

GREEN GLORY

A story of a man of the far future

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AS THE TINY human shapes poured alertly through the subterranean artery, sharp clicks emanated from the magnetic audition disk in the roof of the passage. The clicks announced that the bee swarms were preparing to wage gruesome and relentless war.

To the ant people and their tiny human servitors the bee army's dissolving-fungus tissue was a menace that obscured the splendor of the sun and stars and the joys of shared labor in the sweet-smelling earth. In grim procession the midget shapes moved forward, and Atasmas sang and chanted as he led them. He sang of war and glory and sacrificial death. A huge yellow aphid sat perched on his gauze-clad shoulders and fed him as he advanced.

In his inmost heart Atasmas despised the little stupid insect with its cumbersome-clawed tarsi. He knew that wing-less aphids had once served the ant hordes with complaisant humility far back in the dim legendary ages when his own race was the opposite of complaisant. The aphids were mere contented cattle, mere unthinking milk producers for the omniscient ant people.

Atasmas knew that he was nearly as insignificant as the aphids in the ant people's sight, but he knew also

that his own little race had once wielded immense power on earth, holding all other animal forms in abject thrall. The aphids had never enslaved the hostile forces of nature, and had no idea of the majesty of the far-flung constellations and the vague, tender glory of the night shapes which visited men in dreams.

Deep in the earth, in luminous damp tunnels Atasmas' kind had labored, dreamed, and died for millions of years, enduring their little May-fly span of life with ardent heroism, and remaining unflaggingly devoted to the ants' exalted creeds, their world-subduing techniques.

The ants were great. Even strong-willed men like Atasmas conceded it and were proud to serve as nurses for the large-brained grubs, as removers of excrement in the dark pits, and as re-layers of such scented delicacies as the embalmed bodies of small spiders, roaches, and still smaller mammals.

Along the damp, glowing tunnel Atasmas marched, the triumphant head of the tiny human procession that had formed by itself in response to the sharp clicks in the circular magnetic disk in the roof of the tunnel.

"War formation—war formation—war formation," announced the revolving disk, and Atasmas had marshaled the others into a smoothly progressing service line, thirty abreast.

"A man should die gladly when the disks move," he chanted. "With singing and rejoicing he should merge his little worthless personality in the great dream. When men die in defense of the great dream, the eggs in the abdomen of the queen mother are preserved for a destiny so great that—"

The words froze suddenly on his lips. A circle of light appeared in the roof of the tunnel and a long, attenuated feeler fastened on his shoulder. The aphid hopped to the ground with a frightened screech.

Atasmas groaned and his little body stiffened. He knew that incompetent men were lifted at frequent intervals from the tunnel by the small workers and carried up through long arteries and vertical chambers to the directing queen mothers in their luminous cells.

At the thought of losing his comparative supremacy as a leader of his kind, Atasmas' brain grew numb. He had thought himself secure, for he had served always with alertness and efficiency. But many were the sins of omission which a man could commit almost unconsciously, and Atasmas was sick with the thought that he had perhaps violated some minor but important taboo.

The feeler laid him gently in repose in the center of an immense, chitin-armored back. Then the small worker began its slow ascent to the cells of the directing queens. From his vantage point on the insect's back, Atasmas was privileged to survey with swift wonder the war preparations in a hundred intervening cells.

He saw enormous, green-bellied grubs resting with a kind of repressed fervor in long earthen trenches filled with fungus-dissolving ichors. Their soft, flabby bodies absorbed the ichors with a spongelike greediness, and Atasmas knew that when the bee swarms dropped their deadly fungal tissues the grubs would be impregnable. Though the fungus poison filtered down through the damp earth to the lowest of the nursery cells, the dissolving ichors would protect the young maggots.

UP through many cells Atasmas was carried. He saw enfeebled drones submitting with patient resignation to impregnation with the needle death. He knew that the drones would be spewed forth to mingle with the bee swarms and sow piercing agony in their midst. The needle death was a microscopic animal-cule that propagated with unbelievable rapidity and feasted on insect viscera.

Atasmas observed also huge, glistening black workers preening themselves for combat, and soldier ants with flat-tened heads a hundred feet in diameter which would be thrust into the enormous entrance vents above to serve as stop-gaps against the down-sweeping swarms of envenomed bees.

He knew that the heads would be battered into loathsome pulps, and that the thin, flabby bodies beneath would writhe in unspeakable agony as the bees pierced them with their long stingers; but to the ant people death was a kind of rapturous dedication when it served a socially useful purpose.

Something of this same sacrificial zeal flamed in the midget breast of the little creature on the insect's back. He, too, was part of the enormous dream, and he would have died to save the maggots intrusted to his care as selflessly as the ants who owned him.

There was an ominous vibratory stirring throughout the great central artery adjoining the cells of the directing queen mothers. Down it Atasmas was swiftly carried, his bearer moving with a sure-footed celerity uncommon in a small worker.

For several minutes dark dripping surfaces swept past his upturned gaze, and a peculiarly fragrant odor assailed his nostrils. Then the glow deepened about him, and the small worker came to an abrupt halt before a towering barrier of wax. The barrier was fifty feet in height, and it shone with a radiance as of burnished metal. Without hesitation the insect raised its elbowed feeler and tapped lightly upon it.

For an instant there was no response. Then the luminous partition bulged slowly outward, and the glistening globular head of a queen-preening ant emerged through it. Instantly the head withdrew, and through the rent thus produced the small worker moved with reverence into the cell of the directing queen.

THE QUEEN cell was aglow with a soft blue radiance. As the little creature on the small worker's back looked upward at the enormous swollen bulk of the single occupant of the cell, a great wonder came upon him. The eight slender scarlet rings encircling the majestic insect's abdomen, and the green dots on her thoracic segments revealed that she was the supreme ruler of the colony, the great founder queen whose wisdom and power had filtered down as a legendary fable to the little human servitors in the depths.

The small worker turned slowly on its side, and Atasmas slid from its back onto the soft, moist loam which covered the floor of the cell. Quickly he struggled to arise, to stand with dignity before this great being, whose power was so immense, and whose attributes were so godlike and omniscient. But his foot slipped as he rose from his knees, and he toppled over backward on the soft loam.

He was rescued by the queen herself. Leaning slightly forward, she stretched forth a curving flagellum and set him gently on his feet. And then, as he stood staring reverently up at her, she laid the flagellum on his forehead and spoke to him in speech that surged in cool vibrations through his tiny human brain.

"You are wiser than all the others, little one. The others think first of themselves, but you think only of us. In your humble way you have the sublime, selfless mind of an insect."

In awed silence Atasmas continued to stare up into the great complex eyes, bulbous head, and swiftly pulsating thorax. A hundred feet above him she towered, and her immense, hairy abdomen bulged with its momentous burden of a hundred million eggs. Not even the planets in their courses were so awe-provoking in Atasmas' sight.

"Even the very humble can sometimes be of service," said the queen mother.

Still looking up, Atasmas gestured with his hands. He made a sign speech which conveyed that he had no mind apart from her mind; that her willing was the light of his little human life.

The queen mother said: "Little one, the bee swarms are sweeping down upon us in envenomed fury. For a hundred millions years they have thwarted our dream of universal world dominion.

Atasmas nodded, gestured, chanted. He understood. "You may use me as you will," he conveyed.

"I will have you carried to Agrahan where the bee swarms dwell in immense metallic hives," resumed the queen mother. "You are so small that you can creep unobserved between the legs of the soldier guardian bees. You will carry into the inmost core of the central hive a spore of flarra-eson."

Atasmas recoiled in horror. The color drained from his face and a tremor ran through him. Vague hints and rumors filtering down to the depths had obscurely revealed that flarra-eson was a terrible vegetable petrifactive that fossilized all animal tissue.

By a process of intensive hybridization the small workers had intensified the petrifactive principle of certain chlorophyll-forming organisms of high evolutionary grade, and had produced a microscopic animal-like plant so deadly and swift-blossoming that it was a menace to the great dream itself.

It was rumored that a single spore of properly planted flarra-eson would overrun hives miles in extent and envelop in petrification a billion helpless bees in the course of a single terrestrial revolution. So prolific, indeed, was the growth of this malignant plant that its deadly course could not be checked by any means known to insects.

Though the servants of the great dream had created it, and knew its value as a war technique, they were not unaware that its successful use might envelop them in utter and abysmal ruin. Hitherto they had hesitated to employ it, just as long millenniums ago Atasmas' own race had refused to sanction certain deadly war gases in their hideous and sanguinary conflicts.

The queen mother noticed Atasmas' trepidation, and a note of reproach crept into her speech. "You will be destroyed, of course. But do you value your little life so highly?"

Atasmas experienced a sudden tragic sense of shame and guilt. He made a gesture of frantic denial as the queen resumed:

"You will plant the spore and remain until you are consumed by the fossilizing growth. If you flee when you drop the spore, it may never blossom. The future of the great dream is in your little human hands."

There ensued a pause.

Then the queen said: "There is something I must warn you against. You will meet the night shapes—millions and millions of night shapes."

Atasmas' pulses leaped with a sudden wild joy. "You mean I shall really see and touch the little ones who visit us in dreams?"

The queen assented. "You will see them, and touch them. They will light a great fire in your heart. But you must remember the dream and resist them. Millions of years ago, when we succored your poor frozen race, the night shapes seemed to us feeble, weak things. We refused to help them. We left them to perish beneath the weight of the antarctic glaciations, of the great flood of ice that swept equatorward from the pole. Only a few survived and were succored by the weak and sentimental bees."

Atasmas' eyes were wide with wonder. He asked: "But why do these small weak shapes still haunt our

dreams?"

"Because men will always be primitive creatures," replied the queen mother. "Even though we have multiplied you by laboratory techniques for millions of years, the old, primitive love of women still burns in your veins. We cannot eradicate it. It is a source of weakness in your kind, and in that respect you are inferior to the aphids."

Atasmas affirmed: "I will not forget the great dream. I will harden my heart."

But something within him burst into song even as he promised. He would see the soft and consoling night shapes — see them, touch them.

He said with gestures: "I am ready to die for the great dream."

The queen removed her flagellum from his forehead. She leaned backward, and a satisfied stridulation issued from her thorax.

THE little worker advanced, picked Atasmas up, and set him gently on its sack. For an instant it swayed reverently before the great mother. Then it backed swiftly out of the cell. When it had disappeared through the aperture the queen-preening ant leaped swiftly forward and healed the breach with a glutinous exudate from its swiftly moving mandibles.

The small worker carried its now precious burden up through long tunnels to the surface of the earth. At the central entrance of the nest, four great soldier ants with flattened heads moved reverently aside as the solemn pair came into view. The queen mother had laid upon her little emissary a peculiar and sanctifying scent. He was no longer a leader of his little race in the depths. He had become the potential savior of the immense dream; almost, an insect in his godlike selflessness and reverent dedication.

He was conscious of immense forces at war within him as he gazed upward at the star-flecked sky. Martial dedication and tenderness fought for supremacy in his breast; an immense, overwhelming tenderness when he thought of the night shapes, a tenderness curiously tempered with superiority and disdain and a sense of loyalty to the dream. The night shapes were glorious, but did not the long night of extinction which would envelop him if he died in defense of the immense dream hold a greater glory?

The small worker turned on its side and Atasmas toppled to the earth. He arose in blinding moonlight, dazed and dazzled by the hard metallic brilliancy of the surface world. He stood waiting, scarcely daring to breathe, as the little worker rose on its hindmost legs and emitted a loud chordotonal stridulation by rubbing its elbowed feelers violently against its shins and abdomen.

For a moment as the queer chafing sound increased in volume, he saw only the towering forms of the soldier ants, dark and glistening in the moonlight, and of the little workers beside him. Then an immense dark form came sweeping down upon him out of the darkness. It had a wing span of a hundred feet and its barrel-shaped thorax shone with a luster as of frosted silver.

It came to rest a few yards from the earthen entrance with a loud, vibratory thrumming. Instantly the little worker approached and touched the summit of its globular head to the great bulging thorax of the aerial form. The form quivered and grew still.

With competent celerity the small worker picked Atasmas up, carried him to the waiting form, and deposited him gently in a tiny cavity at the base of the creature's abdomen. Touching Atasmas' forehead with its feeler, it spoke to him in rhythmic speech which surged coolly through his brain.

"You will be carried to Agrahan," it said. "It will be a long, perilous flight. If a storm arises on the southern ocean you will emerge and drop swiftly to your death. The great winged one can-not carry you in a storm. If you perish, another spore of flarra-esson will be pre-pared, and another winged one will carry another of your kind to Agrahan."

"Where is the spore?" asked Atas-mas with excited gestures. Only his midget head and shoulders emerged above the dark, hair-lined cavity.

The little worker withdrew a few paces, turned upon its back, and fumbled for an instant with one of its fore-claws in the loose crevices of its un-derside. When it drew near again to Atasmas it was holding a small metallic cylinder. Atasmas took the cylinder with reverence and thrust it deeply into his gauze-fashioned tunic.

THE SMALL worker touched its head again to the winged shape's thorax. A sudden, convulsive movement shook the great body. It moved spasmod-ically forward, reared with a roar and soared skyward. Fright and wild ela-tion poured in ripples through Atas-mas' brain.

He had never before viewed the kaleidoscopic skies of the surface world from such a perilous vantage point. Looking down, he saw far beneath him the mottled surfaces of earth, and look-ing up he saw the stars in their remote and awful solitude and the planets in their wheeling courses.

He saw the great white suns that would burn as brightly when the earth was a cinder, and suns that burned no more, but whose light would continue to encircle the pear-shaped universe till the immense bubble burst, and time and space were merged in some utterly stupefying absolute for which neither Atasmas' kind nor the ants had any ade-quate symbol.

When Atasmas' gaze penetrated to the awful luminous fringes of the spiral nebula so great a pall enshrouded his spirit that he presently ceased to stare skyward. Far more reassuring was the checkerboard earth beneath with its dark and glistening lakes, ragged moun-tains, and valleys crammed with lush and multihued vegetation.

The checkerboard earth was soon re-placed by the turbulent waters of the great southern ocean. For thousands of miles Atasmas gazed downward at the shining water, wonder and fear fighting for ascendancy in his little hu-man breast. No storm arose to check the smooth southern flight of the great insect.

On and on it flew in the warm dark-ness, five miles above the turbulent dark sea. Belching volcanoes and white coral shoals passed swiftly before Atas-mas' vision. He saw the barnacle col-onies in their ocean-breasting splendor, terraces of iridescent shell rising in im-mense tiers beside the storm-lashed waves.

And suddenly as he gazed, the ocean vanished, and a dark plateau covered with gray-and-yellow lichens usurped his vision.

The great winged one swept downward then. In immense circles it ap-proached the leaden earth and came to rest on a gray, pebble-incrusted plain. For an instant its wings continued to pulsate with a loud, vibratory throbbing. Then the vibrations ceased, and a moist foreclaw arose and fumbled in the cav-ity where Atasmas rested.

The midget voyager was lifted out, and deposited on the dark earth. As he stood staring wildly about him, a feeler fastened on his forehead.

"I will not return without you, little one," conveyed the great winged shape. "When you plant the spore, come back to me quickly. There is no need for you to die. The spore will blossom without supervision if you plant it in rich, dark soil. I pity you, little one. I wish to help you."

Atasmas was stunned and frightened. He started back in amazement and looked up dimly at the great shape. "Why do you disobey the great mother?" he asked with tremulous gestures.

The winged form said: "We who fly above the earth do not obey the small ethics of your little world of tunnels. We have seen the barnacles in their majesty and the bees in their power, and we know that all things are relative. Go, and return quickly."

ATASMAS went. With the glimmering lights of the enormous hives of Agrahan to guide him, he went swiftly to fulfill his destiny. Over the dark earth he moved, an infinitesimal shape in a world of menacing shadows. And as he advanced the lights of Agrahan grew brighter till he was enveloped in their radiance as in a bath of living flame.

But no one observed him. The sentinel bees were asleep at their posts at the entrance of the central hive, and quickly he passed between their legs which towered above him like pillars of fire in the darkness.

Inside the hive a luminous glow guided his footsteps. Moving with caution he ascended a terminus mound studded with several dozen yawning vents and entered one at random. The branching tunnel in which he found himself bore a superficial resemblance to the subterranean arteries of the ant people.

For hundreds of feet it stretched. Its smoothly rounded earthen walls were gray-green in hue, and it had a flooring of moist, dark loam. Atasmas hugged the walls, taking every precaution to avoid being seen. He was tremulous with apprehension as he moved forward. It seemed incredible that the great central hive should be destitute of life, yet all about him silence reigned. From far ahead a dim bluish radiance illumined the walls of the passage, but no moving shape crossed his vision.

He continued to move forward, little suspecting what lay ahead. The silence remained unbroken, and the only visible shadows were cast by his own insignificant form. It was not until he had advanced far into the tunnel that he encountered the dark mouth of the bisecting passage and the huge shape which filled it.

As the shape burst on his vision he sprang back in instinctive alarm, and a cry tore from his throat. But before he could retreat, the thing was upon him. It fell upon him, and enveloped him.

In frantic resistance Atasmas' little hands lashed out. They encountered a spongy surface bristling with hairs—a loose, gelatinous surface which gave beneath the assaults of his puny fists. Screeching shrilly, the bee larva twined itself about him and pressed the breath from his body. He shrieked and hammered and tore at it with his fingers in an agony of terror. His efforts were of no avail. The bulk of the maggot was too enormous to cope with.

He was dimly aware of a menacing yellow-lined orifice a yard from his face, spasmodically opening and closing. It drew nearer as he watched it and yawned above him. It twitched horribly with a dawning hunger.

Atasmas lost consciousness then. His senses reeled before the awful menace of that slobbering puckered mouth, and everything went dark about him.

He never knew what saved him until he found himself getting slowly to his feet in a confused daze. The first sight which usurped his blurred vision was the bee larva lurching cumbersomely away from him down

the tunnel, emitting shrill screeches as it retreated. Then his gaze fastened in wonder on the night shape.

She stood calmly in the center of the tunnel, a form as tiny as himself, but with a sweetness and grace about her that stirred inexplicable emotions within him. She was holding a long, many-thonged goad, which dripped with nauseous yellow ichor.

As Atasmas stood staring, his clearing faculties apprehended with uncanny accuracy her true function in the colony of bees. She was obviously a kind of guardian of the large stupid maggot, and the goad in her hands was an implement of chastisement. In defense of Atasmas' little helpless person she had repudiated her function, had flailed the grub unmercifully. It was a triumph of instinctive over conditioned behavior.

IN GRATITUDE and awe Atasmas drew near to her. She did not retreat, but raised the weapon in warning as he moved to touch her. Something snapped in Atasmas' brain. The wonder of her, standing there, awoke a great fire in his breast. He had to touch her, though he died for it.

He touched her arm, her forehead. With a cry of utter dumfounderment she dropped the goad and her eyes widened. Without uttering a sound,

Atasmas moved even closer and took her in his arms. She did not resist. A great joy flooded Atasmas' being. For a moment he forgot the past and the sublime destiny toward which he moved. He stood there in silence, transformed, transformed.

Then, suddenly, he remembered again. Even as ecstasy enveloped him he remembered the great queen, the nursery artery of the ant people, his selfless function as a servitor in the depths, and the great dream. Deep within him, in the dark depths of his little racial under-mind, the old loyalties flared up.

His hand went to his tunic and emerged with the cylinder. With an effort he tore his gaze from the rapt, upturned face of the night shape and fastened it on the soft loam beneath his feet.

With swift calculation he estimated the depth and consistency of the dark soil. For a brief, momentous instant he seemed to hesitate. Then, with a wrench, he unscrewed the cylinder and released the spore of flarra-son.

He continued to gaze deep into the woman's eyes in reverence and rapture as the tiny green spore took root, sprouted, and spread out in a dark petri-factive shroud.

Far away the great winged shape waited with thrumming wings as a green growth immortalized two lovers without pain in the central tunnel of the great hive of Agrahan.

The growth spread upward and enveloped the little human forms, darkly, greenly, and so absorbed was Atasmas in the woman in his arms that he did not know that he was no longer of flesh and blood till the transforming plant reached the corridors of his brain and the brain of his companion.

And then the transition was so rapid that he did not agonize, but was transformed in an instant, and remained forever wrapped in glory and a shroud of deepest green.