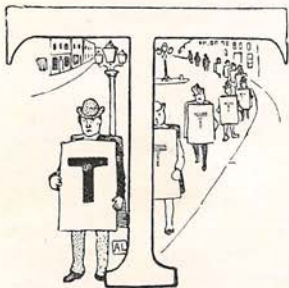


## CABBY CHRONICLES.

By W. J. WINTLE.

*Illustrated by M. FITZGERALD and P. J. BILLINGHURST.*



HE gondola of the London streets, to adopt Lord Beaconsfield's pleasant figure of speech, is a factor which has to be reckoned with in any attempt to appreciate the activities of the great

metropolis. Things have changed since the day when that ancient salt, Captain Bailey, placed four vehicles for hire at the Maypole in the Strand. That was in 1625, and in 1895 the four be-caped and be-muffled jehus had increased to 13,498 licensed drivers. The introduction of the French cabriolet in 1820, and the invention of the hansom in 1834, have been the great epoch-making events in the evolution of the modern cab.

When the guileless foreigner, innocent of acquaintance with the *argot* of the streets, first sets his foot on the platform of Charing Cross or Victoria, he is in danger of hastily concluding that "Keb, sir?" is the English formula of welcome. Should he entrust himself to the careful guidance of one of the enthusiasts who thus unite to greet him,

he will probably be impressed with the vast size of London, and with the extremely circuitous nature of the roads, as were two German youths who recently learnt by sad experience that the distance from Aldgate Church to the Elephant was such that a conscientious cabby assured them he would wrong his wife and family if he accepted anything less than seven-and-sixpence.

The other day a gentleman, whose foreign appearance "wor enough to take in a bloomin' beak," hailed a hansom at Charing Cross and requested to be conveyed to Regent Street. Being in no hurry, he was vastly interested to find that the shortest route to that remote locality lay by way of Whitehall, Victoria Street, Grosvenor Place, Park Lane, and Oxford Street. Arriving at his destination, he placed his shilling on the roof of the vehicle, with the remark "I wasn't born yesterday, cabby," and then leisurely went his way regardless of the tumultuous emotions which surged within that driver's breast.

But it would be a grave mistake to conclude that the rule, *ex uno disce omnes*, has an application here. Taking cabmen as a whole—and I speak from some acquaintance with them—they justify the recent statement of the Duke of York that "the cabmen of London are sober, civil and honest." The

convictions for drunkenness among them show a marked decrease, the records of the Lost Property Office prove their general honesty, and the experience of everyone who uses cabmen fairly goes to show that although abusive and grasping individuals may be met with on the ranks, yet most of them are civil, and many are even gentlemanly. Indeed it is one of the curiosities of the trade that you never know whether the man who drives you is an ex-chimney-sweep or an unfortunate "as kin well remember the time when 'e druv 'is own kerridge an' pair."

Comparatively few men have grown up into the work; most of them have drifted into it after failing to secure a livelihood in other occupations. Coachmen who have lost their situations, and small tradesmen who have come to grief, form no small proportion of the great army of London cabbies, while not a few have fallen from still more exalted positions. At the present time a fully-ordained clergyman of the Church of England is on the look-out for fares, and a near relative of a well-known general officer is plying for hire. Not long ago the son of a famous judge might have been seen hob-nobbing with a distinguished Charter-house man in a cabman's shelter.

An army coach—M.A. of an English University—fell through drink, and for eight months earned his bread by driving a hansom, until his friends came to the rescue and secured for him an appointment as tutor to the son of a well-known member of Parliament. He has now been ordained, and holds a position worth £750 a year.

About the same time a captain in the artillery, holding eight medals, and formerly receiving a salary of £2000 from the Indian Civil Service, was found in a destitute condition in the infirmary of a West London workhouse, and was glad to obtain a cabman's licence and take his seat on the box of a growler. He has now been awarded a small pension, and has retired into private life. Other conspicuous cases might be mentioned, but they are as nothing

to the scores of men on the ranks who are privately pointed out as having seen better days.

But whether he has seen better days or not, cabby finds his present ones both long and arduous. Working from sixteen to seventeen hours, exposed to every kind of weather, it is not surprising to learn that rheumatism and bronchitis find him an easy prey, to say nothing of other diseases which seem peculiar to an outdoor sedentary life. Then he has to contend with the jobmaster, whom he usually regards as an enemy to his race. Probably there is another side to the story, but from the cabman's point of view he certainly seems to have cause for complaint. The charge for a "lot"—including cab, harness and two horses—appears distinctly high. In the height of the season the usual charge

for a hansom is eighteen shillings a day, though sometimes as much as a guinea will be asked, while in the bad time, i.e. in the late autumn, the charge may fall to ten shillings. The vehicle known as a growler or four-in-hand by the drivers, as a clarence by the police, and as a four-wheeler by the public, may be obtained in the season for



THE HARMLESS NECESSARY "GROWLER."

twelve shillings a day, or with only one horse for eight shillings.

Not infrequently does it happen that a driver, through sheer bad luck, fails to earn the amount of the jobmaster's charge, and then he has either to make up the balance from his own pocket, or is told to "Take your bill and sling it." Cases have occurred where wives have pawned their wedding-rings to save their husbands from dismissal.

It is not easy to find out the average weekly earnings of a cabman. One hears widely different stories, but perhaps it will be safe to say that if a man averages from twenty-five to thirty shillings, he has done quite as well as he may expect. We discussed this question with a couple of gray-headed jehus—brothers in the flesh as well as in the profession—as they sat one Sunday

afternoon in a small room over a stable in a northern suburb.

"'Ow much did I ever get in a day, guv'nor?" said the elder of the pair. "Well, the most as I ever tuk wor three pund eighteen an' six. That wor on Thanksgivin' day; an' don't you arst nothink about wot I charged them fares that day. I don't deny but wot it might 'ave bin a little more nor the exact legal amount, but lor, sich a charnce don't 'appen twice in a lifetime! Wy, if we never got no more nor the legal fare we couldn't live nohow. It's them bloomin' bikes wot does the mischief. Young swells wot used to take a 'ansom, now goes out with their donahs on a blessid sewin' machine; an' as for that bloomin' keb strike, wy all the good it did wor to teach fares 'ow to ride in a 'bus. Many a gent I sees goin' to the City on a express 'bus wot tuk a keb afore. Who are the wust fares, d'yer say? Well, milingtary gents is werry perticler to get their money's worth; but the wust of all is women. The old uns allus says yer tryin' to cheat 'em, an' the young uns wants to go that fast as human flesh an' blood carn't stand, let alone 'oss-flesh. Who are the best uns to pay? Well, the public ain't bad in a general way, but the best fares is late at night. Men takin' their wives to the theayters, an' gents wot's a trifle on, they're the blokes wot pays. Wy, guv'nor, the other night a pal o' mine tuk a gent from Pall Mall to Piccadilly. 'E managed to stop six times on the way, an' each time 'e tipped 'im two bob. Lor, don't I wish I'd bin there! It's the late uns I wot pays best."

"Don't yer believe it, guv'nor," said the other as we parted. "Let me give yer the strite tip. The fares wot pays best is them as don't often ride in kebs—they as ain't 'ad no experience, yer know."

Notwithstanding the engaging frankness of these two worthies, there is one standing testimony to the general honesty of the profession. During the past five years property to the value of about £100,000 was left in cabs, and was duly handed over to the police by the drivers. Last year no less than 32,997 articles were thus given up.

Of course these vary immensely in value, from the parcel containing £3000 worth of bonds, which was recently left in a South London cab, to the dilapidated umbrella which has been brought away in mistake for a better one. Some passengers are strangely careless. £500 in notes were recently found

in one cab, while £50 in cash fell into the hands of a West Kensington driver. Opera glasses are often left, as are also articles of wearing apparel, while the ubiquitous umbrella is perhaps the most frequent find of all. The strangest find of recent years was the leg of a mummy left behind by a couple of absent-minded Egyptologists.

The amount of lost property thus deposited has enormously increased of late years. In 1869 only 1912 articles were brought in, while last year there were nearly 33,000. Whether this indicated increased carelessness on the part of the public or greater honesty on the part of the cabmen, who shall say? Fortunately the finder is no longer at the mercy of an ungenerous owner. The police regulations provide that the cabman shall be rewarded at the rate of three shillings in the pound on the value of goods worth less than ten pounds. Above that sum the amount of reward is at the discretion of the Commissioner.

The natural enemy of cabby is the bilker. This is the gentleman who evades payment at the end of his journey and is the apparent cause of the jaundiced view of life which the cabman is commonly supposed to take. Happily the species appears to be dying out, and the result of a week spent in chatting with men in the stables, on the ranks, and in the shelters, as well as with the venerable Tony Wellers who are on the pension list of the Cabdrivers' Benevolent Association, has been to unearth far fewer cases of "bilk" than might have been expected. The old men tell queer tales, but the younger drivers say that they are seldom cheated. Indeed one man naively remarked, "Bilkin', guv'nor? Wy, it's more often the other way." Still the fact that the Cabdrivers' Trade Union secured some convictions for this offence last year proves that it is not yet quite extinct.

The driver of a growler at Kilburn thus discoursed of his experiences: "I relect three young blokes wot wanted to be druv to Cricklewood. When I got there two on 'em said they was goin' up a dark lane for a minute. O' course they didn't come back, an' so the other bloke says as 'ow 'e'd go an' look for 'em. 'No, yer don't, my fly cove,' I says, jumping down off the box an' landin' 'im one on the smeller. Over 'e goes an' me on top of 'im. Well, I 'ammered 'im till 'e guv me all 'e'd got, which wor tuppence less than the legal fare. So I didn't lose much that time arter all.

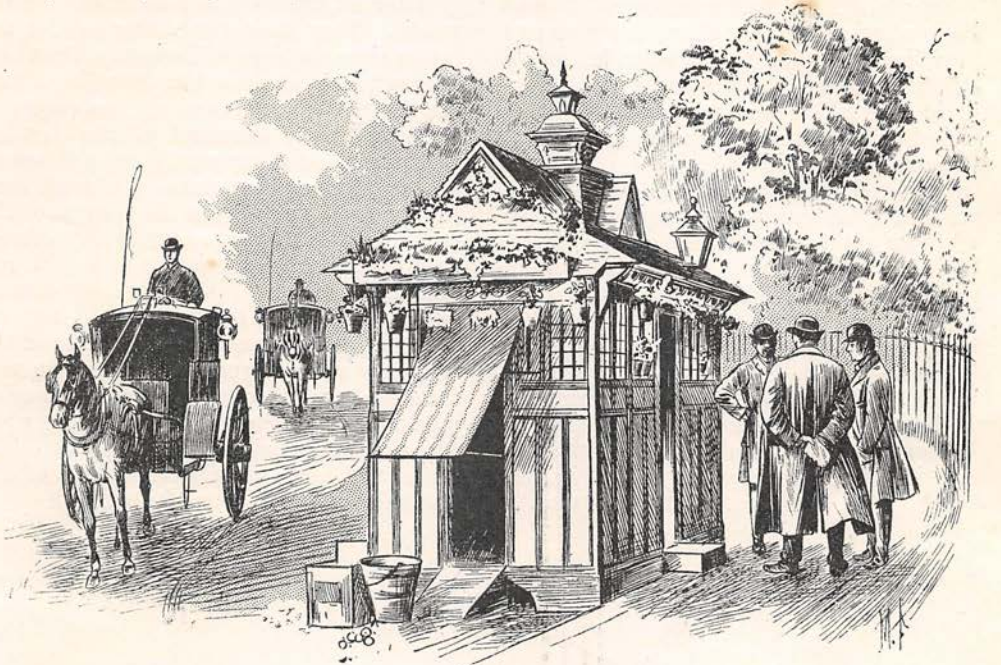
"Another time there wor a swell as 'ad done a lot o' my mates late at night. So I

makes my plans accordin', an' one night the gent come up lookin' a reg'lar torf. 'Keb, sir?' I says, touchin' my 'at. 'Welsh 'Arp,' 'e says, gettin' in. Off we goes; but 'e didn't know as I'd got a buck ridin' on the spring aside the dickey. I 'appened to be drivin' a 'ansom just then. When we got to the 'Arp the swell did a bolt, but the buck wor down an' collared 'im. I gets down too, an' between us we pretty well smashed 'im up; but I never got my fare, gov'nor."

For the benefit of the uninitiated we may explain that a buck is defined as, "a cove wot does a ride to pass the copper when the gaff busts," which, being interpreted, means a

and luggage, including gun-cases and game-bags, from Paddington to Charing Cross, where he was asked to wait while the gentleman saw the lady to her train. He did wait—from 11.30 a.m. till 2 p.m., when he was ignominiously removed by the police for loitering. Needless to say he never saw the gentleman again.

Another jehu drove three "swells" from the St. James's Club to Romano's and waited in vain for their return from midnight till 2 a.m. He was charitable enough to add that he thought they must have taken another cab in mistake for his. But he had no doubt whatever respecting the dishonesty



A CABMAN'S SHELTER.

man who rides inside in order to pass the policeman stationed at a theatre to prevent empty cabs obstructing the thoroughfare when the audience disperses. If any of our readers have chanced to be in the neighbourhood of the Haymarket about 11 p.m. they may have been surprised by an offer from a cabby to take them to Leicester Square or Piccadilly gratis; in other words they were invited to become amateur bucks. It may be as well to mention that both driver and buck are liable to prosecution for conspiring to evade the police regulations.

But to return to the subject of bilking. One cabman in a South London shelter told us how he conveyed a gentleman, with a lady

of the lady who took him one evening from Chelsea to Waterloo Place, where she sent him into a club with a note for a gentleman who was not known there and meanwhile "bolted"—happily without the cab.

On a rank almost beneath the Great Wheel at Earl's Court we found another sufferer at the hands of a deceptive public.

"Bilkin', gov'nor!" he exclaimed. "Wy, my werry fust fare wor a bilk. I druv a gent as looked like a doctor to the corner of Church Street, Kensington, where 'e told me to wait while 'e went into a 'ouse. If yer berlieve me, gov'nor, I waited five bloomin' hours, thinkin' 'e'd got an important case on—an' so 'e 'ad, no doubt, for 'e never come

back. Then I tuk a gent at midnight to a 'ouse among a lot of gardins at 'Olland Park, an' 'e went into one, an' I 'ung about all that blessid night till eight o'clock in the mornin', ringin' at the bells an' knockin' up the servants; an' lor', didn't they let on at me! But I never see my swell again.

"One bloke as I druv to Broad Street, borrowed some change orf me, an' 'e was so well dressed that I guv it 'im, an' then 'e bolted through one of them offices out of Broad Street into Bishopsgate Street, an' I never see 'im no more. But the werry wust day I ever 'ad wor like this: in the mornin' I picked up a gent—or male person—outside St. Pancras' workhouse. I don't know whether 'e'd slep' there, but anyhow I druv 'im to London Bridge, when 'e chucked a florin on top o' the keb an' bolted. That florin wor a bloomin' smasher. Then I picked up a gent as told me to drive 'im to Greenwich, an' said 'e'd give me ten bob. 'E borrowed eighteenpence to get a drink, an then I 'ad one at my own expense, an' when we got to the bottom of Blackheath 'Ill 'e bilked. I 'eard arterwards as someone thought 'e wor a clerk in *Punch's* office. So I goes to Fleet Street to see *Punch*, an' when I gets into the room with the gent, an' begins to say wot I wanted, wot d'yer think 'e said? Wy, 'e said, "'Ave the perliteness to shet that door *from the outside*.'" So out I goes an' shets the door, an' then all at once it struck me as 'ow I'd got the bloomin' chuck. So I didn't get much out o' that."

A favourite method with the bilker is to drive to some piace with two entrances, such as St. James's Hall, and quietly pass through while the cabman waits. Another trick is to require change for a cheque or bank-note, or to tell the driver to call next morning, when he discovers that his fare is not to be found. Is it to be wondered at that the native civility of cabby is overcome by the tumultuous emotions which at such times struggle in him for expression?

Then there are queer tales of lunatics and "rummy fares" current on every rank. What a book the literary cabby might compile about "Fares I 'ave druv!"

After all, the drivers deserve well of the public. They have vastly changed for the better since the days of Dickens. Drunkenness and incivility have largely vanished with the disappearance of the old box-cape and mufflers. Four thousand of the London drivers are teetotalers, and about a thousand are regular communicants. To work hard for sixteen hours a day in the interest of the public and often take so little that "a three-penny thumber"—consisting of a split roll and slice of ham—has to serve for dinner, and through it all to keep himself respectable, is surely to constitute a claim upon the sympathy and generosity of those who ride in cabs; and if occasionally the London gondolier demands "three hog" (3s.), when his legal fare is only "half-a-bull" (2s. 6d.), he may be forgiven in the presence of the hardships which surround his daily life.



A WEST-END HANSON.