A Guest in Sodom

Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman

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YES that was Benjamin Rice. He has been that way ever since the affair of the automobile. His mind was run over and killed by that machine, if minds can be run over and killed, and sometimes I think they can. I have known Benjamin Rice ever since we were boys together, and he was smart enough, but he never quite got through his head the wickedness of the world he had been born into. He thought everybody else was as good and honest as he was, and when he found out he was mistaken, it was too much for him. His wife feels just as I do about it.

"That automobile was too much for pa," she often says. "Poor pa didn't make a god of his money, but he knew the worth of it, through he and his father before him workin' so hard to get a little laid by, and losin' so much was an awful shock to him; but that wasn't the worst of it. Findin' out what an awful wicked place this world he was livin' in was, and what kind of folks there was in it, just broke his heart."

Benjamin's daughter Lizzie says the same thing.

"Yes, that car just broke poor pa's heart," says she. Lizzie calls it car instead of automobile. Sometimes she calls it motor−car. Lizzie has had advantages. Her father didn't spare money where she was concerned. She went to the Means Academy in Rockland, and then her father bought a type−writer for her, and she took lessons. She hasn't worked for money yet, and I don't suppose she needs to, but she may, if she don't get married young; for she favors her father's folks, and they don't like to spend and get nothin' back.

I don't know whether it was mostly on Lizzie's account that Benjamin got that car (guess I will call it car, like her; it's easier) or on his own. For quite a while Benjamin had been sayin' to me sort of mysterious: "One of these days, Billy, I'm goin' to spend a little money for something extra. I've never had anything that I could do without, and I would like one thing, and I'm goin' to have it." When he said that, Benjamin would look real decided for him. Take him in the long run, he was a real meek, mild−spoken kind of man. He was good−lookin' too, with handsome blue eyes, and a high forehead, and a real fair complexion. I always thought Benjamin wasn't an appropriate name for him. He ought to have been christened Joseph. He was just the sort to let his brothers chuck him into a pit and take away his coat of many colors, if he owned one.

That makes me think: after Benjamin bought the car, he got a fur coat. I don't know what kind of critter it come from, but Benjamin he looked real funny in it. My wife said she'd heard of wolves in sheep's clothin', but Benjamin Rice was a sheep in wolves' clothin'. Benjamin's wife didn't have any fur coat, — she wrapped herself up in all the old shawls in the house, — but Lizzie had a real pretty blue coat lined with gray fur.

It is some years ago that Benjamin sold the nine−acre lot and bought the car. He used that money. He sold the land to a real−estate man from the city, and that was where some of the trouble came in. That night Benjamin came to my house and showed me the check he'd got for the land. He looked real excited. There were red spots on his cheeks, and his blue eyes were shinin'.

"Guess you never saw a check as big as that, Billy," says he, and he was right. Big checks have never come in my way, though I've made a fair livin'. I looked at the check, and then Benjamin put it back in his old wallet real careful.

"Guess what I'm goin' to spend that for?" says he.

"Guess you'll put it in Blendon school bonds," says I, laughin', for I couldn't imagine Benjamin spendin' that much money except for more money.

Then he just fired the news right at me.

"I'm goin' to buy an automobile," says he, and then he gives his head a toss, and looked at me as if he thought I might have something to say against it.

"A what?" says I.

"An automobile," says he.

"What for?" says I.

"What folks generally buy 'em for," says he: "to go ridin' round and get a little pleasure out of livin'. Look at here, Billy," says he, "I'm gettin' on in years, and I ain't never had much except my board and lodgin' for my hard work. Now I'm goin' to take this money, and I'm goin' to buy an automobile, and I'm goin' to have a little fun, and my wife is goin' to, and Lizzie is goin' to before she gets old."

"What kind of an automobile are you goin' to buy?" says I, sort of feeble.

"I am goin' to buy an automobile off the Verity Automobile Advance Company of Landsville, Kentucky," says he.

"Why don't you buy nearer home?" says I.

"Sammy Emerson is agent for them automobiles, and he says they are the best to be had for the money, and he knows all about them, and he's goin' to show me how to run it, and maybe Lizzie can learn, and he's goin' to keep it in order," says he.

"Have you got a guaranty?" says I.

"Lord! yes," says he; "I'm dealin' with real square and above−board people. If the first car don't work to suit me, they'll send me another, and they'll supply all the parts that get broken for nothin'; but Sammy says nothin' is goin' to get broken. He says that machine is built to last fifty years."

"Well, Sammy Emerson ought to know," says I.

Sammy Emerson we all think is a genius. We shouldn't be surprised if he did anything. He is a real mechanical genius. We found it out when he stole the works of the Baptist church organ when he was only a boy. That organ began to act queer, and it acted queerer and queerer, and one Sunday Lemuel Jones, the organist, couldn't get a solitary squeak out of it, though little Tommy Adkins was blowin' till he almost dropped. Then they found out what the trouble was. The works were gone, and Sammy Emerson had another organ most rigged up in his ma's barn.

There was an awful fuss about it. That organ had to be made over, and all the works carted back from the Emerson barn. Sammy had stolen them piece by piece. He had made a key that would unlock the church door. Mrs. Emerson had to pay a lot of money; for of course it cost, and they wouldn't let Sammy help set up the organ again, though he offered. But after that we all felt that he was a genius, though we were rather scared. My wife

said she didn't know but Sammy would try to steal her sewin'−machine and make a flyin'−machine out of it; but Sammy didn't do much harm after that. He just tinkered away, and almost did pretty wonderful things. His ma had money, and she let him have the barn to tinker in, and she let him buy lots of old junk that he thought he could make something of. Sammy had almost made an automobile himself. Everybody thought it would go if he could once get it started; but he never quite fetched the startin'. Then he took the Verity agency. I dare say his ma had begun to think he was spendin' too much, and had better try to earn a little to exercise his genius on.

"Well," says I to Benjamin, "I suppose Sammy Emerson knows about it. He ought to."

"Of course he does," says Benjamin. "He says it's the best car on the market, and there's millions back of it."

"Who is back of it?" says I.

"The Variable Tea−Kettle Corporation of Vermont," says Benjamin.

"Seems to me rather queer that a tea−kettle concern should take to making automobiles," says I.

Benjamin never got very mad, but he did look a little riled.

"Don't see anything queer about it," says he. "Anybody knows what the observation of boilin' tea−kettles led to, and everybody that has seen one dancin' on the stove at full boil can figure out for himself that if it had wheels and tires it might get somewhere. Accordin' to my way of thinkin'," says he, "a tea−kettle jest naturally leads up to an automobile."

"Does it run by steam?" says I, a little surprised.

"Do you think me and ma and Lizzie is goin' to take any chances of bein' bu'st up by a steam−engine?" says Benjamin. "Of course it runs by gasolene."

"Where be you goin' to get your gasolene?"

"I'm goin' to buy it in Rockland," says Benjamin.

"You'll have to cart it."

"Can't I run the automobile over there, — it's only ten miles, — and have it put in?" says Benjamin. "And I've cleared out the barn where I kept my hay−wagon and tip−up cart for the automobile."

"What be you goin' to do with those?" I asked.

"Oh, I've made room in the big barn. I had the carryall and the buggy taken over to Rockland, too, to be sold. No use keepin' them if I have an automobile."

Well, Benjamin went home pretty soon, and I am afraid he was a little disappointed. I tried to act real elated with his scheme and pleased because he said me and my wife and daughter should go to ride in his car, but I was really pretty well taken aback.

Well, it seemed that Benjamin had had his car ordered three months before he told me about it, and it didn't come until the first of September. However, the fall was late that year, and it looked as if he might get a good deal out of it before cold weather set in. Everybody was anxious to see it, and when it came up from the freight−station, Sammy Emerson drivin', — Lord knows how he found out the way; some folks claimed he never took any

lessons, — and Benjamin sittin' beside him in his fur coat, although it was an awful' hot day, pretty near all Blendon was out to see. Well, that car came on a Friday, — I remember the day because my wife said it was unlucky, — and they kept it goin' next day Saturday, and it stayed in the barn Sunday, and Benjamin and his wife and Lizzie walked to church. They had always driven to church, but now they had sold their carryall, and Benjamin thought from the first that it was wicked to go out in the car Sundays.

But Monday mornin' they had it out again, and Benjamin was tryin' to learn to drive, leanin' 'way over, and starin' ahead through his far−sighted glasses. In the afternoon they went out, and Sammy drove real nice and slow, and Benjamin sat 'side of him in his fur coat, and Mrs. Rice and Lizzie were on the back seat. There was room for three, and they stopped to see if my wife or daughter wouldn't like to go, but both of them was afraid. My wife said she wouldn't ride on a tea−kettle with Sammy Emerson drivin', and she was sure she wouldn't ride in an automobile drove by Sammy and backed by a tea−kettle company.

That evening Benjamin came over to see me. He looked real excited and pleased, but sort of scared,too.

"It's great, Billy," says he; "but I never can crank her." He showed me his hand all bruised. "It's a knack," says he. "You have to let go of her jest so, or she fetches you an awful blow; and, besides, I never was quite right in my side since that pleurisy two year' ago. My side is lame to−night," says he. "Guess I can't ever crank her, Billy."

"How be you goin' to manage?" says I.

"Sammy is goin' to crank her for me, and he says Abel has sense enough for that, he thinks," says he. Abel was Benjamin's hired man, and none too bright.

"I shouldn't think Abel could do anything that needed a knack," says I.

"Sammy says he can," says Benjamin again, but he did seem kind of sad because he couldn't crank it himself. He was just like a baby with a rattle over that car. Well, Abel did learn to crank it, but I don't think he ever could have except he happened to use both hands alike: he was left−handed and right−handed. When one hand was too used up, he could crank with the other; for he never did learn the knack of it, and the car always hit him a crack before he could get clear from her. Then, too, he wasn't bright enough to know how lame he was, and say he wouldn't crank; and, too, the car wasn't in shape to run, let alone crank, much of the time.

The trouble began the Tuesday after it came. That evenin' poor Benjamin came down to my house, limpin' and lookin' dreadful cast−down.

"What is the matter?" says I.

"She broke down in Rockland," says he, "and ma and Lizzie had to come home by train, and I walked. It is going to cost so much to keep that car that I must begin to save somewhere. I walked all the way, and my corns are bad, and the bunion on my right foot, and I hadn't ought to have come down here to−night, but ma and Lizzie keep askin' me if I think I have got a good car, and I wanted to get away from it. Women mean well, but they don't know when not to talk. Oh, Billy," says poor Benjamin, "I am dreadful' afraid I haven't got a good car, and I have sunk all that money into it! The man over in the automobile place in Rockland says the drivin'−shaft is bent, and he says it is made of tin, when it ought to be steel. Oh, Billy, should you think they would have sold me tin instead of steel?"

Of course I knew better than that. "Couldn't have been tin," says I.

"Mighty poor steel, then," says Benjamin, dreadful' mournful. "I'm afraid I've thrown my money away, and, worse than that, I'm afraid there is more wickedness in the world than I've ever dreamed of. I paid them for good steel,

Billy. It don't make much difference whether it is tin or poor steel, anyway; it's bent, and something else they call the traditional is twisted so it won't work. I'm afraid it's a pretty bad business, Billy, and they are goin' to put up twenty little, cheap houses on the nine−acre lot, and ma and Lizzie say only cheap people will live in them, and it will spoil our place. Should you have thought that a man could do such a thing as that, Billy?"

I pitied Benjamin that night, but I agreed with him that he had made a pretty bad bargain, and we were both right.

Once in a while, after Sammy Emerson had done an extra lot of tinkerin', the car would run real nice a day and a half or two days, but she never run over two. I went out in her once, and I was so sorry for Benjamin that I chipped in and helped him pay a man with a team to drag her to Rockland, then we walked home. That settled me. I was glad to have poor Benjamin come and tell me his troubles, but I didn't want to walk home.

Well, things went on from bad to worse. Finally Lizzie Rice wrote a real nice, ladylike letter to the Variable Tea−Kettle Company, and asked for the money back; but they didn't take a mite of notice of it. Then Benjamin got a lawyer to look at the contract, and the lawyer said it was so open that an elephant could walk between every word without jostlin' them. Then Benjamin gave up gettin' righted by the tea−kettle concern, but he was real charitable. He said that he was sure that they made splendid tea−kettles, and all the trouble was in tryin' to apply their tea−kettle rules to automobiles. He said he didn't doubt they meant well.

It was a beautiful fall that year, not a mite of snow and splendid weather up to Christmas. Benjamin and Sammy tinkered and tinkered, and the car would run a little while between tinkerin's, then it would have to be all done over again. And poor Benjamin had to keep sendin' to factories for the parts that got broken or dropped out. Once Benjamin came to my house with a paper bag full of little broken steel things. "I picked them up in the barn, Billy," says he; "I don't know what they be."

One evenin' he came to my house and almost cried like a baby.

"Now she has busted her transgression, Billy," says he, "and a new one will cost a lot, and we have to wait an awful time for it, too."

I always suspected that Benjamin must have got some of the names of the parts wrong, but I didn't know. What I did know was that Benjamin, who had never cheated his fellow−men out of a penny, had not been treated likewise. I never knew what was really the matter with the car, and I don't believe anybody else did. Our doctor said it was an instance of congenital malformation, which had a terrible sound, and seemed to me to fit the case exactly.

They tinkered in Sammy Emerson's barn, but they tinkered mostly in Benjamin's, for Sammy had so much junk around there wasn't much room. Then two men come from the city, and Benjamin's wife fed them real high, and kept them a week; but though they said they got the car in splendid order, they swore so that Benjamin paid them and sent them off. He said he wouldn't have such language used over any property of his, even if it was an automobile. But after that he hired a driver from the city. They said he had worked in automobile factories and been to an automobile school, but he only ran the car a week before she gave out entirely. Then he left, and Lizzie she wrote to the Kentucky company, and they wrote right back a real nice letter, and Benjamin was tickled 'most to pieces. He showed the letter to me, and it did read real fair.

"That's what comes from dealin' with an honest company," says he, for they wrote to ship the car back to Kentucky, and they would send a brand−new one right from the factory.

Well, the car was shipped back to Kentucky, and Benjamin had an awful bill to pay for freight, and after about six weeks the new car came, and he had freight to pay on that, but he was so tickled he didn't complain. That new car run just twice to Rockland and back before she broke down, and the tinkerin' begun again. They took her over to

Rockland and had her tinkered there by a man who said he had been born and brought up in an automobile school, but after he was through they were six hours and a half runnin' her home. Then Benjamin and Sammy tinkered again, and finally the cap−climax came. Benjamin Rice had never lost his patience within the memory of man. Folks had always said he was too good to live; but he was tried too far. He and Sammy were out in the car, and they had only got half a mile in an hour, when something went off like a pistol, and the car wouldn't budge. It was right in front of the store, too, and a lot of folks came runnin'. I was there. Benjamin he just stood up in that car and he damned for the first time in his life.

"I don't care whether it's the traditional, or the tin drivin'−shaft, or the transgression that's bu'st," says he — "damn, damn, damn!"

Sammy Emerson he was so scared that he slid out of the car and stood gapin' up at him, and Abel, who had his right hand tied up, — had taken him along to crank, — sat in the back seat and shook all over. Benjamin went on, and it was something sort of solemn and awful and made you think of the Psalms.

"I am an old man," says he; "never in my whole life have I taken the name of the Lord in vain, but now I am pushed on beyond my strength by the devil and his work. These things" — and he pointed down at the car, which was smoking up in his face — "are the work of the evil one himself. I have lived a decent, honest life. I have never wronged my fellow−man, and now it has come to me in my old age to see evil and have it worked upon me. I have spent for this worthless thing, the work of dishonest hands and dishonest hearts, money which was earned by honest labor in the fear of the Lord."

Then he goes on to tell us something which did make us stare. It seemed that Lizzie Rice had lost in the first car a little gold breastpin, and she had found it that very mornin' slipped into a little hole in the linin' of one of the pockets; and Benjamin knew by that that the company had not sent him a new car, but his old one painted up, and I suppose they changed the numbers and things. Folks said they must have, but maybe poor Benjamin never thought about the numbers, anyway, and as for Sammy Emerson, he was brighter about mechanics than about some other things, and maybe he never thought either.

Anyway, the point was that Benjamin had his same old car back again, and he knew it. So he keeps on, after tellin' us that. "I will have nothin' more to do with this, so help me God!" says he. "Any man who dares face the father of all lies and tamper with his works can take this automobile and welcome. As for me, I am done with it. I would not sell it for a penny: I should wrong the buyer. I would not give it away: I should wrong the receiver. But I leave it here to be disposed of as any man among you may wish. It is the work of iniquity, which I would have died rather than seen with my old eyes. Oh, if I could have died before I lost my faith in my fellow−men, and seen the wickedness of the world!"

With that Benjamin gets down sort of stiff and majestic, and walks away, and leaves the car starin' at us with its two glassy eyes. But poor Benjamin had not gone far before he began to stagger, and then down he went as if he had been hit on the head. He had a stroke, and they (I was one of them) got him into the storekeeper's wagon, and carried him home, and got the doctor. It was all dreadful. It meant a good deal more than an automobile, as the doctor said. He put it just the way it was. Says he, "that good, simple man has encountered the deadly juggernaut of progress of the times, and has gone down before it."

But Benjamin didn't die, of course, because you just saw him. That automobile stood right there in the road several days while he was so dreadful sick. The horses shied at it, and the women dragged their children past for fear it might start up of its own accord. Then one mornin' comes the doctor, and says that Benjamin had come to himself as much as he ever would, and could speak, though not very plain. "And he wants this confounded rattletrap of a machine," says the doctor, glarin' at the car. The doctor never had any use for automobiles, but drove good horses till he quit doctorin'.

So that car was towed back to Benjamin's, and it has set there in his yard ever since. Benjamin's wife and Lizzie made a waterproof cover for the thing in wet weather, and it's just as good as it ever was, which ain't sayin' much. Lizzie and her mother see to it that it's kept dusted off and real clean, and they have had it painted once. When the house was painted, there was some paint left over, and they had it put on the car to save it. That's the reason why it's white with green stripes. The green was left from the house−blinds. The car was dark blue when it was new.

Well, Benjamin sits in that car every day, dressed up in his fur coat, with his shakin' hand on the wheel, and now and then when he sees anything out on the road he toots the horn. And, though of course it's a dreadful thing, because he ain't what he used to be, you can't seem to sense it, because, if ever there was a man happy in this world, it's Benjamin Rice. He just seems to smile on livin', and you saw yourself how fat and rosy he is. There he sits in that car, that won't stir a peg till the day of judgment, and — he thinks he's goin' forty miles an hour!