The Omnibus

By Quiller-Couch

It was not so much a day as a burning, fiery furnace. The roar of London's traffic reverberated under a sky of coppery blue; the pavements threw out waves of heat, thickened with the reek of restaurants and perfumery shops; and dust became cinders, and the wearing of flesh a weariness. Streams of sweat ran from the bellies of 'bus-horses when they halted. Men went up and down with unbuttoned waistcoats, turned into drinking-bars, and were no sooner inside than they longed to be out again, and baking in an ampler oven. Other men, who had given up drinking because of the expense, hung about the fountains in Trafalgar Square and listened to the splash of running water. It was the time when London is supposed to be empty; and when those who remain in town feel there is not room for a soul more.

We were eleven inside the omnibus when it pulled up at Charing Cross, so that legally there was room for just one more. I had travelled enough in omnibuses to know my fellow-passengers by heart—a governess with some sheets of music in her satchel; a minor actress going to rehearsal; a woman carrying her incurable complaint for the hundredth time to the hospital; three middle-aged city clerks; a couple of reporters with weak eyes and low collars; an old loose-checked woman exhaling patchouli; a bald-headed man with hairy hands, a violent breast-pin, and the indescribable air of a matrimonial agent. Not a word passed. We were all failures in life, and could not trouble to dissemble it, in that heat. Moreover, we were used to each other, as types if not as persons, and had lost curiosity. So we sat listless, dispirited, drawing difficult breath and staring vacuously. The hope we shared in common—that nobody would claim the vacant seat—was too obvious to be discussed.

But at Charing Cross the twelfth passenger got in—a boy with a stick, and a bundle in a blue handkerchief. He was about thirteen; bound for the docks, we could tell at a glance, to sail on his first voyage; and, by the way he looked about, we could tell as easily that in stepping outside Charing Cross Station he had set foot on London stones for the first time. When we pulled up, he was standing on the opposite pavement with dazed eyes like a hare's, wondering at the new world—the hansoms, the yelling news-boys, the flower-women, the crowd pushing him this way and that, the ugly shop-fronts, the hurry and stink and din of it all. Then, hailing our 'bus, he started to run across —faltered—almost dropped his bundle—was snatched by our conductor out of the path of a running hansom, and hauled on board. His eyelids were pink and swollen; but he was not crying, though he wanted to. Instead, he took a great gulp, as he pushed between our knees to his seat, and tried to look brave as a lion.

The passengers turned an incurious, half-resentful stare upon him, and then repented. I think that more than one of us wanted to speak, but dared not.

It was not so much the little chap's look. But to the knot of his sea-kit there was tied a bunch of cottage-flowers—sweet williams, boy's love, love-lies-bleeding, a few common striped carnations, and a rose or two—and the sight and smell of them in that frowsy 'bus were like tears on thirsty eyelids. We had ceased to pity what we were, but the heart is far withered that cannot pity what it has been; and it made us shudder to look on the young face set towards the road along which we had travelled so far. Only the minor actress dropped a tear; but she was used to expressing emotion, and half-way down the Strand the 'bus stopped and she left us.

The woman with an incurable complaint touched me on the knee.

"Speak to him," she whispered.

But the whisper did not roach, for I was two hundred miles away, and occupied in starting off to school for the first time. I had two shillings in my pocket; and at the first town where the coach baited I was to exchange these for a coco-nut and a clasp-knife. Also, I was to break the knife in opening the nut, and the nut, when opened, would be sour. A sense of coming evil, therefore, possessed me.

"Why don't you speak to him?"

The boy glanced up, not catching her words, but suspicious: then frowned arid looked defiant.

"Ah," she went on in the same whisper, "it's only the young that I pity. Sometimes, sir— for my illness keeps me much awake—I lie at night in my lodgings and listen, and the whole of London seems filled with the sound of children's feet running. Even by day I can hear them, at the back of the uproar—"

The matrimonial agent grunted and rose, as we halted at the top of Essex Street. I saw him s[11]p a couple of half-crowns into the conductor's hand: and he whispered something, jerking his head back towards the interior of the 'bus. The boy was brushing his eyes, under pretence of putting his cap forward; and by the time he stole a look around to see if anyone had observed, we had started again. I pretended to stare out of the window, but marked the wet smear on his hand as he laid it on his lap.

In less than a minute it was my turn to alight. Unlike the matrimonial agent, I had not two half-crowns to spare; but, catching the sick woman's eye, forced up courage to nod and say—

"Good luck, my boy."

"Good day, sir."

A moment after I was in the hot crowd, whose roar rolled east and west for miles. And at the back of it, as the woman had said, in street and side-lane and blind-alley, I heard the footfall of a multitude more terrible than an army with banners, the ceaseless pelting feet of children—of Whittingtons turning and turning again.