

# Fantasy and Science Fiction

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*E. C. Hornsby once described himself as "a moderately successful businessman by day and a moderately successful author by night." Some years later he ruefully instructed an editor to delete the phrase "moderately successful" from both professions, and added, "I am about as many inches round the waist as I have years of life, and about the same number of hairs on my head. Shudder and pass me by. It were kinder thus." There's nothing moderate, however, about his success in this deftly devised tale of precognition and telepathy, with a twist as unexpected as it is just.*

## Overlooked

by E. C. HORNSBY

THE DOCTOR, WHO WAS IRISH BY birth, looked reflectively into his glass and a twinkle from its amber depth was reflected in his grey eyes.

"None of you chaps would remember Billy Bates?" he said and glanced round. "No, I thought not; before your time. Billy was the nicest little chap you might ever have met; a chubby little cherub of a fellow. All men liked him and all women wanted to mother him, although none of them ever took him seriously enough to want to marry him.

"One night at this Club we were talking of close shaves we had had, and some of us had been in some pretty queer spots, when Billy chips in to say he'd been nearer to death on three or four occasions than any of us.

"Knowing that he'd never been

anywhere in his life wilder than Margate in the season, we smiled.

"'And did you live?' asked one of the boys.

"'Yes,' said Billy, seriously. 'You see I was watched over.'" And then he told us:

The first incident had happened some years previously when he was a lad working in the City and living in a suburb on the eastern side of London, which we'll call Stanbury. The electric line had just been run out there and one night Billy was sitting in the front coach of a tube train on his way home. Most of the people had got out at the last stop and he thought he was alone in the compartment, but he was busy reading his paper and hadn't noticed properly.

Presently he got the idea he was

being watched so he put down his paper and there was a woman sitting right opposite him. She had a very white face and sunken eyes which were nothing but black hollows and she was looking at him so intently that, embarrassed, he hurried to hide behind his paper again.

But he could still feel her watching him and at last he had to look again. This time she stretched out her hands to him imploringly, and the idea jumped to his mind that she was a bit queer in the head.

"Good Lord," he thought, "I'm going to be involved in a scene."

She opened her mouth in a torrent of words. But the surprising thing was he couldn't hear a sound. It was like watching somebody behind a pane of plate glass. He might have thought himself deaf except that the noise of the train crashing along was going on all about him. Then he thought that perhaps she was dumb.

He looked up and down the carriage but there was nobody else in it, only the woman and himself.

As if despairing of making him understand, she jumped to her feet and walked agitatedly up and down the compartment. Every time she drew near to Billy she flung out her hands imploringly, brought her face to within a few inches of his, and each time there was that silent rush of unspoken entreaty.

Then she went to the door leading to the driver's cab; you know it, it's green painted and there are a couple of little steps leading up to it and a

notice saying, "Keep this Doorway clear." She vanished through it.

Billy stared after her, wondering what he ought to do.

After a bit she came back. She was wringing her hands as if she had failed there as well.

The train was drawing up at the stop before Stanbury. The doors opened and to Billy's relief the woman got out on to the platform.

All he wanted was for the door to close between them and leave her behind. But suddenly she turned and beckoned to him. It was both so imperious and so imploring that he obeyed instantly. The doors were closing as he dived between them and he had to hold one back as he struggled free. The train moved off and the guard standing at the open door of his compartment shouted at Billy for having forced the door back.

When Billy turned, the platform was empty and the woman gone. He was left to wait ten minutes for the next train and thought some pretty hard things about his own stupidity.

The next train came in but it did not move off, being held at the platform by the signals. Eventually word came through.

There had been a signal failure and the train Billy had been in had been switched on to a wrong track and had crashed full pelt into a stationary train. The motor man had been killed and the front coach completely wrecked.

Billy didn't say anything to any-

body about the woman; he didn't understand it himself and didn't expect anybody else to. He was a very normal little chap and didn't want anyone to think him otherwise.

He put the incident out of his mind and then two or three years later he was waiting for a bus one winter's night. It was a miserable night; it had rained earlier and had partly frozen so the roads were very treacherous and the bus was a long while coming. Still, Billy didn't mind. He was at the top of the queue of some dozen people and reckoned he ought to get a seat. Meantime, he read his paper. It was full of reports of smash and grab raids of which there had been a wave at the time and Billy thought indignantly that something ought to be done about it.

Then he had an impression of somebody coming along. Instead of going to the tail of the queue this person stopped alongside him. Billy thought it was somebody going to "jump" the queue so he turned to glare, and there was this woman again, dead white face, deep-set eyes and all. There was the same silent outrush of words, the same imploring gestures of the hand. The odd part was that nobody else seemed to notice. They all read their papers or talked to each other, or just stood looking hopeless and patient like people in a queue do.

The woman paced up and down

the queue; then, in extreme agitation, she beckoned to him.

Again there was something about it he couldn't resist. He left his place at the head of the queue. The others looked surprised but just shuffled one place up. He hurried after her as she moved off and then, as she still kept ahead, he took to his heels and fairly ran.

"I'll catch her this time," he thought, "I've got to get to the bottom of this."

But she vanished round a corner and when he got there a second later there was not a soul to be seen.

He turned back to the bus stop; one part of his mind was badly shaken and kept saying to him: "Billy, you're going balmy," and the other was annoyed in a commonplace fashion that he had been such a fool as to give up his place at the head of the queue.

And then down the street came tearing two cars; the one at the back which was trying to draw level was a police car, with its sign flashing on and off and its gong banging. The car in front was nearly up to the bus stop when it skidded and ran amok. It charged the pavement and ploughed through the queue. Billy could hear screams, saw people falling right and left, and then the car hit a shop front. There was a crash and a burst of fire and a second of even more terrible silence.

"Nothing," thought Billy, trembling, "nothing could have saved me if I'd still been there. Nothing."

And then he wondered *what* thing it was that had actually saved him.

He thought a good deal about the two incidents after that but he wasn't thinking of them at all when the third incident happened for it came up so unexpectedly, right out of a blue sky.

He was on holiday just before the war. He left his hotel one morning and in easy stages walked beyond the prom and on to the sands until he reached a sheltered cove. He stretched himself out on the sands and presently dropped off to sleep. When he awakened he was on an ever-diminishing mound of sand with the sea all about him. He couldn't swim and the sea which earlier had looked so quiet and peaceful was now roaring and tossing about like a lion waiting to be fed.

"I mustn't lose my head," thought Billy, and knew that he was not far from sheer blind panic.

Everything was so normal; there were the cliffs and the sea, the rooftops of some bungalows a little way inland, and a few streaks of smoke on the skyline. All exactly as he had seen so many times. The only difference was that now he was *in* the sea and presently would most undoubtedly drown.

Then he saw a figure on the edge of the sea. Although she was in the shadow of the cliff he knew her instantly. She beckoned to him again and pointed. The path she pointed

out seemed to be where the sea ran roughest but he obeyed without question to find that a raised bank of sand ran just at that point and no more than knee deep in water he splashed and floundered his way to safety — and an empty beach.

The last occasion was in the early part of the war during the daylight Blitz when he left a public shelter at her beckoning and went out in the face of the barrage despite the remonstrances of the shelter warden. A couple of hours later, passing the spot, he saw the result of a direct hit.

We didn't know whether to take Billy seriously or not, although he seemed to take it seriously enough himself. We asked him if he recognized this guardian angel of his and he said no. We suggested all sorts of females of our acquaintances as fitting the post, and grew pretty hilarious.

"She's not a young woman, you chaps," said Billy, blushing like a schoolboy. "She's quite old, old enough to be my mother."

So we invented a Sunday school teacher named "Miss Higginbotham," for whom he had had a crush in his youth and who by reason of her saintly life on earth had been appointed to watch over his later life. We even pretended to see her standing with her harp over by the bar and suggested Billy stand drinks all round on her behalf.

Billy took it all in good part

although I think he had revealed a lot more than he had first intended, and he made an excuse to get away.

When he had gone an elderly man, newly amongst us, said reflectively:

“The woman nearest to a man, whatever his age, is always his mother. I suppose it couldn’t have been his mother?”

There was a silence.

“Have I said something?” he asked, glancing round. “Is his mother dead? Surely even that might be accepted too, presuming, of course, you admit the supernatural?”

“His mother’s still alive,” somebody said awkwardly. “In fact, Billy still lives with her.”

“Besides,” added somebody else, “you remember he said he didn’t recognize her.”

And with that we closed the matter with a minimum of embarrassment to all concerned.

Not that there was anything wrong with Mrs. Bates. She was a mountain of a woman with a heart of gold. But it was just utterly impossible to associate her with anything spiritual. She had started life helping on her father’s barrow in an East End kerb market and had finished up owning a chain of fruit shops; between those two points, she boasted, she had never bought or sold anything that wasn’t good sound honest stuff. The same could be said for her herself.

Have you noticed how everything

that is to happen seems to send its herald a day or two in advance? You wake up thinking of somebody’s name and you go out into the street and come face to face with them; any of you can multiply such experiences by the dozen.

In this case I might have known something would follow in the wake of Billy’s story, but when it did come along perhaps I could not altogether be blamed for not recognizing it at first.

I was called to a Miss Treadmere. She lived in a gaunt Victorian house in the old part of the town. On the one side factories had gradually encroached and further along the houses had been pulled down for flats. Only one or two of the old houses remained like aged spinsters in old-fashioned clothes and peculiar hats, things for derision or pity, soon to be elbowed aside.

I was shown first into a sort of parlour on the ground floor; there was a strong masculine flavour about it; all the furniture looked heavily male, there were pipes in one of those pipe-racks you so seldom see nowadays, a roll-top desk in a corner and even a brass-mounted safe. A portrait of an implacable gentleman with a ruthless mouth under a heavy moustache looked sternly at me from the walls. A nervous looking lady, apologetically faded to a mere shadow, looked forlornly from another frame. I thought it might be Miss Treadmere but it was her mother.

A scaffold pole of a woman took me up two steep flights of stairs to a little sitting room and there I made the acquaintance of Miss Treadmere, or the husk that her dear father had left behind.

She might have been pretty at one time but I doubt if she ever had the deeper beauty that character gives. I could have imagined her in youth petulantly resentful of parental control, but it had been so thoroughly stamped out of her that she had become the very high priestess of the monstrous Juggernaut that had crushed her. At every second word she quoted her father, said what he would approve and what he would not approve, how wise he had proved in denying her this little happiness or that little pleasure. As I listened to this self-revelation I found myself listening for a heavy tread on the stairs. Then suddenly, and with utter amazement, for so strongly did he live in her, I realized that Mr. Treadmere was dead and had been dead for a good ten years.

There was nothing much wrong with Miss Treadmere, except general debility as her paper-white cheeks proclaimed but I think she liked our little chat and I dropped into the habit of a regular call, although, poor soul, she was the dreariest company.

One night in the downstairs parlour, before the remorseless glare of her father and the shadowy nothingness of her mother, Miss Treadmere confided her story to me.

She's dead long since or I would not be telling you this now, but I fancy the dead care little about the secrets they leave behind on earth.

She had had a wilder youth than I had ever imagined; she had run off with a man and her father's door had been closed against her in the approved fashion of the day. She had married this man and had a child by him but he turned out a despicable scoundrel. He had obviously married her thinking she had means of her own and then vented his subsequent disappointment on her. Finally he was taken up by the police and amidst a welter of other charges it came out that he was married already.

Miss Treadmere found her way back to the parental home. Perhaps old Treadmere was so gloomily triumphant at this vindication of his judgment that he desired to have her about the place as a perpetual trophy like big game hunters mount *their* trophies. More likely, that faded lady his wife having quietly faded out of everything a little previously, he wanted a housekeeper. He took her back, but he made his terms. The child — and he described it in round Biblical terms — should not enter his house but must be given away, or sold in the market place. He dealt with that side of the affair himself and Miss Treadmere resumed her maiden name and crept submissively about, drooping before that awful eye and shivering before that fearful frown.

“Sometimes,” said Miss Treadmere, gazing out of the lace curtains at the dreary yellow brick wall opposite, “I wish I had not come back here. If I had had courage to go on and earn my own living — only I didn’t know how. But I might have kept my boy. Strange —” she said, shaking out an imaginary fold in the rustling curtains with a hand almost as transparent, “strange to think now he would have been old enough to keep *me* — if he had wanted to, of course.”

“And you’ve never seen him since?” I asked.

“No,” said Miss Treadmere with a sigh. “Father saw to that. He was adopted by somebody. I never knew who it was.”

She was tired and I had to help her back to her room.

“How the evenings draw in,” she said. “It’s winter again. It always seems to be winter.”

She busied herself amongst her tea things but her mind was elsewhere.

“I said I’d never seen my boy again, doctor,” she said. “That’s not true; at least it is and it isn’t. You’ll think I am queer in the head, but at times I do see him — when he is in danger.”

So there it was — the second half of the affair Billy’s yarn had heralded, coming along to meet me.

“Go on,” I said, on tiptoe as it were.

“I go off in a sort of dream and I come to at a catastrophe — a car

smash, a train wreck, or a bombed building. It’s like looking at the end of a book first. Then I turn backwards as it were and start at the beginning. I see him, my son, in a train, and I know it’s the train that’s going to smash, or I see him standing on the pavement at the very spot where the car is going over it. I beg and implore him to turn aside, to come away. He takes no notice. I cannot make him hear my words. Oh, that is terrible, when he cannot hear me —”

“And then?”

“At the very last, when I am in despair, I beckon him to me like this —” She made a gesture of indescribable supplication with her still beautiful hands. “It is then I seem to pierce the curtain. He sees and obeys. Thank God each time he has obeyed.”

“How do you see him?” I asked. “As a man? Does he alter?”

“No,” she answered, “I see him just as my little baby. How else could I see him for I have never seen him otherwise? I think that is why he knows this gesture, for so, when he was learning to walk, I would hold out my arms and he would always come to me.”

I said nothing to her, but as I went down the stairs I apostrophized the dear departed Mr. Treadmere.

“Well, you old swine,” I thought, triumphantly, “so you wouldn’t have her child in the place? We’ll see about that, now, and what are you going to do about it?”



I was passing the open door of the parlour, and there was the picture of Mr. Treadmere. He was glaring at me with the most insane resentment. I knew of only one reply; I'm sorry to say I made it.

I went round to see Mrs. Bates. She was very guarded and indeed hostile at first but eventually I gained her interested sympathy.

"It's a fact I adopted the boy," she said, "but you might have heard that anywhere. It's a fact that there was an old gentleman — a hard old brute if ever there was one. But it was all done through a firm of lawyers —"

"Trender, Fairburn, and Trender," I suggested, remembering the name of Miss Treadmere's solicitors.

"Yes," admitted Mrs. Bates, looking surprised. "But it was agreed that if Bert and me were to have the boy never were we to communicate with anybody about it again. The old gentleman put a big sum of money in the bank but Bert and me had our pride no less than his, and we never touched it. Now, how do you come into this?"

I told her and she melted largely and generously.

"Poor soul," she said. "Mind you, I'm not giving up Billy; he's mine and always will be. I've been more of a mother to him than she ever has, and he'll be the first to acknowledge it. But there's no reason why she shouldn't see him. I'm sure

she'll always be welcome here whilst she makes herself welcome. There's only one thing, though —" and her cheerful face fell, "I'm not sure how Billy will take this. You might not think it, but he's sensitive as a girl at heart."

"Billy and I know each other pretty well," I said. "Let me have a word with him. Is he home yet?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Bates, "been in an hour or more, but he was sleepy and went to lie down — unusual for Billy."

"I'll go up and see him," I said and made my way upstairs.

He was sitting on his bed, rubbing his eyes in a dazed way.

"Been asleep?" I asked.

"Yes," he agreed, confusedly. He looked at me strangely. "Doc," he burst out, "when I was talking at the Club about the woman that I see sometimes, you didn't believe me, did you? No, I know you didn't, it was in your face. But I wasn't leg-pulling. What's more I've seen her again — this evening."

I sat down and looked at him. He was flushed and wild-eyed but otherwise perfectly normal.

"This time it was different," he continued. "On previous occasions I've been awake and she's come to me. This time I went to her. It was when I got home. I suddenly felt terribly sleepy so I came up here to lie down for a moment. I must have dropped off. I came to in a room — not this room, although otherwise it was just like waking up in the

normal way. She was there in a chair before the fire. I think she's been ill or something for she was in a dressing-gown and slippers."

"Did you notice much of the room?" I asked. "Could you describe any of it?"

"Yes I could," he replied promptly and then proceeded to describe the very room I had stood in an hour before.

"There was a big grandfather clock in it," he added. "There was a scroll and in it the name 'Jno Rawlings, London' and the date — 'A.D. 1685.'"

I was startled; there was no doubt about that. I had had particular cause to notice that clock for it had come up in conversation between Miss Treadmere and myself.

"I saw it was nearly 7 o'clock," said Billy. "I sort of stood there looking on as if it were a stage scene and something was going to happen. I noticed her lift her head as if listening. I thought I heard something myself outside the door, like somebody coming up. She stood up and went to the door. Then it came to me that if she went through that door something terrible would happen. I called to her again and again to stop but she didn't heed. I remember wringing my hands, and then I flung my arms out to her in one last entreaty, like she used to to me. I believe that must have reached her for she stopped with her hand on the door. She turned her face and looked at me and you've no idea of

the turn I got. There was a great bruise on her forehead and blood running down her face and dripping from her chin. Then it cleared and she looked normal again. She gave me a superior sort of smile like you give a troublesome child, turned and went out. Then it happened."

He shivered and rubbed his hand over his forehead.

"I heard her cry out. Then there was a yell. It wasn't her voice. It wasn't any human voice I've ever heard or want to hear. You can't imagine the rage, venom, and fear, that were all jumbled up together in it. I heard her scream and there was a crash. That woke me up. I've been sitting here ever since. I feel sick." He looked at me dolefully. "I suppose I'm going off my rocker."

"I don't think so," I said and then as casually as I could I told him my news. He listened, his eyes unwavering. I think in his own shy commonplace little soul he was a real Sir Galahad where women were concerned. I saw chivalry flash in his eyes. He was all set to idealize this unknown mother of his.

"I must go to her," he said finally, springing to his feet and then he stopped. "But that last business. Something terrible has happened to her."

"No," I cut in, "not *happened*. Perhaps still to happen unless we can stop it. Look, it's only 6:15 now. You said that the clock showed seven. My car's outside, we may still be in time."

We pounded downstairs and into my car. Fortunately it still had one of those sticker labels with the word "Doctor" on it that we used during the war and that saw us through where otherwise we might have been pulled up for I might tell you I took some chances.

We turned the corner of the road with a good quarter of an hour to spare and Billy gave a gasp.

"Look," he said, with a groan.

There was an ambulance and a couple of official looking cars outside the door.

We went up the pathway. The door was open. There was a little group of men in the hall. At the foot of the stairs was the huddled body of Miss Treadmere.

A man, the police doctor I guessed, was kneeling down by her. He lifted her head gently as we came in and there was the white face with the big bruise on the forehead and the dried blood plastered down to the chin, just as Billy had described it.

"What's happened?" I asked.

"It's hard to make out, sir," a police sergeant said, "for the lady was alone in the house. Her woman found her at the foot of the stairs and called us in. We found a tuft of cat's fur on the landing upstairs and what we think happened is that a stray cat got in. The lady must have heard something, come out and fell full tilt over the thing in the dark and headlong down the stairs."

I was looking beyond him, through the open parlour door to the pic-

tured face of Mr. Treadmere. It may have been my fancy, but I thought he looked uncommonly pleased with himself.

Then I heard Billy's voice behind me.

"But it isn't 7:00 yet," Billy said.

"It was by her watch," said the Sergeant and pointed. Despite the smashed glass, we could see the hands of the watch had stopped at a few minutes after 7:00.

Later when we went upstairs and saw the grandfather clock the explanation came to me. I remembered why we — Miss Treadmere and I — had discussed the clock. It was the last day of summer-time and Miss Treadmere had said that as she was going to bed early she would alter the clocks straight away. But like many other ladies of advancing years she had become confused. Instead of putting the clock back an hour she had put it on 1:00.

"But what I can't understand," said poor Billy, "is why she wouldn't heed me. I've always taken notice of her warnings, haven't I? I'm sure she heard me and yet she just ignored it."

"Well, Billy," I said to him, "the way I see it is this. Her warnings to you were, shall we say, supernatural. But when you expected *her* to take notice of *you*, that wouldn't have been supernatural, that would have been against nature itself. For I've never yet heard of any parent who took the slightest heed of anything their children said."