

Part III

CHAPTER 39 Seedy Sam

I should say that for a cab-horse I was very well off indeed; my driver was my owner, and it was his interest to treat me well and not overwork me, even had he not been so good a man as he was; but there were a great many horses which belonged to the large cab-owners, who let them out to their drivers for so much money a day. As the horses did not belong to these men the only thing they thought of was how to get their money out of them, first, to pay the master, and then to provide for their own living; and a dreadful time some of these horses had of it. Of course, I understood but little, but it was often talked over on the stand, and the governor, who was a kind-hearted man and fond of horses, would sometimes speak up if one came in very much jaded or ill-used.

One day a shabby, miserable-looking driver, who went by the name of “Seedy Sam”, brought in his horse looking dreadfully beat, and the governor said:

“You and your horse look more fit for the police station than for this rank.”

The man flung his tattered rug over the horse, turned full round upon the Governor and said in a voice that sounded almost desperate:

“If the police have any business with the matter it ought to be with the masters who charge us so much, or with the fares that are fixed so low. If a man has to pay eighteen shillings a day for the use of a cab and two horses, as many of us have to do in the season, and must make that up before we earn a penny for ourselves I say ‘tis more than hard work; nine shillings a day to get out of each horse before you begin to get your own living. You know that’s true, and if the horses don’t work we must starve, and I and my children have known what that is before now. I’ve six of ‘em, and only one earns anything; I am on the stand fourteen or sixteen hours a day, and I haven’t had a Sunday these ten or twelve weeks; you know Skinner never gives a day if he can help it, and if I don’t work hard, tell me who does! I want a warm coat and a mackintosh, but with so many to feed how can a man get it? I had to pledge my clock a week ago to pay Skinner, and I shall never see it again.”

Some of the other drivers stood round nodding their heads and saying he was right. The man went on:

“You that have your own horses and cabs, or drive for good masters, have a chance of getting on and a chance of doing right; I haven’t. We can’t charge more than sixpence a mile after the first, within the four-mile radius. This very morning I had to go a clear six miles and only took three shillings. I could not get a return fare,

and had to come all the way back; there's twelve miles for the horse and three shillings for me. After that I had a three-mile fare, and there were bags and boxes enough to have brought in a good many twopences if they had been put outside; but you know how people do; all that could be piled up inside on the front seat were put in and three heavy boxes went on the top. That was sixpence, and the fare one and sixpence; then I got a return for a shilling. Now that makes eighteen miles for the horse and six shillings for me; there's three shillings still for that horse to earn and nine shillings for the afternoon horse before I touch a penny. Of course, it is not always so bad as that, but you know it often is, and I say 'tis a mockery to tell a man that he must not overwork his horse, for when a beast is downright tired there's nothing but the whip that will keep his legs a-going; you can't help yourself--you must put your wife and children before the horse; the masters must look to that, we can't. I don't ill-use my horse for the sake of it; none of you can say I do. There's wrong lays somewhere--never a day's rest, never a quiet hour with the wife and children. I often feel like an old man, though I'm only forty-five. You know how quick some of the gentry are to suspect us of cheating and overcharging; why, they stand with their purses in their hands counting it over to a penny and looking at us as if we were pickpockets. I wish some of 'em had got to sit on my box sixteen hours a day and get a living out of it and eighteen shillings beside, and that in all weathers; they would not be so uncommon

particular never to give us a sixpence over or to cram all the luggage inside. Of course, some of 'em tip us pretty handsome now and then, or else we could not live; but you can't depend upon that."

The men who stood round much approved this speech, and one of them said, "It is desperate hard, and if a man sometimes does what is wrong it is no wonder, and if he gets a dram too much who's to blow him up?"

Jerry had taken no part in this conversation, but I never saw his face look so sad before. The governor had stood with both his hands in his pockets; now he took his handkerchief out of his hat and wiped his forehead.

"You've beaten me, Sam," he said, "for it's all true, and I won't cast it up to you any more about the police; it was the look in that horse's eye that came over me. It is hard lines for man and it is hard lines for beast, and who's to mend it I don't know: but anyway you might tell the poor beast that you were sorry to take it out of him in that way. Sometimes a kind word is all we can give 'em, poor brutes, and 'tis wonderful what they do understand."

A few mornings after this talk a new man came on the stand with Sam's cab.

"Halloo!" said one, "what's up with Seedy Sam?"

"He's ill in bed," said the man; "he was taken last night in the yard, and could scarcely crawl home. His wife sent a boy this morning to say his father was in a high fever and could not get out, so I'm here instead."

The next morning the same man came again.

“How is Sam?” inquired the governor.

“He’s gone,” said the man.

“What, gone? You don’t mean to say he’s dead?”

“Just snuffed out,” said the other; “he died at four o’clock this morning; all yesterday he was raving--raving about Skinner, and having no Sundays. ‘I never had a Sunday’s rest,’ these were his last words.”

No one spoke for a while, and then the governor said, “I’ll tell you what, mates, this is a warning for us.”