

The Clockwork Boy

Pendleton Massachusetts, 1841

Gibby Rathersack had always been precocious. She was boisterous, feisty, and didn't back down from a fight. There were days where she would come home covered in dirt, her knuckles scraped and bloodied, and her hair a tangled mess. Most adults saw her and just looked the other way, thinking that Gibby, like so many of the ragamuffin children, had emerged from the alleyway to pick a pocket or beg for a copper or two. Those people couldn't see the diminutive form hiding in her shadow however, and most weren't willing to lower their nose long enough to care.

That is where so many figured Gibby wrong. She wasn't a girl spoiling for a fight, and she didn't particularly enjoy getting dirty either. In fact, there was only one thing that Gibby truly cared about, her little brother, Tinsley. Tinsley had been born when Gibby turned five, and from the moment he could walk, he followed her everywhere. There wasn't a thing Gibby wouldn't do for Tinsley, which explained the dirt, scrapes, and ratty hair. It didn't serve well to be small in Pendleton, especially in the woolen district, where the dog-eat-dog mentality of the poor and disenfranchised tended to mean that the strong preyed upon the weak, and well, no one appeared smaller and weaker than poor Tinsley.

Even at nine years of age, Tinsley was scrawny. His arms and legs were boney, and the small porkpie hat he wore could barely contain the unruly mop of reddish-brown hair. On this particular day in early October, Gibby and Tinsley were on their way to Meilleur Textile Works, where they worked, crawling the looms and spinners, and risking life and limb at the same time, for a few, measly copper.

"Da said If I can save up, I can ride the steam wheel down on harbor way!" Tinsley said excitedly as he kicked a can.

"You don't think..." Gibby started to argue, but cut herself off, wanting to save her little brother from the realization that their father would more likely drink away any money Tinsley brought home than take him to ride the steam wheel at harbor carnival. So she bit her tongue, smiled, and nodded. Tinsley's face brightened and he skipped forward once again.

They arrived at the mouth of the alley and instinctively Tinsley reached out and grabbed Gibby's hand. Together they dodged the busy traffic of Broad Street. They waited patiently as the gilded carriages rumbled by, the horses snorting and chomping away at their bridles as they passed.

Once they reached the safety of the alley Tinsley fell into step behind Gibby as usual, drifting into her shadow. He stuffed his hands into his pockets, and his face fell towards the ground. Gibby wondered what he was thinking about, considering that he spoke so little. He

hummed softly to himself, accentuating the melody of his tune with the scuffing of his shoes against the ground.

Gibby started to hum along with him, recognizing the tune from the brass whistles on the peanut cart that grumbled up and down Market Street. Gibby knew that Tinsley was fascinated with the cart, with its rolling pistons and hissing steam, it appeared as nothing less than a mechanical dragon spitting out savory and wonderfully salted peanuts to those who were brave enough to come near. She also knew that his fascination was fueled by his hunger. With cold, watery porridge at home, and stale bread and cheese at the mill, a delicacy like roasted peanuts presented as a delight to both of their senses.

“Come on Tin, kick to it, we don’t want to be caught late and locked out again,” Gibby said as she kicked her own trot into a jog.

“Okay, okay,” Tinsley muttered, and without removing his hands from his pockets, skipped along to keep pace.

Hand in hand, brother and sister cut into the crowd of Fair Weather Way. Gibby’s red pinafore dress and Tinsley’s blue jacket made them stand out amongst the sea of black overcoats and plaid shawls – they stood out in a place where it was better to blend in. The men and women continued forward, ignoring the two siblings as they knifed by. Most were headed to the mills and textile factories of the woolen quarter, while the others were destined for the processing and packing houses in the slaughter district. Gibby could tell them apart without looking. It was the smells the people couldn’t wash off that set them apart - the eye-stinging astringent of turpentine versus the twang and slightly sweet odor of the slaughter house’s gut troughs.

Gibby held tight to her brother’s hand, and pulled him forward, even when he became obscured by the crowd around them. Abruptly, she pulled him out of the way and followed a small group of women down a side street. She knew the street, and the group of women well enough. Mill Street, dominated by wool and cotton mills was as hazy as ever. White steam and coal smoke rolled overhead, belched into the air by a host of chimneys and steam pipes. The brick underfoot was still wet from the rain the night before and felt slimy from the choking coal dust. It felt as hazardous as ice beneath the smooth soles of Gibby’s shoes.

To their left the Milleneau Mill appeared, but as they turned the corner, Tinsley’s feet stopped moving, and for a moment, Gibby drug him forward. Then Gibby saw it too, and joined her brother in a moment of rapt awe.

Parked before the loading dock of the mill, and glistening in the early morning sun was the most bizarre construct Gibby had ever seen. It looked like a wagon, yet it was pulled by no horse or team. Its wheels were large, and its brass finely polished. Even as they watched, a man in a funny hat walked around the contraption, polishing the tank and pistons with a cloth, while squirting oil on levers and gears.

“What’s that Gibby?” Tinsley breathed next to her as he pawed at her dress.

“Never seen anything...” Gibby started to answer, but before she could finish, a group of women appeared behind them and shoed them forward.

Caught up in the crowd, Gibby and Tinsley were ushered alongside the strange hissing and clanking contraption, and through the large, rolling door of the mill.