

THE LADYBUG MAN

"The other day I saw a little girl, maybe three years old, being interviewed on TV. When asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, she said a 'lieveheersbeestje,' a ladybug." In an email to Eddie from a local pen pal who had no idea that even then the Amsterdam-based American writer was deeply engrossed in researching this tiny friend to greenhouse plant growers.

The gentleman prefers not to be named. Indeed, he insists on it. Says he intends to write a book someday and doesn't want me spilling any of his beans prematurely. Could be. Though it's just as likely that his new wife being a rather famous personality has something to do with it. And so, by way of acceding to his request, I'll simply refer to him as Mr. L and call his spouse Madam X. For it was at one of her legendary dinner parties that our story begins.

I was sitting one place removed from Mr. L and busily chatting with the mutual friend seated between us. Despite the advent of warmer weather still being weeks away, a ladybug ('ladybird' in Commonwealth English, or 'lady beetle' to scientists), a common coccinellid, suddenly landed on the back of a nearby guest's hand. And while the tradition, in Holland and elsewhere, is to gently blow these (usually) dark-orange creatures with black spots on their wing covers away and then make a wish (with intentionally killing them bound to bring bad luck), the woman instead passed our out-of-season harbinger of spring to someone else for doing the honors.

Having watched all this, Mr. L leans over towards me and smilingly says: "I used to sell those things. Bushels of them, kilos. Made a lot of money, too."

"You did what?" I responded, more than a trifle amazed.

"Sold lieveheersbeestjes. Back in the 1980s. Bought them in southern California and Florida for about \$1000 for so many sacks, sold them here for two and a half times that. Made probably 15 or 20 runs over a five or six year period. And better yet, it was all perfectly legal."

"To whom did you sell them?" I inquired.

"Marijuana growers. They eat plant lice, you see. Aphids."

"And then, what, you quit? Made enough money, got tired of schlepping ladybugs across the Atlantic...?"

"No, they started breeding them here, also in winter. So there was no longer a need to import them."

Which was all Mr. L could tell me. Or cared to. He apparently had partners, he was doing the buying over there and running the bugs back; after which, or so hearsay word on the grapevine has it, he wiggled his way into a more lucrative branch of the business overall.

In point of fact, the variety of ladybug in which Mr. L was dealing (the convergent lady beetle, *Hippodamia convergens*) cannot be bred in the Netherlands or anywhere else; while their importation from the USA continued until around 2000, when new EU ecosystem regulations put an end

to the practice. After that, commercial insectaries (Koppert Biological Systems is among the best known and certainly most all-around helpful of these) switched to supplying growers with the two-spotted lady beetle (*Adalia bipunctata*), an equally carnivorous cousin to the convergent species and common throughout most of western Europe. Although it's entirely academic, seeing as how the alternative has been banned from coming here, Lady Two-Spots (bi-punct, yes?) has minuses as well as pluses going for her. Unlike the hippodamia, she can be bred in climate rooms, rendering her locally available all year round. She is, however, a somewhat more expensive proposition, i.e. breeding her costs more than harvesting and importing Miss Convergens. She is also a touch less effective. With her main area of predation expertise centering on pepper crops, chili and bell. Insecticides? Forget it! Apart from the much-touted health risks they pose for eventual consumers, they actually make the pest problem worse, by contributing to rapid increases of aphids. What they call 'broad spectrum insecticides,' and primarily the pyrethroid type, can easily delete the natural enemies of plant pests (not only ladybugs, but green lacewings, damsel bugs, and hover-fly larvae) and as a consequence allow aphid populations to develop unchecked. Whether or not Mr. L was aware of this before, he will be now.

All told, there are some 6000 species of ladybugs worldwide, all fairly similar in appearance and with pretty much the same breeding habits and lifestyles; although only some feed on pests of plants and a few are themselves pests. Whatever their preferred meals, cannibalism of eggs, larvae and pupae is a frequent occurrence, especially when prey is scarce. Plus it is their own aposematic appearance that helps keep them safe from would-be predators: bright colors (in particular orange and black or yellow and black) marks them as potentially poisonous, which many of them are to lizards and small birds. A human, on the other hand, would need to ingest several hundred coccinellidae before feeling any ill effects. In all respects it is more than merely fair to say that ladybugs, ladybirds, what you will, are exceedingly people-friendly. And have been so regarded for centuries, at the very least.

The lady in her name is of course none other than Our Lady, the Virgin Mary. And this is replicated in other languages. In German she's a *Marienkäfer*, Our Lady's or Mary's beetle. An interesting, and far from unusual, Christian-culture (which is to say initially Catholic) supplanting of a term from Norse mythology, so that what was the Freyja (goddess of fertility)-based *Freyjuhaena* and *Frouehenge* got themselves changed first into *Marienvoglein* and then *Marienkäfer*. In Danish the ladybug/ladybird is *mariehøne*, Mary's hen. In Spanish it's *mariquita*, 'little Mary.' (This expression, along with *maricón*, also serves to both describe and address gays, whether rudely or affectionately depending on who is using it and how.) The Dutch, alas, have shown a decidedly more patriarchal preference with their *lieveheersbeestje*, dear Lord's creature. In yet other countries and tongues, the beast of comparison, for whatever reason, becomes a cow: in Russian it's *bozh'ya korovka*, God's cow; in Irish Gaelic *bóin Dé*, God's little cow; and in Yiddish (this I find truly singular) we have *Moyshe Rabeine's kieyaleh*, our leader Moses' little cow. The Turks are prone to the good-

fortune factor, with their *ug̃ur böceg̃i*, lucky bugs. The list is nigh on endless.

Yet leave it to the French and Italians to stand out from the crowd, go their own 'erudite' way, as it were, by sticking strictly to entomology and Latin roots, i.e. *coccinelle* for the former, *coccinèlla* the latter. Never mind. The French transsexual actress and entertainer Jacqueline-Charlotte Dufresnoy (who also underwent the first widely-publicized sexual reassignment surgery in France) made her own statement, whether wittingly or no, concerning such hoity-toity linguistic behavior, by taking the stage name Coccinelle.

There is little doubt but that the myths and legends surrounding the ladybug, no matter what she is called, go back to ancient times. Northern Europe is strong on her granting wishes, should she land on you personally. In central Europe, it is thought that a girl will marry within a year of a ladybug crawling across her hand. In Italy the bedroom is favored as the place in one's house or apartment for her to fly into. A popular Russian children's rhyme pleads with 'God's cow' to take to the sky in order to fetch bread to feed the family. For the Danes fair weather is of primary interest. And so on.

We all know the nursery rhyme that goes: "Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home / Your house is on fire and your children are gone / All except one, and that's Little Anne / For she has crept under the warming pan." Many variants exist, the quaintest of which is perhaps: "Dowdy-cow, dowdy-cow, ride away heame / Thy house is burnt and thy barns are tean / And if thou means to save thy barns / Take thy wings and fly away."

In modern culture, including business culture, we have the Volkswagen beetle, launched by Adolf Hitler in 1936 and, as *der Käfer*, definitely a ladybug. The Citroën 2CV, though more of a duck, surely owes something to its German predecessor. The *lieveheersbeestje* is the symbol of the Dutch Foundation Against Senseless Violence. Plus numerous companies use ladybirds as corporate logos, e.g. Ladybird Books (owned by Pearson PLC), the Ladybird range of children's clothing marketed in Great Britain by Woolworth's, and the software development firm Axosoft.

Not to forget America, where one of the most notable bearers of the name is the late president Lyndon Johnson's (now very elderly, b. 1912) widow, Claudia "Lady Bird" Johnson; who named her eldest daughter...Lynda Bird.

Were only our coccinellida human, she'd be due some hefty royalties by now.

Whilst researching this piece, I got into a lively conversation with a lady at the division of the Dutch Customs Administration (Douane) that deals with regulations governing the import/export of living things. Speaking mainly Dutch, but occasionally switching to English (as did she), I stumbled while trying to figure out the Dutch word for 'breed' when used as a verb.

"It's *fokken*," she said.

"Really?" I replied. "How appropriate."

She laughed. Knowingly.

The next day, upon relating this exchange to a friend, he told me a joke. About a Dutch horse breeder with only a halting command of English who got invited to a diplomatic reception in The Hague, where at some point he found himself discussing the weather or what have you with the British ambassador.

"And what is it that you do exactly?" the envoy inquired.

"I...ah, what's the English word? I *fok* horses."

"Pardon?!" exclaimed the thoroughly shocked diplomat.

"Yes, yes," said the breeder excitedly, *paarden!*" *

Had I known the joke sooner, I'd most assuredly have told it at Madam X's dinner gathering. Given the company present, it would have served as an excellent digestif.

* For those who don't know, *paarden* is the Dutch word for horses.

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