

A Conductor's Conscience

The day was warm and overcast. There was no elasticity in the air. The season was spring-early spring—and it was suddenly, hot weather. The sun's rays, untempered, fell through the budding but still leafless trees with feverish intensity, making a glare upon the pavement, the backs of bricks and roofs of the houses. The wind, which came up from the south, was still and gave no relief. It was a dry wind, charged with dust which got into people's mouths and eyes and which sported weakly with the bits of paper and the straws that lay about in odd angles and corners. Out in the country men in their shirt sleeves were planting peas in dusty rows, and bunches of blue-green garrets were thick and high in the pastures, where already the grass was waving in the fence corners. The willows were green by the brooks, and the farmers said that with rain, when it should come, the trees would burst into leaf in a day or two. But in town people were afraid to lay aside their winter garments, which were oppressive almost beyond endurance.

John Flinn, conductor of car 3198 on the People's Traction Co.'s line, always taciturn, was more than usually uncommunicative. He had a heavy, sullen face, a pair of forbidding gray eyes and a mouth shut close under his sagged, unkempt beard. It was plain at a glance that he was dull of thought, slow of apprehension and as obstinate as a mule. But, also, he was trustworthy. This last characteristic kept him in a place eagerly sought by many an apparently better man. The other men on his route felt sorry for him, a fact which he suspected and resented. Those who knew about his life might have told that his wife was a trial to him every day and that he found little pleasure in his children. There were few nights when he did not return late to find his home in disorder, the children in tears or crouching in corners away from the reach of their mother's heavy, if uncertain arm. The dinner in John's pocket was not always cooked at home. A sandwich of meat, cut in half, both from the same plate at the corner, with half a pint of coffee made in the same place were his usual refreshments. But he always declined the offers of more homey but appetizing fare from the women who took their noon meal beside him, resenting the fact that they knew of his wife's shortcomings and gathered the fruits of their own wives' jealousy with a not unnatural pride.

John Flinn's route was a long one and through a most unpleasant section of the vast city. There were squares and squares of little, inadequate ous and plenty of empty, ragged lots, in some of which were impoverished stoneyards where material for other rows of miserable, cheap and unsanitary houses were being prepared by shifty stonecutters, who rarely worked for sharp contractors, who knew they were shifty. A run every other corner of many of the cross streets were grog shops of more or less flourishing character, and John often cast lowering looks at these, for were not just such places the curse of his life? Perhaps a daily passage through one cheerful and agreeable street might have brightened the poor man's mind occasionally. But he had passed several years already amid those dreary surroundings and had never thought of change. He was a man who in his slow way was observant of little things, a characteristic that brought with much possibility for discomfort, and he well did know every yard of his route that it was quite within the range of possibility that he often slept where he stood, and yet attended to his duties. That he was often exhausted from fatigue is certain, and his home often broken by his wife's drunken mutterings or the crying of the baby, who was cutting her teeth with difficulty and distress to herself and her entire family.

The warm day, following a night of more than common restlessness, had found John in a very depressed and cynical humor. As he boarded his car he gazed at a deep curse, and each time that he pulled the coupling and of his belt strap the

sharp ring might have stood for the expression of another oath as deep and low.

There were not many passengers going his way, either up or down the route, and the day wore along monotonously, wearily, hopelessly for John Flinn.

But about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, as he banged and bounced over the uneven track, he saw standing at the corner of a sloppy, dark court a woman with a child in her arms. It was not the rule for the trolley cars to stop at such insignificant passageways—this was in the middle of the square—but at the sight of the woman an impulse, as undeniable and sudden as are all impulses, seized upon John. He pulled the bell strap and the car stopped. Then he leaned down and helped the woman up the high step by putting his hand under her arm at the shoulder. She went in and sat down in the corner next the door, the child asleep on her arm.

She was a very sorry sight, this woman. Her clothes were more than shabby; they were almost past wearing at all. The narrow, faded crimson cashmere skirt, torn and badly mended in places, showed many a spot and stain. Her coat of shoddy black was heavy without being warm and was pinned unevenly over her thin form. Her dull, scanty hair was fastened tightly under a miserable felt hat, the trimming (save the mark!) a greasy, brown and two hopelessly shattered feathers.

From the look of her sharp, colorless face she must have been starved of hope, of faith, of love, of food, body and spiritual, all her weary life. Yet she was decent and a mother honestly, for a ring of doubtful gold shone of her left hand and she held the sleeping child carefully.

Boyhood retains for a time a certain aspect of royalty, the possession of which is independent of fine raiment. This boy, in his outgrown clothes and worn and dirty shoes, with his head covered by a caricature of a cap, might have posed to any artist for the Infant Jesus and have required little idealizing.

There were several other passengers in the car who had entered it just before the poor woman, and these fares John Flinn had not yet taken up. When he had passed the most important crossing he came into the car and began to collect at the upper end. When he reached the woman he paused for the least fraction of time and then went out on his platform.

With care not to waken the child the woman had managed to get an old purse from her pocket, but John had passed her before she had time to open it, and, still holding it in her hand, she waited. Some passengers got out and others got in, and again John passed through the car, collecting their fares. The woman, seeing him coming, took out a dollar bill from that poor purse and sat holding it in her fingers.

The conductor eyed her where she sat holding the child, and his ugly, ill-tempered face grew sharper and uglier, but several times he passed out to his place without seeming to see her money. As he brushed by her she did not offer the dollar; she simply sat holding it where he must see it as he passed. There were very few stops now and the car traveled very swiftly. It was a quiet part of the city and there was no danger of accident from rapid travel. The motorman thought to create a breeze to cool his hot face. The conductor did not get this refreshment, for the car cut off the current from him.

When her journey—which was a long one—was nearly ended, and still John had not taken up her fare, instead of handing it to him boldly, the woman slowly, very slowly, folded her dollar bill and returned it to her purse. She did not look at the conductor as she did this, nor did he look at her. Yet he knew what she was doing and she felt in her soul that he knew it.

Presently the corner for her debarking was reached and she made a motion to rise. John stopped the car, and as carefully as he had helped her on he now assisted her to get down. There was not a word spoken on either side, nor did either face change its expression a particle.

Gradually after this a change crept over John Flinn. It was like the slow brewing of a storm which takes

long to gather, cloud by cloud, spreading over the blue almost imperceptibly. Always taciturn, he grew silent, more somber of aspect, less and less responsive to the good-natured advances of his fellow-workmen. His unappetizing meals were often untasted, and he fell into the way of bringing a bottle of ale or beer instead of coffee in his dinner pail. These exhilarating beverages had not, however, the effect of cheering him at all; in fact, after a while it looked as if more than mere creature comforts of meat and drink would be needed to arrest his progress to melancholia. In old times there were days when John seemed to look out upon the world with indulgence, if not downright kindness. But of late his eyes had changed in expression and had an unseeing, introspective look, as though their powers of outward perception were lost, and he appeared to dwell in thought far away from the things which surrounded him and should have claimed his undivided attention.

It was not often, however, that he missed the fulfillment of his monotonous duties. But he performed them with the air of a somnambulist, going up and down among the people who crowded his car at certain hours, with an automatic movement which, of course, no one noticed. For was he not, with all of his kind, a mere human machine at work for the public comfort and nothing more?

Whenever he came to the corner of the narrow court where he had taken up the woman and her child he looked out eagerly, as if almost expecting she would again be there. At such times he was totally oblivious of all else. Once he actually fancied he saw her, and pulled his bell, the sound of its ring and the stopping of the car rousing him from his reverie and bringing him to himself and to a flash of anger at his own stupidity, expressed by a contemptuous splitting aside and an oath.

The weather continued to grow warmer, and this may have accounted for the dull flush that came into John Flinn's face and the haggard, glassy eyes which flashed uncharacteristically if any one addressed him. Any physician of the flesh would have told him that he was suffering from malaria. His wife said he had "the spring fever," and she bought some sarsaparilla, which she drank herself, being usually consumed with thirst.

"You'd better take a day or two off, Flinn," his motorman said to him one day, and the suggestion agreed with his own ideas. Whereupon he asked for leave, and another man—one of the hundreds waiting for the chance—slipped into his place, though the "boss" promised to take him "on" when he should be fit for work.

"It looks as if Flinn was took bad with some kind of fever," said the motorman to his new comrade. "Most likely it's worryment with that wife he's got."

So John sat at home in his shirt sleeves by the front window, looking out, but as usual seeming to see nothing. Generally he had the baby in his arms or on his knee, if she would stay with him, or when her mother, washing in the yard, left it to him to get her to sleep. But often he would sit quite alone and silent, while the neighbors passing by looked at him askance.

One night his wife's brother—a worthless fellow with a turn for emotional religion—came in for a visit. He was a talkative, entertaining creature, for whom every one had a good word, although he was universally acknowledged to be "good for nothing" and, like his sister, not always sober. For this reason John did not encourage his coming and gave him but a cool welcome.

"Did you know the Jesuit Fathers is givin' a mission up at St. John's? Won't you go up, Flinn?"

John made no answer. He was brooding and did not seem to hear what was said. But the brother-in-law continued the subject, describing with great gusto the splendid sermon of the evening before, when the church was crowded.

"They're great, them Jesuits! They've a power of words, every one of 'em, but this was the most of all I ever heard. There'll be hundreds of pledges took again the drink when his preachin' is over."

"Will you take the pledge, Barney?" asked his sister, curiously.

"I will, be replied."

"Then it'll be the tenth time, to my knowin', that you've took it!" she commented, indignantly.

When the visitor was gone John got up and, putting on his coat and hat, went after him to the church, arriving in the middle of the sermon.

Patiently standing in a corner he waited until the preacher had finished, and then, cleverly threading his way through the crowd, he managed to reach the door of the sacristy at the same time with the priest and to whisper quickly a word in his ear. "Come to confession. My box is the first one from the door," was the reply.

But John shook his head and followed the priest until they reached a quiet spot. Then he said:

"I've a thing I'd like to have settled if you've got a little time. It'll not take long."

The good man, though weary led the way to a room, where he sat himself down to examine the curious human study before him.

"You're not well," he began.

"No, I'm not well. But I'm strong enough most times for what I've got to do."

Then he began in a queer, rambling way to tell of a thing he had done. "It was nothing, just nothing at all. It's not as if I done a real sin. Many a worse thing I've got back of it, and no worriment to speak of. But it sticks to my mind like a splinter, and I want to be shut out of it, and I know I'll get no rest till I tell it to some one who'll understand and not dog me about when once it's out."

The priest folded his hands and looked at John from under his eyebrows. All this was an old story to him.

"It's a sin you have on your soul, why not come to confession and make the one telling of it and save your time and mine?"

"It's no sin," replied John, doggedly.

Then he told of the woman with her child; how he had taken her up where she stood, instead of making her walk to the next corner according to rule; how he had passed her by without taking her fare. He smiled with his eyes down and cast aside, as if there were a flavor in the story sweet to his memory.

It was such a trifle that the priest was astonished and about to smile himself, when his eye met the upward challenging flash in John's eyes. Then he asked:

"But you know, of course, my man, that, while your motive was a charitable one, your act was wrong."

"Dishonest, you mean? She was poor and sick, tired and hungry. That was her last dollar. How do you suppose she come by it? Where do you judge she was going? I think of her all the time. Maybe her husband drinks. Maybe he beats her and the child."

"It was right to be sorry for her, but—"

"But you think I was wrong to leave her pass. Which do you think could best bear the weight of that lost five-cent fare, the woman, poor like that and weak and helpless, or the great, big, selfish corporation?"

John's voice was deep and his words fell like blows.

"You had no right to judge of that. You know it as well as I do. It was stealing."

"Five cents!" exclaimed John, contemptuously.

"It would have been stealing had it been but one cent."

John shook his head stubbornly.

"Do you think one of them, rich, fine folks that makes up the company, would ever miss it?" he asked, with withering contempt.

"That's not the point as between you and your conscience. You cannot dictate to any one the amount of charity he shall give, nor give in charity for another without his knowledge and consent. Least of all are you in a position to dictate to the company which employs you or to contribute to charity out of that company's pocket."

"I'm glad I let her pass!" muttered John. "She might have been the Blessed Mother herself. I've many a time since thought she was. Why should I have stooped like that in the middle of the square for a common woman? I never done it before—never. She just stood there, helpless like, looking up at me, and I stooped like a shot and took her up. The Blessed Mother has appeared to other people, and maybe she comes like that just to try me. If she ever gets on my car again, whether she's just a poor woman or not (and I hope she will come, if she's not the Blessed Mother with her Son come to try me), I'll do the same thing again. I tell you, father, I couldn't

break that dollar bill, and I'm glad I didn't do it."

The priest watched him in silence. He waited for the excitement to fade out of his face. There was a look of exhaustion there that was not accounted for and showed the man incapable at that time of reasonable argument.

John, having spoken, sat brooding in his place. Suddenly the priest asked:

"Why didn't you pay the woman's fare out of your own pocket?"

John looked up slowly, as though with difficulty putting aside his own thoughts to take in the meaning of the words he heard.

"A man with as kind a heart as you have should not be too mean to give his share."

Like a slowly kindling light in a place that was in darkness the face of John Flinn lost its haggard look. Rising to his feet he exclaimed, a ring of absolute joy in his voice:

"O Lord! I never thought of it!"

True to his word, the "boss" gave his place to John Flinn when he reported "fit for duty" a few days later. His rest had evidently "done him good," for he had resumed his old appearance, never a very cheerful one, but subject to occasional flashes of amiability, and, at least, of toleration of the world at large. The morning he returned to work he was even cheerful, and his first act as he boarded his car and gave the signal to "start her up" was to transfer a nickel from one coat pocket to the other, and then to pull the strap that registers a fare.—P. Barnett Esler in The Irish Monthly.

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—J. B. Tabb in Evangelist.

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