

THE LORD OF THE DYNAMOS.

By H. C. WELLS.

The chief attendant of the three dynamos that buzzed and rattled at Camberwell and kept the electric railway going came out of Yorkshire, and his name was James Holroyd. He was a practical electrician, but fond of whisky, a heavy red-haired brute with irregular teeth. He doubted Carnot's cycle, but accepted Dalton's atomic theory, and he had read Shakespeare and found him weak in chemistry. His helper came out of the mysterious East, and his name was Azuma-si. But Holroyd called him Pooch-bah. Holroyd liked a nigger help, because he would stand kicking—a habit with Holroyd—and did not pry into the machinery and try to learn the ways of it. Certain odd possibilities of the negro mind brought odd abstract contact with the crown of our civilization. Holroyd never fully realised.

To define Azuma-si was beyond ethnology. He was, perhaps, more negroid than anything else, though his hair was curly rather than frizzy, and his nose had a bridge. Moreover, his skin was brown rather than black, and the whites of his eyes were yellow. His broad cheek bones and narrow chin gave his face something of the viperine V. His head, too, was broad behind and low and narrow at the forehead, as if his brain had been twisted round in the reverse mode to a European's. He was short of stature and still shorter of English. In conversation he made numerous odd noises of no known marketable value, and his infrequent words were carved and wrought into heraldic grotesqueness. Holroyd tried to elucidate his religious beliefs, and—especially after whisky—lectured to him against superstition. Azuma-si, however, shirked the discussion of his gods, even though he was kicked for it.

Azuma-si had come, clad in white but insufficient raiment, out of the stoke hole of the Lord Clive, from the Straits Settlements, and beyond into London. He had heard even in his youth of the greatness and riches of London, where all the women are white and fair, and even the beggars in the streets are white, and he had arrived, with newly earned gold coins in his pocket, to worship at the shrine of civilisation. The day of his landing was a dismal one; the sky was dun, and a wind worried drizzle filtered down to the grassy streets, but he plunged boldly into the delights of Shadwell, and was presently cast up, shattered in health, civilised in costume, penniless, helpless and, except in matters of the direst necessity, practically a dumb animal, to toil for James Holroyd, and to be bullied by him in the dynamo shed at Camberwell. And to James Holroyd bullying was a labor of love.

There were three dynamos with their engines at Camberwell. The two that have been there since the beginning are small machines; the larger one was new. The smaller machines made a reasonable noise; their straps hummed over the drums, every now and then the brushes buzzed and fizzled, and the air churned steadily, whoo! whoo! between their poles. One was loose in its foundation, and kept the shed vibrating. But the big dynamo drowned these little noises altogether with the drone of its iron core, which somehow set part of the iron-work humming. The place made the visitor's head reel with the thrum, thrum, thrum of the engines, the rotation of the big wheels, the spinning ball valves, the occasional spitting of the steam, and over all the deep, unceasing, surging note of the big dynamo. This last noise was, from an engineering point of view, a defect, but Azuma-si accounted it unto the monster for mightiness and pride.

If it were possible we would have the noises of that shed always about the reader as he reads, we would tell all our story to such an accompaniment.

It was a steady stream of din, from which the ear picked out first one thread and then another; there was the intermittent snorting, panting and roasting of the steam engines, the suck and thud of their pistons, the dull beat on the air as the spokes of the great driving wheels came round, a note the leather straps made as they ran tighter and looser, and a fretful tumult from the dynamos; and over all, sometimes inaudible, as the car tired of it, and then creeping back upon the senses again, was this trombone note of the big machine. The floor never felt steady and quiet beneath one's feet, but quivered and jolted. It was a confusing, unsteady place, and enough to send anyone's thoughts jerking into odd zigzags. And for three months, while the big strike of the engineers was in progress, Holroyd, who was a blackie, and Azuma-si, who was a mere black, were never out of the stir and eddy of it, but slept and fed in the little wooden shanty between the shed and the gates.

Holroyd delivered a theological lecture on the text of his big machine soon after Azuma-si came. He had to shout to be heard in the din.

"Look at that," said Holroyd; "where's your 'athen idol to match it?" And Azuma-si looked.

For a moment Holroyd was inaudible, and then Azuma-si heard: "Kills hundred men. It helps pay 12 per cent. on the ordinary shares," said Holroyd, "and that's something like an idol!"

Holroyd was proud of his big dynamo, and exulted upon its size and power to Azuma-si until Heaven knows what odd currents of thought that and the incessant whirling and shindy set up within the curly black cranium. He would explain in the most graphic manner the dozen or so ways in which a man might be killed by it, and once he gave Azuma-si a shock as a sample of its quality. After that, in the breathing times of his labor—it was heavy labor, being not only his own but most of Holroyd's—Azuma-si would sit and watch the big machine. Now and then the brushes would sparkle and spit blue flashes, at which Holroyd would swear, but all the rest was as smooth and rhythmic as breathing. The band ran shouting over the shaft, and ever behind one as one watched was the complacent thud of the piston. So it lived all day in this big airy shed, with him and Holroyd to wait upon it; not prised up and slaving to drive a ship as the other engines he knew had been, but a machine enthroned. Those two smaller dynamos, Azuma-si by force of contrast despised; the large one he privately christened the Lord of the Dynamos. They were fretful and irregular, but the big dynamo was steady. How great it was! How serene and easy in its working! Greater and calmer even than the Buddhas he had seen at Rangoon, and yet not motionless, but living! The great black coils spun, spun, spun, the rings ran round under the brushes, and the deep note of its coil steadied the whole. It affected Azuma-si querly.

Azuma-si was not fond of labor. He would sit about and watch the Lord of the Dynamos while Holroyd went away to persuade the yard porter to get whisky, although his proper place was not in the dynamo shed but behind the engines, and, moreover, if Holroyd caught him skulking he got hit for it with a rod of stout copper wire. He would go and stand close to the Colossus and look up the great leather band running overhead. There was a black patch on the band that came round, and it pleased him somehow among all the clutter to watch this return again and again. Odd thoughts spud

with the whirl of it. Scientific people tell us that savages give souls to rocks and trees, and a machine is a thousand times more alive than a rock or a tree. And Azuma-si was practically a savage still; the veneer of civilisation lay no deeper than his slop suit, his bruises and the coal grime on his face and hands. His father before him had worshipped a meteorite stone; it may be, kindred blood had splashed the broad waist of Juggernaut.

He took every opportunity Holroyd gave him of touching and handling the great dynamo that was fascinating him. He polished and cleaned it until the metal parts were blinding in the sun. He felt a mysterious sense of service in doing this. He would go up to it and touch its spinning coils gently. The gods he had worshipped were all far away. The people in London hid their gods.

At last his dim feelings grew more distant, and took shape in thoughts and acts. When he came into the shed one morning he saluted to the Lord of the Dynamos, and then, when Holroyd was away, he went and whispered to the machine that he was its servant, and prayed it to have pity on him and save him from Holroyd. As he did so a rare gleam of light came in through the open archway of the throb-bing machine shed, and the Lord of the Dynamos, as he whirled and roared, was radiant with pale gold. Then Azuma-si knew that his service was acceptable to his lord. After that he did not feel so lonely as he had done, and he had indeed been very much alone in London. And even when his work time was over, which was rare, he loitered about the shed.

Then, the next time Holroyd maltreated him, Azuma-si went presently to the Lord of the Dynamos and whispered, "Thou seest, O my Lord!" and the angry whirr of the machinery seemed to answer him. Thereafter it appeared to him that whenever Holroyd came into the shed a different note came into the sounds of the great dynamo. "My lord bids his time," said Azuma-si to himself. "The iniquity of the fool is not yet ripe." And he waited and watched for the day of reckoning. One day there was evidence of short circuiting, and Holroyd, making an unwary examination—it was in the afternoon—got a rather severe electric shock. Azuma-si from behind the engine saw him jump off and curse at the peasant coil.

"He is warned," said Azuma-si to himself. "Surely my Lord is very patient." Holroyd had at first initiated his "nigger" into such elementary conceptions of the dynamo's working as would enable him to take temporary charge of the shed in his absence. But when he noticed the manner in which Azuma-si hung about the monster, he became suspicious. He dimly perceived his assistant was "up to something," and connecting him with the anointing of the coils with oil that had rotted the varnish in one place, he issued an edict, shouted above the confusion of the machinery, "Don't 'e go nigh that big dynamo any more, Pooch-bah, or 'e'll take thy skin off!" Besides, if it pleased Azuma-si to be near the big machine, it was plain sense and decency to keep him away from it.

Azuma-si obeyed at the time, but later he was caught bowing before the Lord of the Dynamos. At which Holroyd twisted his arm and kicked him as he turned to go away. As Azuma-si presently stood behind the engine and glared at the hated Holroyd, the noise of the machinery took a new rhythm and sounded like four words in his native tongue.

It is hard to say exactly what madness is. I fancy Azuma-si was mad. The incessant din and whirl of the dynamo shed may have churned up his little store of knowledge and big store of superstitious fancy, at last, into something akin to frenzy. At any rate, when the idea of making Holroyd a sacrifice to the Dynamo Fetish was thus suggested to him, it filled him with a strange tumult of exultant emotion.

That night the two men and their black shadows were alone in the shed together. The shed was lit with one big arc light that winked and flickered purple. The shadows lay black behind the dynamo, the ball valves whirled from light to darkness, and the engine beat loud and steady. The world outside seen through the open end of the shed seemed incredibly dim and remote. It seemed absolutely silent, too, since the roar of the machinery drowned every external sound. Far away was the black fence of the yard with grey shadowy houses behind, and above was the deep blue sky and the pale little stars. Azuma-si suddenly walked across the centre of the shed above which the leather bands were running, and went into the shadow by the big dynamo. Holroyd heard a click, and the spin of the armature changed.

"What are you dawin' with that switch?" he bawled in surprise. "Haven't I told you—"

Then he saw the set expression of Azuma-si's eyes as the Asiatic came out of the shadow towards him.

In another moment the two men were grappling fiercely in front of the great dynamo.

"You coffee headed fool!" gasped Holroyd, with a brown hand at his throat. "Keep off those contact rings." In another moment he was tripped and reeling back upon the Lord of the Dynamos. He instinctively loosened his grip upon his antagonist to save himself from the machine.

The messenger, sent in furious haste from the station to find out what had happened in the dynamo shed, met Azuma-si at the porter's lodge by the gate. Azuma-si tried to explain something, but the messenger could make nothing of the black's incoherent English, and hurried on to the shed. The machines were all noisy at work, and nothing seemed to be disarranged. There was, however, a queer smell of singed hair. Then he saw an odd looking crumpled mass clinging to the front of the big dynamo, and, approaching, recognised the distorted remains of Holroyd.

The man stared and hesitated a moment. Then he saw the face and shut his eyes, convulsively squeezing the lids together. He turned on his heel before he opened them, so that he should not see Holroyd again, and went out of the shed to get advice and help.

When Azuma-si saw Holroyd die in the grip of the Great Dynamo he had been a little scared about the consequences of his act. Yet he felt strangely elated, and he knew that the favor of Lord Dynamo was upon him. His plan was already settled when he met the man coming from the station, and the scientific manager who speedily arrived on the scene jumped at the obvious conclusion of suicide. This expert scarcely noticed Azuma-si except to ask a few questions. Did he see Holroyd kill himself? Azuma-si explained he had been out of sight at the engine furnace until he heard a difference in the noise from the dynamo. It was not a difficult examination, being untinctured by suspicion.

The distorted remains of Holroyd, which the electrician removed from the machine, were hastily covered by the porter with a coffee stained tablecloth. Somebody, by a happy inspiration, fetched a medical man. The expert was chiefly anxious to get the machine at work again, for seven or eight trains had stopped midway in the stuffy tunnels of the electric railway. Azuma-si, answering or misunderstanding the questions of the people who had by authority or impudence come into the shed, was presently sent back to the stoke hole by the scientific manager. Of course a crowd collected outside the gates of the yard—a crowd, for no known reason, always hovers for a day or two near the

scene of a sudden death in London—two or three reporters percolated somehow into the scientific experimenter that out again, but himself an amateur journalist. His body was carried away, and public interest departed with it. Azuma-si remained very quietly at his furnace, re-figure that wriggled violently and became still, until the shed it would have looked exactly as if nothing had happened. Peeping presently from his engine room the black saw the Lord brothers, and the driving wheel were beating thud, thud, thud, exactly as it had been earlier in the evening. After all, from the mechanical point of view, it had been a most insignificant incident, the mere temporary deflection of the current, only now the slender form and slender study outline of Holroyd travelling up and down the lane of light upon the vibrating floor of the struts between the engines and the dynamo.

"Have I not served my Lord?" said Azuma-si inaudibly, from his shadow, and the note of the great dynamo rang out full and clear. As he looked at the big whirling machinery little in abeyance since Holroyd's death seemed its sway.

Never had Azuma-si seen a man killed so swiftly and pitilessly. The big, humming machine had slain its victim without wavering for a second from its steady beating. It was indeed a mighty god. The unconscious scientific manager stood with his back to him, admiring on a piece of paper. His shadow lay at the foot of the monster.

"Was the Lord Dynamo still hungry? His servant was ready."

Azuma-si made a stealthy step forward; then hesitated. The scientific manager suddenly stopped writing, and walked down the shed to the endmost of the dynamos, and began to examine the brushes.

Azuma-si hesitated, and then slipped across noiselessly into the shadow by the switch. There he waited. Presently the manager's footsteps could be heard returning. He stopped in his old position, unconscious of the figure crouching 10 feet away from him. Then the big dynamo suddenly fizzled, and in another moment a thick set figure had sprung out of the darkness upon him.

The scientific manager will remember all the details of that struggle with the mad stoker so long as there is life in him. First he was gripped round the body and swung towards the big dynamo, then, kicking with his knee and forcing his antagonist's head down with his hands, he loosened the grip on his waist and swung round away from the machine, then the black grasped him with his arms again, putting a curly head against his chest, and they swayed and panted as it seemed for an age or so. Then the scientific manager was impelled to catch a black ear in his teeth and bite furiously. The black yelled hideously. Suddenly they rolled over on the floor, and the black, who had apparently slipped from the vice of the teeth or parted with some ear—the scientific manager wondered which at the time—tried to throttle him. The scientific manager was making some ineffectual efforts to claw something with his hands and to kick, when the welcome sound of quick footsteps sounded on the floor. The next moment Azuma-si had left him, and in another moment a thick set figure had sprung out of the darkness amid the roar.

The officer of the company, who had entered, stood staring as Azuma-si caught the naked terminals in his hands, gave one horrible scowl, and then hung motionless from the machine, his face violently distorted.

"I'm jolly glad you came in when you did," said the scientific manager, still sitting on the floor.

He looked at the still quivering figure. "It is not a nice death to die, apparently—but it is quick."

The ticket collector was still staring at the body. He was a man of slow apprehension. There was a pause.

The scientific manager got up on his feet rather awkwardly. He ran his fingers along his collar thoughtfully, and moved his head to and fro several times.

"Poor Holroyd! I see now." Then almost mechanically he went towards the switch in the shadow and turned the current into the railway circuit again. As he did so the singed body loosened its grip upon the machine and fell forward on its face.

So ended prematurely the Worship of the Dynamo Deity, probably the most short-lived of all religions. Yet within it could boast a Martyrdom and a Human Sacrifice.—*Full Half Budget.*