

The Black Cat

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In the Power House.

BY CLARENCE MAIKO.



HAVE you ever heard them—the voices of the juice? You can hear them every night at the Power House, when all the city sleeps; you can hear them rising from the motors of the trolley cars, and you can hear them, very plainly, sizzling around a Crooke's tube, when it is all green and crinkly with sparkling rays; but, if you value your peace of mind, you won't listen to them. At any rate don't believe in them, for, if you do, you will find yourself entertaining very peculiar ideas about the inanimate matter they come from; ideas which, if you proclaimed them abroad, would land you in an asylum as fast as railroads and good friends could carry you.

Besides being an anarchist, the only thing the matter with Michael Casey was that all night long he listened to the voices of the juice, that came out of the whirring, sizzling, rotating things in the Power House. When the rest of the night watch were very sensibly dozing in their chairs Casey would move around with staring bright eyes, listening to the talk from the dynamos and the alternators; but his special pet was the Man-killer, a big two-thousand volt Brush machine—a gruesome, crooning she-monster.

The Man-killer knew she was not to blame for having her frame-

work grounded, but, nevertheless, she felt responsible for three killings; her conscience was very black, and the voice that came out of her was melancholy with protest and complaint. Then, she shivered because her armature was not perfectly balanced, and as the number of her vibrations happened to be the natural number belonging to a bar of steel in the field magnet, the voice of the bar had to join her in a long-sustained howl, like that of some awakened drunken thing in delirium.

She was a sick, cranky girl, and unpopular socially with her neighbors in the Power House, the lively Thomson-Houston alternators and the big purring Westinghouse dynamos; they had no blood guilt on their souls and they let her severely alone.

There was one garrulous little alternator that the Man-killer particularly hated, because he giggled and tittered at her all the time. Moreover, though he couldn't raise a current of one hundred volts, the alternator was boastful of his deeds. He had made "juice" for a theater in bygone days, and told a story of how, one night, because a scene-shifter had thrown dirt into him, his bearings became hot, and the lights in the theater began to go out; then a nervous spasm ran over the audience and they started to stampede for the doors, but his engineer was a man of sense and presence of mind; he brought great chunks of ice from the water cooler and held them on his bearings, while the alternator struggled and labored and managed to keep up enough current to light the house while the people were quieted.

He was very proud of that feat, the alternator was, and he told it often to the admiring machines in the Power House. But one day he had to yield first place as popular hero to Number 4, Westinghouse dynamo, who racked and tore himself in two to keep up the current in the trolley circuit, when two of his mates burnt their armatures. It was found out afterwards that a car, full of people, had been in the middle of the grade on Nob Hill, when the current went down, and that if Number 4 had not fought and won his fight with the "juice," the car would have slipped and rolled, killing everybody in it.

If Casey's mental tissue had not been so diseased by contact with frowsy, bewhiskered, spectacled, foreign persons down in the dimly lighted, ill-smelling haunts where those disciples of

“Force” foregathered to air their poisonous doctrines, he would have appreciated the heroism of Westinghouse Number 4, and would have smiled at the yarn of the conceited little alternator.

Being what they were, Casey and the Man-killer fell in love with one another. The Man-killer’s affection for Casey was natural, because Casey fixed her insides, and freed her from pain when anything went wrong, and oiled her, and cleaned her, and sympathized with her generally; but Casey’s affection for the Man-killer was unnatural and in strict violation of the First Commandment, for it was worship, the paradoxical worship of his cult for Great Sin-Stained Power.

Every one in the Power House had an awe of Casey. He knew nothing about Ohm’s Law, or amperes, or volts, but he was on terms of mysterious intimacy with what he called “the juice,” and we term electricity. In the diseases of the machines that ran the trolleys and lights of the city, in connection fractures, commutator flats, and insulation burnings, and in other more obscure ailments, he always diagnosed and cured when all others failed. Then his fellow-workers in the Power House, who were all honest members of the Amalgamated Order of Sons of Toil, knew something of Casey’s fanatical foreign friends and were afraid.

Casey never missed their fellowship. He made up for all that and more, too, by long exchanges of confidence with his big whining pet, the Man-killer. Late at night, when the watch were busy adjusting the sparking brushes on the whirling machines, he listened for hours to the wail of her flying armature, and every little accent and quaver of her voice Casey understood. Then he used to talk back to her in a language unknown and a voice unheard. It was not pleasant to see Casey and the Man-killer having one of these chats. There was a secrecy and furtiveness in Casey’s manner on those occasions, and a wicked bh-r-r bh-r-r from the voice of the machine that made one feel they were whispering things it is not good for any man to hear.

It actually made Westinghouse Number 4 blush up to the bolt heads of his frame to see them making love to one another — for he was a highly proper young thing who had been brought up very strictly. But those rogues of alternators! They acted like a young lady’s little brothers, who hid under a sofa and

watched her beau kiss her. They were very provoking and the Man-killer considered their remarks highly insulting. In her opinion her relations with Casey were perfectly proper. To be sure, she had confided in Casey to an extent she never had in any one else, but then Casey loved her and understood her. She had told him how conscience smitten and unhappy she was because she had killed those three fools who should have known better; and Casey had given her absolution with an assumption of authority that made her think him commissioned by Rome. It was very good of Casey, and made her feel happier and run lighter.

When, in an exuberant frame of mind, she told the rest of the machines about it they smiled broadly and ran quiet. They knew men were very peculiar animals anyway, and when one of them understands the voices of the juice that come out of whirligig things like dynamos and alternators, and hangs around coddling a crazy, crooning she-monster like the Man-killer all night long, anything he says should be accepted with a mental reservation.

As a matter of fact, Casey was making a great mistake in trifling with the affections of the Man-killer. He had lied to her as only a villain of his deep-dyed stripe could lie; he had made her all kinds of promises, which she believed, and, happy in the attention and affection he lavished upon her, she stopped her whining howl, and began to hum softly to herself, like a happy woman sure of her husband's love.

Her armature Casey balanced to a very nearly perfect equipoise, and the voice of the bar of steel in the field-magnet had to lock itself up once more in the metal.

It is a great relief for a soul-sick, blood-stained thing like the Man-killer to have some one come and take the burden of guilt and shame away; and if you could have only heard the voice that came out of her armature in those days, — how it swam and sung through the astonished Power House, — you would have realized how she felt.

Like many of her sex, however, she was destined to be the victim of a man's wiles; for in all Casey's fair words, and coddling, and tinkering, there was a deep design. He had freed her from all her pains and aches; he had shut up the haunting, self-accusing voice of the bar of steel; he had cured her of hysteresis;

he had made her sing a happy song, and, unbeknownst to every one, he was now able to run up her current one hundred volts by tightening a few screws in her armature bearings.

The switchboard of the Power House was on the south wall of the dynamo room. It was made out of white marble, and was glistening with brass ammeters and shiny brake handles. Strung out on a line, at the height of the eyes of a man standing, were the fuse boxes of the dynamos, all wired to the feeders from the machines. A fuse is a sort of safety valve for the juice; when there is a short circuit some place outside, and an excessive current of juice is forced through the wires the fuse explodes; or, when too much current comes out of a machine the fuse melts, and the juice arcs out across the room in a blinding white flash two or three feet broad, electrocuting any live thing it hits.

Casey knew the Man-killer's fuse would not stand more than two thousand volts; an additional one hundred volts would arc it, and that meant sure death to any man who happened to be standing in front of it then.

Now, among those whom Casey's frowsy brotherhood of the Red Flag had tried and sentenced in their queer sick brains was the President of the Great Company that owned the Power House, and the trolley cars, and the electric lights of the city.

He was not such a bad man, he was only a man of steely acumen and cold mathematics, who guarded, perhaps a little too harshly, the great interests entrusted to him, who ruled the Great Company with a rod of iron, and whom a rather conservative public did not quite forgive for his stand against his striking employees a year or so gone by.

Casey, of course, thought of the President of the Great Company just as a rabid dog would, and he smiled in his sleep when he dreamed he saw the Great Man standing in front of the Man-killer's fuse on the switchboard, during one of his inspection tours. He could imagine that broad sheet of flame striking fair in the middle of the President's fat white neck; he could almost hear the juice sizzling through him; then a faint smell of charred flesh and the brain picture of the horror-stricken crowd of employees would make him start and wake up gasping in his bed. He dreamed of those things over and over many times, and waited

and longed for the day when a few turns given to the screws in the Man-killer's armature bearings would see it all accomplished.

All this time the Man-killer, oblivious of the dark design that was brewing in Casey's mind, went on crooning softly to herself, happy in her new-found peace and comfort. She did not mind the merry jibes of the alternators, who had become quite sociable; and even the Westinghouse dynamos unbent a little and talked to her in a cordial tone of good-will and fellowship. The voices grew positively hilarious down at the Power House in those days, and when a little Edison General machine made a Fourth of July celebration by burning its pinwheel armature and showering every one with sparks and flying solder and copper wire, the machines took it in good part and shook with merriment.

In and about among them all, listening to the voices, with pale face and feverish eyes, went Casey, stopping every now and then to whisper to the Man-killer, who was piping along joyous and contented, freed from the blood guilt that had troubled her, and trusting wholly the man that watched and tended her so carefully.

What made Casey change from night shift to day shift nobody knew, any more than they knew why Casey always watched with hungry eyes the office door, by which, once a month or so, the President of the Great Company and the Chief Engineer entered the dynamo room on their routine tours of inspection. But then, there are many things happening in a Power House that wise people do not know about, wise insurance people and wise inspectors of water pipes particularly. Day by day, patiently waiting for the curtain to rise on his tragedy, Michael Casey, anarchist, pined and fondled the unsuspecting machine that was to do murder for him so surely, swiftly, and secretly. His mind was tranquil and at ease — absolutely nothing could go wrong — discovery was absurdly beyond every possibility and question. He was to be at his usual place behind the Man-killer adjusting the sparking brushes. When the right time had come, the screws in her armature bearings were to be given a twist, and the work would be done. He laughed quietly to himself when he thought of the search party going out over the tracks to find where the short circuit had come from, and he smiled as he imagined the wise heads

in the office suggesting arcing cross wires underground, or lightning strokes, or insulation leaks as the possible causes.

Strange it was that it never occurred to Casey that he was trifling with the affections of the Man-killer; that there was a possibility of terrific revolt on her part when she realized how she had been deceived, and was asked to prostitute herself for the commission of the vile and cowardly crime he meditated. It seems as if Casey, who had listened to and believed in the voices of the juice, who knew and understood how the poor, crazy, mad thing used to shudder at her blood-guiltiness when the voices from the other machines cried out to her, "Shame! Shame! Shame!" — it seems as though Casey ought to have had some sort of premonition of what would come. But as we have said before, besides listening too much to the talk of whirligig things, Casey was a red-eyed anarchist.

The tragedy began in the foreordained and providential manner its author wished. The overture was chorused by the voices of the juice, and Casey was the only one who understood and grasped the theme. It was rather long drawn out for Casey, because he knew the President of the Great Company was outside in the office talking business with the Chief Engineer, preparatory to going the rounds of the dynamo room. The weather was especially favorable for short circuits; sullen, lowering rain-clouds blackened the sky, and every now and then Casey could see white forks of lightning flash zigzagging across the skylight above.

The Man-killer was telling her friend Westinghouse Number 4 — they were very familiar now — how happy she was freed from her hysterics and melancholy.

"My morbidness, dear," she said, "I have all put aside, and if I ever get the chance to do anything grand and noble,— like what you did the day you saved all those people in the trolley car,— I shall do it. You see!"

Westinghouse Number 4, who was modest, blushed at this allusion to his heroism, and stammered out something about the pleasure it gave him to hear her good resolutions, and his confidence in her ability to beat him hollow if she had a chance.

Casey, standing by his machine, heard it all, but paid little

attention to it, for his eyes were fastened eagerly on the office door, which had just swung open with a bang.

In the frame of the doorway stood the tall figure of the President of the Great Company. He was dressed, as usual, in a long black frock coat, and he wore a tall silk hat under which the stern, grim features that Casey saw so often in his dreams shone out cold and clear. He stood there some seconds speaking over his shoulder to the Chief Engineer behind him. Around his neck was a high collar, over which bulged a layer of fat, white flesh, and to that Casey's eyes were drawn with irresistible fascination.

It seemed an age to Casey that they stood there talking, while little smoke wreaths from their cigars floated over on the heavy air for him to sniff at.

Mr. Kipling has told us authoritatively that a marine engine and a locomotive are the most sensitive things the hand of man ever made; which proves that Mr. Kipling never knew a dynamo intimately. Around every little molecule of metal in it are invisible eddying, shooting currents, ever at war with one another, attracting, repelling, disappearing and coming again, in a marvelous and inexplicable manner. Surely the pulses of no live thing ever throbbed as does each atom of steel in one of these machines.

Perhaps it was something in the tense, heavy atmosphere; perhaps, like its cousin the Roentgen Ray, the juice penetrated the dark depths of Casey's mind and told the Man-killer what Casey was going to do; anyhow, down in the bowels of the machine some very funny things were happening; all the little currents, by a strange coincidence, were running together, and a great volume of force was rolling up in the bed and frame.

The President of the Great Company and the Chief Engineer had come in and were walking around here and there among the whirligig things, talking in low tones.

Impatiently fingering a tiny screwdriver, Casey followed them everywhere with his eyes glued on a rim of fat, white flesh lapping over the President's high collar. It seemed to him as if they would never get in front of the switchboard.

The voices of the juice had risen louder, and sounded like a grand choir singing a hymn of grave and awful warning, while the soft croon of the Man-killer had sharpened off into a wailing dirge.

Then the moment came; the tall silk hat turned sharply about, followed by the other man, and walked straight over to the switch-board, halting just in front of the Man-killer's fuse. Never taking his eyes off that sagging ring of white above his victim's collar, Casey felt for the screws. But at the crucial moment his hands, unguided by his keen eyes, missed their mark, and grazed the frame of the machine. Then into Casey rushed the enormous charge of juice that the Man-killer had accumulated from the running together of all those little currents in its bowels. Into an apish squatting posture Casey was drawn, his hands stretched out before him in awful appeal to the infuriated monster he had intended to betray. The muscles of his face twitched horribly; he could not cry out, for his jaws were shut like those of a tetanus patient. His face grew blue, then purple, while pink froth hung from his lips. In the calves of his legs and in his wrists great lumps of agony gathered, and his eyes bulged from their sockets. Suddenly he became numb and was conscious only of wonderful music — the music of the juice — the sweetest thing living man ever heard — the mysterious music which every one who is electrocuted hears just before death, and hearing, dies supremely happy.

A faint smell of burnt flesh made the President of the Great Company turn around, sniffing; and then he uttered a startled cry, for there, staring straight into his, with a terrifying suggestiveness, were the two dead, uncanny, bulging eyes of Michael Casey, anarchist and traitor.

The chorus of the voices that came out of the whirling armatures had risen into a wild, weird chant, but shriller, higher than all the rest sounded the wail of the Man-killer; for the voice of the steel bar had come to life again, and joined it in a morbid howl, like something damned.

