

Mrs W. ; 1030 words

The youngsters who got on were unaware of the bus' route, down the East hill and along The Front rather than straight down through the town. They had anxiously asked Mrs. Wiltsire about it when it diverted from the norm. and Mrs. Wiltsire had enjoyed reassuring them they would arrive at the station, that the route was more scenic and enjoyable, and that what with road-works, traffic-lights, and such, it was probably just as quick. Her detailed knowledge established her authority, for a moment she was back with the glory days, the tyranny of Mother knows best.

The 'hippie woman', was always on the bus, they had never spoken, but that was how Mrs W. thought of her; she wore cotton skirts with Indian prints on them in the summer, and sandals like a tourist, a sure sign as far as Mrs. W. was concerned. Now she chipped in, "I am not all together sure that that is true about it being as quick, there are hazards along this route too. I sometimes think it is little more than miraculous the way they get round the parked vehicles on that sharp, downhill bend."

"Carter Road" Mrs. W came back. Such turns of phrase as 'hazards along the route' and 'little more than miraculous' defied the hippie image and required a re-establishing of her authority.

"Possibly," said the hippie woman, and turned to the youngsters, "What time's your train? This reaches the station at ten to, and the London train is on the hour."

There was mutual re-assurance they would make their connection.

"I'm not altogether sure ..." had been a contradiction, even if it was diplomatically phrased as opinion.

"Possibly," implied doubt where there was none,

"And the dismissive way she turned her back and spoke to the children ...". Besides, knowing the time of the London train was subject changing, the sort of knowledge a 'foreigner' rather than a town's person would have, and despicable one-upmanship. Mrs. W. took up the challenge, with a return to the respectable agenda of buses.

"This is the 468, the out of town buses have three figure numbers and the town ones have two. If you are coming back the route is easy to remember, even numbers, 4-6-8. The out of town ones nearly all come in along the front, it's the town ones that go straight down, through the town."

"Nothing the 'hippie bitch' can contradict in that," she thought, and "the town ones go through the town' rubbed her nose in it beautifully." But did it stop her? "Did it heck!" Mrs.W. did not say the other H word, even in her head.

Typical hippie, crafty, she came in obliquely, sounding as though she was agreeing at first,

"I remember the 345 like that, a straight run, like in rummy. I always think of it as being in hearts because it goes out past Sacred Heart School and the Hospital. That's the exception that tries your rule mind, it goes straight up through the town."

Then getting the sentimental in, sacred, heart, school and hospital all in one sentence, before blam! Another contradiction, "Tries my rule indeed" she thought and for a moment it threw Mrs.W. she nearly came back with the old chestnut about what 'tries' meant in that context, a sure loser, flustered she stalled for time,

"345, I don't know that one" she said, with doubt in her voice. Then, gathering herself,

“No I don’t know that.”

She had recovered, the doubt had gone along with the numbers, its previous presence only served to emphasise the certainty of the second statement.

The ‘I’ was emphasised in a way that showed if Mrs W. didn’t know it, it wouldn’t be worth knowing, the second emphasis on ‘that’, and the loss of ‘one’ after it and 345 before stripped it of identity and reduced it to a negligible quality, possibly not even a bus. Mrs W’s use of words, tone, emphasis, accent, in short of every aspect of the spoken word, could be devastating in casual conversation. When she applied her mind to it there was no standing against it.

Satisfied she decided to offer a truce, turning back to the almost forgotten youngsters she said, “Anyway, I only look at the time I get on, but if this lady says you will make the connection I am sure she is right, she uses the bus regularly.”

“Oh quite sure” said the hippie woman to the youngsters, then turning to Mrs W. “I am Jane, I see you regularly as well.”

Olive branch accepted and returned with acknowledgement, and so she should; ‘anyway’ was a ‘French lady’s’ height politer than ‘possibly’. There might be a truce, that didn’t mean one forgot the fallen, or the battles.

“Evelyn,” said Mrs. W., “I am on my way in to Debranhams to look at pillows.”

“Dependable quality,” said the hippie woman,

That sort of consumer knowledge deserved some recognition, “I must remember ‘Jane’ and stop thinking of her as ‘that hippie woman’,” thought Mrs. W., and aloud,

“And it is good way to start the day with a coffee in the restaurant, lovely sea views.”

“The coffee is good, I am not sure how much I would trust them with anything else,” said Jane.

It was not exactly a breach of the truce, and there was an element of truth to it, they kept the fish warm too long and she had found a dirty knife twice, it also contradicted the ‘hippie’ image yet again. Mrs W. decided to go with the flow,

“Oh no, only for my little caffeine kick before I head into the shops, M&F is preferable for food quality. Would you care to join me for a coffee?”

It was daring, an opening gambit, a head on approach. Mrs W. felt the situation deserved it.

“That would be a nice way to start the day, thank you” said the hippie wo-, no, Jane.

A civilised new acquaintance, who fully understood the rules of duelling and appeared to be accomplished in the art, it was turning into quite a day, and they hadn’t even got off the bus yet.