

STICKY WICKET

Corona XIII – scorpions and frogs

Mole

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - www.peterjeffsart.com

A scorpion approached a frog and requested a ride across a pond, promising not to sting the frog, as they both would drown. As he ferried the scorpion across, the frog awaited the fatal sting, which never came. On the far side, the scorpion explained, "So many of us scorpions died that way that we have finally learned our lesson. This way, we both benefit." "Oh, my," said the frog. "You see, we frogs also learned our lesson. So, I'm really sorry about this." Whereupon the scorpion was struck and killed by a passing car, as the frog had led him onto a busy thoroughfare. Moral: You never know who you can trust.

Ambrose Bierce was a 19th century American author, journalist, poet and satirist, whose sharp wit was readily evident in his writing. I am particularly fond of his *Fantastic Fables*. The above is not one of them (I wrote it, as an inferior tribute). He did, however, write this one:

"My boy," said an aged Father to his fiery and disobedient Son, "a hot temper is the soil of remorse. Promise me that when next you are angry

you will count one hundred before you move or speak." No sooner had the Son promised than he received a stinging blow from the paternal walking-stick, and by the time he had counted to seventy-five had the unhappiness to see the old man jump into a waiting cab and whirl away.

I reckon that the moral is the same, but he had much more style than I do. And he makes me laugh. He disappeared around 1914, when he was said to be traveling with rebel troops in the Mexican Revolution. Quite a guy. But that isn't the point ("you have a *point*, Mole?"). Yes, I do. I was thinking about scorpions and frogs.

I'm sure you know the original fable, but if you don't, in the real one the scorpion stings the frog, and as they sink, the scorpion explains that stinging is in his nature, and it is simply what he does. He blames the frog for killing them both, and from this we learn that you shouldn't, um, trust a scorpion? Well, I for one, don't. Certainly not nasty, old Professor Scorpion, who is no fun at meetings *at all*. I like my version better, because at least the frog comes out okay.

As I write this, I am in a country where we are not only in the midst of an ever-spreading Terrible Pandemic, the TP, but also seeing widespread protest after the thoroughly outrageous and unjustifiable murder by police of a subdued suspect. And our leader is a scorpion who is only fanning the flames, and using all of this for photo-ops. *Sigh*. But that isn't what got me on to scorpions and frogs. I know it is a bit trivial in light of all that is happening, but I was thinking about scientists. Hey, it's what I do. I guess it is my nature.

Most of the scientists I know are frogs, by which I mean, they will happily lend a hand to their colleagues if their expertise would be helpful in solving an interesting problem. Take Professor Frog, for example (chosen entirely at random, of course), who has frequently helped us out whenever she can, and is unerringly generous with her knowledge, reagents, techniques and expertise, even when it means that one of the tadpoles spends a few days generating data for us (of course, in return, all involved are co-authors on any publication that results).

But as we know, there are also scorpions. People who wish to exploit our efforts for their own gain, and 'forget' that we might have been collaborating. I don't mean someone to whom I freely give suggestions; I do not expect co-authorship on their paper (but sometimes a "thanks" is nice). But it often happens that we put time, energy and money into a collaboration that doesn't work out; our results do not support the conclusion they wish to make, and they publish it without our work (or findings). Not only is this bad for the

molet who invested in it, but it just isn't good science. Recently, we were struggling with a thorny phenotype and thought that it might relate to a phenomenon that Professor Ibex was studying, and asked for her help. She and her student produced very nice data that clearly showed we were on the wrong track. Once we figured it out (sort of, but enough to move forward), we published it, including the negative results and, of course, Ibex and her calf were co-authors. Win-win. It just took some more work, which is something we do. Others have done the same for us. I guess it is in our nature.

So, why am I talking about that now? Well, because we need more frogs, fewer scorpions. Not only frogs who are sharing their findings on this TP more quickly than I have *ever* seen happen in science, but also the wonderful frogs who are helping to set up and improve testing, screening, treatment and more. And the frogs who consistently wear masks and socially distance, not only to protect themselves, but to protect everyone. But we also need frogs who are listening to the pain and mourning around us, and are ready to stand shoulder to (six foot distant) shoulder to make the point that all of us are in this. Not only the TP, but in all of it, this world we live in. And the scorpions? No, I am not advocating that they be led to their doom, nor thwacking them with a stick (though sometimes I'd like to). But maybe, we can continue to ask them to reconsider their scorpion nature.

I hope that our frog nature continues beyond the TP. We have a lot of important things to do.