

Matrimonial Adventures

The Ants

BY James Hopper

Author of "The Scoop of Charles Hamilton Potts," "Caybigan," "9009," "Trimming of Goggles," "The Freshman," and "What Happened in the Night."

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A FOREWORD OF JAMES HOPPER

James Hopper started his literary career on a San Francisco newspaper. Shortly after this he was one of those who answered a call for 1,000 teachers to go to the Philippines, and was sent to the Island of Negros. He joined that pedagogical company to gain the opportunity to study the life around him, which later he could weave into stories. The result of his stay in the Philippines was a series of stories which appeared first in McClure's Magazine, and then in the book called "Caybigan," which means "friend" in the Philippine language.

In 1914 Mr. Hopper went to France as a war correspondent. In 1916 he returned to this country and went to the Mexican border with the American army. When we entered the World war he again went to France, still as a correspondent, but he joined in the fighting, going over the top with the Twenty-eighth Infantry at Cantigny. He says that this is his main war feat, but that in college he played football. His story "The Scoop of Charles Hamilton Potts" gives a realistic and human but intensely humorous account of a reporter in battle.

The Philippine stories, continued for a number of years, were followed by fiction of various kinds. "The Ants," written for the Star Author Series of Matrimonial Adventures, touches one of the big problems of marriage. It is told with a poignant skill.

MARY STEWART CUTTING, JR.

Peter left the studio, where he had been painting steadily for hours, and stepped out into the garden. It was full moon; he blinked under the high sun and stretched, still a little dazed from his long plunge in toll; he inhaled full the perfume of roses.

A short distance from him, on the edge of the driveway, was a big hole—dug, he surmised, to receive some transplanted bush, lilac or magnolia. Water, trickling from a hose that stretched like a black snake across the lawn, was making of this excavation a small lake. Peter stepped to the little gurgling lake, and sat himself contentedly near its bank. A small lake sufficed Peter; he did not need a big one.

It was lovely here. The water sang; slowly, it rose; the flowers perfumed; Peter's soul dilated deliciously. Far above, in the blue, a hawk circled.

But this did not last. Within the circle of Peter's carefully established vacuum, a small hard thing began to intrude. The rasp of a rake, there behind the hedge, at his back. His face darkened and puckered.

He knew who was raking there behind the hedge. Not only did he know; with that implacable vision given to him with life, he also saw.

It was his wife who was there behind the hedge, raking. And though behind the hedge, which was at his back, he saw her.

He knew exactly how she looked, there, behind the hedge. She looked, there, behind the hedge, like a woman in the wrapper with the big flower pattern; it was tied around her with a cord at the end of which was a worn tassel. Underneath, the soiled white hem showed off the gown she had worn in the night—for from her bed she had gone to her garden. Her bare feet were in old brown slippers; there would be streaks of wet ground across the part of the feet which showed between the flaccid slippers and the soiled gown.

They pressed the earth, these feet, firmly; set down well apart in a solid wide base, they pressed it familiarly. They might—had seen that—be sunk, in their flaccid slippers, into soft manure, unshrinkingly.

Her hair would be tied tight in a small knot behind. She squatted often over some seed, some weed. She was like a strong thick cooile of the rice paddies.

Peter's face puckered still more. Not with anger, not with disgust, but with a sort of mournful helplessness. Then, abruptly, another vision came to him. He saw her as she had been years ago. She was waiting for him at a stile, on the far edge of a golden field. She was slender, fragrant and soft. Her pretty frock was cut low at the neck; the beginning of her virgin breasts swelled deliciously there. And her eyes, turned up to him, were a little wet, as Venus is at dawn, and the red chalice of her lips was slightly opened.

not the only one about. An army of ants was passing close to his feet; so close, in fact, that they swirled about these extremities as a host, following a valley, doubling some rocky El Capitan. Peter hastily withdrew his feet, kneeling down, stretching his rather long neck, he proceeded to observe what was happening.

Across the drive, from the excavation of which Peter's fancy had made a lake, from that hole to the hedge, the ants stretched, a broad rusty-red ribbon. At first Peter thought they were marching one way, then he saw that the movement was a double one. Hundreds of thousands of the small carapaced creatures were marching from the hole to the hedge; but as many were marching from the hedge to the hole; they threaded their way in and out of each others' course, the two movements interpenetrated each other. And bringing his long nose still lower, Peter saw that all this had a character of panic and dismay; that, had this multitude not been denied voice, a great confused clamor would be rising to his high-perched ear.

Of these hastening from the vicinity of the excavation, every one was laden. Carrying it high in their mandibles for short exhausting runs, or dragging it fiercely after them; over sticks that were great logs to them, or pebbles that were Himalayas; skirting or piercing clumps of grass which were impenetrable jungle, they bore each a small whitish thing which looked like a grain, which, in fact was grain—the grain, the life spark, the existence itself of this agitated nation.

Peter ran a glance backward over their march and found its starting point. The ants had all emerged, they were emerging, from five small holes near the excavation; five little holes smaller than the hollow of a wild-owl straw. Out of them, ceaselessly, in a constant trickle, they appeared into the sunlight, carrying on high before them, as the monk does the cross, the sacred larva; or, backing up, fiercely snatching it along after them. Here those of the army who marched the reverse way, and which all were without burden, met those that were coming out and, letting them pass, after a moment's hesitation during which they seemed to be calling to themselves all their courage, resolutely plunged head first down into the earth. Peter now understood. He was the witness, the god-like witness of just such a catastrophe as, in the tenebrous past, again and again had nearly wiped out his own kind. The water, which was filling the excavation dug in the garden, from below had established communication with the city of the ants. It was rising slowly down in there; slowly, mysteriously, inexorably; filling the lowest chambers, rising along the galleries, bursting into halls; and the population, in mute uproar, was feeling its crumbling city, hugging tight to itself its life kernel.

Peter's heart thumped and his brain flamed. He saw clearly the great underground city, its vast halls and dim secret chambers, its interwoven galleries vibrant with peril and disaster. He heard the sullen roar of sudden rushing waters. Walls fell in large fakes, ceilings collapsed, floors sucked in, and thousand upon thousand every second died. He saw the stubborn citizens, in this immense dissolution of all they had ever been sure of, tenaciously toiling to snatch from this cataclysmic threat the future of the race, the grains which were the concentrated promise of future generations. Down there, at every heart beat, thousands died a sacrificial death; down there, under ground, a great holocaust was taking place, made splendid by a myriad heroisms. Peter became much excited;

But a broom, a big, capable garden broom now planted itself down at his side; and without looking at more than the broom, which he could see out of the corner of his eye, he knew that his wife was standing by.

"Look, Daisy," he said, inviting her to share his emotion. "Look at the ants."

There was a moment's silence up there. Then: "Ants! I should think there were! Why, they'll get into the house! Let's kill them!"

He stretched out his hand and turned his fingers around the broom handle. "Get down here with me and look," he said. "It's an extraordinary sight. It's like Sodom, Babylon, Atlantis all rolled into one!"

"Yes—and they'll be in the pantry next. It'll be Babylon in the pantry. Come—let's sweep them off."

The broom stirred in his hand; he detained it. "Don't. They are the survivors of a terrible disaster. They have seen thousands of their mates swept to horrible death. They are safe, bearing with them the future life of their nation. Why, it would be as if men escaped from a city destroyed by flood, standing at last on high ground, naked, exhausted, but alive, saw now upon them the mountain falling!"

"It won't be a mountain," she said. "It will be a broom!"

"Hold on; wait," he pleaded hurriedly, trying a more intimate appeal. "Let me watch them. Daisy—wait—I'm getting something out of it! Let me watch it!"

But the broom was now out of his hand, and in three, four scythe-like strokes the thing was done. Of the broad rusty-red ribbon of carapaced, pululating life stretched across the drive, there was nothing left but, here and there, a lone, squirming small spot indented into the ground; and on the surface of the water in the excavation a film made of dust, dead and mangled ants, and eggs.

For a moment stupor alone pos-

sessed Peter. He had, during his contemplation, shrunk himself to the size of the ants; or, rather, he had swelled them to his dimensions; so that the terrific completeness of the execution performed by these three simple sweeps of a simple broom left him profoundly astonished. Then, as the daze left him, a violence took its place. He faced her, he wanted to speak, and he knew that what he wanted to say was something irreparable. But no words came; his throat was altogether tight, his mind a whirling blank.

Peter turned on his heel and walked away. He walked out of the garden, and up the path which led to the village. In the village was a place where one could drink; the plan at the back of his head was simple enough. He would go to that place and drink; drink till he felt like an ox struck by the slaughtering hammer. But that fixed point of intent within him was small within the turmoil he had become. He felt as if poisoned, absolutely poisoned. His head was hot, he trembled; and a singular part of him, detached and wrath-like, hovering above him looked down with amazement at his state.

He had seen something so clearly; he had felt it so poignantly—the minute cosmic tragedy of these ants. Had she seen nothing at all? Had she felt nothing?

A reservoir deep within him began to surge. It was a reservoir which had been filling there in the dark, drop by drop, for years. Several times it had surged as it was now doing. But only with a tentative pulsing which did not reach the rim. Now, each surge brought the accumulated reserve higher. Like some alchemist's brew boiling on the fire, it rose, neared the margin, collapsed, rose again. But each of its ebullitions was raising it higher; nearer to the film which curtailed his consciousness from the dark secrets beneath; nearer his clear consciousness, nearer his mouth—his tongue, his lips.

And suddenly, with a new effort, it had done it—it had brimmed! Clearly he heard the words spoken in the silent sunlight. The little glade resounded to them, spoken loud.

"Cruel—and stupid!"

That was it. "Cruel and stupid." Three times he heard the words spoken before complete understanding searched out his heart. And then, to this full comprehension, he felt his legs wobble, and abruptly sat down on a little mound of grass.

He remained seated thus, immobile, his eyes fixed ahead as if upon a ghost.

So this is what it had come to after all those years. To this he had come, after all those years.

To these words, spoken merely of the lips, but explosively expelled by his entirely certain being, every drop, every cell, every nerve.

"Cruel—and stupid!"

The glade was very quiet in the sun, and insects hummed. Thoughts also hummed about his head, vague, formless, buzzing thoughts, circling and circling. But always, fixed in the center, was the kernel fact.

"Cruel and stupid"—that is what he had called her.

It seemed to him that a long time had passed when suddenly, like a mirage descended from the sky, an image came clearly before his eyes.

It was that picture of her as she had been years ago. Standing at the stile on the edge of the golden field; with her red mouth, her dewy star-like eyes, her gentle breasts.

He contemplated this long, and then was forced to ask himself a question. As she stood there, that time long ago, so pretty, so tender and so warm, and his arms ached, was she then, already, what today he had called her?

If that were true, then women were indeed terrible.

But if not true—what then? A strange new kind of discomfort took possession of him; his mind, as if affrighted, shied to one side, tried to bolt. He forced it back to the path. "Consider," he said to his mind. "Consider—you must consider that."

Her life, immediately, passed by him in one streak. Her life since their two lives had been side by side.

He squirmed.

She had laid out fresh things. Some already clothed her; others were about, scattered on chairs, across open drawers.

She had gone about doing this in a trepidation of haste, as a child desperately hastens who has been threatened by its parents with being left behind. And hurrying, she had been crying; sobs had sounded in this lonely room as she hurried.

Finally, to a larger burst of woe, coming probably from some last small straw (perhaps one of her shoes had refused to button, or some hook had been found without an eye, or some ribbon had slipped back into its sheath), she had thrown herself across the bed to give way, altogether uncontrolled. And weeping thus, had fallen asleep.

Standing here, his eyes upon this past scene which he saw so well, Peter remembered that which he ever promised himself to remember and which ever he forgot. That she was a child. After all, but a child.

As in the days when she had waited for him at the stile, so now she was a child. The rest—the robust matron's ready, almost rough assurance; its firm contempt for all that which was haze, and halo and opalescence and not core—all that was mere front. She was a child.

He should remember that always. Of course, he should always remember it.

Peter lay down by his wife, and found her hot lips, and awakened her; she clutched at him convulsively.

"I'm sorry, Peter; I'm sorry."

Then later: "Peter, you do so madden me at times, dear. With your airs—no, I don't mean that. But you do shut me out so much, Peter—you do shut me out so much!"

Still later: "And, Peter, you are of those that like the flowers but not the gardening."

"Polished floors, but not the polishing."

"I know, dear. I know."

"Peter, listen: I am of the earth. I accept. You're always somewhere up above."

"I know, dear. Not far above, either. A fool place, in between. I know."

"I accept, I am getting old. Everyone does, Peter. I am willing to grow old."

She whispered now. "Peter—I'm even willing to die!"

He pressed her closer, but the old desolate helplessness had come back.

"You, Peter—you are such a rebel, Peter! How you shut your eyes and fight! Trying to hold what cannot be held. And hating me because I can't. For I can't, Peter, I can't!"

This a child? A strange child! No—a child. Since in children was wisdom. Was this wisdom? A spasm of revolt tightened his heart.

But she was weeping now, softly, against his breast. He registered her in his arms, and with this gesture felt a new large tenderness fill him. A tenderness which was not only for her, but for many others—for the whole world. The whole poor purblind peering world which could not see straight, which could not see clear, which suffered dimly, in a sort of vague hot delirium.

IMPROVED UNIFORM INTERNATIONAL Sunday School Lesson

(By REV. P. M. FITZWATER, D. D., Teacher of English Bible in the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago.) Copyright, 1924, Western Newspaper Union.

LESSON FOR MAY 13

DAVID, THE POET-KING

LESSON TEXT—1 Sam. 16:1-3. GOLDEN TEXT—Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.—Ps. 23:6.

REFERENCE MATERIAL—Ps. 61: 1, 2; Jer. 33:15-26; Luke 1:22, Acts 2:29-34.

PRIMARY TOPIC—The Shepherd Boy Chosen King. JUNIOR TOPIC—God Calls a Boy to Be King. INTERMEDIATE AND SENIOR TOPIC—David, as a Friend. YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULT TOPIC—Lessons From the Life of David.

I. Samuel Mourns for Saul (v. 1). 1. Why He Mourned. The death of Saul was no doubt a personal loss to Samuel, for Saul was a commanding and lovable personality. Then, too, the ruin of so promising a career would deeply affect a soul like Samuel. Finally the humiliation to God and God's people grieved his heart.

2. Excessive Mourning Rebuked. The fact that God had rejected Saul should have lifted Samuel out of his grief. Excessive grief over that which God does is a reflection upon Him and should be rebuked. In all God's acts we should submit although it may change our plans. When sorrow becomes a hindrance to the discharge of duty, it merits rebuke.

II. Samuel Sent to Anoint David (v. 1-3).

1. Samuel's Fear (v. 2). Perhaps by this time Saul was becoming a desperate character. Samuel knew that if Saul should hear that he was taking steps to anoint a successor to his throne, Samuel would be in danger. Samuel was wise in submitting this difficult situation to the Lord. God's servants are to be brave. But even when going on errands for God we should not court danger. We should exercise the greatest caution so that unnecessary dangers be avoided.

2. The Lord's Direction (v. 2, 3). The Lord smoothed the way for Samuel. He showed him how to perform his duty and escape the danger. Samuel was to take a heifer and announce that he was going to offer a sacrifice unto the Lord and to call Jesse to the sacrifice. The prophet was not told all that would happen. This is usually God's way with us. He gives us our work piece by piece and guides us step by step. Samuel's purpose was known only to him. It was to be kept a secret so that the news would not reach Saul. This was a shrewd device but entirely legitimate. There is not necessity for us to reveal all our purposes.

III. Samuel's Obedience (vv. 4-13).

1. The Trembling Elders of Bethlehem (v. 4, 5). It seems that the whole nation was shot through with fear because of Saul's sin. To the elders' alarming inquiry Samuel responded with the assurance of peace, inviting them to join him in worshipping the Lord.

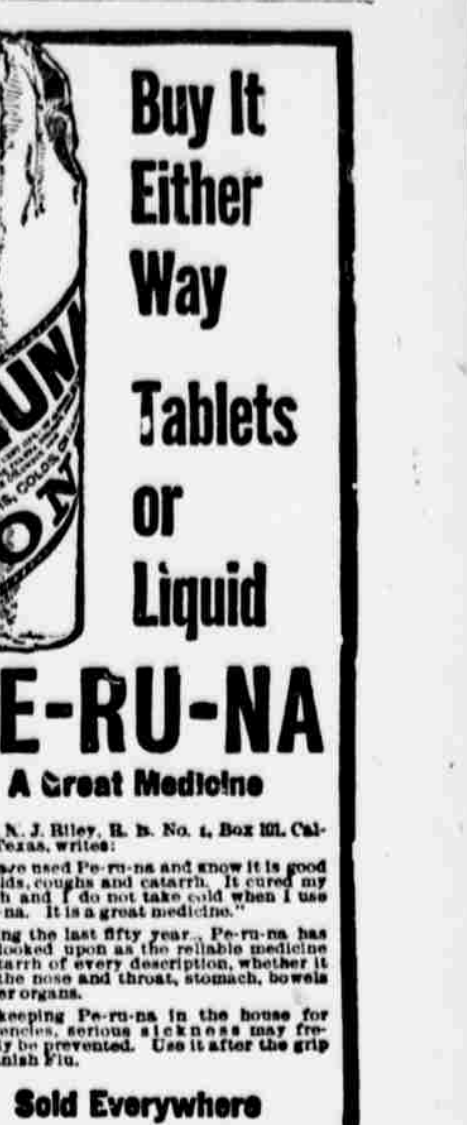
2. Examination of Jesse's Sons (vv. 6-12). The Lord had revealed to Samuel that one of Jesse's sons was to be the new king, but not the particular one. The selection of the right one was a most important matter as destinies hung upon it. (1) Eliab rejected (v. 6, 7). Eliab was the eldest son and therefore he was the first presented as having first right to the place of honor. Further, he was a splendid specimen of a man, tall and majestic in appearance so that even Samuel was captivated by him as he had been by Saul. (10-24). Outward appearance was favorable but the realities seen by God were against him. God knows whom He can trust with great responsibilities. We frequently estimate men by their dress, culture, wealth and position. These are only surface manifestations and frequently lead us astray, but God looks into the heart. (2) David chosen (vv. 8-12). All but one of Jesse's sons had been looked upon but still the Lord's choice had not appeared. Jesse's reply to Samuel's question as to whether all his children had appeared seems to imply that David was not of much importance. He was considered good enough to watch the sheep but not important enough to be called to the feast. Because David was faithful as a shepherd boy, he was in line for promotion when God's given time arrived.

3. David Anointed (v. 13). When the shepherd had appeared, the Lord directed Samuel to anoint him. When the oil was applied the Spirit of the Lord came upon him. David was a gifted and attractive lad but this was of no avail without the Spirit of God. Power must come from God. Only as we are anointed by the Holy Ghost can we truly do the Lord's will and work.

Knowing When. Next to knowing when to seize an opportunity, the most important thing in life is to know when to forego an advantage.—Disraeli.

Indulgence. It is only necessary to grow old to become more indulgent. I see no fault committed that I have not committed myself.—Goethe.

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