

## ❁ ❁ The Story Page. ❁ ❁

### An Insect Tragedy.

BY W. HAMILTON GIBSON.

As I took my seat upon the doorstep I started into flight a big black wasp, upon whose doings I had evidently been intruding. This wasp was about an inch in length. Its wings were pale brown and its body jet-black, with sundry small yellowish spots about the thorax. But its most conspicuous feature, and one which would ever fix the identity of the creature, was the long, slender, wire-like waist, occupying a quarter of the length of its entire body.

In a moment or two the wasp had returned, and stood at the mouth of the shallow pit. Eying me intently for a space, and satisfied that there was nothing to fear, she dived into the hollow and began to excavate, turning round and round as she gnawed the earth at the bottom, and shovelling it out with her spiked legs. Now and then she would back out of the burrow to reconnoitre, and her alert attitude at such times was very amusing—her antennae drooping towards the burrow and in incessant motion; the abdomen on its long wire stem bobbing up and down at regular intervals; accompanied by a flipping motion of the wings; the short fore legs, one or both, upraised with comical effect.

As the tunnel was deepened a new method of excavation was employed. It has now reached a depth of an inch, only the extremity of the insect's body appearing, and the two hindmost legs clinging to surrounding earth for purchase. The deep digging is now accompanied by a continual buzzing noise, resembling that produced by a bluebottle fly held captive between one's fingers. At intervals of about ten or fifteen seconds the wasp would quickly back out of the burrow, bringing a load of sand, which it held between the back of the jaws and the thorax, sustained at the sides by the two upraised fore legs. After a moment's pause with this burden, the insect would have a sudden, short, darting flight of a foot or more in a quick circuit, hurling the sand a yard or more distant from the burrow. At the end of about fifteen minutes the burrow was sunk to the depth of an inch and a half, the wasp entirely disappearing, and indicated only by the continuous buzzing.

At this time, the luncheon hour having arrived I was obliged to pause in my investigations, and, in order to be able to locate the burrow, in the event of its obliteration by the wasp before my return, I scratched a circle in the hard dirt, the hole being at its exact centre.

Upon my return, an hour later, I was met with a surprise. At the exact centre of my circle, in place of a cavity, I now found a tiny pile of stones, supported upon a small stick and fragment of leaf, which had been first drawn across the opening.

This was evidently a mere temporary protection of the burrow, I reasoned, while the digger had departed in search of prey, and my surmise was soon proved to be correct, as I observed the wasp, with bobbing abdomen and flipping wings, zig-zagging about the vicinity. Presently disappearing beneath a small plantain leaf, she quickly emerged, drawing behind her, not a spider, but a big green caterpillar, nearly double her own length and as large around as a slate-pencil—a peculiar, pungent, waspy-scented species of "puss moth" larva, which is found on the elm, and with which I chanced to be familiar.

The victim being now ready for burial, the wasp sexton proceeded to open the tomb. Seizing one stone after another in her widely-opened jaws, they were scattered right and left, when, with apparent ease and prompt despatch, the listless larva was drawn toward the burrow, into whose depths he soon disappeared. Then, after a short and suggestive interval, followed the emergence of the wasp, and the prompt filling in of the requisite earth to level the cavity, much as already described, after which the wasp took wing and disappeared, presumably bent upon a repetition of the performance elsewhere. But she had not simply buried this caterpillar victim, nor was the caterpillar dead, for these wasp cemeteries are, in truth, living tombs, whose apparently dead inmates are simply sleeping, narcotized by the venom of the wasp sting, and thus designed to afford fresh living food for the young wasp grub, into whose voracious care they are committed.

By inserting my knife-blade deep into the soil in the neighborhood of this burrow I readily unearthed the buried caterpillar, and disclosed the ominous egg of the wasp firmly imbedded in its body. The hungry larva which hatches from this egg soon reaches maturity upon the all-sufficient food thus stored, and before many weeks is transformed to the full-fledged, long-waisted wasp like its parent.

The disproportion in the sizes of the predatory wasps and their insect prey is indeed astonishing. The great

sandhornet selects for its most frequent victim the buzzing cicada, or harvest-fly, an insect much larger than itself, and which it carries off to its long sand tunnels by short flights from successive elevated points, such as the limbs of trees and summits of rocks, to which it repeatedly lugs its clumsy prey. In the present instance the contrast between the slight body of the wasp and the plump dimensions of the caterpillar was even more marked, and I determined to ascertain the proportionate weight of victor and victim; constructing a tiny pair of balances with a dead grass stalk, thread, and two disks of paper. I weighed the wasp, using small square pieces of paper of equal size as my weights. I found that the wasp exactly balanced four of the pieces. Removing the wasp and substituting the caterpillar, I proceeded to add piece after piece of the paper squares until I had reached a total of twenty-eight, or seven times the number required by the wasp, before the scales balanced. Similar experiments with the tiny black wasp and its spider victim showed precisely the same proportion, and the ratio was once increased eight to one in the instance of another species of slender orange and black-bodied digger which I found tugging its caterpillar prey upon my doorstep path.

The peculiar feature of the piling of stones above the completed burrow was not a mere individual accomplishment of my wire-waisted wasp. The smaller orange-spotted wasp just alluded to, indicated to me the location of her den by pausing suggestively in front of a tiny cairn. In this instance a small, flat stone considerably larger than a tunnel, had been laid over the opening, and the others piled upon it. On two occasions I have surprised this same species of wasp industriously engaged in the selection of a suitable flat foundation-stone with which to cover her burrow; her widely extended slender jaws enable her to grasp a pebble nearly a third of an inch in width.—Harper's Magazine.

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### Will's Number One.

"There's one thing I'm going to do this year," said Rufus, as he walked to school on the opening day.

"What's that?" asked his companion, Will.

"I'm going to look out for Number One."

Will had just moved into town, and Rufus was the first boy with whom he had become acquainted. He looked a little curiously at his new friend.

"What, exactly, do you mean?" he asked.

"Oh, you know what I mean. I mean to see that Number One gets the best of it every time—the best place, the best things, the best fun going."

"Yes, I think that's a good rule to go by," admitted Will, after a moment's reflection.

"It's easy enough. You can always get it by keeping a keen watch for it. Then all you need is a little pushing aside of the other folks—a little crowding to get in, don't you see?"

"Yes, I see," said Will.

"Might as well have the best of things as we go along."

"Yes," again assented Will.

The months of school life went on. Rufus and Will were recognized as friends, notwithstanding the great difference which was soon observed in their characters.

"Keep out of Rufus' way, if you know what's good for you," said the boys. "He's the most selfish fellow you ever saw."

"Always looking out for himself."

"Yes, in study or fun or whatever's going."

"And he'll ride down anything or anybody that comes in his way."

Will was a quieter boy, and less was said about him, but it came to be seen that any one who needed a helping hand turned to him.

"You're a good fellow to look out for Number One," said Rufus to him one day, a little scornfully.

The school was enjoying a picnic, and Rufus had seen Will give up his tennis racket to a smaller boy.

"What have I done?" asked Will.

"Why didn't you stick to your racket? I tried my best to get one, but there's such a pack of fellows here today one gets no show."

"Poor Jim Slade doesn't often get a chance to play tennis."

"And when we were starting out, you stood and pecked all the little fellows into the band wagon, and then took a seat in that old rattle-bang of a go-cart."

"The little chaps in the primary wanted to ride together," said Will, with a smile. "They had a jolly time."

"Then you gave your fish pole to Mike—when I know you were counting on fishing out here—and set him down just where that country boy told you the best fishing was."

"Poor Mike's lame," said Will. "He can't enjoy himself as we strong fellows do."

"That's right! Look out for Number One!" said Rufus.

"O, I always do," said Will.

"Yes, a lot you do! Haven't I watched you and don't I know? You give up things to everybody and take second best—or rather ninth or tenth best—for yourself. Number One, indeed?"

"But you see," said Will, "I'm not my own Number One."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say," said Will, with a laugh at his companion's expression. "Other folks are my Number One."

"What nonsense!" said Rufus, impatiently.

"No," said Will, a little more soberly. "The only difference between us, Rufus, is that I have a lot of Number Ones, and you have only one. Now this is how it works—mother's my first Number One, then the rest of the home folks, then the fellows at school."

"Then you must come in about number two hundred or so," said Rufus, unable to forbear a smile at Will's whimsical way of putting it.

"I haven't just counted it up," said Will, smiling at him. "But—"

The two had strayed by themselves along the border of the little stream. With a backward glance they could catch sight of the lame boy enjoying the good fishing place. The shouts of their companions were softening in the distance, and before them were the deep, quiet shadows of the woods.

Boys are not given to talking seriously of each other, and Will was by no means inclined to preaching. But just in that place it seemed easier to say what was on his mind.

"But," he resumed, after a long pause, "I've just been trying something that somebody said to me about looking at this Number One business in a new way, and I find it works pretty well."

It might have been a feeling that his own way was not working to his full satisfaction that led Rufus to listen with respect as Will went on.

"It was about the wideness of God's world, and how he loves his creatures all alike—and that not one of them has a bit of right to set himself up for better things than the others; that those who look out only for themselves are narrowed, narrowed down next to nothing—that is, just to one—their own self; while the fellow that does the other thing reaches out, and out, and out, till the whole world is his—his by doing for every one in it that he can—and, hurrah!—Mike's caught a fish, and the poor little fellow doesn't know how to get it off."

With a bound and a shout Will dashed down the creek-side to the cripple's help, while Rufus slowly followed him, doing more thinking than ever before in his life.—Christian Observer.

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### They Say.

Mr. Tattle—You are a stranger in these parts, I reckon, mister.

Mr. Rollins—What makes you think so?

Mr. T.—Well, you kind of stared about you as you got out of the cars, as if the place didn't look familiar.

Mr. R.—Do you know a Mrs. Rollins in this town?

Mr. T.—Is it she that lives in the brown cottage on the hill yonder?

Mr. R.—The same.

Mr. T.—Well, I can't say I visit her, but I can tell you all about her. Poor woman!

Mr. R.—Why do you say that? Is anything the matter with her?

Mr. T.—She has had a hard time of it. Poor young thing! A month after her marriage, and just as she had got fixed there in the cottage, her scamp of a husband ran off to California.

Mr. R.—Scamp of a husband! Ran off! (Indignant). What do you mean, sir?—(Checking himself). Excuse me. What did he run off for?

Mr. T.—For robbing a bank. So they say.

Mr. R.—Who say?

Mr. T.—They say.

Mr. R.—Who are they?

Mr. T.—The world generally. Everybody says. People say.

Mr. R.—Can you name a single person besides yourself who says it?

Mr. T.—Really, so many people say it that I can not think of any one in particular.

Mr. R.—Perhaps I will quicken your memory by-and-by. But what of Mrs. Rollins?

Mr. T.—She's on the point of being married again. So they say.

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Mr. T.—O yes  
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