

Null-ABC

by

Henry Beam Piper

Web-Books.Com

Null-ABC

There's some reaction these days that holds scientists responsible for war. Take it one step further: What happens if "book-learnin'" is held responsible ...?

Illustrated by van Dongen

Chester Pelton retracted his paunch as far as the breakfast seat would permit; the table, its advent preceded by a collection of mouth-watering aromas, slid noiselessly out of the pantry and clicked into place in front of him.

"Everything all right, Miss Claire?" a voice floated out after it from beyond. "Anything else you want?"

"Everything's just fine, Mrs. Harris," Claire replied. "I suppose Mr. Pelton'll want seconds, and Ray'll probably want thirds and fourths of everything." She waved a hand over the photocell that closed the pantry door, and slid into place across from her brother, who already had a glass of fruit juice in one hand and was lifting platter covers with the other.

"Real eggs!" the boy was announcing. "Bacon. Wheat-bread toast." He looked again. "Hey, Sis, is this real cow-made butter?"

"Yes. Now go ahead and eat."

As though Ray needed encouragement, Chester Pelton thought, watching his son use a spoon—the biggest one available—to dump gobs of honey on his toast. While he was helping himself to bacon and eggs, he could hear Ray's full-mouthed exclamation: "This is real bee-comb honey, too!" That pleased him. The boy was a true Pelton; only needed one bite to distinguish between real and synthetic food.

"Bet this breakfast didn't cost a dollar under five C," Ray continued, a little more audibly, between bites.

That was another Pelton trait; even at fifteen, the boy was learning the value of money. Claire seemed to disapprove, however.

"Oh, Ray; try not to always think of what things cost," she reproved.

"If I had all she spends on natural food, I could have a this-season's model 'copter-bike, like Jimmy Hartnett," Ray continued.

Pelton frowned. "I don't want you running around with that boy, Ray," he said, his mouth full of bacon and eggs. Under his daughter's look of disapproval, he swallowed hastily, then continued: "He's not the sort of company I want my son keeping."

"But, Senator," Ray protested. "He lives next door to us. Why, we can see Hartnett's aerial from the top of our landing stage!"

"That doesn't matter," he said, in a tone meant to indicate that the subject was not to be debated. "He's a Literate!"

"More eggs, Senator?" Claire asked, extending the platter and gesturing with the serving knife.

He chuckled inwardly. Claire always knew what to do when his temper started climbing to critical mass. He allowed her to load his plate again.

"And speaking of our landing stage, have you been up there, this morning, Ray?" he asked.

They both looked at him inquiringly.

"Delivered last evening, while you two were out," he explained. "New winter model Rolls-Cadipac." He felt a glow of paternal pleasure as Claire gave a yelp of delight and aimed a glancing kiss at the top of his bald head. Ray dropped his fork, slid from his seat, and bolted for the lift, even bacon, eggs, and real bee-comb honey forgotten.

With elaborate absent-mindedness, Chester Pelton reached for the switch to turn on the video screen over the pantry door.

"Oh-oh! Oh-oh!" Claire's slender hand went out to stop his own. "Not till coffee and cigarettes, Senator."

"It's almost oh-eight-fifteen; I want the newscast."

"Can't you just relax for a while? Honestly, Senator, you're killing yourself."

"Oh, rubbish! I've been working a little hard, but—"

"You've been working too hard. And today, with the sale at the store, and the last day of the campaign—"

"Why the devil did that idiot of a Latterman have the sale advertised for today, anyhow?" he fumed. "Doesn't he know I'm running for the Senate?"

"I doubt it," Claire said. "He may have heard of it, the way you've heard about an election in Pakistan or Abyssinia, or he just may not know there is such a thing as politics. I think he does know there's a world outside the store, but he doesn't care much what goes on in it." She pushed her plate aside, poured a cup of coffee, and levered a cigarette from the Readilit, puffing at it with the relish of the morning's first smoke. "All he knows is that we're holding our sale three days ahead of Macy & Gimbel's."

"Russ is a good businessman," Pelton said seriously. "I wish you'd take a little more interest in him, Claire."

"If you mean what I think you do, no thanks," Claire replied. "I suppose I'll get married, some day—most girls do—but it'll be to somebody who can hang his business up at the office before he comes home. Russ Latterman is so married to the store that if he married me too, it'd be bigamy. Ready for your coffee?" Without waiting for an answer, she filled his cup and ejected a lighted cigarette from the box for him, then snapped on the video screen.

It lit at once, and a nondescriptly handsome young man was grinning toothily out of it. He wore a white smock, halfway to his knees, and, over it, an old-fashioned Sam Browne belt which supported a bulky leather-covered tablet and a large stylus. On the strap which crossed his breast five or six little metal badges twinkled.

"... Why no other beer can compare with delicious, tangy, Cardon's Black Bottle. Won't you try it?" he pleaded. "Then you will see for yourself why millions of happy drinkers always Call For Cardon's. And now, that other favorite of millions, Literate First Class Elliot C. Mongery."

Pelton muttered: "Why Frank sponsors that blabbermouth of a Mongery—"

Ray, sliding back onto the bench, returned to his food.

"Jimmy's book had pictures," he complained, forking up another mixture of eggs, bacon, toast and honey.

"Book?" Claire echoed. "Oh, the instructions for the 'copter?"

"Pipe down, both of you!" Pelton commanded. "The newscast—"

Literate First Class Elliot C. Mongery, revealed by a quick left quarter-turn of the pickup camera, wore the same starchy white smock, the same Sam Browne belt glittering with

the badges of the organizations and corporations for whom he was authorized to practice Literacy. The tablet on his belt, Pelton knew, was really a camouflaged holster for a small automatic, and the gold stylus was a gas-projector. The black-leather-jacketed bodyguards, of course, were discreetly out of range of the camera. Members of the Associated Fraternities of Literates weren't exactly loved by the non-reading public they claimed to serve. The sight of one of those starchy, perpetually-spotless, white smocks always affected Pelton like a red cape to a bull. He snorted in disdain. The raised eyebrow toward the announcer on the left, the quick, perennially boyish smile, followed by the levelly serious gaze into the camera—the whole act might have been a film-transcription of Mongery's first appearance on the video, fifteen years ago. At least, it was off the same ear of corn.

"That big hunk of cheese," Ray commented. For once, Pelton didn't shush him; that was too close to his own attitude, at least in family-breakfast-table terminology.

"... First of all; for the country, and especially the Newer New York area, and by the way, it looks as though somebody thought somebody needed a little cooling off, but we'll come to that later. Here's the forecast: Today and tomorrow, the weather will continue fine; warm in the sun, chilly in the shadows. There won't be anything to keep you from the polls, tomorrow, except bird-hunting, or a last chance at a game of golf. This is the first time within this commentator's memory that the weather has definitely been in favor of the party out of power.

"On the world scene: You'll be glad to hear that the survivors of the wrecked strato-rocket have all been rescued from the top of Mount Everest, after a difficult and heroic effort by the Royal Nepalese Air Force.... The results of last week's election in Russia are being challenged by twelve of the fourteen parties represented on the ballot; the only parties not hurling accusations of fraud are the Democrats, who won, and the Christian Communists, who are about as influential in Russian politics as the Vegetarian-Anti-Vaccination Party is here.... The Central Diplomatic Council of the Reunited Nations has just announced, for the hundred and seventy-eighth time, that the Arab-Israel dispute has been finally, definitely and satisfactorily settled. This morning's reports from Baghdad and Tel Aviv only list four Arabs and six Israelis killed in border clashes in the past twenty-four hours, so maybe they're really getting things patched up, after all. During the same period, there were more fatalities in Newer New York as a result of clashes between the private troops of rival racket gangs, political parties and business houses.

"Which brings us to the local scene. On my way to the studio this morning, I stopped at City Hall, and found our genial Chief of Police Delaney, 'Irish' Delaney to most of us, hard at work with a portable disintegrator, getting rid of record disks and recording tapes of old and long-settled cases. He had a couple of amusing stories. For instance, a lone Independent-Conservative partisan broke up a Radical-Socialist mass meeting preparatory to a march to demonstrate in Double Times Square, by applying his pocket lighter to one of the heat-sensitive boxes in the building and activating the sprinkler system. By the time the Radicals had gotten into dry clothing, there was a, well, sort of, impromptu Conservative demonstration going on in Double Times Square, and one of the

few things the local gendarmes won't stand for is an attempt to hold two rival political meetings in the same area.

"Curiously, while it was the Radicals who got soaked, it was the Conservatives who sneezed," Mongery went on, his face glowing with mischievous amusement. "It seems that while they were holding a monster rally at Hague Hall, in North Jersey Borough, some person or persons unknown got at the air-conditioning system with a tank of sneeze gas, which didn't exactly improve either the speaking style of Senator Grant Hamilton or the attentiveness of his audience. Needless to say, there is no police investigation of either incident. Election shenanigans, like college pranks, are fair play as long as they don't cause an outright holocaust. And that, I think, is as it should be," Mongery went on, more seriously. "Most of the horrors of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries were the result of taking politics too seriously."

Pelton snorted again. That was the Literate line, all right; treat politics as a joke and an election as a sporting event, let the Independent-Conservative grafters stay in power, and let the Literates run the country through them. Not, of course, that he disapproved of those boys in the Young Radical League who'd thought up that sneeze-gas trick.

"And now, what you've been waiting for," Mongery continued. "The final Trotter Poll's pre-election analysis." A novice Literate advanced, handing him a big loose-leaf book, which he opened with the reverence a Literate always displayed toward the written word. "This," he said, "is going to surprise you. For the whole state of Penn-Jersey-York, the poll shows a probable Radical-Socialist vote of approximately thirty million, an Independent-Conservative vote of approximately ten and a half million, and a vote of about a million for what we call the Who-Gives-A-Damn Party, which, frankly, is the party of your commentator's choice. Very few sections differ widely from this average—there will be a much heavier Radical vote in the Pittsburgh area, and traditionally Conservative Philadelphia and the upper Hudson Valley will give the Radicals a much smaller majority."

They all looked at one another, thunderstruck.

"If Mongery's admitting that, I'm in!" Pelton exclaimed.

"Yeah, we can start calling him Senator, now, and really mean it," Ray said. "Maybe old Mongie isn't such a bad sort of twerp, after all."

"Considering that the Conservatives carried this state by a substantial majority in the presidential election of two years ago, and by a huge majority in the previous presidential election of 2136," Mongery, in the screen, continued, "this verdict of the almost infallible Trotter Poll needs some explaining. For the most part, it is the result of the untiring efforts of one man, the dynamic new leader of the Radical-Socialists and their present candidate for the Consolidated States of North America Senate, Chester Pelton, who has transformed that once-moribund party into the vital force it is today. And this achievement has been due, very largely, to a single slogan which he had hammered into

your ears: *Put the Literates in their place; our servants, not our masters!*" He brushed a hand deprecatingly over his white smock and fingered the badges on his belt.

"There has always been, on the part of the Illiterate public, some resentment against organized Literacy. In part, it has been due to the high fees charged for Literate services, and to what seems, to many, to be monopolistic practices. But behind that is a general attitude of anti-intellectualism which is our heritage from the disastrous wars of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries. Chester Pelton has made himself the spokesman of this attitude. In his view, it was men who could read and write who hatched the diabolical political ideologies and designed the frightful nuclear weapons of that period. In his mind, Literacy is equated with '*Mein Kampf*' and '*Das Kapital*', with the A-bomb and the H-bomb, with concentration camps and blasted cities. From this position, of course, I beg politely to differ. Literate men also gave us the Magna Charta and the Declaration of Independence.

"Now, in spite of a lunatic fringe in the Consolidated Illiterates' Organization who want just that, Chester Pelton knows that we cannot abolish Literacy entirely. Even with modern audio-visual recording, need exists for some modicum of written recording, which can be rapidly scanned and selected from—indexing, cataloguing, tabulating data, et cetera—and for at least a few men and women who can form and interpret the written word. Mr. Pelton, himself, is the owner of a huge department store, employing over a thousand Illiterates; he must at all times have the services of at least fifty Literates."

"And pays through the nose for them, too!" Pelton growled. It was more than fifty; and Russ Latterman had been forced to get twenty extras sent in for the sale.

"Now, since we cannot renounce Literacy entirely, without sinking to *fellahin* barbarism, and here I definitely part company with Mr. Pelton, he fears the potential power of organized Literacy. In a word, he fears a future Literate Dictatorship."

"Future? What do you think we have now?" Pelton demanded.

"Nobody," Mongery said, as though replying to him, "is stupid enough, today, to want to be a dictator. That ended by the middle of the Twenty-first Century. Everybody knows what happened to Mussolini, and Hitler, and Stalin, and all their imitators. Why, it is as much the public fear of Big Government as the breakdown of civil power because of the administrative handicap of a shortage of Literate administrators that is responsible for the disgraceful lawlessness of the past hundred years. Thus, it speaks well for the public trust in Chester Pelton's known integrity and sincerity that so many of our people are willing to agree to his program for socialized Literacy. They feel that he can be trusted, and, violently as I disagree with him, I can only say that that trust is not misplaced.

"Of course, there is also the question, so often raised by Mr. Pelton, that under the Hamilton machine, the politics, and particularly the enforcement of the laws, in this state, are unbelievably corrupt, but I wonder—"

Mongery paused. "Just a moment; I see a flash bulletin being brought in." The novice Literate came to his side and gave him a slip of paper, at which he glanced. Then he laughed heartily.

"It seems that shortly after I began speaking, the local blue-ribbon grand jury issued a summons for Chief Delaney to appear before them, with all his records. Unfortunately, the summons could not be served; Chief Delaney had just boarded a strato-rocket from Tom Dewey Field for Buenos Aires." He cocked an eye at the audience. "I know Irish is going to have a nice time, down there in the springtime of the Southern Hemisphere. And, incidentally, the Argentine is one of the few major powers which never signed the World Extradition Convention of 2087." He raised his hand to his audience. "And now, until tomorrow at breakfast, sincerely yours for Cardon's Black Bottle, Elliot C. Mongery."

"Well, whattaya know; that guy was plugging for you!" Ray said. "And see how he managed to slide in that bit about corruption, right before his stooge handed him that bulletin?"

"I guess every Literate has his price," Chester Pelton said. "I wonder how much of my money that cost. I always wondered why Frank Cardon sponsored Mongery. Now I know. Mongery can be had."

"Uh, beg your pardon, Mr. Pelton," a voice from the hall broke in.

He turned. Olaf Olafsson, the 'copter driver, was standing at the entrance to the breakfast nook, a smudge of oil on his cheek and his straw-colored hair in disorder. "How do I go about startin' this new 'copter?"

"What?" Olaf had been his driver for ten years. He would have been less surprised had the ceiling fallen in. "You don't know how to start it?"

"No, sir. The controls is all different from on the summer model. Every time I try to raise it, it backs up; if I try to raise it much more, we won't have no wall left on the landing stage."

"Well, isn't there a book?"

"There ain't no pictures in it; nothing but print. It's a Literate book," Olaf said in disgust, as though at something obscene. "An' there ain't nothin' on the instrument board but letters."

"That's right," Ray agreed. "I saw the book; no pictures in it at all."

"Well, of all the quarter-witted stupidity! The confounded imbeciles at that agency—"

Pelton started to his feet. Claire unlocked the table and slid it out of his way. Ray, on a run, started for the lift and vanished.

"I think some confounded Literate at the Rolls-Cadipac agency did that," he fumed. "Thought it would be a joke to send me a Literate instruction book along with a 'copter with a Literate instrument board. Ah, I get it! So I'd have to call in a Literate to show me how to start my own 'copter, and by noon they'd be laughing about it in every bar from Pittsburgh to Plattsburg. Sneaky Literate trick!" They went to the lift, and found the door closed in their faces. "Oh, confound that boy!"

Claire pressed the button. Ray must have left the lift, for the operating light went on, and in a moment the door opened. He crowded into the lift, along with his daughter and Olaf.

On the landing stage, Ray was already in the 'copter, poking at buttons on the board.

"Look, Olaf!" he called. "They just shifted them around a little from the summer model. This one, where the prop-control used to be on the old model, is the one that backs it up on the ground. Here's the one that erects and extends the prop,"—he pushed it, and the prop snapped obediently into place—"and here's the one that controls the lift."

An ugly suspicion stabbed at Chester Pelton, bringing with it a feeling of frightened horror.

"How do you know?" he demanded.

Ray's eyes remained on the instrument board. He pushed another button, and the propeller began swinging in a lazy circle; he pressed down with his right foot, and the 'copter lifted a foot or so.

"What?" he asked. "Oh, Jimmy showed me how theirs works. Mr. Hartnett got one like it a week ago." He motioned to Olaf, setting the 'copter down again. "Come here; I'll show you."

The suspicion, and the horror passed in a wave of relief.

"You think you and Olaf, between you, can get that thing to school?" he asked.

"Sure! Easy!"

"All right. You show Olaf how to run it. Olaf, as soon as you've dropped Ray at school, take that thing to the Rolls-Cadipac agency, and get a new one, with a proper instrument board, and a proper picture book of operating instructions. I'm going to call Sam Huschack up personally and give him royal hell about this. Sure you can handle it, now?"

He watched the 'copter rise to the two thousand foot local traffic level and turn in the direction of Mineola High School, fifty miles away. He was still looking anxiously after it as it dwindled to a tiny dot and vanished.

"They'll make it all right," Claire told him. "Olaf has a strong back, and Ray has a good head."

"It wasn't that that I was worried about." He turned and looked, half ashamed, at his daughter. "You know, for a minute, there, I thought ... I thought Ray could read!"

"Father!" She was so shocked that she forgot the nickname they had given him when he had announced his candidacy for Senate, in the spring. "You didn't!"

"I know; it's an awful thing to think, but—Well, the kids today do the craziest things. There's that Hartnett boy he runs around with; Tom Hartnett bought Literate training for him. And that fellow Prestonby; I don't trust him—"

"Prestonby?" Claire asked, puzzled.

"Oh, you know. The principal at school. You've met him."

Claire wrinkled her brow—just like her mother, when she was trying to remember something.

"Oh, yes. I met him at that P.T.A. meeting. He didn't impress me as being much like a teacher, but I suppose they think anything's good enough for us Illiterates."

Literate First Class Ralph N. Prestonby remained standing by the lectern, looking out over the crowded auditorium, still pleasantly surprised to estimate the day's attendance at something like ninety-seven per cent of enrollment. That was really good; why, it was only three per cent short of perfect! Maybe it was the new rule requiring a sound-recorded excuse for absence. Or it could have been his propaganda campaign about the benefits of education. Or, very easily, it could have been the result of sending Doug Yetsko and some of his boys around to talk to recalcitrant parents. It was good to see that that was having some effect beside an increase in the number of attempts on his life, or the flood of complaints to the Board of Education. Well, Lancedale had gotten Education merged with his Office of Communications, and Lancedale was back of him to the limit, so the complaints had died out on the empty air. And Doug Yetsko was his bodyguard, so most of the would-be assassins had died, also.

The "North American Anthem," which had replaced the "Star-Spangled Banner" after the United States-Canadian-Mexican merger, came to an end. The students and their white-smocked teachers, below, relaxed from attention; most of them sat down, while monitors and teachers in the rear were getting the students into the aisles and marching them off to

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

