

The Tiddlywinks of Constantinopolus

"Contessa," the Duke says, turning to face her, "perhaps you would care to regale us with the story of how you accidentally caused the demise of The Five Headed Hydra of Constantinople, and how you escaped the King's subsequent wrath. "

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"Ah yes," murmurs the Contessa, "I had almost forgotten that little incident, coming as it did just before the much more memorable Toothpick Adventure. Still, it's not a tale I've told before and it isn't without it's own small interest.

"It was during the reign of King Taif of Constantinople that I found myself in some small financial difficulties following my somewhat impulsive purchase of the Sapphire Sword at auction as a gift for a young man to whom I had taken a fancy. I had thought myself beaten in the auction and naturally gave up when I reached my limit, but the auctioneer was of a very traditional school, and took my blink of resignation as a bid for a further 10,000 royals. It was a very handsome piece and well worth the final price, but it left me with only a few days to scrape together the gold to honour my bid.

"So when I heard from a friend that Professor Mayim at the British Museum was prepared to pay well for the recovery of the famous stone Tiddlywinks from the Steps of the Temple of Constantinopolus, I perhaps did not ask so many questions as I normally might.

"Still, it was after all For Science and so undoubtedly a good cause, and would nicely cover the purchase price of the Saphire Sword into the bargain. I set out for Constantinople at once."

"But surely", says the Duke," Constantinopolus is that rather rundown and cheaply imitative city in the lower west of Greece? I fail to fathom the necessity of going to Constantinople when the artefacts you needed were in fact in the Greek Tourism and Mistaken Identity department's very own version of the city."

"Yes, you do, don't you?" observed the Contessa, archly. "The Tiddlywinks were on the steps of the Temple of Constantinopolus, but the key needed to remove them without damage was held in a security deposit box in the First Bank of Constantinople. I thought that was common knowledge.

"So, as I have said, I made my way immediately for Constantinople. Time being of the essence, I elected to travel by balloon, thus bypassing France, Germany, and the troubles of Hungary. I made good time, dispatching a troublesome flock of flying hyenas with the aid of a pigeon tied to a green silk ribbon, and with little trouble. All in all, though, the flight was remarkably trouble-free. In Romania, I stopped to refuel in a small village in the Fagaras Mountains. Leaving my valet to tie down the balloon, I headed to the market square, where the people seemed to be preparing for some sort of festival, as each person I saw was wearing an elaborately carved and grotesque wooden mask. Naturally, they had never previously seen a Spaniard arriving in a balloon, and when I walked into the marketplace, the locals all turned to stare, and they whispered among themselves."

"Common knowledge indeed, Contessa", the Duke replies in an affronted manner. "But hardly part of the exclusive education that the noble born are honoured with."

"Staring at you?" says the Earl, "why of course, and no wonder. I would wager that the fact that you were wearing the savaged remains of a pigeon in your hair, tied with green ribbon excited their curiosity no end.

"Such attire is entirely appropriate in the jungles of Afrique, or the savannas of Bungo-Bongo, where the flying hyena slayers are held in much regard and are often sought as brides by the tribal kings. However, in Romanian villages, a headdress like this would not go unnoticed, for one of their quaint prophecies talks of the Bearer of the Bloody Bird in less than auspicious - or flattering - terms."

"I'm sure you got some more appropriate clothes fairly quick, lady," says the Bruce, "not for nothing is there the old Scottish saying: 'never meet people in masks with a pigeon in your hair'."

"Yes, I remember hearing that expression. And for some reason it was also coupled with the phrase 'Never attempt to rend a Scotsman in two with a wet haddock'", says the Duke.

"I'm afraid, sir," the Contessa addresses the Bruce, "this was before my adventures in Scotland and I was not at the time familiar with Scottish sayings. The little Romanian village was not the first place an acquaintance with Scotch folk-wisdom would have served me well - have I never told you of the time I fell foul of the phrase, 'never let a cockerel clean your shoes'?"

"So the Earl is entirely correct, and I entered the marketplace with the ribbon and bloody remains still tied in my hair, having completely forgotten to remove it once I had dispatched the hyenas. It was a rather fetching green ribbon, so when I noticed the stares and remembered the pigeon, I assumed that it was simply the usual reaction to my natural pulchritude.

"I was soon disabused of that notion, however, as the young men began to run away, the cowbells they wore at their waists for the occasion of the festival ringing the alarm and exciting the attention of their elders. The young women fell to their knees and began wailing, spoiling the elaborate embroidery of their skirts in the dust. The old men and women approached me in anger and - to my great surprise - their spokesperson began jabbering at me in French.

"Now, it is not something that I advertise, but I am somewhat familiar with the language of the frogs. The minds of the French are so base and simple that their language can be picked up - rather like the pox - without any effort and in fact, can be hard to avoid absorbing if you have a quick mind and find yourself for more than a moment on French soil. So I was able to make some sense of what the Romanian elder had to say.

"It seemed that there is a prophecy - long passed down through the folklore of Romania - that a French demon known as the Bearer of the Bloody Bird would one day fall from the sky, signalling a plague of impotence among the young men of the villages until a certain sacrifice was made to the demon. The elder had somehow mistaken me for the Frenchie and was doing his best to convince me to leave before the plague began."

The Contessa pauses for a sip of water before continuing her tale.

"It was at that point that I heard a loud cry and looked up to see my balloon aloft, my valet hanging desperately to one of the ropes with which he was supposed to be tying it down. For some reason the poor fool had untied the sandbags.

"I saw the need for action at once. I must somehow acquire a new valet. Speaking quickly in their own native tongue, I convinced the village elders that by handing over a comely young man (and two swift

llamas) to my service, the terms of the prophecy (that is, the sacrifice) would be fulfilled and the plague averted."

"Ah, rarely a wise plan to take servants or beasts from small Romanian villages. I wonder whether it was the boy or the llamas which caused you the most hindrance thereafter?"

"My own experience with Romanian servants suggests that you made the wise choice in acquiring llamas to act as your valet, but I cannot for the life of me work out what you needed the lad for. A beast of burden, perhaps?"

The Bruce mutters another Scottish proverb into his beer. You're not sure exactly what it is, but you hear "never trust a llama [something] unless it's the third of the month and he's got a [something something] in his sporran." After nearly 150 pints, the Scotsman is starting to look somewhat the worse for wear, not to mention full.

"Why yes! The llamas made adequate servants, though in the long run they turned out to be more trouble than the boy, since it was so expensive to get them adequately kitted out in the proper livery. But we (that is, the llamas and myself) still had to get to Constantinople in a hurry, and now my balloon was gone with my incompetent former valet. The young men in those parts are possessed of great strength, acquired naturally through years of carrying their horses from place to place, since the mountainside being far too steep for a horse to make its own way around. They were also (as I had observed as they fled from me when I arrived in the village) remarkably fleet of foot - perhaps a gift from God to make up for their equally remarkable slowness of thought. So what better way to get to Constantinople than to commandeer a cart for myself and my new llama valets, line it with cushions for comfort, and have it pulled down the hillside by a boy?"

"This took only a few moments to arrange, such was the villager's fear. The llamas settled into the soft cushions happily enough and the young man who had been assigned to my service was yoked up to the cart. With only a little persuasion from the whip, he galloped the rest of the way down the mountainside, across neighbouring nations and onwards to Constantinople.

"Being a fair and compassionate master, I saw to his needs before my own, making sure that he had a comfortable stall in the stables, a nice bag of oats, and a groom who would hose him down regularly. Meanwhile, I sent my valets on into the hotel to sort out our own rooms."

"It must have been quite difficult for your valets under the circumstances.", says the Duke. "What with the anti-Llama protests of the local trade unionists (curse their socialist ways). Was there not a demonstration march at the very moment your valets entered the city? I had heard you inadvertently created a riot at the time."

"Oh!" exclaims Contessa Barbara, "Is that what that was all about? An anti-llama riot, you say? How extraordinary! Well, perhaps that explains it.

"When we first arrived in town, the llamas were so deeply settled into the cushions on the cart that only their heads could be seen - they may well have been mistaken for goats. But when I sent them up from the stables to arrange our rooms, they could not have been mistaken for anything but the faithful servants they were. They seemed to be gone for quite some time, so after I had the boy settled into his stall (he must have been pining for Romania, for he seemed a little unhappy, and off his oats), I went up to the hotel to see what was keeping them.

"The street outside seemed a little rowdy, but I couldn't see the cause of the hullabaloo. The manager of the hotel was no-where to be found, no matter how loudly I rang the little bell on the front desk. I took matters into my own hands and went through the hotel room-by-room, looking for my room and

my llamas.

"The first door opened at my knock, and I found inside an elderly dragon, peering up at me from its meal of a virgin princess. Well, this was not what I was here to discover, so I apologised for the intrusion and moved on. The second door was opened by a troop of drunken Frenchmen, so I dispatched the lot and tried the third door. This would not open, nor did anyone answer my knock."

"The Dragon didn't take you to be the second course? Why ever not?"

The Earl calls for another glass of wine.

"I'll wager that the third room had previously belonged to the princess, who, being curious, adventurous and Russian, had decided to make the acquaintance of the Frenchmen, and had gotten a rude shock when she happened upon the dragon's room by mistake. The dragon had, in turn, gotten a rude shock of his own, when he found out that the princess was not quite what he'd ordered, and got terrible indigestion.

"I'm curious as to how you dealt with an angry dragon with a volatile digestive system, in such a way that you escaped with your hair, pigeon and sword unblemished but the rest of your outfit ruined."

The Contessa, too, orders more wine, then continues.

"While I debated whether to knock again at the door of the third room, or whether to move on to the fourth, the dragon finished unwrapping its intended dinner, popped her into its mouth and - as you say - realised that she was not quite what it had anticipated. Of course, it immediately spat out the princess, who fled the hotel without pausing to - er - wrap herself up again. Running out into the crowd, I daresay she soon found - if she was still interested - the sort of adventure that she had been seeking with the Frenchmen.

"Spitting her out, however, was not enough to settle the dragon's stomach, once it had her taste on its tongue. Roaring with rage, it burst out into the hallway and directed its anger at the first person it saw - namely, myself.

"Normally, an elderly dragon would not have presented a problem, but in Constantinople, they have some very troublesome wildlife protection laws. In short, I could not legally raise a hand (or more to the point, a sword) against the creature. So I retreated post-haste down the stairway, thinking quickly in the heat of its breath.

"While I was myself constrained by law from harming a scale on the dragon's back, the creature itself was quite exempt from the laws of the land. All mythological creatures, in fact were exempt. I realised at once that I could use this to my advantage." "At the time of my tale, there lived in the outer courtyard of the Great Palace of Constantinople an infamous five-headed hydra. It had arrived five hundred years before as a mere two-headed pup, and this had caused some considerable upset. Any number of brave (but perhaps none too bright) knights and soldiers tried their hands (and more to the point, their swords) against this creature, but even the most successful succeeded only in chopping off one of the creature's heads before their own heads joined the pile of skulls that littered the courtyard. And of course, each time one head was removed, two grew back in its place.

"Over time, the people grew resigned to the hydra's presence, and then even proud of their mascot, throwing chunks of meat over the castle wall to keep the creature well fed. An alternative entrance was made on the other side of the great castle so that no-one had to pass directly by the hydra, and

tourists came from far and wide to catch a glimpse of the beast in its courtyard. Eventually, the King passed the law that I have already mentioned, to protect the hydra and others of its ilk.

"My idea was to lead the dragon into the courtyard of the great castle so that it could be destroyed by the hydra and I myself would not fall foul of the law by drawing a sword against it. So I ran through the city, the angry, belching dragon close behind me doing nothing to calm the rioting crowd but doing much to ease my passage. On my way through, I paused to rescue my two llamas, who I found were being accosted by a gang of unruly manservants. So we arrived together at the outer wall of the hydra's courtyard, with only my shirt-tail and a few peasants singed by the dragon's breath."

The Earl looks confused, then laughs out loud.

"Oh, Contessa, for a moment there you had me thinking that the Hydra was going to **fight** the Dragon for you! But that is clearly just a clever rhetorical device intended for misdirection to make the ending of your story more amusing - it could never actually be!

"For, as we all know, the Hydras (or more accurately, Hydrae) are closely related to the Dragons (or Dragonae), and I'll wager that the elderly dragon in hot pursuit of yourself was in fact the Great Uncle of the Constantinian Hydra, on her mother's side (her mother, though this is of little account, being a greek lass of strange green complexion), and was in fact in town on family matters.

"So, there being no chance at all that they would fight each other, it seems entirely plausible that they would have joined forces against you and your llamae!"

The Contessa looks a little put out. "You're right, of course, but now you've gone and given it away! Hydrae are essentially the royalty of Dragonae - the result of extreme inbreeding within a noble line. The Dragon families into which Hydrae are born consider this a mark of rank and do their best to encourage the trend. So the dragon I met was indeed the Great Uncle of the Constantine Hydra, and had arrived in Constantinople that very evening, having elected to rest for a night before seeing to his family business.

"As I am familiar with dragons, I realised as soon as I encountered this one what he was up to. What else would an elderly dragon be doing so far from its native Yugoslavia?

"Indeed, it was entirely plausible that the two great creatures would join forces against me, but I was counting on another factor. The young hydra had been all alone in Constantinople for a full five hundred years. It would have reached maturity nearly 300 years ago. The elderly dragon, for its part, would have been saving its reproductive energies for this important occasion. So it was inevitable that as soon as they saw each other... Well, I am getting ahead of myself.

"I arrived at the gate of the courtyard just a little ahead of the dragon. Knowing what was to come, I had a duty of care to protect the innocence of the young llamae in my service, so I tore two strips of cloth from my skirts to provide blindfolds. The dragon, upon arriving, seemed at once to forget my existence and made its passions known to the hydra.

"This was a very noisy and firey affair, with the result that I was obliged to tear several more strips from my clothing for use in smothering fires before they could take hold in the city.

"Now, it is a little known fact that Dragonae and Hydrae, in mating, share something in common with spiders. That is to say; after the event, it is usual for one to feast upon the other, to provide extra nutrients for the developing eggs. I was counting on this. It is even less widely known - in fact, I myself was not aware - that the species also has something in common with sea-horses. The male carries the eggs."

"By the time the roaring and flaming settled down, my outfit had been almost completely sacrificed to the cause of putting out fires, but the dragon had forgotten all about me and its upset belly. The two great creatures nuzzled each other affectionately before - to my surprise - the dragon swallowed the hydra completely in two big bites (not the other way around, as I had anticipated). The King of Constantinople - who had been watching from a window - roared his distress and sent down guards to arrest me on the charge of destroying the Hydra and inconveniencing the Contantine tourism industry.

"Fortunately, I was easily able to prepare my defence, as I had not in fact directly breached the laws and - in any case - the dragon showed ever sign of a satisfactory pregnancy, which would furnish the city of Constantinople with several new Hydrae. Once he realised this, the King's anger turned to joy and he presented me with a key to the City by way of reward.

"At the nearest pawnbroker, I traded in the key to the city for the key to the Tiddleywinks of Constantinopolus and a small sum of cash sufficient to purchase good livery for my llamae and a fresh bag of outs for the Hungarian boy, who took us swiftly to Constantinopolus, where I was able to retrieve the famous Tiddleywinks in time to pass them on to the fellow at the British Museum, accept the reward and pay for the Sapphire Sword at the auction-house.

"Fickle creatures that young men are, the one to whom I had intended to give the Sword had gone and married a duchess while I was away."

The Contessa sighs, pulls a beautiful blue sword from her scabbard, and places it on the table. "So that is why I still have the sword today."

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Last update: **2008/08/27 17:57**

