

# CON

by Ambrose Fierce

The Legend of Egon Pfordenhasseler, Part II

Egon Pfordenhasseler let himself into his apartment and flew to his dictionary. He looked up the offending words, fiercely whispering, "Of course!" after each rediscovery. He consulted his French-English dictionary for *je ne sais quoi*, that germ of ignorance which had burgeoned to blight his evening, and considered its meaning sinisterly ironic. He snickered bitterly. He cursed.

While he drew a steaming bath, Egon fixed a large drink, then climbed into the tub and sipped and soaked until his chubby body was ruby-hued and glowing. He soaped himself and stepped under a spray as hot as he could bear. He stood there a full fifteen minutes, moodily clasping his midriff bulge in his hands and vibrating his arms so that his torso rippled and quivered all the way up to his collar bone, as when one end of a rope is snapped and the curve crawls along to the end.

This adipose game amused him. "I'm fat," he told himself, but he was not displeased with his ruddy, healthy, comfortable physique. He towelled himself, padded into the bedroom, and slipped between clean sheets.

The sting and gloom of his department chairman's party faded slightly. He shouldn't be so fanatical about remembering things. If a word crops up in conversation, the meaning for which eluded him, why, he should just let it go — that's what his colleagues did. But... damn! These were all words he *knew*. He wanted to make sure of words, not so much to impress his students and peers — though that was important, no getting around it — but because he had at some previous time taken the trouble to learn them, to *make them his own*. And it made him angry, sometimes nearly frantic, that the body of his knowledge, so lately distended with words and facts, was wasting and waning to a pallid, elusive wisp of what it had been. He felt as if he were being robbed, God damn it, that's all. How many times must something be learned? He was turning into a nervous wreck. *He was turning into an ignoramus!*

The soothing effects of his drink and bath had worn off; he lay rigid and raging.

His face on the pillow was a tight pink knot in a white bow.

He work still tired. A nightmare, horrible utterly and compellingly real, had torn his troubled sleep to shreds, leaving Egon exhausted and half-strangled in a ropelike tangle of sweat-drenched sheets.

The ogre had been soft-spoken and polite at first. It had appeared in Egon's living room and had begun questioning him about obscure facts, about the

names and dates associated with works of literature, about the meanings and etymologies of words. Egon looked to his library of reference material but it had disappeared.

The ogre's urbanity soon wore thin; with each of Egon's helpless dream-shrugs it became increasingly belligerent until it was leaning, hunched, with all its knuckles on Egon's desk. Its eyes were cold and dead as a frozen shark's, pitiless, and twitched at the corners. Bleak blue veins squirmed and bulged in the pale scoops of temple and eye socket. This hellish and venomous death's head stuck out its chin and skinned back its lips from all its long teeth, snagged, dagger-like, wickedly gleaming. The ogre shuddered with fury. "Don't shrug!" it screamed, "do you know the answer or not? *Yes or no?*"

"No."

"Then say so like a man."

"I don't know the answer."

"And you call yourself a Doctor of Philosophy."

"I'm sorry —"

"You should be sorry. Fraud."

"If," Egon began, timidly, "if I could just check a certain book —"

"Forget it. *I'm sorry, Doctor*. You either know it or you don't. One last chance: what do you call a word that reads the same forward as backward? Be quick."

"I know it!" said Egon. "That is... I *knew* it. Just let me check —"

The ogre lunged. Egon gasped and woke, trembling and sweating, shrouded in sheets and blankets. He disentangled himself from his dank bedding and stumbled into the living room. Sure enough, there they were, his massive banks of reference works: his huge *Random House Dictionary* that had never failed him; his language dictionaries; his *O.E.D.*; his *Encyclopaediae Britannica* and *Americana*; his atlases; his anthologies; his histories, biographies, and autobiographies; his bibliographies and bibliographies of bibliographies; his *Books in Print* and his *Bartlett's*; his selected criticism and thesauri; his compendia of style, usage, and everything else. It was all there, of course, row after row of it, rearing up massy and huge as the Hoover dam.

That day at work was bad, worse than the party. He sped home with a dozen unknowns crepitating about in his head — *two* dozen, maybe. God only knew how many. He dug salted peanuts from the sack beside him on the car seat and clapped them into his mouth, holding his hand in place while he chewed. Home to his dictionaries he roared, looking as though he were going to vomit.

To Be Continued...

# Coffee

NEW YORK (LNS-CUP) - Suisse Mochas, Cafe Francais, Cafe Vienna and Orange Cappuccino have all been exposed for what they are — sugar, chemicals and less than one-third coffee. It came to light in a San Francisco courtroom Jan. 21 when Maxwell House Coffee, a division of the General Foods Corporation, was charged with false advertising, fraud, and deceit for labeling these products "international coffee."

A spokesperson for the food agent, quoted in the *New York Times* claimed he didn't know the true make-up of the four "coffees." "The contents are listed," he said, "but there is no requirement to list the percentages."

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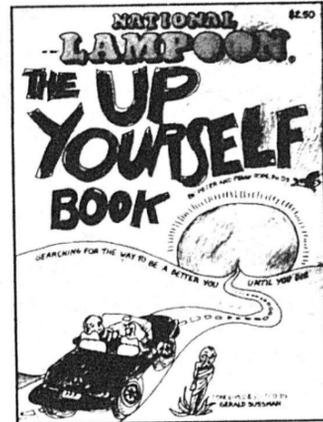
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