

JOHN THORN CROFT WATCHES THE WORLD DRIFTING BY

Simple Story of a Man Who for More Than Ninety Years Has Borne a Life of Unusual Activity With the Grace of a Brave Spirit and Still Enjoys Each Day.

THE lion and the lamb do not generally lie down together. The Siberian pine and the palm tree are not found growing in the same soil and climate. The battering power of the threshing machine and the gentle, musical ticking of a fine watch are not found in the same mechanism. Take the latter two and combine them and convert the hybrid resultant into a human being and you have John Thorn Croft, a citizen of Omaha who is remarkable in many ways. He possesses the qualities both of the lion and the lamb, of the threshing machine and the watch. He has mowed in the thick of raging battles; he has dealt with the lawless breed of men who rubbed the first roughness from the wild western plains; he has fought the Indians; he has hunted the fierce wild animals of the mountains. These activities show the qualities of the lion. But he has also devoted fourscore years to those gentle symphonies of the great life which is not seen, the life of music. He is a true Bohemian in his present style of living and has been so always. He carried his violin with him through all the adventures of his tempestuous career. He has it today. It has soothed him, comforted him, encouraged him, for he understands that language which is known to so few.

In addition to being a sort of combination of threshing machine and delicately balanced watch, Mr. Croft possesses the qualities of a powerful dynamo, a dynamo that does not wear out. Look at that erect figure, those clear eyes unglazed, the full head of white hair, the healthy hue of his face, the softness of the skin on his hands. See him move about with quick, alert step and hear him talk with animated voice and with perfect memory. How old would you judge this man to be? Possibly seventy but very well preserved for that age. Your guess is good but you have missed it just twenty-four years. Mr. Croft is in his 94th year, a marvel of perpetual youth, physical and mental.

He was born January 23, 1815. He inherits longevity. His grandfather died at the age of 95; his grandmother at the age of 96 and his father was cut off at the untimely age of 90 years. His ancestors were sea-faring people and gained eminence in England. His great grandfather was Commodore John Thorn Croft of the English navy who was with Nelson at the battle of Trafalgar. Much of John Croft's boyhood was spent on the sea. He had relatives in New England and in England and, as his uncle was captain of a ship, he traveled back and forth, getting part of his education on each side. His aunt had married Lord Cecil and they lived at Brighton, England, near the house where King George IV spent part of the summer.

Meeting With King George IV

That monarch, shut up by necessity of state within his exiguous island, used to talk to the little boy who lived with Lady Cecil and had traveled all the way to America. One day the king patted John T. Croft on his boyish head and said:

"Little boy, what do the people in America do in the evening?" And he was surprised when he learned that the people in far off America had as many amusements as the people in the midst of civilized England. Victoria, who was to become queen of England and empress of India, was a little girl at the time also and little Johnny Croft knew her in their childhood days. Thus early was he intimate with great people and continued to be so through his life. He became intimately acquainted with three presidents of the United States, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan and General Grant, besides knowing scores of lesser dignitaries.

At an early age he ran away from home and began work on a farm. From a child he had had an idea of harmony and a fine voice. He naturally took to the study of music. In 1832 he was attending McGill college Montreal, Canada, when the plague of Asiatic cholera raged there and saw the carts driving through the streets with the ghostly call, "Bring out your dead." When he was 17 years of age he took charge of a school in Canton, N. Y. Later he taught in Kingston, Upper Canada. About 1840 the time of the "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" campaign, when Croft was already a man of 25 years—he went to Boston and had attained such proficiency as a musician that he became a teacher in the Boston Academy of Music under the famous Lowell Mason. He was there eight years, during which he made a name in the world of music. He gave many concerts in the high circles of Boston society at which the famous Mendelssohn quintet played which included Anna Stone, the great singer of Boston and George F. Hayter, the great pianist. During the summer he conducted "floral concerts" in England cities and towns.

Associate of the Websters

During his residence in Boston the Mexican war broke out. He and his friend, Fletcher Webster, son of Daniel Webster, undertook to raise a regiment. When half of the regiment was raised Fletcher Webster was ordered to the front with it while Mr. Croft remained behind for the purpose of recruiting the other half. Before this was accomplished peace was declared.

The number of his friends in erudite New England is great. He met Mrs. Pierce, while he was teaching in Concord, N. H., and through her he met her husband who was to become president of the United States. He was a frequent visitor in the home of Prof. Lord, president of Dartmouth college.

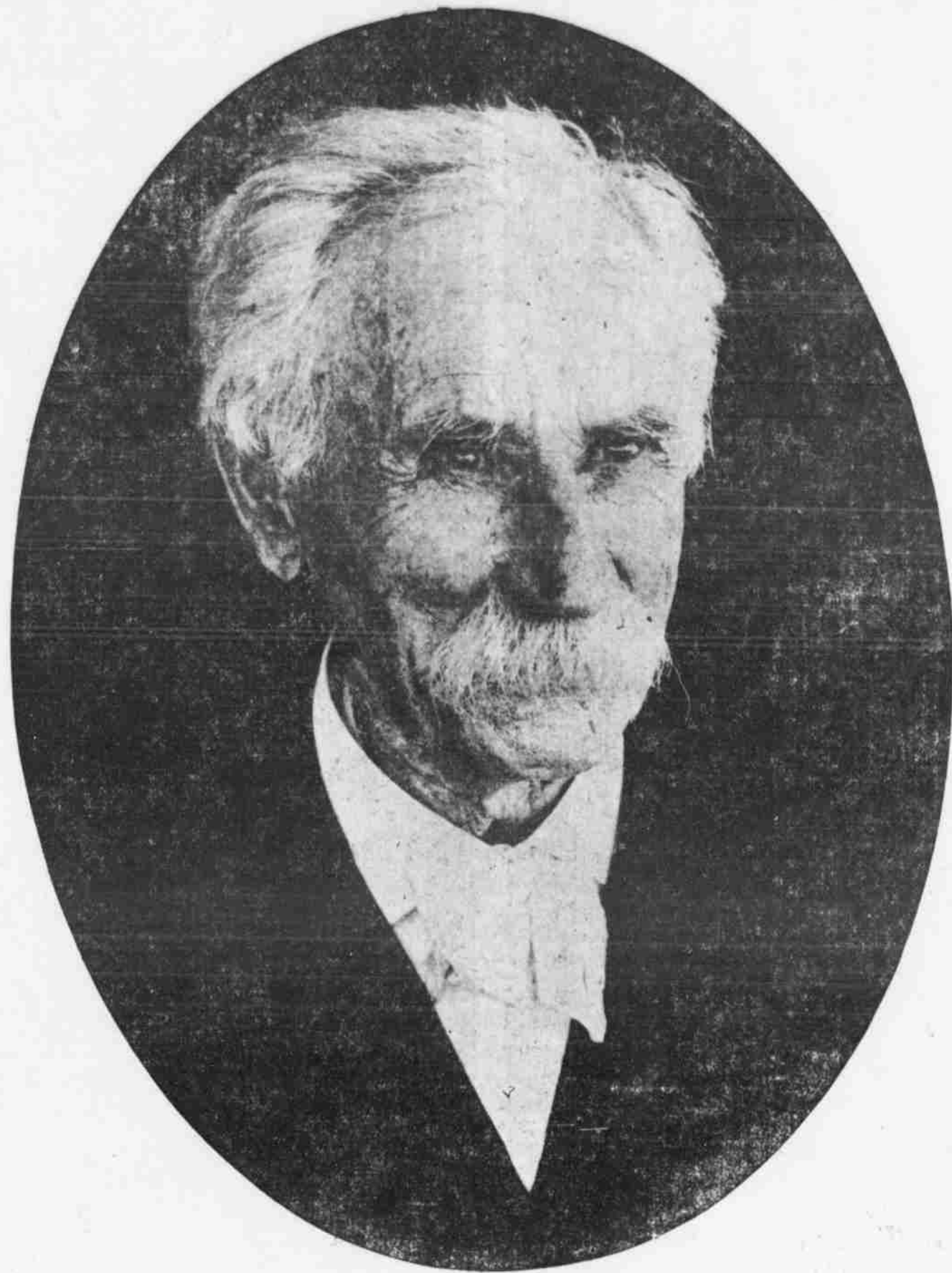
He left Boston in 1848 and went to Philadelphia where he became identified with the big music publishing firm of J. E. Gould & Co. He went from there to Harrisburg, Pa., where he opened a branch store for the house. His natural qualities, his energy and interest in affairs which have always been in striking contrast to the artistic temperament which he certainly has, soon made him acquainted with the political leaders. Not only was he acquainted with them, but he was on intimate terms. His music store there was made unofficial headquarters of many of the big state and national leaders. Many an unrecorded meeting at which big plans were made was held in a little room back of the music store. Once James Buchanan, Chief Justice of the United States Gibson, Attorney General Black, Simon Cameron, "Dave" Wilnot and David Porter were assembled in this room at one time.

Mr. Croft was already 33 years of age in 1853 when he decided to come west. That was eight years before the civil war began. These two facts give a vivid impression of the age to which Mr. Croft has attained. In that year he married Miss Elizabeth Nichols, of Boston. Her family was one of the oldest in New England, having settled near Searport, Me., on land granted by King George I. Miss Nichols was the niece of Jacob Sleeper of Boston, known as the richest Methodist in the United States.

Omaha and Prosperity

Coming west with his beautiful young wife, he stopped first in Chicago where they remained a few months. Then they came on to Davenport, Ia. There the young musician invested his savings in Iowa lands. In the winter of 1856 they arrived in Omaha. Mr. Croft immediately invested heavily in a suburban farm which is the land now comprised between Sixteenth and Twenty-fourth street and Ames avenue. He laid out 122 lots and built seven houses. The following year he lost the whole thing because the homestead title of the man from whom he had bought it was proven to be valueless. This took practically all his possessions. But he was not discouraged. He managed to get a start and bought and sold cattle to the Mormons. At one time he had 1,200 oxen, 480 horses, 200 mules and scores of wagons standing on his property near Nineteenth street and Ames avenue; for he again secured possession of the land out of which he had been defrauded.

When the civil war began he was commissioned through the influence of his friend, Senator Simon Cameron to raise two companies of cavalry to be attached to the First Nebraska. Later these companies were consolidated at Benton Barracks with Minnesota, Missouri and Iowa companies and became known as the "Curtis horse" under Colonel William Lowe. Mr. Croft was cap-



JOHN THORN CROFT.

tain of Company B. The troops remained at Benton Barracks for some time during which Captain Croft was raised to the rank of major with his battalion. Then an order came that he should be permanently detached from his regiment and report to General Grant at Fort Henry. He reported and on March 11, 1863 he was ordered with his battalion to Paris, Ky., where with part of General Lew Wallace's regiment and Buell's battery he attacked Clay King's command known as the "Kentucky hellhounds," and gained a victory over them. He was wounded near Clarksville and came home to Omaha on a furlough.

After the war he began freighting, working some time for the Western Telegraph company. He was successful and made money rapidly. He took a contract to "clean up" all the freight of several wagon trains of the Butterfield Freighting company which had been captured by the Indians on Smoky hill. The trains were valued with their contents at \$1,500,000. He was successful in this venture and brought the goods to Denver and contracted to take them on to Salt Lake. At the latter city he sold his train for \$122,000.

"I never saw one cent of that money," he says with the amused laugh of the philosophically minded man who looks back upon the ventures he has made in the affairs of men, ventures so puny and ephemeral and unimportant viewed from the eminence of fourscore and fourteen years. "I think my fault was having too much

faith in men. I took a man's word at par whether it involved a dollar or a hundred thousand dollars. I had a wonderful faculty for making money, but I also had a wonderful faculty for losing it."

He was an intimate friend of Brigham Young as well as of other of the elders who stood high in Mormon councils. Once he met Permore Little, a nephew of Young in Omaha and Little had no place to stay. Croft took him under his own roof. When Croft was in Salt Lake an opportunity arose for Little to return the compliment which he did with great cordiality.

Home of His Old Age

Visit this remarkable man who seems to have foiled Father Time and who defies death, this man who has fought bravely and courageously, loved deeply and unceasingly and at the same time listened with trained and appreciative ear to the lifelong harmony which is vouchsafed only to the loftiest souls. The house in which he lives is built in bungalow style. It stands back from the street at 1920 Ames avenue on part of that land which young Mr. Croft bought when he first came to Omaha in 1856. It is ideally situated, commanding a wide view across the valley to where the Missouri flows and across that stream to the high bluffs on the other side. There is a garden around on one side of the house; there are vines climbing up at the windows; a long wooden trough

serves to catch the raindrops from the kitchen roof and convey them to a rain barrel.

You knock at the door. Immediately there is the sound of a quick step, evidently that of a young man. He appears. It is a young man in spite of white hair and mustache. But this young man is 94 years of age. He ushers you in with that cordiality which is universally recognized as the outward sign of a warm heart. It is necessary to remove two violins from the chair in order to provide a place for the visitors. The room is large and a glance around gives the impression that it is inhabited by violins. There are four lying on a small center table, two repose on top of the piano, three are standing in a conversational group on a large arm chair. They seem to be everywhere while in one corner, like the widower father of the whole family stands a cello. There is also a piano. On the walls are pictures of famous violinists ranging from some of the old masters down to Kubelik. It is evident by a glance at this and the adjoining rooms that the master of the house keeps bachelor hall and also that he has the Bohemian temperament, too much bound up in the charms of his art to care for the everyday routine of eating and drinking and sleeping.

Charming as a Host

You may talk to this man for hours and you won't get tired of his conversation. He can tell you about things that happened before your father was born and tell it with vividness, as though it had happened yesterday. He talks rapidly and animatedly and he laughs freely as a boy. He has a piece of music which he will sing for you. It is the song he used to sing with the daughter of Prof. Lord, president of Dartmouth college more than seventy years ago. The mossy marble of the tomb has rested upon her mortality for many a year but his voice is nearly as good as it was then. He will tell you of his experiences in the hard fight of the world and of his delight in the realm of music. He tells of all these things without boasting.

It is easy to see that his whole soul is bound up in music. He taught music in recent years without compensation beyond the pleasure of seeing his pupils develop under his instruction. Today he has a few pupils whom he teaches for pure pleasure. He does not need to do it for his living. His whole heart is wrapped up in them. When he talks of some of these juvenile pupils tears of affection come into his eyes. They are to him as his own children. For he has a nature which demands some object for its love. His wife is gone and all his children are dead but one, his son, John Croft who lives in the house adjoining him. In his music and his pupils he finds outlet for his affection.

"When I am playing and when I am instructing a beloved pupil," he says, "I forget my grief. Music makes me forget. When I am with people they think I never am anything but happy. But I have some of the most gloomy and melancholy moments that can possibly come to men. My wife died in 1872 and I never cared for another woman. She was said to be the most beautiful woman who ever came to Nebraska. She was as good as she was beautiful. She was also a great social favorite. When General Sherman visited Omaha, for instance, he led the march at the ball given in his honor and Mrs. Croft was his partner. She dropped dead on the street in 1872. She had never been ill a day before that."

Love of His Violins

He regards his violins with almost the love of a parent. He has eighteen of them. His own he has had more than seventy years. One of them was formerly owned by Father Desmythe, a missionary among the Blackfoot Indians. Upon his death it was kept as a sacred relic by the chief of the tribe in a buckskin bag for forty years. Major Croft looks on the violin as the most wonderful of musical instruments, eulogized not too strongly by Oliver Wendell Holmes who wrote as follows:

"Violins! The sweet old Amati! The divine Stradivari! Played on by ancient maestro until the bow hand lost its power and the flying fingers stiffened. Bequeathed to the passionate young enthusiast who made it whisper his hidden love and cry his inarticulate longings and scream his untold agonies and wail his monotonous despair. Passed from his dying hand to the cold virtuoso who let it slumber in its case for a generation till when his hand was broken up it came forth once more and rode the stormy symphonies of royal orchestras beneath the rushing bow of their lord and leader. Into lonely prisons with improvement artists; into convents from which arose day and night the holy hymns with which its tones were blended; and back again to orgies where it learned to howl and laugh as if a legion of devils were shut up in it; then again to the gentle dilettante who calmed it down with easy melodies until it answered him softly as in the days of the old maestros; and so given into our hands, its pores all full of music, stained like the meerschaum through and through with the concentrated hue and sweetness of all the harmonies which have kindled and faded on its strings."

Judging by the vigor of Major Croft, he may live far past the century mark. He himself declares he "would rather die between now and morning." He is not at all of a despondent nature but he considers his usefulness past, a view in which his many friends by no means concur.

Intelligence Displayed by Ants at Work and at War

AROUND around the foot of an old apple tree in our back yard," said an Omaha man who this year is leading the simple life in the pleasant country north of the city, "we planted nasturtiums and other flowers last spring, and as they began to appear above ground I spent a good deal of my spare time watching them grow. Although the apple tree is in bearing, its stem is hollow at the butt, with a large, knotty opening on one side three feet or so from the ground.

"As the season advanced I began to notice that what I had at first supposed was a little sprinkling of sawdust that had in some way been spilled at the foot of the tree, beneath the opening in the side, was growing and forming into a mound of considerable size. And then for the first time I began to take notice of numerous black ants, some of them a third of an inch long, and with enormous heads, whose traveling up and down the stem of the old tree had not before attracted my attention. I was not long in discovering that they were of a colony of ants that had taken possession of the hollow tree trunk and which was fixing up that interior for its home. Then the mystery of the mound of sawdust was cleared up.

"Somewhere in the hidden depths of that hollow it was plain that members of the ant colony were busily mining away the decayed wood to form such apartments as were required, while others were industriously bearing the debris up from the depths and casting it out at the opening. Ant after ant appeared at the edge of the opening, in continuous procession, each with a grain of wood in its jaws, which it would drop to the ground. Little showers of these grains were in the air constantly.

"About three inches below the opening to the hollow trunk a bit of the tree's bark was loose at the upper end and flared out from the wood so that it made a pocket a couple of inches wide and

of the same depth. Into this some of the grains would lodge, and by and by it was nearly filled. Then one day an ant of much larger size and who acted to me as if he was a sort of boss or inspector came up out of the hollow and went to looking around. The accumulation of mine waste behind that bark appeared to catch his eye and he hurried down the trunk, passed around and over it, inspected it from all sides and then hurried excitedly back to the opening above. I am not prepared to say what he did the next few seconds, but when he reappeared at the end of that time and came hurriedly down the tree to the pocket he was accompanied by a dozen or more of the smaller ants, which, apparently under his orders, went to work clearing the debris from that pocket and dropping it to the mound below until it was all removed.

"That's all exceedingly amazing!" I found myself saying to myself, "but what's to hinder the ants from filling that pocket from above the same as before? And what difference does it make, anyhow?"

"Just what difference it made I, of course, will never know, but the boss ant must have thought it made a difference or he wouldn't have ordered the pocket cleaned out; but I soon found out what would hinder it from filling up again. From the time the debris was removed from behind that obstructing bit of bark the procession of ants that bore the mined wood from the depths carried their burdens down below the pocket before dumping them.

"After I had watched this further exhibition of intelligent management a long time I interfered to save the extra labor and stripped the flaring piece of bark off the tree. The ants made several trips down to where it had been, though before they seemed to become aware of the removal of the obstruction. Then they resumed their old dumping place at the mouth of the open-

ing. The boss ant appeared on the scene some time after those ants had found that trip unnecessary and he acted to me as if he was all put out because the others were not following orders. But he soon discovered what had happened and returned calm and satisfied to his post, whatever it was, down in the mining district of the tree.

"Thus the work went on, days and days, without further incident until the mound from the hollow tree had risen three or four inches in height and covered a foot or more of ground. Then I noticed that at intervals several of the bigger ants, the inspectors or bosses, as I classed them, came out of the works and made tours of the mound, going around it and over it and evidently sizing it up. Then one day down came half a dozen or so of these big ants, and with them a host of the ants that seemed to be doing the mental labor.

"These instantly 'threw off their coats,' so to speak, and buckled in to the work of carrying that mound of stuff away. Taking it up grain by grain that army of laboring ants carried it off in all directions, spreading it around on the ground until after several days the mound had been reduced to a level. I couldn't see any reason for this, but it wasn't for me to reason why. When the work was done at last the laboring ants returned to their places in the depth of the tree.

"The work of mining inside the tree and the dumping of the debris out of the opening continued all through the month of June, and although another mound of dust was formed it was not disturbed. But in the meantime there had been exciting episodes in the life of the colony. Our nasturtiums had come into bud and blossom and the radiant bank of bloom attracted to it various winged things and things that were not winged. And one day, seeking these, came a solemn, big-eyed toad, sitting between the edge of the refuse and the inner border of the nasturtium bed. What was either an inspecting or scouting party of the

big ants from the colony in the hollow was passing in irregular course that way. There were three in the party and the course of one of them was taking it within the line of the toad's vision, but at least four inches distant. As the ant came in line the toad cocked his head on one side as if to make sure that he saw something, and then, quick as a flash of lightning, he hurled his long, glutinous tongue at the ant and in another flash the ant was in the toad.

"One of the ant's companions had been eye witness to this tragedy, having turned in that direction at that instant. He stopped and quickly backed away out of possible range and seemed to ponder the situation. The third ant, unconscious of the sad fate that had befallen his comrade, was some distance ahead, hurrying toward the tree. The ant that had witnessed the tragic taking off of his late associate paused but an instant as he was beginning the trip up the tree trunk. He must have told this ant right there and then what had happened, for this one raised to an almost upright position, and for all the world it looked to me as if he was exclaiming: 'Great heaven! You don't tell me!'

"At any rate, after an excited confab at the foot of the tree the two ants went up the trunk a ways and then made their way around it until they came to a spot directly above where the toad sat. The two ants gazed down at the monster awhile, held another excited confab and then turned up the tree and disappeared into it through a smaller opening, which I had some days before discovered was a rear entrance to the colony's abode. I was quite sure something was going to happen.

"Soon out of that rear entrance a stream of ants began to pour, enormous fellows, bigger than any I had seen yet. Some of them seemed half an inch long, and they were armed with powerful

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