

PASSENGERS

By Ethel Lina White

The Exciting Tale of an Orphaned English Girl, Returning from Her Holidays in Italy, Who Finds Mystery, Murder—and Love—in a Single Train Journey

JUST before the blow fell Edna felt unusually well and happy. Her holiday was over, her bill at the hotel was paid, and her suitcase lay on the station platform. For over an hour she had sat—the sun beating down on her uncovered head—feasting her eyes on the scenery.

She had just spent a glorious three weeks rambling the mountains in congenial Anglo-American society, and it seemed strangely civilized to be wearing a skirt and silk stockings again after shorts and nailed boots. The rest of the crowd had returned yesterday, but she had chosen to stay one day longer, alone.

Suddenly the sun struck her. Owing to the altitude, the air was cool and bracing so that she had not realized the fierceness of its rays. She felt a violent pain at the back of her neck, followed by a rush of sick dizziness. As the white-capped mountains darkened and rocked she had a ghastly moment of panic.

"I'm going to be ill—alone—among strangers." Then everything slipped away. . . . When she opened her eyes she was in the cool gloom of the primitive little waiting room, while a black pinafored woman held a glass of raw spirits to her lips. People stared at her curiously and spoke to her, but she could not understand a word.

Luckily, she soon felt better and was able to reward her Good Samaritans. But, after they had left her, she had another bad minute when she wondered if she had been robbed while she was unconscious. Examination of her bag, however, proved that her tickets, passport, and money were untouched.

She was now in a fever of impatience to get away, for her experience had unnerved her. It had made her realize, for the first time in her life, the horror of helplessness far away from familiar things.

With a whistle and a roar the engine steamed into the little station. The porter had difficulty in finding a place for Edna, for, although her seat was reserved, the carriage already held its quota of six. He appeared to be abjectly apologetic to a majestic lady in deep black, who plainly resented the newcomer.

The whistle shrilled and the engine began to lurch slowly on its way back to England. Except the frontiers there was only one stop—Milan—before Basle, where Edna changed into the Calais express.

A family party—two large parents and a daughter of about twelve—sat on the same side of the carriage as herself. Opposite was a fair and beautiful girl in black and white who appeared to have modeled herself on a film star, a typical British spinster, and the lady who had opposed her intrusion.

Veiled and draped in heavy black, she was an overwhelming and formidable personality—essentially of the ruling class—with an arrogant beaked nose and fierce, proud eyes.

Presently the majestic lady received a visitor—a pallid man with dead eyes, a black spade beard, and glasses. As they carried on a low conversation Edna was amused to notice that the British spinster was straining her ears to listen. She also remarked that the black-clad lady looked in her direction as though in annoyance and made a low observation to her companion.

Sensing their hostility, she closed her eyes and only knew when the man had left the compartment by the absence of guttural whispers. The motion rocked her to a light sleep.

Her torpid trance was broken by an official who poked his head through the door and shouted something, to which the company in general was unresponsive. The British spinster, however, tapped Edna on the arm.

"You're English, aren't you?" she asked in a crisp, pleasant voice. "Tea is ready in the restaurant car. Coming?"

EDNA'S head was aching badly, so that she was glad to follow her guide into the corridor. As they passed the next compartment to theirs they saw through the door a figure, covered with rugs, stretched out on one seat. Both head and forehead were bandaged, while a criss-cross of plaster strips concealed the features from brow to chin in a diagonal line.

The invalid was in charge of the pallid black-bearded man who had just visited their carriage and a nursing sister who was dressed like a nun. Her face was hard and repellent, with a brutal mouth, so that it was difficult to connect her with the profession of nursing.

"How ghastly to be ill on a journey!" shuddered Edna, with a memory of her recent attack. Her companion was able to tell her all about the invalid, for she was the type that collects information.

"Yes, a motor smash higher up the valley. Her face is terribly cut, poor thing, and there's head injury, so they're rushing her to Milan for an operation. The doctor was telling the baroness about it just now."

Edna learned that her compatriot was a Miss Winifred Bird, who had been English governess to a titled family for two years and was now going home on her first holiday. To her surprise this adult lady actually possessed living parents.

"Mummy and daddy say they can talk of nothing else but my return," Miss Bird told her. "They're excited as children, and so is Ruff. He's an old English sheep dog, not pure, but an appealing dog, and so devoted to me. He understands I'm coming home, but not when, so he meets every train. Mummy says he always comes back with his tail down, the picture of depression. They're both imagining his frantic joy the night I do come. And that's tomorrow."

"Are you going back after your holiday?" Edna asked.

"Yes, but not to my post." Miss Bird looked around her and then lowered her voice. "I'm coming back to give evidence in a murder trial. I'll mention no names, but I was governess to the very highest in the place. You've no idea of his

power. What he says goes, and he hasn't got to speak, for a wink is enough. But, although he rules absolutely, there's a small communist element in the town, and their leader—a young man—accused the—my employer—of corruption. I'm afraid it was true. There was an awful scene at the castle, and the—my employer—shot the young man. I saw it all."

"You've really seen a man killed?" gasped Edna. "How terrible."

"Terrible at the time, my dear, but afterwards it all turned to a thrilling adventure. Life's so interesting because things are always happening. Every one wanted to hush it up and say it was suicide. But, of course, I had to insist on being heard for the sake of justice. You've no idea how unpopular I was. The children threw stones at me in the street and the shop people refused to serve me. Even the police were quite angry with me. And I'm sure the muddle about my seat was intentional."

"What muddle?" asked Edna.

"I booked my seat second class, but, when I got to the train they said my place was already taken. But the baroness was kind and said I was to travel 'first' with her and she would make it right about my ticket. I felt awkward, as she's related to the—my employer."

EDNA gathered that the autocratic lady in black was the baroness and that she had annexed her own reservation for Miss Bird. By this time, however, she was growing tired of Miss Bird's confidences. After they had blundered back to their compartment she felt she must make a bid for silence.

"Do you mind if I don't talk?" she asked. "My head is nearly splitting. I've just had a touch of sunstroke."

As she knew Miss Bird's curiosity had to be appeased, she gave a brief account of her attack. While she did so she had the feeling that the baroness was listening to her story with concealed interest.

Miss Bird kindly supplied aspirin, which made Edna feel pleasantly drowsy.

Down, down, she drifted into sleep. Suddenly she gave a violent start and her heart began to leap as though she had just stepped into vacancy. Opening her eyes, she stared around her confusedly.

Miss Bird had disappeared. Common sense told Edna that Miss Bird had probably gone to wash and would soon be back. She looked at her watch to time her absence. In five minutes she would surely be back, and with her warm humanity, her curiosity, and her stories about family and home.

Five minutes passed, then ten, then fifteen. Still Miss Bird did not come back. When, after twenty minutes had passed, Edna chanced to look up at her rack, she received a nasty shock.

Miss Bird's suitcase was not there.

She could restrain her uneasiness no longer. As the baroness still slept, she appealed to the other passengers. She was probably the world's worst linguist, but she made a brave effort in three of the languages of civilization.

She coked out her inquiries with pantomime, pointing to Miss Bird's empty place, while she raised her brows in exaggerated inquiry. But the passengers merely shrugged and shook their heads to show her that they did not understand.

Since no sight of intelligence gleamed on their blank faces, Edna decided to find out whether Miss Bird had changed her seat. But it seemed unlikely, in view of the fact that the train was so full, and she felt acutely worried as she worked her way down the shaking corridor—clinging to the rail, pushing past loiterers, and staring into every compartment.

Her quest reminded her of the hunt for the proverbial needle in the haystack. Although she visited every portion of the long train, including both restaurant cars—where men were smoking and drinking—she could find no trace of Miss Bird. With a leaden sense of apprehension she returned to her own compartment.

The baroness still slept. Suddenly desperate, Edna leaned forward and shook her awake. As she did so, she heard a smothered gasp from the other passengers, as though she had committed some act of sacrilege.

THE baroness opened her proud eyes in a glare of outraged majesty. But Edna was too overwrought to apologize.

"Where is the English lady?" she cried.

"What English lady?" asked the baroness, speaking without a trace of accent.

"Miss Bird. The one who sat here."

"I do not understand. That seat has not been occupied, ever."

Edna's head began to reel.

"Yes, yes," she insisted. "I talked to her. We had tea together."

"No." The baroness shook her head and spoke with slow emphasis. "You make a strange mistake. There has been no English lady here except you, yourself."

Feeling as though she was trapped in some bad dream, Edna sank weakly down in her seat.

Either they're all mad, or I'm mad, she thought. No Miss Bird? Did I dream her? No, she was as real as me, with her old parents and Ruff. . . . O, heavens! it's ghastly to be so helpless.

Presently she sprang to her feet in a burst of nervous futility.

Scarcely conscious of her actions, Edna began to make a second search through the train. But, this time, she was aware that she was an object of curiosity and amusement. In every carriage was a blur of faces.

As she entered the first class restaurant car she thought she heard an Oxford accent. Unable to locate it, she made a general appeal.

"Please. Is there any one English here?"

The spectacle of a pretty girl in distress brought two men to their feet, although one of them appeared to regard chivalry merely as a duty. He was tall, thin, and of academic appearance, which, in his case, was not deceptive, since he was a university professor of modern languages.

The other was younger and rather untidy, with rough hair and audacious blue eyes.

"An English lady, Miss Bird, has disappeared on the train," Edna declared, her voice shaking as she spoke. "They say—but that's absurd, I'm frightened by it all. Something's wrong—and I can't speak their miserable language—and—"

As her voice failed, she was conscious of a tall gray man, bald as a vulture, who stared at her with piercing eyes as though she was something on a microscope slide.

"Could you pull yourself together and make a concise statement?" asked the professor.

The chill in his voice was tonic to her nerves, breaching her to compress the situation into a few words. To her overwhelming relief the professor was impressed, for he looked grave.

"This must certainly be investigated," he said. "Will you show me where your compartment is?"

The frivolous youth joined them and, somehow, managed to infect Edna with a sense of comradeship as they fought their way through the crowded corridor.

"My name's Carr," he said. "Much too long for you to remember. Better call me 'John Michael Peter, like every one else. I'm an engineer and speak the lingo, too. Look on me as a second string."

STRONG in the support of her compatriots, Edna felt certain of a happy issue as she entered her own compartment. The baroness was talking to the doctor, who was paying her another visit, but she listened, with gracious condescension, to the professor's statement.

He appeared to be in his element as he held his official inquiry and questioned the passengers, in turn. She looked up at him with a smile and was unpleasantly surprised by his unresponsive face. Although she could not understand the language, it was easy to follow the proceedings by the negative shake of each person's head.

By degrees, her



"Miss Bird," screamed Edna.

confidence began to cloud. The ticket collector was called into the carriage to add his contribution to the general confusion and noise. She glanced at Carr, but he only pulled down his mouth in a grimace.

Her heart sank and her head began to swim. It was inconceivable that all these people should lie—yet they appeared to be denying the existence of Miss Bird.

Presently the professor spoke to her coldly. "You appear to have made a most extraordinary mistake. No one in this carriage—including the ticket collector—knows anything about the lady you say is missing."

"Are you telling me I invented her?" asked Edna, wildly. "We had tea together."

"Then, will you describe her so that I can interview the tea waiters?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you much," she faltered. "There's nothing about her to catch hold of. She's middle aged, and ordinary, and rather colorless."

"Surely you know if she is tall or short, dark or fair?"

"No. But I remember she had blue eyes."

"What did she wear?" asked Carr with a flash of intuition.

"Tweed, I think. I didn't notice much because I've such a splitting headache."

"Exactly." The professor's tone was dry.

"Cause and effect. The doctor tells me you've just had sunstroke."

Suddenly Edna saw her chance to convince him.

"How does the doctor know that?" she asked.

"I only told that to Miss Bird. How could I tell any one else when I only speak English?"

"It appears you were taken ill on the station platform. The baroness was there and she told the doctor."

"It explains all," said the doctor, speaking English with a grating accent. "Your sunstroke has given you a delirium—a delusion. You went to sleep and you dreamed. Your Miss Bird is only your dream."

A long-drawn howl, as though a damned soul were lamenting, and a succession of rattles like gunfire told her that they were passing through a tunnel.

Suppose Miss Bird's body was, even then, being thrown out of the carriage in which it lay concealed.

EDNA felt her temperature rushing up as though she were in a furnace. Every one considered her slightly mad and found her antics a funny spectacle. Mocking eyes followed her as she stormed the restaurant car.

The professor sat in interested conversation with the vulture-headed man, while Carr listened. When he saw Edna he looked up with a slight frown.

"I must tell you something," she cried. "I've discovered that there's a conspiracy against Miss Bird. We've got to help her because she's English like ourselves. Do listen."

The professor heard her story in stony silence and then he raised his brows interrogatively to the man with the piercing eyes. He nodded agreement when the other made some rapid explanation.

"Will you take some advice, offered in a friendly spirit?" asked the professor, speaking to Edna as though to a fractious child. "This gentleman is a famous Russian alienist, and he is of the opinion that you may be, temporarily, slightly deranged, as a result of your sunstroke."

"D'you mean mad?" cried Edna in horror. "Me?"

Suspicious of everyone, she imagined the alienist

might be in league with the baroness, and if she persisted in her charges he would send her to a home in Milan.

She closed her eyes wearily and let herself drift on the choppy current of the train's frantic rhythm.

She was recalled to reality by a friendly voice, and she looked up to see Carr smiling at her.

"I've been thinking over 'The Strange Disappearance of Miss Bird,'" he said. "If you like, I'll tell you how it could be done. But first—when you came on the train was there one nun next door to you, or two?"

"One."

"And now there are two."

"I know. But the other might have been somewhere else in the train. There's just a jam in the corridors."

"Good," declared Carr triumphantly. "No one would be likely to notice them. Now, we'll assume your little lady has got up against the High Hat—and it's true about the feudal system being still in force in these remote places. So she's got to be bumped off. And what better way than on a railroad journey?"

"Do you mean—they've thrown her on the rails in a tunnel?" asked Edna faintly.

"Lord, no. Her body would be found and awkward questions asked. What I meant was that a lot of valuable time will be wasted before it's proved she's missing. Her people will think she's lost a connection or is stopping for a few days in Paris. Even if they are influential and know the ropes, the trail will be cold by the time they get busy."

"And they're old and helpless," said Edna.

"Bad luck. In any case, when they make inquiries locally they'll find themselves up against a conspiracy of silence. . . . This would be a natural matter of tradition and policy. But I believe the baroness, the doctor and the two nuns are the only people in the plot. All the other passengers are local folk who would back up the baroness as a matter of course. There's no doubt, though, there was dirty work at the crossroads over her reserved seat, so as to force her into the baroness' compartment, which is at the end of the train and next door to the doctor."

"But what's happened to her?" asked Edna faintly.

"My theory is that she's lying in the next compartment to yours, covered up and disguised with bandages and trimmings. You were an unwelcome interloper, but when you obligingly went to sleep Miss Bird was asked to render some slight service to their invalid, and I'm sure she would go like a bird."

"Yes," nodded Edna. "I'm positive she would."

"There you are, then. Directly she entered she was gripped and gagged by two of them while a third gave her an injection. When she was unconscious they bandaged her up roughly and stuck plaster all over her face to disguise it. Then the false patient, who was already dressed in uniform, would only have to put a veil over her bandages, which would look like the proper bands, and peel off her own strip to look the perfect nun."

"And—when they reach Milan?" asked Edna fearfully.

"I'm afraid the betting is she'll be taken in an ambulance to some lonely place near a river. . . . But she'll know nothing of it. They'll keep her unconscious all the time."

Edna sprang to her feet.

"We must do something at once," she cried.

"Listen to me," Carr pulled her back to her seat. "All this is only my idea, because I was suspicious of the way the invalid is on view in order to show all is above board. If it was genuine illness I am sure they'd pull down the blind. . . . But, remember, it is impossible to prove it."

"But why? Why?"

"Because it may be a real patient. We can't insist on examining her bandages to see if they are wound on or in correct surgical manner, or rip off her plaster to spy her face. We might start the wound bleeding and she might pass out. We can't risk years in quod for manslaughter."

Edna fought against his restraining arm, but he continued to hold her.

"Don't start anything mad," he said. "The truth is I can't forget your sunstroke. I just showed you how things might be done. But I'm like the old lady who saw a giraffe for the first time. I don't believe it."

The passengers for the first dinner began to stream into the car. Feeling that food would choke her, Edna was driven out into the corridor. When Carr spoke to her she turned on him in a fury.

"Go away. I hate you!"

AFTER an age long struggle through two sections of the train, where the connecting passages seemed clanking iron concertinas, in which she might be caught and pressed to death, she realized that she was near to her own compartment.

"I must find her," murmured Edna confusedly. They were getting near Milan. She could see scattered lights in the distance. In the conflicting reflections of the windows walls and roofs appeared like quivering landscape and running water. She could hear movements in the next carriage. Luggage was lowered to the floor and voices called for service. The guard passed in the corridor, just as Carr came to the door.

"We're coming into Milan," he said.

"Milan!" As though the word were an electric needle stabbing a raw nerve, Edna sprang to her feet, inflamed by a dynamic impulse. She acted with the blind delirium of fever. Ducking under the guard's arm, she pushed into the next compartment, and—before any one could guess her purpose—dug her fingers under the plaster, tearing it from the invalid's face.

The guard gave a gasp of horror which sharpened into a whistle of surprise as the adhesive strip peeled off. Instead of raw gashed flesh he saw the skin of a middle aged woman.

"Miss Bird!" screamed Edna.

There followed a panic of noise and confusion, in which Edna felt herself pushed roughly on one side. At the same moment she went to bits, utterly exhausted by her supreme effort. Staggering back to her own seat she collapsed.

Shouts and sudden flashes of light told her that they were entering a large station, and she felt the jerk of the train as it stopped. The tumult in the next compartment seemed to increase. . . . Then it died down. . . . Other passengers entered her carriage. She heard the whistle of the engine and the slow clank of wheels as it steamed slowly on its way to Basle.

Very soon some one spoke to her, and she looked up into the eyes of an old and intimate friend who did not know her name.

"I say, you," said Carr. "Everything's O. K., and I've had the time of my life. The guard was immense, and knew just what to do. The doctor and his little lot went like lambs. They know they'll only have to stand for a charge of attempted abduction, and though the baroness sailed out—no connection—she'll work it for them somehow. Wheels within wheels, you know."

Edna was indifferent to their fate, one way or the other.

"What happened to Miss Bird?" she asked.

"Responding to treatment, and all that. The alienist, who's a frightfully decent chap, is looking after her, and she'll soon be conscious. But she must stop at Basle and go on tomorrow. Will you break your journey to keep her company?"

"Will you be there, too? Then I will."

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