

# **The Cabman's Story**

**by**

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or THE MYSTERIES OF A LONDON "GROWLER"]

We had to take a "growler," for the day looked rather threatening and we agreed that it would be a very bad way of beginning our holiday by getting wet, especially when Fanny was only just coming round from the whooping cough. Holidays were rather scarce with us, and when we took one we generally arranged some little treat, and went in for enjoying ourselves. On this occasion we were starting off from Hammersmith to the Alexandra Palace in all the dignity of a four-wheeler. What with the wife and her sister, and Tommy and Fanny and Jack, the inside was pretty well filled up, so I had to look out for myself. I didn't adopt the plan of John Gilpin under similar circumstances, but I took my waterproof and climbed up beside the driver.

This driver was a knowing-looking old veteran, with a weather-beaten face and white side whiskers. It has always seemed to me that a London cabman is about the shrewdest of the human race, but this specimen struck me as looking like the shrewdest of the cabmen. I tried to draw him out a bit as we jogged along, for I am always fond of a chat; but he was a bit rusty until I oiled his tongue with glass of gin when we got as far as the "Green Anchor." Then he rattled away quickly enough, and some of what he said is worth trying to put down in black and white.

"Wouldn't a hansom pay me better?" he said, in answer to a question of mine. "Why, of course it would. But look at the position! A four-wheeler's a respectable conveyance, and the driver of it's a respectable man, but you can't say that of a rattling, splashing 'ansom. Any boy would do for that job. Now, to my mind money hain't to be compared to position, whatever a man's trade may be."

"Certainly not!" I answered.

"Besides, I've saved my little penny, and I'm got too old to change my ways. I've begun on a growler, and I'll end on one. If you'll believe me, sir, I've been on the streets for seven-and-forty year."

"That's a long time," I said.

"Well, it's long for our trade," he replied. "You see, there ain't no other in the world that takes the steam out of a man so quickly-- what with wet and cold and late hours, and maybe no hours at all. There's few that lasts at it as long as I have."

"You must have seen a deal of the world during that time," I remarked. "There are few men who can have greater opportunities of seeing life."

"The world!" he grunted, flicking up the horse with his whip. "I've seen enough of it to be well-nigh sick of it. As to life, if you'd said death, you'd ha' been nearer the mark."

"Death!" I ejaculated.

"Yes, death," he said. "Why, bless your soul, sir, if I was to write down all I've seen since I've been in the trade, there's not a man in London would believe me, unless maybe some o' the other cabbies. I tell ye I took a dead man for a fare once, and drove about with him nigh half the night. Oh, you needn't look shocked, sir, for this wasn't the cab--no, nor the last one I had neither."

"How did it happen?" I asked, feeling glad, in spite of his assurance, that Matilda had not heard of the episode.

"Well, it's an old story now," said the driver, putting a small piece of very black tobacco into the corner of his mouth. "I daresay it's twenty odd years since it happened, but it's not the kind o' thing as slips out of a man's memory. It was very late one night, and I was working my hardest to pick up something good, for I'd made a poor day's work of it. The theatres had all come out, and though I kept up and down the Strand till nigh one o'clock, I got nothing but one eighteenpenny job. I was thinking of giving it up and going home, when it struck me that I might as well make a bit of a circuit, and see if I couldn't drop across something. Pretty soon I gave a gentleman a lift as far as the Oxford Road, and then I drove through St. John's Wood on my way home. By that time it would be about half-past one, and the streets were quite quiet and deserted, for the night was cloudy and it was beginning to rain. I was putting on the pace as well as my tired beast would go, for we both wanted to get back to our suppers, when I heard a woman's voice hail me out of a side street. I turned back, and there in about the darkest part of the road was standing two ladies--real ladies, mind you, for it would take a deal of darkness before I would mistake one for the other. One was elderly and stoutish; the other was young, and had a veil over her face. Between them there was a man in evening dress, whom they were supporting on each side, while his back was propped up against a lamp-post. He seemed beyond taking care of himself altogether, for his head was sunk down on his chest, and he'd have fallen if they hadn't held him.

"Cabman,' said the stout lady, with a very shaky voice, 'I wish you would help us in this painful business.' Those were her very hidentical words.

"Cert'nly, mum,' I says for I saw my way to a good thing. 'What can I do for the young lady and yourself?' I mentioned the other in order to console her like, for she was sobbing behind her veil something pitiful.

"The fact is, cabman,' she answers, 'this gentleman is my daughter's husband. They have only just been married, and we are visiting at a friend's house near here. My son-in-law has just returned in a state of complete intoxication, and my daughter and I have brought him out in the hope of seeing a cab in which we could send him home, for we have most particular reasons for not wishing our friends to see him in this state, and as yet they are

ignorant of it. If you would drive him to his house and leave him there, you would do us both a very great kindness, and we can easily account to our hosts for his absence.'

"I thought this rather a rum start, but I agreed, and no sooner had I said the word than the old one she pulls open the door, and she and the other, without waiting for me to bear a hand, bundled him in between them.

"Where to?' I asked.

"Forty-seven, Orange Grove, Clapham,' she said. 'Hoffman is the name. You'll easily waken the servants.'

"And how about the fare?' I suggested, for I thought maybe there might be a difficulty in collecting it at the end of the journey.

"Here it is,' said the young one, slipping what I felt to be a sovereign into my hand, and at the same time giving it a sort of a grateful squeeze, which made me feel as if I'd drive anywhere to get her out of trouble.

"Well, off I went, leaving them standing by the side of the road. The horse was well-nigh beat, but at last I found my way to 47, Orange Grove. It was a biggish house, and all quiet, as you may suppose, at that hour. I rang the bell, and at last down came a servant--a man, he was.

"I've got the master here,' I said.

"Got who?' he asked.

"Why Mr. Hoffman--your master. He's in the cab, not quite himself. This is number forty-seven, ain't it?'

"Yes, it's forty-seven, right enough; but my master's Captain Ritchie, and he's away in India, so you've got the wrong house.'

"That was the number they gave me,' I said, 'But maybe he's come to himself by this time, and can give us some information. He was dead drunk an hour ago.'

"Down we went to the cab, the two of us, and opened the door. He had slipped off the seat and was lying all in a heap on the floor.

"Now, then, sir,' I shouted. 'Wake up and give us your address.'

"He didn't answer.

"I gave another shake. 'Pull yourself together,' I roared. 'Give us your name, and tell us where you live.'

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