

Chapter 3

Ants In

Hitch woke in the afternoon with a sharp-set hunger. Pushing along at such a quick pace since leaving the wide country had not given him time to find more than a bite or two. He always 'lived off the land' when travelling. Though often skimpy, what there was, was tasty. To follow his meat he liked the juicy berries; wild strawberries and blackberries that grew in the hedges. Until he could settle he must make do with what he could come by. Something was making little signals to his nose now; tantalizing signals, come- in- this- direction- and- find- me, sort of signals. They must have been there all the time but he had been much too weary, from his long hard climb from the lake to notice them until now. Obeying the commands he found a store of nuts forgotten by some busy squirrel. How grateful he felt, that squirrels were so thrifty. The stockpile was not new, so he did not feel guilty about taking them. It was not likely that they would be needed now. Feeling refreshed he felt in no mood to go back to sleep. Taking things quietly he could continue on his way with a pocketful of acorns. He would attract no attention for no one was about.

While he slept the morning had been warm and loud with all the usual sounds of late spring and early summer. Sometime after noon, it had grown quiet and as still as the holding of one's breath. A cool grey-blue shadow masked the sky. Cold and sharp, a light shower of rain pattered the leaves and buffeted the grasses. Then as suddenly as it had come the shadow lightened and disappeared, leaving only a wispy lace of cloud. From the gauzy blue of the fresh-washed sky, the sun shone down. Earth that had been dry and thirsty gave thanks and a mulchy scent arose.

Amazingly new and sweet the world had become as Hitch went on his way. Compared to the night before the going was easy. His progress though was slow, for there was so much to linger over along the path. There were new things to inspect and many old familiar things to delight

him. Now and then he roamed from the way to look out over Knotty Cot, retraced his steps to the point where he had left it, only to leave it yet again a little further on, to explore. With the waning of the afternoon he began to feel hungry and remembering the acorns he carried he looked about for a likely spot to take a rest and eat them. To the side of the track between the gnarled roots of a beech tree he found an inviting looking, grass-fringed, dry-leaf covered heap. He would sit there and turn over in his mind an idea that had come to him on one of his little trips from the path. So it was that he stretched his legs with pleasure, but a whole colony was put into a state of panic.

That comfortable looking resting place was in fact a roof. A great dome arched over a well-planned, orderly world. It was huge compared to the tiny Meadow Ants who had built it, or the Red Ants who shared it. The whole province was threaded by highways, tastefully screened. They made it easy to travel without delay. The architecture was the best of its kind. Chambers and halls were lofty and spacious. Vaulted ceilings, arches and galleries were supported on graceful pillars. Elegant stairways wound from one level to another. Paved walkways linked courtyards from which there were fine views. No matter whether it was the royal apartments and nurseries; common-rooms and kitchens; or the cellars which housed the store-rooms and the milking-parlours where the herds of greenfly cattle were kept; all were fashioned with the same care.

It was a queen who sat at the head of this state. Those she ruled were almost all females and they devoted themselves to serving the sisterhood. The few males that there were, lounged about, idle. They did nothing until they spread their wings to woo and wed the princesses at Swarm Time.

Now this was a very special day. A splendid air-show took place. Whatever their office or trade, all the ants were granted a holiday. Great was the excitement as they crowded out to watch the display: the stunts and the fly-past of their winged fellows. Scrambling for the best places to gain a good view, they climbed anything and everything in the neighbourhood. Others at the runways and launching sites put heart into the timid and cheered the daring ones. It was a time ringed on the ant calendar, looked forward to and talked of long afterwards.

At all other times they toiled without let or hindrance. The Queen's attendants waited upon her, pampering her. In every fad, every whim, they humoured her. The nursemaids bathed and fed their charges. Whether it was royal or not, each one was tended and cherished. Cocooned in baby-wraps the mites were moved from nursery to nursery to make sure that everything was right for them: that they were neither too hot nor too cold. When they were old enough they were carried in their cots and placed in rows in the sunshine and fresh air as all babies should be. The chambermaids who waited on the guests, be the boarders caterpillars or beetles, gave them the sort of attention found in a 'five star' hotel. A satisfied client would pay the bill with sweetness. From the most skilled journey-women to the raw young apprentices just learning their trade, all went steadily about their tasks. Kitchens were filled with warmth and bustle; store-rooms and corridors drummed with feet as goods were hauled in or pulled out; while in the milking-parlours a sweet smell as of vanilla, hung in the air over the greenfly as they were milked, or the sound of their sucking-the-sap filled the air like cows chewing-the-cud.

To protect this busy world they recruited an army. It was mostly for defence though it did go off on campaigns sometimes. There was no room in the army for weaklings; every soldier must be fit from top to toe. Soldiers must never think for themselves it is true: they must always do as they are ordered, but this did not come hard. An ant learned early, whether she was in the army or not, that if she broke the rules she was a dead ant. If she died without breaking the rules then she had done her duty. The colony's survival was the thing!

It could be a ticklish thing to tell soldiers from their fellows, in the larger world, save that they wore helmets. Otherwise their dress was the same, quite plain. Now if they were silent also, it gave them the advantage. Many ants could be taken to be just one ant if sighted singly at different times. Then would come the discovery that they were everywhere, in everything, especially where they were not wanted. So when they went out into the big world, a tablet over each door warned that they should take no risks. It prompted them to appear as 'A PLAIN MUTE'. For hidden in that was the key to their success they knew, though you or I might stand on our heads to find it. (ÆLV'UQINVAW). To keep in touch with each other they carried Pant-Coms (Portable Ant

Communication Sets) so small they went unnoticed. This superior design worked on vibrations and odour trails and could only be picked up by the ants' special antennae. Other insects' simpler types might look the same, though they were set at a different angle, but they were in a lesser class. If all other tactics failed and they were in a tight corner, the ants carried acid to throw at the enemy.

A council managed the state's affairs. Everyone took her turn to serve and when her spell of duty was over returned to her normal tasks.

Hitch sat there, happy to take his weight from his legs. Meanwhile under him ceilings and walls of upper chambers caved in and crumbled. The panic followed.

"Nursemaids, rescue your charges. Evacuate those rooms. send out the guard."

The army rushed out in haste and in helmets. When the queen heard of the disaster she immediately sent for her chief minister, a very able body.

"What's all this, what's all this, why has it happened?" she demanded in a peevish tone as if she held the minister personally responsible for the whole mischance.

"Everything is being brought under control, your majesty," she was hastily assured.

"Brought! Brought! It should never have 'gone out' of control," the queen rasped. "What's the use of having ministers if they don't administer?"

She ignored the fact that sometimes one is powerless.

"Just so, ma'am, but we do our best," the minister countered.

"Then it's not good enough. I can see that I shall have to take a hand. When I think of what I have managed with just one pair...!" She chose to ignore that she had twice as many feet.

"We did not wish to trouble you ma'am," she was soothed.

The last thing they wanted was to involve the queen. She was very old and absent minded: she never could remember in which hand to hold



her sceptre. More than this though she had grown stupid. Much of the time they managed her. So long as they kept her well fed and waited upon she coped, keeping up a supply of workers and producing the necessary number of princesses with enough suitors to keep the line going. She had founded the queendom many years before and was mostly content now to leave it to her ministers to manage. From time to time however, as now, she interfered. Then if crossed she became obstinate and argued. Losing the argument she would suddenly shout:

“Logic, that’s what’s needed. Logic!”

By this time, however, she would be quite muddled herself. The simplest acts of attempting to reason always led her to the most remarkable conclusions. For instance in an absent minded moment, she had demanded of one of her maids just when she was to have her breakfast and the surprised maid had shown her the empty dishes she was carrying away.

“Dear, dear,” remarked the queen, “I am absent minded
Geniuses are absent minded,
I am a genius.”

“Her and her silly gisms,” murmured the maid under her breath.

The queen, too busy producing the heirs and workers had never studied English; that was for the advisors who in turn never thought to explain a ‘syllogism’. So how was she to know it shows when a conclusion is stupid, however argued?

To return to the minister standing before the queen; she bowed her head and said:

“If that is all ma’am?”

“It isn’t all,” snapped the queen, not at all sure of what else she wanted to say, but feeling that something should follow this. Then inspired she ordered:

“Call out the guard.”

This we know had been done already, but the wise minister could see that it was best to humour her further.

“You are wise. We all bow to your majesty. Your’s is the crowned head,” she appeased, but her choice of words was unlucky.

Surprised at getting her own way so easily the queen was determined to have the last word. Seizing on the last piece of flattery she replied at random but with spirit:

**“All heads have crowns,
You have no crown,
Therefore you have no head.”**

But even she could see that there was something wrong with this and hastily added, her wits partly returning to her for a moment:

“Er... for royal matters.”

The minister bowed again, but privately she thought, “I can use that kind of logic:

**Grasshoppers are obstinate, vain and foolish,
You are obstinate, vain, and foolish,
You are a grasshopper.”**

Now this for an ant, was the lowest opinion to have of anyone, but ever loyal she said nothing.

Meanwhile Hitch made himself more comfortable. So well had the ants done their job of camouflage, and so busy was he with his own thoughts, that he had no idea of the damage he was doing. He munched his acorns. Even when climbing the terraces he had had no plans other than to reach these parts. It was the sight of Knotty Cot that had given him this idea he had now. There were two parts to it. The first part was that he should visit his daughter Holly and her little family who lived in one of the model houses in Knotty Cot village near the farther boundary. He had never seen his grandchildren. News of them had reached him a little while after they had been born. Messages were passed along from one to another. The second part of the idea was, for one generally content to amble along with many halts to search into wayside matters, unusual to say the least of it. He would go by model railway train. The more he thought about it, the more he liked it. He had been travelling for some time now. Holly’s was a long way from here, over country that could be wearisome. To make the village as life-like as possible, much had been

crowded together; hedges and fences, ditches and embankments, railways and waterways, to name only the more important. On foot it would be more like an obstacle race than a cross-country run.

While Hitch pondered, the army ants arrived to find the cause of their troubles and remove it. They set about their business in their usually orderly fashion. Sightings were taken and plans quickly mapped out to climb and survey. The task was begun. Companies were sent to spread out and then advance secretly upon the hostile body. Some came from behind and up over the domed roof and others from the sides. The officer commanding rallied her troops:

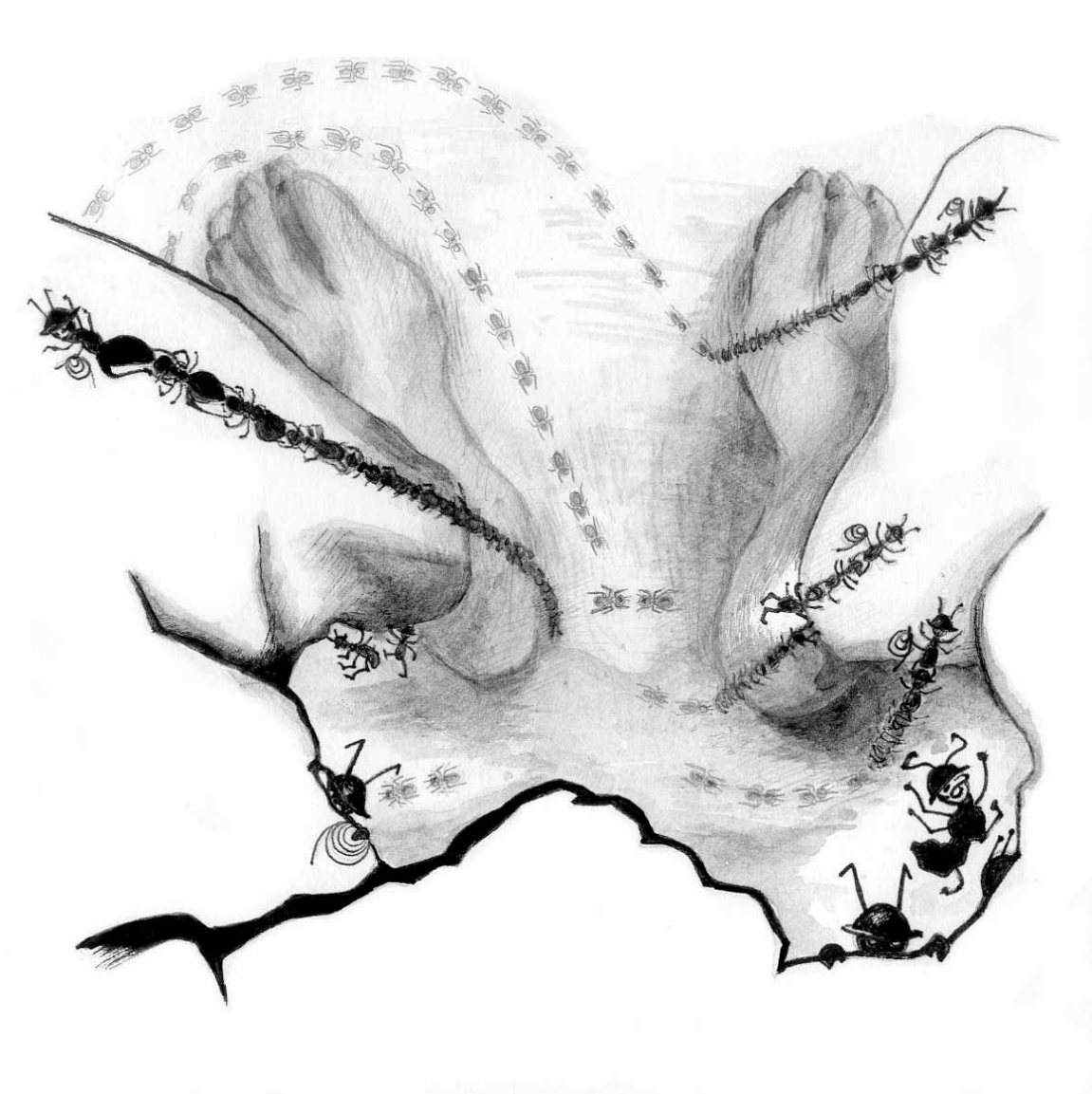
“I want volunteers! ... C Company forward march.”

Whereupon they struggled to scale the precipices of Hitch's feet and legs without him knowing. At their touch however, he flexed his feet and without their helmets there would have been many sore heads. They were recalled. This would not do. Next must be tried the ladder tactic. Flexing her muscles, the strongest ant braced herself and a second ant climbed nimbly upon her shoulders; when a third took her place on the shoulders of the second; the fourth on the third. One after another they made the 'ladder' until they reached their goal. It went very well save for minor mishaps. Someone's foot slipping caused the 'ladder' to waver about in the air like a teetering clothes-line prop in a high wind. Another finding the toe of her comrade above planted firmly in her mouth, forgot herself and bit it.

A very large part of the force was soon in places that offered any hold whatsoever in the lower half of Hitch's covering. It was clear to everyone 'what' had to be removed, but 'how' was a different matter. Ordering their troops to stay where they were the commanders went down to put their heads together and compare notes.

Hitch finished his last acorn at the same time as he made up his mind. That was it; best foot forward to the nearest station, Lurkin-Long-the-Lake. He rose.

The army commanders were delighted, dazed and dismayed all at once. Their difficulty was solved. More, it had quite disappeared, but with



it most of the army also. They gazed up into the empty blue. Oh where were they now; what dedication to duty!