

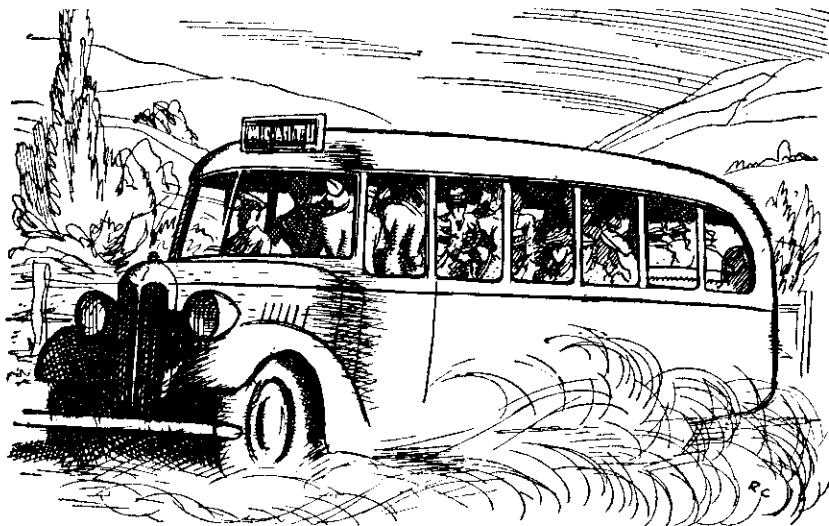
THE BUS

(Specially written for

"The Listener" by

BARBARA HARPER)

WHEN there were unlimited supplies of petrol and tyres, the Bus barely entered into our scheme of things; except, perhaps, as a time signal for those who lived near main highways, or a monster that took up too much of the road. But time has changed the monster into a queen; a queen of the road, who has the road to herself; who dictates whether you're to enter her dusty precincts or not; who, even though you



are waving your handkerchief violently, may sail past, "No room to-day! No room to-day!"

So your pre-war disdain has changed to deep respect. In addition, you harbour a fondness for the Bus which is an important link between you and your doctor, your dentist, your hairdresser, your banker, your friends, and the cinemas—between you and town. And your fondness is shared with many others. You have come in contact with a little travelling community, hitherto unknown to you, when you travelled in your own car, with both eyes glued to the road. You may have noticed how Bill's turnips compared with yours, or how Jack's sheep were looking, or if Tom had harvested his wheat. If you sat on the left hand side, you were mostly occupied with the arrangement of your hair and your hat, and your shopping list. Now you are occupied with humanity, which you have discovered interesting, enlightening, sometimes amusing, sometimes alarming.

You have learnt from experience that you must be on the spot some time before the Bus leaves town, if you want to make sure of procuring a seat. So last time you went to town, you left your meeting before it closed, hurried through your lunch, and scampered through the shopping, to give yourself a half-hour to spare.

Exactly half-an-hour before the Bus was due to leave, you scrambled in, with

your umbrella and coat and basket of parcels. Already the Bus was half full. You procured a seat, but at the expense of giving up your afternoon cup of tea. And you were famished after the busy, tiring day. Just then, you wanted a cup of tea more than anything else in the world, until a young soldier with a wooden leg and a smiling face, stepped into the bus.

You stared through the window beside you, and noticed a woman with large brown, sad-looking eyes, standing on the pavement, evidently waiting for someone. Amidst all the comings and goings and chatter, you couldn't take your eyes off this Madonna-like face.

The Bus filled up. It was time to leave. The driver sounded the horn. The dark-eyed woman entered, alone.

At the first stop, a young man stepped off, rather stealing the thunder of his silk-stockinged, fur-coated companion. His sports coat was of contrasting colours, light brown, with yokes and collar of dark green.

By now you had persuaded the dark-eyed woman to have your seat, and while you were standing, trying to balance, so that you wouldn't knock the parcels from the lap of the man on your left, or the knitting needles from the hands of the woman on your right, fragments of conversations reached your ears. To you, the fragments were useless, but perhaps significant of the stories of which they were parts, or the sources from which they came; rebellious, jocular, kind, sad.

At the next stop, an airman and a blonde alighted. They caused the "Oh, to be young again" stir which young, happy-looking couples usually stir, and stage-whispered suppositions.

Every mile or so, the Bus pulled up. As your destination was near the terminus, you were able to watch the curtain slowly falling on this little group of players, whose make-ups conveyed so much, and no more.

Into the now creeping darkness, several passengers emerged, among them an old bent man with two sticks. You offered assistance, but he said he could manage, thank you.

The Bus was half-empty. You sat down, rather thankfully.

And when only you and two others remained, the little journey nearly complete, the act nearly finished, the act which had no ending, you felt as you had when you'd gazed at a sunset; incomplete, joyful and sad, refreshed and forlorn.

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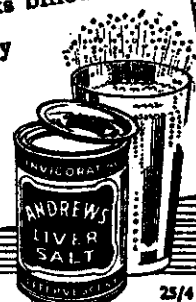
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