

# ARTHUR LOVERIDGE BATTLES WITH WARRIOR ANTS

by  
DEE BROWN

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*It was as if all the driver ants in Africa had arrived  
to do battle with this single human being.*

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**A**rthur Loveridge's battle began one July morning in Tanganyika,<sup>1</sup> Africa. About eight o'clock, he stepped outside his house and noticed large numbers of beetles flying in the air. As Loveridge was a naturalist especially interested in insects, he observed these flying beetles rather more closely than the average person would have done. He was surprised to see that fierce reddish-colored ants were attached to many of the beetles, biting at their hind legs.

Immediately afterward, Loveridge discovered half a dozen long lines of the same ants marching over the ground and

into cracks at the base of his house. All along the lines of march, skirmishing parties were attacking crickets and grasshoppers, slashing off their legs and tearing at them with large powerful jaws. As he studied the marching formations, Loveridge noted that the ants were of varying sizes. The majority, or worker drivers, were half an inch or less in length, but along the outer edges of the columns huge winged ants marched up and down like officers directing an army. From his knowledge of insects, Loveridge guessed at once that he was being invaded by a small army of driver ants.

He did not at first, however, realize

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1. *Tanganyika* (tang'ge nyē'ke).

the seriousness of his situation. Like a true naturalist, he spent the morning observing the army rather than attempting to fight it. He was fascinated by the military precision of the drivers. In addition to the "officer" ants who seemed to be directing the formations, sentries were stationed about two inches apart along both sides of the columns. These sentries stood with the foreparts of their bodies raised and with their powerful jaws wide open as if to repel any disturbers. Loveridge teased the sentries by inserting tiny sticks into their opened jaws, and as soon as they clamped down, he would lift them a few feet away, drop them, and then watch them scurry about until they found their proper posts again.

Returning inside his house, Loveridge was startled to find that the invading drivers had already worked their way into his kitchen and were roaming about the place in search of household prey. His first thought was of his valuable collection of butterflies, birds, tortoises, crocodiles, and other African species which he had spent months in assembling. Deciding to fight off the army ants, he soaked balls of paper in prussic acid and stuffed them in the outer holes where the columns were entering. With a broom he swept the drivers which had already penetrated his kitchen out into the yard. Then he piled grass over the heap of ants, poured

kerosene upon the grass, and set it afire. Within fifteen minutes, only a few scattered army ants were left around his house.

Congratulating himself upon his victory, Arthur Loveridge retired inside to relax. Had he known the habits of driver ants, how the main body of their army frequently marches after dark, he would not have been so confident.

"About 9 P.M.," he later recorded, "as I was reading, I became gradually conscious of many small noises. Some time later on taking up the light and going to my bedroom, the reason was obvious. The white-washed walls were a moving mass of driver ants. They swarmed upon the books in the bookcase, overran other shelving, chest of drawers, etc. The sound was made by the feet of the countless multitude."

While he danced up and down to keep the ants off his feet, Loveridge discovered what this second army of drivers was after—a great host of plant beetles which had flown into his bedroom, evidently fleeing the drivers. When molested, the plant bugs gave off a powerful odor. Ordinarily this odor served as a repellent against ant attacks, but to the drivers it was only a challenge and seemed to excite them to more violent battle.

For two days Arthur Loveridge fought the invaders. With the help of several Tanganyikans, he began fighting

them with fire and water and oil. They set out meat baits, and as soon as the meat was covered with ants, they drowned them in oil-filmed water. "We thus destroyed several thousand in a few minutes with the greatest ease."

At the end of the second day, the tide of battle appeared to have turned against the drivers, and Loveridge decided he could safely return to sleeping in his bedroom. But he did take the precaution of filling washbasins and soap dishes with water and placing them beneath the four legs of his bed. He also raised a fine-meshed mosquito net over the bed.

About two-thirty in the morning he was awakened by the splashing of a crocodile in its pen. "Most of my creatures I had moved outside the previous day, but I thought that the young crocodiles in the tank could defy drivers. The tortoises had also been left in their pen, as it was outside the house." Deciding to go to the rescue of his live specimens, Loveridge untucked his mosquito net and stretched forth a hand to turn up the lamp on his reading table. An ant was on the lamp handle. When the light flared up, he saw that the walls and floors were a crawling mass of drivers.

But what concerned him most was a group of ants on his pillow and two single lines moving up the mosquito net, one line outside and the other inside!

"By turning up the mattress and giving the net a more generous tuck-in, I stopped the inside stream. Then jumping up, I got out, on to my slippers around which ants were swarming. First I examined the pans of water in which the bed legs were standing. Across one of them, at the head of the bed, a company of sappers had thrown a bridge composed of living ants upon which their comrades were crossing and so up the net. Unscrewing the cap of the lamp container, I hurriedly splashed out enough oil on the bridge to cause its collapse, and also to form a film of oil on the water beneath."

After treating the other pans under his bedposts in the same manner, Loveridge hurried outside to see after his young crocodiles. He found one of the cages filled with drivers, and the crocodile inside was turning around and around in the water, flipping alternately from back to belly and thrashing the water with its tail. The edges of the rectangular pen were lined with ants, and whenever the crocodile's struggles brought him near a side, they would hurl themselves upon him.

When Loveridge reached one arm inside the cage, a shower of drivers leaped upon it. But he managed to catch hold of the crocodile's tail, lifted the young reptile out, and tossed it several feet away. Immediately a swarm of ants upon the ground surrounded the

unfortunate crocodile. Once again, Loveridge hurried to the rescue, removing the crocodile to a drinking tank some distance away where there were no drivers.

Returning to the cage, Loveridge discovered that his other crocodile had already been killed by the drivers. Hearing quite a commotion in his tortoise pen, he hurried in that direction, staying clear of the shrubbery since every leaf was crawling with ants and the ground beneath was teeming with them. Noticing one dense heap of ants, he turned them over with a stick and discovered that they were devouring a large chameleon. "The ground that lay between me and the tortoises," he recorded afterward, "was so alive with drivers that I very respectfully turned back." He also realized that the tortoises probably had crawled under the rocks in their pen and that he would not be able to get at them.

By this time, after two days and nights of battling, Loveridge had grown so accustomed to living with the warrior ants that he decided to return to the battlefield of his bedroom and seek the shelter of his mosquito net. He tore off all the bedclothing which might be harboring his foes and then sat down in the center of the bed beneath the net to review his situation.

"The enemy column that had entered the net was wandering to and

fro on the ceiling of it, while a score or more of individuals were frantically rushing about on the sheet or sides of the net. Armed with my entomological forceps I picked these off one by one, killing them as I did so." In a similar manner he disposed of the column on the ceiling of his mosquito net. He then shook off what were left outside the net.

Loveridge knew that it was three hours until dawn, and he dared not fall asleep. He lay there through the tortuous hours, listening to the whispering movement of the drivers, to the darting, slithering sounds of gecko lizards being pursued in the roof, and to the flight of bats. Once he heard the frightened squeak of a rat, which escaped to the outer roof, then lost its footing on the galvanized iron, and rolled down to land with a thump on the ground outside.

As soon as first dawnlight showed, he escaped from his mosquito netting, hurried outside, and summoned his employees to begin an attack on the drivers before they could gain cover in their holes at daybreak.

Loveridge was relieved to find all of his tortoises alive, though some were suffering badly. The box tortoises had drawn in their armor-plated forelegs, thus protecting their heads, and it was the soft-shelled land tortoises that had borne the brunt of the drivers' fury. A score or more ants were attached to each one of them, biting at their eyelids.

He dropped the tortoises in water drums, and put one of the Tanganyikans to picking ants off them with a forceps.

Wondering if his collection of mounted birds and butterflies still survived, he went back into the house. Early in his war with the drivers, Loveridge had taken the precaution to stuff all the cracks of his largest insect case with cotton. But when he entered the specimen room that morning, he could hear the rasping of the drivers' feet on the gauze mesh, and he knew they had broken through his defenses.

For once, however, he received a pleasant surprise. Only one of his bird specimens had been molested, and only such butterflies and mantises as had not dried thoroughly had been destroyed. There was not enough fresh meat on the *others to attract the flesh-eating drivers.*

During his long war with the drivers, Loveridge had learned that their main attacks came late in the day, and he spent the afternoon preparing new defenses for an expected evening battle. At the first sign of a skirmish line, he and his helpers began annihilating the ants with hot ashes.

By dusk it looked as if Loveridge had won that day's battle. "Then came the shock," he said. "In every direction

from east and south, ants were arriving in countless thousands. Quite thirty of these steady streams were moving in the direction of the house."

It was as if all the driver ants in Africa had been summoned to do battle with this single human being who had dared defy them. While Loveridge and his frightened employees waited, wondering if they should flee while there was yet time, the vast armies halted in the grass some thirty feet from the cleared yard, their ceaseless whispering movements sounding across the deepening dusk.

But they never came any closer. Why they did not, no one can say. Had these new armies been summoned by the drivers who had been battling for days against Loveridge's resistance? Had there been a council of war? Had the destructive tactics of hot ashes and cyanide powder proved so deadly in the final battle that the soldier leaders decided to retreat? No one will ever know, of course.

But when Arthur Loveridge entered his house late that night, he found not one single driver ant in the building. And the next morning, the besieging armies had vanished from the lonely African landscape.