

Monomória and the Pyrétrines

The real estate agent had made an appointment to show the house at 2 p.m. Saturday. The client was from New Canaan, Connecticut, transferred to Cincinnati, where he would have to spend \$975,000 on a new house, or else pay a Capital Gains Tax.

Decades previously, Arthur Gabriel's four bedroom house had cost him \$40,000 to build, plus \$4,000 for the acre lot. When he and Eunice decided to sell, they listed it in the Enquirer as a "Georgian Colonial Ranch"; no asking price was mentioned. Pseudo-New England farm house style amid vastly overgrown landscaping which concealed some of the architectural faux-pax, it had caught the client's eye. Desirable location perhaps, certainly not good taste, was involved, and the client had no wife to help make the decision.

Contemplating the profit, neither Arthur nor Eunice were disturbed by the prospective size of their tax. "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. . ."1 et cetera. (They could never remember the rest of the quote).

At 10 a.m. on the day of the appointment, it was warm and sunny, in early summer. Arthur and Eunice were finishing their prune juice and coffee, chatting about the 2 p.m. meeting, when suddenly they both recoiled, as one, in horror. They were looking at a swarm of crawling and flying insects emerging from a tiny crack between the flooring and the baseboard.

"God save us! Termites!" Eunice wailed. "We'll have to cancel the appointment!"

"Not at all. I'll deal with it," said Arthur, who could be rather officious at times.

He had also happened to have learned something about pest control in his youth, a background detail of which Eunice was unaware. He got up from the table, scooped some of the bugs into an empty jelly jar and capped it tightly. In a matter of seconds he was in his car headed for a well known exterminating company downtown, which advertised 24 hour emergency service.

Coincidentally, a double header was scheduled that day at the Stadium. Arthur, with his jar of bugs, was soon tied up in a long line of barely moving traffic. Drumming his fingers with impatience, he felt a headache coming on. For distraction and to help relieve the stress, he found himself recalling how baseball, in a way, had led him into the exterminating business one summer many years before:

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Arthur had been raised in a comfortable house in a comfortable suburb. The front of the house faced a fashionable street, but the back of the property bordered a different street which was far from fashionable. It had different kinds of houses in which different kinds of people lived. A retaining wall and thick hedge protected Arthur's parents. They did not want to look at or associate with the residents of the

smaller houses. Social status was important to them; but Arthur did not understand social status.

His father had wisely laid out a soft ball diamond on a back corner of the property to encourage Arthur and his school friends in a healthful sport, and plebeian Arthur invited not only his school friends to play ball, but also two slightly older boys from the little street in back, whom he had seen peeking through the hedge. They all got along just fine, because the new boys not only brought improved skill to the ball games, but a different culture as well. They knew some dandy new cuss words, for instance, straight from their parochial school.

Arthur's mother was displeased by this new influence on her 12 year old son. She wanted to keep the boys from the back street off the property. But, as was the custom in this household, Arthur's father immediately took the opposite position. He insisted that it was good for Arthur to learn to get along with all kinds of people, as he would have to do later on in life.

Leroy<sup>2</sup> and Sylvester were the two boys from the back street; they were brothers, 13 and 14, who lived with their Dad, a widower.

Dad had inherited a pest extermination company, but he was in the process of exterminating himself by drinking a bottle of bourbon a day. There were only two clients left. Son Leroy performed the professional services required by one client, a hotel infested with bedbugs, and Sylvester the other, an apartment building with rats. Dad collected the monthly fees and gave the boys a little money from time to time, but he was not known for his largesse.

It was after one of the scrub games that Leroy and Sylvester cornered Arthur and offered him a job. Sylvester, who was not very bright, would have to attend summer school that year or else drop back a

class in the Fall. It did not occur to Sylvester that he could spend less time on baseball, soda fountain visits or shooting pool. Instead, he offered Arthur his share of the exterminating work and half of whatever his Dad might pay. Arthur was enchanted by his first-ever job offer, but he realized that he would have to get his parents permission.

Arthur's Dad was *not* enchanted by the idea of his son working for some shaky enterprise connected with people of unknown quality on the back street.

"It's not fair for you to take a paying job in these days of hardship, son. Think of the poor folks in the bread lines. One of them should have this job because they need it more than you. You are fortunate that you won't have to work 'til after college."

In accordance with household custom Arthur's Mom countered:

"Not at all, my pet. It's important for you to learn the work ethic as young as possible. And Daddy always said we should learn the value of a dollar. It's not too soon for you to have a job and learn how to make money. Go for it, son!"

We should note that in the 1930's pest control was not a mature industry. Right here in Cincinnati, Solomon Rose Rat Exterminators had been founded in 1860, possibly the first pest control company in the World. For a fee Mr. Rose poisoned rats by putting out pieces of bread coated with phosphorous paste. His company grew, moved to Chicago and by the end of World War I had many branches and franchises. But in the last 1930's they still exterminated chiefly pests of the *Rattus*, *Mus Musculus*, *Blattidae*, *Tinea Pellionella* and *Climex Lectularius* families, popularly known as rats, mice, cockroaches, moths and bedbugs. *Isoptera*, or termites, were in that era left undisturbed. Much credit for the prosperous level of pest control today is due to the highly developed Entomology Department of

Purdue University, which inaugurated practical courses for would-be exterminators, and where the Pest Control Hall of Fame is located. But during Arthur's and Leroy's youth the most advanced agents to combat pests were at the level of a saturated *betone* related to *terpenes*, derived from the tree *Cinnamómum Camphóra*, known chemically as  $C_{10}H_{10}O$ , and otherwise known as moth balls.

Having now elevated our paper to Academic status with the foregoing data, we will return briefly to Arthur's recollections of his youth as he sits with his jar of bugs in the traffic jam:

Arthur's first assignment was to accompany Leroy to the small hotel where the residents complained constantly of being bitten by *Cimex Lectuláarii*.

"A bedbug does not really bite, it sucks blood like a mosquito," Leroy explained as they sat together on the streetcar headed downtown.

Arthur was so astonished at this sudden burst of pedantry, so unlike the Leroy whom he thought he knew, that he did not reply. It must have been the first complete sentence that he had ever heard Leroy utter. More interesting information followed; Leroy had learned a lot on the job.

Arriving at the hotel, Leroy took Arthur from room to room and showed him how to use his spray and powder. Arthur noted that only ladies occupied the rooms. They were friendly and smelled wonderful, but when he asked Leroy about them, there was no answer. Leroy was interested only in the habits of the bedbugs.

After the first visit it was Arthur's duty to go alone about every ten days, because Leroy had to service the other client, the apartment building where the rats were so tame that in hot weather they were often seen swimming in the toilets.

As the summer went on, Arthur's visits to the hotel became most enjoyable. The ladies were very nice to him. He often had to wait when the ladies had visitors - they did not stay very long, but of course he could not go into a room until the visitor had left.

One day, while waiting, he noticed the piles of soiled towels here and there, so he offered to help one of the nice ladies carry them downstairs to the laundry. Cheryl, who was a slightly worn twenty-two year old, was especially nice to Arthur from then on. In fact, during their spare time, she taught him how to play Parcheesi. It was her favorite game.

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"Parcheesi was my favorite game too - until I started golf," mused Arthur, and just then the traffic began to move.

In a trice he was at the Exterminator Company explaining the situation to a technician and showing him the jar of insects.

"Relax, Buddy, those are not the dreaded *Isoptéra*, they are only members of the *Monomórium Pharaónis* family, flying ants to you. They were probably practicing *Trophálladis*, a bizarre of reciprocal feeding. Here's a spray that'll knock 'em out cold before you can count to ten and well before your real estate man arrives at 2 p.m." From the shelf behind him he handed Arthur a quarter size spray can containing a professional strength compound of *Piperónyl Butóxide* and selected *Pyrétrines*.

"That's \$184.61 with the tax. Yeah, yeah, we take Visa. Now you have a good day, Old Bud."

As was predicted the spray worked beautifully and Eunice had wiped up the mess well before one o'clock. But a problem surfaced which neither Arthur nor the technician had foreseen. A terrible odor of bug spray

began to permeate the house. Even the most insensitive client would suspect that the house had just been treated for termites.

"Quick, Eunice, get in the kitchen and cook something that smells to high heaven," Arthur was really a nerd.

The realtor and the client arrived on time.

"What's cooking?" inquired the client, as he was being shown through the house.

It did smell delicious, if one likes the odor of corned beef and cabbage. Fortunately the client did.

<sup>1</sup> Matthew XXII 21b and Luke XX 25 RSV

<sup>2</sup> Pronounced LEEroy