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THE LAST TRIP

By ARCHIE BINNS

THE driver congratulated himself on having only one more trip to make that night. It was nearly 11:30 when he brought the long-backed car up to the bus station on Pacific Street and let his passengers out. When he got back to Lewis he would turn in for the night. And it was high time.

A group of men stood waiting at the edge of the curb, and almost as soon as the bus had been emptied it was full again. Butler looked around. Eight men occupied the eight places in the tonneau.

"One more for the emergency seat, and we're off," he thought. And while he was thinking it, the ninth man came to the curb and took the seat beside him.

"That's the way to get passengers," he told himself as he took up the fares. "Just the right number and no waiting." It was something that had never happened before in his long experience as a driver.

In less than a minute after arriving, he was jockeying the long-backed bus out through the traffic. He climbed the H Street hill, gathered speed on the lever and slipped into the overdrive without disturbing the clutch.

It was a dark, windless night and there was nothing to see but the pool of headlights on the road. In the darkened tonneau eight passengers sat like shadows without speaking, nodding slightly with the motion of the car. Beside the driver the ninth

man looked steadily and silently into the darkness. Butler was annoyed.

"Anyone would say that I was driving them to a funeral," he thought.

The light in the last house slipped by and they rushed on between the dark walls of scrub pines that bordered the road. And no one had spoken a word.

"What a gang of passengers!" he breathed to himself.

Suddenly the buzzer vibrated through the silence. And for some reason the man at the wheel started.

"Driver, I want to get out here," a voice called from the darkness of the tonneau.

Obediently he put his feet on the pedals and brought the bus to a full stop with the hand brake. A man climbed out and disappeared into the blackness.

"The devil," the driver thought as he started on; "I never saw a cross-road here!"

Again the big car whined along in the overdrive. And not a word had been spoken except by the man who had gotten out. A nice party!

Three minutes later the buzzer broke through the silence.

"Driver."

Again his feet reached for the pedals.

"I want to get out here."

The car came to a stop, a man got out, closed the door; and they rolled on.

"Is there any place for that man to go?" Butler wondered. "Anyway,

it was too dark for him to see where we were."

A SMALL car, traveling rapidly, hummed by. And in some way it gave him a feeling of relief. He glanced back. In the moment of light he saw the six remaining passengers in the tonneau, sitting like so many shadows, nodding slightly with the motion of the bus. When the other car had passed, the night and the road seemed darker and uglier than before.

Hardly a minute later he started again at the harsh noise of the buzzer.

"Driver, I want to get out here."

The same voice, and the same blackness of scrub pines. As the man got out, the driver put his head into the darkness and looked about. There might or might not have been some trail through the woods. He could not see.

He used the throttle a little more.

"It may be some game that they are up to," he told himself. "But if they want to rob me, why do they get out before they have their money's worth out of their fares?"

Now the bus was fairly swallowing up the road.

"Half an hour more of this and we're—"

B-r-r-r! The buzzer again.

"Driver, I want to get out here!"

Butler did not put out his head to look this time. It seemed safer not to. Besides, he knew that there was no crossroad of any kind. Out of the corner of his eye he glanced at the man beside him in the emergency seat.

"Is he in this, too?" the driver wondered. "Why can't he say something?"

But the fellow was still looking out into the darkness, without ever having moved his head.

"What a cursed, black road," he muttered inside his chest. When the buzzer growled again he started vio-

lently because he had been listening tensely.

"Driver, I want to get out here," he mimicked to himself. And his skin prickled all over when the words were repeated, in exactly the same tone, from the darkened tonneau.

The fifth man got out. Butler drove on and did not look around. Without being fully conscious of it, he was driving faster than he had ever driven before. The lightened car rocked as it plunged on over the road.

"Why is it that the fewer there are, the more scared I am?" he wondered.

He listened intently for the buzzer, nearly starting out of his seat at the first harsh vibration.

"Driver, I want to get out here."

And the sixth man disappeared into the blackness of the pines, where there was neither house nor trail. The two remaining men in the back of the car were silent as shadows. In the emergency seat the other man had never moved nor turned his head.

"I wish we could meet some more cars," the driver thought. He put on the brakes as the buzzer snarled again.

"Driver, I want to get out here."

The repeated sound of the buzzer and the voice was maddening. Again he stopped between the ugly walls of darkness, letting the seventh passenger out.

"Seven from nine makes two," he told himself as the bus lunged on. "If they start anything, I might be able to handle the two of them. If only the one beside me would turn around, or get out, or say something!"

And the long car shot rocking through the darkness, with only the driver and the one shadow in the great tonneau, and the man who was looking intently into the blackness of pines and the night. Butler gripped the wheel and felt his hair prickling on his head. The one in the back was moving about. Perhaps he was reaching for the—

B-r-r-r—!

The buzzer seemed attached to his nerves, racking them with its harsh vibrations.

"Driver, I want to get out here."

It was spoken in the same tone that the others had used. But each time it was repeated it became more hateful and uncanny.

He let the eighth man out.

"Good-night."

"What!" the driver exclaimed. The two words had startled him unbelievably.

THE door had no sooner closed on the empty tonneau than the car was in motion again. Why had he started so when the man said "good night"? Passengers often did that. But spoken by the last of the eight, the words seemed to have a strange meaning.

"Eight from nine makes one," he reassured himself, slipping into the overdrive again. "But who is the one, and what is he up to?"

As if in answer, the man in the emergency seat took a deep breath, like a sigh, and turned from studying the darkness. It was a face that the driver had never seen before, smooth and pale, with dark, luminous eyes. The man folded his arms over his breast and spoke for the first time.

"How far is it to the Woodland Cemetery?"

Butler started violently and pressed the throttle.

"Five miles." Then he added, "We're having a nice ride, aren't we?"

The passenger laughed:

"Ha ha!" You are driving fast, Mr. Butler."

He flinched at the weird sound of the laughter mingled with the rush of the car; and the mention of his name made him tremble. Because he felt that he must do or say something, he observed: "Well, better introduce

yourself, since we are riding together."

"If you wish," was the cool reply.

"My name is Death."

"I didn't quite get it."

"Death!"

The bus driver put his feet on the pedals.

"This has gone far enough to suit me," he thought.

"Better not," the man beside him remarked. "Do you see anything under my elbow?"

In the dim light that was shed from the instrument board he made out the muzzle of an automatic pistol, protruding slightly from under folded arms.

"As you like," he agreed. "Where were we? Your name is Death, I believe. I suppose that is why you are going to the cemetery."

"Exactly, that is why we are going to the cemetery."

The driver felt a horrible chill coming over him.

"We? I didn't know I was invited."

"You were invited when I planned this ride."

"So you planned it, eh, with the others getting out along the road?"

"Exactly, so that we could go alone."

The passenger began tapping on the foot-boards with his feet, keeping time with the swaying car. Butler tightened his grip on the wheel, shivering and snarling like an animal in a cage.

"If you are Mister Death, then it's the cemetery for you. But you might tell me what's the idea of taking me along. By God!" he burst out; "if you carried a scythe, as you are supposed to, instead of that pistol, I would take a chance on seeing if we both went there!"

"Death has tricked people before," the passenger observed coolly. "And hadn't you better think a minute and

see if there isn't a reason for your going there?"

"What the devil are you driving at? What have I done?"

"You should remember."

"Remember what?"

The driver's heart pounded so that he could hear it above the roar of the motor; and the car that raced over the road seemed to be standing still in the horrible darkness.

"So you don't remember?"

"No. What is it?"

"How far is it to the cemetery now?"

"About three miles. Why?"

"And still you don't remember?"

"No. Who the devil are you?"

"You have forgotten!" the passenger cried, his eyes shining like those of a cat. "God, I wish I could forget! And you don't even remember!"

"But what is it I don't remember?"

"Listen. When you were a bus driver here in 1918, did you once crowd a woman's car into a ditch?"

"What is that to you?"

"So you did?"

"Yes," the driver admitted sullenly. "What is that to you?"

"What happened to the woman?"

"The car turned over and she died.

But who—what was she to you?"

"Everything!"

The passenger stared with mad intensity. Then he continued:

"I would have died long ago if it hadn't been for her. I was blown up and shot to pieces. But I wouldn't die. Then, when I was ready to come home, I heard that you had killed her."

"But it wasn't my fault! I had to keep on schedule. That day—"

He turned his face away from the wild, unnatural light in the man's eyes. Before him there rose the scene that he had never let himself think of since the day it happened: the crowded bus tearing over the road to

make up time, the gray roadster pushed to the edge of the ditch by the heavier vehicle, the gasp of the passengers, followed by a shriek that went up and up, as the small car turned over and crumpled, the bus sliding to a stop with smoking brakes, the white-faced passengers crowding round, the delicate, drooping face of the girl, and the blood—blood all over her white dress! The driver pressed the throttle as far down as it would go, trying to get away from the fearful picture.

"So you killed us both. It was too much to stand. They brought back what was left of me, and put me away. I waited my chance until tonight, when I came to find you."

Still the picture floated before his eyes, while the shrieking pierced him through. And this madman or ghost was making him remember every detail.

"How far is it to the cemetery now?"

"A mile," Butler said between chattering teeth.

"Good, we shall be in time!"

THE bus lumbered swiftly down the hill, through the valley, and roared up the other slope, with the passenger beating time to its rhythm. As he neared the crest, the driver saw a faint light in the sky. Soon they would be on the open flat, in sight of the cemetery—

"Quick, how far is it now?"

"A quarter of a mile."

His staring eyes were ready to burst and the hair bristled on his head. The drooping face, the blood all over the white dress, and the shrieking, filled his eyes and ears.

"If I can only get past without stopping," he repeated to himself.

The black iron fence came in sight; the dim gravestones flitted by like ghosts. Just ahead, at the bend in the highway, the dark gateway of the cemetery rose against the sky. If he

kept on the road at that turn, he would be safe in sight of the lights of the town.

Butler winced fearfully as the car rocked over an unevenness of the road. The dark arch of the gateway seemed to draw his eyes toward it, like a magnet.

"We are here!" the passenger cried, rising in his seat.

The wheel twisted in the driver's hands, and the long-backed car

careened and banked sharply. Then it plunged toward the cemetery, where the white gravestones stood waiting, row after row, like ghosts, to welcome his arrival.

One side of the stone entrance leapt up before the car. And at the moment of the crash that sounded to the sky, there was a wild, triumphant burst of laughter, either from the mad passenger—or the dead who were waiting.