

THE THEATER PARTY

(From *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*)

By Alice Hegan Rice

In the Public Domain

One cold December day Billy Wiggs came in and found his mother leaning wearily on the table. Her face brightened as he entered, but he caught the tired look in her eyes.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Ain’t nothin’ the matter, Billy,” she said, trying to speak cheerfully, “I’m jes’ wore out, that’s all. It’ll be with me like it was with Uncle Ned’s ole ox, I reckon; he kep’ a-goin’ an’ a-goin’ till he died a-standin’ up, an’ even then they had to push him over.”

She walked to the window, and stood gazing absently across the commons. “Do you know, Billy,” she said suddenly, “I’ve got the craziest notion in my head. I’d jes’ give any thin’ to see the show at the Opery House this week.”

If she had expressed a wish for a diamond necklace, Billy could not have been more amazed, and his countenance expressed his state of mind. Mrs. Wiggs hastened to explain:

“Course, I ain’t really thinkin’ ’bout goin’, but them show-bills started me to studyin’ ’bout it, an’ I got to wishin’ me an’ you could go.”

“I don’t ’spect it’s much when you git inside,” said Billy, trying the effects of negative consolation.

“Yes, ’tis, Billy Wiggs,” answered his mother, impressively. “You ain’t never been inside a theayter, an’ I have. I was there twict, an’ it was grand! You orter see the lights an’ fixin’s, an’ all the fine ladies an’ their beaux. First time I went they was a man in skin-tights a-walkin’ on a rope h’isted ’way up over ever’body’s head.”

“What’s skin-tights?” asked Billy, thrilled in spite of himself.

“It’s spangles ’round yer waist, an’ shoes without no heels to ’em. You see, the man couldn’t wear many clothes, ’cause it would make him too heavy to stay up there in the air. The band plays all the time, an’ folks sing an’ speechify, an’ ever’body laughs an’ has a good time. It’s jes’ grand, I tell you!”

Billy’s brows were puckered, and he sat unusually quiet for a while; looking at his mother. Finally he said:

“You might take my snow-money from las’ week.”

Mrs. Wiggs was indignant. "Why, Billy Wiggs!" she exclaimed, "do you think I'd take an' go to a show, when Asia an' Australia ain't got a good shoe to their backs?"

Billy said no more about the theater, but that afternoon, when he was out with the kindling, he pondered the matter deeply. It was quite cold, and sometimes he had to put the reins between his knees and shove his hands deep into his pockets to get the stiffness out of them. It really seemed as if everybody had just laid in a supply of kindling, and the shadowy little plan he had been forming was growing more shadowy all the time.

"I 'spect the tickets cost a heap," he thought ruefully, as he drew himself up into a regular pretzel of a boy; "but, then, she never does have no fun, an' never gits a thing fer herself." And because Billy knew of his mother's many sacrifices, and because he found it very hard to take Jim's place, a lump lodged in his throat, and gave him so much trouble that he forgot for a while how cold he was.

About this time he came within sight of the Opera House, and tantalizing posters appeared of "The Greatest Extravaganza of the Century." He pulled Cuba into a walk, and sat there absorbing the wonders depicted; among the marvels were crowds of children dressed as butterflies, beautiful ladies marching in line, a man balancing a barrel on his feet, and—yes, there was the man in "Skin-tights" walking on the rope!

A keen puff of wind brought Billy back to his senses, and as his longing eyes turned from the gorgeous showbills they encountered the amused look of a gentleman who had just come out from the Opera House. He was so tall and fine-looking that Billy thought he must own the show.

"Some kindlin', sir?"

The gentleman shook his head. The posters still danced before Billy's eyes; if his mother could only see the show! The last chance seemed slipping away. Suddenly a bold idea presented itself. He got out of the wagon, and came up on the step.

"Couldn't you use a whole load, if I was to take it out in tickets?"

The man looked puzzled. "Take it out in tickets?" he repeated.

"Yes, sir," said Billy, "theayter tickets. Don't you own the show?"

The gentleman laughed. "Well, hardly," he said. "What do you want with more than one ticket?"

There was a certain sympathy in his voice, in spite of the fact that he was still laughing, and before Billy knew it he had told him all about it.

"How many tickets could yer gimme fer the load?" he asked, in conclusion.

The gentleman made a hurried calculation. "You say you have three sisters?" he asked.

"Yep," said Billy.

“Well, I should say that load was worth about five tickets.”

“Gee whiz!” cried the boy, “that ’ud take us all!”

He followed the gentleman back to the ticket-office, and eagerly watched the man behind the little window count out five tickets and put them in a pink envelope.

“One for you, one for your mother, and three for the kids,” said his friend, as Billy buttoned the treasure in the inside pocket of his ragged coat.

He was so excited that he almost forgot his part of the bargain, but as the gentleman was turning away he remembered.

“Say, mister, where must I take the kindlin’ to?”

“Oh, that’s all right; you can sell it tomorrow,” answered the other.

Billy’s face fell instantly. “If you don’t take the kindlin’, I’ll have to give you back the tickets. Ma don’t ’low us to take nothin’ that way.”

“But I don’t need the kindling; I haven’t any place to put it.”

“Ain’t you got no home?” asked Billy, incredulously.

“No,” answered the man, shortly.

The idea of anyone, in any walk of life, not having use for kindling was a new one to Billy. But he had no time to dwell on it, for this new complication demanded all his attention.

“Ain’t there nobody you could give it to?” he asked.

The gentleman was growing impatient. “No, no; go along; that’s all right.”

But Billy knew it would not be all right when he got home, so he made one more effort. “How’d you like to send it out to Miss Hazy?” he inquired.

“Well, Miss Hazy, not having the pleasure of my acquaintance, might object to the delicate attention. Who is she?”

“She’s Chris’s aunt; they ain’t had no fire fer two days.”

“Oh!” said the man, heartily, “take it to Miss Hazy, by all means. Tell her it’s from Mr. Bob, who is worse off than she is, for he hasn’t even a home.”

An hour later there was wild excitement under the only tin roof in the Cabbage Patch. Such scrubbing and brushing as was taking place!

“It’s jes’ like a peetrified air-castle,” said Mrs. Wiggs, as she pressed out Asia’s best dress; “here I been thinkin’ ’bout it, an’ wantin’ to go, an’ here I am actually gittin’ ready to go! Come here, child, and let me iron out yer plaits while the iron’s good an’ hot.”

This painful operation was performed only on state occasions; each little Wiggs laid her head on the ironing-board, a willing sacrifice on the altar of vanity, while Mrs. Wiggs carefully ironed out five plaits on each head. Europena was the only one who objected to being a burnt-offering, but when she saw the frizzled locks of the others, her pride conquered her fear, and, holding tight to Billy’s hand, she bent her chubby head to the trying ordeal.

“Now, Billy, you run over to Mrs. Eichorn’s an’ ast her to loan me her black crepe veil. Mrs. Krasmier borrowed it yesterday to wear to her pa’s funeral, but I guess she’s sent it back by this time. An’, Billy—Billy, wait a minute; you be sure to tell ’em we are goin’ to the show.” Mrs. Wiggs vigorously brushed her hair with the clothes-brush as she spoke. Australia had thrown the hair-brush down the cistern the summer before.

“Asia, you go git the alpaca from behind the chest, an’ sorter shake it out on the bed.”

“Who’s goin’ to wear it, ma?” The question came in anxious tones, for the blue alpaca had been sent them in a bundle of old clothes, and though it failed to fit either of the girls, the wearing of it was a much coveted privilege.

“Well, now, I don’t know,” said Mrs. Wiggs, critically surveying the children; “it won’t button good on you, and swags in the back on Australia.”

“Lemme wear it, ma!”

“No, lemme!” came in excited tones.

Mrs. Wiggs had seen trouble before over the blue alpaca; she knew what anguish her decision must bring to one or the other.

“It really looks best on Asia,” she thought; “but if I let her wear it Austr’y’ll have a cryin’ spell an’ git to holdin’ her breath, an’ that’ll take up so much time.” So she added aloud: “I’ll tell you what we’ll do. Asia, you kin wear the skirt, an’ Austr’y kin wear the waist.”

But when she had pinned the skirt over one little girl’s red calico dress, and buttoned the blue waist over the clean apron of the other, she looked at them dubiously. “They do look kinder mixed,” she admitted to herself, “but I reckon it don’t matter, so long as they’re both happy.”

Just here Billy came in, with the veil in one hand and a bunch of faded carnations in the other.

“Look, ma!” he exclaimed, holding up his trophy, “I swapped ’em with Pete fer a top an’ agate. He got ’em outen a ash-barrel over on the avenue.”

“Well, now, *ain’t* that nice?” said Mrs. Wiggs. “I’ll jes’ clip the sterns an’ put ’em in a bottle of water, an’ they’ll pick up right smart by the time we go. I wisht you had something to fix up in, Billy,” she added, “you look as seedy as a raspberry.”

Billy did look rather shabby; his elbows were out, and two of the holes in his pants were patched and two were not. Mrs. Wiggs was rummaging in the table drawer.

“I wisht I could find somethin’ of yer pa’s that would do. Here’s his white gloves he wore that time he was pall-bearer to ole Mr. Bender. Seems to me they do wear white gloves to the theayter, but I disremember.”

“Naw! I ain’t a-goin’ to wear no gloves,” said Billy, firmly.

Mrs. Wiggs continued her search. "Here's yer grandpa's watch-fob, but I'm skeered fer you to wear it, you might lose it. It's a family remnant—been handed down two generations. What about this here red comforter? It would sorter spruce you up, an' keep you warm, besides; you know you've had a cold fer a week, an' yer pipes is all stopped up." So it was decided, and Billy wore the comforter.

At seven o'clock they were ready and, the news having spread abroad that the Wiggsses were going to a show, many of the neighbors came in to see how they looked and to hear how it happened.

"Some of you all shake down the stove an' pull the door to fer me. I am jes' that skeered of hurtin' Mrs. Eichorn's veil. I'm 'fraid to turn my head," Mrs. Wiggs said nervously, as she stepped off the porch .

. The little procession had left the railroad tracks far behind, when Mrs. Wiggs stopped suddenly.

"Fer the land's sakes alive! Do you know what we've gone an' done? We have left the theayter tickets to home!"

At this Australia began to cry, and a gloom settled upon the party.

"Billy, you run back, fast as yer legs kin carry you, an' look in that tin can behind the clock, an' we'll wait right here fer you." Mrs. Wiggs wrapped Europa in her shawl, and tried to keep up the spirits of the party as they huddled on the curbing to await Billy's return.

"Look how pretty it looks, all the lights a-streamin' out the winders on the snow. Looks like a chromo ma used to have."

But the young Wiggsses were in no frame of mind to appreciate the picturesqueness of the scene.

It was very cold, and even the prospect of the show was dimmed by the present discomfort. By and by Australia's sobs began anew.

"What's the matter, honey? Don't cry; Billy'll be back in a little while, an' then we'll git in where it's good an' warm."

"I want my supper!" wailed Australia.

Then it dawned on Mrs. Wiggs for the first time that in the excitement of preparation, supper had been entirely overlooked.

"Well, if that don't beat all!" said she. "I had jes' 'bout as much idea of supper as a goat has of kid gloves!"

But when Billy came flying back with the tickets, and the party had started once more on the long walk to the Opera House, the enticing posters began to appear, and supper and the cold were forgotten.

* * *

“If his heart at high floods
Swamped his brain now and then,
‘Twas but richer for that
When the tide ebbed again.”

A large audience assembled that night to witness “The Greatest Extravaganza of the Century.” The Opera House was a blaze of light and color.

From the recesses of one of the boxes, Redding made a careful survey of the faces beneath him. First nights usually found him there, with the same restless, eager look in his eyes. Tonight he evidently failed to find what he sought, and was turning listlessly away when he stopped suddenly, bent forward, then smiled broadly. He had caught sight of Billy’s red comforter.

The boy’s hair was plastered close to his head, and his face was transformed by soap and happiness. Redding glanced quizzically at the rest of the party—at the mother’s radiant countenance beaming from the dusk of her crepe veil, at the three little girls in their composite costumes, at the carnations pinned on each bosom. Then he deliberately turned his back on “The Greatest Extravaganza of the Century,” and centered his attention on the parquet group.

It was a singularly enthusiastic theater party, oblivious of surroundings, and lost in wonder at the strange sights. Billy’s laugh rang out frequently, with refreshing spontaneity. Their enjoyment was so evident that Redding was surprised, at the close of the first act, to see them put on their wraps and march solemnly out of the theater. He hastened to the lobby, and touched Billy on the shoulder.

“Didn’t you like the show?” he asked.

“You bet!” said Billy, his eyes shining and his cheeks flushed.

Mrs. Wiggs was hopelessly entangled in the crepe veil, but her ideas of etiquette were rigid. She disengaged one hand and said, with dignity: “I ’low this is Mr. Bob, Billy’s friend. Happy to meet yer acquaintance. Asia, speak to the gentleman—Australia—Europena!” with a commanding nod at each.

Three small hands were thrust at Redding simultaneously, and he accommodated them all in his broad palm.

“But why are you going home?” he asked, looking from one to the other.

“Where else would we go to?” asked Mrs. Wiggs, in amazement.

“Why not stay and see the play out? That was only the first act.”

“Is there some more, ma?” asked Asia, eagerly.

“Why, of course,” explained Redding, “lots more. Now, go back, and stay until everybody has left the theater, and then you will be certain it’s over.”

So back they went, furnishing an amusing *entr’acte* for the impatient audience.

After the curtain descended on the final tableau, Redding waited in the lobby while the stream of people passed. The Wiggsses had obeyed instructions, and were the very last to come out. They seemed dazed by their recent glimpse into fairyland. Something in their thin bodies and pinched faces made Redding form a sudden resolve.

“Billy,” he said gravely, “can’t you and your family take supper with me?”

Billy and his mother exchanged doubtful glances; for the past three hours everything had been so strange and unusual that they were bewildered.

“You see, we will go right over to Bond’s and have something to eat before you go home,” urged Redding.

Mrs. Wiggs was in great doubt, but one of the little girls pulled her skirt and said, in pleading tones: “Ma, let’s do!” and Billy was already casting longing eyes at the big restaurant across the way. She had not the heart to refuse. As they were crossing the street, Asia stopped suddenly and cried:

“Ma, there’s the ‘Christmas Lady’ gittin’ in that hack! She seen us! Look!”

But before they could turn the carriage door had slammed.

Redding took them into a small apartment, curtained off from the rest of the cafe, so that only the waiters commented on the strange party. At first there was oppressive silence; then the host turned to Europena and asked her what she liked best to eat. A moment of torture ensued for the small lady, during which she nearly twisted her thumb from its socket, then she managed to gasp:

“Green pups!”

Mr. Bob laughed. “Why, you little cannibal!” he said.

“What on earth does she mean?”

“Cream puffs,” explained Mrs. Wiggs, airily. “She et ’em onct at Mrs. Reed’s, the Bourbon Stock Yard’s wife, an’ she’s been talkin’ ’bout ’em ever sence.”

After this the ice, while not broken, at least had a crack in it, and by the time the first course was served Redding was telling them a funny story, and three of the audience were able to smile. It had pleased him to order an elaborate supper, and he experienced the keenest enjoyment over the novelty of the situation. The Wiggsses ate as he had never seen people eat before. “For speed and durability they break the record,” was his mental comment. He sat by and, with consummate tact, made them forget everything but the good time they were having.

As the supper progressed, Mrs. Wiggs became communicative. She still wore her black cotton gloves, and gesticulated with a chicken croquette as she talked.

“Yes,” she was saying, “Jim was one of these handy children; when he was eight years old he could peddle as good as you could! I guess you heard ’bout our roof; ever’body was talkin’ ’bout it. Billy is takin’ right after him; do you know what that boy has gone and done? He’s built his pa a monumint!”

“A monument!” exclaimed Redding.

“Yes, sir, a tombstun monument! I was allers a-wishin’ that Mr. Wiggs could have a monumint, and Billy never said a word, but he set his head to it. One day he came home with a lot of these here tiles what they had throwed out from the tile fact’ry; some of ’em was jes’ a little nicked, an’ others was jes’ as good as new. Well he kep’ on gittin’ ’em ever’ day or two, till he had a consider’ble pile. Ever’ night he used to set on the floor an’ fool with them things, a-fittin’ ’em here an’ crack in’ ’em off there, but I never paid no ’tention to him. One night, when I came in from Mrs. Eichorn’s, what did I see on the floor but a sure-’nough tombstun slab, an’ spelt out in little blue tiles down the middle was:

‘Pa. Gone, but not forgotten.’

I was jes’ that pleased I set down an’ bust out cryin’. We made a sorter box to hold it, an’ chinked it up with cement, an’ las’ Sunday me an’ the children took it out an’ fixed it up on Mr. Wiggs’s grave. Someday we are going to make Jimmy one; you know Jimmy’s my boy that’s dead.” Her eyes filled and her lips trembled; even the sunshine of her buoyant nature could not dispel one shadow that always lay across her heart.

At this moment Billy, doubtless thrilled at being the topic of conversation, upset his glass of water, and the deluge descended full upon Australia, drenching the waist of the blue alpaca. Such a wail as arose! Threats and persuasion were alike unavailing; she even refused to be mopped off, but slid in a disconsolate heap under the table. Redding attempted to invade the citadel with an orange as a flag of truce, but his overtures were ineffectual, and he was compelled to retreat under fire.

“I’d leave her be, Mr. Bob,” advised Mrs. Wiggs, placidly, as she spread her salad on a piece of bread. “She’ll git to holdin’ her breath if you notice her.”

The shrieks gradually diminished to spasmodic sobs, which in turn gave place to ominous silence.

"Billy," said Redding, taking Mrs. Wiggs's advice and ignoring the flood sufferer, "how would you like to be my office-boy?"

"I'd like it a heap," answered Billy, promptly.

Redding turned to Mrs. Wiggs. "You see, it's a newspaper office, and while the pay isn't much at first, still it's better than peddling kindling, and there would be a chance for promotion as he got older."

"Oh, yes," answered Mrs. Wiggs, complacently, "there wouldn't be no trouble ’bout Billy promotin’. I ’spect he could take to writin’ newspapers right away, if you could hold him down to it.

“He’s jes’ like his pa—the very spittin’ image of him!
Mr. Wiggs was so educated—the most fluent man in jography I ever seen!”

“I’m goin’ to be like Mr. Bob when I grow up,” said Billy, stoutly. His recollection of his paternal parent was not the sort ideals are made of.

Just here the waiter appeared with the final course, and Asia lifted the tablecloth and whispered, “Say, ‘Straly, we’ve got ice cream.” No answer. Then little Europa, with baby wisdom, put her tow head under the cloth, and said, “ ‘Traly, it’s pink!” and Australia emerged, tear-stained but smiling, and finished her supper on Mr. Bob’s knee.

When the limit of capacity had been tested to the fullest, and Billy had declared that “he couldn’t swaller no more, he was jes’ chawin’,” Redding filled their pockets with candy and, when Mrs. Wiggs was not looking, put a quarter in each hand. Then he rang for a carriage and, in spite of Mrs. Wiggs’s protestations, he put them in, and repeated Billy’s directions as to the exact location of the Cabbage Patch.

“My, my, ain’t this nice!” said Mrs. Wiggs, leaning back against carriage cushions for the first time in her life, while Redding lifted Europa in beside her.

“We’ve seed a good time fer onct in our lives,” said Asia. It was the first time she had spoken since they left the theater.

“Lemme ride up on top, ma!” demanded Billy, eagerly.

“Lemme, too, lemme!” came from the sleepy Australia, who did not know what new attraction was being offered, but was resolved not to miss anything.

“All right, Billy; but Austrya, you must stay with ma. Good-by, Mr. Bob, and thanks-thanks fer one an’ all!”

Redding stood on the corner where they had left him, and the smile died out of his face. Within a block was a jolly crowd and a hearty welcome; across the street was the big apartment house where his dark and cheerless window promised him nothing. For a moment he stood irresolute. “There is certainly nobody to care where I go,” he thought gloomily; then suddenly the smile came back. “But if I’m to be Billy Wiggs’s model, I guess I’d better go to bed.” He ran lightly across the street, and up the broad stone steps.