

“Cuckwold's Nuclear War” (excerpt)

by Frederick Covins

Whatever Sir Hartley meant to say will never be known because at that moment the door burst open to admit a wildly distraught Lieutenant Fairthorpe clutching an armful of newspapers, "C... Colonel!" he stammered.

Seven pairs of astonished eyes stared at the excited figure. Sir Hartley's were the first to register, "You!" he exploded in recognition, "Bettinger, this is the idiot who threw me in jail. Who the devil is he?"

Colonel Bettinger swallowed hastily, "Fairthorpe, sir. Lieutenant Fairthorpe." He turned on the Lieutenant, "Lieutenant, what is the meaning of this? I thought I told you to put yourself under arrest."

"Y... y... yes, sir. But... the newspapers, sir."

"Oh!" snorted Sir Hartley, "This is outrageous. What the devil's he babbling about?"

Excitedly, Lieutenant Fairthorpe pushed a newspaper in front of Sir Hartley's eyes and stabbed a forefinger at the headlines, "T... there, sir."

"Damn it, man!" Sir Hartley roared, "Don't shove newspapers at me like..." He stopped abruptly as his eyes took in the headline. To everybody's alarm he grabbed the paper and shot from his chair as if scalded, "Damn and blast it!" he roared as his eyebrows clambered frantically up his forehead, "Colonel? Who is responsible for this?"

The Colonel blinked his eyes rapidly in surprise, "For... for w... what, sir?" he quavered.

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Sir Hartley pounded the newspaper with one hand, "For this, dammit, for this..."

Curiously everyone crowded around Sir Hartley and read the stark headlines:

'ARMY TAKES OVER ESTATE FOR NUCLEAR BASE'

'MARTIAL LAW DECLARED IN CUCKWOLD'

'VILLAGERS TO BE EVICTED'

"Good God!" muttered Colonel Bettinger, his face pale and sickly.

"You might well say that, Bettinger." Raged Sir Hartley, "Listen to this, 'The Society for Nuclear Disarmament announced late last night that an immediate demonstration against this new base is being organised and will probably be held in the occupied village of Cuckwold today'."

An enraged Sir Hartley crumpled the paper into a ball and flung it at the floor, "Do you realise what this means, Colonel?" he asked heavily. Colonel Bettinger realised only too well, but wisely forbore to say so. Sir Hartley continued, "It means, Colonel that every damned newspaper man, pacifist nincompoop and anti-nuclear beatnik in the country will be swarming over this place in a matter of hours, unless we do something pretty damn quick."

Agitatedly, Sir Hartley paced the floor, watched with some amusement by the civilian group. Suddenly he stopped pacing and glared at Colonel Bettinger, "Well just don't stand there, Bettinger. Close every entrance and exit to this estate, cordon off the whole area, and if so much as one little beatnik gets through I'll have your scalp. Understand? No one comes in and no one goes out... got it?"

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"Y... yes, sir." Colonel Bettinger nodded and hurried from the room, closely followed by the now forgotten Lieutenant Fairthorpe.

The Reverend Pennyfold stepped forward, "Sir Hartley. I wish to protest at this interference with the liberty of my parishioners,"

Sir Hartley glared at the Vicar who refused to wilt, "You can protest all you want, Reverend, but I have no choice. There is, I admit, a quantity of top secret equipment on this site and more arriving today. It is my responsibility and I intend to establish security measures in any way I have to."

"I see," murmured the Reverend Pennyfold, "Then may I ask how much notice of eviction you are giving my people?"

"In the circumstances, Reverend, one week. By then this place will be sewn up so tight even the birds will need passes."

The Reverend Pennyfold nodded resignedly and indicated to Mark Carroll and Phineas Sloop that they should leave. Adam and the Major followed them to the door, but the Major couldn't resist a last dig at Sir Hartley, "Got your hands full, Bully?"

Sir Hartley glared at him coldly, "If I thought for one moment that you were the menace who gave this to the newspapers I'd have you hung, drawn and quartered."

Adam winced at Sir Hartley's tone and spared a sympathetic glance at the back of the departing Mark Carroll and hoped that Sir Hartley would never reach the same conclusion.

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Outside the drawing room they found Leonora Denby, Reggie Gaydon, Mrs. Peabody and Jane all anxiously holding newspapers and waiting for news. Questions bombarded the quartet from all directions.

Quickly, Adam silenced the flow of questions and invited the Reverend Pennyfold to explain.

Carefully and precisely the Vicar outlined the facts, carefully pointing out the generousness of Adam's offer to re-purchase the estate and mentioning the Major's contribution. To the confusion and embarrassment of those gentlemen they were richly thanked and Jane gave Adam a special hug.

When the Reverend Pennyfold had concluded his account, the ring of glum faces testified to the love they all held for their little corner of the world.

Major Forsyth, who had been muttering furiously to himself, now glanced around the miserable expressions of his friends and suddenly stamped his foot, "Dammit!" he exploded, "What sort of ninnys are we?" The group glanced at him curiously, "Well, stab me!" he continued, "Are we so damned spineless we can't fight?"

"Fight?" echoed Adam.

"Yes, dammit! Fight! Are we just going to let them walk all over us without bothering?"

A gleam of hope lit in Adam's eyes and he glanced around, "The Major's right you know. Can we honestly let them turn us out of our homes without a struggle?"

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The faces around him began to brighten and Mark Carroll nodded his head quickly, "Of course! Why not? Even if we don't win, we can at least not make it easy for them."

Adam glanced at Mark, "Mark's right, he's already put one spoke in their wheel..."

"How...?" began Mark.

Adam chuckled, "Just a guess, but who else has newspaper contacts..."

Major Forsyth heartily slapped Mark's back, "Well done, me boy. That'll show 'em. Well? What are we waiting for? Lets go and round up a few villagers.

Phineas Sloop was the one to prick the mood of euphoria, "Hrrumph!" he coughed gloomily, "May I enquire how you intend... er... fighting? Legally they are fully entitled to do as they wish on their own land."

"Dad blast it!" cried the Major, "How do I know. But we can have a meeting in the village hall and see what ideas anyone's got."

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