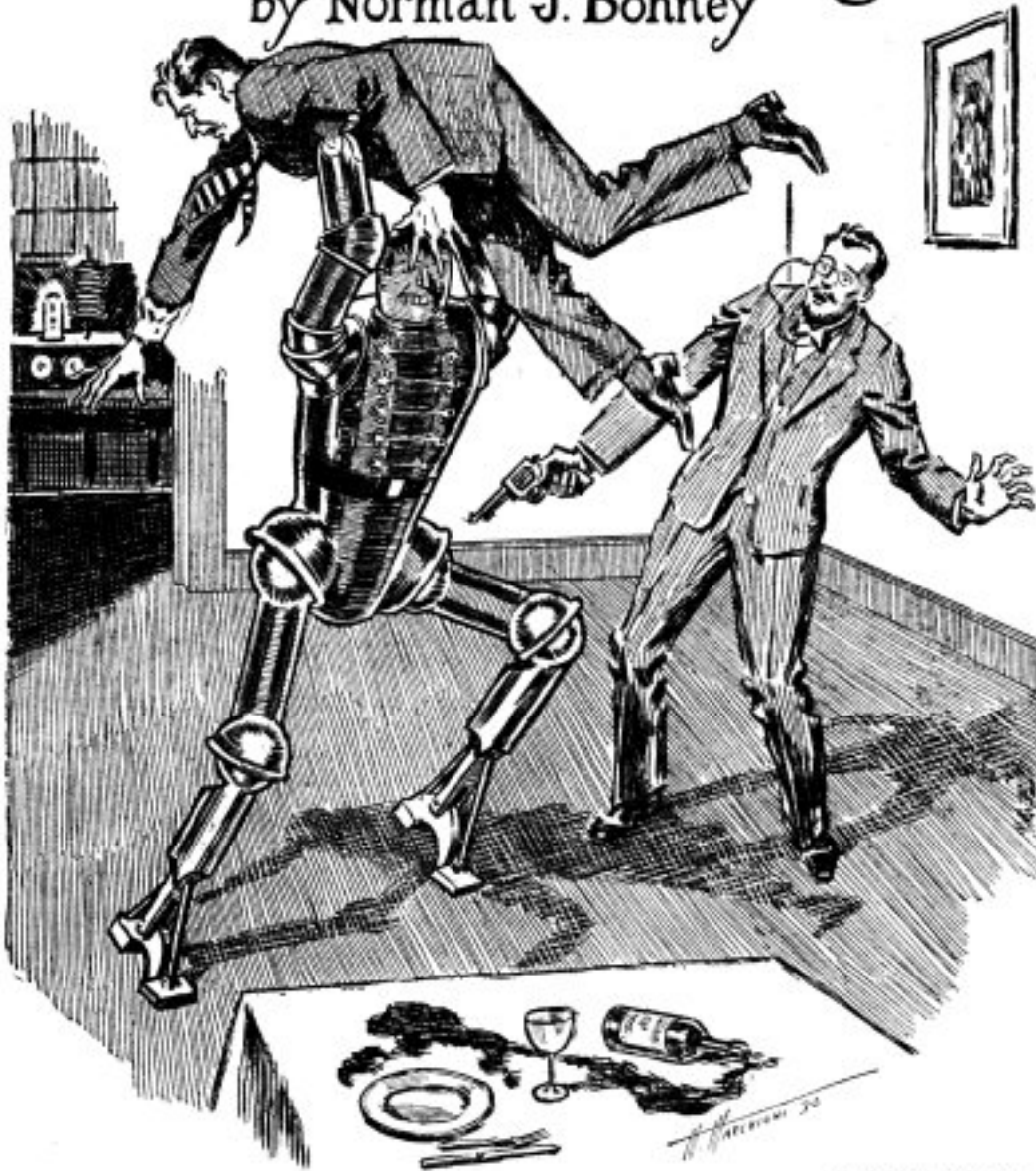


The Man Who Laughs

by Norman J. Bonney



(Illustrated by Marchino)

A quarter ton of machinery was running amuck! Crawford, screaming terribly, was lifted high overhead and rushed to the nearest wall.

THE machine, despite the smile on its painted face, was hideously ugly. Yet Menley—whose creature it was—

rubbed his hands in satisfaction as he surveyed the result of his labor. A year's work had gone into the building of this, his latest invention, a

year of innumerable difficulties and disappointments. But now all was forgotten; the masterpiece was finished. Menley stepped back to admire his handiwork.

The man—it could as easily be called beast—stood in Menley’s workshop surrounded by a clutter of wheels and wires that were only counterparts of countless cogs and springs that had gone into the making of the thing. It was of average height but badly proportioned. The shoulders were too broad, the waist too narrow. The legs were long, the arms short. These matters would have been disturbing to a sculptor or an artist. But Menley was neither. He was an inventor and if the machine worked he would be satisfied.

The man was in livery. That is, Menley had intended that it should appear so and to that effect had painted upon the creature’s torso a coat of brilliant scarlet. Gilt frogs—also painted—linked a double row of gilded buttons that stretched from throat to waist line. The buttons were real, utilitarian even more than ornamental. A black belt circled the waist, and from hip to knee the legs were scarlet.

The effect of the painted garments was startling. A scarecrow garbed in cast-off clothing resembles, to a certain extent at least, a human being. But Menley’s mechanical man could never have been mistaken for a creature of flesh and blood. It was a monstrous deformity.

The peremptory ringing of an electric bell roused Menley from the study of his creation. The ring was familiar. Only one man summoned Menley in that imperious manner. The inventor’s face wore a twisted smile as he crossed the floor to the vestibule and opened the outer door.

On the threshold stood the man whom the inventor was expecting. It was Cameron Crawford, entrepreneur, business man extraordinary, captain of industry. It was said of Crawford that he owned Menley body and

soul. His manner toward the inventor proved that he at least believed the statement.

“Is it finished?” he asked, making no attempt to conceal his eagerness. Menley nodded and stood back from the door. Crawford entered hastily. For a year he had left the inventor alone, giving him full scope to work on his invention, supplying without question the money Menley demanded from time to time to carry on the task. A lifetime’s successful exploitation of Menley’s inventions had given him full confidence in the inventor’s genius. He crossed the vestibule with that masterful stride that always distinguished him and paused at the threshold of the door to the workshop. His lips curled in proleptic satisfaction.

But at sight of the red monstrosity within, his jaunty air deserted him. He drooped noticeably. Menley, standing behind him, cringed almost as if expecting a blow. The big man whirled on him savagely.

“What the hell is it?” he cried, his reddish hair almost standing on end.

Menley rubbed his hands. Some of the pigment with which he had painted the creature still stained them.

“It’s a robot,” he said. “A mechanical man. Don’t condemn it until you’ve seen it work,” he begged. “It’s better than it looks.”

“It would have to be!” snarled Crawford. He was insanely angry. He had hoped for big things, a masterpiece even. Menley’s inventions had always been gold mines. But this device, this iron mannikin, he saw at once was impractical. He could not conceive of it as possible of producing revenue.

But Menley was ignoring his show of temper. He had stepped closer to his iron man and now pushed one of the gilded buttons that were seemingly a part of the creature’s brilliant uniform. A soft whirring sound filled the workshop. The man began instantly to walk.

Despite his anger, Crawford was interested. The creature moved in a slow and peculiar gait directly toward an open door that led from the workshop to Menley's living room. The inventor followed close in the footsteps of his invention. At the threshold there was a slight hitch. The robot found difficulty in negotiating the step. Menley put out a hand to steady it.

"It's a little top-heavy," he apologized. "I must make the feet broader."

Crawford's lip curled in scorn but he controlled his tongue. The mechanical man came to a stop three paces beyond the living room door. The whirring sound ceased.

BY this time Crawford had regained control of his temper. No use to quarrel with Menley. He knew that the inventor was sensitive. There was such a thing as killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. After all the old freak had made few failures. Perhaps even this thing might not be as unprofitable as it looked.

"What next?" he asked in his friendliest fashion.

Menley pointed to a table where there was a cloth laid and plates and glasses set for two.

"I had thought to make him a major-domo, a sort of mechanical butler," explained the inventor in his weak apologetic voice. "But of course I can make changes that will fit him for almost any kind of domestic service."

"We can discuss that later. Go on with the demonstration. Put him through his paces."

As he spoke, Crawford seated himself in the chair facing the invention. Menley seemed to be desirous of adding a further word but Crawford's resigned manner kept him silent. He bit his lower lip and without speaking turned and pressed the second button on the left side of the mannikin's breast. Again the low whirring sound was heard, and slowly, yet with the utmost precision, the

creature turned about, walked three steps to the cabinet that stood against the wall behind the inventor and there stretched out its gloved right hand, the long jointed fingers of which closed firmly on the neck of a tall bottle. It then turned, walked straight to Crawford's elbow and paused at his side. Uncannily, its hand, still holding the bottle, stretched out and poured a tumblerful of wine over the white napery of the table. To avoid the deluge Crawford thrust his chair back and leaped to his feet.

"What the—" he began savagely.

"You moved your glass!" cried the little man frantically. "With your elbow when you sat down. How could you expect him to know it. He has no eyes. He poured where the glass should have been. Only for your elbow—"

"Aw, shut up!" snarled Crawford. He had seen enough. The thing was utterly absurd. Its market value was nil. Menley's feelings could be damned for all he cared. The old fool had pulled a boner this time and he might as well be told of it. A year of wasted work, not to mention the money the thing had cost.

The whirring sound inside the mechanical man had stopped. The creature itself was standing passively beside Crawford's chair. Its painted smile maddened him.

"How much do you think I've spent on this monkey business?" he howled. "Twenty-five thousand dollars! Twenty—"

"It weighs five hundred pounds," interrupted Menley.

"What of it?" raged Crawford. "Fifty dollars a pound is big money for a piece of junk!"

"But this is no junk. It works. It—"

"It is junk. No one would buy it on a bet."

"You haven't seen what it can do yet."

"I've seen enough. Why, they had one

of these dummies at the radio show and it could give you cards and spades! No buttons, no buzz! Just give him a command and that's all there was to it. . . ."

"You know Crawford, I've never dabbled in electricity or radio. The mechanical world is my field. Mechanics—"

"I've heard all that before. Don't pour it at me again. Throw this dummy in the lake. It's no good. Make me a mouse-trap or a meat grinder and I'll back you to hell. But this thing!"

His words expressed unutterable scorn.

"But Crawford?" Menley expostulated. "Give me a chance to show it!"

The big man shook away from the inventor's hand which had grasped his coat lapel.

"Show it to the marines!" he snarled. "I'm through!"

He strode toward the door.

"Wait!"

The voice was Menley's. But it was so changed that Crawford scarce recognized it. He turned and all his anger vanished like smoke. Menley stood where he had left him but the hand that a moment before had clutched his coat lapel in supplication, grasped now the butt of an old-fashioned Colt revolver, down the blue barrel of which Crawford found himself looking to a threat of death.

THE business man's face went white. Like all bullies, he was, despite his bluster, a coward at heart. He could not face Menley's pistol without fear. There was, moreover, a light in Menley's eye that he had never seen before. People had told him that the inventor had a queer streak. Personally he had never noticed it. But men of genius were notoriously prone to madness. Perhaps old Menley had suddenly gone cuckoo!

This thought in connection with the

pistol was none too pleasant. Crawford's face was a sickly yellow.

"What-what's the matter, old man?" he stammered. "Why the cannon?"

"Sit down!" ordered Menley.

There was a noticeable weakness about Crawford's knees. They had suddenly developed a tendency to buckle under his weight and he fell rather than sat in the indicated chair.

The pistol in Menley's hand transformed in the twinkling of an eye the relationships between the two men. The docile inventor had become the dominant figure. His pale face was fixed in a look of determination. His dark eyes glittered with a light almost fanatical. Crawford shrunk into himself. He seemed somehow to have grown physically smaller. He had begun to cringe.

Menley's voice, in tones of authority, continued.

"Are you ready now for a demonstration?"

Crawford nodded and licked his dry lips. He tried to speak carelessly.

"Why sure, old man," he said. "I didn't realize you were so set on it. Go ahead. Maybe I can do something with the thing after all."

"You're lying, Crawford. You say that to placate me. You know there's no market for an invention of this sort. I know it too. But just the same there are a few original features about my man that I particularly want you to see."

Menley spoke in slowly articulated words in a voice so icily cold that Crawford's flesh crept. He stirred uneasily in his chair. Menley continued:

"For twenty years I've slaved for you, Crawford," he said. "And what have you given me in return? Abuse—nothing but abuse. Oh, you've fed me and clothed me and housed me. You've even given me money for experiments. But you've kept the lion's share of my earnings for yourself. I've made you a

millionaire twice over, whereas I, if I were to die at this moment, would fill a pauper's grave."

"Never, old man! I'd see—"

"Oh, you'd probably bury me all right, give me a monument and all that. But that's not what I mean. I'd die penniless. And there'd be nothing to perpetuate my memory. My inventions, my motor, my shoe machines, my textile improvements all bear your name. You've exploited me for your own profit. I'm your slave, your chattel, a creature as much yours as this robot here is mine. You—"

"But you've never said that you wanted the glory. You've been happy in your laboratory. What's got into you, anyway?"

Some of the color was coming back into Crawford's face and with it came some of his accustomed bluster.

Menley shook his head sorrowfully.

"You can neither bluff nor bully me any longer," he said. "You're an octopus that has been slowly strangling me all these years. If you had left me to myself—"

"I did on this last thing and look what you've done! The maddest piece of junk—"

"Don't say it, Crawford. Remember, there's more to be shown. You may change your mind yet."

The words were quiet, slow-spoken. The pistol muzzle that emphasized them never moved a handbreadth as Menley spoke. Again a chill of fear clutched at Crawford's heart. With clumsy cunning he attempted a smile, relapsing again into docility.

"I'll tell you," he said. "We'll call this last one 'The Menley Man,' or better yet, 'The Menley Mechanical Man.' The name's alliterative, has a kind of a swing to it. It might catch on. . . ."

His voice died in his throat. Menley was smiling sardonically.

"I used to believe you when you talked like that," he said. "But you've disappointed me too many times. Stand up!"

Crawford's legs were trembling again, but despite their weakness he succeeded in rising.

MENLEY had approached his man and touched a third button. The whirring began again. The creature extended its right hand toward Crawford, fingers straight, thumb lifted.

"He wishes to shake hands," said Menley.

Reluctantly Crawford accepted the offered fingers. They closed gently about his own. The glove that covered them was of a soft material, not unpleasant to the touch.

"That's the way you met me," said Menley. "A simple introduction. A clasping of hands in a casual way. But once your fingers touched mine, they hung on. They never let go. Like—"

Crawford's scream interrupted him. The hand that held his had contracted suddenly, crushing his fingers in a relentless grip.

"What the hell!" howled Crawford.

Menley's voice continued, even-toned, but with a determined ring in it as remorseless as the word of doom.

"Like the octopus I spoke of before, once you had me in your hands you surrounded me with the tentacles of your power. . . ."

Uncannily, as Menley spoke, his creature's left hand stretched out toward Crawford, who screamed and tried to draw away. But the right hand pulled him nearer and the left arm encircled his waist, dragging him into a close embrace. Crying now with fear, Crawford began to rain blows with his free left hand upon the creature's smiling face. But beneath the smile was an iron surface and in an instant Crawford's broken knuckles were streaming with his own blood.

Menley's voice continued:

"When I objected, when I struggled,

you crushed me. . . .”

The arm about Crawford’s waist contracted. Beads of sweat began to form on the victim’s brow.

“My own ideas,” said Menley, “my own plans, my inventive genius you strangled. . . .”

Again the creature’s arm tightened, bringing a horrid cry from between Crawford’s lips.

“For God’s sake!” he moaned. “Make him let me go!”

Menley shook his head.

“When I begged for freedom, you laughed at me, told me you were making me rich, famous. . . .”

“I will yet,” pleaded Crawford. “Only let me go and I’ll—”

“It’s too late,” said Menley. “You’ve had a thousand chances and you’ve turned them all down. Now you suffer as I suffered. I want you to know—”

He broke off suddenly. Crawford, desperate with fear, had formed a sudden resolution. His left arm and hand were free. That bright row of buttons on the creature’s breast controlled his actions. Without thought of consequences, Crawford began deliberately to push them, one after another.

“Don’t do that!” screamed Menley, leaping forward. But he was too late. Crawford’s action had brought instantaneous result. The whirring sound became a grinding of machinery at cross purposes. The creature,

still clutching Crawford to its breast, began a frenzied but ponderous dance, a quarter-ton of machinery running amuck.

Crawford, screaming terribly, was lifted high overhead. Borne thus, he was rushed to the nearest wall, against which the creature, without loosening his hold, dashed him with frightful force. The whole house shook.

Rebounding from the impact, the automaton began to run clumsily toward the open door. Menley tried to bar the way. He was only partially successful. The creature, with Crawford still in its arms, struck the door jamb a glancing blow, whirled and fell upon the wall cabinet, sweeping bottles and glasses together with itself and Crawford to a shattering heap upon the floor. It fell, breast down, with Crawford beneath it, rolled over halfway and lay supine, its painted face staring rapidly up at the white ceiling.

With a moaning cry, Menley dropped to his knees beside Crawford’s body.

“Wake up, wake up!” he begged, tugging at the mangled remains of his erstwhile master.

Then suddenly, horribly, he began to laugh. He laughed when the servants came, hours later, from the big house on the hill. He laughed as they took him away. He laughs still, but his laughter is heard only by those who have become hardened to it, calloused souls behind strong, walls to whom such laughter means—nothing.