

## One Shoe



'There's another bus behind us.'

The rest of the queue took the driver's advice and rushed for the second bus which they could see was nearly empty. Simon stayed. He already had one foot on the step and was far too depressed to want to think about changing his mind. He waited, his pass and fare ready in his hand. The large elderly lady in front of him finally closed her purse and pushed it deep into her shopping trolley before taking the ticket held out by the driver who was working hard at staying polite.

'The College, please' Simon paid his fare. He would walk back. He had intended *to walk to college*, but had been delayed just as he left his room. It was that which had increased his low state of mind. Mrs. Morris, whom everybody knew was making a fortune out of student lodgings, had demanded the rent and then announced a two pounds a week rise. 'It's not a lot,' she had added. 'Not to you,' Simon thought. 'Five rooms. That's ten pounds a week to you.' To him it meant less bus rides and one less lunch a week. He had had a job last year. That was partly responsible for him failing his course. He could not risk failing the re-take. He needed all his time for his studies. The rent rise had come on the back of the letter from his mother. She never asked for money but always made it clear she couldn't make ends meet. Simon hated subsidising her habits. He knew that was what it was for. But, home was home and 'Mum' was all he had. She *did* care really.

'Move along there.' The driver had already closed the door. The elderly lady had manipulated her trolley to fit in a space by the front seat and was making up her mind which of the last two seats would be hers. The front bench seats faced each other with room for three passengers one side and two the other. She had a choice. She could sit between two elderly gentlemen on one side, or next to a young man she would call a 'hippie' on the other. Despite the driver's repeated call to move along, she looked hard at the young man. She took in his stained old overcoat and jeans; the bright green shirt; the once blonde hair which looked as though it had not been cut or washed for months; the grubby finger ends poking out of red woollen gloves; and his feet. One foot poked out of a broken sandal and the other was pushed tightly into an almost shiny black shoe. She sat between the two elderly gentlemen, her eyes fixed on the odd feet opposite her.

The bus moved forward. Simon took his place beside the strange young man, who smiled at him and shuffled up his rucksack to make more room. Aware of the young man's gaze, Simon eventually turned to look at him. 'You look as though the roof's fallen in.' The young man grinned at him. 'At least you got a seat. It could be worse. You could be standing.' Simon was surprised to hear a cultured voice, but was too low in spirits to say any more than, 'Yes.' An embarrassed silence followed, during which Simon glanced at the old lady who was still looking at the young man's feet.

'Yes, it could be worse,' he thought. 'I can find the extra rent, even if it means cutting back. At least I have a pair of comfortable trainers, and one good meal a day.' He was sure his fellow passenger could not be certain of that for himself. He was probably sleeping rough in the city somewhere. The young man tried again to get Simon to talk. 'Are you at the college then. I went once. Work and me didn't agree.' He laughed. Simon grinned back at him and nodded, but again said nothing. He suspected the man was a bit 'high' and that any moment now he would ask for money.

All this time the elderly lady opposite had not taken her eyes off the young man's feet. One broken sandal and one black shoe. Eventually she looked up and caught his eye. He knew she had been staring at his feet, and she knew he knew. 'Haven't you seen the likes of me before,' he laughed across at her. Embarrassed, she said, 'You've lost a shoe.'

The young man didn't say anything. Instead, he looked down at his feet and then lifted them up for closer inspection. Grinning across at her, he turned to Simon, hitched up his dirty old coat, reached into the pocket and brought out an old sandal. At one time it would have been the obvious companion to the one on his foot. He laughed as he waved the sandal at Simon, 'I haven't lost a shoe,' he said. 'I've found one !'  
Simon could not help laughing. The elderly lady laughed. Her gentleman escorts laughed.

Simon did not get thoughts into words, but something inside him agreed that there's more to life than worrying about a rent increase. There's finding as well as losing. It was only then he realised he was still clutching the change from his fare. They were at the College. Simon got up. 'Thanks,' he said to the young man and dropped the change into the heel of his spare sandal.