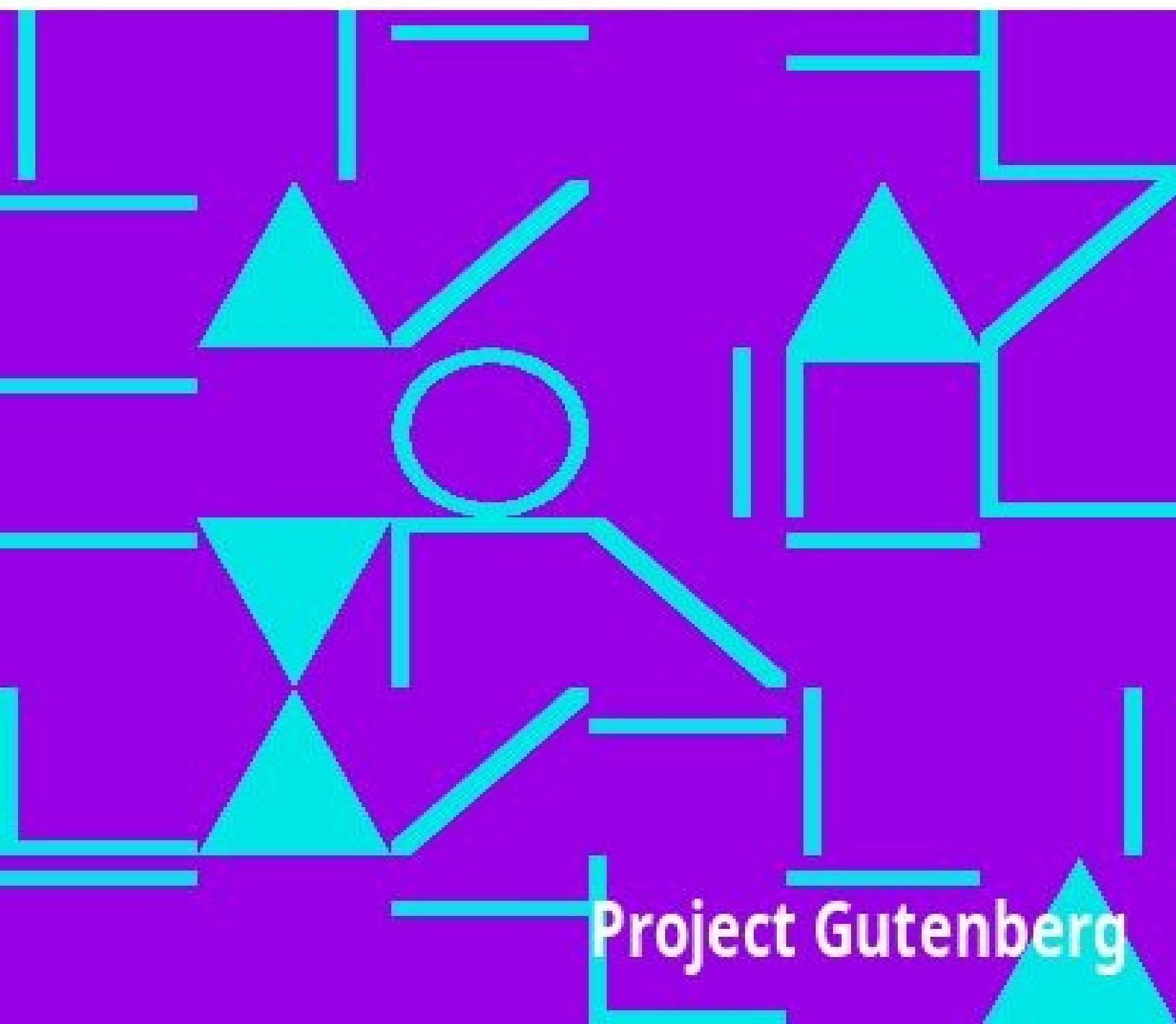


The Clean and Wholesome Land

Ralph Sholto



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*Utopia had been reached. All the
problems of mankind had been
solved. It was the perfect State. If
you doubted it, you died.*

The Clean and Wholesome Land

By Ralph Sholto

WHILE Professor Cargill lectured from the rostrum, Neal Pardeau prowled the dark auditorium. This, he knew, was the place to find them. Here was where they whispered and plotted and schemed—feeling safe in this pure, hard core of patriotism.

Safe because Cargill was the Director of Education in the New State, just as Pardeau was the Director of Public Security. Safe because Cargill's lectures were given before a commanded audience, with attendance strictly mandatory.

The insistence was not really necessary of course. The people would have come to hear Cargill regardless. His was a compelling, magnetic personality. Even now his great voice was booming out:

"—and upon this anniversary of the New State, we can look out with great pride upon a clean and wholesome land. With strong emotion, we can look upon the physical manifestation of our glorious principles—that only through self-effacement—through fanatic love for the state—can the individual come to complete physical and mental fruition. Upon this anniversary we see our enemies, both within and without, broken, and completely subjugated—"

This was the place they whispered and schemed and plotted. Pardeau prowled the aisles, his eyes piercing the darkness—spotting them, cataloguing them. And thus he came upon Emil Hillerman, his Deputy of Vital Intelligence sitting dutifully in the end seat of a middle aisle. Hillerman's thick lips hung lax, his eyes squinted laboriously as he

sought to follow the thread of Cargill's lecture.

Pardeau tapped Hillerman on the shoulder. The latter started guiltily. He whirled and sought to identify Pardeau in the semi-darkness. Pardeau said, "Please step outside with me. I have some questions."

There was fear in Hillerman's bearing as he got clumsily to his feet and followed Pardeau. But none of Cargill's speech was missed. A battery of loudspeakers carried it even into the foyer where Pardeau stopped and turned on Hillerman. He regarded the man through cold, calculating eyes. He seemed to be both enjoying Hillerman's discomfort and also listening to Cargill's booming words.

"—these pale weaklings, these traitors with twitching muscles and twitching minds who skulked in dark places have been finally and decisively defeated. Even their vaunted leader—"

"What have you been doing," Pardeau asked, "relative to Karl Lenster?"

The frightened Hillerman licked his fat lower lip as he sought for words. "Everything—everything possible. But Lenster is clever. You know that. You know that yourself."

Pardeau's eyes bored into those of the Intelligence Director. They were noted for their icy penetration, but upon this night they were like steel knives. It was as though he surveyed Hillerman from behind the bulwark of some new and hostile information. Even as he stared, Cargill was booming from the rostrum:

"—Karl Lenster, their *peerless* leader—"

And Cargill's voice crackled with the inflections of pure contempt.

"—a degenerate—a dope addict whose greatness lay only in the realms of his sensual dreams. A weak, pitiful figure bereft of

followers, cringing alone in—"

When Pardeau spoke, his voice held a new sharpness to complement the new ice in his eyes. He said, "In half an hour I am attending a meeting of the Council. They will want a report. What about Lenster?"

Hillerman looked quickly to right and left, then back at his Chief. He hesitated as though fearing the consequences of what he was about to reveal. "You know of the Wyckoff Chemical Transformation Process —"

"Certainly I know of it," Pardeau blazed. "What about it?"

"I—I—" But Hillerman seemed to lose the courage he'd screwed up to continue in this direction. He straightened and a little of the hangdog servility dropped away. "I am doing all that is humanly possible to apprehend Lenster. All that any man could do. The secret jails are full. My interrogators work night and day. Even a superficial check of my records would show that more has been done in the last six months and is being done now than—"

Pardeau raised an impatient hand, opening a gap of silence into which the voice of Cargill poured.

"—land in which the voice of dissenter is not heard; in which Lenster and men of his despicable ilk are forever crushed and beaten—"

Pardeau was scowling. Almost unconsciously he had held the pause, with hand upraised, until Cargill finished his passage. As Cargill stopped for breath, Pardeau jerked his hand down sharply, completing the gesture. "I have no time for any more of this. And I resent having to seek you out. Next time report to my office as is proper and keep me posted as to your activities. Next—"

Pardeau eyed Hillerman for one blank moment and allowed the threat

to reflect clearly that possibly there would not be many more next times. Then he turned and strode swiftly from the foyer.

CARGILL'S voice had hardly faded when he picked it up again on his car radio. It was a foregone conclusion that every radio in the land would be tuned to the lecture. So great was Cargill's popularity that every citizen traveling in a car would wish to hear it and turn on his receiver. It was foolish not to have a radio properly tuned when Cargill spoke. He was saying:

"—and so under the banner of complete solidarity, we will march forward, a solid phalanx against which no force can stand. Now that our own house is swept clean of vermin—rid forever of carrion like Lenster and his ilk, we can—"

Pardeau had traveled swiftly through the streets at the high speed reserved for higher servants of the New State. Lesser servants of the New State had learned caution and thus no regrettable deaths or maimings occurred; the lesser servants having grown wary and fleet of foot.

Pardeau switched off his motor but left his radio blaring. Cargill's voice followed him up the broad steps of the Executive Building and was just fading out when Pardeau was able to pick it up again from the loudspeaker under the great arches.

He entered the building and traversed the vast foyer to a niche which housed a private elevator. He entered the lift, deserting it on the ninth floor, where he entered an unobtrusive door and joined a group which consisted of the New State's well guarded pool of power and brains.

There was Blanchard of Finance; Keeley, Director of Foreign Education; Masichek, overlord of the nation's larder, and seven others.

When Pardeau entered, all conversation stopped and every man looked up from a luxurious overstuffed chair. Pardeau must certainly have swelled inwardly with pride at this unconscious tribute. It was well known that he held a key position on the chessboard of politics. His was in reality the most important job of all. It was to Pardeau that this powerful group of men looked for that which they most treasured—their own personal safety.

A chair was waiting for Pardeau. He said, "I'm sorry to be late, gentlemen. I have been on a personal tour of inspection. I'm sure you will forgive me however. I have a most interesting report."

He seated himself, timing the action so it coincided with the ebb of applause coming over the speaker—applause from the loyal multitudes who had just heard Professor Cargill end his lecture. As it was now permissible, Blanchard reached under the table and snapped a button. The speaker went silent.

"An interesting report?" Keeley asked.

"Amazingly so," Pardeau said. "I have just unearthed a traitor—a traitor in a high place."

Every man in the group strove not to react and this striving was in itself a reaction. "Most interesting," Blanchard murmured. "Are you ready to name names?"

"That is my intention, but in order to forestall a great many questions, let me give you a complete background."

Leiderman, Ambassador without Portfolio, and very close to the Man of Almost Sacred Name who never attended these meetings, felt strong enough to evince impatience. "The name, man! First the name.

Then the details."

Pardeau smiled coldly. "Very well. The name is, Karl Lenster."

Leiderman sprang from his chair, his face bordering on purple. "Is this a joke, Pardeau? We all know Lenster is the arch-traitor of our times—the leader of the resistance movement. Talk sense!"

Pardeau, not in the least disconcerted, smiled coldly. "I'm sorry. Perhaps I should have said Emil Hillerman, my Deputy of Vital Intelligence, the man who holds immeasurable power in his two hands."

Blanchard was not given to outbursts. But his lips were grim as he said, "We are waiting for you to talk sense, Pardeau."

"The confusion comes from your not allowing me to tell it as I wished. There is a gap between Lenster and Hillerman; one which—with your permission—I will fill."

"Talk, man! Talk!"

"You have all heard of Formula 652, known also as the Wyckoff Chemical Transformation Process."

There were expressions of both understanding and bewilderment. Noting these, Pardeau said, "For those of you who haven't made a point of looking into the thing, I'll explain. Wyckoff, in case you don't recall, was a chemical engineer of more than average ability who stumbled onto this formula before he died, most regretfully, four years ago, in 1984."

Leiderman continued to scowl. "We all know each other, Pardeau. Call a spade a spade. Wyckoff was a reactionary scoundrel whom you did away with for reasons of security."

"Precisely," Pardeau said. "In its essence, the formula is a process for

taking over a man's brain—his body—his personality."

"You mean—"

Pardeau refused to be interrupted. "We were of the opinion that Wyckoff, though he and Lenster were great friends, was not able to impart his knowledge to the latter. We took him into custody shortly after he perfected the formula and were fortunate in persuading him to give it to us."

"But he gave it to Lenster also?"

"We were certain, at the time of his death, that he had not been able to do that—we are still certain."

Keeley, with a gesture, requested the floor. "I wonder if you could go into a little more detail concerning the formula—for those of us who —"

"Of course," Pardeau said. "The formula is a combination of six chemicals and the process of transformation is relatively simple, yet highly dangerous to both subjects involved. It means sure death for the proposed host, and if not delicately handled will also result in death for the usurper. The transformation requires three hours to perform. Once completed successfully, the usurper can never return to his own body. It must be destroyed. Also, the mentality of the host vanishes after it is pushed from its original brain tissue through the influence of the formula."

"Then if Wyckoff didn't give the formula to Lenster, it was stolen from our vaults—or wherever it was kept?"

"Exactly. Certain investigations I have made prove beyond doubt that Lenster got to my Deputy, Hillerman. I never considered Hillerman very bright, but I thought him to be honest and loyal. But beyond all doubt, with his aid, Lenster stole the formula—possibly got it verbally

—and used it to take Hillerman's body from him." Pardeau smiled grimly. "Therefore, gentlemen, we have a traitor in a high place. My Deputy of Vital Intelligence."

PARDEAU sat silent now, seeming to enjoy the fear he had engendered in his colleagues—sat silent until Leiderman said, "You've arrested him of course."

"No. I have not."

"Then get at it, man—get at it."

"I have no intention of arresting Hillerman."

Leiderman's eyes widened as did those of the rest of the company. But Blanchard, even under the impact of such a bombshell had the presence of mind to glance at his watch. Immediately he snapped on the loudspeaker. The voice of Professor Cargill blared forth:

"—and upon this anniversary of the New State, we can look with pride upon a clean and wholesome land—"

It was the rebroadcast, from recordings, of Cargill's speech and no man in his right mind would have refrained from tuning it in because everyone wanted to hear it at least twice.

Leiderman, almost apoplectic, ignored the speech. "Not arresting him! Are you mad?"

"I'm quite sane, and the situation is well in hand." Pardeau grinned and there was wickedness in the grin—wickedness and intelligence. "As I said before, Hillerman was not a smart man. His job was too

much for him and I would have been faced, soon, with the necessity of replacing him regardless. Lenster, on the other hand, is of grade-A intellect. But, gentlemen, he is frightened—badly frightened in his new environment—and, in order to insure his own safety, is doing an excellent job. Ever since the transformation, that department has gained in efficiency until it now ranks as one of the highest in our entire government."

Slowly, Pardeau's strategy dawned on the group. Blanchard suddenly smiled. Then Pardeau scowled and went on with a new and sudden ferocity. "I have the proof, and I have Lenster-Hillerman under my palm. So he stays—continues to do a good job for us. But he'll be watched, gentlemen. He won't be able to go to the bathroom without being under surveillance. We will learn a great deal from him. All we need to know."

"Then you'll arrest him?" the boss of the state larder wanted to know.

Pardeau came to his feet. His fist slammed down on the table. "I shall *not* arrest him—ever. When the time comes, I shall personally shoot him down in the street like a dog. There will come a day, gentlemen, when you will witness this act of vengeance—when I shall make such an example of Lenster-Hillerman as the resistance will not forget—a morale-crumbling example, I promise you."

"—in which Lenster and his ilk are forever crushed and beaten," the speaker said.

Blanchard took the floor. "Gentlemen—I move a vote of thanks and confidence for our colleague, Neal Pardeau."

The Director of Public Security stood at attention and assayed a sharp, military bow. It was a moment of rare triumph. "Thank you, gentlemen," he said.

An hour later, Lenster-Pardeau was alone in his apartments. He stripped off his uniform with an air of grim satisfaction. While he undressed, he thought of the martyrs to the Cause; the men who had died. He thought of Wyckoff and wished Wyckoff could have had the pleasure of knowing who had usurped the body of Neal Pardeau—Pardeau the Butcher—the infamous Pardeau.

From the speaker came the third and final rebroadcast of Cargill's speech:

"—a clean and wholesome land—"

"A clean and wholesome land," Lenster murmured, and the tone of his voice was a prayer.

THE END

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