

Pride

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“Excuse me mister.”

He whirled round yelling; “What!”

I jumped back involuntarily & stared at one of the most angry faces I had ever seen.

“Would you like some tea?” I stammered to get the words out as I took in the black and blue bruises across his nose and cheekbones, and two eyes that were red with broken veins. “No!” he almost shouted again, and turned on his heels to resume tightening bolts on the crane’s jib. I walked away, but couldn’t help but glance nervously over my shoulder as I went, fearing the worst. He shouted: “Hey kid!” I turned around and he was walking towards me, I was apprehensive but stood resolutely to the spot. “I’m sorry I shouted at you.”

I started breathing again. He said slowly: “I’m not fit for company, so I’ll pass on the tea.”

“I can bring it to you” I said. His face broke into a sad distorted smile and he mumbled

“Thanks, that would be great.”

I made my way back to our site cabin and made a full can of tea using scalding water from the boiler, stirred in a large quantity of sweetened, condensed milk then added two heaped teaspoons of sugar. Our foreman was watching me, and as I picked up the tea-can and a couple of Penguin biscuits he said quietly: “Watch out for yourself Joe.”

I nodded and said “OK” then left the cabin to walk back to where the crane driver was still tightening bolts.

I had spent a large part of the morning watching the progress of the driver and his mate as they built up the jib of the massive self-erecting crane in the access road next to our compound. I had been there at 7:30am when the crane and trailer had arrived, pulling into the compound – only to be ordered out again by our officious CEGB site engineer McPherson. There had been a heated discussion between the driver and McPherson, about where the crane was to be built, and although I wasn’t close enough to hear, it was fairly easy to deduce that our site engineer was doing his usual bossy ‘I know best’ act. I had noticed the bruising on the driver’s face – even from a distance it looked bad, and one of our crew intimated that the man had been involved in a brawl the night before.

I handed him the can and biscuits and he hitched himself up until he was sitting on the jib of the crane. Pouring himself a cup, he took a bite of biscuit and sipped the tea. “Thanks kid, that’s great – I’ve had a helluva morning.” Again that sad lop-sided smile.

“You’re welcome” I said, “Don’t let that engineer get to you – he’s an idiot. Just do what he says, and watch shit happen.”

He looked at me and lifted his head in a question. I joined him sitting on the jib and he sat drinking his tea, as I told him the saga of our experiences since we came on site.

Our job was to build a 35-ton girder some 150ft long and erect it at the edge of the compound where it would form a gable to support the construction of an extension to the massive switch-house at Delaval-Bois power-station. The girder parts were all of high-strength steel, as were the bolts, and in that lay a serious problem. During the construction of the girder, the old CEGB engineer we knew had retired and his place taken by McPherson, who had made his presence felt around the whole Power Station and especially with us. He had insisted first of all, that each of the 11/2 inch diameter bolts on the main truss had to be tightened with a torque wrench to 450 ft/lbs. As the youngest and smallest in our crew, I had to add a small scaffolding padlock onto the handle of the wrench before I could turn it.

Almost as soon as we had finished re-tightening every bolt, McPherson decided that this wasn't good enough. He had discovered that despite being torqued to 450 ft/lbs, he could still get a feeler-gauge under the head of some of the bolts. These special bolts had 3 raised blips on the underside of each bolt-head, and McPherson insisted that these had to be forced into the steelwork to indicate that each bolt was tight enough. The simple truth was that they were just an aid to stop the head turning whilst the nut was tightened. As a remedy to these 'slack' bolts, we were ordered to re-tighten these until we couldn't insert the feeler gauge under each bolt head.

The results were inevitable. First of all I wasn't strong enough to tighten the bolts even with a full-sized scaffold padlock adding to the wrench length, the second was that bolts started snapping. I was intrigued to discover that it wasn't the threads that failed as I had expected, but the shaft of each bolt simply lengthened and reduced in diameter until it failed. Samples of these stretched and snapped bolts were delivered to McPherson's office by our foreman, without comment.

Subsequently a new delivery of replacement bolts arrived with new instructions that these were to be torqued to 450ft/lbs as before. So, the girder was built, and ready to lift into place hence the giant crane.

I finished talking and was aware that he had been listening attentively to every word. He nodded his head and asked me: "What's your name kid?"

"I'm Joe", I replied. He offered his huge hand to me and as I took it he said: "I'm Gary, and thanks Joe, my morning just got better." We both slid off our perches on the crane jib, and I went back to the cabin, while he continued building the jib.

It was early afternoon before the crane was ready, and our crew stood outside and watched it crawl along the road very slowly, with the jib lowered very close to the ground. Loud yelling was heard and McPherson came running down the road, shouting and waving his hands at the crane. The driver brought the crane to a halt and we could hear McPherson yelling at the driver about regulations that the jib of the crane must be fully up whilst moving around the site. To everyone's surprise the crane driver had simply nodded and slowly the jib was pulled up until it was almost vertical, when the crane once more

progressed along the road on it's way into the compound.

We all stood and watched in horror as McPherson walked backward down the road in front of the crane signalling instructions to the driver. Just as the crane approached the compound there was a series of very loud explosions, and brilliant blue lights as the crane jib cut into the first series of 75Kvolt overhead cables that crossed the road. The foremost sections of the jib were instantly vapourised and it swan-necked forward until the higher section landed on the second tier overhead cables. Again there were a terrific series of explosions and the jib now fell to the ground, completely severed by the white heat of the short circuits. Meanwhile the melted cables whipped back each side of the road and they left trailing blazes of fire and sparks on the ground. McPherson was transfixed – both hands up to his head - which was just as well, for if he had moved he would have been in the path of the deadly snaking cables, and would have surely been killed.

The driver stopped the crane and jumped down from his cabin. With not even a passing glance at McPherson, he walked towards us putting on his coat. As he passed he looked across at me and slowly winked, then turned and walked off site. I never saw him again.