The Lease

By Algernon Blackwood

The other day I came across my vague friend again. Last time it was in an A.B.C. shop; this time it was in a bus. We always meet in humble places.

He was vaguer than ever, fuddled and distrait; but delightfully engaging. He had evidently not yet lunched, for he wore no crumb; but I had a shrewd suspicion that beneath his green Alpine hat there lurked a straw or two in his untidy hair. It would hardly have surprised me to see him turn with his childlike smile and say, "Would you mind *very much* taking them out for me? You know they *do* tickle so!"—half mumbled, half shouted.

Instead, he tried to shake hands, and his black eyebrows danced. He looked as loosely put together as a careless parcel. I imagined large bits of him tumbling out.

You're off somewhere or other, I suppose?" he said; and the question was so characteristic it was impossible not to laugh.

I mentioned the City.

"I'm going that way too," he said cheerfully. He had come to the conclusion that he could not shake hands with safety; there were too many odds and ends about him—gloves, newspapers, half-open umbrella, parcels. Evidently he had left the house uncertain as to where he was going, and had brought all these things in case, like the White Knight, he might find a use for them on the way. His overcoat was wrongly buttoned, too, so that on one side the collar reached almost to his ear. From the pockets protruded large envelopes, white and blue. I marvelled again how he ever concentrated his mind enough to write plays and novels; for in both the action was quick and dramatic; the dialogue crisp, forcible, often witty.

"Going to the City!" I exclaimed. "*You?*" Museums, libraries, second-hand book-shops were his usual haunts—places where he could be vague and absent-minded without danger to anyone. I felt genuinely curious. "Copy of some kind? Local colour for something, eh?" I laughed, hoping to draw him out.

A considerable pause followed, during which he rearranged several of his parcels, and his eyebrows shot up and down like two black-beetles dancing a hornpipe.

"I'm helping a chap with his lease," he replied suddenly, in such a very loud voice that everybody in the bus heard and became interested.

He had this way of alternately mumbling and talking very loud—absurdly loud; picking out unimportant words with terrific emphasis. He also had this way of helping others. Indeed, it was difficult to meet him without suspecting an errand of kindness—rarely mentioned, however.

"Chap with his lease," he repeated in a kind of roar, as though he feared someone had not heard him—the driver, possibly!

We were in a white Putney bus, going East. The policeman just then held it up at Wellington Street.

"It's jolly stopping like this," he cried; "one can chat a bit without having to shout."

My curiosity about the lease, or rather about his part in it, prevented an immediate reply. How he could possibly help in such a complicated matter puzzled me exceedingly.

"Horrible things, leases!" I said at length. "Confusing, I mean, with their endless repetitions and absence of commas. Legal language seems so needlessly—"

“Oh, but this one is right enough,” he interrupted. “You see, my pal hasn’t signed it yet. He’s in rather a muddle about it, to tell the truth, and I’m going to get it straightened out by my solicitor.”

The bus started on with a lurch, and he rolled against me.

“It’s a three-year lease,” he roared, “with an option to renew, you know—oh no, I’m wrong there, by the bye,” and he tapped my knee and dropped a glove, and, when it was picked up and handed to him, tried to stuff it up his sleeve as though it was a handkerchief—“I’m wrong there—that’s the house he’s in at present, and his wife wants to break *that* lease because she doesn’t like it, and they’ve got more children than they expected (these words whispered), and there’s no bathroom, and the kitchen stairs are absurdly narrow—”

“But the lease—you were just saying—?”

“Quite so; I was,” and both eyebrows dropped so that the eyes were almost completely hidden, “but *that* lease is all right. It’s the other one I was talking about just then—”

“The house he’s in now, you mean, or—?”

My head already swam. The attention of the people opposite had begun to wander.

My friend pulled himself together and clutched several parcels.

“No, no, no,” he explained, smiling gently; “he likes *this* one. It’s the other I meant—the one his wife doesn’t approve of the one with the narrow bathroom stairs and no kitchen—I mean the narrow kitchen stairs and no bathroom. It has so few cupboards, too, and the nursery chimneys smoke every time the wind’s in the east. (Poor man! How devotedly he must have listened while it was being drummed into his good-natured ears!) So you see, Henry, my pal, thought of giving it up when the lease fell in and taking this other house—the one I was just talking about—and putting in a bathroom at his own expense, provided the landlord—”

A man opposite who had been listening intently got up to leave the bus with such a disappointed look that my friend thought it was the conductor asking for another fare, and fumbled for coppers. Seeing his mistake in time, he drew out instead a large blue envelope. Two other papers, feeling neglected, came out at the same time and dropped upon the floor. My friend and a working-man beside him stooped to pick them up and knocked their heads violently in the process.

“I *beg* your pardon,” exclaimed the vague one, very loud, with a tremendous emphasis on the “beg.”

Oh, that’s all right, guv’nor,” said the working-man, handing over the papers. “Might ’appen to anybody, that!”

“I beg your pardon?” repeated my friend, not hearing him quite.

“I said a thing like that might ’appen to anyone,” repeated the other, louder.

He turned to me with his happy smile. “I suppose it might, yes,” he said, very low. Then he opened the blue envelope and began to hunt.

“Oh no, that’s the wrong envelope. It’s the other,” he observed vaguely. “What a bore, isn’t it? This is merely a copy of his letters to—er—to——”

He looked distressingly about him through the windows, as though he hoped to find his words in the shop-letterings or among the advertisements.

“Where are we, I wonder? Oh yes; there’s St. Paul’s. Good!” His mind returned to the subject in hand. Several people got out, and swept the papers from his knee to the ground and the next few minutes he spent gathering them up, stooping, clutching his coat, stuffing envelopes into his pockets, and exclaiming “I *beg* your pardon!” to the various folk he collided with in the process.

At last some sort of order was restored.

“—merely the letters,” he resumed where he had left off, and in a voice that might suitably have addressed a public meeting, “the letters to his tenant. There’s a tenant in the other house. I forgot to mention *that*, I think—”

“I think you did. But, I say, look here, my dear chap,” I burst out, at length, in sheer self-preservation, “why in the world don’t you let the fellow manage his own leases? It’s giving you a dreadful lot of trouble. It’s the most muddled-up thing I ever heard.”

“That’s because you’ve got no head for business,” he whispered sweetly. “Besides, it’s really a pleasure to me to help him. That’s the best part of life, after all—helping people who get into muddles.” He looked at me with his kindly smile. Then he turned and smiled at everybody in the bus—vaguely, happily, his black eyebrows very fierce. Several people, I fancied, smiled back at him.

“Let’s see,” he said, after a pause; “where was I?”

“You were saying something about a lease,” I told him; “but, honestly, old man, I’m afraid I haven’t quite followed it.”

“That’s my fault,” he said; “all my fault. I feel a bit stupid to-day. I’ve got the ’flue, you know, and a touch of fever with it. But I promised Henry I would see to it for him, because he’s awfully busy—”

“Is he really!” I wished I knew Henry. I felt a strong desire to say something to him.

“—packing up for a trip to Mexico, you know, or something; so, of course, he finds it difficult to—er—to——” He looked gently about him. “Where the deuce am I?” he asked in a very loud voice indeed.

Several people, myself among them, mentioned the Mansion House.

“Dear me!” he exclaimed, gathering up parcels, envelopes, and various loose parts of his body—his aching body, I’m afraid—“I must be getting out. I’m in the wrong bus. I wanted Essex Street—up there by the Law Courts, you know.”

But I really couldn’t stand it any longer. I took him by the arm and planted him, parcels, papers, and all, by my side in a taxi. We whizzed back along Queen Victoria Street, and on the way I sorted him out, buttoned his overcoat so that it no longer tickled his ear, rolled up his umbrella so that the points no longer got caught, and made him put on both gloves, so that he could not drop them any more. And I kept tight hold of him until we reached Essex Street. He talked leases the whole way.

“Thanks awfully,” he said at the end, smiling; “you’re always kind—if a little rough. But I’ll keep on the taxi, I think, now. The fact is, I find I’ve left the right lease at home after all—you know, the one about the house without the—”

I heard the rest, alternately mumbled and shouted at me, as the taxi whirred off into the Strand, bound for some unknown destination in Chelsea. It was impossible to help him more. But I should like to have heard what he said to (*a*) the chauffeur at the end of his journey, (*b*) to the solicitor. I should also like to swear that when he got back to his rooms he found the right lease had been in his pocket all the time.

I met him again the following day, but I had not the courage to ask him anything.