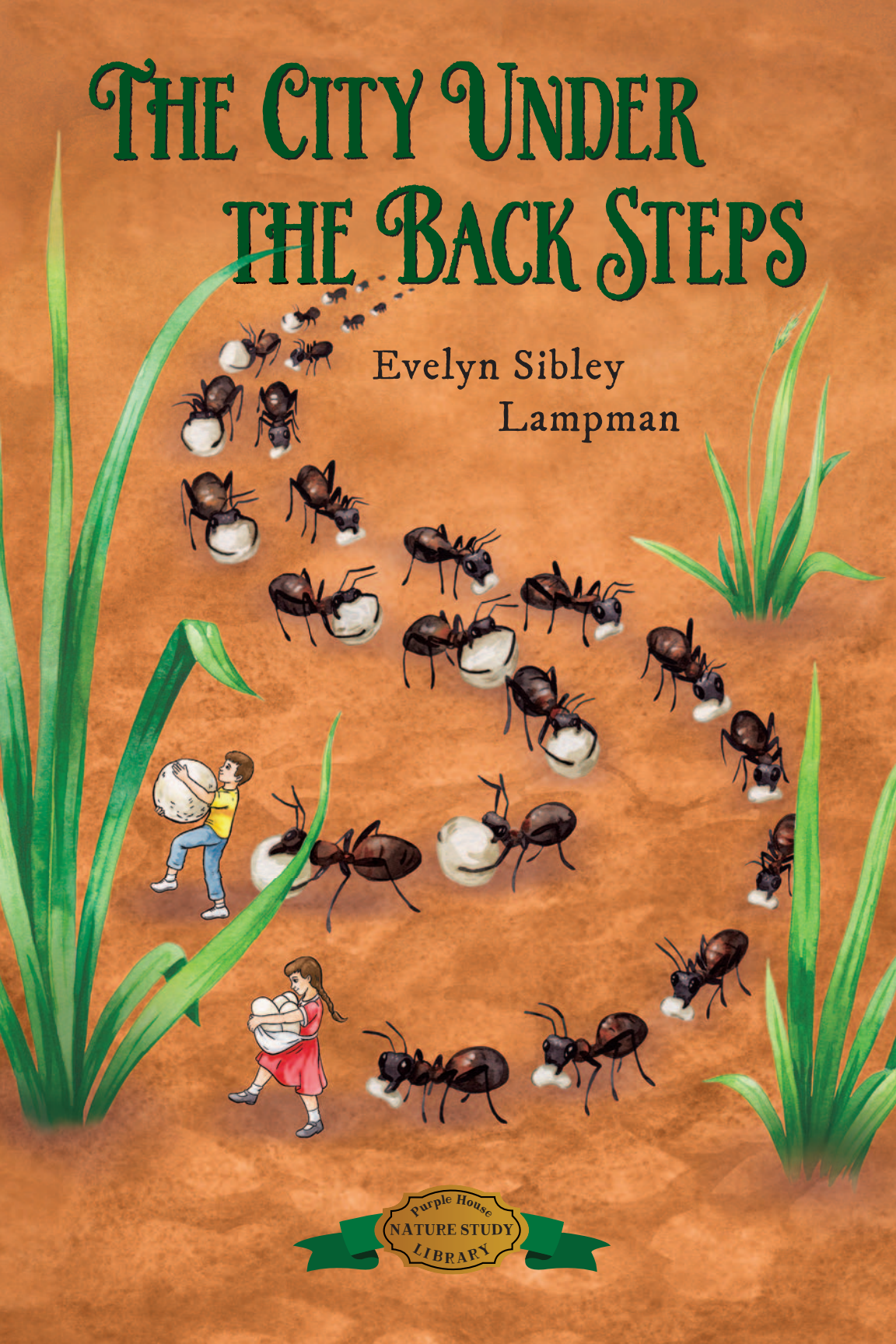
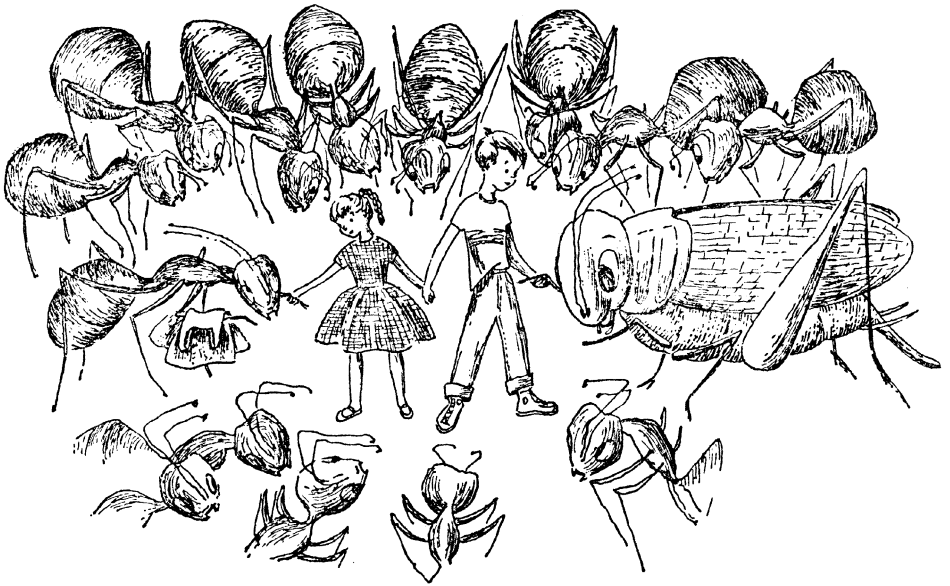


THE CITY UNDER THE BACK STEPS

Evelyn Sibley
Lampman



THE CITY UNDER THE BACK STEPS



Evelyn Sibley Lampman
illustrated by Honoré Valintcourt



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THE CITY UNDER
THE BACK STEPS



CLACK, CLACK! Clackety clack clack!”

Craig came around the house being a space pilot, his imaginary ray gun dissolving unwary meteorites. But as he rounded the corner, the triumphant smile of accomplishment faded from his face, the last clack was swallowed before it came out, and he stuffed empty hands, no longer filled with glamorous outer-space equipment, into the pockets of his jeans. His cousin Jill was crouched on the sidewalk before the back steps.

“Why hello, Craig,” said Jill politely. “Why were you making those funny noises?”

Craig ignored her question.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded suspiciously.

“Mother wanted to see Aunt Grace, and she made me come, too. Don’t think I wanted to.”

“Oh,” grunted Craig in relief. So long as Jill hadn’t come to see him on her own initiative, it was all right. He understood about mothers sometimes insisting that their children accompany them on calls to relatives. It was something you had to expect, something you had to go along with. If any of the guys happened to see Jill in his back yard, it would be easy enough to explain that her mother had made her come along. But if Jill had just come over to his house for no reason at all, that was something else again. He certainly didn’t want her to think she could get away with that. She was a girl, even though she was his cousin, and the guys wouldn’t understand that kind of visit at all.

“What are you looking at, anyway?” he asked a little more amiably, moving forward to see for himself.

“Ants. Aunt Grace gave me some cookies, and I dropped some crumbs here on the walk. Just look at all the ants come to carry them off.”

“Huh,” said Craig scornfully. “Ants are pests. I hate them.”

Deliberately he brought his foot down and stepped on one of the scurrying black insects.

“Craig Eaton!” scolded Jill angrily. “That was mean. Poor little ant. It never did anything to hurt you.”

“Well, its friends have,” objected Craig, sitting down on the back step. “They’re always getting into food at picnics, and crawling all over you. Once they started coming in the kitchen, and Mother had to put out poison to get rid of them. And once I actually ate one.”

“You ate an ant?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to,” he assured her hurriedly. “It was the ant’s fault. I left half a candy bar on the front porch, and I didn’t remember it until after dark. And then I went to get it, and I took a bite right away without looking.”

“And there were ants on it? How’d they taste?” she added curiously.

“Sour. Horrible. I spit it out right away.”

“Then you didn’t really eat an ant,” decided Jill. “You just bit into one.”

“Serves it right for all the times they’ve bitten me,” decided Craig grimly. He fumbled in his pocket for his new Boy Scout knife, opened it, and began whittling carefully on the edge of the step.

Jill watched him thoughtfully, but she didn’t remind him that he shouldn’t be whittling the steps as his other girl cousin, Georgia, would have done. Jill was a pretty good egg, even though she was a girl. He decided it was safe to confide in her a little.

"I'm going to be a space pilot when I grow up. Did you know that?"

"No. Why?" asked Jill curiously.

"Why? Why, because it's adventure. Who wants to stick around this dull old planet? There's nothing here. It's all boring."

"Do you want to live on the moon?"

"Certainly not. That's just a jumping-off place. I want to go where there's something exciting. Where there's strange kinds of people. They probably won't be people like we have on earth, either. I mean really strange ones, with maybe six legs instead of two, and maybe they'll have scales instead of skin, and they won't talk the way we do, either."

"Then how will you know what they're saying?"

"Oh, I'll learn to understand them. Maybe they'll have thought transference instead of words, and—"

"What's that?" demanded Jill, coming to sit beside him on the step.

Craig beamed on her approvingly. She was dumb, of course, but still smarter than most girls or she wouldn't be so interested. He gave up whittling, folding the knife and putting it back into his pocket.

"It's mind reading," he explained. "You wouldn't have to know a language to tell what somebody was thinking."

Jill considered the idea for a moment.

"Wouldn't you be scared?" she asked finally.

"Certainly not. As soon as they saw I didn't mean to hurt them, they wouldn't want to hurt me. We'd just find out about each other, that's all."

"Oh," said Jill. Apparently she wasn't as interested in other worlds as Craig had thought, for she got up and returned to inspect the progress made by the ants in transporting cookie crumbs.

After a moment, Craig got up and came over to watch also.

“They’re sure dumb,” he observed critically. “Or else they’d stop and break those big crumbs in two before they tried to carry them off. The crumbs are bigger than the ants, and they can’t see around them to tell where they’re going.”

There were dozens of the tiny black insects, all coming or going. Those carrying sugary burdens in their mouths hurried as fast as they could toward a small gap under the bottom step. A second group, empty-jawed, emerged from the same opening, and converged by jerky spurts upon the little pile of crumbs.

“At first there was only one ant,” explained Jill in a fascinated tone. “Then it went back and told some friends. They’re probably laying in their winter supply of food.”

“Ants can’t talk,” Craig reminded her in a superior way. “It’s instinct.”

Without warning, a new insect, a little larger than those on the walk, landed in the very center of activity, sending cookie crumbs and even an ant or two scattering in every direction. Although wings, like half furred sails, trailed from both sides, the insect must not have used them on this flight, for there had been no swooping descent. Instead it had seemed to fall straight downward from a cloudless sky. A moment later, a handful of other winged insects, somewhat resembling the first, littered the surrounding pavement.

“What are they? And where’d they come from?” demanded Jill in astonishment.

“Flying ants,” guessed Craig, although he really had no more idea than she. He leaned over to inspect the nearest one more closely, and was gratified to see that it did resemble an ant with wings. It must have been stunned by the blow, for it lay almost motionless.

“It’s dead. Or almost. Shall I step on it?”

“No,” snapped Jill. “Why do you always want to be stepping on things, anyway? Leave it alone, poor thing.”

The small black ants, disturbed at their task of conveying

cookie crumbs from the walk to their nest, had momentarily left off work. Some had been startled into dropping the loads they were carrying, and the two who had been knocked aside were waving frantic legs in an effort to regain their footing. Now, as the children watched, those who still retained crumbs between their jaws put them down, and, as though in answer to an unspoken command, each advanced upon the feebly struggling intruder in the center.

“Now listen,” protested Jill, anticipating a battle. “You can’t all pick on him. It isn’t his fault that he fell on your old cookie crumbs.”

“Leave them alone,” advised Craig. “He can always fly away if he doesn’t like it.”

“No, he can’t. Look, one of his wings broke off when he fell. I’m going to move him out of the way!”

Just in the nick of time, Jill snatched the newcomer away from the onrushing ants.

“Poor little bug,” she said sympathetically. “I’m going to take you home, and put you in a box and keep you till you’re all well. I’ll feed you crumbs every day, and—Ouch!”

“What’s the matter?” asked Craig in an interested tone.

Jill had dropped the insect suddenly, and now had her hand to her mouth.

“It bit me, the ugly, mean thing!”

“Bugs don’t bite. They sting,” corrected Craig superiorly. He bent over to pick up the discarded insect himself. “I wonder what kind of bug it is, anyway. If you don’t want it, maybe I’ll keep it myself.”

A second later, he also flung the insect from him, for although he had been holding it between thumb and forefinger in a way he considered sure protection against the danger of stings, he had felt a sharp barb himself.

“Go ahead, ants,” he invited angrily. “Eat him up. It’ll serve him right.”

But as he spoke it seemed that his voice grew smaller and

smaller, and tinier and tinier. It had started out in the normal tone he generally used, but with each word it shrank a little until it ended with the faintest wisp of a whisper. At the same time Craig began to experience a shrinking feeling within his body. It was a strange feeling, as though he might be withering away, or else that everything around him was growing rapidly. It made him quite dizzy, so dizzy that he closed his eyes, and when he opened them again he couldn't recognize where he was.

On one side was a tall forest of lush green vegetation which grew so thickly that he could not see between the wide flat stalks. It stretched high above his head, as tall as the tallest trees, but unlike ordinary trees these had no brown trunks or branches, for the wide green growth sprang directly from the ground. On his other side was a white wall, made of wood, as high as the tops of the green forest, and underfoot was hard, rough gray rock which went on and on, seemingly forever.

At first he thought he was alone in this strange place, and then he saw that he was not. Advancing toward him, at a galloping run, were four of the most terrifying creatures he had ever seen. They were inky black, and their skins looked hard and glistening in the sunlight, as though they had been freshly oiled. Six legs, three on each side, carried them ahead at such a speed that even had Craig turned to run away, he could never have hoped to escape. A moment later they had reached him, whereupon they arranged themselves in a guarding position, one to stand directly in front, one behind, the other guarding each side.

Craig stood perfectly still, hoping the creatures wouldn't know how frightened he was. He made himself stare into the black face which was on a level with his own, and tried to look as though such an encounter happened every day. But of course it didn't. He had never seen such a face, outside of a nightmare or a Halloween mask. And he wasn't asleep, and this wasn't Halloween.

Three gigantic pearl-colored eyes stared unblinkingly back at him from the center of the creature's forehead, while two more eyes protruded slightly from the sides, in the places where people grow ears. There were no ears at all on this head, and no nose, either, but there was a mouth, which moved from side to side as well as up and down. When it did so, Craig had a glimpse of something that flickered like a tongue, and of something else that was sharp and might have been teeth. Protruding from the creature's head were two long black tubes with tiny holes in the end, and these tubes moved restlessly from side to side and up and down as though it was impossible for them to be still.

The head rested directly on the creature's body, with no neck at all, and the body itself seemed to be composed of two shining black balls, separated by a tiny stem or waist. The two legs in front were finished off with jagged edges, like the teeth of a comb, and they looked sharp and formidable.

Craig had never seen anything like this before. But in the back of his mind some memory stirred. Somewhere he had read, or heard about, such awesome beings. And then he knew.

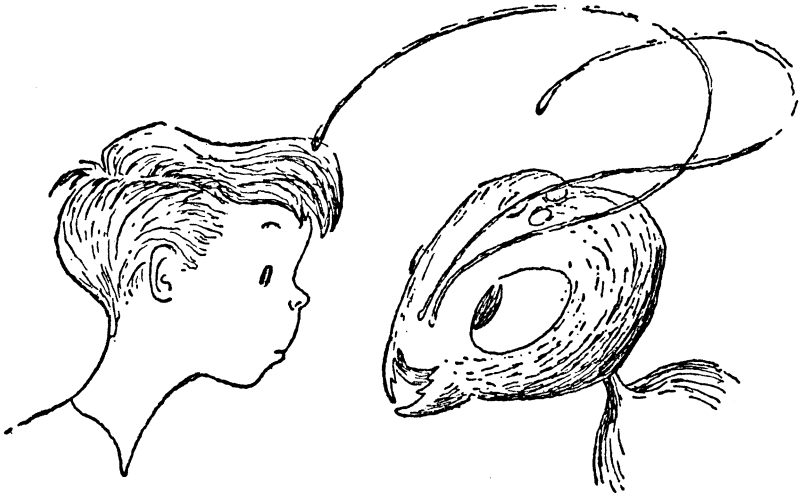
"You're from outer space!" he cried. "That's what you are!"

A moment later he jumped and pulled back, but the creature behind was there holding him still, while the one facing him lightly placed one of the long black tubes on Craig's forehead.

"What are you?" said a voice in his ears, and Craig realized that the black, waving tendril was a speaking tube, an antenna, and that the creature was asking a question.

"I'm a boy. An earth boy," said Craig. He spoke loudly as one might address someone who was hard of hearing. "What planet are you from?"

"A boy?" Craig had the impression that the creature was displeased. "What a waste. Her Majesty will be disappointed. But perhaps, if she plans to keep you as a pet, the fact that you are a male and of no real use is not important."



The creature seemed to be studying him with its three milky white eyes, and when Craig glanced from left to right, those guards, too, were regarding him curiously from their many-faceted side eyes.

“Are you going to eat me?” he quavered.

“No,” denied the creature mildly. “I’ve never encountered anything quite like you before. You might not be edible. Where do you live?”

“Why, I live right here in this house,” began Craig, and then he stopped. There was no house, only a high white wooden wall on one side and an exotic waving forest of strange trunkless trees on the other. He had never been in this place before. He had never even seen pictures of anything resembling it. Where was he? How had he got here? And who were these ugly black creatures, as large as he, who walked on six legs and spoke and read thoughts through antennae on their glistening heads?

Craig knew the answer to some of the questions instantly. He had read enough space books so that there could be no doubt. He was on some far planet from the earth, and the four creatures were some of its inhabitants. The only question he couldn’t answer was how he had got here. However it had happened, he didn’t like it. He wasn’t ready to explore outer

space. Not yet. He gulped hard, for something which he couldn't swallow was sticking in his throat.

Perhaps the creature interpreted some of his confused and frightened feelings, for the words which came through the antennae and into Craig's brain suggested that they meant to be comforting.

"You will like it in our city. And today is an auspicious time to meet Her Majesty. It is her wedding day."

Craig nodded without speaking. He couldn't speak. If he tried to he would cry, and he didn't want to cry in front of these strangers from a distant planet. But he didn't want to be here. He wanted his mother and his father. He wanted his home, and he wanted the Earth.

"Come, let us march to the City," said the creature, and removing its antennae from Craig's forehead it whirled around to face the front.

Although Craig had distinctly heard the word "march," the pace set up by the four was distinctly a run, and encircled as he was, Craig had to run, too. Before he knew it, he was out of breath but when he lagged the guard behind pushed him on with a hard bullet-like head.

He had never run so fast in his life, and his legs grew weak and finally refused to go on. Panting with exhaustion, he fell down on the hard gray rock, and just lay there. If they wanted to take him to their queen they'd either have to slow down or carry him.

This time it was one of the other guards who put questioning antennae on his forehead, for the one in the lead did not immediately discover that the others had stopped, and was some distance ahead before becoming aware of this. When it did so, it turned and raced rapidly back to them.

"What is the matter?" asked the guard who had taken over the questioning. "Why have you stopped? Why did you lie down?"

"I'm tired," gasped Craig. "I can't run so fast."

"But it is a hot day," explained the guard in surprise. "On a hot day it is proper to march faster than on a cool day. That is one of the oldest rules."

"I never heard of any rule like that," protested Craig, but the creature was no longer listening. The first guard had returned and the four of them put their antennae together as though conferring with one another.

After a time they apparently reached a decision, and one of them approached Craig and placed the black tube on his forehead.

"It has been decided to carry you."

"I'm pretty heavy," objected Craig quickly. "You need all your legs for walking. I don't see how you and all your men together could carry me and still walk."

The antennae rapped sharply against his head.

"Must you be insulting? How dare you call us men?"

"I don't know what else to call you," explained Craig quickly. "I don't know what you call yourselves here."

"We are women," insisted the creature, and the antennae against Craig's forehead throbbed with indignation. "We four happen to be soldiers, so you may call us Major."

"Women soldiers?" gasped Craig.

"You certainly couldn't expect to make a soldier from a male, could you? Silly, stupid weaklings!"

The black creature looked so terrifying at the moment, with her sharp teeth snapping in her powerful jaws, that Craig felt it was better not to argue the point. Instead he asked meekly, "How do you four all happen to be majors? Where are the generals and the privates?"

"There are no privates in Her Majesty's army," explained the major. To Craig's relief, her antennae began to quiet down a little. "And no generals either. We are all majors. That way we do not have to obey any commands, other than those of

Her Majesty, and we are all on an equal footing. It is more democratic that way. Do you understand?”

“Oh, yes,” agreed Craig quickly, but he really didn’t. It seemed to him that someone ought to be in command of an army.

“Very well. It’s all agreed then. We will carry you to the City,” decided the major.

Immediately the four soldiers grasped Craig in their jaws, two by the ankles, two by the shoulders. He felt himself being raised in the air, and a minute later twenty-four legs fell into step as they proceeded at a galloping run over the gray rock highway. Their teeth had looked hard and sharp when viewed from a distance, but Craig was relieved that none of the majors seemed inclined to close her jaws. He was held carefully, but securely, and borne along with as little bumping as might be expected.

They were traveling next to the white wall, and suddenly they came to the end of it, whereupon the four majors made a smart turn to the right, and the road underfoot became very rough. Craig peered down as best he could and saw that they had left the gray highway and were now traveling up and down over brown, hilly earth. The lush green forest of trunkless trees was behind them, but here was a new kind of vegetation. This, too, was exotically tropical, growing to tremendous heights, but way up in the tops he could see splashes of brilliant color, which meant that these trees must be of a flowering variety. After a few moments the four majors gently placed Craig on the ground.

“We are at the City gates,” one of them told him. “We think it would look better if you walked in yourself. But watch your steps. The causeway leading down is rather steep.”

Craig nodded. He looked around for a gate to swing open, but there was none. There was only an opening with what appeared to be a white wooden timber across the top. Below

the timber was a well defined road of hard pounded earth which disappeared into shadows.

Once more the four majors took up their original positions surrounding him, and again they hurried him forward into the cool darkness. At first Craig could see nothing at all, although his feet told him he was descending a steep, winding hill. Occasionally he had the impression that someone or something, doubtless another creature like the soldiers, passed them on its way up the hill, but no one spoke and the earthy cavern gave off no sound.

He remembered some of the science fiction books he had read. More than one author had guessed that life on other planets might be lived underground. Craig wished that he could tell them that their guesses had been right, but of course he couldn't. Perhaps he'd never be able to. He might never get back to Earth at all, but would just have to stay here forever.

Gradually he was becoming able to distinguish a little in the darkness, the gleam of pearly eyes, an occasional glittering flash which might have been given off by a hard polished body. He had thought that his eyes were growing accustomed to the dark, but now he knew differently. There was light ahead, filtered light, but light enough to see. A moment more, and they had reached the bottom of the passage.

Craig saw that they were in a large underground chamber. Although there were hundreds of black creatures, similar to the four soldiers, each rushing around at some task, the room was by no means crowded. It could have accommodated twice that number. Then he was aware of a most distinctive odor which seemed to hover in the air like incense. It was not an unpleasant odor. In fact it smelled more like vanilla than anything else he could think of, and he suddenly remembered that when he was being carried by the four majors he had received a whiff of the same scent. Here, however, it was very strong, and he decided it must be a perfume which they all wore.

As they stood there in the entranceway, one of the inhabitants bustled up to them. Delicately, she and one of the majors touched antennae, then she placed her other antenna on Craig's forehead.

"So this is the other new pet," she observed. "You have done well, Major."

"Thank you, My Lady," said the major gratefully.

"How are you, little girl?" asked My Lady.

"I'm afraid it's a boy, My Lady," apologized the major.

"Oh!" For a moment My Lady withdrew her antenna from Craig's forehead as though the touch had become distasteful. Then she put it back resolutely, as one who is determined to do her duty. "Well, whatever you are, come along. You may stand with the other new one until Her Majesty has time to grant you an audience."

Craig felt reluctant to leave the four majors who had brought him here. After all, one of them had come right out and admitted she had no intention of eating him. And while they had been firm about delivering him to the queen, they had not been unkind. They had been surprised to find that he was a boy, and insulted when he thought they themselves were men, but they had got over that. My Lady, on the other hand, gave him the impression that she wouldn't overlook his sex so easily. The touch of her antennae on his forehead had been almost cringing, as though she was afraid he might contaminate her.

"Can't I stay with you?" he begged the majors. "You can take me to see the queen."

"Oh, no," denied the major quickly. "Only My Lady in Waiting, and some of the nursemaids who attend her, are permitted in the royal chamber. Go with My Lady. It is proper."

My Lady's antennae quivered violently, but whether it was with pride or indignation Craig did not know. But he was sure that it would do no good to argue further, so he obediently turned to the lady in waiting, who began racing, at full speed,

to the other side of the chamber. Obviously he was expected to follow.

It was a long way across the big room, and Craig could not possibly keep up, no matter how fast he ran. Several times My Lady had to stop and wait impatiently for him to catch up. Then she would race on a little farther before she stopped to wait once more.

They must have been half way to the opposite wall when Craig heard the first noise which had been made in the room since his arrival. It was a loud, scratchy sound, and echoed against the hard dirt walls.

“Crick, crick, crick!”

He stopped and looked around, but none of the others seemed to have heard it, or if they had they considered it so unimportant that they took no notice. Then he saw My Lady, waiting and tapping her antennae together impatiently, so he put the strange noise from his mind, and began running once more.

At last they reached the far wall, and Craig was so breathless that he could only stand wearily and pant. He felt My Lady’s antennae touch his forehead gingerly.

“Stay here,” she ordered. “With the other pets. You will be sent for.”

Pets! What kind of pets were kept by these residents of outer space? He had been too exhausted to observe where he had been brought before, but now he looked up eagerly. Before him was a gigantic black thing, many times larger than any of his captors. It was bigger than an elephant, and its body, raised off the ground by six jointed legs, was covered with shiny black skin that looked as hard as shell. It had a round bullet head from which protruded two long whip-like antennae, and a wide mouth, filled with sharp teeth, which was gaping at the moment.

As Craig stared in horror at the fearful creature, who could have easily swallowed him down in one gulp, the two sides of its round body seemed to lift in air. They came together, as wings, and Craig knew the origin of that strange noise he had heard before.

“Crick, crick, crick!”

Heard close at hand, it made little drops of perspiration appear on his forehead. And then, suddenly, from behind the horrible black giant appeared something else which made him forget everything else. It was his cousin Jill, advancing joyously to greet him.

“Craig!” she cried. “I’m so glad to see you. I thought I was all alone here in this anthill. Cricket, this is my cousin Craig that I’ve been telling you about.”

