

"Oh, I just psycho-analysed him," replied the magician grandly. "That, and of course I sewed on a new nose on both of them."

"What kind of nose?" asked the Wart.

"It is too funny," said Kay. "He wanted to have the griffin's nose for one, but I would not let him. So then he took the noses off the young pigs which we are going to have for supper, and used those. Personally I think they will grunt."

"A ticklish operation," said Merlyn, "but a successful one."

"Well," said the Wart, doubtfully. "I hope it will be all right. What did they do then?"

"They went off to the kennels. Old Wat is very sorry for what he did to the Dog Boy, but he says he can't remember having done it. He says that suddenly everything went black, when they were throwing stones once, and he can't remember anything since. The Dog Boy forgave him and said he did not mind a bit. They are going to work together in the kennels in future, and not think of what is past any more. The Dog Boy says that the old man was good to him while they were prisoners of the Fairy Queen, and that he knows he ought not to have thrown stones at him in the first place. He says he often thought about that when other boys were throwing stones at him."

"Well," said the Wart, "I am glad it has all turned out for the best. Do you think I could go and visit them?"

"For heaven's sake, don't do anything to annoy your nurse," exclaimed Merlyn, looking about him anxiously. "That old woman hit me with a broom when I came to see you this forenoon, and broke my spectacles. Could you not wait until tomorrow?"

On the morrow Wat and the Dog Boy were the firmest of friends. Their common experiences of being stoned by the mob and then tied to columns of pork by Morgan le Fay served as a bond and a topic of reminiscence, as they lay among the dogs at night, for the rest of their lives. Also, by the morning, they had both pulled off the noses which Merlyn had kindly given them. They explained that they had got used to having no noses, now, and anyway they preferred to live with the dogs.

*In spite of his protests, the unhappy invalid was confined to his chamber for three mortal days. He was alone except at bedtime, when Kay came, and Merlyn was reduced to shouting his eddication through the key-hole, at times when the nurse was known to be busy with her washing.*

The boy's only amusement was the ant-nests—the ones between glass plates which had been brought when he first came from Merlyn's cottage in the forest.

"Can't you," he howled miserably under the door, "turn me into something while I'm locked up like this?"

"I can't get the spells through the key-hole."

"Through the what?"

"The KEY-HOLE."

"Oh!"

"Are you there?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"What?"

"Confusion take this shouting!" exclaimed the magician, stamping on his hat. "May Castor and Pollux. . . No, not again. God bless my blood pressure. . ."

"Could you turn me into an ant?"

"A what?"

"An ANTI! It would be a small spell for ants, wouldn't it? It would go through the key-hole?"

"I don't think we ought to."

"Why?"

"They are dangerous."

"You could watch with your insight, and turn me back again if it got too bad. Please turn me into something, or I shall go weak in the head."

"The ants are not our Norman ones, dear boy. They come from the Afric shore. They are belligerent."



"I don't know what belligerent is."

There was a long silence behind the door.

"Well," said Merlyn eventually. "It is far too soon in your education. But you would have had to do it sometime. Let me see. Are there two nests in that contraption?"

"There are two pairs of plates."

"Take a rush from the floor and lean it between the two nests, like a bridge. Have you done that?"

"Yes."

The place where he was seemed like a great field of boulders, with a flattened fortress at one end of it—between the glass plates. The fortress was entered by tunnels in the rock, and, over the entrance to each tunnel, there was a notice which said:

#### EVERYTHING NOT FORBIDDEN IS COMPULSORY

He read the notice with dislike, though he did not understand its meaning. He thought to himself: I will explore a little, before going in. For some reason the notice gave him a reluctance to go, making the rough tunnel look sinister.

He waved his antennae carefully, considering the notice, assuring himself of his new senses, planting his feet squarely in the insect world as if to brace himself in it. He cleaned his antennae with his forefeet, frisking and smoothing them so that he looked like a Victorian villain twirling his moustachios. He yawned—for ants do yawn—and stretch themselves too, like human beings. Then he became conscious of something which had been waiting to be noticed—that there was a noise in his head which was articulate. It was either a noise or a complicated smell, and the easiest way to explain it is to say that it was like a wireless broadcast. It came through his antennae.

The music had a monotonous rhythm like a pulse, and the words which went with it were about June—moon—noon—spoon, or Mammy—mammy—mammy—mammy, or Ever—never, or Blue—true—you. He liked them at first, especially the ones about Love—dove—above, until he found that they did not vary. As soon as they had been finished once, they were begun again. After an hour or two, they began to make him feel sick inside.

There was a voice in his head also, during the pauses of the music, which seemed to be giving directions. "All two-

day-olds will be moved to the West Aisle" it would say, or "Number 210397/WD will report to the soup squad, in replacement for 333105/WD who has fallen off the nest." It was a fruity voice, but it seemed to be somehow impersonal—as if its charm were an accomplishment that had been practised, like a circus trick. It was dead.

The boy, or perhaps we ought to say the ant, walked away from the fortress as soon as he was prepared to walk about. He began exploring the desert of boulders uneasily, reluctant to visit the place from which the orders were coming, yet bored with the narrow view. He found small pathways among the boulders, wandering tracks both aimless and purposeful, which led toward the grain store, and also in various other directions which he could not understand. One of these paths ended at a clod with a natural hollow underneath it. In the hollow—again with the strange appearance of aimless purpose—he found two dead ants. They were laid there tidily but yet untidily, as if a very tidy person had taken them to the place, but had forgotten the reason when he got there. They were curled up, and did not seem to be either glad or sorry to be dead. They were there, like a couple of chairs.

While he was looking at the corpses, a live ant came down the pathway carrying a third one.

It said: "Hail, Barbarus!"

The boy said Hail, politely.

In one respect, of which he knew nothing, he was lucky. Merlyn had remembered to give him the proper smell for the nest—for, if he had smelled of any other nest, they would have killed him at once. If Miss Edith Cavell had been an ant, they would have had to write on her statue: SMELL IS NOT ENOUGH.

The new ant put down the cadaver vaguely and began dragging the other two in various directions. It did not seem to know where to put them. Or rather, it knew that a certain arrangement had to be made, but it could not figure how to make it. It was like a man with a tea-cup in one hand and a sandwich in the other, who wants to light a cigarette with a match. But, where the man would invent the idea of putting down the cup and sandwich—before picking up the cigarette and the match—this ant would have put down the sandwich and picked up the match, then it would have been down with the match and up with the cigarette, then down with the cigarette and up with the sandwich, then



down with the cup and up with the cigarette, until finally it had put down the sandwich and picked up the match. It was inclined to rely on a series of accidents to achieve its object. It was patient, and did not think. When it had pulled the three dead ants into several positions, they would fall into line under the clod eventually, and that was its duty.

Wart watched the arrangements with a surprise which turned into vexation and then into dislike. He felt like asking why it did not think things out in advance—the annoyed feeling which people have on seeing a job being badly done. Later he began to wish that he could put several other questions, such as “Do you like being a sexton?” or “Are you a slave?” or even “Are you happy?”

The extraordinary thing was that he could not ask these questions. In order to ask them, he would have had to put them into ant language through his antennae—and he now discovered, with a helpless feeling, that there were no words for the things he wanted to say. There were no words for happiness, for freedom, for liking, nor were there any words for their opposites. He felt like a dumb man trying to shout “Fire!” The nearest he could get to Right or Wrong, even, was to say Done or Not Done.

The ant finished fiddling with its corpses and turned back down the pathway, leaving them in the haphazard order. It found that the Wart was in its way, so it stopped, waving its wireless aerials at him as if it were a tank. With its mute, menacing helmet of a face, and its hairiness, and the things like spurs on the front leg-joint, perhaps it was more like a knight-in-armor on an armoured horse: or like a combination of the two, a hairy centaur-in-armor.

It said “Hail, Barbarus!” again.

“Hail!”

“What are you doing?”

The boy answered truthfully: “I am not doing anything.” It was baffled by this for several seconds, as you would be if Einstein had told you his latest ideas about space. Then it extended the twelve joints of its aerial and spoke past him into the blue.

It said: “105978/UDC reporting from square five. There is an insane ant on square five. Over to you.”

The word it used for insane was Not-Done. Later on, the Wart discovered that there were only two qualifications in the language, Done and Not-Done—which applied to all questions of value. If the seeds which the collectors found

were sweet, they were Done seeds. If somebody had doctored them with corrosive sublimate, they would have been Not-Done seeds, and that was that. Even the moons, mammals, doves, etc., in the broadcasts were completely described when they were stated to be done ones.

The broadcast stopped for a moment, and the fruity voice said: “G.H.Q. replying to 105978/UDC. What is its number? Over.”

The ant asked: “What is your number?”

“I don’t know.”

When this news had been exchanged with headquarters, a message came back to ask whether he could give an account of himself. The ant asked him. It used the same words as the broadcaster had used, and in the same voice. This made him feel uncomfortable and angry, two emotions which he disliked.

“Yes,” he said sarcastically, for it was obvious that the creature could not detect sarcasm, “I have fallen on my head and can’t remember anything about it.”

“105978/UDC reporting. Not-Done ant has a black-out from falling off the nest. Over.”

“G.H.Q. replying to 105978/UDC. Not-Done ant is number 42436/WD, who fell off the nest this morning while working with mash squad. If it is competent to continue its duties—” Competent-to-continue-its-duties was easier in the ant speech, for it was simply Done, like everything else that was not Not Done. But enough of the language question. “If it is competent to continue its duties, instruct 42436/WD to rejoin mash squad, relieving 210021/WD, who was sent to replace it. Over.”

The creature repeated the message.

It seemed that he could not have made a better explanation than this one about falling on his head, even if he had meant to—for the ants did occasionally tumble off. They were a species of ant called Messor barbarus.

“Very well.”

The sexton paid no further attention to him, but crawled off down the path for another body, or for anything else that needed to be scavenged.

The Wart took himself away in the opposite direction, to join the mash squad. He memorized his own number and the number of the unit who had to be relieved.

The mash squad were standing in one of the outer cham-



bers of the fortress like a circle of worshippers. He joined the circle, announcing that 210021/WD was to return to the main nest. Then he began filling himself with the sweet mash like the others. They made it by scraping the seeds which others had collected, chewing up the scrapings till they made a kind of paste or soup, and then swallowing it into their own crops. At first it was delicious to him, so that he ate greedily, but in a few seconds it began to be unsatisfactory. He could not understand why. He chewed and swallowed busily, copying the rest of the squad, but it was like eating a banquet of nothing, or like a dinner-party on the stage. In a way it was like a nightmare, in which you might continue to consume huge masses of putty without being able to stop.

There was a coming and going round the pile of seeds. The ants who had filled their crops to the brim were walking back to the inner fortress, to be replaced by a procession of empty ants who were coming from the same direction. There were never any new ants in the procession, only this same dozen going backward and forward, as they would do during all their lives.

He realized suddenly that what he was eating was not going into his stomach. A small proportion of it had penetrated to his private self at the beginning, and now the main mass was being stored in a kind of upper stomach or crop, from which it could be removed. It dawned on him at the same time that when he joined the westward stream he would have to disgorge the store, into a larder or something of that sort.

The mash squad conversed with each other while they worked. He thought this was a good sign at first, and listened, to pick up what he could.

"Oh Ark!" one of them would say. "Ear comes that Mammy—mammy—mammy—mammy song again. I dew think that Mammy—mammy—mammy—mammy song is lovely (done). It is so high-class (done)."

Another would remark, "I dew think our beloved Leader is wonderful, don't yew? They sigh she was stung three hundred times in the last war, and was awarded the Ant Cross for Valour."

"How lucky we are to be born in the 'A' nest, don't yew think, and wouldn't it be awful to be one of those orrid 'B's.'"

"Wasn't it awful about 310099/WD! Of course e was

hexecuted at once, by special order of ar beloved Leader."  
"Oh Ark! Ear comes that Mammy—mammy—mammy—mammy song again. I dew think . . ."

He walked away to the nest with a full gorge, leaving them to do the round again. They had no news, no scandal, nothing to talk about. Novelties did not happen to them. Even the remarks about the executions were in a formula, and only varied as to the registration number of the criminal. When they had finished with the mammy—mammy—mammy—mammy, they had to go on to the beloved Leader, and then to the filthy Barbarus B and to the latest execution. It went round in a circle. Even the beloveds, wonderfals, luckies and so on were all Dones, and the awfuls were Not-Dones.

The boy found himself in the hall of the fortress, where hundreds and hundreds of ants were licking or feeding in the nurseries, carrying grubs to various aisles to get an even temperature, and opening or closing the ventilation passages. In the middle, the Leader sat complacently, laying eggs, attending to the broadcasts, issuing directions or commanding executions, surrounded by a sea of adulation. (He learned from Merlyn later that the method of succession among these Leaders was variable according to the different kind of ant. In *Bothriomyrmex*, for instance, the ambitious founder of a New Order would invade a nest of *Tapinoma* and jump on the back of the older tyrant. There, concealed by the smell of her host, she would slowly saw off the latter's head, until she herself had achieved the right of leadership.)

There was no larder for his store of mash, after all. When anybody wanted a meal, they stopped him, got him to open his mouth, and fed from it. They did not treat him as a person, and indeed, they were impersonal themselves. He was a dumbwaiter from which dumb-diners fed. Even his stomach was not his own.

But we need not go on about the ants in too much detail—they are not a pleasant subject. It is enough to say that the boy went on living among them, conforming to their habits, watching them so as to understand as much as he could, but unable to ask questions. It was not only that their language had not got the words in which humans are interested—so that it would have been impossible to ask them whether they believed in Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness—but also that it was dangerous to ask



questions at all. A question was a sign of insanity to them. Their life was not questionable: it was dictated. He crawled from nest to seeds and back again, exclaimed that the Mammy song was lovely, opened his jaws to regurgitate, and tried to understand as well as he could.

Later in the afternoon a scouting ant wandered across the rush bridge which Merlyn had commanded him to make. It was an ant of exactly the same species, but it came from the other nest. It was met by one of the scavenging ants and murdered.

The broadcasts changed after this news had been reported—or rather, they changed as soon as it had been discovered by spies that the other nest had a good store of seeds.

*Mammy—mammy—mammy* gave place to *Antland, Antland Over All*, and the stream of orders were discontinued in favour of lectures about war, patriotism or the economic situation. The fruity voice said that their beloved country was being encircled by a horde of filthy Other-nesters—at which the wireless chorus sang:

When Other blood spurts from the knife,  
Then everything is fine.

It also explained that Ant the Father had ordained in his wisdom that Othernest pismires should always be the slaves of Thisnest ones. Their beloved country had only one feeding tray at present—a disgraceful state of affairs which would have to be remedied if the dear race were not to perish. A third statement was that the national property of Thisnest was being threatened. Their boundaries were to be violated, their domestic animals, the beetles, were to be kidnapped, and their communal stomach would be starved. The Wart listened to two of these broadcasts carefully, so that he would be able to remember them afterwards.

The first one was arranged as follows:

- A. We are so numerous that we are starving.
- B. Therefore we must encourage still larger families so as to become yet more numerous and starving.
- C. When we are so numerous and starving as all that, obviously we shall have a right to take other people's stores of seed. Besides, we shall by then have a numerous and starving army.

It was only after this logical train of thought had been put into practice, and the output of the nurseries trebled—both nests meanwhile getting ample mash for all their needs from Merlyn—for it has to be admitted that starving nations never seem to be quite so starving that they cannot afford to have far more expensive armaments than anybody else—it was only then that the second type of lecture was begun.

This is how the second kind went:

- A. We are more numerous than they are, therefore we have a right to their mash.
- B. They are more numerous than we are, therefore they are wickedly trying to steal our mash.
- C. We are a mighty race and have a natural right to subjugate their puny one.
- D. They are a mighty race and are unnaturally trying to subjugate our inoffensive one.
- E. We must attack them in self-defence.
- F. They are attacking us by defending themselves.
- G. If we do not attack them today, they will attack us tomorrow.
- H. In any case we are not attacking them at all. We are offering them incalculable benefits.

After the second kind of address, the religious services began. These dated—the Wart discovered later—from a fabulous past so ancient that one could scarcely find a date for it—a past in which the emmets had not yet settled down to communism. They came from a time when ants were still like men, and very impressive some of the services were.

A psalm at one of them—beginning, if we allow for the difference of language, with the well-known words, "The earth is the Lord's and all that therein is, the compass of the bomber and they that bomb therefrom"—ended with the terrific conclusion: "Blow up your heads, O ye Gates, and be ye blown up, ye Everlasting Doors, that the King of Glory may come in. Who is the King of Glory? Even the Lord of Ghosts, He is the King of Glory."

A strange feature was that the ordinary ants were not excited by the songs, nor interested by the lectures. They accepted them as matters of course. They were rituals to them, like the Mammy songs or the conversations about their Be-



loved Leader. They did not look at these things as good or bad, exciting, rational or terrible. They did not look at them at all, but accepted them as Done.

The time for the war came soon enough. The preparations were in order, the soldiers were drilled to the last ounce, the walls of the nest had patriotic slogans written on them, such as "*Stings or Mash?*" or "*I Vow to Thee, my Smell,*" and the Wart was past hoping. The repeating voices in his head, which he could not shut off—the lack of privacy, under which others ate from his stomach while others again sang in his brain—the dreary blank which replaced feeling—the dearth of all but two values—the total monotony more than the wickedness: these had begun to kill the joy of life which belonged to his boyhood.

The horrible armies were on the point of joining battle, to dispute the imaginary boundary between their glass trays when Merlyn came to his rescue. He magicked the sickened explorer of animals back to bed, and glad enough he was to be there.

## 14

*In the autumn everybody was preparing for the winter. At night they spent the time rescuing Daddy-long-legs from their candles and rushlights. In the daytime the cows were turned into the high stubble and weeds which had been left by the harvest sickles. The pigs were driven into the purlieus of the forest, where boys beat the trees to supply them with acorns. Everybody was at a different job. From the granary there proceeded an invariable thumping of flails; in the strip fields the slow and enormously heavy wooden ploughs sailed up and down for the rye and the wheat, while the sowers swung rhythmically along, with their hoffers round their necks, casting right hand for left foot and vice versa. Foraging parties came lumbering in*

with their spike-wheeled carts full of bracken, remarking wisely that they must:

Get whome with ee breakes ere all summer be gone  
For tethered up cattle to sit down upon,

while others dragged in timber for the castle fires. The forest rang in the sharp air with the sound of beetle and wedge.

Everybody was happy. The Saxons were slaves to their Norman masters if you chose to look at it in one way—but, if you chose to look at it in another, they were the same farm labourers who get along on too few shillings a week today. Only neither the villein nor the farm labourer starved, when the master was a man like Sir Ector. It has never been an economic proposition for an owner of cattle to starve his cows, so why should an owner of slaves starve them? The truth is that even nowadays the farm labourer accepts so little money because he does not have to throw his soul in with the bargain—as he would have to do in a town—and the same freedom of spirit has obtained in the country since the earliest times. The villeins were labourers. They lived in the same one-roomed hut with their families, few chickens, litter of pigs, or with a cow possibly called Crumbocke—most dreadful and insanitary! But they liked it. They were healthy, free of an air with no factory smoke in it, and, which was most of all to them, their heart's interest was bound up with their skill in labour. They knew that Sir Ector was proud of them. They were more valuable to him than his cattle even, and, as he valued his cattle more than anything else except his children, this was saying a good deal. He walked and worked among his villagers, thought of their welfare, and could tell the good workman from the bad. He was the eternal farmer, in fact—one of those people who seem to be employing labour at so many shillings a week, but who are actually paying half as much again in voluntary overtime, providing a cottage free, and possibly making an extra present of milk and eggs and home-brewed beer into the bargain.

In other parts of Gramarye, of course, there did exist wicked and despotic masters—feudal gangsters whom it was to be King Arthur's destiny to chasten—but the evil was in the bad people who abused it, not in the feudal system.