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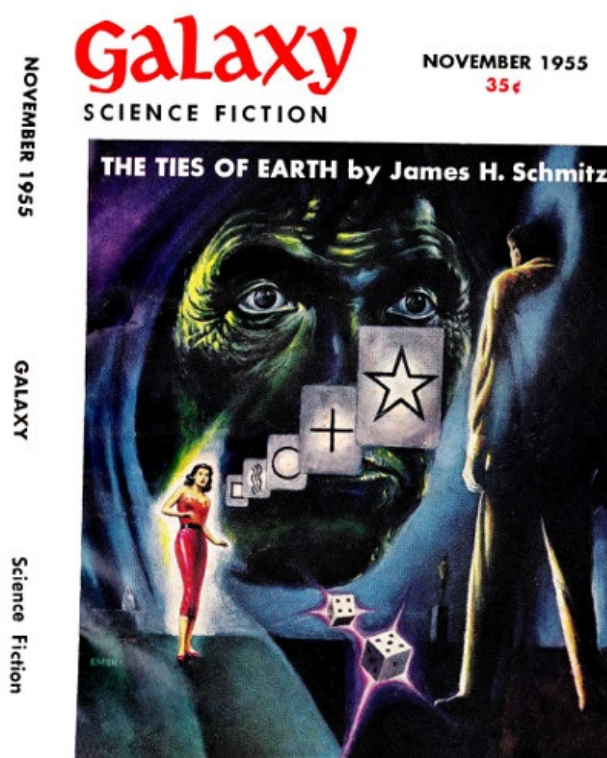
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SEMANTIC WAR ***



THE SEMANTIC WAR

By BILL CLOTHIER

Illustrated by WES

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***Perhaps there have been causes for slaughter
just as silly as this was—but try to find one!***

The rain pours down chill out of a sullen sky. My pace quickens as I try to regain the relative warmth and shelter of the cavern before I become thoroughly drenched. I cannot afford to catch a cold. All alone as I am and with no medicine, I would stand too great a chance of a quick death. These lowering Oregon skies still hold traces of nameless disease in their writhing cloud tendrils. I am not just afraid of a cold. That would only be the key for some other malady to use and strike me down forever.

I see the cave up ahead and feel a sense of contentment as I draw near and then duck inside its stony mouth. The rain hisses without, but inside it is dry. There is a heavy cow-hide hanging on a peg in the wall and I take it down and wrap it around me. Soon I will be warm. Once more I may stave off my ultimate end.

Sometimes I wonder why I wish to put it off. Certainly, according to my old standards, there is no point in living. But somehow I feel that the mere fact of living is justification in itself. Even for such a life as mine.

I didn't always feel this way. But then circumstances change and people change with them. I changed my circumstances more than myself, but I had no alternative. So now I exist.

I suppose I should be content. After all, I am alive and, in my own simple way, I enjoy life. I can remember people who asked nothing more than to be allowed to live—to exist. Ironically enough, I always considered them sub-normal. I felt that a man should strive to do something that would not only perpetuate the happiness of his own life but that of his fellow-men. Something that would make life more beautiful, and easier, and more kind.

It was with this feeling that I applied myself as a student of philosophy at Stanford University. And the strengthening of this same belief led me to take up teaching and embrace it as the only way of obtaining genuine happiness. My personal philosophy was simple. I would learn about life in all its real and symbolic meanings and then teach it to my pupils, each of whom, I felt sure, were thirsting for the knowledge that I was extracting from my cultural environment. I would show them the meaning behind things. That, I felt, was the key to successful living.

Now it seems strangely pathetic that I should have essayed such an impossible task. But even a professor of philosophy can be mistaken and become confused.

I remember when I first became aware of the movement. For years, we had been drilling certain precepts into the soft, impressionable heads of those students who came under our influence. Liberalism, some called it, the right to take the values accumulated by society over a period of hundreds of years and bend them to fit whatever idea or act was contemplated. By such methods, it was possible to fit the mores to the deed, not the deed to the mores. Oh, it was a wonderful theory, one that promised to project all human activities entirely beyond good and evil.

However, I digress. It was a spring morning at Berkeley, California, when I had my first inkling of the movement. I was sitting in my office gazing out the window and considering life in my usual contemplative fashion. I might say I was being rather smug. I was thinking how fortunate I was to have been graduated from Stanford with such high honors, and how my good luck had stayed with me until I received my doctor's degree in a famous Eastern university and came out to take an associate professorship at the Berkeley campus.

I was watching the hurrying figures below on the crosswalks and idly noting the brilliant green of the shrubbery and the trees and the lawn. I was mixing up Keats with a bit of philosophy and thoroughly enjoying myself. Knowledge is truth, truth beauty, I mused, that is all we know on Earth, and all we need to know.

There was a knock on my door and I said come in, reluctantly abandoning my train of thought which had just picked up Shakespeare, whom I was going to consider as two-thirds philosopher and one-third poet. I have never felt that the field of literature had the sole claim to Shakespeare's greatness.

Professor Lillick came in, visibly perturbed. Lillick was a somewhat erratic individual (for a professor, at least) and he was often perturbed. Once he became excited about the possibilities of the campus shrubbery being stunted and discolored by the actions of certain dogs living on campus. He was not a philosophy professor, of course, but a member of the political science group.

"Carlson," he asked nervously, "have you heard about it yet?"

"I have no idea," I returned good-naturedly. "Heard about what?"

He looked behind him as if he thought he might be followed. Then he whirled around, his sharp-featured face alight with feeling. "Carlson—the Wistick dufels the Moraddy!" And he stared at me intently, his gimlet eyes almost blazing.

I stared back at him blankly.

"You haven't heard!" he exclaimed. "I thought surely you would know about it. You're always talking about freedom to apply thought for the good of humanity. Well, we're finally going to do something about it. You'll see. Keep your ears open, Carlson." Then he turned and started out of the room. He paused at the threshold and fixed me again with his ferretlike eyes. "The Wistick dufels the Moraddy!" he said, and vanished through the door.

And that was my first unheeded omen of what was to come. I paid little attention to it. Lillick wasn't the sort of man who inspired attention. As a matter of fact, I considered reporting him to the head of his department as being on the verge of a nervous breakdown. But I didn't. In those days, nervous breakdowns were a common occurrence around college campuses. The educational profession was a very hazardous occupation. One Southern university, for example, reported five faculty suicides during spring quarter.

In the days that followed, however, I began to realize that there was some sort of movement being fostered by the student body. It couldn't be defined, but it could be felt and seen. The students began to form groups and hold meetings—often without official sanction. What they were about could not be discovered, but some of the results soon became evident.

For one thing, certain students began to walk on one side of the street and the other students walked on the other side. The ones who used the north side of the street wore green sweaters with white trousers or skirts, and the south-side students wore white sweaters with green trousers or skirts. It even got to the point where those in green sweaters went only to classes in the morning and those in white attended the afternoon sessions.

Then the little white cards began to appear. They were sent through the mail. They were slipped under doorways and in desk drawers. They turned up beside your plate at dinner and under your pillow at night. They were pasted on your front door in the morning and they appeared in the fly-leaves of your books. They were even hung on trees like fruit, and surely no fruit ever spored so queer a seedling.

They said either one thing or the other: THE WISTICK DUFELS THE MORADDY, or THE MORADDY DUFELS THE WISTICK. Which card belonged to what group was not immediately clear. It was not until the riots broke out that the thing began to be seen in its proper perspective. And then it was too late.

When the first riot started, it was assumed that the university officials and the police could quell it in a very short time. But strangely enough, as additional police were called in, the battle raged even more fiercely. I could see part of the affair from my window and therefore was able to understand why the increasing police force only added to the turmoil. They were fighting one another! And through the din could be heard the wild shouts of "The Wistick dufels the Moraddy!" or "The Moraddy dufels the Wistick!"

The final blow came when I saw the Registrar and the Dean of Men struggling fiercely in one of the hedge-rows, and heard the Dean of Men yell in wild exultation as he brought a briefcase down on the Registrar's head, "The Wistick dufels the Moraddy!"

Then someone broke in through the door of my office. I turned in alarm and saw a huge three-letter man standing only a few feet from me. He had been in one of my classes. I remembered something about his being the hardest driving fullback on the Pacific coast. He was certainly the dumbest philosophy student I ever flunked. His hair was mussed and he was wild-eyed. He had blood on his face and chest, and his clothes were torn and grass-stained.

"The Wistick dufels the Moraddy," he said.

"Get out of my office," I told him coldly, "and stay out."

"So you're on the other side," he snarled. "I hoped you would be."

He started toward me and I seized a bookend on my desk and tried to strike him with it. But he brushed it aside and came on in. His first blow nearly broke my arm and as I dropped my guard due to the numbing pain, he struck me solidly on the side of the jaw.

When I recovered consciousness, I was lying by the side of my desk where I had fallen. My head ached and my neck was stiff. I got painfully to my feet and then noticed the big square of cardboard pinned to the door of my office. It was lettered in red pencil and in past tense said, "The Wistick dufelled the Moraddy."

The uprisings arose spontaneously in all parts of the country. They were not confined to colleges. They were not confined to any particular group. They encompassed nearly the entire population and the fervor aroused by their battle-cry, whichever one it might be, was beyond all



I could not understand either slogan's meaning—and there were others like myself. On several occasions, I attempted to find out, but I was beaten twice and threatened with a pistol the third time, so I gave up all such efforts. I was never much given to any sort of physical violence.

One night, I went home thoroughly disheartened by the state of affairs. The university was hardly functioning. Nearly the entire faculty, including the college president, had been drawn into one camp or the other. Their actions were utterly abhorrent to me. If the professor was a green-top, or Wistickian, he lectured only to green-tops. If he belonged to the Moraddians, or white-top faction, they were the only ones who could enter his classroom.

The two groups were so evenly divided that open violence was frowned upon as a means of attaining whatever end they had in view. They were biding their time and gathering strength for fresh onslaughts on each other.

As I say, I went home feeling very discouraged. My wife was in the kitchen preparing dinner, and I went in and sat down at the table while she worked. The daily paper was lying on the table, its headlines loaded with stories of bloodshed and strife throughout the nation. I glanced through them. Lately, there seemed to be a sort of pattern forming.

East of the Mississippi, the general slogan was emerging as the Moraddy dufelling the Wistick. West of the Mississippi, the Wistick was receiving the greater support. And it seemed that the younger people and the women preferred the Moraddy, while elderly people and most men were on the side of the Wistick.

I commented on this.

My wife answered briefly, "Of course. Anyone should know that the Moraddy will win out." She went on with the preparations for dinner, not looking at me.

I sat stunned for a moment. Great God in Heaven, not my wife!

"Am I to understand that you are taking any part of this seriously?" I asked with some heat. "The whole thing is a horrible, pointless prank!"

She turned and faced me squarely. "Not to me. I say the Moraddy will win out. I want it to—and I think you'd be wise to get on the bandwagon while there's still time."

I realized she was serious. Dead serious. I tried a cautious query:

"Just what does the dufellation of the Wistick by the Moraddy mean?"

And it made her angry. It actually made her angry! She switched off the front burner and walked past me into the living room. I didn't think she was going to answer, but she did—sort of.

"There is no excuse for an egghead in your position not knowing what it means." Her voice was strained and tense. "If you had any perception whatever, you would understand what the Moraddy has to give the American people. It's our only hope. And you've got to take sides. You're either for the Moraddy or the Wistick—you can't take the middle way."

I felt completely isolated. "Wait! I don't know what it means—"

"Forget it," she broke in. "I should have known. You were born, you have lived, and you will die an egghead in an ivory tower. Just remember—the Moraddy dufels the Wistick!" And she swept on upstairs to pack. And out of my life.

And that's the way it was. Whatever malignant poison had seeped into the collective brain of the nation, it was certainly a devastating leveler of all sorts of institutions and values. Wives left husbands and husbands left wives. Joint bank accounts vanished. Families disintegrated. Wall street crumpled.

Developments were swift and ominous. The Army split up into various groups. Most of the enlisted men favored the Moraddy, but the officers and older non-coms pledged the Wistickian faith. Their power was sufficient to hold many in line, but a considerable number in the lower ranks deserted and joined forces with the Moraddians, who held the eastern half of the country.

The Wisticks ruled the western half with an iron hand, and all signs pointed toward civil war. Labor and military authorities conscripted the entire population regardless of age, sex or religious convictions.

For my own part, I slipped away from the campus and fled north into the Oregon mountains. It was not that I was afraid to fight, but I rebelled at the absolute stupidity of the whole thing. The idea—fighting because of a few words!

But they did.

The destruction was frightful. However, it was not as bad as many had thought it would be. The forces of the Wistick leveled the city of New York, true, but it took three H-bombs to do the job, instead of one, as the Air Force had claimed. In retaliation, San Francisco and Los Angeles were destroyed in a single night by cleverly placed atom bombs smuggled in by a number of fifth-columnist wives who gained access to the cities under the pretext of returning to their husbands. This was a great victory for the Moraddians, even though the women had to blow themselves up to accomplish their mission.

The Moraddian forces were slowly beaten back toward the Atlantic shores. They were very cunning fighters and they had youthful courage to implement that cunning. But their overall policy lacked the stability and long-range thinking necessary to the prosecution of total war. One day they might overrun many populous areas and the next day, due to the constant bickering and quarreling among their own armies, they would lose all they had won, and more, too.

Finally, in desperation, they loosed their most horrible weapon, germ warfare. But they forgot to protect themselves against their own malignity. The Semantic War ground to a shuddering halt. The carrion smell of death lay round the world.

The dufellation of the Wistick and the Moraddy.

So here I am, scuttling around in the forests like a lonely pack-rat. It is not the sort of life I would choose if there were any other choice. Yet life has become very simple.

I enjoy the simple things and I enjoy them with gusto. When I find food that suits my stomach, I am happy. When I quench my thirst, I am happy. When I see a beautiful sunset from one of my mountain crags, I am happy. It takes little when you have little, and there have been few men who have had less.

Only one thing troubles me. I suppose it doesn't matter, but I go on wondering.

I wonder which side was right. I mean *really* right.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SEMANTIC WAR ***

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