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History Lesson

Leonard Johnson

Of all the forgotten figures of history, perhaps none is as infamous as the medieval philosopher Opheleus Christ (no relation). Surely none has fallen from glory quite like he did. His story could serve as a parable for our time, or at least as another tale of authority gone astray. Take it as you wish. History, after all, rarely speaks for itself when its participants are long dead.

Opheleus Christ was a universal genius at a time when a man's universe consisted mainly of wine and women. On these two popular subjects Opheleus knew everything, and such insight proved especially useful in the tiny village/kingdom of Deep Hole. Opheleus arrived there in the middle of the incompetent reign of King Kenos--a man who was certainly ahead of his time in terms of inconspicuous stupidity--and set up shop as the resident wise man. Had times been different, he might have been nothing more than a "Dear Abby" for the townspeople. But then, the times may have been what he had in mind when he moved there.

What Opheleus did to earn his fame was deceptively simple. He merely spread the word that he, Opheleus Christ, was the ultimate advisor in all things of public interest. And slowly, the people of Deep Hole came to realize that the man's claims were absolutely accurate. A few at first, then just about everyone in the entire kingdom, eventually paid at least occasional visits to Opheleus's humble hut to ask him about their favorite vices. Opheleus's reputation grew and, when he began charging service fees, so did his wealth.

But more than simply becoming well-known, Opheleus had achieved the position as the preeminent public figure of the area. While King Kenos was really nothing more to the people than a source of cheap gossip, Opheleus was respectable. He became the one to whom special privileges were granted when he appeared in public. Opheleus was looked up to; Opheleus was big.

And, as if to perpetuate his legend, Opheleus began distributing unsolicited, hand-written pamphlets of deep thought and wisdom for public consumption. These included: "Why Women Are Truly the Opposite Sex" and "Why Getting Out of the Wrong Side of Bed is Better than Staying There."

Such was how one man built his immortal fame.

Or, that may have been so if the forces of Fate hadn't conspired to test Opheleus's claim during one particularly hot summer in Deep Hole.

This particular summer Deep Hole was struck by a drought that soon showed little sign of abating. This was especially worrisome as Deep Hole was an agricultural community. None of the farmers knew what to do; it had never failed to rain during growing season

before. The farming community was thrown into a tizzy. They decided to seek the services of the man they came to rely upon in times of need.

Several of the farmers arrived at Opheleus's now quite luxuriously furnished hut early one morning. Opheleus personally let them in, and they all entered the room designated for his advising. Opheleus climbed into his large, throne-like chair and asked "How may I serve you?" as he had done for years.

One of the farmers replied "O wise one, we are in the midst of a terrible drought. What can we do to bring rain?"

Opheleus's face briefly flashed shock. He had been taken off guard by the farmer's plea. For the first time in his career as a professional visionary, he had been asked a question that did not pertain to wine or women.

If Opheleus had had less at stake, he might have simply said he did not know. But Opheleus Christ-Intellectual-without Peer-had won his fame and fortune by being a literal know-it-all. And, he was not about to risk the foundation on which he lived merely because he could not think of a more clever thing to say to a group of ignorant farmers than "I don't know."

So Opheleus leaned back in his chair and, in a welcome burst of inspiration, conceived an answer.

He told the farmers, "You will need six dead horses placed in the center of each of your fields."

The farmers stared blankly. Finally, one asked, "Why?"

Opheleus was hoping they would ask. He loved to explain himself, even when he didn't know what he was talking about.

"Well, he began, "as is common knowledge, horses are drawn to water. Now, it is my theory that this principle operates in reverse as well, meaning that water is also drawn to horses. Therefore, if you place horses in a position of being unable to be drawn to water, then water will come to the horses, which, naturally, will take the form of rain."

Awed by Opheleus's display of intellect the farmers expressed their gratitude and left. And they quickly did exactly as they were instructed.

Of course, Opheleus was counting on Mother Nature to part with some rain before long. It had, after all, never failed before to rain during growing season. And if, when it did, the people decided to reward him for his great idea, that would be better yet.

Two weeks passed. No rain.

The farmers decided, reluctantly, to return to Opheleus's hut. None of them wanted to risk offending such a great man as Opheleus Christ, but they just couldn't shake the feeling that his plan wasn't working.

They asked him, as politely as possible, whether he had miscalculated.

Opheleus replied, "Nonsense! Get more horses." Then he added, "Yours aren't big enough. That doesn't surprise me, considering how you take care of the poor things. You'll need three more."

Having no other recourse, they did as they were instructed.

Another week passed. No rain.

Opheleus considered giving up his pretenses after that third week, but before the thought could become concrete, it was, as they say, too late, because after that third week, Deep Hole was struck by a flood that destroyed half the kingdom and killed hundreds. Almost nothing was entirely untouched; Mother Nature had had quite a burden to unload, apparently.

People, as most would-be psychologists pride themselves on noting, tend to act irrationally in times of crises. This was certainly true of the survivors of the flood when they converged on Opheleus's slightly waterlogged hut. Opheleus didn't understand the ironic half logic the surviving townspeople were operating on until they kicked open the door. Opheleus Christ was never seen again.

And no one saw much of the Kingdom of Deep Hole afterward, either. As if the carnage the flood wrought wasn't enough to cause the dissolution of the community, it was even more severely struck by the poor marital judgment and excessive drinking that sprung from the absence of Opheleus Christ. King Kenos certainly wasn't any help. The rest of Deep Hole was history.

Of course, modern civilization is far too, well, modern to fall for a character like Opheleus Christ, right? And people like him simply don't exist in our times, right?

But then, maybe there is no moral to this story. Maybe there's no point in expounding on it. Maybe it's merely another mildly interesting, but ultimately useless story in history. Read it again. Judge for yourself.

But it's interesting to note that, even though agriculture has become almost completely industrialized, some farmers still insist on owning horses.