

The Ants at Princeton, F. Scott Fitzgerald

And that is the true story of the ants at Princeton. That they became a nuisance and had to be exterminated the following spring does not detract from the credit of their achievement.

The extermination order did not of course apply to "Aunty." You can see him any day now, if you are curious, for he has specialized in the future of his own people and holds down with credit the Harkness Chair of Insectology at Yale and in his spare time coaches the team. And Captain Saltonville is still remembered as one of the fastest running guards the Crimson ever knew.

The Ants at Princeton

Sufficient time having elapsed it is now possible to tell the facts about a case concerning which little is known, but about which the wildest speculations have been made. As a Princeton man and a friend of certain University officials the present author is in a position to know the true story, from its beginning at a faculty meeting to its nigh tragic ending at an intercollegiate football game.

One detail will forever elude me—which member of the faculty first conceived the idea of admitting ants as students to the University. The reasons given, I remember, were that the insects by their highly complicated organising power, their discipline and above all, their industry, would set an example to the other students.

In any event the experiment was inaugurated one autumn under what seemed the best auspices. It was possible through the efforts of Professor _____ of the bacteriological department, and through the generosity of Mr. _____ of the Board of Trustees to find a number of ants suitable to the experiment. And so tactfully was it managed that many of the students were totally unaware of the presence of their new classmates, and, but for a certain incident which forms the basis of this story, might have remained so all through college.

Some of the ants, because of their diminutive stature, found difficulty in "keeping up" with their fellow students and these were reluctantly dropped at midyear examinations. The majority of them did well, however, and all progressed favorably through the year in spite of a growing inferiority complex among them. This complex was strongest in an especially large well developed ant, in whom the conviction gradually grew that it was his destiny to justify his people and their abilities before the rest of the student body.

As I say, his stature approached that of a man, and it was natural that his ambition should take the form of making for himself a berth on the varsity football team.

This was not so difficult, for during the previous year the team had been disorganized. It was between regimes, so to speak, and Fritz Crisler had been called East from the University of Minnesota to take the reins.

One of Mr. Crisler's first acts in assuming control was to ask for full independence in moulding a newer and better team—and the first matter that came up in this connection naturally centered about the ant.

For the ant by this time was playing running guard on the second varsity and to older alumni it seemed almost a disgrace that a team which had in other days contained such legendary heroes as Hillebrand, Biffy Lee, Big Bill Edwards and the Poes should have an ant on it, no matter what his personal character or ability.

But Crisler was firm.

"At Minnesota," he would say, "we have no racial discriminations on our teams—except of course against Scandinavians."

So as spring practice turned to fall practice the older alumni became resigned to the situation. And meanwhile the ant was moved up to the first varsity in which he became an important cog because of his versatility, playing secondary defense on the offense and secondary offense on the defense.

By the beginning of the season the coaches were beginning to think of him as a potential All-American. He was big and rugged and the dazzling way in which he twisted through the line on all fours, as well as his confusing ability to carry the ball under any of his eight arms, seemed to inaugurate a new era in American football. The whole offense was gradually built about him.

Every old Princetonian will remember that season—how in turn Cornell, Pennsylvania, Dartmouth, Columbia and Yale, and the two "breathers" (as the easy games were called), the Lawrenceville Seconds and the New Jersey School for Drug Addicts fell before the onslaught of the Tiger—or rather of the ant, for it was to him that the sports writers gave full credit. When his head was torn off in the Yale game there was dismay on the campus and a sigh of relief went over the undergraduate body when it was once more fixed in place.

Only one obstacle lay in the way of a victorious season and a sure trip to the Rose Bowl. The last game that year was with Harvard and the captain of the Crimson, Cabot Saltonville, who also played running guard, declared that he would rather cancel the game than play against an ant.

"I do not think it necessary to give any reasons," he declared to an eager press, "but I assure you on my word as an old Groton man it is not a question of fear."

The battle raged in the newspapers and on the two campuses. The Princetonians naturally saw in it a disingenuous desire to get rid of their star player. The claim was made that a Maeterlinck had written about ants while only an Adams had written about Bostonians. The Cambridgians stood almost unanimously behind their captain and broke up a radical meeting which considered the matter an aspect of the class war.

In the end Princeton yielded. The ant would sit on the sidelines. Saltonville had won.

As the game progressed the result was as prophesied. Without their quintuple threat the Princeton team was as paralyzed. Steadily the score mounted 7-0, 14-0, 50-0, 65-0—while the cheering from the Tiger stands gradually, took on the semblance of a groan.

Finally someone—legend ascribes it to a freshman—started a singsong slogan:

"We want 'Aunty'.
We want 'Aunty'."

Those near-by took it up and finally the whole orange and black section were chanting it.

"We want Aunty!"

It was here that Captain Saltonville of Harvard made his great mistake. There were only ten minutes to play and in the overweening confidence engendered by the score he was moved to one of those gestures of chivalry inherited from a long line of New England ancestors.

He called time out and shouted to the Princeton sidelines.

"Send in that insect."

They sent him in. He was in his civilian clothes for he had not expected to play, but before ten seconds had passed that seemed to make no difference, for once he was on the field a new spirit possessed the Princeton players. They swung into their old formations and with the ant leading the tandems rushed down the field. Crisler, as has been said, had built an offense around him that had carried them through an undefeated season. As "Aunty" bucked, tackled, spun, reversed, kicked and passed, hundreds of other smaller ants making their way cautiously through the grass swarmed over the Harvard players, and at each starting signal nipped them with such vehemence as to completely destroy their charge and spoil any vestige of an offense. (Some of them, by penetrating the players' nether garments, gave rise to a famous phrase which would be indelicate to set down here.)

Captain Saltonville, his face black with ants so that he could scarcely see, cursed his generosity. But still he saw the score roll up 6-65, 25-65, 55-65, 64-65—until Princeton was ahead at last. Then he decided on a desperate measure.

He would "get" Aunty. He would violate all the traditions of his family and play dirty.

The signal was given and in he rushed.

"Bim!" went his fist, under the scrimmage, "Bim! Bam! Bim!"

Something warned him even at the moment that he was being rash.

And presently the huge throng was treated to a strange sight. Out of the pile burst Captain Saltonville, running at full speed, and after him, with a ferocious light in his beady eyes came the ant. Past his own goal posts ran the Cambridgian, and then with a glance behind and a terrified cry, up he went over the barrier into the stands, up the aisle he climbed with the ant always behind him.

Terrified, the crowd watched knowing that eventually Captain Saltonville would reach the top of the stadium with no alternative to a fifty foot leap to the ground.

The stricken Massachuseten reached the press box and paused, white with anguish. Nearer and nearer came the ant, impeded only a little by the efforts of Harvard men to head him off.

And then another anonymous figure walks into this story. It was a young resourceful sports writer.

"If you will give the proper statement to the press," he said, "I think I can calm him down."

"Anything!" cried Saltonville.

Carefully the reporter dictated and Saltonville repeated after him into the mike, his blood quivering with shame at the words.

"This anim- I mean my honorable opponent, is superior to me... in industry, character and courage..." He hurried on for his adversary was within hearing, "He is a gentleman and sportsman and I am proud to have encountered him even in defeat."

The ant heard and stopped. Flattery is sweet and his fighting nature was mollified.

The pressman spoke for him.

"Do you mean that, Captain Saltonville?" he asked.

"Of course I do," faltered the son of John Harvard, "That's why I hurried up to the press box. I couldn't keep back the truth any longer."