

# “Taxi, Mister?”

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## I

I BROKE loose from my last examination like a wild bird whose cage door had been opened. I bought an evening paper and looked through the ads. Auto-mechanics, bakers, barbers, bricklayers, riveters, tailors. No chance for me. Perhaps a chauffeur's job . . .

I had qualms about applying to the Yellow Cab Company of Philadelphia. When I had applied to them two years before they had asked me to sign a non-union agreement and I had refused. Now they were under “Mitten Management.” There would be no non-union agreement to sign, but still there was no union.

When I came into the employment office on Monday morning there were about twenty others already there. They were sitting at a table along the wall, filling out application blanks. The agent gave us the blanks, examined our driver's licenses, accepted our applications, and sent us to “school.”

School was a long-drawn-out three-day affair, with no pay for our time. Doctor's examinations; intelligence tests that a five-year-old could pass; road tests that anyone who knew how to start and stop a car could pass; lectures on salesmanship, courtesy, accidents; warnings, threats. The most unbearable part of our schooling was waiting in the hot employment office between examinations. The whole course could have been completed in one day.

They told us, and repeated it again and again, that we were salesmen, selling safe transportation. They urged us to use any means to obtain riders provided we collected the fares and did not damage the company's reputation or property. My impression was that I had become a petit bourgeois, with a store on wheels, out to “go get it” and let the other fellow worry about himself.

There were fifty in the class. We sat in a crowded room, hour after hour, waiting. All kinds of men are here: Professional cab-drivers who roam from city to city and work, a few months here and there; married men who are out of work and take such a job until they find a better one; seasonal hands whose trades are dull; a stray college student. There is no one here over thirty.

Work looked like freedom when, late the third afternoon, they sold us our uniforms, took our pictures, and appointed us to garages. We had received our university diplomas. They did not know whether we knew the city or not. They let us loose to learn at the expense of the riders.

## II

I was put on a night shift, 6:30 p. m. to 4:30 a. m. If my day-man came in time I was to leave the garage promptly and remain on the street for at least ten hours. If I wanted I might remain out until eight o'clock the next morning. But no later.

*This essay was awarded first prize in The Nation's contest for American college students who spent the summer of 1926 in industry or agriculture. The second prize was awarded to Alfhild Johnson of Oberlin College for an account of her experience in a hardware factory. The third prize went to William C. Putnam of Stanford University for his essay, Serfs of the Sea. Alfred W. Page of New Zealand contributed an article on coal mining which, although ineligible for a prize, will on account of its high merit be printed in a later issue of The Nation.*

They gave me what was officially known as an 03 cab. The drivers called them “boilers” or “cement-mixers,” and a more descriptive or appropriate name could not have been devised. They are the oldest cabs in the city. For an accelerator there is a needle in the floor that carves holes in the sole of your shoe. The lights are so poor that if you were in a dark section, of which there are plenty in Philadelphia, you could only see about ten feet ahead of you. The cab is

clumsy and difficult to steer. The gears are as hard to shift as those of a five-ton truck. The car can not go up the slightest grade on high. It has no self-starter, and since we were not allowed to leave the motor running, our hands from cranking became as calloused as a pine cone. The driver's seat has no protection from rain. A tradition prevails among the cab-drivers, one that is well advised: “Don't drink milk if you drive a ‘boiler.’”

We were paid on a purely commission basis of 33 1-3 per cent. About forty supervisors checked us up for speeding, cheating, running motors, sitting in the back of the cab, and other offenses. During the day the “loop,” center of town, would be most profitable. In the early evening, the residential sections for the theatergoing crowd. From ten o'clock on, the “loop”—again for the theaters. From twelve to two, the cafes. After two, “rolling the tracks” for a stray fare, who is waiting hopelessly for a trolley, or “laying” at street-car junctions for the unwilling rider who has missed his car.

The cab people had the Sesquicentennial hysteria. There were twice as many Yellow Cabs on the street as in a normal summer—1,200 cabs in all. Of these, 300 were “boilers,” 300 new ones, and 600 “babies,” of which 200 were comparatively comfortable, the others almost as bad as the “boilers.” The Quaker City Cab Company, the Yellow's chief competitor, had 700 cabs. The smaller companies, together with the independents, must have totaled about 500 cabs. Twenty-four hundred cabs look meager among a populace of 2,500,000. But the people of Philadelphia are not regular riders, the city is too large and scattered, the fares higher than in New York. Moreover, many of the regular riders leave the city in the summer.

Between the hot weather, which scattered the residents, and the double number of cabs, the drivers were “left on the back fence.” It is no good “playing the loop” when there are twice as many cabs there as the public needs. There is no object in “laying” at a corner if you have to wait an hour or so to be first out. The same is true for “boxes” (company telephones placed on walls and telegraph poles throughout the city). What is the use of “playing” the theaters or cafes when the people will not get into a “boiler” but will choose a new cab out of a line-up that is big enough to haul the whole audience home?

Last summer the average pay was about \$20 a week, to which can be added \$10 in tips, making an average earning of about \$30. (Tips generally amount to one-half of the commission, if there are no lucky breaks.) This is low enough for work which demands long hours, six days a week, and some skill. I found the drivers dissatisfied. Many of the old boys were "throwing up the sponge," resigning. It is hard for a married man to live on \$30 a week.

Many of the drivers worked twelve, fourteen, or even sixteen hours at a stretch. There was a time when to stay out on the street more than ten hours was the meanest thing a fellow could do. It earned for him the most disreputable epithet of all—"hungry." It meant taking bread and butter from the men who were on regular shifts. The driver's code of morality would not allow it. But now we were all "hungry." Twelve hours on the street a day would guarantee us our \$35. Some would even work on their days off, to earn another \$4 or \$5. Twelve hours on the street really meant thirteen hours of work, for it took time to gas up, wait for your cab, have it repaired. The clock was punched when the cab left the garage.

There were some married men, generally with large families, who worked on one-man cabs. They took their cabs out at two in the afternoon and were permitted to remain out as long as they chose. When I rang in at five or six in the morning I would see them coming in. They needed the money and would set a mark, say \$15 or \$20 in receipts, and they would remain out until they got it. They got back to work at two the same afternoon.

Most of the cabs ran two shifts a day. The day-man might be due to take his cab out at eight in the morning. He would return at six. The night-man would take it from six until four the next morning. That left four hours which they could put in as extras between them. This was nearly always used, either by one man or both.

About seven years ago there was a union, eight hundred strong. They had a strike and lost. The company rehired the men on condition that they would sign a non-union agreement. Now the company is in the hands of the Philadelphia Rapid Transit. I asked some of the men why they didn't form a union. Well, a union is all right. But you know about so-and-so of such-and-such a union who ran away with the funds. And Mitten's got it now. He'll do something for us. The car men are satisfied. You'll see if we don't get free passes on the trolleys. And he'll throw the "boilers" on the scrap-heap. This confidence in Mitten was prevalent among the men. When I left, the Yellow Cab Company had been under Mitten Management for four months and not a thing had been done for the men.

The cab-driver is an independent salesman selling transportation, so the company would have us believe. They even replaced the old "driver" on our hats with "salesman." It was curious how this attitude worked itself into the driver's psychology. Thinking himself, more or less, in a business of his own, the driver is alienated by competition from his fellow-workers. In reality he is a wage-earner and might be considered a piece-worker. Organization of transportation workers meets with a great difficulty in the fact that the nature of the job is such that the men work by themselves or in groups of two. In the case of the cab-drivers there is the additional factor of a twofold competition, on the one hand among the men of one company, on the other between men of competing companies. This very condition is aggravated by the labor policy and training methods of the companies.

In case of strike, where the sympathy of the public is of such importance, the regular riders are not such as would give much thought to the drivers. The workingman, from whom sympathy is to be expected, is not a cab-rider. Peaceful picketing is almost impossible, since drivers are easy to obtain, and scattered.

The cab-driver, the salesman of luxuries, giving his personal services to the client, belongs to the mass of tip-takers. When I received my first few tips I felt uncomfortable. It is an awkward moment when you are counting out the change, with the question in your mind, "What will he give me? Shall I give him a quarter, two dimes, and a nickel, or two quarters?" The passenger at the same moment asks himself, "What shall I give him? That clever fellow is counting the change with an idea." Sooner or later the awkward moment becomes a part of the "racket." Tips are figured in as a part of the earnings and the driver looks upon them as his rightful wages. A quarter is a satisfactory tip. More often we got ten or fifteen cents, and many times we were "left flat."

A one-sided partnership is thus cleverly thrust upon the public. The clients pay, in the form of tips, what ordinarily the company would have to add to its salary. Gangsters and gamblers are the most liberal tippers. A workingman with his family of six once a month follows a close second. Jews, no matter of what class, are very liberal. The usual run of people that we pick out of the Bellevue-Stratford and the Ritz ride short and give you a cheap cigar or ten cents. Once I got a \$5 tip from a man out of one of the big hotels—and he wasn't drunk. That is called a lucky break. It is a cabman's dream and happens once in a lifetime.

### III

The Philadelphia cab-drivers come from all walks of life. The majority are under thirty, although there are some gray-haired regulars who have been in the game from the time of the hansom. Many are married men and have families to support. They are independent fellows, made more so by the nature of their work. The freedom that their work allows is their strongest argument for the job. A more motley and yet more united group would be hard to find. A fight, and you are sure to find the Yellows there en masse; a flat tire, and they are on hand to help one another. Comradely, good fellows, rough, good-natured, dirt-slingers, jack-handle wielders, yarn-spinners.

You can always tell a new man by the way he wears his uniform, by the way in which he pulls up at a stand. There was something about me at first that the observant eye of a regular caught. I could never understand what they had against the student unless it were a dim feeling of class distinction. Those of us who worked among them were not highbrow. We took our jobs seriously—perhaps too seriously. At any rate, in a week I had assimilated the language and could bandy words and hold my own in slang and curses. In about two weeks I had succeeded in hiding the student. I could make a neat turn into a stand, hop unconcernedly out of my cab, approach the group, and say, "Hello, fellows! How are they rollin'?" and listen to their stories with a straight face. I became one of them.

Those stories. In times of idleness—there were plenty of them that summer—we would collect at the stands and street corners, outside of cafes, theaters, and railroad stations. Sitting on soap-boxes, curbs, steps, someone would pull out a pack of cigarettes.

"Pack out!"

"Hey, kid, gimme one of your sticks."

"I'll tell you a funny one . . ."

Anyone at all might begin. Stories of drawn-out rides for strangers, "rollin' up a bill," drunks, crooks, lucky breaks, women. Once begun, they flowed on like a river. There was one man, a Southerner, who in a racy Southern drawl could tell stories for hours. We would hear the crunch of his brakes and his once-upon-a-time drawl at the same moment. I heard enough stories, real and imaginary, to keep a proletarian de Maupassant at work for a lifetime.

The cabman is independent in other ways. If a customer does not suit him he will turn him down. He will collect the last penny of his fare at any cost. He will not stand for "high-hat stuff" from aristocrats. He is ever ready to use his jack-handle to get rid of pests, crooks, and other undesirables. He will step in where a cop would be afraid to poke his club. Living by the street, he knows its lingo, its manners and morals, its rough-and-ready ethics. He has met people—from gangster to actress. Whether it be before a Washington Avenue gat-toter or a college professor, he preserves his dignity and self-respect. He knows the city—its speak-easies, gambling joints, houses of ill-repute, street-walkers, milkmen, breadmen, dicks.

People who have used cabs tell me that a cab-driver looks so unapproachable and straight-faced that they are afraid to speak to him. To look that way is a part of his business. There are many things that a cab-driver must not see. Strange happenings in the back of his cabs. Mysterious night journeys. All kinds of people. But those very people should hear their straight-faced, eyes-front driver talk to his buddies in his moments of idle waiting. He has seen everything. And there is hardly anything new that happens. One runs the whole gamut of such affairs in a few weeks' time.

I was on night shift. I saw the night life of the city. I had worked at night before, as a newspaper-carrier; but then I saw the breadman, the milkman, the people going to work, lunch pail in hand, wiping the sleep out of their eyes, grim, hardened to work. This summer I saw the pleasure-seeker, hardened to rum, women, and gambling.

I "played" regularly, after 1 a. m., the busiest street intersection of West Philadelphia. On the second story of one corner building was a large gambling joint. A few doors along, a saloon. A door or two on the other side, a cafe where drink and women were for sale. Two girls also "played" that corner regularly. Every night they were there and every night they were "picked up," sometimes by cops, sometimes by smart men in automobiles. Many a girl was transferred from a private car on that corner to a cab to be taken home. Men have stepped into my cab to go home and have picked a companion out of the street. I have had to lift drunks out of my cab who were so powerless that they could not open the door. During the day this corner is the business and trading center for the respectable families of West Philadelphia. These things do not happen once a week, or even once a night, but all night long in all parts of the city.

#### IV

This evening I have arrived early at one of the outlying boxes to catch the theatergoing crowd. Two cabs are in ahead of me and soon three more line up. We lean against the wall idly smoking cigarettes, listening now to one, now to another of the drivers "putting their line across." We never miss a detail of what happens on that corner. A cab-

man's eye is alert, sharpened by the continual lookout for possible riders and by a forced lazy observation that comes from much loafing on street corners.

Business is dull. It is already 7:30 and only one cab has moved. Someone remarks that it looks like rain. We all cheer up. Rain means business.

"Yes. And now we'll get them damn rainy riders that always leaves you flat."

Thoughts of rain lead to yarns of emergency calls at breakneck speed over wet streets; or queer birds one gets when it rains. The inevitable symposium has begun.

"That's nothin'. Listen to this one."

The box is becoming "hot." I am now first out. I lean against the box beside a middle-aged driver who has listened to all that has been said. He looks at me sidewise:

"Yes, you meets all kinds of people in this business. Gee, the kinds of people I've seen—there's no telling what you're hauling. I've seen so many things and different kinds of people—dammit, I wish I could write and put it all down."

"Have you tried?" I ask him.

He blushes, looks at his feet, and says, "Aw, no!" Pause. "But, you know, I like to read. I can sit down and read all day long. Some of those stories in *Adventure* and *Saturday Evening Post* are damn good stories. And I got a set, I forget the name of it, *Collier's* gave it one year, Harvard something, that's got damn good stuff in it."

"You know," I said, "there is a guy who used to wish that he could write—he saw so many interesting things in life. So at night, when he came home from work, he used to sit down in a corner of his home and write down his thoughts and what he had seen. He would write every night. Now he's one of the best writers we've got. It's not so hard as you think."

"Yes, I guess it's not hard to write, but it's damn hard to make it good reading. Well, here goes your ring, buddy; go get it!"

I find it hard to reflect the psychology of the cab-driver. Perhaps a few months of acquaintance are not enough to get at the spirit that makes a group of workers out of an otherwise pied collection of men.

What difference does Plato or Aristotle make to a man who, occupied with his work for at least twelve hours, sleeping eight hours, has four hours left to dress, talk to his wife and children, and enjoy himself? As I go back to school that man is on my mind. During my few months of work among the men of the street I have learned as much as in my three years of college. I am tickled to death when a page of "The History of Aesthetics" catches on a callous. I love to squeeze the feminine hand of a student or professor in my crank-hardened grip. But to feel another palm, as hard, as calloused, in mine is one of the most beautiful sensations I have had.

#### What Made These Women "Modern"?

The tenth article in the series of personal revelations by well-known women will appear next week. John B. Watson, behaviorist, and Beatrice M. Hinkle, psychoanalyst, will analyze these articles for *The Nation*, in an attempt to discover the underlying causes of the modern woman's attitude toward men, marriage, children, and jobs.