

Today! "It Can't Happen Here"

CHAPTER I

by SINCLAIR LEWIS

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 & feed store) and Louis Rotenstern (custom tailoring—pressing & 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, U. S. A. (ret.), who dealt angrily with the topic "Peace Through Defense—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 cafes 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.

Appetizers and Mottoes

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 rumored 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 genuine relationship to Europe is in our arduous task of having to try and educate the crass and ignorant masses that Europe has wished onto 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 eying 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 ardently 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 A.E.F. "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 Quarter-master 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!"

But her social services were not all confined to prehistoric areas. 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:



"So, Lorinda, I think you ought to apologize to the General. . . ." He was looking down at Lorinda with sternness, yet Medary Cole, president of Rotary, wondered if Doremus wasn't kidding them.

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 Religion of Patriots

The D. A. R. (reflected the cynic, Doremus Jessup, that evening) is a somewhat confusing organization—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 D. A. R. (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 K.K.K., high dunces' caps and public nightshirts.

So, whether Mrs. Adelaide Tarr Gimmitch was called in to inspire military morale, or to persuade Lithuanian chorale societies to begin their program with "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean," always she was a D.A.R., 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 gray 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 toward all the men present: she giggled 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-board-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 colored 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 meeting she criticized every substantial interest in the whole country: 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 business men to bring back prosperity! All these corrupt and self-seeking labor 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—Will Power—Character!"

She turned prettily then toward 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 labor 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-wells, 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!"

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 January first, 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 anar-

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. Yes—he must be wrong, for Mrs. Lorinda Pike was (without rising) caroling, "Oh, yes! I do apologize, General! Thank you for your revelatory speech!"

The General raised his plump hand (with a Masonic ring as well as a West Point ring on the sausage-shaped fingers); he bowed like Galahad or a head-waiter; he shouted with parade-ground maleness: "Not at all, not at all, madame! We old campaigners never mind a healthy scrap. Glad when anybody's enough interested in our fool ideas to go and get sore at us, huh, huh, huh!"

And everybody laughed and sweetness reigned. The program wound up with Louis Rotenstern's singing of a group of patriotic ditties: "Marching through Georgia" and "Tenting on the Old Camp-ground" and "Dixie" and "Old Black Joe" and "I'm Only a Poor Cowboy and I Know I Done Wrong."

Louis Rotenstern was by all of Fort Beulah classed as a "good fellow," a caste just below that of "real, old-fashioned gentleman." Doremus Jessup liked to go fishing with him, and partridge-hunting; and he considered that no Fifth Avenue tailor could do anything tastier in the way of a seersucker outfit. But Louis was a jingo. He explained, and rather often, that it was not he nor his father who had been born in the ghetto in Prussian Poland, but his grandfather (whose name, Doremus suspected, had been something less stylish and Nordic than Rotenstern). Louis's pocket heroes were Calvin Coolidge, Leonard Wood, Dwight L. Moody, and Admiral Dewey (and Dewey was a born Vermonter, rejoiced Louis, who himself had been born in Flatbush, Long Island).

He was not only 100 per cent American; he exacted 40 per cent of chauvinistic interest on top of the principal. He was on every occasion heard to say, "We ought to keep all these foreigners out of the country, and what I mean, the Kikes just as much as the Wops and Hunkies and Chinks." Louis was altogether convinced that if the ignorant politicians would keep their dirty hands off banking and the stock exchange and hours of labor for salesmen in department stores, then everyone in the country would profit, as beneficiaries of increased business, and all of them (including the retail clerks) be rich as Aga Khan.

So Louis put into his melodies not only his burning voice of a Bydgoszcz cantor but all his nationalistic fervor, so that every one joined in the choruses, particularly Mrs. Adelaide Tarr Gimmitch, with her celebrated train-caller's contralto.

The dinner broke up in cataract-like sounds of happy adieux, and Doremus Jessup muttered to his good wife Emma, a solid, kindly, worried soul, who liked knitting, solitary, and the novels of Kathleen Norris: "Was I terrible, butting in that way?"

"Oh, no, Doremouse, you did just right. I am fond of Lorinda Pike, but why does she have to show off and parade all her silly Socialist ideas?"

"You old torty!" said Doremus. "Don't you want to invite the Siamese elephant, the Gimmitch, to drop in and have a drink?"

"I do not!" said Emma Jessup. And in the end, as the Rotarians shuffled and dealt themselves and their innumerable motorcars, it was Frank Tasbrough who invited the choicer males, including Doremus, home for an after-party.

Chapter II

AS HE TOOK his wife home and drove up Pleasant Hill to Tasbrough's, Doremus Jessup meditated upon the epidemic patriotism of General Edgeways. But he broke it off to let himself be absorbed in the hills, as it had been his habit for the fifty-three years, out of his sixty years of life, that he had spent in Fort Beulah, Vermont.

Legally a city, Fort Beulah was a comfortable village of old red brick, old granite workshops, and houses of white clapboards or gray shingles, with a few small little modern bungalows, yellow or seal brown. There was but little manufacturing: a small woolen mill, a sash-and-door factory, a pump works. The granite which was its chief produce came from quarries four miles away; in Fort Beulah itself were only the offices . . . all the money . . . the meager shacks of most of the quarry workers. It was a town of perhaps ten thousand souls, inhabiting about twenty thousand bodies—the proportion of soul-possession may be too high. There was but one (comparative) skyscraper in town: the six-story Tasbrough Building, with the offices of the Tasbrough & Scarlett Granite Quarries; the offices of Doremus's son-in-law, Fowler Greenhill, M.D., and his partner, old Dr. Olmsted; of Lawyer Mungo Kitterick, of Harry Kindermann, agent for maple syrup and dairying supplies, and of thirty or forty other village samurai.

(To Be Continued)