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LOVE-LIFE OF THE ANT

THE ANTS OF TIMOTHY THÜMMEL. by Arpad Ferenczy. 320 pp. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

TRUTH is so very much stranger than fiction that sometimes it is practically unbelievable. Any one reading Arpad Ferenczy's "The Ants of Timothy Thümmel," for instance, will be apt to smile in the most skeptical manner upon being informed that there are no incidents in the imaginary tale that do not find their foundations on scientific data or theory directly based on such data. For the characters of this novel are ants and the powers of co-ordination, domestic and social practices, methods of warfare, and industrious planning for the future attributed to them are almost inconceivable. Yet readers of Fabre, Lubbock, Forel, and one or two others, will be partially prepared to accept certain of the surprisingly human traits planted in these fictional ants by Mr. Ferenczy. He, by the way, is a professor of sociology, jurisprudence, &c., in the University of Budapest, and he appears to have made a close study of ant life. His book is purportedly written by one Timothy Thümmel, described as once Custodian of the Insect House at the Zoological Gardens in Budapest, a man who has been ridiculed into an early grave because he transferred the title of "sapient" from Man to the Ant. This savant is supposed to have left the manuscript of the book behind him and that manuscript is supposed to have been translated from the ant hieroglyphics of the Chronicles of the Aruwimi Ants.

In a gigantic primeval forest in the heart of Africa, to the north of the Congo and near the tributary of the Aruwimi, is the glade where the ants dwell. The Chronicle describes the history of these ants (there are several tribes of them), their befoolment into a false religion, their love-life, their mighty wars in which millions of ants take part, their domestic and economic habits, indeed, most of the various activities in which these ants round out their busy lives. Mr. Ferenczy has done his work with a lively sense of humor and satire and because this is true there are moments when a Swift-like atmosphere hovers over the novel. One thinks of the satire in Gulliver and applies the sagaciousness of the ants to the more stumbling tactics of man. The Aruwimi ants are skillful and malicious conspirators. They are full of tricks whereby they push forward their own fortunes. No sooner has the reader started the book than he is met by a wily ant who discovers that by transforming himself into an inspired prophet of the Giant-Ant he can escape all labor and have the less sacred creatures work for him. It is the destruction of this sacred race of loafers and the false aristocracy, the Big-Heads, that forms the underlying thread of the novel. Not until Pye-Ksye climbs the tree and comes back with his revelation from the Giant-Ant (much like Moses from Sinai) that all must labor and there must be equality for all do the disastrous wars in the Aruwimi Ant-Glade cease.

These wars are extremely amusing in the telling. The manoeuvres of the huge army corps, the sly tactics of the ant-generals, the feints and false advances, the tunnel digging, the throwing of living bridges, the activities of the poisonous cohorts who can throw burning formic acid as far as seven inches—all these things should serve to keep the reader quite spellbound.

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