

CON

by Ambrose Fierce

The Legend of Egon Pardenhasseler

Egon Pardenhasseler woke from a dreamless sleep in his own bed, a day later. A hangover rippled and ricocheted about in his skull and felt to him like a small, frenzied, sharp-clawed creature trying to escape from his head. Egon felt his body for things seriously wrong, discovered a note pinned to his blanket, ripped it loose, and more or less focused on it:

O for a draught of vintage! that hath been Cooled a long age in the deel-delved earth.

He crumpled it and threw it aside, and went looking for something to soothe his skull.

It was imperative that his skull be brought under control because he had to use it to remember something with, something extremely important that had eluded him for months, for years, something he felt might account for his other lapses of memory, somehow, if only he could remember it. Just before passing out for the second time the night before he had caught a glimmering.

Egon dosed himself with Bromo-Seltzer, then scalding coffee, then a half dozen aspirin. These things helped but not enough. He rummaged about and found a bottle with two inches of vodka left in it. To this he added a can of V-8 juice, an egg, some salt, lemon juice, and a generous dollop each of tabasco and worcestershire sauce.

His thumb over the neck of the bottle, Egon shook it, feebly, then stepped into a blistering shower, sat down, and pondered, pulling intermittently from his therapeutic bottle. What was that certain vital something? It was buried somewhere under the rubble of last night. What was it? He pondered hard, and swigged, and grew scarlet from his near scalding. He was feeling better, more confident. The pores in his brain were starting to open, and the concept — it — seemed closer. His memory was working flawlessly now, things were falling into place, suddenly ... *he had it!* His hot, rosy face worked into a smile as he drained the bottle, stepped from the tub, and towelled himself while humming jubilantly snatches from "Old Man River." *He had it.*

"Tote that barge, lift that bale, get a little drunk aaaaaaaaand..."

Egon was still grinning and softly singing, prone with an ice pack on his head, when it occurred to him that he might as well go to work. Minutes later he surveyed himself with satisfaction in the mirror: shoes shined, trousers pressed, tie expertly knotted and tasteful, coat well cut and rich looking. Nothing about him suggested that he had needed carrying home and tucking in, nothing except the ice pack. He removed it and winced as the throbbings returned. He replaced it, cast about for something with which to conceal it, and eased on his Zapata sombrero.

"Hi, Nadine," said Egon to the chairman's secretary.

"Egon, you're late," his chairman intoned from the depths of his office.

"So? Get stuffed."

Egon's colleagues were all hungover too. They recoiled from him and raised their arms defensively at the sight of his giant sombrero, for it was even more shouting in the daylight, a vast and blazing mass of burning orange-red, the purple life scenes flaming on the rim, and the pompoms giving the whole hat a weirdly kinetic quality. They averted their eyes. They asked no questions. Egon's headache was disappearing. He was in time for his last class, so he taught it, and found he had somewhat better than usual class participation.

He wore it the following day. His colleagues worked conversations around to sombreros, but Egon would only smile, unless he were asked point-blank why he was wearing the thing. Then he might say, "It's made from the kind of felt you love to rub against your cheek," or, "You can drink from it if you forget your canteen," or, most often, "I don't know."

He wore it the rest of his life, everywhere. When people asked him why, and if he hadn't analyzed that day's motivation, as he usually had not, then he said, "I don't know."

As the years passed, this became his favorite reply; eved if he did know the answer to a question, just for the fun of it, he would laugh and look sidelong at his interrogator from underneath his giant hat, and say, "I don't know."

He acquired the reputation of a sage.

"I don't know."

But there was one thing Egon *did* know: why he wore his huge hat. He wore it for warmth in the winter, for its protection from rain and snow, for its copious shade in the summer, and (because he was not a totally humorless man) for his own amusement; the main reason he wore it, however, was that it helped him recall something crucial. And this was Egon's crucial recollection: he had started wearing it three years to the day after his promotion to associate professor and simultaneous granting of tenure.

He had been tenured all that time since!

Tenured! It mattered not a whit, thereafter, if he published a good book or let his brains turn into rhubarb preserves, if he said clever things or stupid things, if he taught well or abominably, if he remembered everything he read and heard or if he forgot his own name. Tenure! All he had to do was keep out of the newspapers and his students. Tenure! He was set for life; he had no cares; he was *in*. Tenure! Certainly the least of his remaining tiny worries was a quirky memory — whether he remembered or whether he did not, always or something or never, did not matter, not since that magical promotion day, did not matter one God damn.

He had forgotten that.

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