

The Passenger

By E. F. Benson

On a certain Tuesday night during last October I was going home down war-darkened Piccadilly on the top of a westering bus. It still wanted a few minutes to eleven o'clock, the theatres had not yet disgorged their audiences, and I was quite alone up aloft, though inside the vehicle was full to repletion. But the chilliness of the evening and a certain bitter quality in the south-east wind accounted for this, and also led me to sit on the hindmost of the seats, close to the stairs, where my back was defended from the bite of the draught by the protective knife-board.

I had barely taken my seat when an incident that for the moment just a little startled me occurred, for I thought I felt something (or somebody) push by me, brushing lightly against my right arm and leg. This impression was vivid enough to make me look round, expecting a fellow-passenger or perhaps the conductor. We were just passing underneath a shaded lamp in the middle of the street when this happened, and I perceived, without any doubt whatever, that my nerves or a sudden draught must have deceived my senses into imagining this, for there was nobody there. But, though I did not give two further thoughts to this impression, I knew that at that moment my pleasurable anticipations from this dark and keen-aired progression had vanished, and, with rather bewildering suddenness, a mood uneasy and ominous had taken possession of me.

I did not, as far as I am aware, make in the smallest degree any mental connection between this sense of being brushed against by something unseen and the vanishing of the contented mood. I put the one down to imagination, the other to the desolate twilight of the streets and the inclemency of the night. A falling barometer portended storm, there had been disquieting news from the Western battleline that afternoon, and those causes seemed sufficient (or nearly sufficient) to account for the sudden dejection that had taken hold of me. And yet, even as I told myself that these were causes enough, I knew that there was another symptom in my disquietude for which they did not account.

This was the sense that I had suddenly been brought into touch with something that lay outside the existing world as I had known it two minutes before. There was something more in my surroundings than could be accounted for by eye and ear. I heard the boom and rattle of the bus as we roared down the decline of Piccadilly, I saw the shaded lamps, the infrequent pedestrians, the tall houses with blinds drawn down according to regulations, for fear of enemy aircraft, and soon across the sky were visible the long luminous pencils cast on to the mottled floor of clouds overhead by the searchlights at Hyde Park Corner; but I knew that none of these, these wars and rumours of wars, entirely accounted for my sudden and fearful alacrity of soul. There was something else; it was as if in a darkened room I had been awakened by the tingling noise of a telephone bell, had been torn from sleep by it, as if some message was even now coming through from unseen and discarnate realms. And on the moment I saw that I was not alone on the top of the bus.

There was someone with his back to me on the seat right in front. For a second or two he was sharply silhouetted against the lamps of a motor coming down the hill towards us, and I could see that he sat with head bent forward and coat-collar turned up. And at that instant I knew that it was this figure unaccountably appearing there that caused the telephone-tingle in my brain. It was not merely that it had appeared there when I was certain that I was the sole passenger up on

the top; had the roof been crowded in every seat I should have known that one of those heads, that belonging to the man who sat leaning forward, was not of this world as represented by the tall houses, the searchlight beams, the other passengers. Then, mixed up with this horror of the spirit, there came to me also a feeling of intense and invincible curiosity. I had penetrated again into the psychical world, into the realm of the unseen and real existences that surround us.

Precisely then, while those impressions took form and coherence in my mind, the conductor came up the stairs. Simultaneously the bell sounded, and as the bus slackened speed and stopped, he leant over the side by me, so that I saw his face very clearly. In another moment he stamped, signalling the driver to go on again, and turned to me with hand out for my fare. He punched a two-penny ticket for me, and then walked forward along the gangway towards the front seat where the unexplained passenger sat. But halfway there he stopped and turned back again.

‘Funny thing, sir,’ he said. ‘I thought I saw another fare sitting there.’

He turned to go down the stairs, and, watching him, I saw, just before his head vanished, that he looked forward again along the roof, shading his eyes with his hand. Then he came back a couple of steps, still looking forward, then finally turned and left me alone on the top there—or not quite alone.

After leaving Hyde Park Corner a somewhat grosser darkness pervaded the streets, but still I believed that I could see faintly the outline of the bowed head of the man who sat on the front seat of the bus. But in that dim, uncertain light, flecked with odd shadows, I felt that my certainty that it was still there faded, as I strained my eyes to pierce the ambient dimness.

Looking forward eagerly and intently then, I was suddenly startled again by the feeling that somebody (or something) brushed by me. Instantly I started to my feet, and with one step got to the head of the stairs leading down. Certainly there was no one on them, and equally certainly there was no one now on the front seat, or on any other seat.

A fine rain had begun to fall, blown stingingly by the wind that was increasing every moment, and having completely satisfied myself that there was no one there, I descended from the top of the bus to go inside if there was a seat to be had.

I was delayed, still standing on the stairs, by the stream of passengers leaving the bus, and when I got down to the ground floor I found that as I had had the top to myself on the first part of my journey, I was to enjoy an untenanted interior now. I sat close to the door, and presently beckoned to the conductor.

‘Did anyone leave the top of the bus,’ I asked, ‘just before we stopped here?’

He looked at me sideways a little curiously.

‘Not as I know of, sir,’ he said.

We drew up, and a number of cheerful soldiers invaded the place.

For some reason I could not get the thought of this dim, inconclusive experience out of my head. It was not at all impossible that all I had seen—namely, the head and shoulders of a man seated on the front bench of the bus—was accounted for by the tricky shadows and veiled light of the streets; or, again, it was within the bounds of possibility that in the darkness a real living man might have come up there, and in the same confusion of shade and local illumination have left again.

It was conceivable also that the same queer lights and shadows deceived the conductor even as they had deceived me; while, as for the brushing against my arm and leg, which I thought I had twice experienced, that might possibly have been the stir and eddy of some draught on this windy night buffeting round the corner by the stairs. And yet with every desire to think

reasonably about it, I could not make myself believe that this was all. Deep down in me I knew I was convinced that what I had seen and felt was not on the ordinary planes of perceptible things. Furthermore, I knew that there was more connected with that figure on the front seat that should sometime be revealed to me. What it was I had no idea, but the sense that more was coming, some development which I felt sure would be tragic and terrible, while it filled me with some be-fogged and nightmarish horror, yet inspired me with an invincible curiosity.

Accordingly, next evening I stationed myself at the place where I had boarded this particular bus some quarter of an hour before the time that it passed there the previous night. It appeared probable that the phantom, whatever it was, was local; that it might appear again (as in a haunted house) on the bus on which I had seen it before. I guessed, furthermore, that, its habitat being a particular bus, the locality of its appearance otherwise was between the Ritz Hotel and the top of Sloane Street.

My knowledge of the organization of the traffic service was *nil*, it was but guesswork that led me to suppose that the conductor would be on the same bus tonight as that on which he had been the evening before. And, after waiting ten minutes or so, I saw him.

Tonight the bus was moderately full both inside and on the top, and it was with a certain sense of comfort that I found myself gregariously placed. The front seat where it had sat before, however, was empty, and I placed myself on the seat immediately behind.

Just on my right were a man in khaki and a girl, uproariously cheerful. The sound of human talk and laughter made an encouraging music, but in spite of that, I felt some undefined and chilly fear creeping over me as we bounced down the dip of Piccadilly, while I kept my eyes steadily on the vacant couple of seats in front of me. And then I felt something brush by me, and, turning my head to look, saw nothing that could account for it. But when I looked in front of me again, I saw that on the vacant seat there was sitting a man with coat collar turned up and head bent forward. He was not in the act of sitting down—he was there.

We stopped at that moment at Hyde Park Corner; the rain had begun to fall more heavily, and I saw that all the occupants of the top of the bus had risen to take shelter inside or in the Tube station; one alone, sitting just in front of me, did not move.

At the thought of being alone again with him, a sudden panic seized me, and I rose also to follow the others down. But even as I stood at the top of the stairs, something of courage, or at least of curiosity, prevailed, and instead I sat down again on the back seat (nearer than that I felt I could not go) and watched for what should be. In a moment or two we started off again.

Tonight, in spite of the falling rain, there was more light; behind the clouds, probably the moon had risen, and I could see with considerable distinctness the figure that shared the top with me. I longed to be gone, so cold was the fear that gripped my heart, but still insatiable curiosity held me where I was.

Inwardly I felt convinced that something was going to happen, and, though the sweat of terror stood on my face at the thought of what it might be, I knew that the one thing even more unfaceable was to turn tail and never know what it was.

On the right the leafless plane-trees in the Park stretched angled fingers against the muffled sky, and below, the pavements and roadway gleamed with moisture. Traffic was infrequent, infrequent also were the figures of pedestrians; never in my life had I felt so cut off from human intercourse.

Close round me were secure, normal rooms, tenanted by living men and women, where cheerful fires burnt and steady lights illuminated the solid walls. But here companionless, except for the motionless form crouched in front of me, I sped between earth and sky, among dim

shadows and fugitive lights. And all the time I knew, though not knowing how I knew, some dreadful drama was immediately to be unrolled in front of me. Whether that would prove to be some re-enactment of what in the world of time and space had already occurred, or whether, by the stranger miracle of second-sight, I was to behold something which had not happened yet, I had no idea. All I was certain of was that I sat in the presence of things not normally seen; in the world which, for the sake of sanity, is but rarely made manifest.

I kept my eye fixed on the figure in front of me, and saw that its bowed head was supported by its hands, which seemed to hold it up. Then came a step on the stairs, and the conductor was by me demanding my fare. Having given it, a sudden idea struck me as he was about to leave the top again.

‘You haven’t collected the fare from that man in front there,’ I said.

The conductor looked forward, then at me again.

‘Sure enough, there is someone there,’ he said, ‘and can you see him, too?’

‘Certainly,’ said I.

This appeared to me at the moment to reassure him; it occurred to me also that perhaps I was utterly wrong, and that the figure was nothing but a real passenger.

What followed happened in a dozen seconds.

The conductor advanced up the bus, and, having spoken without attracting the passenger’s attention, touched him on the shoulder, and I saw his hand go into it, as it plunged in water. Simultaneously the figure turned round in its seat, and I saw its face. It was that of a young man, absolutely white and colourless. I saw, too, why it held its head up in its hands, for its throat was cut from ear to ear.

The eyes were closed, but as it raised its head in its hands, looking at the conductor, it opened them, and from within them there came a light as from the eye of a cat.

Then, in an awful voice, half squeal, half groan, I heard the conductor cry out:

‘O my God! O my God!’ he said.

The figure rose, and cowering as from a blow, he turned and fled before it. Whether he jumped into the roadway from the top of the stairs, or in his flight fell down them, I do not know, but I heard the thud of his body as it fell, and was alone once more on the top of the bus.

I rang the bell violently, and in a few yards we drew up. Already there was a crowd round the man on the road, and presently he was carried in an ambulance, alive, but not much more than alive, to St George’s Hospital.

He died from his injuries a few days later, and the discovery of a certain pearl necklace concealed in the clothes of his room, about which he gave information, makes it probable that the confession he made just before he died was true.

The conductor, William Larkins, had been in gaol on a charge of stealing six months before, and on his release, by means of a false name and forged references, he had got this post, with every intention of keeping straight. But he had lost money racing, and ten days before his death was in serious want of cash.

That night an old acquaintance of his, who had been associated with him in burglaries, boarded the bus, heard his story, and tried to persuade him to come back into his old way of life. By way of recommendation, he opened a small dressing-bag he had with him, and showed him, wrapped away in a corner, the pearl necklace which subsequently was discovered in Larkins’ room. The two were alone on the top of the bus, and, yielding to the ungovernable greed, Larkins next

moment had his arm over the passenger's face, and with a razor out of his dressing-bag had cut his throat.

He kept his wits about him, pocketed the pearls, left the bag open and the razor on the floor, and descended to the footboard again.

Immediately afterwards, having ascertained that there were no blood stains on him, he ascended again and instantly stopped the bus, having discovered the body of a passenger there with his throat cut and the razor on the floor. The body was identified as that of a well-known burglar, and the coroner's jury had brought in a verdict of suicide.