

The Professor Nutkins Chronicles

3. Conservation

By David Silver

Time had flown since my last visit to see my friend Professor Nutkins. As I pulled the bell cord at the front portal of Nutkins Mansion I heard a distant thud then what sounded like a curse and a raised voice from the depths of the house.

"That's my Prof" I thought to myself, "never a dull moment". I whistled a little air to myself whilst I waited, Chattanooga Choo Choo I think it was.

The door opened. There was the Prof, larger than life and twice as ... there was something strange about him. He was still wearing the electric blanket overcoat but now the yellowish camouflage patches were interspersed with what looked like scorch marks. But what was it about his face? I suddenly got it. His eyebrows had been singed off!

"Come in, come in" he said, a trifle wearily, "saving the planet is hard work you know". A strange opening gambit. On the other hand it wasn't altogether surprising. The Prof is very much anti-modern technology and pro-conservation of natural resources. "How so?" I asked. "Conservation, recycling, pollution, the usual sort of thing" he replied.

There was a loud thump from a back room, followed by another, then another, the intervals gradually shortening as of something accelerating. An enormous contraption, probably seven feet tall, hove into view. It bore a vaguely humanoid shape. Its centre section – the midriff? - appeared to be comprised of one of those old-fashioned coal boilers you would see in kitchens across the country until a few decades ago. Atop the 'midriff' was a cube somewhat resembling a loudspeaker, with a small video camera mounted upon each upper corner. Projecting from each side of the midriff were telescopic mechanisms terminating in waldos. They appeared to be constructed out of tumble drier venting tube and claw cranes. You know, from those fraudulent fairground games where you feed in oodles of money in the hope of picking up a cuddly toy worth thirty pence from inside a glass case, but you always fail to grab anything. You have to go through this money wasting ritual to appease the nagging child you are accompanying (otherwise why would you be in one of these infernal places?). Sticking out of the underside of the midriff section were 'legs', each fashioned out of pogo sticks and those tripod walking frames beloved of older people.

This terrifying-looking thing was **walking**. Each time a leg was raised a cloud of foul-smelling sulphurous steam gushed from an orifice at the rear. Then, as the leg was lowered, a roar of flame jetted through the partly open front door of the boiler. The whole thing brought to mind youthful experiences involving beer and curry.

"Meet my steam-powered household assistant" announced the Prof proudly.

"Cedric - Conservation of Energy Domestic Recycling by Internal Combustion. He runs on dried cow-dung which as you may well know is rich in captured methane. Every step he takes burns off greenhouse gas and benefits the planet".

At this point there was a loud pop and a live cinder shot out of the boiler door. This was unfortunate for the sad, henpecked-looking cat which was trying to sneak by unnoticed with its ears and back flattened. The cinder landed on its tail, setting it alight. The poor creature began rushing around the room in a shrieking panic followed closely by the Prof waving a fire extinguisher - but oh no, even this wasn't conventional. The Prof had fashioned his own device out of a stirrup pump and popcorn bucket. You know the sort of

thing. Go to the pictures with a small child whose very presence makes you feel guilty if you don't ply them with an extravagant selection of expensive goodies. Medium bucket of popcorn £4.75, Large Bucket (twice as much) £5.15, Giant Bucket (twice as much again) £5.35, Horrendously Huge Bucket (don't even think about if you've got a hernia) £5.45. As the final credits are rolling you realise you've missed the film because you've been in a reverie trying to work out the economics of the deal. Anyway, if the cat wasn't already terrified enough by having its prized tail set alight then surely being chased by a Yuman Bean With No Eyebrows waving a Horrendously Huge bucket and a pump must have been absolutely appalling.

Now, like a scene from a Laurel and Hardy slapstick movie, things went from bad to incredibly worse. The screaming cat raced past the window, its sizzling tail setting the curtains ablaze. The curtains, apparently having been fashioned out of compressed recycled toilet paper, certainly didn't take much encouragement to ignite. Cedric, attracted by the heat source began clumping toward the window, waldos repeatedly extending and retracting and waving wildly. Not perceiving the Prof because his programming, based as it was on an old Videoplus handset possessing several times more computing power than that used for the first Moon landing, still didn't enable multi-tasking. Cedric barged into the Prof causing him to upturn his Horrendously Huge fire bucket onto the floorboards. The contents immediately leaked into the cellar below drenching the team of power-walkers on their treadmills. "Whaaaat?" you say. Oh yes, unemployed students with whom the Prof had traded 'free gym facilities' in exchange for electricity. (Nice one Prof! Walk a mile and power a light bulb for three minutes. Very apposite for the times). The lighting went out but fortunately the blazing curtains and Cedric's boiler provided enough illumination for me to note the location of the exit door.

A whistle started to whistle, quietly at first then rising in volume and pitch. It must have come from a recycled tea kettle. "Damn" exclaimed the Prof, "Cedric's regulator is stuck, I think he's about to blow. Cedric, engage your dampers" he barked authoritatively. There was no response, presumably because the antique ear-trumpets through which Cedric perceived sound were melting with the rising heat. He was deaf.

I hastily headed toward the front door, overtaken along the way by a screeching cat with a smouldering tail. The last thing I observed with fascinated horror was the Prof wearing a pair of oven gloves grappling with Cedric's fiercely waving waldos, trying to get to the boiler's controls. As I left, slamming the door behind me and observing the poor illuminated cat screeching its way down the street, I heard a loud explosion.

Soon there was the unmistakable sound of approaching fire engines.

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