

IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE

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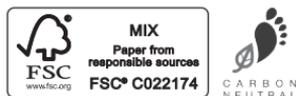
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*It Can't
Happen Here*

SINCLAIR LEWIS



RENARD PRESS

IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE

THE HANDSOME DINING ROOM of the Hotel Wessex, with its gilded plaster shields and the mural depicting the Green Mountains,* had been reserved for the Ladies' Night Dinner of the Fort Beulah Rotary Club.

Here in Vermont the affair was not so picturesque as it might have been on the Western prairies. Oh, it had its points: there was a skit in which Medary Cole (grist mill and feed store) and Louis Rotenstern (custom tailoring – pressing and cleaning) announced that they were those historic Vermonters, Brigham Young and Joseph Smith,* and with their jokes about imaginary plural wives they got in ever so many funny digs at the ladies present. But the occasion was essentially serious. All of America was serious now, after the seven years of depression since 1929. It was just long enough after the Great War of 1914–18 for the young people who had been born in 1917 to be ready to go to college... or to another war, almost any old war that might be handy.

The features of this night among the Rotarians were nothing funny – at least not obviously funny – for they were the patriotic addresses of Brigadier General Herbert Y. Edgeways, USA (ret.), who dealt angrily with the topic 'Peace through Defence – Millions for Arms But Not One Cent for Tribute', and of Mrs Adelaide Tarr Gimmitch – she who was no more renowned for her gallant anti-suffrage campaigning way back in 1919 than she was for having, during the Great War, kept the American soldiers entirely out of French cafés by the clever trick of sending them ten thousand sets of dominoes.

Nor could any social-minded patriot sneeze at her recent somewhat unappreciated effort to maintain the purity of the American

Home by barring from the motion-picture industry all persons, actors or directors or cameramen, who had: (a) ever been divorced; (b) been born in any foreign country – except Great Britain, since Mrs Gimmitch thought very highly of Queen Mary; or (c) declined to take an oath to revere the Flag, the Constitution, the Bible and all other peculiarly American institutions.

The Annual Ladies' Dinner was a most respectable gathering – the flower of Fort Beulah. Most of the ladies and more than half of the gentlemen wore evening clothes, and it was rumoured that before the feast the inner circle had had cocktails, privily served in Room 289 of the hotel. The tables, arranged on three sides of a hollow square, were bright with candles, cut-glass dishes of candy and slightly tough almonds, figurines of Mickey Mouse, brass Rotary wheels and small silk American flags stuck in gilded hard-boiled eggs. On the wall was a banner lettered 'Service Before Self', and the menu – the celery, cream of tomato soup, broiled haddock, chicken croquettes, peas and tutti-frutti ice cream – was up to the highest standards of the Hotel Wessex.

They were all listening, agape. General Edgeways was completing his manly yet mystical rhapsody on nationalism: '...For these U-nited States, a-lone among the great powers, have no desire for foreign conquest. Our highest ambition is to be darned well let alone! Our only gen-uine relationship to Europe is in our arduous task of having to try and educate the crass and ignorant masses that Europe has wished on to us up to something like a semblance of American culture and good manners. But, as I explained to you, we must be prepared to defend our shores against all the alien gangs of international racketeers that call themselves "governments", and that with such feverish envy are always eyeing our inexhaustible mines, our towering forests, our titanic and luxurious cities, our fair and far-flung fields.

'For the first time in all history, a great nation must go on arming itself more and more – not for conquest, not for jealousy, not for war, but for *peace*! Pray God it may never be necessary, but if foreign nations don't sharply heed our warning, there will, as when the

proverbial dragon's teeth were sowed, spring up an armed and fearless warrior upon every square foot of these United States, so arduously cultivated and defended by our pioneer fathers, whose sword-girded images we must be... or we shall perish!

The applause was cyclonic. 'Professor' Emil Staubmeyer, the superintendent of schools, popped up to scream, 'Three cheers for the General – hip, hip, hooray!'

All the audience made their faces to shine upon the General and Mr Staubmeyer – all save a couple of crank pacifist women, and one Doremus Jessup, editor of the Fort Beulah *Daily Informer*, locally considered 'a pretty smart fella but kind of a cynic', who whispered to his friend the Reverend Mr Falck, 'Our pioneer fathers did rather of a skimpy job in arduously cultivating some of the square feet in Arizona!'

The culminating glory of the dinner was the address of Mrs Adelaide Tarr Gimmitch, known throughout the country as 'the Unkies' Girl', because during the Great War she had advocated calling our boys in the AEF* 'the Unkies'. She hadn't merely given them dominoes; indeed, her first notion had been far more imaginative. She wanted to send to every soldier at the Front a canary in a cage. Think what it would have meant to them in the way of companionship and inducing memories of home and mother! A dear little canary! And who knows – maybe you could train 'em to hunt cooties!*

Seething with the notion, she got herself clear into the office of the Quartermaster General, but that stuffy machine-minded official refused her (or, really, refused the poor lads, so lonely there in the mud), muttering in a cowardly way some foolishness about lack of transport for canaries. It is said that her eyes flashed real fire, and that she faced the Jack-in-office like Joan of Arc with eyeglasses while she 'gave him a piece of her mind that *he* never forgot!'

In those good days women really had a chance. They were encouraged to send their menfolks, or anybody else's menfolks, off to war. Mrs Gimmitch addressed every soldier she met – and she saw to it that she met any of them who ventured within two blocks of her

– as ‘My own dear boy’. It is fabled that she thus saluted a colonel of marines who had come up from the ranks and who answered, ‘We own dear boys are certainly getting a lot of mothers these days. Personally, I’d rather have a few more mistresses.’ And the fable continues that she did not stop her remarks on the occasion, except to cough, for one hour and seventeen minutes, by the Colonel’s wristwatch.

But her social services were not all confined to prehistoric eras. It was as recently as 1935 that she had taken up purifying the films, and before that she had first advocated and then fought Prohibition.* She had also (since the vote had been forced on her) been a Republican Committeewoman in 1932, and sent to President Hoover daily a lengthy telegram of advice.*

And, though herself unfortunately childless, she was esteemed as a lecturer and writer about Child Culture, and she was the author of a volume of nursery lyrics, including the immortal couplet:

All of the Roundies are resting in rows,
With roundy-roundies around their toes.

But always, 1917 or 1936, she was a raging member of the Daughters of the American Revolution.*

The DAR (reflected the cynic, Doremus Jessup, that evening) is a somewhat confusing organisation – as confusing as Theosophy, Relativity or the Hindu Vanishing Boy Trick,* all three of which it resembles. It is composed of females who spend one half their waking hours boasting of being descended from the seditious American colonists of 1776, and the other and more ardent half in attacking all contemporaries who believe in precisely the principles for which those ancestors struggled.

The DAR (reflected Doremus) has become as sacrosanct, as beyond criticism, as even the Catholic Church or the Salvation Army. And there is this to be said: it has provided hearty and innocent laughter for the judicious, since it has contrived to be just as ridiculous as the unhappily defunct Ku Klux Klan, without any need of wearing, like the KKK, high dunces’ caps and public nightshirts.

So, whether Mrs Adelaide Tarr Gimmitch was called in to inspire military morale, or to persuade Lithuanian choral societies to begin their programme with ‘Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean’,* always she was a DAR, and you could tell it as you listened to her with the Fort Beulah Rotarians on this happy May evening.

She was short, plump and pert of nose. Her luxuriant grey hair (she was sixty now, just the age of the sarcastic editor, Doremus Jessup) could be seen below her youthful, floppy Leghorn hat; she wore a silk print dress with an enormous string of crystal beads, and pinned above her ripe bosom was an orchid among lilies of the valley. She was full of friendliness towards all the men present: she wriggled at them, she cuddled at them, as in a voice full of flute sounds and chocolate sauce she poured out her oration on ‘How You Boys Can Help Us Girls’.

Women, she pointed out, had done nothing with the vote. If the United States had only listened to her back in 1919 she could have saved them all this trouble. No. Certainly not. No votes. In fact, Woman must resume her place in the Home and: ‘As that great author and scientist, Mr Arthur Brisbane, has pointed out, what every woman ought to do is to have six children.’*

At this second there was a shocking, an appalling interruption.

One Lorinda Pike, widow of a notorious Unitarian preacher, was the manager of a country super-boarding-house that called itself The Beulah Valley Tavern. She was a deceptively Madonna-like, youngish woman, with calm eyes, smooth chestnut hair parted in the middle and a soft voice often coloured with laughter. But on a public platform her voice became brassy, her eyes filled with embarrassing fury. She was the village scold, the village crank. She was constantly poking into things that were none of her business, and at town meetings she criticised every substantial interest in the whole county: the electric company’s rates, the salaries of the schoolteachers, the Ministerial Association’s high-minded censorship of books for the public library. Now, at this moment when everything should have been all Service and Sunshine, Mrs Lorinda Pike cracked the spell by jeering: ‘Three cheers for

Brisbane! But what if a poor gal can't hook a man? Have her six kids out of wedlock?'

Then the good old war horse, Gimmitch, veteran of a hundred campaigns against subversive Reds, trained to ridicule out of existence the cant of Socialist hecklers and turn the laugh against them, swung into gallant action: 'My dear good woman, if a gal, as you call it, has any real charm and womanliness, she won't have to "hook" a man – she'll find 'em lined up ten deep on her doorstep!' (Laughter and applause.)

The lady hoodlum had merely stirred Mrs Gimmitch into noble passion. She did not cuddle at them now. She tore into it:

'I tell you, my friends, the trouble with this whole country is that so many are *selfish*! Here's a hundred and twenty million people, with ninety-five per cent of 'em only thinking of *self*, instead of turning to and helping the responsible businessmen to bring back prosperity! All these corrupt and self-seeking labour unions! Money grubbers! Thinking only of how much wages they can extort out of their unfortunate employer, with all the responsibilities he has to bear!

'What this country needs is Discipline! Peace is a great dream, but maybe sometimes it's only a pipe dream! I'm not so sure – now this will shock you, but I want you to listen to one woman who will tell you the unadulterated hard truth instead of a lot of sentimental taffy, and I'm not sure but that we need to be in a real war again, in order to learn Discipline! We don't want all this highbrow intellectuality, all this book-learning. That's good enough in its way, but isn't it, after all, just a nice toy for grown-ups? No, what we all of us must have, if this great land is going to go on maintaining its high position among the Congress of Nations, is Discipline – Willpower – Character!'

She turned prettily then towards General Edgeways and laughed: 'You've been telling us about how to secure peace, but come on, now, General – just among us Rotarians and Rotary Anns – fess up! With your great experience, don't you, honest, cross-your-heart, think that perhaps – just maybe – when a country has gone money-mad, like all our labour unions and workmen, with their propaganda to

hoist income taxes, so that the thrifty and industrious have to pay for the shiftless ne'er-do-weels, then maybe, to save their lazy souls and get some iron into them, a war might be a good thing? Come on, now, tell your real middle name, Mong General!

Dramatically she sat down, and the sound of clapping filled the room like a cloud of downy feathers. The crowd bellowed, 'Come on, General! Stand up!' and 'She's called your bluff – what you got?' or just a tolerant, 'Attaboy, Gen!'

The General was short and globular, and his red face was smooth as a baby's bottom and adorned with white-gold-framed spectacles. But he had the military snort and a virile chuckle.

'Well, sir!' he guffawed, on his feet, shaking a chummy forefinger at Mrs Gimmitch. 'Since you folks are bound and determined to drag the secrets out of a poor soldier, I better confess that while I do abhor war, yet there are worse things. Ah, my friends, far worse! A state of so-called peace, in which labour organisations are riddled, as by plague germs, with insane notions out of anarchistic Red Russia! A state in which college professors, newspapermen and notorious authors are secretly promulgating these same seditious attacks on the grand old Constitution! A state in which, as a result of being fed with these mental drugs, the People are flabby, cowardly, grasping and lacking in the fierce pride of the warrior! No, such a state is far worse than war at its most monstrous!

'I guess maybe some of the things I said in my former speech were kind of a little bit obvious and what we used to call "old hat" when my brigade was quartered in England. About the United States only wanting peace, and freedom from all foreign entanglements. No! What I'd really like us to do would be to come out and tell the whole world: "Now you boys never mind about the moral side of this. We have power, and power is its own excuse!"

'I don't altogether admire everything Germany and Italy have done, but you've got to hand it to 'em, they've been honest enough and realistic enough to say to the other nations, "Just tend to your own business, will you? We've got strength and will, and for whomever has those divine qualities it's not only a right, it's a *duty*, to use

'em!" Nobody in God's world ever loved a weakling – including that weakling himself!

'And I've got good news for you! This gospel of clean and aggressive strength is spreading everywhere in this country among the finest type of youth. Why, today, in 1936, there's less than seven per cent of collegiate institutions that do not have military training units under discipline as rigorous as the Nazis, and where once it was forced upon them by the authorities, now it is the strong young men and women who themselves demand the *right* to be trained in warlike virtues and skill – for, mark you, the girls, with their instruction in nursing and the manufacture of gas masks and the like, are becoming every whit as zealous as their brothers. And all the really *thinking* type of professors are right with 'em!

'Why, here, as recently as three years ago, a sickeningly big percentage of students were blatant pacifists, wanting to knife their own native land in the dark. But now, when the shameless fools and the advocates of Communism try to hold pacifist meetings – why, my friends, in the past five months, since the 1st of January, no less than seventy-six such exhibitionistic orgies have been raided by their fellow students, and no less than fifty-nine disloyal Red students have received their just deserts by being beaten up so severely that never again will they raise in this free country the bloodstained banner of anarchism! That, my friends, is NEWS!'

As the General sat down, amid ecstasies of applause, the village troublemaker, Mrs Lorinda Pike, leaped up and again interrupted the love feast: 'Look here, Mr Edgeways, if you think you can get away with this sadistic nonsense without—'

She got no further. Francis Tasbrough, the quarry owner, the most substantial industrialist in Fort Beulah, stood grandly up, quieted Lorinda with an outstretched arm, and rumbled in his Jerusalem-the-Golden basso, 'A moment please, my dear lady! All of us here locally have got used to your political principles. But as chairman, it is my unfortunate duty to remind you that General Edgeways and Mrs Gimmitch have been invited by the club to

address us, whereas you, if you will excuse my saying so, are not even related to any Rotarian, but merely here as the guest of the Reverend Falck, than whom there is no one whom we more honour. So, if you will be so good... Ah, I thank you, madame!’

Lorinda Pike had slumped into her chair with her fuse still burning. Mr Francis Tasbrough (it rhymed with ‘low’) did not slump; he sat like the Archbishop of Canterbury on the archiepiscopal throne.

And Doremus Jessup popped up to soothe them all, being an intimate of Lorinda, and having, since milkiest boyhood, chummed with and detested Francis Tasbrough.

This Doremus Jessup, publisher of the *Daily Informer*, for all that he was a competent businessman and a writer of editorials not without wit and good New England earthiness, was yet considered the prime eccentric of Fort Beulah. He was on the school board, the library board, and he introduced people like Oswald Garrison Villard, Norman Thomas and Admiral Byrd* when they came to town lecturing.

Jessup was a littlish man, skinny, smiling, well tanned, with a small grey moustache, a small and well-trimmed grey beard – in a community where to sport a beard was to confess oneself a farmer, a Civil War* veteran or a Seventh Day Adventist. Doremus’s detractors said that he maintained the beard just to be ‘highbrow’ and ‘different’, to try to appear ‘artistic’. Possibly they were right. Anyway, he skipped up now and murmured: ‘Well, all the birdies in their nest agree. My friend, Mrs Pike, ought to know that freedom of speech becomes mere licence when it goes so far as to criticise the Army, differ with the DAR and advocate the rights of the Mob. So, Lorinda, I think you ought to apologise to the General, to whom we should be grateful for explaining to us what the ruling classes of the country really want. Come on now, my friend – jump up and make your excuses.’

He was looking down on Lorinda with sternness, yet Medary Cole, president of Rotary, wondered if Doremus wasn’t ‘kidding’ them. He had been known to. Yes – no – he must be wrong, for Mrs Lorinda Pike was (without rising) carolling, ‘Oh yes! I do apologise, General! Thank you for your revelatory speech!’