Ririro
READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

A Christmas Matinee

Mrs. M.A.L. Lane

It was the day before Christmas in the year 189-. Snow was falling heavily in the streets of Boston, but the crowd of shoppers seemed undiminished. As the storm increased, groups gathered at the corners and in sheltering doorways to wait for belated cars; but the holiday cheer was in the air, and there was no grumbling. Mothers dragging tired children through the slush of the streets; pretty girls hurrying home for the holidays; here and there a harassed-looking man with perhaps a single package which he had taken a whole morning to select—all had the same spirit of tolerant good-humor.



"School Street! School Street!" called the conductor of an electric car. A group of young people at the farther end of the car started to their feet. One of them, a young man wearing a heavy fur-trimmed coat, addressed the conductor angrily.

"I said, 'Music Hall,' didn't I?" he demanded. "Now we've got to walk back in the snow because of your stupidity!"

"Oh, never mind, Frank!" one of the girls interposed. "We ought to have been looking out ourselves! Six of us, and we went by without a thought! It is all Mrs. Tirrell's fault! She shouldn't have been so entertaining!"

The young matron dimpled and blushed. "That's charming of you, Maidie," she said, gathering up her silk skirts as she prepared to step down into the pond before her. "The compliment makes up for the blame. But how it snows!"

"It doesn't matter. We all have gaiters on," returned Maidie Williams, undisturbed.

"Fares, please!" said the conductor stolidly.

Frank Armstrong thrust his gloved hand deep into his pocket with angry vehemence. "There's your money," he said, "and be quick about the change, will you? We've lost time enough!"

The man counted out the change with stiff, red fingers, closed his lips firmly as if to keep back an obvious rejoinder, rang up the six fares with careful accuracy,

and gave the signal to go ahead. The car went on into the drifting storm.

Armstrong laughed shortly as he rapidly counted the bits of silver lying in his open palm. He turned instinctively, but two or three cars were already between him and the one he was looking for.

"The fellow must be an imbecile," he said, rejoining the group on the crossing. "He's given me back a dollar and twenty cents, and I handed him a dollar bill."

"Oh, can't you stop him?" cried Maidie Williams, with a backward step into the wet street.

The Harvard junior, who was carrying her umbrella, protested: "What's the use. Miss Williams? He'll make it up before he gets to Scollay Square, you may be sure. Those chaps don't lose anything. Why, the other day, I gave one a quarter and he went off as cool as you please. 'Where's my change?' said I. 'You gave me a nickel,' said he. And there wasn't anybody to swear that I didn't except myself, and I didn't count."

"But that doesn't make any difference," insisted the girl warmly. "Because one conductor was dishonest, we needn't be. I beg your pardon, Frank, but it does seem to me just stealing."

"Oh, come along!" said her cousin, with an easy laugh. "I guess the West End Corporation won't go without their dinners to-morrow. Here, Maidie, here's the ill-gotten fifty cents. I think you ought to treat us all after the concert; still, I won't urge you. I wash my hands of all responsibility. But I do wish you hadn't such an unpleasant conscience."

Maidie flushed under the sting of his cousinly rudeness, but she went on quietly with the rest. It was evident that any attempt to overtake the car was out of the question.

"Did you notice his number, Frank?" she asked, suddenly.

"No, I never thought of it" said Frank, stopping short. "However, I probably shouldn't make any complaint if I had. I shall forget all about it tomorrow. I find it's never safe to let the sun go down on my wrath. It's very likely not to be there the next day."

"I wasn't thinking of making a complaint," said Maidie; but the two young men were enjoying the small joke too much to notice what she said.

The great doorway of Music Hall was just ahead. In a moment the party were within its friendly shelter, stamping off the snow. The girls were adjusting veils and hats with adroit feminine touches; the pretty chaperon was beaming approval upon them, and the young men were taking off their wet overcoats, when Maidie turned again in sudden desperation.

"Mr. Harris," she said, rather faintly, for she did not like to make herself disagreeable, "do you suppose that car comes right back from Scollay Square?"

"What car?" asked Walter Harris, blankly. "Oh, the one we came in? Yes, I suppose it does. They're running all the time, anyway. Why, you are not sick, are you, Miss Williams?"

There was genuine concern in his tone. This girl, with her sweet, vibrant voice, her clear gray eyes, seemed very charming to him. She wasn't beautiful, perhaps, but she was the kind of girl he liked. There was a steady earnestness in the gray eyes that made him think of his mother.

"No," said Maidie, slowly. "I'm all right, thank you. But I wish I could find that man again. I know sometimes they have to make it up if their accounts are wrong, and I couldn't—we couldn't feel very comfortable—"

Frank Armstrong interrupted her. "Maidie," he said, with the studied calmness with which one speaks to an unreasonable child, "you are perfectly absurd. Here it is within five minutes of the tune for the concert to begin. It is impossible to tell when that car is coming back. You are making us all very uncomfortable. Mrs. Tirrell, won't you please tell her not to spoil our afternoon?"

"I think he's right, Maidie," said Mrs. Tirrell. "It's very nice of you to feel so sorry for the poor man, but he really was very careless. It was all his own fault. And just think how far he made us walk! My feet are quite damp. We ought to go in directly or we shall all take cold, and I'm sure you wouldn't like that, my dear."

She led the way as she spoke, the two girls and young Armstrong following. Maidie hesitated. It was so easy to go in, to forget everything in the light and warmth and excitement.

"No," said she, very firmly, and as much to herself as to the young man who stood waiting for her. "I must go back and try to make it right. I'm so sorry, Mr. Harris, but if you will tell them—"

"Why, I'm going with you, of course" said the young fellow, impulsively. "If I'd only looked once at the man I'd go alone, but I shouldn't know him from Adam."

Maidie laughed. "Oh, I don't want to lose the whole concert, Mr. Harris, and Frank, has all the tickets. You must go after them and try to make my peace. I'll come just as soon as I can. Don't wait for me, please. If you'll come and look for me here the first number, and not let them scold me too much—" She ended with an imploring little catch in her breath that was almost a sob.

"They sha'n't say a word, Miss Williams!" cried Walter Harris, with honest admiration in his eyes.



But she was gone already, and conscious that further delay was only making matters worse, he went on into the hall.

Meanwhile, the car swung heavily along the wet rails on its way to the turning-point. It was nearly empty now. An old gentleman and his nurse were the only occupants. Jim Stevens, the conductor, had stepped inside the car.

"Too bad I forgot those young people wanted to get off at Music Hall," he was thinking to himself. "I don't see how I came to do it. That chap looked as if he wanted to complain of me, and I don't know as I blame him. I'd have said I was sorry if he hadn't been so sharp with his tongue. I hope he won't complain just now. 'Twould be a pretty bad time for me to get into trouble, with Mary and the baby both sick. I'm too sleepy to be good for much, that's a fact. Sitting up three nights running takes hold of a fellow somehow when he's at work all day. The rent's paid, that's one thing, if it hasn't left me but half a dollar to my name. Hullo!" He was struck by a sudden distinct recollection of the coins he had returned. "Why, I gave him fifty cents too much!"

He glanced up at the dial which indicated the fares and began to count the change in his pocket. He knew exactly how much money he had had at the beginning of the trip. He counted carefully. Then he plunged his hand into the heavy canvas pocket of his coat. Perhaps he had half a dollar there. No, it was empty!

He faced the fact reluctantly. Fifty cents short, ten fares! Gone into the pocket of the young gentleman with the fur collar! The conductor's hand shook as he put the money back in his pocket. It meant—what did it mean? He drew a long breath.

Christmas Eve! A dark dreary little room upstairs in a noisy tenement house. A pale, thin woman on a shabby lounge vainly trying to quiet a fretful child. The child is thin and pale, too, with a hard, racking cough. There is a small fire in the stove, a very small fire; coal is so high. The medicine stands on the shelf. "Medicine won't do much good," the doctor had said; "he needs beef and cream."

Jim's heart sank at the thought. He could almost hear the baby asking; "Isn't papa coming soon? Isn't he, mamma?"



"Poor little kid!" Jim said, softly, under his breath. "And I shan't have a thing to take home to him; nor Mary's violets, either. It'll be the first Christmas that ever happened. I suppose that chap would think it was ridiculous for me to be buying violets. He wouldn't understand what the flowers mean to Mary. Perhaps he didn't notice I gave him too much. That kind don't know how much they have. They just pull it out as if it was newspaper."

The conductor went out into the snow to help the nurse, who was assisting the old gentleman to the ground. Then the car swung on again. Jim turned up the collar of his coat about his ears and stamped his feet. There was the florist's shop where he had meant to buy the violets, and the toy-shop was just around the corner.

A thought flashed across his tired brain. "Plenty of men would do it; they do it every day. Nobody ever would be the poorer for it. This car will be crowded going home. I needn't ring in every fare; nobody could tell. But Mary! She wouldn't touch those violets if she knew. And she'd know. I'd have to tell her. I couldn't keep it from her, she's that quick."

He jumped off to adjust the trolley with a curious sense of unreality. It couldn't be that he was really going home this Christmas Eve with empty hands. Well, they must all suffer together for his carelessness. It was his own fault, but it was hard. And he was so tired!

To his amazement he found his eyes were blurred as he watched the people crowding into the car. What? Was he going to cry like a baby—he, a great burly man of thirty years?

"It's no use," he thought. "I couldn't do it. The first time I gave Mary violets was the night she said she'd marry me. I told her then I'd do my best to make her proud of me. I guess she wouldn't be very proud of a man who could cheat. She'd rather starve than have a ribbon she couldn't pay for."

He rang up a dozen fares with a steady hand. The temptation was over. Six more strokes—then nine without a falter. He even imagined the bell rang more distinctly than usual, even encouragingly. The car stopped. Jim flung the door open with a triumphant sweep of his arm. He felt ready to face the world. But the

baby—his arm dropped. It was hard.

He turned to help the young girl who was waiting at the step. Through the whirling snow he saw her eager face, with a quick recognition lighting the steady eyes, and wondered dimly, as he stood with his hand on the signal-strap, where he could have seen her before.

He knew immediately.

"There was a mistake," she said, with a shy tremor in her voice. "You gave us too much change and here it is." She held out to Jim the piece of silver which had given him such an unhappy quarter of an hour.

He took it like one dazed. Would the young lady think he was crazy to care so much about so small a coin? He must say something. "Thank you, miss," he stammered as well as he could. "You see, I thought it was gone—and there's the baby—and it's Christmas Eve—and my wife's sick—and you can't understand—"

It certainly was not remarkable that she couldn't.



"But I do," she said, simply. "I was afraid of that. And I thought perhaps there was a baby, so I brought my Christmas present for her," and something else dropped into Jim's cold hand.

"What you waiting for?" shouted the motorman from the front platform. The girl had disappeared in the snow.

Jim rang the bell to go ahead, and gazed again at the two shining half dollars in his hand.

"I didn't have a chance to tell her," he explained to his wife late in the evening, as he sat in a tiny rocking-chair several sizes too small for him, "that the baby wasn't a her at all, though if I thought he'd grow up into such a lovely one as she is, I don't know but I almost wish he was."

"Poor Jim!" said Mary, with a little laugh as she put up her hand to stroke his rough cheek. "I guess you're tired."

"And I should say," he added, stretching out his long legs toward the few red sparks in the bottom of the grate, "I should say she had tears in her eyes, too, but I was that near crying myself I couldn't be sure."

The little room was sweet with the odour of English violets. Asleep in the bed lay the boy, a toy horse clasped close to his breast.

"Bless her heart!" said Mary, softly.

"Well, Miss Williams," said Walter Harris, as he sprang to meet a snow-covered figure coming swiftly along the sidewalk. "I can see that you found him. You've lost the first number, but they won't scold you—not this time."

The girl turned a radiant face upon him. "Thank you," she said, shaking the snowy crystals from her skirt. "I don't care now if they do. I should have lost more than that if I had stayed."

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