

In An Omnibus

Thought transmission? Clairvoyance? No, I can't say I believe much in that sort of thing; you wouldn't expect it from a matter-of-fact old city man like me would you.

All the same, I did have a rather curious experience the other evening. It was only a trifling affair, and I scarcely there is nothing in it really, but I've tried to apply the ordinary rules of experience to it—tried to work it out by the rule of three, as it were; but somehow there's always a hitch that I can't quite level up.

Here's the story for what it's worth: I had had a busy day at the office, and was tired out when I took my usual bus home—Hammersmith, you know; and I had walked as far as Charing Cross by way of exercise and to clear my brain of stuffy figures. It had just begun to drizzle, and I was lucky to get a place in the bus—just about the centre of the left side it was, up against the metal bar that divides the long seat into halves.

There was only just room for me, for my two fellow passengers on the right were bulky individuals, so I was wedged up pretty tight against the bar. It's lucky that I'm not a big man myself, or I don't know what would have done. As it was, in settling down, my arm came rather sharply into contact with the shoulder of a girl who was placed on my left—just the other side of the bar, you understand. She gave a little cry and started, just as if she had been aroused from a nap, and didn't quite know where she was.

Of course I apologized and then forgot all about the matter. I didn't even look at the girl, didn't realize if she were smart or snabby, fair or dark. It is very rare for me to take interest in folk I meet in omnibuses. She was quite young—nineteen or twenty perhaps—neither pretty nor ugly and of non-descript coloring. Her hair was fluffed out on either side of her head, covering the top halves of her ears, and she wore a round cap of some cheap fur. It was quite unpretentious, but somehow it suited her. Her features were rather thin, and she had no complexion to speak of; any could easily guess that she was put in all sorts of weather, or subjected to an unwholesome atmosphere of some kind.

Oh, ho; I wasn't the least bit fascinated, or any rot of that sort. I'm not the kind of man who is always on the lookout for chance acquaintances—that game is played out as far as I am concerned. But I had to think of something and the girl by my side was more interesting than any of the other stodgy folk who had got into the bus—a job lot if ever there was one. There was a woman sitting opposite me—a young woman, with a baby on her knees—whose expression was as inane and vacuous as that of the baby itself. Everybody was wet and uncomforable, and we all hated each other with a cordial hatred.

Well, the bus rumbled on, and nobody seemed inclined to move. We were all bound for Hammersmith. I leaped back in my seat as well as I could, to make room for my stout neighbor, who kept wedging me closer against the rail; the girl was leaning back too, and my arm—couldn't help it, pressed against hers. I had my hand upon the rail, you see; she had both of hers clasped up on her lap. She wore no gloves, and she had a cheap ring on one of her fingers—an engagement-ring I suppose it was meant to be. Nobody spoke, and by degrees I began to feel sleepy—forgot all about the bus, even about the little lady by my side, and allowed my mind to be a perfect blank. I have rather a habit of doing that after a heavy day, and I give you my word, it's most restful to the brain.

At the same time, I suppose—as the clairvoyants would say—the brain is particularly receptive when it is in that condition. Anyway, after a while a curious mist began to form before my eyes, a mist which soon became a blur of dim colors, and this gradually worked itself to a focus of light, in which I felt somehow, that I could see pictures if I wished. It was a strange sensation, quite new to me. I wasn't asleep, you understand. If I tried I could see the various faces of the woman who sat opposite me and the baby on her knees, the mist dispelling to let me see so; but when I gave myself up to the thoughtless repose it collected again, and the clear spot in the center became more defined. I was conscious of one other thing—a curious tingling sensation in my left arm, the arm that pressed against that of the girl by my side; it was just as if the blood were rushing from her veins into mine. I don't know if you have ever experienced a matter-of-fact man like myself that I hardly know how to explain.

I had the girl's eyes fixed on me; she was looking at me as if I had figured him out, that evening. I was at an A. B. C. shop where I sometimes go myself for a cup of tea. He was sitting at one of the little tables and there was a girl with him to whom he was engaged in making violent love. But it was not my friend of the omnibus—oh, no; it was another girl altogether, though I think she was of the same class—Alice and Claude Astan in London Street.

on rapport—isn't that what you call it?—a sort of unconscious cerebration.

Well, she must have been thinking hard of something that had happened to her—that very day, I take it. And I saw it all with her eyes. First of all a dingy work room—a lot of girls sitting at a long table and sewing mechanically dress material of some sort—I'm no good at describing that sort of thing, but I saw it as clearly as if I'd been in the room. The floor a litter, the table a litter, patterns, stuff of every hue and quality, cut and uncut, yards of it, spread out and tumbled together, dummy figures, some partially clad some only framework and wooden bust; sprays of artificial flowers, lace, ribbon, cotton. Cotton! Why, the atmosphere of the place seemed loaded with it. You know the close smell of a draper's shop? I assure you I got exactly that kind of impression.

All the girls seemed to be chattering together gaily enough—all except my girl. I saw her as plainly as I see you. She was working a sewing machine, and she kept glancing at a big clumsy clock upon the wall. She could hardly see the time by it, for the room was so full of mist, there were flaming gas jets hanging from the ceiling, but they didn't seem to give sufficient light. However, I knew well enough what the girl wanted; she was anxious for the hour to strike when she would be at liberty to take her departure. The minutes seemed to drag out into eternity for her.

"Will he be there?" That was what she was repeating to herself, and, of course, being for the time, as it were, in her brain, I knew all about "him"—as much as she did, anyway. I thought, with her, that he would be certain to turn up at the appointed meeting place.

He did. They met at an A. B. C. tea shop, and he was evidently cross with her for being late. I didn't like the look of the fellow at all; he was a shocking boulder, loudly dressed, and with a bowler hat set on one side of his head. A loafer, if I ever saw one. He had shifty eyes and a receding chin and horrid thick lips.

John smiled and chatted amiably enough at first, while the girl nervously sipped her tea; but his expression changed quickly when she leaned forward and began to talk to him very earnestly. I quite expected, I would—as did she, poor girl. You see, I knew what was in her mind.

It was pitiful. He regained his composure and began to talk soothingly, but it was such obvious acting, even she was scarcely deceived by it—though she tried hard to believe him genuine. He kept shifting about in his seat, anxious the whole time to get away. There were tears in her eyes when she rose to go, but he whispered something that made her smile up at him through her tears. I think it was a promise to her.

They parted under the glare of the electric light outside the shop. She lifted her face or a kiss and he gave it to her; but I think his kiss must have told her the truth. She stood gazing after him as he disappeared in the crowd, and there was an agony of apprehension in her face. "He won't come back! I shall never see him again!" You may laugh, but I felt as if the words were torn from my own heart.

Well, I'm very near the end of my story. The girl must have moved her arm just then, for all of a sudden the whole train of impressions was broken. I started up as if I had just come out of a dream and those words were on my lips—I actually spoke them aloud—"He won't come back! I shall never see him again!"

She heard me. It must have seemed to her as though I had spoken her actual thought. She too, was sitting up, and there was a scared look on her face—her eyes were absolutely wild.

"How did you know?" she whispered. Then realizing that I was a stranger fancying I suppose, that I had not addressed her, that she had been dreaming; "Oh, I beg your pardon," she said hurriedly.

I can't remember if I replied or not. I was struggling to collect my own thoughts. I felt a bit dazed myself, and perhaps it was lucky that the baby set up a howl just at that moment and distracted everybody's attention. Before I had time to decide how to act, the girl got up, and without so much as looking at me jumped out of the bus. We were bearing Hammersmith then, but I'm sure she hadn't reached her own destination.

A queer story, isn't it? I can't attempt an explanation, but I'm absolutely positive that, quite innocently, I got an insight that evening into the poor little tragedy of a girl's life. For I'm quite sure he never came back—he wasn't the sort of man to do so. No, I never saw her again, though I traveled back by the same bus night after night, rather in the hope of doing so. But there is a sequel, and it's this—perhaps the strangest part of the whole affair, when one remembers that it was all an impression, a sort of dream. I saw the man, the identical fellow, dressed just as I had figured him out, that evening. I was at an A. B. C. shop where I sometimes go myself for a cup of tea. He was sitting at one of the little tables and there was a girl with him to whom he was engaged in making violent love. But it was not my friend of the omnibus—oh, no; it was another girl altogether, though I think she was of the same class—Alice and Claude Astan in London Street.

BASHFUL YET FEARLESS

If I had been caught in such a situation by anybody but John Benton I should have been terribly annoyed. There I was sitting on the floor of the nursery with hair tumbled, my face red, and a great rent across the front of my skirt where it had been caught by a nail a few minutes before during a fierce blindman's buff scrimmage.

My little sister Alice was having a party and of course I had to assist in entertaining the guests. There were just twelve, seven boys and five girls, when John Benning tapped at the door I said "come in," carelessly supposing it was one of the servants. "I beg your pardon, Miss Latour. They said I should find you here. But perhaps I have made some mistake."

Not at all, Mr. Benton, said I as I scrambled to my feet. "We are pleased to see you. Sit down on the piano stool. The chairs have been taken into the other room. We have been playing blindman's buff."

"I received this invitation," went on Mr. Benton, taking an envelope from his pocket.

The gilt-edged card within read: "Miss Latour requests the pleasure of your company on Tuesday, December 29, at five o'clock."

I looked reproachfully at my seven-year-old sister Alice. She had sent one of the printed invitations in which the printer had neglected to insert the name "Alice" to John Benton, and the great booby had taken it for granted that I was the Miss Latour, so he had come in full dress, a nice contrast to my torn dress and disheveled hair.

I did not care much what I said to John Benton. Ever since I had met him at the Warren's ball three months before, my brothers all decided that he was in love with me, but was too bashful to tell me so.

Not that he was backward where men were concerned. My brother Will took me to the Stock Exchange one morning, and I saw John Benton, with his hat on the back of his head, grasping a brass railing with one hand and shaking the other, holding some papers in the face of a savage looking man, and shouting at him at the top of his voice in the most defiant manner.

But Mr. Benton was not thinking about the market as he walked over to the piano stool in his dress suit and white necktie and sat there with one of the most sheepish smiles I ever saw on a young man's face.

"Now, Lou, you must sit down on the floor again, so that we can play forfeits. And you, too, Mr. Benton, come on," said Alice.

John Benton blushed and looked at me. Most of the penalties were in the shape of kisses, and I felt nervous until my turn came. Alice held forfeits over the head of a particular friend of hers, a girl of her own age and it was the duty of the latter to say what would be done with the owner of the article. There was my handkerchief held up threateningly.

I am ashamed to say that my heart beat quickly when Alice repeated the familiar jargon, and I fairly jumped when she with a mischievous glance at Mr. Benton and myself stepped and whispered to her friend. Then she went on with the question: "What shall be done with the owner?"

Clear cut and distinct came the answer: "She shall kiss Mr. Benton."

"Oh, it's Lou—it's Lou!" shouted Alice. There was silence, as everybody except Mr. Benton looked at me to see the operation performed, when a baby voice at my side said: "I'll kiss him for you, Lou."

So Stella climbed up to Mr. Benton's neck, with one of her hands on his white shirt front, and, as she said herself: "I kissed him right on the mouf, and it tickled my nose!"

I did not want to play at forfeits any longer—it was too dangerous, so I proposed that we should all sing.

"No, no, I saw a birdie on the tree," she persisted. He put her down and she ran over to me. As I took her on my lap I heard the door close and saw that John Benton had disappeared.

"I want some more sugar candy," announced Stella, imperiously. "I shall have to go down for it, Stella. It is all in the dining room," I said.

"Well, go down. I'll be dood." Of course I had to go. I left Stella to Alice's charge and ran swiftly down the stairs. The nursery was on the third floor. I do not know what induced me to open the door of my parents' bedroom as I passed it, I did so, however. It was quite dark save for the narrow bar of moonlight forcing its way through the branches of the poplar outside the window.

I glanced carelessly into the room, with my hand on the handle of the door, and was about to continue my journey to the dining room when I felt a current of air from an open window, and saw something white gleaming in the moonlight for an instant, and then disappear.

"What is that? It looked like a hand," I thought, as an indescribable feeling of terror passed over me and left me shivering.

There was not a sound to be heard in the room save the rustling of the curtains as the light wintry breeze blew them from the window, but I was certain someone was there. He was inside the room by this time and I noticed that his footsteps were noiseless, as if he had no shoes on as he moved across the bar of moonlight toward the bureau where my mother always kept her jewelry.

I saw a round path of bright yellow fall on the keyhole of the top drawer and then heard a metallic rattling. The thief was picking the lock.

If I could only scream or call Will! The drawer opened, the man was fumbling at the contents, when—crash! The yellow flash of light disappeared, and with a fearful wail, I saw the man fall, another man holding him. Then a pistol shot rang through the room and echoed up and down the stairs, and the room was flooded in light. Somebody had switched on the light.

For a few seconds my eyes were dazzled that I could not see anything. Then I saw two men rolling on the floor in a desperate struggle, while a pistol lay just outside of their reach. The man underneath with his closely fitting plush cap, was scowling at me as he tried to release himself, and I thought I could see murder written on his thin lips and short, turned up nose so plainly that I should have been in favor of hanging him on the spot.

In the battle, just as my father and Will reached the room the combatants turned over; a very red face, which, however, was anything but sheepish now, was turned toward me. The face of—John Benton!

Will had the thief by the arm in a moment, while John Benton lay panting on the floor. Then it was I saw a great red stain on the white shirt front. It was blood.

Somehow, I forgot all about the thief, Will, my father—everything as I threw myself down by the side of John Benton and pressed my handkerchief over the red stain.

"John, John! What is it? Where are you hurt? Oh, father, he is killed!" I screamed. "What shall I do?" I will never believe again that John Benton was ever bashful, for he just put one of his hands on the back of my head, pulled my face down to his and whispered:

"Do just what you are doing now; and as you have commenced to call me John do it all the rest of your life and let me call you Lou."

There was a sudden disturbance. The thief had broken away. "It is not serious," said John, sitting up. "That fellow cut his hand in some way while opening the bureau and he rubbed the blood all over my shirt, that's all."

I bit my lip and gave John a look that should have frozen him. It did not have the proper effect, however, for he followed me upstairs to the nursery, where the racket of play had rendered the children oblivious to the disturbance below. As he took Stella on his knee he said: "You must sing 'Birdie on a Tree' for us again, will you?"

The COURAGE OF EFFIE DROOD

It was an account worth much effort and some sacrifice of dignity to get hold of. All the three bank managers in Bellington understood that; the respective general managers at the respective head offices understood it even better, and wrote emphatic letters on the subject.

You must offer Sir Julian every possible inducement to give us his business now that he has definitely decided to do it all in Bellington. If necessary, all commission on the account may be waived and interest allowed at Bank rate. The directors look to you to do your best in the matter, and will feel greatly disappointed if you allow yourself to be out-manoeuvred by your rivals."

So said the general manager of the South Midlands bank to Mr. Grundy, manager of the Bellington Bank. Mr. Drood and Mr. Steele, local managers of the National United Bank and the Royal Bank, were hampered at by their chiefs in much the same tone, especially Mr. Drood.

And now once again Sir Julian called on Mr. Drood. He stepped into Mr. Drood's private office with smug triumph on his fat face, as if he looked forward to the enjoyment of another bout of wits.

"I want to tell you," he said, straight out, "that Steele's people are disposed to allow me half per cent above Bank rate, and Grundy says he won't be beaten by anything they can do. I thought I'd let you know."

Drood shrugged his shoulders. "It's an awful business, Sir Julian," he said, "and there won't be a penny profit in it, but I'll go a quarter per cent better than that. Assuming your credit balance keeps at about £30,000, we will give you a quarter per cent over Bank rate, and charge you no commission on a three months' agreement."

"Sir Julian seemed surprised. "The deuce you will, Drood?" "Since you say it, Sir Julian, the deuce will. And I'll tell you why, I'm rather ajar with my authorities, and I'm afraid they'll remove me from Bellington, if I fall in this."

"Ah," said Sir Julian. "Don't dust their boots for them quite as they like, eh?" I expect that's it. I can't toady to them or any one. The great man laughed.

"You're too independent for your job, I can see, Drood," he said. "Well, thanks, I'll make a note of your amended terms. By the way, how's your pretty young wife?"

Mr. Drood winced ever so slightly. "Thank you, she is well," he replied. "Well, look here, Drood," he said, after a puff of smoke, "you can tell her if you like that if I transfer my account to you it'll be more for the sake of her pretty face than—Hullo! What's up?"

Drood had risen sharply. "I won't have your account!" he exclaimed. "I withdraw my offer and wish you good afternoon."

"Bless the fellow!" said Sir Julian, sitting still; "you're too touchy. They'll kick you out of your berth here to a certainty if I say the word."

"I don't care what they do. I'll thank you to leave my office." Sir Julian jumped to his feet. "Me! Leave your office! Are you out of your senses, man?"

"Well, sir," said Drood, hesitating before the fate he was challenging, "perhaps I am a little out of my senses. I've had a good deal to put up with of late. If you will apologize for bringing my wife into the matter—"

"Apologize for mentioning your wife! I'll see you hanged first. Go to the devil your own way, my friend. Such airs!" He strode from the room into the general office, turned, and gave poor Drood the finishing stroke of humiliation in the presence of his own clerks. "I'll see your folks at head office to-morrow, Drood," he said waving his hand with the cigar in it. "They'll be deeply interested. I warrant. Good-day to you!"

Drood made no reply. He and his staff watched the rich boor strut through the door held open for him by a porter. "We have lost his account, Bridge," said Drood simply to his cashier, as he returned to his ownpered.

somewhere, I'm afraid." "But Effie was a brave little wife. "The coarse wretch!" she declared, with a beautiful flush, when her husband came to the source of his trouble. "He always was like that, Adam. Father used to say he was horrid as a young man, and such a coward. If he hadn't all that money he wouldn't dare hold his head so high."

"Yes," said Drood; "I dare say he is just a common bully. But I couldn't do anything else. Could I?" She laid her pretty head on her husband's shoulder.

"I'm a tomboy still at heart, you know," she whispered. "I would dearly though like to—to punch his head. That's what comes of growing up with eight brothers, Adam."

"And being a champion at hockey, eh, Effie?" "Oh, yes, all that kind of thing. But don't let's see red before red comes. Old boy. We'll have some tea and by and by a nice little dinner—with oyster patties, and—oh! that tiresome telephone!"

Adam patted her loved head and went to the tube. The general manager himself was at the other end and soon Adam rejoined his wife with a particularly glum expression.

"Mr. Severn must have heard something already," he said. "He says I am to move heaven and earth to keep the account. My salary will go up to fifty if I do it."

"And did you tell him, Adam?" "No, I hadn't the courage. I just thanked him. That's all."

"Do you mind, dear?" she said gently. "If I cycle out to old Mrs. Forrest before dinner? I shan't ask you to come with me. Have your tea by yourself, old boy, and then just putter about in the garden. Will you?"

Old Mrs. Forrest lived at Hooten, and so did Sir Julian King. Effie's father had been vicar of Hooten and Mrs. Forrest had nursed her as a baby. Mrs. Forrest's cottage was close to the lodge gates of Hooten Hall. Little that went on in the hall escaped the dame's eyes and ears. She was wont to watch the goings and comings as if they were as precious a part of her life as the geraniums on her window sill.

"No, dearie," she said, "Sir Julian isn't home yet, but he's due. It's half-past 5, and he hasn't been later than that any day this week. Fine and pert he keeps for his age, too."

"That's all right," thought Effie. She enraged the old woman with her rheumatism and topics of general interest for ten minutes. Then the rush of a motor-car was heard, and Sir Julian dashed up to the Hall gates.

"There he goes, dearie!" cried Mrs. Forrest. "What a dust he do leave behind him, to be sure! There's no keeping one's curls clean for it."

Effie rose to leave. "Poor old curtains!" she said gaily. "I'll go and tell him about it." She sped up the Hall avenue as if that really was her intention. Mrs. Forrest shook her head at the sight. She had never known such a wilful, determined, and yet lovable child as Miss Effie in the old vicarage days.

"I do believe she going to do it," she whispered. Some twenty minutes passed and Effie returned with glowing cheeks. She paused at the cottage, to leave half a crown for a new set of window curtains.

"Didn't I tell you?" she said. "Sir Julian thinks you're an old silly to live in his dust, though, and so you are—a beloved old silly."

She was on her bicycle and away again before Mrs. Forrest's tongue had a suitable reply ready. So back to the bank where Drood was smoking a thoughtful and rather melancholy pipe in the green house. She came in with laughter on her lips and in her eyes and gave him a letter.

"Read that, old boy," she whispered. Drood recognized the great man's handwriting on the address, frowned and opened the envelope. Hooten—Dear Sir: I have pleasure in informing you that my account will be transferred to your branch from head office on the proposed arrangement of three days ago, by which you allow me one-half per cent. interest above bank rate on my credit balance with you and charge me no commission. Yours faithfully, Julian King.