and to give her two red apples he had been saving for her. She looked at the apples as if they were invisible and she could not see them, and standing in her disorderly little dressmaking parlor, with its cuttings and scraps and litter of fabrics, she said:

"It is no use, John. I shall have to work here like this all my life -- work here alone. For I don't love you, John. No, I don't. I thought I did, but it is a mistake."

"You mean it?" asked John, bringing up the words in a great gasp.

"Yes," she said, white and trembling and putting out her hands as if to beg for his mercy. And then -- big, lumbering fool -- he turned around and strode down the stairs and stood at the corner in the beating rain waiting for his car. It came along at length, spluttering on the wet rails and spitting out blue fire, and he took his shift after a gruff "Good night" to Johnson, the man he relieved.

He was glad the rain was bitter cold and drove in his face fiercely. He rejoiced at the cruelty of the wind, and when it hustled pedestrians before it, lashing them, twisting their clothes, and threatening their equilibrium, he felt amused. He was pleased at the chill in his bones and at the hunger that tortured him. At least, at first he thought it was hunger till he remembered that he had just eaten. The hours passed confusedly. He had no consciousness of time. But it must have been late, -- near midnight, -- judging by the fact that there were few persons visible anywhere in the black storm, when he noticed a little figure sitting at the far end of the car. He had not seen the child when she got on, but all was so curious and wild to him that evening -- he himself seemed to himself the most curious and the wildest of all things -- that it was not surprising that he should not have observed the little creature.

She was wrapped in a coat so much too large that it had become frayed at the bottom from dragging on the pavement. Her hair hung in unkempt stringiness about her bent shoulders, and her feet were covered with old arctics, many sizes too big, from which the soles hung loose.

Beside the little figure was a chest of dark wood, with curiously wrought hasps. From this depended a stout strap by which it could be carried over the shoulders. John Billings stared in, fascinated by the poor little thing with its head sadly drooping upon its breast, its thin blue hands relaxed upon its lap, and its whole attitude so suggestive of hunger, loneliness, and fatigue, that he made up his mind he would collect no fare from it.

"It will need its nickel for breakfast," he said to himself. "The company can stand this for once. Or, come to think of it, I might celebrate my hard luck. Here's to the brotherhood of failures!" And he took a nickel from one pocket of his great-coat and dropped it in another, ringing his bell punch to record the transfer.

The car plunged along in the darkness, and the rain beat more viciously than ever in his face. The night was full of the rushing sound of the storm. Owing to some change of temperature the

glass of the car became obscured so that the young conductor could no longer see the little figure distinctly, and he grew anxious about the child.

"I wonder if it's all right," he said to himself. "I never saw living creature sit so still."

He opened the car door, intending to speak with the child, but just then something went wrong with the lights. There was a blue and green flickering, then darkness, a sudden halting of the car, and a great sweep of wind and rain in at the door. When, after a moment, light and motion reasserted themselves, and Billings had got the door together, he turned to look at the little passenger. But the car was empty.

It was a fact. There was no child there -- not even moisture on the seat where she had been sitting.

"Bill," said he, going to the front door and addressing the driver, "what became of that little kid in the old cloak?"

"I didn't see no kid," said Bill, crossly. "For Gawd's sake, close the door, John, and git that draught off my back."

"Draught!" said John, indignantly, "where's the draught?"

"You've left the hind door open," growled Bill, and John saw him shivering as a blast struck him and ruffled the fur on his bear-skin coat. But the door was not open, and yet John had to admit to himself that the car seemed filled with wind and a strange coldness.

However, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered! Still, it was as well no doubt to look under the seats just to make sure no little crouching figure was there, and so he did. But there was nothing. In fact, John said to himself, he seemed to be getting expert in finding nothing where there ought to be something.

He might have stayed in the car, for there was no likelihood of more passengers that evening, but somehow he preferred going out where the rain could drench him and the wind pommel him. How horribly tired he was! If there were only some still place away from the blare of the city where a man could lie down and listen to the sound of the sea or the storm -- or if one could grow suddenly old and get through with the bother of living -- or if --

The car gave a sudden lurch as it rounded a curve, and for a moment it seemed to be a mere chance whether Conductor Billings would stay on his platform or go off under those fire-spitting wheels. He caught instinctively at his brake, saved himself, and stood still for a moment, panting.

"I must have dozed," he said to himself.

Just then, dimly, through the blurred window, he saw again the little figure of the child, its head on its breast as before, its blue hands lying in its lap and the curious box beside it. John Billings felt a coldness beyond the coldness of the night run through his blood. Then, with a half-stifled cry, he threw back the door, and made a desperate spring at the corner where the eerie thing sat.

And he touched the green carpeting on the seat, which was quite dry and warm, as if no dripping, miserable little wretch had ever crouched there.

He rushed to the front door.

"Bill," he roared, "I want to know about that kid."

"What kid?"

"The same kid! The wet one with the old coat and the box with iron hasps! The one that's been sitting here in the car!"

Bill turned his surly face to confront the young conductor.

"You've been drinking, you fool," said he. "Fust thing you know you'll be reported."

The conductor said not a word. He went slowly and weakly back to his post and stood there the rest of the way leaning against the end of the car for support. Once or twice he muttered:

“The poor little brat!” And again he said, “So you didn’t love me after all!”

He never knew how he reached home, but he sank to sleep as dying men sink to death. All the same, being a hearty young man, he was on duty again next day but one, and again the night was rainy and cold.

It was the last run, and the car was spinning along at its limit, when there came a sudden soft shock. John Billings knew what that meant. He had felt something of the kind once before. He turned sick for a moment, and held on to the brake. Then he summoned his courage and went around to the side of the car, which had stopped. Bill, the driver, was before him, and had a limp little figure in his arms, and was carrying it to the gaslight. John gave one look and cried:

“It’s the same kid, Bill! The one I told you of!”

True as truth were the ragged coat dangling from the pitiful body, the little blue hands, the thin shoulders, the stringy hair, the big arctics on the feet. And in the road not far off was the curious chest of dark wood with iron hasps.

“She ran under the car deliberate!” cried Bill. “I yelled to her, but she looked at me and ran straight on!”

He was white in spite of his weather-beaten skin.

“I guess you wasn’t drunk last night after all, John,” said he.

“You -- you are sure the kid is -- is there?” gasped John.

“Not so damned sure!” said Bill.

But a few minutes later it was taken away in a patrol wagon, and with it the little box with iron hasps.