

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF AESOP

A Short Story

by

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To a paleontologist, unearthing a new find is like great sex. Hours go by while he crouches over the dig on all fours, teasing and scratching the last slivers of rock and dust away from his prize. A fossil? Or another rock? His back hurts; his knees hurt; his feet are numb. Sweat trickles down his forehead, stinging his eyes and tracing a wet trail down the ridge of his nose, pooling into a droplet at the tip. He ignores it all. He is patient. Then the telltale shape and color begin to peek through the last layer of dirt and debris. Not in their entirety, but enough. Ahh! Not just a rock; a fossil!

Dr. Archibald Higgins was such a paleontologist. A demure, mousy little man, he wore half specs perched on the end of his nose and secured with an elastic strap round the back of his head. He carried a wide assortment of stainless steel dental picks and fuzzy, camelhair brushes in a black leather satchel such as doctors used--he called them his instruments. And though Higgins would have fainted at the mere thought of sex of any caliber, he knew the carnal joy of bringing a new find into the light of day. He was good at it too, a truffle hound sniffing out secrets buried in the past. His colleagues marveled at his deftness in coaxing the delicate artifacts from their rocky warrens.

His Excellency, the Divinely Inspired Herald of the Word and Supreme Overseer of the Tower of Truth--Jeremiah Falwell to his mother--did not count paleontologist among his many titles. He had no affiliation with the scientific community--professional or

otherwise--and would have been insulted at the assumption. He bore no resemblance to the diminutive doctor in any way save shortness of stature. Falwell was a pompous balloon, bursting with hubris, whereas Higgins was... suffice it to say his balloon exceeded its contents. Nevertheless, Falwell had been at this primitive dig site for some months, showing an uncharacteristic enthusiasm for Higgins' efforts to further the interests of science.

"Damn it, man! Have you got one or not?" Falwell asked. He was kneeling on the edge of the hole Higgins was working in. His head was below the rim and his plump behind protruded into the sky, exposing a pair of pink dimples where his shirttail and belt had bid adieu. His fat-fingered hand rested in the middle of Higgins' back, keeping him from falling in on top of poor Higgins.

"Eh?" Higgins had difficulty looking up at his interrogator given the extra weight he was forced to support.

"A fossil, by the great Aesop! A fossil! Isn't that what we're here for?"

"Oh. Yes, I suppose so."

"Yes? Did you say, 'yes?' You have one then?"

"I meant, yes, that's what we're here for."

Falwell rose up to his full five feet six inches of height, clutching his head with his hands as though he should uproot it at the neck in his anguish. "By the great Aesop! Why must I infest myself with sorcerers to prove the Word? Why couldn't I just have fleas or mites or... or... body lice like normal men?"

Higgins rose to his knees inside his hole and looked up at the little round man from under the drooping hoods of his eyelids. He looked like a basset hound with his lower lids bloodshot from the rock dust and hanging in limp scallops atop the sagging cheeks of his face. "Beg pardon, Excellency?" He raised a timid hand.