

## The Gypsy's Sharp Game

Amos Cowhill, or, rather, the individual whom, for sufficient reasons, I dub by that imaginary style, was a Newmarket trainer, well known in the seventies. He never, indeed, achieved the reputation of a Dawson or a Porter. Still, he had a considerable name, and some of the most prominent men then on the turf were among his patrons. That he thoroughly understood his business no one was ever found to dispute. What Amos Cowhill did not know about horses was, in truth, not worth knowing. And his knowledge of humanity, as represented by jockeys, grooms and stable hands, was hardly inferior. He did not look shrewd. On the contrary, his heavy, red face and stolid, sleepy eyes rather gave the impression of stupidity. But it was a most fallacious impression, nevertheless. Behind that heavy countenance and that sleepy eye there lurked a penetration that scarcely anything escaped. And the less he seemed to notice, the more he really took in.

By his employers he was esteemed a man upon whose judgment in turf matters it was always safe to rely; and on those few occasions when they refused to be guided by his advice they almost invariably had subsequent reason to regret it. By his employees he was regarded with mingled awe, admiration and fear, as something between an oracle and a bogey—one who never failed to spot either their most secret misdemeanors or their most trivial good services, and to store them up for future reference in his retentive memory.

Woe to that stableboy who scamped his work, imagining that because his sleepy-eyed guv'nor made no remark thereon he had not noticed it; the fellow would be allowed to continue in his evil ways, growing more and more securely idle, for perhaps a fortnight. Then he would be summoned one morning into Amos Cowhill's office, where he would be civilly invited to explain his whole fourteen days' delinquencies in detail, traveling backwards. Usually when this retrograde process had reached the tenth of the ninth day, the unfortunate man's power of inventing excuses would have become exhausted. Then Amos would drop his civil tone and talk straight.

"You're no use here, you lout. I'll trouble you to be off the premises in ten minutes."

Only once had a lad been found of sufficient boldness to challenge the legality of this high-handed proceeding.

"You've no right," protested the audacious youth, "to discharge me without a week's wages."

"Praps not, sonnie," replied Amos imperturbably. "What then?"

"I'll have the law of you, and make you pay. That's what I'll do."

"Very well; do it, then, my lad, and come to me for a reference afterwards."

"I ain't afraid. I've a-done nothing why you shouldn't speak for me."

"Oh, I'll speak for you right enough. Don't make no blooming error about that. Now, then, out you get."

Considering what manner of man Amos Cowhill was you may imagine that none of his stable hands could receive the summons: "Guv'nor wants ter see yer in 'is office."

Without many qualms of conscience and nervous forebodings. But those interviews were not always of a disagreeable kind. Sometimes the trainer sent for a lad to commend, and even to promote him. It was with this intention that on a certain October morning in the year 187— he summoned Samuel Wix to his august presence.

Samuel Wix—or "Bow-legged Sambo," as he was known in the stables—stood fumbling nervously with his cap and shuffling uneasily with his feet before the great man. He was a stunted, shriveled youth, who, in spite of his 17 years, had hardly achieved sixty inches of stature, and who in his bare skin could not have scaled an ounce more than five stone.

For, judged by his low forehead and vacant expression, did his intellectual faculties appear to be more developed than his physical. However, despite his lack of ordinary intelligence, he was thoroughly understood and was deeply devoted to horses, and, moreover, was as daring and skillful a rider of his age as could be found in all Newmarket.

"Ah, Sambo," began the trainer, in his most genial tones, "I've had my eye upon you as a likely youngster this twelve-month past, and now I'm going to give you practical proof of a good opinion I've formed of you. Lord Ewell and I have talked

the matter over, and—well, in fact, we've decided to put you up on Spinning Jenny next week in the Cambridgeshire."

"Eh, sir," gasped the bow-legged one, with mouth wide open and an expression of almost incredulous joy overspreading his vacant countenance. "Me go up on Spinning Jenny in the Cambridgeshire?"

"Yes, my lad, you—your blooming self," said Amos. "You're a fine rider. You're well within the weight. You can manage the mare against any of 'em. And, in short, you're going to ride her."

Sambo's features were now expanded in a smile of simply childish delight, and his dull eye lit up strangely as he said:

"Oh, yes, I can manage the mare—I can do that, Muster Cowhill. They say she has a temper, but—"

"The temper of a fiend," interposed Amos.

"She never show it with me," said Bow-legged Sambo, chuckling and rubbing his wart-bedizened hands.

"No, no! She's too fond of me, sir, and I of her. We understands one another—we does. That's about the size of it, Muster Cowhill."

"You've a wonderful control of her, anyway," said the trainer. "And she's more likely to do herself justice with you than any one else. She's well 'in,' too."

"Ah!" cried Sambo. "Well 'in,' I should think she was, sir. Six three, Muster Cowhill—six three. The race is a gift for Spinning Jenny at that, I do believe."

"I agree with you, my lad, if she runs all right and don't indulge in those damned tantrums that have always spoilt her chance on previous occasions."

"She'll not do that if I'm up," declared Sambo, with eager conviction.

"I hope not," replied the trainer. "Well, that's all for the present, my lad. Now go back to your work."

Bow-legged Sambo went back to his work in the seventh heaven of delight.

A few mornings later Cowhill sent for him again. The trainer held in his hand the current copy of a sporting journal.

"Look here, Sambo," he said, "I want to give you a word or two of caution, my lad. Since it has got cut that we've found some one to ride Spinning Jenny, who understands her temper and can manage her, the mare's price has suddenly jumped to half. Four days ago she was quoted at twenties, now she's at tens. You'll have to be careful of yourself, Sambo."

"No fear of my doing nothing as is like to spoil my condition, I give you my word, Muster Cowhill. No, no! A chance such as I've got don't come to every stableboy, and I'll not dish it by no carelessness, sir."

"Ah, but I don't mean that, Sambo," said the trainer. "I mean there are those, as I happen to know, who don't mean to let Spinning Jenny win if they can help it. And it's on the cards that they'll try to 'get at' you, my lad."

"They won't make nothing out of me, Muster Cowhill," declared the lad, confidently. "I wouldn't be bought off from the chance of piloting Spinning Jenny 'ome, not for all the ranno in the Bank of England."

"Bribing is not the only, nor the most certain way, though," replied Amos. "I know plenty among 'em who wouldn't stick at violence, if they could find the chance—a broken arm or leg, for instance, or praps even worse."

"You mean as they might 'ave a shot to crook me up?" inquired the lad.

Amos nodded.

"Just that," he said. "And I don't speak at random. Fact is, I've heard something. So if you take my advice, you'll not be outside the stables more than you can help, and never by yourself, or after dark. Twigs?"

"Yes, sir, I twigs, and I'll be careful to act as you says," rejoined Bow-legged Sambo.

Next day the Marquis of Ewell himself paid a visit to the stable. He came into Spinning Jenny's loose box with Cowhill, while Sambo happened to be there rubbing the mare down.

"Morning, Sambo," he said, nodding to the lad.

"Good morning, my lord," answered Sambo, touching his forelock respectfully.

The marquis was a young man, still under 30, though he looked at least a dozen years older, by reason, doubtless, of the life he had led. Notoriously wild and fast, even in boyhood, he had, by the time he was 21, gained for himself a reputation that was the envy of many middle-aged

rakes. But now, in his 29th year, he showed unmistakable signs that nature was beginning to exact the inevitable penalty of his dissipation. The crows' feet round the eyes, the dark hollows beneath them, the numerous lines and wrinkles that creased his worn face, all these told their infallible tale. And if report spoke true, his fortune was little less impaired than his constitution. Every acre of his estates, the gossips said, was mortgaged to the hilt. Even the park round his country seat was let to a grazier, while in his very garden he might not pick a peach or a plum off the walls without the consent of the gardener, who received no direct wages, but made what he could out of the produce.

However that may have been, his lordship generally managed to find money for his personal indulgences, and though he betted and gambled heavily, he never failed to pay up his losses. To be sure, he frequently won large sums both on the turf and at play; and now he made no secret of the fact that he was backing Spinning Jenny for a large stake which he confidently hoped to land.

After watching the mare in silence for some minutes, biting his nails nervously the while, as his habit was, he turned to the trainer and said, with free-and-easy familiarity:

"Locks pretty fit—eh, Cow?"

"Fit for a fiddle, my lord," assented Amos. "We shall get her to the post in the very pink."

"That's good—that's good. If only she don't show that cursed temper of hers there is nothing in the race to touch her. You've a rare chance of distinguishing yourself, Sambo, my lad. Mind you make the most of it."

"Trust me, my lord," answered the stableboy, grinning with pride and pleasure.

"You can manage her all right? Seems as docile as a lamb with you, Sambo. How the devil do you work it, eh?"

"She and me understand each other—that's what it is, my lord," explained the bow-legged one, eagerly.

"Oh! That's it, is it? Well, it's a damned lucky thing anyway. I've got ten thou. depending on this race; I don't mind telling you. And if you steer the mare home, my lad, five hundred of 'em's yours."

Sambo's eyes glistened at the mere mention of such (to him) fabulous wealth.

"Thank you, indeed, my lord," he cried. "Your lordship's too generous. I'll do my level best to earn the money as you offers so liberal. Not but what," he added, "I'd do all I know to win, even if I wasn't to be a penny the richer for it."

"I'm sure you would, Sambo," said the marquis, nodding to him good-naturedly.

Then he strolled out of the box, followed by the trainer.

"Think he'll manage it, Cow?" he inquired, after a minute.

"I'm pretty confident, my lord. The control he has of the mare is something wonderful, and I never saw a finer rider of his age in all my experience."

"Hope he will, that's all," said the marquis, anxiously.

Then they went on to look at some of his other horses.

On the following day—which was, in fact, the Monday before Cambridgeshire—a message came from Amos Cowhill at his private house to Bow-legged Sambo at the stables, requesting him to step round at once as he wished to see him on urgent business.

Sambo lost no time in complying with the summons.

Now, Cowhill's house stood a quarter of a mile from the stables, with which it was connected by a private road. Sambo had traversed about half the distance when all of a sudden two or three men, who seemed, as it were, to rise out of the earth, sprang upon him in the darkness. He was seized and thrown to the ground almost before he was aware. He tried to call for help, but a handkerchief saturated with acme sticky, stupefying liquid was instantly pressed over his face. A faint dizziness—a sense of suffocation—and then he lost all consciousness.

When he came to himself—how long afterward he had no idea—he found himself lying upon a heap of straw in what appeared to be a gipsy's van. That the van was in motion the constant jolting, which bade fair to split the lad's aching head, at once informed him. He looked dizzily around. The vehicle was lit by a dingy oil lamp, nailed to the side. Its flickering beams revealed the figure of a man who sat near him, with his keep, black eyes fixed upon his face. He was a powerfully built fellow, dressed in tattered garments, and wearing a fur cap, bare in patches to the leather, which came so far on to his head that it seemed almost to rest upon his large protuberant ears.

"Where am I?" inquired Sambo, in a dazed manner, essaying to sit up.

The other placed his strong hand upon the lad's chest and held him down as easily as if he had been a kitten.

"Lie still," he said, gruffly, "and then you won't come to no arm."

"But what's the meanin'—?"

"Meanin'?" interposed the gypsy, chuckling grimly. "The meanin' is this. You've friends, my little cock, as is interested in yer 'ealth and thinks a few days' change of air 'll do yer good. Ha, ha!"

And he laughed hoarsely at his own wit.

"But you must lemme go, you must, I say!" cried Sambo, excitedly.

"Dunno 'bout that," retorted the gypsy; "I only knows as I shan't. So there!"

Sambo stared at his swarthy custodian in bewildered dismay. The circumstances of his capture were gradually coming back to his confused mind, and the truth began to dawn upon him.

"I see," he ejaculated, though more to himself than to his companion. "This is a put-up job—a plan to get me out of the way, so as I shan't ride Spinning Jenny on Wednesday."

"No! Does yer really twig that? What a penetratin' bloke yer are—an out-and-out deep un!" said the gypsy with ponderous facetiousness.

"But you shan't keep me; you shan't, I tell 'ee," exclaimed Sambo, again struggling to rise.

"If yer don't lie still," he said, threateningly, "I'll make yer. Look here, now, my little bantam, we wishes yer no 'arm, and won't do yer none, so long as yer quietly accepts the inevitable. But if yer refuses to do that, and tries to kick up a dust—Well, we ain't the ones to be over partik'lar 'ow we silencea yer. And the sooner yer puts that in yer stummick and digests it, the better."

Seeing that resistance or escape was, for the present at any rate, out of the question, Sambo lay still, inwardly chafing against the cruel fate into which he had been entrapped. By and by drowsiness overcame him and he sank into an uneasy slumber.

When he next awoke the oil lamp was out and daylight was streaming in through the little window at the side of the van. His former custodian had now disappeared, and in his place sat a younger man, of tolerably forbidding aspect, who declined to answer any of Sambo's remarks, but simply bade him "shut up and lie still, yer little devvie, can't yer?" every time he attempted to move or open his lips.

After awhile a gypsy woman came in, bringing the prisoner some breakfast, for which, however, he had little appetite.

"Where are we?" he ventured to inquire, while discussing the meal.

"Wouldn't yer like to know?" she laughed mockingly.

"Mayn't I go outside and breathe the air for a few minutes?" he said.

"I'm fair suffocated in 'ere, I am."

"No, yer don't," interposed the man gypsy, with a threatening gesture. "Try to do anything of the sort, young un, and I'll knife yer. Now, then," he added, "if yer ain't going to eat no more of that grub just yer lie down again. None of yer nonsense fer us, and so I warn yer."

The day wore wearily on, the van continuing to jolt steadily along with scarcely a halt. At dinner time the elder man resumed sentry-go over the unhappy prisoner.

"I say, guv'nor," cried Sambo suddenly, an idea occurring to him that made his heart beat with eager hopefulness.

"Well?"

"Lord Ewell's a-promised me five 'undred quid if I pilots Spinning Jenny 'ome to-morrow."

"Oh, 'e ave, 'ave 'e?" replied the gypsy with laconic indifference.

"You shall 'ave the lot, guv'nor—every blooming cent, if yer'll only lemme go," cried Sambo, his eyes sparkling.

The man laughed.

"Dam kind of yer," he replied sarcastically; "guess you'd keep yer promise once yer was free, young un wouldn't yer? Nothing more likely—eh?"

"But I would—I would, faithful," declared poor Sambo earnestly.

"No go. Shut up!" said the gypsy gruffly.

At length—and to Sambo an interminable length it seemed—darkness again set in. The van was still on the move. He reckoned that they must now be at least twenty or thirty miles from Newmarket. And to-morrow the Cambridgeshire—and no earthly chance of escape! He lay silent and despairing, for now he realized the utter hopelessness of his position. The hours dragged slowly on. Sambo heard a church clock in the distance striking midnight. Just then the elder gypsy came in to re-

lieve his younger mate, who had been on guard since 7 o'clock.

Another hour passed. Then his custodian, who had sat smoking until now in silence, said, with almost startling suddenness:

"Yer'd like to make your lucky, young un, wouldn't yer?"

Sambo returned no answer. He imagined that the fellow was taunting him.

"But I needn't ask," went on the other. "In course yer would. Well, 'posin' yer make it, then."

Still no reply. Sambo had no intention of being "drawn" for his facetious interlocutor's amusement.

"Yer thinks I'm taking yer on," continued the gypsy. "That's nat'ral enough, but yer mistook, my little cock. I'm sober serious. Look 'ee," he added, after a brief pause, "I can't let yer go. 'Twouldn't do. It'd be again my contract. But what if I was to go out of this 'ere van for a minute and forget to fasten the door behind me, what then, Master How-legs, eh?"

There was that in the man's tone that evidently meant business. An unlooked-for hope brought the blood rushing hotly to the lad's excited face.

"Yer mean it—yer mean it, guv'nor?"

"Deeds is better'n words," replied the gypsy, rising from his seat and moving to the door of the van. "I'm a-goin' out, young un, now. And if yer 'ere when I comes back, at the end of five minutes, yer'll be a bigger foot'n I takes yer for. Just the word," he continued, turning around in the open doorway, through which the cold night air came rushing in, "yer've escaped, mind—escaped without my knowledge" (here he winked).

"Tell yer guv'nor that, D'ye hear? If yer gives me away, I'll find means to settle yer afore yer many days older. And hist. When yer slips out of the van, foller yer nose until yer comes to four cross roads, then turn to yer left and keep straight on and yer'll find yourself in Noomarket well afore daylight."

With these words he disappeared, leaving Sambo in a transport of delighted wonder at so extraordinary and unexpected a turn of events.

You may be sure that the lad lost no time in taking the gypsy's broad hint. He sprang up, slipped through the open door of the van and started along the road in the direction indicated as fast as his legs could carry him. By 5 o'clock next morning he arrived safely at Cowhill's stables.

When the trainer saw him his joy and astonishment knew no bounds. After hearing the story of the lad's adventure in which nothing was omitted except the gypsy's connivance at his escape he said:

"Of course I never sent that message. It was evidently part of the plan. But this is grand—grand, Sambo. How these soundrels will be sold! I'll take steps to keep your

arrival secret until the last minute so as to let 'em bug themselves on the success of their plot as long as possible. And if they commit themselves to further heavy speculation on the strength of it, why so much the better."

"Who are they, sir? Ave yer any notion 'oo's at the bottom of it?" inquired Sambo eagerly.

Amos Cowhill shrugged his shoulders.

"Praps. Praps not," he replied. "Some swindling bookie, I should n't wonder," remarked the lad knowingly.

"Very likely. Anyways since the news of your being kidnapped has got about, Spinning Jenny's price has gone back to twenty-fives. And I only hope that they'll lay those odds against her for all they're worth," said Amos Cowhill, emphatically.

Spinning Jenny, with Samuel Wix up, carried off that eventful Cambridgeshire by three lengths. Two days after the race, the lad received the following peculiar epistle, which being unable to read himself, he took to Amos Cowhill.

The epistle ran thus:

"Dear Howlegs,—Yer rode that race on Wednesday a fair treat. 'im as put me up to kidnap yer paid me a 'undred down, premising another 'undred after the race. But it seemed to yer too good a business to let that second 'undred slide and plank the first 'undred on Spinning Jenny at twenty-fives. That was 'ow yer come to get yer chance of making yer lucky, which I'm a blooming capytilist over the job and thanks yer according.—Yers obliged,

"THE GYPSY."

Amos read this aloud twice; then he began to chuckle.

"Nice way to behave, ain't it, Sambo?" he said. "To take a 'undred for kidnapping you, and then to let you escape on purpose that he might invest it on your mount at long odds. 'Pon my soul, he's a humorously cynical rascal! I guess his employer is feeling pretty sick about now. Serve him right, too. He wanted to play a dirty trick on us, and put us all in the 'cart, instead of which—and I am jolly glad of it—he's simply got left in the 'cart himself," ejaculated Amos, with evident exultation.

"Who is 'e? Yer speaks as if yer know 'im personal?" cried the excited Sambo.

"So I do, my lad," nodded the trainer. "I keep my eyes and ears pretty wide open, and I've had an inkling that there was something dicky in that quarter all along. You were kidnapped, Sambo, by the design of a certain gentleman who pretended that he stood to win £10,000 by Spinning Jenny's victory, but who had really schemed to land a larger sum by her defeat. I refer to the mare's most honorable owner, the Marquis of Ewell."—London Truth.

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