

The Free Press' Short Story

HORN-POWERED TAXI-CABS

H. H. KROLL

CATO NEEL was in a hurry. He had to go to Mrs. Lade's for the book-order material, and he had to do Oliver's column, "On and Off the Square," during Oliver's attendance at the state convention of journalists at the capital. He was driving the News-Journal car, and the blucosity contraption

At this moment the taxicab zoomed up behind and made an attempt at passing, while its multi-powered horn bellowed as though the little six-cylinder car were a fleet of Greyhound omnibuses.

Cato Neel jumped. If there was anything on earth that roused on his nerves it was a ten-foot taxicab from the college up town bellowing for right of way, left of way, and all the way. He looked up into the rear vision mirror, and snorted. "Just as I thought!" he muttered. "It's that steam-heated sap, Big-Talk Stevens!"

Cato had been racking his brain for a subject for "On and Off the Square." His grinning. He had it, even to the title—"Steam-heated Saps." His district would be on local taxicab drivers! A long-suffering small town would read at its supper table, what Cato Neel, "pinch-hitting" for Oliver, had to say about the bellowing variety of taxicab drivers.

The on-coming traffic thinned, and the ash truck turned up a side street, and William Stevens, cap jauntily on the side of his head, his horn bellowing as though he were carrying a millionaire to a life-and-death financial conference on which the fate of nations depended, wove in and out. He was going with a declining yowl of his vociferous horn. His car was empty.

Cato picked up speed, secured the book column material from Mrs. Lade on College Avenue, and hurried back to the newspaper office. He dropped into a chair before a typewriter and began to pound.

"STEAM-HEATED SAPS"

Cato plugged a vitriolic portable when he was moved by something that lay close to his heart, and he was in a mood to dip the keys in some sour acid. He hammered fast, and his grin spread; it resulted in vague chuckles at his own middle. When he was through, he pulled out the sheet, read, and broke into laughter. Something amused him greatly.

"You must have discovered you're a humorist," commented young Needham, laboriously glancing a few sports items from a dearth of college news.

"Wait till you navigate your eyeballs over 'On and Off the Square!' If this doesn't make Chief McNabb and Mayor Sam Hicks take the taxi-horn nuisance in hand, then I've missed my opportunity while Oliver's orating about the future of journalism in America!"

He carried the stuff down to the linotype men himself, still chuckling.

The paper came off the press about four o'clock that afternoon, and the newsboys took their loads. Cato could not forget the joy of following the boy who made the business section, and listening in at the bunch of taxicab drivers and barbers who roared like turtles on a log on the iron railing just around the First National Bank corner. They read "On and Off the Square" first, to see if their names were mentioned, usually they were not.

Cato was just behind the newsboy when he gave the head barber the paper. "Stevens, read 'On and Off the Square.'" The voice was Stevens'. "See who's on and who's off."

"You're off—you're too dumb to be on!" said Stevens.

He opened the paper. Cash darted into the niche of the bank door and made himself flat against the plate glass. "Har! Har!" he heard a roar of laughter.

"Well, read it to us, Stevens!" "Boys, somebody's sure giving you all a spiritual barbering and personality scalping!"

"Read it, prince!" Stevens' voice, drawled.

"Of all the peanut-headed, gas-line-sniffing, steam-heated saps local in the universe, some of our local taxicab drivers get the super-duper button. If they had half as much brain power as they have horn power, they'd have sense enough to buy somebody besides themselves busy license tags and pays gas tax. You hear a snort and yowl behind you, that makes you almost leap out of your car, thinking a ten-ton truck is about to climb on you from the rear; you look back, and what, dear chum, do you see? Why, dears, you see a taxicab driver, and a driver frantically bellowing for your part of the street, his part, and the part belonging to on-coming traffic; he seems past you with set jaw and gleaming eyes, as if his time were worth ten dollars a minute, when the rest of us know

good and well he'd be over-paid at two-bits an hour—"

He broke off in tremendous guffaws of laughter. A voice yelled: "That's Big-Talk Stevens! That's Big-Talk—"

"Who wrote that about me?" snarled Stevens.

"S. P. Oliver himself writes 'On and Off the Square,'" said another, chuckling.

"I'm going to look S. P. in the eye and tell him where he heads to!"

"Now, you won't, Big-Talk. That's just some more of your big—"

"Oliver never wrote that," spoke up another. "S. P.'s off making a big speech at some kind of newspapermen's blow-out. Read about it in this morning's Capitol Enterprise."

Stevens growled, "Well, I'll find out who did it! I'll show him if he can call me a steam-heated sap!"

"Who called you a steam-heated sap?" demanded Stevens.

"Did you just read it?"

"It didn't say a word about you!"

"The shoe must pinch, Big-Talk—"

Cato Neel slipped away. He had heard all he wanted to know. As he passed along the street, he observed other merchants and loiterers before the stores chuckling over "On and Off the Square."

By this token Cato was aware that he had public opinion behind him.

Young Stevens must have done a good job of detecting, or an accurate piece of guessing, for the next day when Cato was coming up Main Street here came the taxicab, with its variety of horns, signs and telephone number; and a prolonged bellow, from the time Stevens saw and recognized the newspaper car, until he swept ahead, the taxicab driver shrilled his horn at Cato.

The gesture both amused and irritated Cato Neel. He grinned, but the grin faded. Finally, he did not like it.

He had not gone more than a block before he met another of the fleet of taxicabs, headed out of town toward the campus; this time it was Rawson, and did he bellow at Cato! Rawson emptied a broadside that made the echoes rumble against the austere big houses on Main Street.

That was the beginning. Every time Cato met, or was overtaken by a taxicab, he was given the same chorus. He discovered himself to be an emotional stew, the chief ingredient of which was anger. Small solace could be derived from the fact that he was, in general, right in his contention about the business. He could not drive around town without being bawled at, from before and behind. The drivers gave him mirthless grins, too, which were all the way from mean to vindictive. The "steam-heated saps" were hot on his trail, and it made Cato angrier daily.

He verged on the edge of falling victim, in the next few days, to his anger. He got hold of himself directly however. He had a lot of driving to do for the paper, collecting at the first of the month; he was on the streets nearly all the time. He wisely saw that if the drivers ever learned of his annoyance, he was doomed. He sat in the car, eye straight ahead when not on the rear-vision mirror. Every time a taxicab appeared from either direction, he made himself rigid and ignored the salutations, which grew more and more raucous.

S. P. Oliver returned from the convention. He was feeling pretty good over the impression he had made. Needham said, "Cato's made a killing, too."

"Eh?" inquired the boss. "How's that?"

"He's feeling the superheat from steam-heated saps." Taxi-drivers, in other words. Haven't you read his 'On and Off the Square'?"

"Needham, while Cato stood sheepishly near, showed Oliver the issue containing the diatribe. 'S. P.' read, guffawed, then suddenly pounded the desk with his fist. 'You're a fine guy to leave the responsibilities of a column on! Look what you cooked up behind my skirts! What do you mean, young fellow?'

Needham snickered. "Don't worry, chief, the drivers know who cooked it up."

"S. P." laughed then. "Okeh with me, so long as you take the responsibility." He reread the piece and chuckled deeply. No matter how severe the chief tried to look, Cato had the gratified feeling that in his heart Oliver appreciated the scathing humor, and recognized the need of something like this being written. Perhaps it was the weapon of sarcasm and ridicule that he did not exactly approve. The chief himself was not a sarcastic person. He was honest and fearless, but there was nothing sour or bitter in him. That, more than anything else, rebuked Cato.

During the next day or two the drivers pestered Cato unmercifully. He had a

notion they went out of their way to bellow at him. It was maddening. Cato gritted his teeth and tried to bear it, although his nerves were becoming so much on edge he began to fear he would crack. Of them all, young Stevens was the worst. Cato hungered to go to the chief of police and make a complaint. The thought of this weakness shamed him. The situation crystallized itself into the question, Which is the greater, the pen or the taxicab horn?

A spell of rainy weather set in. One afternoon during a slow diurnal drizzle that made the pavement sticky and treacherous, Cato was heading for the office on his last round for the day. Suddenly here came a taxicab. At the moment there were three or four cars moving toward the square. Cato recognized Big-Talk Stevens even before Stevens began to sound his horn.

"Burr-rr-rr-rr-rr—"

For the space of a breath Cato became almost blind with anger. The following was so utterly childish of Stevens that Cato's anger faded. He was not angry with Stevens, but with the intention of cutting out to pass. Then, as most accidents occur, things began to happen. A truck was heading down the other traffic lane. Had Stevens not been so intent upon looking his horn, he could easily have seen the cumbersome vehicle, despite the muck and the gloom. The truck, in all reason, should have had its lights burning. They were not. Stevens should have been attending to his driving. He was not. Perhaps Cato never should have dipped his typewriter keys in the vitriol—but he had! For all these reasons the combination for trouble was ideal, and it happened in the twinkling of an eye.

Stevens was out in the opposite lane before he saw the truck. The truck driver saw the taxicab too late. The taxicab made a gesture of climbing the truck head on, but in a flash Stevens must have decided that would not do. He shot off far to the left, while the truck veered to the left also. Just as the taxicab started to climb a tree, the big truck scaped off Cato's left fender. When Cato had collected his scattered wits, he was on a near-by lawn, his car receding against a column of Colonel Lucknow's imposing mansion, the taxicab was on a lawn across the street, and a woman was screaming wildly.

"Whew!" groaned Cato, and mopped his face. He scrambled to his feet. The traffic was stopping. The truck was half across the avenue. The woman kept screaming. Cato saw Stevens, trying to crawl out of his battered taxicab.

Finding his bones intact, Cato darted across the street and helped Stevens drag himself through the door, which had been jammed from its moorings and now dangled in the turf. The street lights flashed on to supplement the gleams of illumination Cato peered into perhaps the most agonized face he had ever viewed. It was ghastly. Blood ran from a cut on Stevens' cheek. The woman had stopped screaming.

Cato started once to groan, but realized it was not a groaning time. He knew people were coming from the houses. He heard some one yell, "Phone for the ambulance!"

Cato snatched at the rear door and flung it open. He heard a huddled woman sniffle. Cato asked anxiously, "Hur? Are you badly hurt?" He heard the siren of Chief McNabb's police car. He took hold of the woman and she turned her face to him. Horrors! She was "S. P.'s" young wife!

"Mrs. Oliver!" gasped Cato.

"Cato!" she said. "Am I dead?"

"Are you?" asked Cato hollowly.

"Give me your hand, Cato, and let's see if I am!" She gave a nervous little laugh as Cato grasped her out.

She was not, nor was Stevens, nor the truck driver. Horns bellowed. Chief McNabb pushed through the crowd. The ambulance siren screamed. The truck driver appeared, looking pretty subdued. He and Stevens began to revile each other, laying the fault on the other's shoulders; then both of them looked at Cato and abruptly hushed.

When Mrs. Oliver discovered she was not killed, or even injured more than being a bit shaken, she waited, "I have to catch the five-thirty train, Cato!"

"The News-Journal silver is over in Colonel Lucknow's yard, with the motor rammed back under the front seat, Mrs. Oliver," reported Cato, sadly.

Chief McNabb said courteously, "The police car is at your service, Mrs. Oliver." He fished out her grip, conducted her to the police car and sent her on her way, then returned, demanding of Cato and young Stevens, "Well, who's responsible for all this mess? Come clean now—look what a pile-up here! Get that truck out of the street!"

The truck driver faded. Directly his motor roared. The traffic bellowed. It took five minutes to clear the street; then Cato, Stevens and the truck driver found themselves detained, just as Mr. Oliver and Needham drove up and jumped out. "Where's my wife?" yelled S. P. Oliver.

"On the train by now, Oliver," said the chief. "Shaken a bit, that's all. But, he added, "it could have been a terrible thing. Now," returning to the three culprits, "I want the straight of this."

Stevens, firing the taxicab driver darkly, "This is some of your work! If I didn't know you are a good driver, I'd lay it all on you. You're a smart-aleck, but you're a good driver. What got into you?"

Stevens moistened his lips, but he said no word, after a covert glare at Cato Neel.

"Well, well!" impatiently demanded the chief of police. "Out with your alibi!"

The truck driver broke in. "Chief, this taxi bird walked right out in front of me, blowing his idiotic horn. He had to take to a tree to keep me from flattening him out, and I had to sideswipe the News-Journal car to keep from killing somebody—that's the way of it."

It seemed Cato Neel's turn. Cato spoke quietly, as the chief turned with a dry grin to him and said, "Neel, what's your alibi?"

"I was about half my turn—or maybe more. I was where I belonged in the street, all right. The truck driver was not at fault at all. Stevens and I were the ones. I wrote that stuff in the 'On and Off the Square,' about taxi drivers, when it would have been better, I guess, not to have been so nasty. I ought not to have done that to make the drivers sore, though they should long since have learned road courtesy. Stevens and I are the ones."

An odd hush fell upon the group at this forthright outburst. Suddenly McNabb chuckled and clapped Cato on the shoulder. "You, you were right. But, as you suggest, you can both be right and wrong." He considered, "Am I letting you all off, since nobody's hurt. Okeh, Stevens, any more horn bellowing?"

"No, sir," said Stevens, humbly.

"No more about any more sarcasm, Neel!"

"No more."

"Okeh. Clear out."

So it cost no more than that to put a stop to taxicab-driver discourtesy; although Cato Neel was the first to admit that the lesson could have been demonstrated more easily. He dips his portable in vitriol no more.

A SMALL OVERDOSE

The doctor met Mrs. Brown in the street.

"And how is your husband sleeping, now, Mrs. Brown?" he asked. "Did you give him the sleeping draught?"

"Yes, sir," she replied. "You told me to give him the amount I could get on a small nickel, but as I hadn't any silver I used five pennies and he's been fast asleep for five days."

LONG WAIT LIKELY

"My dear chap, a thousands years is nothing to a geologist."

"Have you? And I lent one a five-spot the other day!"



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more species of mosquitoes that are found in Canada are bloodsuckers, and while they vary considerably in their life-histories and habits, all of them require more or less stagnant water for the immature stages (larvae and pupae) to develop. It is quite impossible for them to develop in damp grass or in dew on vegetation, although this is a common-held belief. The fact that the larvae and pupae develop only in water, and that although they are aquatic, they must frequently come to the water surface for air, makes it possible to destroy them in vast numbers before they have a chance to emerge. This is done by spraying pools and flooded areas with petroleum oil, such as fuel oil, in spring and early summer. Such work should be properly planned and, if possible, carried out on a community scale to give the maximum results. Eliminating breeding places by drainage, filling or drying are alternative measures to oiling, and of more permanent value. Further information on this subject may be secured by writing to the Publicity and Extension Branch, Dominion Department of Agriculture, Ottawa.

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