

L'ULTIMO EROE

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d) pagine 10 (in inglese)



THE LAST HERO

by

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It is towards the end of the Ordinary War (by which is meant that it is neither the Little nor the Great War) in a sector of front X. The soldiers in the trenches are anxiously waiting for the proclamation of the armistice which they know to be imminent, and are full of projects as to what they will do when peace comes. One of the soldiers is looking affectionately at his own cottage on a neighbouring hill, which has miraculously escaped damage during the terrible bombardments.

The armistice is proclaimed, and amidst general enthusiasm the soldiers on both sides leap from the trenches and cross over to give a friendly greeting to their late enemies.

But the prevailing gaiety is brought to a sudden end by the roar of a cannon and, in the icy silence that follows, the soldier's cottage is blown into the air with a dull crash. The poor soldier, after the first moment of dismay, rushes to his lieutenant and then to the captain and the major; none of them will listen to him. Then he decides to go to the General, who is at the telephone listening to the General of the other side, who is just explaining to him, with amusement, that there has been a slight error, due to a watch which is slow.



The General of this side also finds the affair amusing and begs the other not to bother about excuses, for it is not worth it. Then he turns to the soldier, with an air of boredom, and endeavours to console him. As a matter of fact he is rather surprised that such a fuss should be made about such a small affair. In any case the error has been explained away, and the ex-enemy on the other side of No Man's Land seems to be a very nice fellow. The soldier, however, does not agree with him. Is there or isn't there an armistice? Well, then, his cottage ought to be still standing. It is a violation of the pact, an open provocation. The General is annoyed. What does the man want? To begin another war?

"Just that!". The soldier wants justice. And besides, his cottage wasn't such a little thing; it had four rooms and a kitchen... But the General gives him a friendly slap on the back and pushes him out of the door.

The soldiers are in a hurry to be off. The troops and their equipment are formed into long columns and the march begins to the sound of music and singing.

Our soldier, surrounded by his buddies, is attentively reading the proclamation of the armistice, which is posted up everywhere. Yes, there it is: cessation of all hostilities..... that's clear enough, isn't it? And wasn't it an act of hostility to bombard his house?...

But his companions are in a hurry to be off and, with a word or two of consolation, they run to join the column and leave him alone.

There is none but he left now on the deserted front, and he stands gazing disconsolately at the ruins of his beautiful cottage and medita-



ting over the injustice that has been done to him. With a shake of his head he takes his decision. Fixing his bayonet on his rifle, he leaves the trenches, as he has done so often before when going to attack, and penetrate into the enemy's territory. And this is the beginning of the <sup>the</sup> adventure of the Last Hero and beginning also of our story.

The joy is universal and all the towns are making holiday. The Grand Congress of Nations has met to sign the Treaty of Peace .

One by one, the delegates of the various states, very solemn and conscious of the historical importance of the moment, affix their signature.

When it is the turn of the delegate of the state to which the Hero belongs, a slight hesitation on his part arouses the suspicions of the President, who asks him if he really represents the unanimous consent of his nation. The delegate is embarrassed and declares that he does represent the whole of his nation, but is bound to admit that there is one - only one however - who is not in agreement; this man is a certain soldier X who does not want peace. The thing is not so simple as may appear at first sight, but is indeed very serious; it may be said to be of exceptional gravity! A lively discussion follows, becoming more violent and confused. One sensible delegate advises his embarrassed colleagues to build a new house for the soldier in place of the one which is causing all the trouble. In fact, to build him a palace if nothing else will satisfy him. But the other delegates will not hear of it, declaring it to be impossible and unheard of! Why, it would be a capitulation, an offence against decorum, against.....against....! And



then, juridically.....

The delegates, who have come to sign the Peace Treaty, seem ready to set to work and quarrel amongst themselves.....

Meanwhile, the Hero continues his victorious advance, followed by Iampo, a mongrel and mangy dog who has been his companion in the war, until he arrives at a little town.

In the market square, the mayor, the priest, the chemist and the mayor's wife are animatedly discussing this serious case, the news of which was on the first page of all the morning papers. They are very worried about it. Good Heavens, the papers are speaking of the advance of the enemy! At this moment, some rifle shots announce the arrival of Iampo, who presents himself to the mayor with the intimation that they are to surrender to the Hero. The poor things are terrified. The men are ready to obey, but the mayor's wife is for resistance to the death. The matter is settled by Iampo. Catching sight of a bitch, he approaches her with the air of a conqueror. She appears quite ready to be friendly, but another dog of the town calls all his companions together and they attack poor Iampo, who is forced to flee for help to his master. The latter seeing the danger, threatens the other dogs with his bayonet and drives them back into the town until they reach the market square. The mayor and his companions are knocked down by the dogs who flee barking as if they were mad. What can the mayor and his companions do, but surrender before the threatening attitude of the Hero?

The news of the town's capitulation spreads through the world like lightning. The papers are continually printing special editions about it, making it seem more and more important.



America plunges into the affair as one man. There is a hurried departure of special envoys, theatrical and cinematographic impresari, representatives of building firms which hope to obtain the order to build a new house for the Hero. It will be a fine advertisement for the firm which obtains the contract. The Congress holds an extraordinary night sitting and the delegates, who have at last come to an agreement, approve the formation of an Expeditionary Corps to fight the Hero, and, if possible, take possession of him. But a new discussion breaks out when they have to fix the percentage of troops to be supplied by each state in proportion to its importance. The little Republic of St. Pasquale, for instance, will have to give one single drummer boy and a short one at that!

The delegates take turns at the microphone to give the results of the Congress to the world, and trade representatives succeed in persuading them to slip the names of their products into their speeches. For instance, the delegate of Perepele is to say, when speaking of the Expeditionary Corps: "...equipped with Mirele tents; don't forget, MI-RELE!, the best and cheapest.....", and so on.

The departure of the troops from the station is very solemn and carried out according to the best traditions. Bands, flags, weeping mothers and wives, kisses, embraces, and boldly expressed intentions of the part of the soldiers.

At the end, amid the waving of handkerchiefs and flags and the crescendo of the bands, the train goes on its way to the enemy and glory. The little town seized by the Hero has a new aspect. The journalists, the producers, the impresari, the representitives, etc have arrived and are encamped around the Hero's tent, forming a great encampment near the



town. All this is a great piece of luck for the inhabitants, who are coining money and go about dressed in their best everyday to be ready for photographers. The Hero has become very popular. In fact, they are talking about erecting a monument to him. The Mayor and the town policeman, however, are jealous of his popularity and therefore against the project. The most fervent allies of the Hero are the children, the Mayor's son at their head. This is quite natural because children find a great fascination in adventures and the unexpected.

The Hero is literally besieged by the journalists, impresari, etc, who ask for interviews, want to give him contracts, want him to approve of projects for skyscrapers and so on.

One of the most assiduous of these is Minnie, a pretty American girl, who is the representative of a building firm. She tries to make him accept the plan for an enormous skyscraper and although he refuses, scandalized, he finds her very charming and is persuaded at least to take the matter into consideration. He has no idea, of course, of having such a building, but it gives him a good pretext to be with her.

Meanwhile, strange thefts of jam are taking place in the town, the victims being Minnie and the Mayor, the latter of whom owns the grocer's shop. The town policeman is informed about the matter and goes over the facts with the Mayor. They wonder whether the Hero is the thief. That would give them a chance to get hold of him and they decide to keep a good watch.

But historic times are approaching.

One of the children comes running from the telegraph office to the Hero and gives him the ultimatum of the General commanding the



Expeditionary Corps: Unconditional surrender otherwise the small army will attack you.

It is a solemn moment. Everybody is around the Hero, intent on what he may be going to say. Slowly and in silence he tears the telegram into pieces.

A yell of uncontrollable enthusiasm greets this gesture which is more eloquent than words. The Hero has acted up his fame and to their expectations.

The journalists are hurriedly taking photographs.

"But what are you going to do?", asks Minnie, half worried and half amused.

"Fight", he replies simply.

"But there are so many of them! Do you want to get killed?.. You are mad!"

"Mad, to want justice? Is my request for reparation just or not? Did they or did they not destroy the cottage when had no right to do so?"

The Hero gently points out to Minnie that these are not affairs for women. He says good-bye to her and to all the others, both inhabitants and followers; orders the children who want to follow him, to remain where they are, and goes off.

Minnie stands looking after him, uncertain whether to be amused or sorry, whether to admire him or..... no, she can't make up her mind.

The General commanding the Expedition divides his army into two columns and, after a short but intense preparation of artillery, which creates a panic amongst the grazing cows and sheep, orders the



attack.

The two columns advance with flanking movements to capture the hill.

The Hero, in his turn, so manoeuvres as to put the two columns facing each other, so that when the soldiers break out of the wood at a run, they meet the others who are climbing the hill, with the disastrous effects that may be imagined. The intervention of Iampo, in great style, turns the confusion into an ignominious rout and the soldiers, trampling and tumbling over one another in their shame, take to their heels.

The battle is thus won by the Hero, who takes the General prisoner.

He hurries back to the camp where he is greeted as a conqueror, but at this moment the town policeman comes on the scene and arrests him for stealing jam from the Mayor and Miss Minnie.

Oh the vanity of human things! Here is the man who has turned the world upside down - Public Danger No. 1 if ever there was one - arrested, humiliated and imprisoned for the theft of jam! He hopes that perhaps the presence of his prisoner, the General, who has followed him to prison, since his honour as an old soldier compels him to remain with those who have conquered and captured him, may be some compensation for the humiliation of being laid low by a humble country policeman - he who had challenged the world!

But, strange to say, our Hero appears to be worried by one thing alone, namely to persuade Minnie that it was not he who stole her jam. To the scandal of the General all the rest does not matter to him. Here, naturally, we ought to make a long discussion on Love, the



little blind god who turns people's brains etc. but we will consider it said and confine ourselves to the statement that the Hero is in love. As to be object of his love, who could it be but Minnie!

The latter, while awaiting the trial which the Mayor is preparing as magistrate of the town, pays a visit to the Hero in prison. She says she is very sorry about what has happened, and she really is, as though the fault were hers. The Hero tries desperately to convince her of his innocence. He has never stolen any jam, but Minnie pushes that aside as of no importance. Even if he had!.....the whole thing is ridiculous. In the face of this attitude of hers, the Hero is in despair how to prove his innocence, since it is of capital importance to him that she should not consider him a thief. And of jam, of all things!

As she shows, however, that she does not think him guilty, and is not vexed with him, he timidly asks her about the skyscraper project which he once found so annoying. They begin to discuss it, and, little by little, as they take off one storey after another, the skyscraper begins to look strangely like the Hero's cottage. He is delighted to see that Minnie understands him, and she also is glad because she has discovered so much simplicity and moving humanity in him and because.....because she realises that she is very fond of him. They are both happy therefore.

The Mayor is also happy on the day of the trial. The Court is full. Minnie is there and wants to withdraw her part of the accusation. But the Mayor refuses to listen. There has been a theft, the facts are against the prisoner and therefore.....

"It was I, papa!", suddenly says the Mayor's little boy.



Amidst the general stupor he turns weeping to the Hero and tells him he did not mean.....he never thought that they would have blamed it on ~~him~~ to him.....he had not spoken, but now.....

The Mayor is turned to stone. The public is laughing and making a row. All the same he is not ready to give in: what about all those empty jars found in the Hero's tent and the proofs collected by the policeman?

"It was I who put them there....." confesses the contrite policeman, "but I did it to please you!"

The public jumps to its feet and the Mayor does not know which way to turn. Luckily, the court usher enters now, in a state of confusion and gives him a bunch of visiting cards, begging to be excused for the disturbance, but there are a lot of persons outside, and one says he is a Minister, and another an Ambassador.....as for himself, he cannot make head or tail of it. They all seem to be going mad!

The Mayor is perplexed, and his perplexity grows when he sees all the Members of the International Congress enter the Court. They have come to make terms with the Hero, to redeem their General and to reprove the frightened Mayor who has dared to treat the Hero in this way.

The President turns to the Hero to suggest the conditions of Peace. They have come there to make an agreement with him.

On the hill where the Hero's cottage stood, there is a busy atmosphere around the scaffolding of a new building, where the Members of the International Congress, who have lost nothing of their air of



gravity and importance, are working hard, shirtless and sweating; some are trundling barrows, some preparing mortar and others carrying bricks laying them, etc.

The Hero and Minnie are watching them a smile.

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