

The Seven-Headed Hydra

"Go," said the lady of my heart, "and kill the seven-headed hydra."

"All right," I said, "if you think that'll amuse you."

But where was the monster? The traffic policeman had no idea. I asked the editor of the children's page of a popular daily, but he scratched his head and said he had not seen the hydra for some time, and an inquiry at my fencing club produced no better result.

Finally, I discovered it in the store room of the Opera House, where it lay forgotten since they stopped playing "Siegfried" with a dragon.

It lay in a corner, sick and covered with dust; one head coughed, the second cried, the third was trying to catch a fly in its flight, while the fourth hung disconsolately and the other three were asleep.

As soon as it caught sight of me, the hydra began to wail:

"What do you want, man? You want to fight me, I suppose? You've been sent by the lady of your heart to chop off my seven heads, haven't you?"

Well, all right, you won't have to strain yourself. Get on with it. You can cut off all my heads. I'll be pleased to lend you my penknife, if you like—or do you prefer a razor blade? Well, what are you waiting for?"



"I know that one," I said with a suspicious look. "For every head I cut off you'll grow another three."

The hydra shook one of its heads.

"That rumour," it said, "was started by Heracles when I was living at Lerna. But there isn't a word of truth in it."

"But then," I said with some embarrassment, "then I don't understand. . . ."

"What is it you don't understand," bawled the

hydra with three heads simultaneously. "What sort of a life do you think this is? I couldn't bear it even if I had a dozen heads. Why can't people leave me alone? Let them cut off my heads and throw them into the dustbin, but at least they must let me die in peace."

"You mean you refuse to fight?"

"Yes," barked the hydra. "I've had enough. Have you ever read a folk tale or a legend, from Siegfried down to this day, in which I wasn't conquered? Every rickety boy and every consumptive poet beats me at the end of the story, so why should I go on trying? I'm sick of it!"

The three sleeping heads woke up.

"Stop that noise!" they growled in chorus, and went to sleep again.

Tears rose to my eyes and I slunk out of the store-room. I was simply incapable of attempting to kill the hydra.

As to the lady of my heart, well, I thought, the most she could do was to deprive me of her favours.

A Horrible Story

I am the only person on earth who knows about it.

I must not mention it to anyone else, and least of all to Amanda, who has been my faithful companion before God and man for twenty-five years, and who still thinks that our marriage was the outcome of that wonderful afternoon "when we found each other."

I alone know the truth about that afternoon.

It happened in the second half-hour of my visit. I remember everything very clearly. We were alone, Amanda and I, in the half-light of the drawing room. In those days we often withdrew like that without realising the motive—though perhaps Amanda may have guessed something.

We were talking about books. I remember how I enjoyed the sound of my own voice as I chatted with her, mixing wit with sentiment. I had a deep, sonorous voice then, and I knew that she liked to listen to it. I even recall that I mentioned Anna Karenina in proof of a witty theory I had evolved

about love. While analysing Vronsky's sentiments for Anna I suddenly realised that a great change was going on within me. A great change. I felt the blood draining from my face. Simultaneously, a vision of the hall through which I had come rose before my eyes, the hall and various mysterious corridors, through which I could flit to and fro unobserved like a ghost.

I broke off in the middle of a sentence, and Amanda gave me a startled look. She, too, was silent for a moment, then:

"Why did you stop?" she asked very softly, very tenderly, and yet a little sadly.

I forced a smile. It must have been a very queer smile.

"I don't know," I said. "Perhaps I've been talking nonsense."

"You mean when you said that the moment when love's born is more mysterious than actual physical birth?"

"Yes. . . . It sounds nonsensical like that, but—"

I could not go on. But she, to my intense surprise, did not seem to be wondering why I stammered. She was silent for a time, then she said earnestly:

"It isn't nonsense."

I could not bear it any longer. I stood up.

"I must go now," I said.

She looked at me wide-eyed, with an earnest, penetrating look.

"Why did you go pale?"

"I? . . . Did I?"

"Sit down." Then, noticing my alarmed hesitation, more firmly: "Sit down. I can't let you go while you're so agitated."

I was surprised to see that she, too, had gone pale, and was regarding me with a peculiar, kindly smile. Ah! Was she, too.

But before I could complete the thought in my mind, Amanda gently pushed me down onto the settee, and sat down herself beside me. She took both my hands in hers.

"Look at me," she said, "into my eyes." And her mouth twitched.

I stammered something. Impossible! I was seized with sudden terror. I could not stay another minute! Awful! At the same time. . . . No, I'd rather die! My face must have looked awful.

"Ervin . . . Pull yourself together . . . Silly boy . . . Could you leave me like this . . . before you've had your answer?"

What could I say? My hair stood on end and my brow was beaded with cold sweat. She opened her mouth, shut it, then she bent closer and whispered:

"Why didn't you speak? . . . How could I know? . . . If I hadn't happened to look at you just now, when you went pale . . . at that sentence. . . ."

"Great Scot! what's she driving at?" I thought desperately. But I had to say something, so I blurted out:

"How could I?"

"You were afraid?—silly boy."

"Yes."

"Darling. . . ."

We stared at each other, I pale and perspiring, she with her hands on her heart, her eyes half closed, as though she were smiling in her sleep. I jumped to my feet. She detained me. I had to go through with it.

She shut her eyes completely, and whispered rapidly, feverishly:

"No, it wasn't nonsense. . . . It's true . . . just as you said, darling. . . . Silly boy, what were you afraid of? . . . I . . . I . . . Kiss me."

She drew my face towards her mouth. I had to kiss her. Then she gave a low cry and leapt to her feet.

"Mummie! Mummie!" she called.

I heard "Mummie's" footsteps approaching. At last I could dash off. It would appear as if I had done so under the stress of this dramatic

situation. In the hall I could hear Amanda's half laughing, half crying voice:

"Mummie, Ervin and I are going to be married."

I didn't care a rap. Slamming the door, I ran down the stairs three at a time. Night was falling and the stars began to stud the heavens. For a moment I stopped to find my bearings, then I made a dash for a small wood beyond the garden whose trees were beckoning to me in the dusk with encouragement and understanding.

Strange Coincidence

The fair-haired young man with the chrysanthemum buttonhole came hustling up to the cab rank.

"Is this cab disengaged?"

"Yes, sir, but——"

"But what?"

"Only if you don't want it for long," completed the driver. "I'm about to be relieved and I want to go home."

"Have you got half an hour?" asked the young man.

"Half an hour? Yes, sir. But no more. What's the address, please?"

"Listen, my friend. You'll drive to 36, Falkengasse, where we're calling for a lady, and from there we'll drive to the 'Golden Stag' in the woods. You know where that is, don't you?"

"Certainly, sir. Only . . . what was the first address, now?"

"Number 36, Falkengrassse."

"I see. . . . Well, get in, sir."

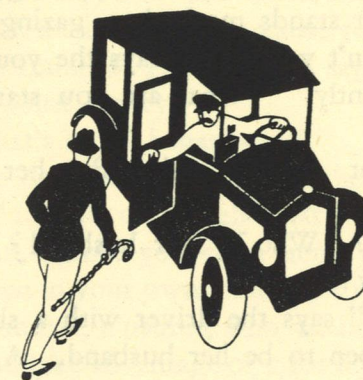
"But do be quick, my friend. I'm late as it is."

The cab starts, accelerates, streaks through streets, over bridges, past traffic policemen. Finally it turns a corner and draws up in front of a building. The driver hops out and opens the door. But the young gentleman makes no move to alight.

"Listen," he says, "do you see that balcony—there, on the first floor?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right. Now go up to the first floor. Don't speak to the porter, or to anyone else for that



matter. Just knock on the first door on the right. Get me? You must knock, not ring. You'll knock at the door of flat number seven. A servant girl will answer the door. . . . You tell her quietly to tell her mistress that Pista's waiting downstairs. . . .

Get me? Pista. . . . If the servant doesn't come to the door, don't knock again, and don't ring the bell on any account, but just come down again, because that means——"

"I understand, sir—it means that her husband's come home in the meantime."

"Splendid, my man, splendid. I give you full marks. Well, I needn't tell you any more, need I. Go ahead, old man."

The driver does not budge.

"What's the matter?" asks the young gentleman.

The driver stands motionless, gazing at him.

"Why don't you go?" says the young gentleman impatiently. "What are you staring at me for?"

"I'm not staring, sir. But her husband's arrived."

"Arrived? Who? Her husband? But how do you know?"

"I know," says the driver with a shrug, "because I happen to be her husband. A pure accident." And noticing that the other is too flabbergasted to say anything, he adds reassuringly:

"I told you I was going to be relieved and wanted to go home. . . . The fare is one and nine—by the clock. . . ."

The Honest Man

"But look here——"

"Please don't interrupt," said the Honest Man, trying to meet with his frank eyes the averted gaze of the Hungry Man. "I know quite well what you'd like to say, only you daren't say it, and you daren't look me in the eyes, because you don't know how to be frank, so I'm going to say it for you,—you want some money."

"But that's how I began——"

"Please don't interrupt," said the Honest Man loftily. "I know quite well what you began with. You began, before you came here, you began by insulting me in your own mind, by supposing that I was a scoundrel, a usurer, who would exploit your trouble and take advantage of it for his own profit."

"Really, sir," said the Hungry Man in alarm. "it would never enter my head to——"

"If it'd never enter your head, why did you say that the three apple trees in your garden were really worth a great deal more, because the fruit would cover the loan five times over?"

"Why I said it? Because it's true. Ask any expert. Besides, you can tell yourself."

"Then the fruit would be worth five times more than the advance you want from me? So you do believe that I'm a usurer, a thief? In a word, you came to me, because you think I'm the sort of man who takes advantage of other people's troubles?"

"Of course not, sir, of course not," stammered the Hungry Man. "It never entered my head. As a matter of fact, I didn't think of your character at all. I only thought that, you being a fruit merchant and in view of the fact, er. . . . Well, I have these three apple trees and there's going to be no fruit on them till autumn, and you can't hasten it, so to speak although at the same time . . . I was thinking . . . I mean I need the money now . . . very badly . . . so I thought I'd sell the fruit. . . . But I swear I wasn't thinking of anything else."

The Honest Man nodded his head with a severe yet sympathetic expression.

"So you didn't think of my character. You admit it. The essence of all that you've said is that you didn't think of my character. That's because—forgive my saying so—because you've no character yourself, and you can't imagine that there may be among these dishonest, thieving, usurious fruit merchants at least one honest man, one decent

business man who doesn't rush in, despite the prospect of a good profit, when someone wants to persuade him to enter into a usurious transaction."

"For God's sake, sir, I didn't say it was usury. . . . All I said was——"

"Please don't interrupt," snapped the Honest Man. "Though you are a man of weak character, you're well-meaning enough to deserve this lesson from me. I'm going to show you that there is at least one honest fruit merchant who absolutely refuses to exploit other people's need. I'm not going to buy the produce of those trees, because you're right when you say it'll be worth five times more than I could get it for, and I want you to enjoy the proper reward of your labours one day. I want you to sit in the shade of the fruit-laden trees with your family, happy and contented, on a sunny autumn day, and I want you on that happy day to remember that there is somewhere an honest man who at this difficult hour showed you the right path—honest, persevering work that's useful to society as well as to the worker himself and which alone can lead to a happier and more prosperous future."

The Honest Man wiped his brow. The Hungry Man was about to reply, but he could not. He collapsed and died, for he was very hungry indeed.

The Same, Yet Not the Same

The General Manager stopped in the middle of the pavement. His eyes were bright and he was talking to himself.

"No," he murmured with emotion, "this is no ordinary love affair. I've nothing but contempt for men who lose their heads over a pretty face. . . . I'm in love with her mind, her personality, her whole mysterious, beautiful ego, as I know it from her conversation. Her soul's opened up to me in our talks. . . . When I'm with her I forget that she belongs to the opposite sex. . . . It's her soul. . . . We're soul-mates. What beautiful things we've been discussing, and how enchanted I was by what she said. What was it, now? I really ought to note down what she says. There's meaning in her words. Depth. None but I can understand her, none but I deserves her love, none but I can grasp the beauty of her mind. What was it she said? 'Sometimes I feel so strange, don't you know. . . .' Yes, that's what she said, word for word. And, 'Sometimes I just sit looking in front of me,

thinking of nothing in particular.' Isn't that beautiful! And poetic! But not one man in a thousand would understand. Then the other day when she said: 'I often feel I want to be somewhere else, not where I am. . . . I can't really say where. . . . I mean somewhere, where I've never been.' How true that is! I often felt it myself, but I could not, dared not, express it like this. And once she said: 'People are not born to what life makes of them.' I saw right into her soul through this profound truth that I alone can understand. There was the time when she sighed and I said to her, 'Why did you sigh?' And she said, 'Who knows? . . . I've no idea, myself.' What a wonderful, profound and sweet reply that was. I didn't ask any more. I only felt I understood her and admired her."

The General Manager's eyes became moist and he wiped them quickly, because he was now near the office and he did not want anyone to notice his emotion.

The first thing he noticed on his desk was the Schwarz file he had given out to be attended to the day before. As soon as he saw it lying there he bawled out:

"Fuchs!"

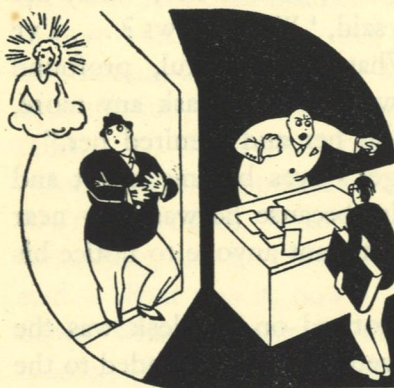
Fuchs, a pale, scared young man with long hair, leapt in from the next room.

General Manager: "Listen, Fuchs. . . . What the devil's this? You haven't added the enclosures to this damned file."

Fuchs: (blushes, lowers his eyes; stammering) "I b-beg your p-pardon, sir. . . . I beg your pardon. . . . I f-forgot all about it."

General Manager: "Forgot all about it? How can you forget such a simple thing. What am I paying you for, I'd like to know."

Fuchs: (stammering) "I really don't know, sir. . . . Sometimes I feel so strange, don't you know, sir. . . ."



General Manager: "You feel so strange? What nonsense is this?"

Fuchs: (whining) "Yes, sir. . . . I don't understand it myself. Sometimes I just sit looking in front of me, thinking of nothing in particular. . . ."

General Manager: "You just sit looking in front of you, thinking of nothing? Why, my friend, then you ought to go to a mental home, not to an office!"

Fuchs: "Please don't be angry with me, sir. I

often feel I want to be somewhere else, not where I am. . . ."

General Manager: "Somewhere else, eh? I suppose you don't like the textile department, what? You want to be transferred to the metal department, what? Well, they don't want idiots like you in the metal department——"

Fuchs: "I can't really say where, sir. . . . I mean somewhere where I've never been. . . ."

General Manager: "The Lunatic Asylum, my friend, that's where you ought to go."

Fuchs: "People are not born to what life makes of them, sir."

General Manager: "Is that so? Any more silly observations like that? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, talking such rank nonsense instead of apologising for your negligence."

Fuchs: (heaves a sigh).

General Manager: "Don't puff! What are you puffing for?"

Fuchs: (sad smile) "Who knows? . . . I've no idea, myself."

General Manager: (enraged) "You've no idea, eh? Then let me tell you! At the end of the month you can go to blazes! You're fired! Take this muck away. (Throws file at Fuchs's head). I don't want imbeciles like you on my staff."

Pre-Historic Scene

(Scene: Inn built on piles. Time: the Pliocene Era).

FIRST MAN (enter) Good morning, Smith.

SECOND MAN Morning Brown. Where do you come from?

FIRST MAN I've been out fishing. May I sit here?

SECOND MAN Certainly.

FIRST MAN What have they got here?

SECOND MAN I keep to my war rations. Must cut my coat according to my cloth.

FIRST MAN Yes, prices have gone sky high. It's beyond endurance. I had my breakfast at the "Mastodon"—guess what they charged me for a dish of mammoth tripe.

SECOND MAN Well, there's a war on.

FIRST MAN Eighteen coloured pebbles! Why, I'm at the end of my wits where to get them, though my wife's working, too. How long is this scarcity going to last?

SECOND MAN That's nothing. Do you know what I pay here for a dish of Ichtyosaurus trotters with beans? Twenty shells! You could get a lot more for twenty shells in the good old Miocene times.

FIRST MAN Two Plesiosaurs with trunks.

SECOND MAN At the very least.

FIRST MAN Yes, it's past bearing. This war ought to be stopped.

SECOND MAN On the contrary, now that we've started it it must be carried on.

FIRST MAN Is that your opinion?

SECOND MAN (with conviction) It is. We're serving the cause of peace in straining every nerve to subdue the gibbons.

FIRST MAN But who'd have thought that it was going to last so long! In view of the perfection of modern technology, in view of the fact that we're living in a century of enlightenment, at the very peak of human civilization, in the glorious era of the Lewis club, the eighteen inch

boar's tusk, finger-nails sharpened on obsidian and teeth sharpened on iron—in view of all this we were surely entitled to believe that we would finish the gibbons, who've forced this war upon us, in less than no time.

SECOND MAN That's precisely why we can't stop now. I'm firmly convinced that this will be the last war.

FIRST MAN Do you think so?

SECOND MAN Certainly. If, with the aid of our technically perfect weapons, and by straining all our resources, we carry this war to a victorious conclusion, we can make a peace that'll bring security and prosperity to all the inhabitants of the earth for ever. We shall all be brothers, and in future any differences that may arise will be settled by a league of nations. Never again will the nations resort to force after this war has been brought to an end. That's as sure as that the sun revolves round the

earth or as that the earth, according to the discovery of our glorious scientists, is a huge toad-stool balanced on the trunk of a mammoth. Science, my friend, is just wonderful!

FIRST MAN If you talk like that why don't you go to the Front yourself?

SECOND MAN (nervously) You know very well that I'm in the employ of the First Pliocene Axe Grinding Corporation, and therefore indispensable and exempted from military service. Besides, I'm busy on a play.

FIRST MAN What, again?

SECOND MAN Yes. I've got an interesting plot. I think it's going to be a success, like my last play. The background alone'll make it a success. It's set in the Miocene Era, with charmingly old-fashioned dialogue. The play is about a woman who leaves her husband because she longs for a different life, with more beauty and passion. She falls in love with

