

The Apple

H. G. Wells

“I must get rid of it,” said the man in the corner of the carriage, abruptly breaking the silence.

Mr. Hinchcliff looked up, hearing imperfectly. He had been lost in the rapt contemplation of the college cap tied by a string to his portmanteau handles—the outward and visible sign of his newly-gained pedagogic position—in the rapt appreciation of the college cap and the pleasant anticipations it excited. For Mr. Hinchcliff had just matriculated at London University, and was going to be junior assistant at the Holmwood Grammar School—a very enviable position. He stared across the carriage at his fellow-traveller.

“Why not give it away?” said this person. “Give it away! Why not?”

He was a tall, dark sunburnt man with a pale face. His arms were folded tightly, and his feet were on the seat in front of him. He was pulling at a lank black moustache. He stared hard at his toes.

“Why not?” he said.

Mr. Hinchcliff coughed.

The stranger lifted his eyes—they were curious, dark-grey eyes—and stared blankly at Mr. Hinchcliff for the best part of a minute, perhaps. His expression grew to interest.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “Why not? And end it.”

“I don’t quite follow you, I’m afraid,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, with another cough.

“You don’t quite follow me?” said the stranger quite mechanically, his singular eyes wandering from Mr. Hinchcliff to the bag with its ostentatiously displayed cap, and back to Mr. Hinchcliff’s downy face.

“You’re so abrupt, you know,” apologised Mr. Hinchcliff.

“Why shouldn’t I?” said the stranger, following his thoughts. “You are a student?” he said, addressing Mr. Hinchcliff.

“I am—by Correspondence—of the London University,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, with irrepressible pride, and feeling nervously at his tie.

“In pursuit of knowledge,” said the stranger, and suddenly took his feet off the seat, put his fist on his knees, and stared at Mr. Hinchcliff as though he had never seen a student before. “Yes,” he said, and flung out an index finger. Then he rose, took a bag from the hat-rack, and unlocked it. Quite silently he drew out something round and wrapped in a quantity of silver-paper, and unfolded this carefully. He held it out towards Mr. Hinchcliff—a small, very smooth, golden-yellow fruit.

Mr. Hinchcliff’s eyes and mouth were open. He did not offer to take this object—if he was intended to take it.

“That,” said this fantastic stranger, speaking very slowly, “is the Apple of the Tree of Knowledge. Look at it—small, and bright, and wonderful—Knowledge—and I am going to give it to you.”

Mr. Hinchcliff’s mind worked painfully for a minute, and then the sufficient explanation, “Mad!” flashed across his brain, and illuminated the whole situation. One humoured madmen. He put his head a little on one side.

“The Apple of the Tree of Knowledge, eigh!” said Mr. Hinchcliff, regarding it with a finely assumed air of interest, and then looking at the interlocutor. “But don’t you want to eat it yourself? And besides—how did you come by it?”

“It never fades. I have had it now for three months. And it is ever bright and smooth and ripe and desirable, as you see it.” He laid his hand on his knee and regarded the fruit musingly. Then he began to wrap it again in the papers, as though he had abandoned his intention of giving it away.

“But how did you come by it?” said Mr. Hinchcliff, who had his argumentative side. “And how do you know that it is the Fruit of the Tree?”

“I bought this fruit,” said the stranger, “three months ago—for a drink of water and a crust of bread. The man who gave it to me—because I kept the life in him—was an Armenian. Armenia! That wonderful country, the first of all countries, where the ark of the Flood remains to this day, buried in the glaciers of Mount Ararat. This man I say, fleeing with others from Kurds who had come upon them, went up into desolate places among the mountains—places beyond the common knowledge of men. And fleeing from imminent pursuit, they came to a slope, high among the mountain-peaks, green with a grass like knife-blades, that cut and slashed most pitilessly at anyone who went into it. The Kurds were close behind, and there was nothing for it but to plunge in, and the worst of it was that the paths they made through it, at the price of their blood, served for the Kurds to follow. Every one of the fugitives was killed save this Armenian and another. He heard the screams and

cries of his friends, and the swish of the grass about those who were pursuing them—it was tall grass rising overhead. And then a shouting and answers, and when presently he paused, everything was still. He pushed out again, not understanding, cut and bleeding, until he came out on a steep slope of rocks below a precipice, and then he saw the grass was all on fire, and the smoke of it rose like a veil between him and his enemies.”

The stranger paused. “Yes?” said Mr. Hinchcliff. “Yes?”

“There he was, all torn and bloody from the knife-blades of the grass, the rocks blazing under the afternoon sun—the sky molten brass—and the smoke of the fire driving towards him. He dared not stay there. Death he did not mind, but torture! Far away beyond the smoke he heard shouts and cries. Women screaming. So he went clambering up a gorge in the rocks—everywhere were bushes with dry branches that stuck like thorns among the leaves—until he clambered over the brow of a ridge that hid him. And then he met his companion, a shepherd, who had also escaped. And counting cold and famine and thirst as nothing against the Kurds, they went on into the heights, and among the snow and ice. They wandered three whole days.

“The third day came the vision. I suppose hungry men often do see visions, but then there is this fruit.” He lifted the wrapped globe in his hand. “And I have heard it too, from other mountaineers who have known something of the legend. It was in the evening time, when the stars were increasing, that they came down a slope of polished rock into a huge dark valley all set about with strange, contorted trees and in these hung little globes like glow-worm spheres, strange round yellow lights.

“Suddenly this valley was lit far away, many miles away, far down it, with a golden flame marching slowly athwart it, that made the stunted trees against it black as night, and turned the slopes all about them and their figures to the likeness of fiery gold. And at the vision they, knowing the legends of mountains, instantly knew that it was Eden they saw, or the sentinel of Eden, and they fell upon their faces like men struck dead.

“When they dared to look again the valley was dark for a space, and then the light came again—returning, a burning amber.

“At that the shepherd sprang to his feet, and with a shout began to run down towards the light, but the other man was too fearful to follow him. He stood stunned, amazed, and terrified, watching his companion recede towards the marching glare. And hardly had the shepherd set out when there came a noise like thunder, the beating of invisible wings hurrying up the valley, and a great and terrible fear; and at that the man who gave me the fruit turned—if he might still escape. And hurrying headlong up the slope again, with that tumult sweeping after him, he stumbled against one of these stunted bushes, and a ripe fruit came off it into his hand. This fruit. Forthwith, the wings and thunder rolled all about him.

He fell and fainted, and when he came to his senses, he was back among the blackened ruins of his own village, and I and the others were attending to the wounded. A vision? But the golden fruit of the tree was still clutched in his hand. There were others there who knew the legend, knew what that strange fruit might be.” He paused. “And this is it,” he said.

It was a most extraordinary story to be told in a third-class carriage on a Sussex railway. It was as if the real was a mere veil to the fantastic, and here was the fantastic poking through. “Is it?” was all Mr. Hinchcliff could say.

“The legend,” said the stranger, “tells that those thickets of dwarfed trees growing about the garden sprang from the apple that Adam carried in his hand when he and Eve were driven forth. He felt something in his hand, saw the half-eaten apple, and flung it petulantly aside. And there they grow, in that desolate valley, girdled round with the everlasting snows, and there the fiery swords keep ward against the Judgment Day.”

“But I thought these things were—” Mr Hinchcliff paused—“fables—parables rather. Do you mean to tell me that there in Armenia—”

The stranger answered the unfinished question with the fruit in his open hand.

“But you don’t know,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, “that, that is the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. The man may have had—a sort of mirage, say. Suppose—”

“Look at it,” said the stranger.

It was certainly a strange-looking globe, not really an apple, Mr. Hinchcliff saw and a curious glowing golden colour, almost as though light itself was wrought into its substance. As he looked at it, he began to see more vividly the desolate valley among the mountains, the guarding swords of fire, the strange antiquities of the story he had just heard. He rubbed a knuckle into his eye. “But—” said he.

“It has kept like that, smooth and full, three months. Longer than that it is now by some days. No drying, withering, no decay.”

“And you yourself,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, “really believe that—”

“Is the Forbidden Fruit.”

There was no mistaking the earnestness of the man’s manner and his perfect sanity. “The Fruit of Knowledge,” he said.

“Suppose it was?” said Mr. Hinchcliff, after a pause, still staring at it. “But after all,” said

Mr. Hinchcliff, “it’s not my kind of knowledge—not the sort of knowledge. I mean, Adam and Eve have eaten it already.”

“We inherit their sins—not their knowledge,” said the stranger. “That would make it clear and bright again. We should see into everything, through everything, into the deepest meaning of everything—”

“Why don’t you eat it then?” said Mr. Hinchcliff, with an inspiration.

“I took it intending to eat it,” said the stranger. “Man has fallen. Merely to eat again could scarcely—”

“Knowledge is power,” said Mr. Hinchcliff.

“But is it happiness? I am older than you—more than twice as old. Time after time I have held this in my hand, and my heart has failed me at the thought of all that one might know, that terrible lucidity—Suppose suddenly all the world became pitilessly clear?”

“That, I think, would be a great advantage,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, “on the whole.”

“Suppose you saw into the hearts and minds of everyone about you, into their most secret recesses—people you loved, whose love you valued?”

“You’d soon find out the humbugs,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, greatly struck by the idea.

“And worse—to know yourself, bare of your most intimate illusions. To see yourself in your place. All that your lusts and weaknesses prevented your doing. No merciful perspective.”

“That might be an excellent thing too. ‘Know thyself,’ you know.”

“You are young,” said the stranger.

“If you don’t care to eat it, and it bothers you, why don’t you throw it away?”

“There again, perhaps, you will not understand me. To me, how could one throw away a thing like that, glowing, wonderful? Once one has it, one is bound. But, on the other hand, to give it away! To give it away to someone who thirsted after knowledge, who found no terror in the thought of that clear perception—”

“Of course,” said Mr. Hinchcliff thoughtfully, “it might be sort of poisonous fruit.”

And then his eye caught something motionless, the end of a white board black-lettered

outside the carriage window. “—mwood,” he saw. He started convulsively. “Gracious!” said Mr. Hinchcliff. “Holmwood—!” And the practical present blotted out the mystic realisations that had been stealing upon him.

In another moment he was opening the carriage-door, portmanteau in hand. The guard was already fluttering his green flag. Mr. Hinchcliff jumped out. “Here!” said a voice behind him, and he saw the dark eyes of the stranger shining and the golden fruit, bright and bare, held out of the open carriage-door. He took it instinctively, the train was already moving.

“No!” shouted the stranger, and made a snatch at it as if to take it back.

“Stand away,” cried a country porter, thrusting forward to close the door. The stranger shouted something Mr. Hinchcliff did not catch, head and arm thrust excitedly out of the window, and then the shadow of the bridge fell on him, and in a trice he was hidden. Mr. Hinchcliff stood astonished, staring at the end of the last waggon receding round the bend, and with the wonderful fruit in his hand. For the fraction of a minute his mind was confused, and then he became aware that two or three people on the platform were regarding him with interest. Was he not the new Grammar School master making his debut? It occurred to him that, so far as they could tell, the fruit might very well be the naive refreshment of an orange. He flushed at the thought, and thrust the fruit into his side pocket, where it bulged undesirably. But there was no help for it, so he went towards them, awkwardly concealing his sense of awkwardness, to ask the way to the Grammar School, and the means of getting his portmanteau and the two tin boxes which lay up the platform thither. Of all the odd and fantastic yarns to tell a fellow!

His luggage could be taken on a truck for sixpence, he found, and he could precede it on foot. He fancied an ironical note in the voices. He was painfully aware of his contour.

The curious earnestness of the man in the train, and the glamour of the story he told, had for a time, diverted the current of Mr. Hinchcliff's thoughts. It drove like a mist before his immediate concerns. Fires that went to and fro! But the preoccupation of his new position, and the impression he was to produce upon Holmwood generally, and the school people in particular, returned upon him with reinvigorating power before he left the station and cleared his mental atmosphere. But it is extraordinary what an inconvenient thing the addition of a soft and rather brightly-golden fruit, not three inches in diameter, may prove to a sensitive youth on his best appearance. In the pocket of his black jacket it bulged dreadfully, spoilt the lines altogether. He passed a little old lady in black, and he felt her eye drop upon the excrescence at once. He was wearing one glove and carrying the other, together with his stick, so that to bear the fruit openly was impossible. In one place, where the road into the town seemed suitably secluded, he took his encumbrance out of his pocket and tried it in his hat. It was just too large, the hat wobbled ludicrously, and just as he was taking it out again, a butcher's boy came driving round the corner.

“Confound it!” said Mr. Hinchcliff.

He would have eaten the thing, and attained omniscience there and then, but it would seem so silly to go into town sucking a juicy fruit—and it certainly felt juicy. If one of the boys should come by, it might do him a serious injury with his discipline so to be seen. And the juice might make his face sticky and get upon his cuffs—or it might be an acid juice as potent as lemon, and take all the colour out of his clothes.

Then round a bend in the lane came two pleasant sunlit girlish figures. They were walking slowly towards the town and chattering—at any moment they might look round and see a hot-faced young man behind them carrying a kind of phosphorescent yellow tomato! They would be sure to laugh.

“Hang!” said Mr. Hinchcliff, and with a swift jerk sent the encumbrance flying over the stone wall of an orchard that there abutted on the road. As it vanished, he felt a faint twinge of loss that lasted scarcely a moment. He adjusted the stick and glove in his hand, and walked on, erect and self-conscious, to pass the girls.

But in the darkness of the night Mr. Hinchcliff had a dream, and saw the valley, and the flaming swords, and the contorted trees, and knew that it really was the Apple of the Tree of Knowledge that he had thrown regardlessly away. And he awoke very unhappy.

In the morning his regret had passed, but afterwards it returned and troubled him; never however when he was happy or busily occupied. At last, one moonlight night about eleven, when all Holmwood was quiet, his regrets returned with redoubled force, and therewith an impulse to adventure. He slipped out of the house and over the playground wall, went through the silent town to Station Lane, and climbed into the orchard where he had thrown the fruit. But nothing was to be found of it there among the dewy grass and the faint intangible globes of dandelion down.

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