

VARIOUS

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COSTERS AND THEIR DONKEYS

In walking through any part of the metropolis – be it in the City, the West End, or any part of the suburbs north or south – you will, especially if early in the day, see men with wheeled trucks drawn by donkeys, and laden with fish, vegetables, or other articles for sale to the inhabitants. Rough as they are in appearance, and poor as may be their commercial outset, these are a useful class of persons; and looking to the vastness of the population crowded within a wide but yet limited space, one has a difficulty in knowing how the ordinary life of many individuals could get on without them. A small town could manage pretty well with a few shops. But in the metropolis, in which there are now from three to four millions of people, the shop-system does not fulfil the general wants; and supernumeraries with trucks

to hawk their wares among customers, have sprung up as a convenience and necessity. The name given to these humble street-traders is Costers or Costermongers. Their professional designation is of old date, and is traced to Costard, a large variety of apple. Costermongers were therefore originally street-sellers of apples. The apple might be termed their cognisance.

Henry Mayhew, in that laboriously constructed and vastly amusing work of his, *London Labour and London Poor*, issued some six-and-twenty years ago, describes the costermongers as numbering upwards of thirty thousand. It might be inferred that in the progress of time, the number would have increased; but such, we believe, is not the case. Social arrangements have considerably altered. Owing to police regulations, there is a greater difficulty in finding standing-room in the street for barrows. By improved market arrangements and means of transport, small shopkeepers in humble neighbourhoods have become rivals to the costers. As regards means of transport for traders of all sorts, there has been immense progress within the last few years, on account of the abolition of taxes on spring-carts, and latterly the abolition of taxes on horses. We might say that for these reasons alone there are in all large towns ten times more spring-carts and vans for distribution of goods from shops than there were a very few years ago. Of course, all this has limited the traffic of itinerant vendors, and prevented any great increase in their number. Under such drawbacks, however, there are probably still as many as thirty thousand costermongers in

and about the metropolis. The young and more rudimental of the class do not get the length of possessing donkeys. They begin with hand-trucks, which they industriously tug away at, until by an improvement in circumstances they can purchase, and start a donkey. Having attained the distinction of driving instead of personally hauling, they have enviedly reached the aristocracy of the profession. They are full-blown costers, and can set up their face in all popular assemblages of the fraternity. A costermonger driving his donkey and habitually taking orders for carrots or turnips as he passes the doors of anticipated customers, is in his way a great man. At all events he presents a spectacle of honest labour, and is immensely more to be respected than the pompous 'swell' who sponges on relations, who is somewhat of a torturation, and who never from the day of his birth did a good hand's turn.

Mayhew, who deserves to be called the historian of London street-dealers of all descriptions, gives a far from pleasing picture of the social condition and habits of the costermongers. With all their industry, they are spoken of as for the most part leading a dismally reckless kind of life – spending their spare hours at 'penny gaffs,' a low species of dancing saloons, and so on. What he mentions is just what might be expected in a loose, uneducated, and generally neglected population of a great city. If you allow people to grow up very much like the lower animals, what are you to expect in the way of delicacy? You may be thankful that with the innumerable disadvantages of

their condition, and the temptations that surround them, they have the rough good sense to work for their livelihood, however vagabondising may be their enterprise.

The lapse of thirty years has made a considerable change for the better in the social economics of the costermongers. They have participated in, and been benefited by, those elevating influences which have been assiduously cultivated by city missionaries, by the press, and other agencies. Penny gaffs have almost disappeared. The licenses compulsorily required for singing, music, dancing, and dramatic rooms may be said to have killed them. The costers with advanced tastes and intelligence seek for more rational recreations than were customary in the past generation. Attached to home life, marriages amongst them are more numerous; they pay greater attention to their children; they read more and drink less; notably they are better dressed and kinder to their donkeys. On this last particular we would specially dwell. A consideration for the comforts of the animals dependent on our bounty marks an advance in civilisation. The character of a man may indeed be known from the manner in which he treats his horse, his dog, his ass, or any other creature of which he is the owner. Rude treatment to any of these dumb and defenceless beings who willingly minister to our profit or pleasure, indicates a low type of humanity. The London coster used to be careless about his donkey. As concerns its food, its style of harness, its stabling, and its hours of work, there was no particular attention. Such, generally speaking, is no longer the case. We might say that

the rights and feelings of the animal are respected. So to speak, it is better dressed, and is more lively in its aspect. In its face there seems to be a spirit of contentment. The coster, its master, pats it, and addresses it in a far more encouraging and kindly way than was customary in our early days, or even so lately as twenty years ago.

All this is as it should be. Has it ever occurred to any one to inquire why the donkey should have so long been held in contempt and been cruelly tyrannised over? In the East, and in the south of Europe, the ass is esteemed as a useful beast of burden. Alpine regions inaccessible to wheel-carriages, would not be habitable without the services of this sure-footed and easily-kept animal. It is the only carrier, and may be seen patiently toiling with laden panniers on narrow pathways far up in the mountains. In our own country, as an aid in various laborious occupations, the donkey has never been properly appreciated, but on the contrary, it has met with such shameful usage as to stunt it in its growth and sorely to try its naturally gentle temper. Reasons could perhaps be assigned for this undeserved contumely. The poor donkey has no great claim to elegance of form. Its long ears are a reproach; no one being apparently aware that Nature has bountifully granted these long trumpet-shaped ears to enable it to hear at a great distance, and if necessary to escape from its enemies. Another reason is, that the donkey is too patient and meek to resent affronts. Its submissiveness is imputed to stupidity. If it could stand up for its rights, it would

be more thought of. The lion, which is of no use whatever, and is nothing else than a ferocious wild beast, with a proud overbearing look, is highly honoured as an emblem of power and dignity. The ass is heraldically valueless. It could be adopted only as an emblem of untiring and uncomplaining labour, which would suit no coat armorial. In the improved treatment of the costermonger's donkey we begin to see brighter days for this hitherto down-trodden creature. The costers themselves being improved through different agencies, their animals feel the benefit of the general advance.

In the vast obscurities of London there is a neighbourhood known as Golden Lane and Whitecross Street, intimately associated with the progressive improvement of costers and their donkeys. A kind of oasis in the desert, this neighbourhood, which is now considerably improved in appearance, shines forth as an important central mission, to the merits of which we can but feebly do justice. We have often had occasion to remark how much good is unostentatiously done by one man, through mere force of character and persevering vigilance. The one man in this case has been Mr W. J. Orsman, who for a series of years has earnestly devoted himself to the amelioration of the condition, moral and social, of the poor street-dealers clustered in and around Golden Lane and Whitecross Street. He acts as honorary secretary to the Costermongers' Society; he edits a little periodical, known as the *Golden Lane Mission Magazine*; and he fosters and helps to maintain many small sub-societies, if we

may so term them. Among these are a 'Share Barrow Club,' for lending barrows to men who possess neither donkey-carts nor hand-barrows; a Sick and Burial Club, to which the men pay fourpence a week each; a 'Coster's Friends' of Labour Club, through the aid of which the men can put out small sums at interest, or borrow small sums for limited periods; an 'Emily Loan Club' (named, we believe, after a daughter of the Earl of Shaftesbury), for the benefit of respectable female street-dealers; a Penny Savings-bank; a Maternity Fund; a Soup Kitchen; a Coal Fund; a Clothing Club; a Donkey Club (for purchasing donkeys by means of small instalments), besides others for educational, moral, and religious improvement.

The accounts given of the annual meetings of the costers and their friends are among the curiosities of current literature. Coming prominently forward at these assemblages we perceive the Earl of Shaftesbury, a nobleman who, animated by the kindest motives, deems it no sacrifice to his high position to encourage by his presence and by his speeches the humble efforts made by the costers in the progress of well-doing. A few years since, at one of the annual meetings, which are held in May, the Earl of Shaftesbury took the chair. First, there was tea given to three hundred of the men; then was held a donkey-show, in which the excellent condition of the animals was fully evinced; and then came the event of the evening. The costermongers had bought a donkey of unusual size, strength, and beauty; they decked him profusely with ribbons, and brought him into the

Hall. In the names of all the men, Mr Carter, a vestryman of St Luke's parish, who kindly interests himself in their welfare, presented the donkey to the Earl of Shaftesbury. The Earl, as is said, had already become, in a whimsical and pleasant sense, a costermonger, and now in virtue of his donkey was an accepted full member of the corps. Whether the Earl's Neddy appreciated the honour conferred on him, we do not know; but we may be quite sure that no hard usage was in store for him.

As may be generally known, attempts to encourage the improvement of donkeys have taken place through public shows and the offering of prizes. A Donkey and Mule show, held at the Crystal Palace in May 1874, was the means of giving to many persons their first idea of the real value of an exhibition which some had beforehand laughed at, as an absurdity. It was amply proved that the donkey can become a really beautiful animal when well treated; and it was equally made manifest that rough street-dealers can be as kind as their betters when encouraged to be so. An archbishop carried off a prize; several costermongers did the same; and a truly cosmopolitan feeling was exhibited when the prizes were distributed. The Earl of Shaftesbury, who presided on the occasion, humorously claimed to be a costermonger himself; for (to encourage others in a good work) he had enrolled his name in the Golden Lane branch of the Costermongers' Society. Many of the donkeys exhibited at the Crystal Palace had been employed in drawing carts and trucks laden with vegetables, fruit, fish, salt, sand, firewood, crockery-

ware, and other commodities; and the excellent condition of some of them won prizes for their owners. Even a few of the donkey-drivers of Blackheath and Hampstead Heath shewed that the fraternity are not always so rough and unkind as they usually appear. It was asserted that donkeys which do not work on Sunday are generally more active and ready on Monday; so that the trader is but little a loser by this course in the long-run. The Earl of Shaftesbury remarked that: 'It would be seen from the show that these animals are designed by Providence to be of the greatest service to mankind; and that kindly treatment and respect – respect for the wants and feelings of the animals – will bring their own reward in willing service.' Several donkey-shows have since been held in and near the metropolis, conveying the same useful lesson.

In August of the present year, a Pony and Donkey show was held in London, in connection with the Golden Lane Mission and Society. The Earl of Shaftesbury and Lady Edith Ashley kindly and patiently examined the hard-working dumb companions of the costermongers, and exchanged pleasant words with the men. There was a tea for four hundred going on nearly at the same time. After this came a general 'march past,' and a distribution of money and books as prizes. The donkeys were all in admirable condition; while many of the ponies were plump and sleek. His lordship now called for Wilkins, a shrewd prosperous coster of Golden Lane, and bedecked with the insignia of authority as an officer of the Benefit Society. This coster and another made brief

speeches; after which Colonel Henderson, Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, declared that the costers are generally deserving of high praise, and that the police have very little trouble with them – when once the laws relating to the public streets are well understood. After a few more speeches and addresses, the noble chairman said in pleasant humour that he had received a poem entitled *The Earl and the Ass*; that the donkey he had received a few years before at the hands of the costermongers was under the doctor's care; and that this fact alone prevented the animal from being present. Every donkey at the show was known by some name or other; and hence there were many such designations as Tommy, Old Tommy, Black Tommy, Jack, Prince, Paddy, Old Jack, Old Sam, Boko, Charlie, Mike, Ugly Tom, Quick; while the other sex in the race was represented by such feminine names as Jenny, Pretty Polly, Kitty, Pretty Jane, Maggie, and Betsy.

We do not know what was the poem to which the Earl of Shaftesbury alluded, but conclude that it was a poem which appeared in *Punch* relative to the presentation of the donkey to his Lordship. To shew how a facetious periodical can rise above mere jesting, we transcribe the following verses:

Could there be a better gift? The patient beast
Who bears the stick, and will on thistles feast,
Yet in hard duty struggles to the end,
Is always grateful to a human friend,
But seldom finds such friends; is roughly fostered

By costermongers, sellers of the costard,
Sellers of other things from door to door,
And very useful traders for the poor —

He bears a cross, we know; and legends say
Has borne, in memory of a wondrous day,
When love wrought miracles, in stress and strife,
And sick were healed, and dead men raised to life.
Since when, 'twixt hard knocks, hard words, and hard fare,
He and his owners both their cross must bear.

The Earl, who loves his race, loves other races;
He has sought evil out in darksome places,
And bravely grappled with its many arms,
And tamed its strength, and paralysed its harms;
Brought aid to weakness, moved dead weights away,
That crushed the soul down, deep in mire and clay.
The greatest, by descending, may ascend:
The peer who is the costermongers' friend,
Dares on the platform stroke an ass's ears,
Rises above the level of his peers.

As an evidence that the endeavours to improve the London costermongers morally as well as physically, have not been thrown away, we may add the following anecdotes.

In 1872 a costermonger named Darby, plying his itinerant trade in the densely packed and comfortless region immediately eastward of the City of London, was one day driving his donkey-

cart, laden with cheap fish from Billingsgate. The poor donkey accidentally put his foot into a plug-hole, fell, and broke his leg between the knee and the fetlock – pitching his master out of the cart, and seriously bruising him. His brother-costers advised Darby to kill the animal at once, as no one had ever heard of a donkey's broken leg being healed. But Darby would not listen to this. He took the donkey home, and made a temporary bed for him in the only sitting-room. The man and his wife tended the poor animal, which often groaned with pain. The wife was a washerwoman at the East London Hospital, but she did not grudge to the poor donkey a little of that time which was so valuable to her. A kind lady then undertook to take charge of the donkey until cured, at a place twelve or fourteen miles from London. With bandaging and careful treatment, aided by the benefit of pure fresh air, the leg became sound in eighteen months; and Darby had a good reply to make to those companions who had said to him: 'Kill it, old fellow; it will never be able to get up again. First loss is the best; nobody can set a donkey's leg. Kill it, old fellow, at once!' The kind-hearted costermonger became known as 'Darby, the donkey's friend.' A testimonial was presented to him by the Ladies' Committee of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; and he is justly proud of it.

As we write, a paragraph appears in *The Times*, communicated by an observer. 'Having occasion to pass through Whitecross Street on Thursday evening, my attention was

attracted to some fine turnips on a coster's barrow. Retaining my boyish fondness for a raw turnip, I at once selected one, and putting my hand into my pocket, paid, as I thought, two halfpence, the price charged. I had scarcely advanced a hundred yards, when a tap on my shoulder caused me to halt; and lo! the woman from whom I had made my last purchase accosted me. "What did you give me?" she said. I told her as above, when she opened her hand and displayed two bright shillings, which I had given her by mistake, and which she now returned. Thanking the woman for her honesty, I rectified the matter, reflecting on my way home that the labours of Lord Shaftesbury and his worthy coadjutors among the costermongers could not have been spent in vain; for the cleanliness, civility, and "honour bright" of these small traders are very evident to those who knew the locality ten years ago.'

Our task is ended. We have told all we know about the costermongers, and no doubt much that we have said is not new to many of our readers; but in the way we put it, good may be effected, as shewing the degree of social progress in an industrious and useful class in the metropolis. Donkeys can of course never attain to the beauty, the strength, and the value of the horse. We may admit their inferiority to ponies; but as docile, kept at little expense, and useful in various departments of labour, they have their appointed place in creation. They offer themselves as the poor man's friend and servant. In what numberless cases, as is exemplified by the London costers, might

they be employed to meliorate a lot sometimes very hard to bear! We do not bespeak for them more consideration than they deserve. All we expect is that they shall not be treated as abject and worthless. Let us appreciate their unobtrusive willingness to serve to the best of their ability. They ask little, and let that little be conceded. We do not look for elegant turn-outs of donkeys, though we believe the example of a donkey-phaeton has been set by the Baroness Burdett-Coutts, who is never wanting where the welfare of the lower animals is concerned. From our own personal experience, we may tell of employing Donald, our pet donkey, to draw a light four-wheeled phaeton, holding two persons. In bright harness, enlivened with jingling bells, he proceeds on a drive of eight to ten miles with the speed of a quick-trotting pony, and with a cheerfulness which it does one good to look at.

W. C.

A CAST OF THE NET THE STORY OF A DETECTIVE OFFICER

IN FOUR CHAPTERS. – CHAPTER I

Any one who feels the slightest curiosity as to the date of my story, can tell pretty nearly when its events occurred, by various incidents mentioned in it, and which the public know quite as much about as I do; but I do not feel inclined, for certain reasons of my own, to identify the precise date or to name the exact spot at which I was employed in the business.

It was a case for the police – for the detective police – and I was the detective employed. Now you must understand that I was not at this time regarded as a regular detective; I was a sergeant in what we will call the 'A' division, and I did ordinary duty; but though I was not yet on the regular detective staff, somehow or another I was very often taken from my usual work and put on all sorts of jobs, sometimes fifty or a hundred miles in the country; and I was once paid a very high compliment by the chief magistrate – of course I mean at Bow Street. He said: 'Nickham, you're not a regular detective, are you?'

'No, your Worship,' I said; 'I am not.'

'Well, Nickham, you're worth a dozen of them; and I have made a special note of your conduct, and shall send it on to the Commissioner.'

The Commissioner was old Sir Richard Mayne then. And that's how I got to be a sergeant; but it was only because I was lucky in two or three cases which the chief magistrate happened to notice.

Well, I was one night at the section-house, for I wasn't on duty (I don't mean the station-house; the section-house is a place where our men lodge, perhaps fifteen or twenty together, or more); and I was sitting in the large room by myself; for it was a fine evening, and none of the men cared much about chess or draughts or things of that kind. I was reading the paper by myself, when the door opened and one of our people looked in. It was Inspector Maffery; and I was very much surprised to see him there, as our place was quite out of his district. Seeing I was by myself, he said: 'Oh!' in a tone which shewed he was pleased at it, and turning to some one outside, he said: 'Come in, sir; the party is here by himself.' With this, a tall, stout, gray-whiskered gentleman came in.

Inspector Maffery closed the door after him, and not only did that, but shot the bolt, and then coming to me at the table, says: 'Nickham, this is Mr Byrle, the celebrated engineer that you have heard of.'

Of course I had heard of him; in fact I once had a cousin who

worked in his factory. So I bowed and made a civil remark.

Then Inspector Maffery went on to say: 'This, Mr Byrle, is Sergeant Nickham, one of our most active men, as I have told you, and who, I think, is just the man for you. This place is very safe; and as I have bolted the door, and the men below know I am here, there will be no interruption; and you can say anything you wish to Nickham as well here as anywhere.'

So they sat down; and with a very polite speech, for he was really a gentleman, Mr Byrle told me what he wanted.

He made a long story of it; I shall not; but the public have really no idea of putting facts well together, and presenting them without any excrescences, if I may say so. However, I listened patiently, and found out what was required. It seemed that his factory had been robbed on several nights, in spite of an extra watchman being put on; and only the completely finished and most expensive engine-fittings were taken; shewing that the thief, whoever he was, knew what things to take, where to find them, and where to dispose of them. The robberies were mortifying, because they proved, as all such things do, that the firm were employing a thief, and trusting some one who was deceiving them. The loss of these fittings often delayed other work seriously; and above all, it was considered that it demoralised all the factory (where best part of a thousand hands were employed), by shewing that the firm *could* be robbed with impunity. So, although it was hardly the sort of business which a first-rate man was required to work; and though I say it myself,

and though spite and envy in certain quarters kept me off the regular staff, there was not a better man in London than I was, and our people knew it; yet I listened very patiently, and asked such questions as occurred to me. For a civilian, Mr Byrle seemed pretty sharp at catching my drift; while as an old hand, and knowing what was best with the public, Inspector Maffery sat without saying a word, or one now and again at the most, leaving Mr Byrle to settle things for himself. I then roughly sketched out a scheme, which in a few words I laid before the gentleman.

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