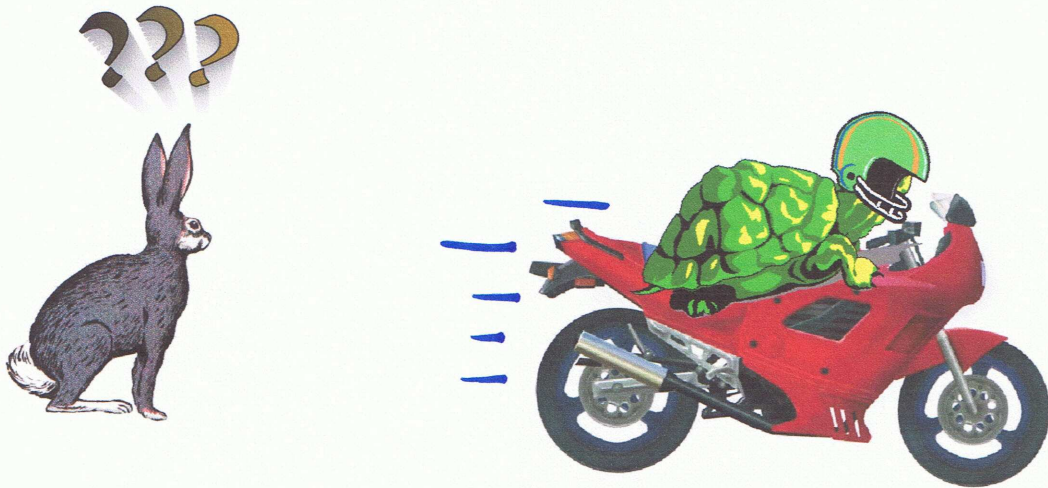


Aesop Updated



FABLES FOR THE
THIRD MILLENNIUM

Well, not really updated, since Aesop's originals are timeless, and as relevant today as they were centuries ago. The Fox continues to see the grapes as sour when he can't reach them, and no doubt he always will.

But Aesop never worked in a thirty story office building or a twenty level office hierarchy, and never had to deal with a recalcitrant computer or a belligerent boss. So for those of us who do, or did, here are fables about folk who coped with some of these modern aspects of life.

Aesop drew his morals from life; I draw mine from four decades of working for a living, thirty of them as a Federal Bureaucrat in Ottawa, (fifteen as a first level Senior Executive). I know that many people would say that "life" and "federal bureaucracy" have little, if anything, in common, but I believe that they share, amongst other things, bungled messages, suffocating committees, politically correct morons, managers who cannot manage and leaders who cannot lead. And also a few good guys.

If you have downloaded my “Eclectic Lights” collection of short stories you will have met some of my fables before. You will find several of these repeated here, alongside some new fables.

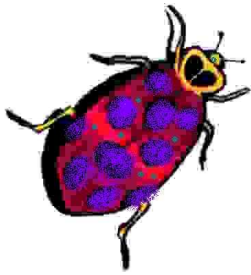
So thank you for downloading them. I hope you find my modern fables amusing; I hope you find them entertaining; I hope you find them useful.

*Barry Daniels
Western Shore, Nova Scotia
June 2009*

THE STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE FOLLAME BEETLE

A Fable for the Third Millennium

In the spring of 1927 an entomological expedition to the Amazon River Basin brought back samples of a previously unknown insect, which they found in large numbers along the river banks close to the river's source. Experts were at a loss to explain how an insect



present in such large quantities had not previously been reported or identified. The large, multicolored beetle, named for the team's leader, entomologist Sir Edmund Follame, was a beautiful creature, having a carapace which resembled mother-of-pearl in its subtle shades and in its luminescence. Sunlight

falling on the shell was reflected as though from some precious stone.

The beetles were of particular interest to entomologists of the era due to their unique foraging process. One insect, normally the largest and strongest of the group, would take the lead and become responsible for locating food. In order to be able to eat while traveling the insects had evolved a singular physiology; the antennae of each beetle were constructed so as to connect with and lock onto the rear legs of the beetle in front. In this way individual insects did not even have to look where they were going, and could concentrate on eating. Long lines of foraging insects would march through the jungle in a way which inspired one explorer to remark: "It was as though a diamond necklace were moving through the forest, catching those rays of sunlight which found their way through the canopy in a most amazing and

delightful display.” Lines of several hundred meters in length were common, and chains of up to half a kilometer were not unknown.

And then, suddenly, they were gone. While expeditions in '29 and '30 reported large colonies of Follame Beetles wandering in lengthy procession along the banks of the Amazon, the 1931 party was stunned to discover that the insects were nowhere to be found. The discovery of exoskeletal remains later that year explained what had happened to the beetles but not *why*. The shells formed a huge circle, over a kilometer in diameter, along jungle trails several kilometers west of the river.

The scientific community was baffled, and while various theories were examined and discarded, it fell to the noted entomologist Ivor Bindair-Dundat to produce the now generally accepted theory to account for the unfortunate demise of the Follame. Dundat had noticed from his observations of the beetle in previous years that the foraging lines were becoming fewer in number but were much longer. This was the result of the leading beetle of one line coming upon the end unit of another line and joining onto it. Ultimately this had resulted in the entire population of Follame beetles becoming joined together in a single line of immense length. This situation could probably have continued for some time except that, purely by chance, the leading beetle came into contact with the tail end of its own line and instinctively joined it. Bindair-Dundat speculated that after two or three circuits of the same area all available food had been taken, and the circle of beetles probably moved faster and faster in its search for food until the weaker members of the line perished from starvation. The dead insects unfortunately maintained their linkage, fore and aft, and the chain remained unbroken. While dead beetles could be carried by the line up to a certain point, it could not continue indefinitely. Move-

ment of the line finally ground to a halt, and the remaining beetles starved to death while locked into place in the motionless chain.

Bindair-Dundat was widely quoted as saying: “It saddens me greatly to think that if only one beetle had managed to break away from the circle the entire population could have been saved from extinction.”

Don't be a Follame Beetle! Never mistake Activity for Accomplishment. 'Moving' is not necessarily 'Going Somewhere'. And if you're going nowhere, running will not get you there any faster.

* * *

THE MONASTERY AT ESRA

A Fable for the Third Millennium

On the day after his fifty-fifth birthday King Ethelbert awoke with a splitting headache and a sour stomach, which is to say, as usual, and in his normal foul temper. As he returned reluctantly to the waking world the king recalled with distaste the problems which had haunted him throughout the restless night and which would no doubt be waiting for him again this morning. The Chancellor of the Exchequer was probably already outside the royal bedchamber with his rows and columns of figures which he would present with doleful accounts on the precarious situation of the royal coffers. Tradesmen needed to be paid; the Royal Guard had not received a paycheque for close to three months; the roof of the Queen's Tower was leaking like a sieve. The King's Chamberlain would be at the man's shoulder to explain again why even a small increase in taxes would probably push the unhappy peasantry into open rebellion, which would be seen by the King of Ombria, to the north, as an invitation to invade.

The Queen would be close behind, wailing about the ragged appearance of her ladies in waiting, with Prince Egbert hanging onto her skirts complaining that, at thirty five years of age, it was time he was given more responsibility in running the Kingdom.

It was all too much. Ethelbert went out through the window.

He slipped quietly back into the palace through a little used door that led past the Gardener's quarters into a walled courtyard. He opened a small gate which was cunningly concealed behind a rose bush, and so into the town. At a nearby Inn the king rented a horse, bought provisions for a week, and left the city by the main gate, unchallenged by the guard, who had just come on duty and was still rubbing the sleep dust from the corners of his eyes.

Three hours later Ethelbert emerged from his reverie to realise two things; Firstly, he felt better than he had for many months, and, secondly, he had no idea where he was.

Trotting along a backroad, not much more than a cart track, the king finally recognised the path as one he had taken many years ago, when he had been a young prince. He had ridden out with a few friends on a road to anywhere, looking for adventure. He had found, instead, the Monastery at Esra.

Ethelbert had fond memories of that time. He had stayed for several weeks at the monastery, long after his companions had left to return to court, and had formed a special friendship with a young monk named Jonathon. Even at that time, so long ago, his new friend had risen to high office, and was third only to the Abbot himself and his deputy, the Prior. Ethelbert remembered little about the Abbot, only that he, too, had seemed young for the great responsibility imposed on him, but he well remembered happy days spent with Jonathon as the monk made his rounds, discharging his many duties. Ethelbert had learned much of gardening, of literature and the copying of treasured manuscripts, of trade with the local villagers. The monks were



well advanced in the science of medicine, and held clinics to which local villagers travelled for treatment of their ills. The king had immersed himself in this practice, impressed by the kindness and respect which the monks had shown to all who came seeking their aid. He had vowed then that when he attained the throne all men in his kingdom would be treated with kindness and respect such as the monks had shown to their patients.

* * *

He was greeted at the gates by an elderly monk, and handed his horse to a groom who had run from the stables on seeing that a guest had arrived. He was offered shelter and refreshment, but before accepting either, he told the monk, he would first seek to become reacquainted with Brother Jonathon, friend of his youth. "Even so long ago," he told the monk, "Jonathon had achieved a high rank and must surely by now have ascended to the Abbot's robes."

"Yes, of course," the man replied, "I believe that Brother Jonathon did indeed wear such robes in his turn; but that was long ago, and I believe that he has long since gone to the fields."

Ethelbert did not at first understand what the monk meant by this remark, but then realised that he was using 'gone to the fields' as a gentle way of saying that his old friend had passed away.

"Do you mean that my friend is now to be found in the cemetery?" he asked.

"Indeed yes, I think that you must seek him there," the old man smiled. Obviously, to him, passing from flesh into spirit life was not in any way a cause for sadness.

Following the old monk's direction Ethelbert walked sadly along a winding path to the Monastery graveyard, which sat on a hill overlooking the buildings and with a view to the distant shore. The view was beautiful but could not lighten the king's dark mood.

For a long time he walked among the stones, reading the names of monks buried there, and was so lost in thought that he did not

hear the caretaker step quietly up behind him.

“May I help you?” the monk asked. “Are you seeking a particular marker, or are you here simply to enjoy the scenery, for truly it would be hard to find the equal of the view shared by our departed brothers.”

“I seek the stone of an old friend of my youth, Brother Jonathon by name, who I regret I did not visit many years ago, as I was told now that I must look for him among the departed.”

“Indeed you were well advised to do so, since he is here, for it is his task this week to care for the stones and tend the garden which is here to honour their memory. I thought I recognised you, young Prince, but the years have not been kind I fear.”

“Jonathon! Is it you? I thought....”

“To weep at my marker, Ethelred. And yet you may, but not today. Come with me to a place of shade which I know, and we will speak of the years that have gone by.”

The two men sat beneath an ancient willow and shared the bread and cheese which Jonathon had brought for his mid day meal.

“But how can this be?” the king asked. “Even long ago you were within reach of the purple robe, and yet now I find you picking caterpillars from the roses in the Monastery graveyard.”

“This confuses many visitors, to find our abbot so young and the pot boy a greybeard, but that is how such things work here. The job of abbot is not one for the old or feeble. The daily stresses of that post would bend the strongest back and break the sternest will. And so we reserve such a position for someone young, with a good mind and a strong constitution, so that he may survive on three hours sleep a night, and meals taken on the run; so that he may shoulder the endless troubles, problems of a type with which I am sure you are overly familiar.

“When we first met I had served my term as Abbot, and had recently stepped down. I well remember that time, and I was never

in my life so glad of anything as I was to finally take off the robes and pass them to my successor. For some years after that I worked as Master to the Illustrators, who copy old manuscripts, and from there I moved to the stables. There I stayed for longer than expected, for I loved to work with horses, and I do to this day. And then a peaceful term in the fields, raising crops and livestock for food and trade.

“But now I have attained the highest rank, where none may order my time. I pass my days in prayer and contemplation of God’s magnificent works, and, when I choose to do so, I may spend some time helping the sick at the clinic, or as you find me today, caring for the dignity of friends who have moved on beyond any earthly concerns.”

“But surely, my old friend, it is a great loss to the monastery that one such as yourself, full of the knowledge and wisdom of the years, should spend his days chasing insects in the cemetery gardens!”

“But of course! A waste it would be. If you look now down the hill you will see our newly minted abbot surrounded by a group of his peers, making his way up the hill towards us. I see with him Brother Peter, who at twenty six years old is recently appointed Minister of the Exchequer, a thankless task at which I also spent time some years ago. It is a rare day that I am not sought out for an opinion, or a piece of advice, or some morsel of knowledge I have stored away within this grey head of mine. In my days as Abbot I consulted frequently with older heads, and it would be a fool of an Abbot who did not take such advantage. But see, they will be greatly apologetic, and will not trouble us for long, and I will take you then to visit the medical rooms, for you will find much there to interest you.”

* * *

The king rode back into the palace yard on a glorious afternoon when the sun stood so high that it cast no shadow. He was challenged and then saluted as the guard recognised his sovereign through the veneer of road dust and grey bristles. As he trotted towards the stables a groom ran forward to meet him and take the

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