

# The Lapse of Conductor Buck

Who Proclaimed His Ambition—"Just to Do a Job Right Before I Left It."

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Illustrated by A. Lismer



"She came towards the car."

ON the rear platform of the Midvale and Eastern Street Railway's car stood conductor E. Buck, gazing contentedly across the valley, which lay bathed in golden autumn sunshine. Traffic was light at this season; in fact, the last passenger had left the car at Wharton, and Buck anticipated a dreamy, un-

eventful run to the end of the line. He turned his eyes to the track ahead; it ran lonely, deserted, amidst a riot of colour—yellow goldenrod and reddening maple leaves. Looking back, his gaze encountered a vision that galvanized him into instant action. He reached for the bell-rope and pulled it with a violence that startled his motorman out of a day-dream.

The cause of his sudden display of energy was a girl, who had emerged from a wood-road just after the car had passed. He watched her in bewildered admiration as she came toward the car, the western sun spilling its red glory about her. When she was quite near, he rubbed his eyes and exclaimed, under his breath:

"Why, it's real! It's a girl!"

He sprang to the ground and helped her on to the running-board. Giving two bells, he returned to the rear platform, standing there motionless, a rapt look in his eyes. His interest in the landscape had vanished; instead, his thoughts were centered on his new passenger. Subconsciously, he admired the fit of her golden-brown tailored suit. Her jaunty little toque filled him with esthetic delight. She seemed so ethereal, in spite of her sartorial perfection. Her aristocratic slimness was so out of place in the vehicle of a common carrier that Buck's first impression of her unreality began to return.

There is a limit to the amount of impersonal speculation regarding a pretty girl in which the average normal human of masculine persuasion can indulge with any degree of satisfaction. The girl turned her head ever so slightly, giving Buck a glimpse of a ravishing profile, a wholly delightful chin, and the prettiest, waviest dark hair that ever caused a poor conductor's heart to become erratic in its action.

With characteristic impulsiveness, he jumped to the running-board and made his way toward her while the car rocked and swayed down a sharp incline. When he actually stood beside her, he gasped; his temerity seemed unpardonable in her dainty presence.

"We are going through the prettiest part of the run," he said, striving desperately for a casual manner. "I thought I'd point out Black Mountain to you."

She leaned forward and followed his outstretched arm with her eyes. "How beautiful!" she exclaimed.

Her voice was just what it should be, decided Buck; rather deep for a woman's, rich, musical. It seemed a miracle that he should actually have engaged her in conversation.

"It's a long trip," he hazarded; "wouldn't you be more comfortable if you had some one to talk to?"

She regarded him in disapproving silence for a long moment. Then: "I should, if there was any one," she answered.

EVIDENTLY, she purposed to eliminate him. However, his conscience was perfectly clear; he was entirely unconscious of any attempt at wrong-doing. With utter ingenuousness, he remarked:

"There's me."

She appraised him with a cool glance. He had taken off his cap when he addressed her, and the wind was rumpling his hair. He stood straight and tall beside her, his lean, brown hand grasping the rail. There was something personable in the strength

of him, in the fearlessness of his blue eyes, and in his engaging smile.

"We have not been introduced," she said, finally, with the patient air of an elder pointing out to a small child some very evident truth.

Buck wrinkled his brows in emphatic disapproval of the situation. "It seems so sort of foolish!" he exclaimed. "If I go back to the platform, you'll feel uncomfortable, knowing that I'm behind you, watching you. And I—I'll feel as though I had missed something. 'Well—'" He took his hand from the rail, and turned.

"O look out! You'll fall!" cried the girl.

He stood on the narrow board with his arms folded. A broad smile spread over his face, disclosing two rows of teeth, whose whiteness was dazzling in its contrast to his tanned skin.

"What do you care?" he laughed. "We haven't been introduced."

She did not deign to comment on his levity. The genuineness of her concern for his safety, however, showed in the petulance of her voice.

"Don't be so silly," she chided. "There, take hold of the hand-rail, and you may talk to me."

"O thanks!" cried Buck, availing himself of the permission with alacrity. "You see, this is a pretty lonely run, and I don't get a chance to talk very much. I'm sociable by nature, and it comes hard. There's Curly—my motorman—he used to be good company; but he got married last month, and now, nothing interests him except the little woman at home. It's right, too. When a man finds his ideal, what else is there in life to get his enthusiasm?"

The girl threw back her head and laughed—a low, little laugh of utter amusement. The conductor flushed a deep red; throat, cheeks, and brow were suffused with colour.

"You're laughing at me!" he protested.



"Would you accept my escort?" he asked.

"Indeed, no, Mr.—"

"The boys on the line call me 'Buck.'"

"Indeed, I was not, Mr. Buck," she denied. "To prove it, I will tell you my thoughts. When you mentioned your friend—Curly, was it not?—it reminded me of my earliest ambition. We all have them; don't we?"

"Sure; and they take some queer turns. Were you going to confide yours?"

She nodded, the dimples still playing their frolicsome game of hide-and-seek about her mouth, infuriating Buck.

"Mine was to grow up soon and marry a motorman; they always fascinated me."

"Conductors are a step higher in rank," asserted

Buck, his manner wholly impersonal, his expression inscrutable.

He was beginning to dread the end of the run. The vision would vanish as abruptly as it had appeared, leaving him in the midst of a drab-coloured, workaday world. A sudden smile lighted his face as the absurdity of his fears flashed over him. Of course, she would remain on the car. She could not leave it at the end of the trip. The line was not finished; it stopped with disconcerting abruptness in the hills. Evidently, she had come merely for the ride; and, in that case, she would return to Wharton. He was on the point of questioning her, when she broke the silence.

"I have told you my earliest ambition," she said. "Tell me yours."

Her tone was a blend of imperiousness and gracious interest.

"Mine?" said Buck, with his quick smile. "You'd think it was very simple. It must have been simple," he mused, "or it wouldn't have lasted so well. It's mostly negative—not to be a millionaire kid."

THE girl sat up straight, and cast a scrutinizing glance at him. She started to speak, then changed her mind.

"There's more to it," said Buck, his eyes still smiling, but the line of his jaw hardening. "I made up my mind that I'd never let a day's work down me. I've never shirked a job. There were some pretty tough ones a while ago; but I did 'em, and asked for more. This one's easy—to run my car to the end of the line, and see that it gets back to the barn all right. There are some harder jobs ahead of me—and I'm ready for them. Yes," he ended, smiling into her eyes; "that was my earliest ambition, and it's lasted—just to do a job right before I left it."

The girl sat very still, her hands folded in her lap. Her graciousness had slipped from her, leaving an expression of wonder in its place.

"Simple!" she said, under her breath.

"Simple!"

Buck changed the subject hurriedly. "Are you going back to Wharton to-night?"

"No; I'm going to Durham."

"This car doesn't go there."

"I know; the line is not finished. But, it's only a step; isn't it?"

"Four miles."

The girl looked startled. The short day was drawing to a close. The golden light had left the earth; the hills were growing sombre-hued.

"I went down by train this morning," she explained. "They told me there was a trolley line toward Durham. The day was so glorious that I walked until your car overtook me. I must get back to-night. Anyway, four miles isn't a great distance."

She smiled bravely, although her eyes held a vague hint of worry.

As she finished speaking, they passed a siding, on which stood a work-car with a trailer, swarming with labourers. The men were noisily celebrating their release from the day's work.

"That's the construction gang from the end of the line," said Buck, gravely. "They've just quit work for the night. Some of them walk in to Durham."

The girl shivered slightly. "I must get back," she murmured; "my father would go mad with worry. We are spending the month at Durham for his health," she added.

BUCK peered ahead into the dusk. The track lost itself in the gloom beneath a vista of trees. They were ascending a steep hill. On its summit, the car came to a grinding stop, and the motorman lumberingly descended to reverse the trolley-pole.

The conductor turned to the girl. "You can't walk to Durham alone," he said. There was a sudden masterfulness in his manner, a definite finality in his tone.

"It would seem as though I had to," she said, a catch in her voice.

She rose, and stepped from the car. "Good-bye," she called, over her shoulder, and turned resolutely to face the darkness.

"Wait!" said Buck.

The word was a command, sharp, abrupt; and the girl came back hesitatingly.

"Would you accept my escort?" he asked, his arbitrariness changing to humility.

"Of course! I should be very glad to," she answered, frankly; "but it's out of the question. You have your duty to perform, Mr. Buck."

"Then, that's settled!"

He turned to the motorman, who had been listening in open-eyed astonishment. "Curly, you run the car (Concluded on page 15.)"