

Dave Arnold's Christmas

"Six years ago I, Dave Arnold, was in the ruck; just one of the great crowd who sweated away their days for a weekly wage that any one of you would give for a good dinner. My overalls were just as greasy, my hands as grimy as those of any toiler who turned out from the works at the clang of the bell. The difference lay in the fact that they, with a Union behind them that guaranteed work, were content with their lot, while I, with the excitement of something that dimly was shaping itself in my mind, was not. A happy inspiration had set my brain at work on the evolution of a labor-saving machine that, could I perfect it, would revolutionize an existing process and make me a rich man.

"Step by step, as I worked at the problem nightly in my garret, the way became clearer. Every hour made its possibility more apparent. Slowly the model grew beneath my hands until one night I went to sleep, successful and exultant. Theoretically it was sound. To prove it so in practice could only be done by actual experiment.

"I was a poor man. I had no means whatever of patenting the invention. But I was not to be deterred. The reward of my endeavor was at my finger ends, and I meant to grasp it. Seizing the first opportunity I approached the principal and requested an interview. My shopmates eyed me askance as I followed him to his office, for I was not popular.

"Inside his room I told him of my discovery. At first he was frankly incredulous. Was I not but an ordinary mechanic? It was impossible that such a man could have achieved this wonderful thing! I read his veiled distrust and my face flushed beneath the grime. I told him as much as was polite until an understanding had been arranged, and saw his expression change. My earnestness of manner impressed him. The possibility of success made him tolerant. Before I had finished he was half convinced of its practicability. I left him with the promise that he would place the necessary power and materials at my disposal, and I should have a corner of the shop partitioned off in which to erect the machine, conditionally that if it succeeded he had the option of acquiring it.

"Next morning the work commenced.

"From the first the men evidenced their feelings in no uncertain manner. It galled them to think that I, under the favor of the head, had climbed above them and that they were, at least for the time, at my beck.

"Regardless of it all I pursued my course. Day and night I labored on to perfect the machine. The fever that consumed me allowed me scarce time for sleep. As the idea took shape under my hands a growing anxiety kept me chained by it. The open threats of the men and the fear of its destruction bade me guard it zealously, and the chief, convinced by the manifest signs of discontent, gave me permission to sleep in the shop. For three weeks I never passed beyond the gates, and the only creature who entered my shop beside myself was the little chap who brought my meals.

"He was a bright little fellow—the son of a widow with whom I lodged. When the great works, save for that one bright corner, were wrapped in gloom, his signal at the window which overlooked the canal at the rear of the premises would gain him admittance.

"One night about the time I was anticipating his visit, a gentle knock came at the door of my room. Knowing that the works, save for myself, were deserted, my hand stole to the revolver I had thought it advisable to purchase.

"Who's there? I shouted.

"Me! came back the childish treble. Laughing at my fears, I unlocked the door and sternly bade him tell me how he had gained admission.

"I thought I'd surprise yer,' he said, gleefully. 'You see where the cut comes into the works there's a ledge under the bridge. I come round to-night.'

"Gently I rebuked him, warning him of the danger of a slip. He protested his competence to do it on his hands, and the incident ended in a mutual laugh.

"During those three weeks two attempts were made to incapacitate me. The first, presumably an acci-

dent, I ignored. The second was so flagrant that I was compelled for my own protection, to report and the perpetrator—my erstwhile foreman—was summarily dismissed. That afternoon—it was Christmas Eve—a deputation of the most violent among the malcontents called me out and delivered their ultimatum.

"Rumor of the purpose for which my invention was intended had leaked out, and the blind fools imagined that it would rob them of their means of livelihood. Deaf to reason, they showered upon me taunts and curses, and finally left after allotting me twenty-four hours in which to make up my mind.

"Twenty-four hours! Why, yes, I could have no objection to that, for by the Christmas night my work would be ended. The machine stood in the room merely requiring the finishing touches. An adjustment here, an alteration of the gear there, and it would be ready for the test. Oh, yes, they might come on the morrow night if they chose. I would desist willingly enough.

"All through that night and late into the Christmas Day I labored like a man possessed. Oblivious to everything but my work I strove on, and when at last I threw down the wrench and staggered back to feast my eyes upon its perfection before applying the power my trembling legs could scarce support my body. For the last hour my lips had been uttering foolish confidences to it. Reeling into the darksome workshop I started the gas-engine and racing back, pulled over the lever. The belt slid gently on the pulley and on the instant the machine sprang into being.

"I had done it! Intoxicated with success I danced irrationally around it, gloating over the wonder of its action. I can remember laughing aloud at the ease with which it accomplished its purpose; and then with the laugh on my lips, came a stunning blow on the back of my head, and after that—darkness!

"I came back to consciousness to find myself in a strange position. My legs were tied together, my arms were trussed behind my back and I stood erect, supported by a pendant rope which had been passed under my arms, looking down on the dimly-illuminated workshop from what seemed to me a raised platform beneath my feet. When I tried to move my swimming head, I discovered that a chain had been looped round my neck.

"Below me stood two men, who I recognized as the discharged foreman and one of his deputation. Terror-stricken I stood, wondering at their intent, and involuntarily a great groan burst from my lips.

"A merry Christmas, Mr. Inventor! burst out one of them with a drunken laugh. 'You hardly expected us, did you? Now listen to me, you dog. Listen to the mon you kicked out o' of the place he's worked at sence a lad, for he's th' Lord Harry it'll be the last speech ye'll iver hear on this earth. We come 'ere th' night to stop th' thing gooin' on. We'm late. But curse 'ee! we'm none too late to finish 'ee. That machine o' yours shall send 'ee to perdition!

"Let me tell 'ee now how 'e stand,' he went on, thickly. 'Under thy feet, lad, is th' gas-holder, round thy neck is the chain o' a travelling crane. We'm agoin' to start the engine. . . Yo' know what that means. When Jim 'ere d' that rope which is about thy infernal body theer's three links chain atween you an' the hang yo' deserve. Yo' shall hear the machine o' yours a-runnin' merry an' know that ivery whirr of the wheels is tightening the chain round thy neck and draggin' nearer to death.'

"For a brief instant, as I realized their horrible intention, my heart pulsations seemed to stop. Then next, I was straining at the rope like a madman.

"Cut it, Jim!' he laughed, 'and see the fool hang 'is blessed self.'

"His words arrested my struggling and, even as the rope was severed, I stood inert. The least movement now would tighten the chain and make an end. Springing to the engine the pair set it running, and the cogs in my machine started off with a whiff. The blaspheming wretches stood glaring up at me for a moment; then, as shrieked aloud in mortal terror with a final burst of mocking laughter they were gone.

"Again and again I shrieked, but only the echoes of my screams rang through the great workshop.

"I was on a telescopic gas-holder. The engine was absorbing the gas. The holder would gradually sink beneath my feet. How long would those links give me? How long would it be before I felt the chain gripping my throat, tighter, even tighter, until it lifted me from my

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