

IN THE TRAIN

(Written for "The Listener" by S.M.J.)

IT was still daylight when Mrs. Pym and her three friends got into the train where it stood on the siding, but the wind was blowing strongly bringing in the evening, and she was quite pleased to close the carriage door and sit in the place they had left for her on an inside seat near the window. She would rather not have sat with Miss Horne; but it was all arranged by the others, that sort of thing interested them so much, and they knew she wouldn't bother. She was tired, and rather happy, and quite content to sit there, quiet, taking the day to pieces in her mind. Its happiness was that she had been able to slip away several times by herself and wander alone, watching, alone but knowing that at any moment she need not be; "I'll just slip along this street for a moment . . . see if there are any of those patterns you want . . . no, don't bother to come, any of you, no, I don't mind . . . I'll see you again . . . soon . . ." and their voices, little admonishing, negative cries, had been snatched away by the wind.

It was always easier to separate from their little group like that on windy days, the others were more occupied with hats, and parcels, and scarves. Of course she hadn't looked for any patterns, and she hadn't really minded when every now and then, rounding a corner, they'd found her again, with exclamations and callings to her and to each other; "Here you are, Mrs. Pym, look, here's Mrs. Pym, Mrs. Hooper, now we're all together again, where shall we go?" They'd drifted on, cakes and tea in the clean little shop by the waterfront, where there was pink and grey linoleum on the floor, and rich moist brown cake with chocolate icing; more shopping, more aimless argument, talking, meeting friends; and she'd find herself gradually out on the edge of the group drifting away, knowing that if she said anything they simply wouldn't notice her. Not intentionally; they didn't mean to ignore her, they didn't notice anyone, really, they just talked on and on, half listening to each other, but listening most to what they would say next themselves. So she walked on, just behind them or in front, watching, listening, to the talk that snapped and crackled all round her, but seldom, how very seldom, joining in.

SHE smiled now, in the train, as she remembered the day, and listened to the others, still endlessly, effortlessly, talking; but for a moment they were unhappy, they were restless, they were not together. One of them had an idea. "Shall we turn this seat so we'll all be facing, then we can talk so much better . . ." "Yes, but what about facing the wrong way? Don't you think . . ." "I don't mind, I'll sit that way . . ." "Oh, I do, I couldn't bear to have everything going past the wrong way, back to front . . ." "It doesn't make any difference, really, if you don't watch . . ." "Mrs. Pym, what about you . . ." "Yes, what about Mrs. Pym, perhaps she

doesn't mind sitting that way . . ." and she realised that they meant her, that for once their talk required an answer.

She stood up, smiling. "No, I don't mind, not a bit," and her answer went all round the circle, anxious for a moment that their idea would be spoiled, now all relieved. "Mrs. Pym doesn't mind; no, she said she doesn't—isn't that lucky—now, you're sure, you're not just saying it, it won't upset you to sit that way?" And she reassured them eagerly; this was better than she hoped. She wouldn't have to sit tête-à-tête with Miss Horne, with any of them, with their questions that had to be answered, their opinions to which she would have to make a pretence of listening; pretence that was much more fatiguing than real interest. The three would lean closer, and she could after a while gently, quietly, lean back, a little further back, unnoticed as usual, and watch them and listen to them in her own way.

She was passionately interested in them, really, as she was in everyone, though not often in the silly words that poured out so easily from them; she looked in their faces, for what their words meant. Mrs. Hooper, opposite her, was small and dark, and full of burning life and energy, which would use her up early, so that there would be only a shell left to finish out her time; she was tired, and her face seemed to grow hollow and to shrivel as you looked at it, but her eyes, big and brown and startling, sparkled more brightly as she talked; her hands, knitting, moved jerkily, impatiently, as she talked on and on about her child. Behind the words, the silly, boastful words, Mrs. Pym could see the tiny little boy, ordinary, shy, but never to be just himself; always to be weighted with the importance given him by his mother's pain and anguish at his birth; she could see the fear that even now something would go wrong, she would lose everything that made sense of life for her . . . "They told me, over and over again, every doctor I went to, that I'd never bear him, that he should be taken away . . . and then they said he wouldn't live a week . . . but you see, five years old now, and clever . . . you'd never believe the things that child says. But the time I had, to rear him . . . I simply lived for him; the trouble I took; everything just so, his food never a minute behind time, or ahead; never an ounce too much, or too little. Far more trouble than I'd ever take for myself. But I did it . . ." the sparkle and triumph of her eyes fascinated Mrs. Pym, even while she thought, "Doesn't she know really, that we don't care a pin? That not one of us is the tiniest scrap interested, she tries to force her caring on us, she deceives herself, we all do. Miss Horne would sacrifice John, immediately, if it would give her what she wants; Mrs. Martin is more interested in her knitting . . . I, too . . ." and she had to smile again to herself.

THE honeymoon couple in the seat behind hers sat still and quiet. "They haven't said anything at all, not one little word, either of them since we came



in," she thought. She had taken them in completely, at a glance, as she stood up to change the seat round. The girl leaned in the curve of his arm, and her hair brushed his cheek every time he looked down at her; fine, yellow hair, half covered by a crocheted net of soft blue wool. She was different in a thousand ways from the four middle-aged women whose talk mingled with the click of their needles; but she could some day be like any of them. She would have laughed now to be told that. She's at the the beginning of everything, Mrs. Pym thought tenderly, perhaps a little enviously, but not very; she was tired, and rather glad that she didn't have to go through it all again, all that that beginning implied. It was better to be older, wiser, ah, how infinitely wiser; she was filled sometimes with incredulous wonder at the foolishness and immense stupidity of the girl she had once been. It was better to have secret satisfactions no one knew of but herself, instead of ones she could flaunt, which had once seemed so important. Still, she liked to think of the two young people there, behind her, unseen, but comprehended perfectly, it added to her content. How different from the way poor Miss Horne was feeling. She knew by the way Miss Horne beside her was sitting, moving uncomfortably, restlessly, in her seat, from the way she was talking, even more foolishly than usual, from the two red spots that glowed on her hollow cheek, that she was aware of them too, in an angry, envious way, and for a moment Mrs. Pym felt the other woman's almost unbearable disappointment and frustration perhaps more keenly than she did herself.

Miss Horne had no children of course, but she had an arm, and whenever she could she brought the conversation back to it. "The doctor is completely at a loss; he simply can't tell what it is; he's admitted that, and he's advised me to see a specialist; at once. Isn't it a strange thing? There it was, one day, nothing the matter with it, and the next . . . well, you know the trouble I've had with it . . . the pain. Most nights I don't sleep with it, at all. Yes, of course I've tried everything—massage, poultices, fomentations—nothing's any good. It's not as if I had even knocked it, any time, then we could understand—doctor's so kind, so understanding, I've been to him so often now, with it, we're quite old friends . . ." she went on and

on, reiterating, keeping the conversation as long as she could from Mrs. Hooper.

Mrs. Pym withdrew still further; with her mind; she wanted never to be active, always passive, watching, thinking. So she withdrew in that way, and she enjoyed it tremendously. Why didn't she mind now, as she had once, that she was never one with other women? Once it had made her bitter, sad, she had spoiled her youth with longing for companionship, something she had never been meant to have, because this something so much better had been reserved for her. She had longed to be always the centre of a circle of friends, talking brightly, consulted and loved, envied; and she had always found herself pushed to the outside edge, ignored, never ready to respond to advances if they did come, always finding when she forced herself at last to speak that the splendid friends she had dreamed of, had gone, attracted to someone who hadn't her uncomfortable silences, her embarrassment, someone who could speak readily without needing to think first. She had minded dreadfully, once. Now when she was 40, and not young any more, in that way, she didn't want to be in. She just simply didn't want it; she wasn't deceiving herself; she was more than content to be on the outside, always; more than that, she schemed to be; she was never lonely, and once she had feared that, more than anything. Now she disliked being possessed by them, being forced to fit herself to them.

They turned to her, every now and then, smiled at her, and were contented with her yes, or no, and went on with their work and their talk. Their talking amazed her, as it had always done. It was about nothing, about everything. Mrs. Martin was fair and stout, and always too warm, so that now while the others sat with their coats across their shoulders, ready to slip on as the darkness grew, and the carriage seemed cold and bare, she sat in a thin blouse, heavy and white in the dusk. In the dusk, while the guard came nearer, turning on the light, she knitted a cardigan for one of her daughters, and Mrs. Pym knew that when it was finished another would be begun instantly, and when her daughters were off her hands she would knit them for endless grandchildren, a long string of cardigans coming from her busy fingers, so that one always thought of her as sitting, immobile except for her lips