
The Man on the 19 Bus

A familiar journey can take an unexpected direction

“Scuse me. You the chap what writes about bus journeys?”

I was on my way home on a murky, chilly, late January afternoon, and there were flecks of sleet in the air. I’d thought I was alone at the front of the top deck of the 19 bus but now I turned to look at the person sitting across the aisle from me. He was a stranger, a rather pinched-faced little man in a dark overcoat which seemed a bit too big for him.

‘You mean the pieces in *Battersea Matters*?’

‘I don’t know about that,’ he said, ‘Someone pointed you out once. Said you wrote about bus journeys.’

Invisible

‘I’ll be there soon as I can!’ The young woman sitting somewhere behind me had made phone contact with the outside world. She was talking on in a voice that was just a bit too loud. Probably hadn’t even noticed me. Older people are invisible to the young. ‘Traffic’s dreadful tonight.’ She paused, then, ‘No. Only about halfway along Kings Road...’

The stranger introduced himself. ‘I’m Vernon. Late of Battersea, I suppose you’d say. Used to live in Octavia Street.’

‘You must know my friend Leo, then. He’s lived there since the year dot.’ He didn’t reply but stared out of the window again as the bus lurched to another halt. There was clearly a log jam of traffic somewhere ahead.

Vernon spoke again. ‘Didn’t get traffic this bad in my day. Used to work on the buses, I did. Conductor.’

‘Really. On this route?’ He nodded. ‘How long ago?’

He shrugged. ‘Lose track of time, don’t you?’

‘Better than being a driver, I should think. A conductor gets to meet people, talk to them. These days most people don’t even acknowledge the driver.’

‘All right if you like people, I s’pose,’ he retorted darkly.

‘And you don’t?’

Without answering that he said, ‘No jumping on or off at traffic lights anymore.’ His fists clenched,

knuckles white. ‘Dangerous. Fall off the platform and you could do yourself an injury.’

He gave a hoarse little cough. ‘S’posed to keep an eye on them, we were. Not that the young ones ever took notice. Come haring down the stairs like flippin’ mountain goats, then straight off into the traffic. Not a scratch.’

Accidents

The girl behind us laughed suddenly, derisively. ‘Oh he didn’t say that? That is really out of order... Oh thank the lord for that, we’re moving again.’

‘Presumably there were accidents sometimes,’ I suggested.

Vernon glared at me fiercely.

‘Why’d you say that?’

A bit taken aback, I said, ‘Well, not everyone’s as agile as a mountain goat.’

He eyed me thoughtfully, and then his voice went off into a gallop, words tumbling over each other.

‘You’re right there. Course it wasn’t my fault. Winter’s day like today it was. Come on to the platform and seen his lady friend coming out of a shop, jumped off before the stop. Had too many business lunches I reckon. Top heavy and couldn’t keep his balance. Taxi driver saw him, but couldn’t avoid him, not really...’ He shook his head grimly.

‘That’s terrible – was he killed?’

‘No,’ said Vernon. ‘Wasn’t going to do much walking anymore, though. He swore blind it was my fault – he didn’t exactly say I’d pushed him, but I had a bad reputation by then you see.’

I eyed this mild-looking little man in astonishment. ‘Reputation?’

Sour

Vernon sighed. ‘After me and Shirley split up I lost heart in the job, see. Got a bit sour you might say. People got the rough end of my tongue. I had complaints. Once an inspector caught me cheeking a passenger. So when this bloke accused me of ... being responsible, they believed him. He got the compensation he was after – and I got the push.’

‘Surely somebody saw what happened?’ I said disbelievingly. ‘Someone to speak up for you?’

‘Maybe, but I couldn’t be bothered anymore. Just admitted it was down to me. That I should have taken more care of my passengers, whatever.’

He looked straight at me, his blue eyes suddenly piercing. ‘But I’m telling you now, that I didn’t do nothing. I’m putting the record straight, at last.’

‘Why are you telling me?’

‘Maybe you’ll write about it?’ He suddenly looked like a man with a weight off his shoulders. ‘A trouble shared is a trouble halved, is that right?’ He glanced out of the window. ‘This bus terminates here, eh?’

We’d crossed the bridge while Vernon told his sorry tale and we’d reached our destination. ‘Come across the road and I’ll buy you a drink,’ I said.

Pushing

Not waiting for his response I got myself to the head of the stairs with the girl, still talking on her phone, pushing behind me. I was hustled down the stairs by her eagerness to get off. As usual the Parkgate Road bus stop was very crowded, and I had to squeeze through the crush to find some open pavement. The girl was still right behind me as I swung round to look for Vernon.

‘Where’s he got to?’

‘What?’ she glared at me in irritation for blocking her path.

‘The man I was talking to upstairs? He must have been behind you?’

‘No idea what you’re talking about.’ She dismissed me from her mind and stalked off. But clearly Vernon had decided our conversation had also terminated.

When I got home I called Leo. After the usual preliminaries, I asked, ‘Did you ever have a neighbour called Vernon?’

‘Vernon the bus conductor? What on earth put him into your head?’ Without waiting for me to explain, he went on, ‘He moved away after his marriage broke up. I last saw him five or six years ago. He came along to

the summer party.'

'He was a member of the society?' I asked in surprise.

Leo laughed, 'No. Came along with an old acquaintance who was a member. Poor old Vernon. Terrible cough. Just a shadow of his former self, really. Why are you...'

'Did he leave Battersea under a cloud?'

But Leo was listening to something his wife was saying in the background. 'Oh, that's right.' He came back to me. 'Harriet's reminded me that Vernon got the sack for pushing someone off his bus. Twenty-five years ago maybe.'

'He didn't do it you know.'

'Didn't do what?'

'He didn't push anyone off the bus. He was... framed.'

'You seem to know a lot about it,' Leo said suspiciously.

I started to explain. 'He was on my bus tonight. We got talking and for some reason he decided to tell me about it.'

Silence

There was silence at the other end. I think Leo's hand was over the phone as he spoke to Harriet. Then with a nervous laugh he said. 'Someone's having you on, my friend. We went to Vernon's funeral, few months after that summer party...'

Later that evening I finally managed to track down the photos I'd taken at that party. Sure enough there was Leo and standing near him a thin faced little man with piercing blue eyes staring straight at me, as if making sure he'd recognise the man who wrote about bus journeys.

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