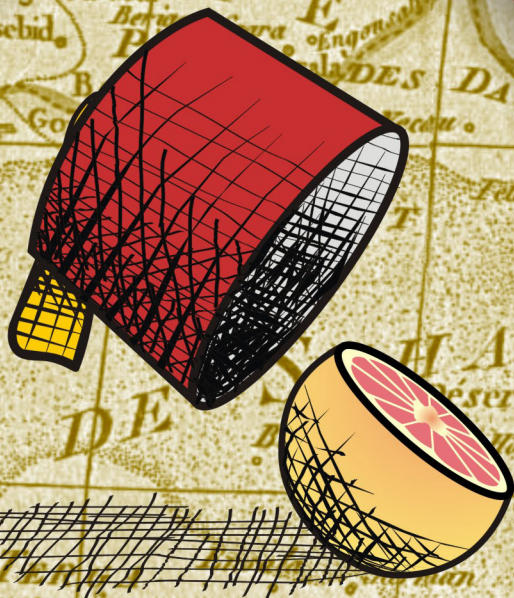


The Red Fez



Leopold McGinnis

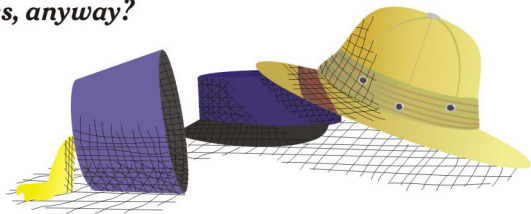
“Fourteen?!”

Mohammed and his assistant stared. Never before had Habibi bought so many tins of mustachio wax.

“Fourteen tins of Harold LaTrouse's Masculine Mustache Wax...for I will use no other brand...”

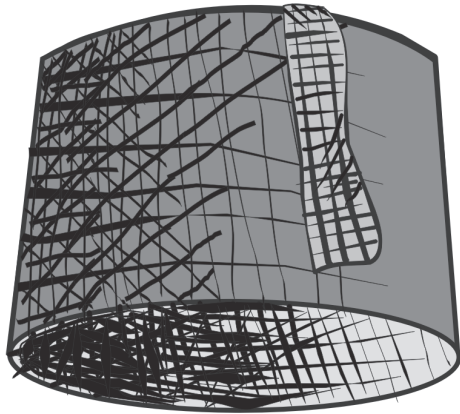


And so begins The Red Fez. In 1936 Algiers, a potentially valuable artifact is ‘stolen’ from a French archeological site and seemingly nobody knows where it has gone. Pierre Rensard, Chief of Police, is suddenly charged with recouping the item in a realm of moral ambiguity where everyone feels entitled to the ill-gotten gains. When Savid - proprietor of the local underground gambling establishment - and supposed husband murderer and British gun trader Sylvia Longshot (alongside her hunchbacked lover Afiz) enter the picture, law, order and morality all go by the wayside. But all this is before the city becomes swamped with crates of grapefruit... And where is Habibi during all this mess, anyway?



...for Papa

The Red Fez



Leopold
McGinnis

Algiers, 1936

Habibi El-Adiz wore a red fez that capped off his head in perfect fashion, cunningly mirroring the squareness of his jaw. And under his nose he wore a very thin, pointed mustachio, separated flawlessly down the middle.

This mustachio was of perfect straightness due to the constant stroking and application of mustache wax. Habibi went through a tin of mustache wax every two days which is an incredible amount for such a small mustachio. But the wax served a double purpose for Habibi. It wasn't only to keep his mustachio straight but to keep it from falling out from constant wear and tear. For you see, Habibi stroked his mustachio every time that he was plotting or scheming or devising, which was almost always. In fact, he had been plotting, scheming and devising so much and for so long that over time his mustachio had been ground down, compressed, smoothed to the point where it was no longer soft and hair-like but hard and sharp like a black fingernail or rhinoceros horn. Instead of a thin moustache Habibi had now two smooth black spikes jutting east and west on his upper lip. This often did Habibi El-Adiz stroke his mustachio.

So when Habibi El-Adiz showed up at his local mustache-wax merchant and purchased fourteen tins of mustachio wax it was obvious that Habibi was preparing to do some

Leopold McGinnis

serious plotting, scheming and/or devising. And when he was seriously plotting, scheming and/or devising he could go through two or three tins of wax a day.

“Good day, Red Fez,” the merchant greeted Habibi. He was often called Red Fez for few had ever seen him without his. “Two tins as usual, Habibi?” It was a rhetorical question as the merchant immediately reached behind his stand and brought two out.

“Not today, Mohammed. Today I need fourteen.”

“Fourteen?!” Mohammed and his assistant stared. Never before had Habibi bought so many tins of mustachio wax.

“Fourteen tins of Harold LaTrousse’s Masculine Mustache Wax...for I will use no other brand,” Habibi stated very seriously. And if things went as he suspected he would need a good stock. The upcoming embargo (if everything went to plan) could cut off his supply of wax...and that would not do.

Mohammed asked no other questions for he saw Habibi’s hand already at work on his mustache, thinking away. It had probably been at work there since dawn. Habibi was deeply occupied in thought. Plunking his francs down on the stand Habibi placed several of the round tins in each pocket and a couple in his ‘secret compartment’ under his robe.

Thus, Habibi always kept a steady supply of mustachio wax with him. Never did he know when he might be stranded in the desert, captured by brigands or far from a

The Red Fez

supply. He also always hid a backup tin or two in his--and this is something else characteristic of Habibi which very few people knew about...under his kaftan he wore a bra. "A great smuggling device," he had told one who once knew... and it was. But it was also a secret comfort to Habibi to wear it for it gave him courage and made him feel at ease. It was in here he kept his secret tins of mustachio wax. Today, one in each cup, like the storage humps of a camel.

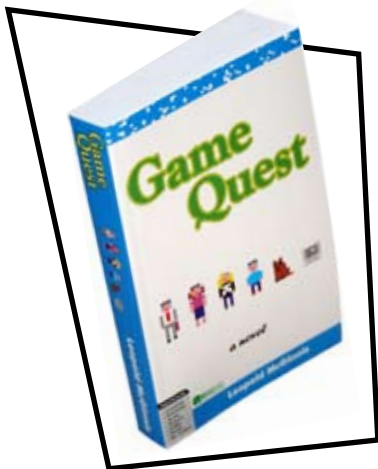
Going up the street Habibi stopped and leaned up against the wall of a dim streetway, just beside the busy market street. Taking a tin out of his pocket he applied some wax to his mustachio. Replacing the tin he went to work at his mustache. He stayed in this position for several hours applying equal time to both sides to both east and west horns, oblivious to the world around him as the hot Algerian sun beat down over the market place. Then, in the late morning, he went to his abode and there, under the shade of a palm tree, continued his plotting as he stared out into the distance. Over time his lips pursed. Later the ends of his mouth began to slowly turn up at the ends...growing and growing until his once expressionless face had evolved into a brilliant inward grin. Habibi continued to stroke his mustachio in pleasure -- reviewing his plan and working on the fine details. His plan was flawless. As usual.

Already he had gone through a tin and a half of wax.



Other books by Leopold McGinnis

Game Quest
a novel



The Red Fez
a novella

Buy 'em or read 'em online,
along with a variety of other stuff,
at www.leopoldmcginnis.com