


The Mouse That Saved The West



a novel
by

**Leonard
Wibberley**

author of
The Mouse That Roared



SUPERVEO

~~The True and Secret History of How the World Oil Crisis Was Solved by the Duchy of Grand
Fenwick ...~~

or

THE MOUSE THAT SAVED THE WEST

Leonard Wibberley

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I have examined this manuscript thoroughly and affirm that the facts related therein are as accurate as those in any other history I have read.

Vincent,
Count of Mountjoy
the castle,
Duchy of Grand Fenwick

CHAPTER

1

The Count of Mountjoy, deep in thought, was lying on a huge couch in his bedroom in the castle of Grand Fenwick examining the ceiling. The ceiling was decorated in a design of red lions, white unicorns and yellow roses. It was the work of one Derek or Dennis of Pirenne (1400-circa 1467), who had died in some chivalric scuffle with a knight of Vignon over a lady of quality. The exact date of his death seemed to have been deliberately obscured to protect his slayer or some other secret.

The ceiling was twenty feet above the floor, which Mountjoy regarded as reasonable, for he was a man of extensive vision. As a boy he had loved to lie on the same couch when the bedroom was his father's and indulge his fantasies among the lions and unicorns and roses. He dreamed, then, of knights and maidens, and the glint of armor in a wintry sun and the ancient shout "a Mountjoy! a Mountjoy!" with which his forefathers had rallied the little army of Grand Fenwick around the banner of the double-headed eagle, when courage ebbed and men's hearts needed lifting up again.

Now, a grown man, indeed an almost venerable man, prime minister of the tiny Duchy of Grand Fenwick, tucked into a fold of the Alps between France and Switzerland, he had the same fancies. He regarded himself as the guardian and protector of Grand Fenwick, founded by the first duke, Roger Fenwick, in 1370, by the unanswerable logic of a broadsword and fifty English bowmen determined to carve a nation for themselves out of the welter of European dukedoms. Yes, the protector of the nation now six hundred years old, and all its traditions. More than that, the protector of the traditions of Europe itself and thus of all Western civilization.

He was certainly the oldest living statesman in Europe. He had served his gracious lady, Gloriana XII, for thirty years and her father for thirty before. He was, he supposed, eighty years of age, though this did not seem in the slightest degree possible. Still he could remember from his boyhood the Great War and later the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the Korean War. (He had warned President Truman in a letter that confrontation was inevitable under the peace treaty which had disarmed Japan. In return he had received a photograph of the President, with written at the bottom, the words "Like hell—Harry.") He'd seen the Vietnam War and the Laotian war and the Cambodian war and he regarded all these wars as the work of bunglers who had come to think of themselves as statesmen.

Reflectively examining the ceiling it occurred to him that Derek of Pirenne had put more into his work than he, Mountjoy, had previously seen. He decided to look more closely into the man and his history. The design was obviously symbolic. The graceful white unicorns represented statesmen, educated, refined, intellectual minds attacked, but never destroyed, by the aggressive, unthinking lions. The entwining roses were the flowers and riches of civilization for which the two contending powers fought. Fanciful, perhaps, and yet there was something solid in the interpretation.

The Tompion clock which stood by a lancet window of the vast bedchamber struck three and Mountjoy pulled the bell cord which dangled beside his huge fourposter bed. Then he wandered into his study in the adjoining chamber and sat at his desk. The mail, which came by bus (nothing in the world would persuade the French postal authorities that diplomatic mail to Grand Fenwick should be sent by special conveyance) would be delivered at any moment.

It was collected at the border by Bill Treadwick, the postmaster, who then rode his bicycle with it to the castle, for delivery to Mountjoy.

Treadwick was getting a bit old, and the distance of something over two miles was mostly uphill. The journey took him about an hour and sometimes longer, for he was not above stopping at the Grey Goose, the only tavern in Grand Fenwick, for a pint of beer, or, on Saturdays, a glass of wine.

Once he had left an important cablegram for Mountjoy on the taproom bar and half the nation had known of its contents before it was finally delivered to the Prime Minister. The memory irked Mountjoy deeply, for it had been a key event in the chain of unlucky chance which had brought about the downfall of President Nixon.

The matter is worth a brief note to set the chronicle of those unhappy times straight. In the midst of the crisis, which Mountjoy had decided to ignore as part of the astonishing naivete of Americans in political affairs, the hot water system in the castle had broken down. The system had been installed at American expense as an essential part of the peace treaty between the United States and Grand Fenwick bringing an end to the war between the two nations which Grand Fenwick had won, the details of which are recorded elsewhere.¹

Before the installation of the American hot water system, the water for Mountjoy's bath had had to be heated in the kitchen several floors below and brought up in buckets, by which time it was no longer hot but tepid. The American water heater was, then, for Mountjoy, an important part of the treaty of peace. When the system broke down, Mountjoy immediately cabled Nixon, "Send plumbers."

The harassed President, thinking he was receiving advice concerning White House leaks, had gratefully cabled Mountjoy, "Thank you for your wise advice. Have started plumbing operation. Anticipate happiest results here. Pat sends her love. Ever yours. Dick." He had then launched the secret investigation into the affairs of Ellsberg and others which rebounded so horribly against him.

It was this cablegram which had lain on the taproom bar of the Grey Goose for several days before delivery to Mountjoy. By the time he received it and realized that the President had utterly mistaken his request as a piece of advice concerning his own domestic troubles, the damage was already done and the White House had begun to topple.

The daily mail delivery, then, was a time of anxiety for the Count of Mountjoy; a time when his patience was sorely tried and a time when he was often indignant that the affairs of the nation should be so frequently in the hands of an aging postman.

On this particular day the mail, when it arrived, contained little of note—a letter from a lady in Chicago who had lost a pair of shoes, size seven, while visiting the castle of Grand Fenwick, and was appealing to Mountjoy to find them for her, all other appeals having failed; a circular advertising the sale of three racehorses in Ireland and an airmail copy of the London *Times*, three days out of date thanks to the French, and a short handwritten note from Benjamin Rustin, Secretary of the Interior of the United States, which read:

Dear Al:

The full impact of the energy crisis is something we are going to have to face eventually, but

view of the political situation we are not playing it up until after the elections. You understand of course how the sins of previous administrations are always blamed on the incumbent and it is the consensus here that the only way to duck is to adopt a position of calm and confidence. But we have to have a plan eventually on which as you may imagine many experts in my department are working. We will not propose anything that might be hurtful in your many areas without first consulting you. In the meantime if there is anything you can do to make us look good as the crisis looms, we'll all be grateful.

Benjy.

The Count of Mountjoy read through this letter twice before concluding that he had been perhaps too hard on the postal service of France and the postal service of the United States was not, in the words of Katherine, his seven-year-old great-grandchild, winning any Brownie points. Then he examined the envelope and realized that the error had nothing to do with the postal service but was the fault of some clerk on the staff of the United States Minister for the Interior. The envelope was plainly addressed to him. In short, Al, whoever he was, had received a letter intended for the Duchy of Grand Fenwick, and he had received this missive with a hint at least of political chicanery intended for the mysterious Al.

This was worrying. The letter for him would obviously be on a matter of importance entrusted to the State Department which did not want to be found in direct correspondence with Grand Fenwick, or the Department of the Interior. So Mountjoy reasoned, for he had years of experience in the deviousness of intergovernmental correspondence. The note dealt with a sensitive matter, then, one in which secrecy was essential. Now Al, whoever he was, knew all about it and he, Mountjoy, had only this piece of blather about the energy crisis in compensation.

"Damnation," he cried. "The world is full of blunderers and there is a rising tide of carelessness everywhere, the finest product of the modern system of education, which will sweep us all into the dark ages." He reached for the telephone to call Henry Thatcher, the U.S. Secretary of State, holding that he was certainly the person who should be told of this miscarriage of correspondence. Direct dialing not yet having reached Grand Fenwick, he gave the number to the Grand Fenwick operator who gave it to the French operators, who gave it to the international operator. The message would be bounced off a communications satellite in some manner which Mountjoy could not understand and with which he disagreed in principle as belittling the function of the heavens.

After a brief silence he heard a ringing tone and then a voice came on the line that said, "I am sorry. The number you have called is no longer in service. Please consult your latest directory or ask your operator for assistance."

"Idiot!" cried Mountjoy. "I'm calling the United States of America. Are you going to tell me that is no longer in service?" He hung up and tried again, but this time all the lines were busy. There were eight telephone lines in Grand Fenwick. Two lines were supposed to be reserved at all times for Mountjoy's use. But the operators were easygoing and democratic by nature. They thought it no sin to allow others to use the reserved lines when there was a flood of calls.

Mountjoy, after several futile attempts to get a free line, put the telephone down and stared at the wall. The world, he was aware, was full of incompetents—the result of cruelly attempting to educate the lower classes beyond their ability. There was an easygoing camaraderie among these allowing little or no respect for those in authority or of superior knowledge.

At that moment Meadows, his butler, appeared, answering the summons on the bell pull with a tray on which there gleamed a silver teapot in the Regency style, a silver milk jug, a silver sugar bowl with sugar tongs in the form of eagles' claws, and two Royal Doulton teacups and saucers.

Mountjoy glanced at the two teacups and then at Meadows, who put the tray down on a low table and said, "Her Grace has signified a desire to visit you for a cup of tea, sir."

Mountjoy was touched and at the same time a trifle mortified. It was gracious of his sovereign lady, Gloriana XII of Grand Fenwick, to leave her own chambers to have tea with him, gracious and keeping with her character. But he was mortified by the thought that she had been coming to have tea with him more and more frequently in recent months, and this might be because she thought him a trifle old and not up to the task of walking up the two flights of stairs to visit her in her own quarters.

"Excellent," he said. "Orange pekoe, I trust."

"Yes, my lord," said Meadows, "but Her Grace has recently been drinking plain Lipton's—in a tea bag."

"Good God," cried Mountjoy. "Is she sick?"

"No, my lord," replied Meadows. "Quite well."

"That's the influence of Bentner," growled Mountjoy. "The fellow has been drinking plain Lipton out of tea bags for years, and his mind has become increasingly sluggish as a result." David Bentner, a mere whippersnapper of sixty-four, was the founder of the Grand Fenwick Labor Party and leader, at the present time, of Her Grace's Loyal Opposition in the Parliament of Grand Fenwick—the Council of Freemen.

Her Grace entered alone. She was wearing an afternoon gown of some flowered material and looked to Mountjoy like a girl of perhaps seventeen—with a fresh loveliness which had never deserted her through the years. She was in fact in her mid-forties, though still acknowledged one of the ruling beauties of Europe.

"Your servant," said Mountjoy, rising to meet her.

"Bobo," replied Gloriana, "when you say that I still got a little quiver. Did you see the movie about Disraeli and Victoria? Do you think he was really in love with her?"

"Service is love, Your Grace," said Mountjoy quietly, "and in that sense I am sure that Disraeli loved Victoria as much as I have loved Your Grace for thirty years."

"You're such a darling, Bobo," said Gloriana. "Remember, you used to take me for picnics when I was a child? I never told you before but when I was little and the wind was blowing and making a horrible noise around the Jerusalem Tower of the castle, near my bedroom, I used to imagine you standing guard at the end of my bed and it made me feel quite safe."

"You were a pretty child, Your Grace," said Mountjoy, "as you are now a beautiful woman." Another matter, the remarriage of the Duchess, who had been a widow now for ten years, presented itself, but he pushed the question aside. The mood was wrong and the timing too. He dismissed Meadows and

with a thin and aristocratic hand reached for the teapot.

"I'll pour," Gloriana said. "Did you stir it?"

"No," Mountjoy replied. "It's Grey's orange pekoe. It should never be stirred since stirring releases suspicion of tannin, which crushes the delicate flavor."

"Oh," said Gloriana. "Sorry. Lipton's isn't bad when you get used to it and it costs very much less."

"The money cost may be less," Mountjoy said. "The cost to so delicate a palate as yours is hardly to be borne. Pray, Your Grace, why do you touch such a mixture?"

"We have to economize," Gloriana said. "Bentner says so and I think he's right, you know. It's something to do with the energy shortage, which everybody seems to think is going to get worse. If you use Lipton's in a tea bag, you need only one cup of boiling water and that saves on fuel. Bentner gave me some figures to show that if everyone switched to tea bags, instead of using loose orange pekoe or something grand in pots, the world saving in energy cost in ten years would amount to the total output of the sun for half a day. Something like that."

"And the death of millions from indigestion," said Mountjoy. "Bentner's a fool. You can, as I have often told Your Grace, recognize a fool by the fact that he always argues from statistics. Statistics, at best, may give us a rough picture of things as they are at the moment. But they are utterly unreliable as a basis for reasoning, for they make the unwarrantable assumption that the proportions and desires of the past will be the proportions and desires of the future. It is fallacious to assume that you can learn anything about humanity from statistics. Two lumps of sugar, if I may."

Gloriana dutifully put the two lumps of sugar in his cup and watched with how steady a hand he took it from her. Mountjoy had always distrusted statistics. There was a quality in the Count of Mountjoy which was at constant odds with the cold logic of calculators, a quality which made him champion of humanity with all its errors, against the rigid rules of science.

"Bobo," Gloriana said, "what is this energy talk all about? Is it something that is going to affect us here in Grand Fenwick?"

Mountjoy took a judicious sip of his tea, delighted that the subtle flavor of the orange pekoe found its perfect counterpart in the two lumps of sugar. He put his cup down with a steady hand and said, "It's a sort of international bogeyman which has been raising its head for the past fifteen years or more and has been ignored by everyone as being politically and economically too hot to handle. It dates at least from the better days of President Nixon, who once rather foolishly assured the United States that America had no real need of oil from the Arabian countries and could get along quite well without it. That was a highly popular statement at the time though quite without foundation.

"The truth is that America, doing all it could for the state of Israel, and rightly too, happened at the time to have all its energy eggs in an Arabian basket. Now they have to look around for some different eggs or face mounting prices and a possible serious shortage of oil."

"It's serious then," Gloriana said. "All those people over there riding bicycles and jogging through the streets—is that part of it?"

"No," Mountjoy said, "that is part of the American dream of eternal youth. Americans will have nothing at all to do with the wisdom and serenity of age. But then, after all, they are a very young nation, scarcely two hundred years old."

"Well, Bentner thinks that it is going to affect everybody," said the Duchess. "He says it's going to produce an enormous rise in the cost of living and it may bring about a huge depression—the collapse of society as we know it now' was the phrase he used."

"In my lifetime," said Mountjoy, "I've lived through four or five collapses of society and the only one that really bothered me was the disappearance of the horse. The automobile is not an adequate substitute."

"But Your Grace should not be concerned. I have the matter well before me and propose to get in touch with the United States on the subject. As Your Grace well knows, there have been several occasions in the past when we in Grand Fenwick have been able to put to rights matters which seemed beyond the competence of greater nations."

When she had left, Mountjoy remained for a long time thinking about Bentner, the energy crisis and the misdirected letter which lay on the table before him. The energy crisis was one he had been long aware was coming, though in the United States it was apparent that the political implications were more immediately worrying to the administration than the unavoidable economic impact.

Grand Fenwick, which scarcely used any oil energy at all, would hardly be affected. Still Grand Fenwick had a duty to the world and to its close ally, the United States of America. He must think of some plan for avoiding the crisis and present it at the proper moment. The enormity of the project cheered him immediately and he poured himself another cup of orange pekoe as a sort of celebration.

CHAPTER

2

The Al for whom the misdirected letter to the Count of Mountjoy had been intended was Alfonso Birelli, Chairman of the Board of Transcontinental Enterprises, a conglomerate whose holdings and interests included shipping, airlines, steel, railroads, real estate, electronics, three publishing houses, twenty television stations and Pentex Oil, a mammoth producing, refining, importing and distributing company; the largest in fact in the world.

Physically he was of a size to match his position—a tall gray wolf of a man, big-boned, with a lean face, cold as frost, though capable now and then of a glint of humor. He was fond of saying that he had come up the hard way, for his father had been a millionaire and his grandfather too.

"To be born wealthy is a crippling, handicap, which only the toughest survive," he said. "My whole life has been devoted to proving that I am not just the mentally impotent son of a rich man." He had proven it abundantly, over and over again, but those who thought of him as merely a financial and industrial wizard now completely misunderstood him. He was instead a warrior, a fighter, a lover of hazard and of battle; a man who would risk everything to gain his end; and the various companies over which he ruled were a testament to how well his daring had served him. They were for him the spoils of war in which he was always more daring than his enemies.

His name, even his existence, was quite unknown to the American public at large. Indeed there were many newsmen in the higher strata of press, television and radio who had never heard of him.

Those at the very top were aware of Alfonso Birelli merely as a Power.

It was rumored that he had close connections with the Mafia and it was also said that he had close connections with the White House, but this in a sense belittled him.

It would be more true to say that the Mafia and the White House even had some close connections with Alfonso Birelli, for he had enough muscle to do favors, when he wished, for both. Nor did it matter to him who at any particular time occupied the White House or was the nation's chief Godfather. Whoever they might be, there would come a time when they would need support from Alfonso Birelli.

It was in keeping with his lone-wolf character that he occupied no luxurious suite of offices but conducted his business from two rooms, furnished in the fashion of the nineteen-thirties, on the twentieth floor of a venerable building on Wall Street.

There were a desk, a swivel chair, a few filing cabinets and a secretary, Miss Thompson, a woman in her late fifties—plump, sweet and motherly, and hard as a stainless steel nail. She handled all his telephone calls, all his mail and all his appointments. She alone knew where he was at all times and she alone knew who might speak to him and who might not.

Miss Thompson was surprised, then, one morning, in opening his mail, to find a letter from the Secretary of the Interior, announcing a meeting of American vintners and inviting him to send a representative.

She glanced quickly at the top of the letter, found that it was addressed to the Count of Mountjoy, ~~Duchy of Grand Fenwick, and threw it in the wastepaper basket.~~

Then she reflected that there actually was a Duchy of Grand Fenwick and that the Duchy of Grand Fenwick had on several occasions in the past made a not inconsiderable mark on the United States of America and world history.

She glanced at the envelope, which was addressed to Alfonso Birelli, and realized that a mistake had been made.

Any mistake which involved her employer might have, she knew, serious consequences, so she retrieved the letter from the wastepaper basket, put it with the half dozen other communications she had decided should be brought to his attention and glanced at the electric coffeepot on a shelf beside her small desk.

It was perking briskly. Alfonso Birelli liked a mug of piping-hot coffee brought in with his mail. She poured out the coffee, put the mug on a tray with the letters and took them in to him, first giving the connecting door a gentle kick with her foot, which was her way of announcing her presence.

"Morning," said Birelli without glancing up. "Cancel that seat on the Concorde to Paris. Tell Mr. Hastings that I'm not going and buy a thousand shares of Etienne et Cie. They'll be down a point and a half when word gets around. What have you got that's funny?"

"Funny" was his word for important, and she gave him the selected mail, with the Grand Fenwick letter on the bottom. He glanced through the letters and without the slightest exchange of expression read the Grand Fenwick communication to which the envelope was pinned.

"Son of a bitch," he said thoughtfully, looking from the envelope to the letter. "This means that the Count of Mountjoy has got hold of some communication intended for me. The last person in the world I want knowing anything about my business is Mountjoy. That guy's either the smartest statesman since Machiavelli or the biggest fool ever to hold public office. I've never been able to decide which."

"It's from the Department of the Interior," said Miss Thompson somewhat unnecessarily. "Shall I call the Secretary, explain the situation, and ask him what his letter was about?"

"Get him on the phone," said Birelli grimly. "I'll speak to him myself."

When the call was put through he picked up the phone and said "Benjy? Al here. You know anything? I don't give a hang about attending a meeting of the nation's wine growers. Now what else did you have in mind?"

With such an introduction it took a little while before the Secretary of the Interior grasped the situation, apologized for the error and said his note had contained a reference to the energy crisis, the low profile the government was going to assume on the matter, to the fact that many were working on plans to soften or avert the crisis when the full extent of the oil shortage became known to the public, that nothing would be done without his first being consulted, and concluded with a request that he lend whatever help he could to the administration when the time arrived.

"As far as covering up," snapped Birelli on hearing this, "you're about four innings behind in the ball game right now. Mountjoy knows the contents of that letter and he's probably leaked it to half a dozen chancelleries right at this moment."

"I hardly think so," said the Secretary. "He's not what I would call a prime source of news of international importance among the governments of Europe."

"Listen," said Birelli. "Anything to do with oil, oil prices, oil shortages—anything at all—including U.S. government concern about oil—hurts me where I'm very sensitive. Right now I don't want the full facts about the energy crisis to become public any more than the President does. In fact, I can't think of a time when I would be willing to let the facts be known to the public. I've already outlined four plans of my own for dealing with the situation when it arises, but now I have to take them under consideration that Mountjoy has been alerted to the coming crisis. Maybe it will mean nothing to him." He paused while he thought of all he knew of Mountjoy and Grand Fenwick. "Maybe it might even be helpful," he said softly, as Plan Number Five began to take shape in his active mind.

"What might be helpful?" asked the Secretary of the Interior.

"Never mind," said Birelli. "Just bear this in mind. I'm going to be able to handle the crisis myself without any of your boys from the nation's law schools screwing things up, provided nobody announces that there is a crisis. A crisis is only a crisis when somebody in authority calls it a crisis. Get that around to the presidential staff, too, will you? If they don't understand it, tell them to start reading a book called *The Prince* by Machiavelli. We've avoided three depressions in the last twenty years by calling them recessions and we can do the same with this oil shortage provided nobody blows the whistle.

'Anyway, leave it to me. I'll handle it and Mountjoy as well. Just stick to the low-profile idea and hire somebody over there who has brains enough to put the right letters in the right envelopes."

With that he hung up and took a huge sip of his coffee, no longer boiling hot, his mind busy with Mountjoy, the Duchy of Grand Fenwick and the oil crisis. He canceled all his appointments for the day, told Miss Thompson not to put any phone calls through to him, and by three o'clock in the afternoon he put through a telephone call to France. When the call was concluded and Miss Thompson, in answer to his summons, entered his office to take some dictation, she noted a glint of smile in his eyes, and knew that he had launched a plan which pleased him well and would have tremendous impact upon the world.

The Duchy of Grand Fenwick's oil consumption was the lowest in the whole of Europe, for the tiny nation had no factories, no railroads, no buses, no airplanes, a very small power station and but two automobiles—a Daimler belonging to Her Grace which she used for occasional shopping trips to France or Switzerland, and a Rolls-Royce which Mountjoy had inherited from his father. The Daimler dated from 1947 and the Rolls, a superb Silver Ghost, from 1927. Whenever Gloriana wanted to move about in Grand Fenwick, she walked or rode her bicycle, and Mountjoy walked also, though recently finding himself a trifle stiff, he was sometimes chauffeured around in the Rolls.

Some days after receiving the letter intended for Birelli, Mountjoy decided to go for a drive in the Rolls both to get some air and to call on Bentner, who lived in a small cottage close to the French frontier three miles from the castle.

Bentner, though he had made a considerable fortune from his sheep and his vineyards which together with the others of the Duchy produced that noble wine, Pinot Grand Fenwick, insisted on living in this humble dwelling, which was lit by oil lamps and where all the cooking was done on a woodburning range. This was in keeping with his position as founder of the Grand Fenwick Labor Party.

He took a weekly bath in a huge tin tub with water heated on the same range, and he always took the bath in the kitchen, ordering everybody out. Then, with the fire glowing and the water deliciously heated, he stepped into his vast tin tub—pink, fat and a trifle wrinkled—and luxuriated for forty minutes or more. Sometimes he fell asleep in the tub, and Mrs. Marsden, his housekeeper, failing to wake him by hammering on the door, would have to come in and rouse him, naked and rosy, fat and content.

When this had happened half a dozen times, Bentner married her as being the decent thing to do in the circumstances. After their marriage he still called her Mrs. Marsden and she still called him Mr. Bentner. They had borne those names too long to change. But they had a sort of pudding love for each other—quiet and comfortable and based on deep mutual respect.

Mountjoy thought Bentner a fool, though he was fond of him. "He has the brain of a somnolent oyster," he once said, but he knew that there was in Bentner and his followers in the Labor Party a kind of plodding sense essential to the political structure of Grand Fenwick.

Mountjoy was not an autocrat. He was a democrat in that true sense of the word which permits the aristocracy and the commonalty to staunchly champion their own viewpoints without despising each other. The Church, of course, stood patiently neutral, properly calling upon God to bless both sides. "A tolerance of which only God is capable," as Abbot Ambrose, of the tiny monastery lodged in the equally tiny forest of Grand Fenwick, pointed out.

There was but one gasoline pump in Grand Fenwick to serve the two automobiles of the Duchy. It was operated by Bert Green, who ran the bicycle shop in the village and added to his living by grazing twenty plump sheep on a mountainside pasture. He sold a few new bicycles, mostly around Christmas, and all of them of English manufacture—Raleighs, BSAs and Rudge-Whitworths for the most part.

Mountjoy then called for his Rolls and, putting on his motoring cap and greatcoat and gloves, descended to the courtyard. He told the chauffeur to drive him to Bentner's place and the chauffeur, touching his cap, said he would have to stop in the village for petrol. He coasted the car down through the village street to Bert Green's bicycle shop and stopped before the old-fashioned, hand-operated gasoline pump.

"Fill her up," the chauffeur said to Bert and Bert looked at the pump and at the Rolls, took a stub of cigarette out of the corner of his mouth and crushed it slowly on the ground.

"Can't," he said. "There's only five gallons in the bottom of the sump. A lot of that's water and the pump can't reach it."

"What happened?" asked the chauffeur. "Sump leaking?"

"Nope," said Bert. "Bloomin' Frogs have cut us down to twenty gallons a month, and I put fifteen

Her Grace's Daimler day before yesterday. No more coming for a fortnight."

"And pray," said Mountjoy, who had overheard the exchange, "why are we to have only twenty gallons of petrol a month in Grand Fenwick?"

Bert shrugged. "Search me," he said. He went into the bicycle shop, rummaged in a drawer near the cash register where he kept bills, receipts, pencil stubs and a few tools, and came out with a grubby piece of paper. "Chap who came with the delivery truck gave me this. It's in French so I didn't read it. He handed Mountjoy a sheet of green paper with some italic printing on it, and some blank space filled in by hand in purple ink. Mountjoy glanced at the sheet. It was headed:

Compagnie Internationale des Produits Mazout Francais

The text read:

Nous sommes obliges de vous aviser qu'à cause de la situation internationale regardant la provision des produits mazout, il est nécessaire de limiter sévèrement la distribution de l'essence. En conséquence une quote-part a été instituée et le lotissement de Bert Green a Grande Fenwick a été fixé a quatre-vingt litres chaque mois.

Charles Dupleixes President C.I.P.M.F.

The signature was rubber-stamped.

"When did you get this?" demanded Mountjoy.

"Last delivery—couple of weeks ago."

Mountjoy swallowed hard and was for the moment speechless. It was an outrage that he, the Prime Minister of a sovereign and independent nation, should be informed by a gasoline-station attendant that the supply of gasoline to his country was to be almost entirely cut off.

The thing was beyond bearing, and it cut deeper that he received the news on a printed form letter with a rubber-stamp signature. He would instantly send a telegram to the President of the French Republic couched in such terms as to have this fellow Dupleixes imprisoned in whatever the French now used as a substitute for the Bastille.

Meanwhile the chauffeur and Bert stood looking at him patiently and a horrible thought occurred to the Count.

"What about the fuel oil for heating my bath?" he asked. It came from the same supplier.

"Sent the last ten gallons up to the castle yesterday," said Bert. "Should last a week. Looks like we're not going to get any more."

"Damnation," cried Mountjoy. "The government of the United States of America is obliged, under treaty approved by their own Senate, to supply me with hot water in perpetuum. This is an outrage. I shall not stand for it."

He had dismounted to inspect the letter Bert had produced and he now got back into the Rolls and slammed the door.

"Drive on," he said to the chauffeur.

"Can't," the chauffeur replied. "We're out of gas."

CHAPTER

3

Grand Fenwick, then, became the first country in the world to feel at one blow the full effect of the energy shortage with Mountjoy reduced again to one bath a week, his bath water having to be heated on the woodburning kitchen stove below and brought up several flights of stairs as in previous years.

The twenty gallons of gasoline permitted under the French quota allowed the Duchess in her Daimler and Mountjoy in his Rolls to drive between them a total of eighty miles per month.

Mountjoy, true to his word, immediately sent off a strong letter of protest to the President of the French Republic and to the President of the United States.

From the first he received no reply.

From the second he received, after some while, a short note signed by Kurt Hannigan, Executive Assistant to the President, assuring him that every effort was being made to increase oil production in the United States but adding that the situation in the Near East, coupled with the vastly expanding use of oil for fuel, made any immediate hope of relief improbable.

This was followed by a pamphlet from the Department of the Interior on how to insulate a house in order to cut down heating costs, emphasizing that the expenditure involved was deductible from income tax.

"Damn fools," exclaimed Mountjoy when he received the latter. "How do they expect me to insulate a castle? And what effect would stuffing the roof with some kind of artificial sponge rubber have on the temperature of my bath water? They've been bungling for years and we in Grand Fenwick are the first victims of their inspired incompetence. I insist that the terms of our peace treaty with the United States be carried out to the letter. I insist on my hot bath. I shall write again."

"I don't think it's the United States," said Bentner, to whom Mountjoy had been fulminating. "The Americans are nice people. Just a bit too trusting. It's them Arabs. They're the ones holding up the oil supply, creating a shortage and hoping for a rise in price. Supposing we were to send twenty longbowmen over there like when we invaded New York and capture a couple of oil wells for ourselves. Maybe even a refinery."

"Good Lord, Bentner," Mountjoy exclaimed. "Do you think we are back in the time of the Crusades with the Arabs riding around on camels dressed in flowing robes and armed with small shields and lances? Don't you realize that the Arab nations at the present time probably have an air force and an armament of modern weapons, including rockets, sufficient to challenge Great Britain?"

Bentner considered this for a while and shook his head. "Where did they get them?" he asked.

"From the United States, of course. Great Britain and France as well, I suspect. They got a lot of money for their oil. Billions of pounds and bought arms in return. Largely because of the Israeli situation. As I see it, we in Grand Fenwick are caught in a conflict between Moses and Mohammed with the result that I cannot get a hot bath.

"You don't suppose they'd have any use for a score of longbows and a few bushels of arrows?" asked Bentner.

"No. I certainly don't. We'll have to think of something else. First I am going to insist that the terms of our peace treaty with the United States are implemented to the letter. Then I see that I'm going to have to put my mind to the solving of the oil problem on a worldwide scale. Civilization cannot exist and progress without a plentiful and cheap supply of fuel oil. But if this is truly a shortage and not a piece of manipulation to drive oil prices up, an alternative source of energy is plainly called for. I'll talk to Dr. Kokintz about it. After all, the man who developed the Q, or quadium, bomb singlehandedly should readily be able to come up with an inexpensive method of heating water and running an automobile."

The prospect roused him. He, Mountjoy, was once again going to take a hand in saving the world from its follies.

"Bentner," he said. "We are going to have to stand shoulder to shoulder in this crisis. The question is not one of politics but of the salvation of society. What has happened here now in Grand Fenwick will shortly be happening all over the world. People will be shivering in their homes, their automobiles motionless in their garages, their great factories closing down one by one, and with each closing thousands put out of work and unable to use their Visa cards. That in itself will put thousands more out of work, shake the financial foundation of many great corporations, and spread gloom and despair like a plague through the domain of Western Man. Western civilization stands at its greatest crisis—crisis involving not freedom of speech nor of thought nor of worship, but the equally great freedom to live at some level of dignity and comfort above that of a medieval peasant. Something must be done. You and I must do it."

"Look," said Bentner, "aren't you making a bit too much fuss about not getting a hot bath? Do what you do. Put the tub down in front of the fireplace in the kitchen, kick everybody out and enjoy yourself. Let the world solve its own problems. We've got enough wood here to last us for centuries."

"Bah," Mountjoy said. "I will not be driven back to the sixteenth century by half a million Arabs who seem to have made a captive of every brain in America. Forward, I say, into the thick of the battle, and let the banner of Grand Fenwick lead the way."

"Still think you ought to try having a bath in front of the kitchen fire first," said Bentner.

The interview had taken place in Mountjoy's study in the castle. When it was over Mountjoy decided to call immediately on Dr. Kokintz, who, as noted, was the inventor of the appalling Q-bomb which Grand Fenwick had captured during its war against the United States.

Kokintz, now a citizen of Grand Fenwick, had his office and laboratory in the dungeon of the main keep of the castle, and there he carried out various experiments of which Mountjoy knew little and cared less.

Kokintz was dressed as usual in a rumpled pullover, a pair of shoddy trousers and a jacket of his own design. It was without a collar or lapels but had numerous pockets in which Kokintz kept pencils and pens and scraps of paper on which he made cabalistic calculations. In the side pockets he kept crackers and pieces of bread with which to feed the birds during his daily walks about Grand Fenwick.

for he was very fond of birds and prided himself more as an ornithologist than as a physicist.

When Mountjoy entered, Kokintz was seated at a long table, littered with retorts, Bunsen burner spirals of glass tubing which connected with series of bottles, an apparatus for producing old-fashioned ruby laser rays and another, not yet completed and of his own design, a white laser capable of penetrating a foot of high-tensile steel. All around were cages of birds: some pets and others he was treating for a sickness or injury. He was at the moment tying a lump of something white to a long piece of string.

"What's that?" Mountjoy asked.

"Suet," Kokintz said. "I hang it in the garden. It helps the birds get enough fat when seeds and berries are getting scarce."

When he had finished tying the piece of suet to the string he held it up smiling with pleasure.

"The titmice will love it," he said.

"I suppose they will," said Mountjoy, who didn't give a hang for titmice. "Actually I came to talk to you about the energy crisis and perhaps get you working on the problem. Do you have any thoughts on energy?" The question was as close as Mountjoy could come to being scientific.

"Energy," said Kokintz, vaguely, as if he had heard the word somewhere. His mind was still on the suet. He took off his glasses and polished them on the hem of his pullover. "Energy," he repeated, putting his glasses back on his nose and pulling his mind together. "We are surrounded by energy. Everything we see or touch is energy in one form or another. Energy is something we will never run out of."

"Well, we just ran out of it," said the Count. "My Rolls is down in the village at this moment and is utterly useless. We are out of petrol. Also heating oil."

Kokintz shrugged. "Oil is but one source of energy," he said. "A minor source, in fact, though the one that comes easiest to hand. But you are surely aware of solar energy in all its forms—radiation from the sun, winds, tides, the growth of vegetable matter and even ourselves. Yes, my friend, we are a result of solar energy, without which we would die.

"Then there is the energy to be obtained from coal, itself solar energy stored from the sunshine of billions of years ago, and from wood and from the burning or distillation of vegetable matter, and then of course there is nuclear energy, and the energy which results from the mysterious force known as gravity, though that source is perhaps but two percent of the energy available on earth. I might add the energy whose primary source is sound—a great deal of which is of course inaudible to the human ear though we have instruments which can pick up much, but not all of it. We are, as you perhaps know, being constantly bombarded by energy from outer space, some of which consists of sounds and some of which can be transformed into sounds—"

"What about oil?" said Mountjoy, interrupting, for he knew from experience that once Kokintz started talking on any subject of scientific interest, he was all but unstoppable.

Kokintz puffed through his lips, which was a mannerism of his when he had been asked a question on a hopeless topic. He considered the vast swarm of the galaxies with their trillions of planets spinning around their billions of suns. He considered the possibility of organic life decomposing on these planets and turning into oil, oil shale and coal.

"There must be enough oil in outer space to drown the earth under a sea of it thousands of fathoms deep," he said.

"Never mind outer space," said the Count of Mountjoy testily. "I mean how about oil right here in Grand Fenwick, enough to run two motorcars and heat my bath, to start with."

Kokintz shook his head. "Most unlikely," he said. "The mountains are igneous rock—granite for the greater part. No oil-bearing formations. It would appear that Grand Fenwick was never subjected to the pressures and marine conditions which produce oil."

Mountjoy decided to try another tack.

"What are you working on right now?" he asked, looking over the complicated apparatus set up on the long table.

Kokintz, forgetting for the moment the laser on which he had been engaged for some months, said "I'm making a kite for your great-granddaughter Katherine. A blue one," he added.

Mountjoy took a deep breath. His great-granddaughter, he well knew, was a persistent little being and had been bothering everybody she knew in the Duchy to make her a blue kite. Kokintz, one of the most eminent physicists in the Western world, had now been cornered into doing the job.

"Well," said Mountjoy, a trifle huffily, "when you get through with Katherine's kite, would you be good enough to turn your mind to the problem of finding a cheap and abundant source of energy other than oil, so that not only can I get a decent bath each day, but the whole of Western civilization can be saved from complete chaos." He then went back to his study to take up the matter again, this time quite firmly, with the President of the United States. Kokintz watched him go, shook his head and went out into the garden to hang up the piece of suet for the titmice. When he came back his mind was involved not with energy or lasers but with the design of a kite which could be readily flown by a seven-year-old child. For Kokintz, such problems were not unimportant.

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