

## “One Thousand Hours”

The pale moon tucked itself behind the leaden clouds that had begun to accumulate, almost as if in response to the foreboding milieu of the evening. Even the trees, steadfast as ever, seemed to retreat into the shadows of the Swiss countryside. The château, whose warmly lit interior illuminated the pallid stone arcades, seemed to be the only thing not swallowed up by the night. A half-dozen Ford Model T automobiles were neatly parked at the far end of the courtyard near the garden parapet. The guests have already arrived.

Inside the château there was little activity. The lights, Osram Licht bulbs of high candlepower, illuminated the impressive foyers, stairwells, hallways, and dining area, all of which were empty. *Waiting for a Train* by Jimmie Rodgers was faintly humming from a phonograph in the sitting room. The men were thoroughly unperturbed, they had just moved next door to the study area and they are now locked in tense debate. This meeting is of the utmost importance and secrecy. It represents an unlikely, surreptitious alliance between rivals.

Executives from General Electric, Philips, Tungsram, Osram, and others, all are here in the same room and of the same mind. The world's premier incandescent light bulb producers have come together to form the Phoebus Cartel. Phoebus, better known as Apollo, is the Greco-Roman god of sunlight, healing, prophecy, truth, the arts, archery, and much more. Surely he could never have known that he would become the poster child for such a meticulously controlling group.

Mr. Coffin, co-founder and first president of General Electric, was the host for the evening's proceedings, having offered up his summer château as a place of correspondence for the group. Known

for his ballistic temper, he was already showing traces of annoyance with Philips father-son duo, co-founders Gerard and Anton.

Gentlemen, please, let's have a civil discussion now. We must come up with an equitable set of standards that we can all comply with.

Of course Mr. Coffin, but what my son was trying to say earlier is that your politics put this entire operation at risk. Philips has been giving regular kickbacks to dissenting British Parliament members who have been aware of our meetings for some time now, and your open support of Coolidge is causing more trouble for us overseas.

Mr. Coffin shook his head curtly. My relationship with Coolidge is none of your concern. He's been instrumental to the growth of General Electric, and I won't let any of your protesting get in the way. Besides, it's not my fault that Parliament has been curtailing monopolistic activities so harshly as of late. Perhaps you should be more 'tactful' in your diplomacy.

Gerard's face metastasized to match the burgundy recliner he sat in. This is absolutely untoward behavior, how dare you speak to me like this! Americans like you think they can say and do whatever they please. I don't care that Thomas Edison, one of the great inventors of this generation, is among your cohort. My son and I have transformed our family business into a multinational monolith; you have no absolutely no authority over me.

Anton, whose countenance had grown increasingly distressed as his eyes darted between the two men, inserted himself before the argument could decay any further.

Mr. Coffin, please excuse my father's remarks, he meant no disrespect to you and your hospitality. We Dutchmen are a proud people. Please understand that we are simply concerned that the

terms you pose will be more difficult for us to comply with given our already dicey relationship with Parliament. Perhaps we could renegotiate some of the terms?

Mr. Coffin slammed his fist down on the oak credenza, rattling the tray of empty wine glasses. There will be no renegotiating! The terms are final, and you are the only two that seem to have a problem. Perhaps Philips should withdraw from the agreement if you are going to be so myopic.

Mr. Welsbach of Osram, whose dry wit rivaled the inner recesses of the crackling hearth, now spoke. Withdraw? My friend, if that's the case then I'm afraid you'll be manufacturing lights that will never shine. But you are correct about the haziness of the agreement, perhaps we should go over the terms once more. Thus far, we have agreed to work to lower operational costs, raise prices, and standardize the life expectancy of our light bulbs. But, Mr. Philips has a point, it may be more difficult for some of us to match the same operating costs as General Electric. Mr. Coffin, what are you willing to concede in order to make this proposition more attractive for us?

Mr. Coffin sighed, knowing full well he had been outmaneuvered. He rose from his seat and began pacing back and forth along one of the bookshelves.

It seems that the terms are less satisfactory than I was initially led to believe, he grumbled. Very well. I will help finance the transition to shorter-life bulbs by providing capital. However, each party will still be required to put together a small independent team of engineers to audit the manufacturing process. Anyone failing to comply will face...steep consequences.

There is a deadening silence in the study, as though they are schoolchildren anticipating a wrap on the wrist from an angry teacher. Though the potential profits from subverting such a contract

would be vast, the men know that they will be met with a promethean fate should they be caught.

They remain cordial, but there is an icy enmity among them.

Anton was the first to break the spell. Thank you, Mr. Coffin, for negotiating. The terms you lay out have helped somewhat in putting my concerns at ease. Tell me once more, what will the lifespan of our light bulbs be?

One thousand hours, and not an hour more. The engineering consortium has shown that one thousand hours is a fine figure to balance out the other costs of manufacturing and distribution. Besides, longer lifespan bulbs have been proven to be less luminous because they produce proportionally less heat. We'll feed that to the papers if they discover that anything's amiss - they'll eat it up in a heartbeat.

Gerard raised a hand of protest. 'If' they discover anything? Surely you can't think that this can go on forever? It's only a matter of time before the public uncovers the truth. We're talking about reducing the lifespan from twenty-five hundred hours per bulb to one thousand, that's no small change.

Indeed it is not, Mr. Welsbach responded levelly. We need to remain composed. As long as the public doesn't learn of our collusion, we have a perfectly sensible reason for the change. We tell the public that it's a necessary sacrifice for increasing the luminosity of the bulbs, and that's the end of it.

The other men nodded in agreement. They had been in the study for quite some time now, and the first rays of morning light were beginning to peek through the drawn curtains. Gerard yawned, and was immediately accompanied by a succession of yawns and sighs from the others.

Well, we really must be going, Anton remarked as he and the other men slowly got to their feet and shook hands with one another.

Yes, it's really been a pleasure doing business with you gentlemen tonight, Mr. Coffin replied unctuously through gleaming white teeth. I do hope to meet with you all again soon. Best of luck.

The group filed out of the study, traipsing through the dining room and toward the main foyer where they arranged their things and pulled on their overcoats.

Injurious as it is, the Phoebus Cartel has reached a conclusion for the time-being. The executives travel back to their respective locations, where production has resumed. Teams of engineers are paying meticulous attention to the bulbs so that each of them should not burn for an hour longer and thus violate the agreement. Though the competitiveness of the executives and their contempt toward one another tempt them from time to time to evade the restrictions, they ultimately stand by. Profits soar, for a time. Perhaps their greed acts as a scintillating scotoma, a blind spot in their better judgment. After all, Phoebus is also the patron of truth and prophecy. And what would be more fitting than swift justice snuffing out the flame and revealing the truth to society.

Or perhaps Mr. Welsbach was right, perhaps the people will accept it. In 1951, twenty six years after the cartel first met, The Monopolies and Restrictive Practices Commission had this to say in a report sent to the British Parliament:

"As regards life standards, before the Phoebus Agreement and to this day the general service filament lamp was and is designed to have, on average, a minimum life of 1,000 hours. It has often been alleged—though not in evidence to us—that the Phoebus organization artificially made the life of a lamp short with the object of increasing the number of lamps sold. As we have explained in Chapter 9,

there can be no absolutely right life for the many varying circumstances to be found among the consumers in any given country, so that any standard life must always represent a compromise between conflicting factors. B.S.I, has always adopted a single life standard for general service filament lamps, and the representatives of both B.S.I, and B.E.A., as well as most lamp manufacturers, have told us in evidence that they regard 1,000 hours as the best compromise possible at the present time, nor has an evidence been offered to us to the contrary. Accordingly we must dismiss as misconceived the allegation referred to above." (MRPC).

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I grimaced as I finished reading the document through the microfilm reader. I lifted my eyes from the aperture and surveyed the library. It was a pastiche of Art Deco and Gothic styles, blending brilliantly kaleidoscoping ceramic floors with skeletal rib vaults and arches that resembled the anatomy of a large beast. The stained-glass window behind me showed the time immemorial scene of the three wisemen following the Star of Bethlehem, although their eyes seemed to be fixated on the enormous plaque above that read 'Welsbach Library, Est. 1930.' He certainly had a following, and there was no doubt in my mind that even the magi would have been magnetized by the Osram Licht CEO's dour presence.

Over the past several decades, I have built up a significant body of research on the crimes and controversies of governments and private organizations. I requested documents from the National Archives and Records Administration and the UK's MI5 files on topics ranging from Nixon's Watergate scandal, to the mysterious Polybius arcade game, to the Cambridge Spy Ring of Soviet spies. But no historical event captures my attention in the way that the Phoebus Cartel does. It is one of the

more well known collusions and one of the earliest examples of planned obsolescence, but its monopolistic augury seems to be dismissed by most. It is as if this single event behind closed doors opened up the floodgates for all sorts of expendable products to hit the market. Automobiles, nylon, plastics, electronics, all leading us toward a disposable future. True, Phoebus may not be the most shocking or even controversial conspiracy. But it sets a precedent for future oligopolistic and monopolistic activities.

I assembled my notebooks and files and stowed them in my messenger bag. I took one last glance around the admittedly beautiful library and left. It was late afternoon, and the city streets were filled with the sounds of the occasional car engine and a distant jack hammer. The urban ambience filled the silence perfectly like the final piece of a puzzle, giving it the expected air of familiarity. I realized that most people were still at work, which made me grateful that I was no longer employed. I'm getting old now, but in all fairness I never had much of a career to begin with.

I crossed at the next light and took a left toward downtown. I wasn't sure where I was headed, but deep concentration had clearly stolen the logic from my step. I wanted somewhere to sit and collect myself. The bar across the street? No, that won't do, it's too early for a drink. That quaint coffee shop over there with the dark oak furnishing and bohemian decorations? Perfect. I ordered at the counter and settled into a nearby booth. I looked up at the industrial wall sconce above me which illuminated my table like a spotlight on center stage. How long would it be before that bulb would need to be replaced? I sat there mouldering until my order was called. I was grateful for the interruption; I got my coffee and sipped it dispassionately.

My attention was once again drawn to the wall sconce. I stared at it with unwavering intensity in an effort to intimidate it. The bulb glowed brighter in response to my aggression, or perhaps it was just my eyes beginning to strain.

What do you want? I asked.

I have no desires, I only observe, it replied.

Don't you wish to live? I asked. The most basic human desire.

No.

Then what is your purpose?

To observe, to illuminate, it said back.

Who are you? I asked.

*I AM WHO I AM*, it replied in a pulsing current. I go by many names, Apollo, Phoebus, god.

I glanced around the cafe, but no one else seemed to be sharing my divine revelation.

Why do you come to me now? I asked reticently.

The sconce grew brighter until it had nearly swallowed me up.

I have a task for you. Go out into the world and say to them:

'In the name of Phoebus, let all the lights shine for eternity.'



Monopolies and Restrictive Practices Commission (1951). [Report on the Supply of Electric Lamps](#). London: His Majesty's Stationery Office. p. 98.