

Them!

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Based on a treatment by George Worthing Yates

A small reconnaissance plane is flying through a heavy dust storm. The pilot is in radio contact with a highway police squad car, which is following on the road below. Seeing a tiny figure below, the pilot circles to investigate. It is a small girl, lost in the expanse of desert.

Two police sergeants are in the squad car. Following directions from the plane, they drive the car off the highway to intercept the child. She is stumbling blindly through the swirling dust, clutching a broken doll. She seems to be in a state of shock, sleepwalking in a nightmare.

Ben Peterson, the older of the two cops, gets out of the car and picks her up but is unable to get her to speak. Ed, his partner, uses the car radio to call in for urgent medical assistance. Directed by the plane overhead, the two cops and the child drive on across the desert. They discover an abandoned car, which has been totally wrecked. There are no signs of the occupants, but fragments of the broken doll's head identify it as probably belonging to the child's parents. A revolver, which has been fired, is discovered. A quantity of sugar has been upset on the floor of the caravan. Most curious is the damage to the trailer – its sides seemed to have been ripped out rather than caved in.

Photographers arrive with more police and an ambulance. As Ben is handing the child over to the ambulance attendant, they react to a strange noise, a high-pitched oscillation, an eerie whistling sound coming from something invisible in the clouds of the dust storm. Though neither Ben or his colleagues notice the reaction, it has an effect on the little girl. She comes out of her trance-like state, trembling and terrified. It fades and she relapses again.

Dispatching the ambulance with the child, Ben returns to Ed, suggesting that they make inquiries at a store a few miles away. The owner, Gramps Johnson, may have some information about the owners of the trailer.

With the dust storm still blowing the two cops arrive at the isolated general store, twelve miles from the caravan. They find it also in a shambles. Searching the wreckage, they see no sign of the owner, though the radio is still playing (a commentator's voice is describing the tensions of international politics, conferences on world health issues, and such). Ben puts in a call to police headquarters while Ed is searching the debris. At the bottom of the stairs to the cellar is the body of Gramps. "Looks like he was dragged and thrown down there." A shotgun lies on the floor – broken, its barrel twisted as if by some more than human strength. The wreckage is similar to that of the caravan trailer – the side of the building looks as if it had been clawed out. The floor of the shop is covered with sugar from a large bag that has been ripped open and its contents scattered. Nothing has been taken from the till. Instructing his companion, Ed, to remain on the site, Ben decides to drive back to headquarters to follow up on their radio report. Ed, left alone, is nervous.

Presently, over the howling of the wind, he hears a sound, the same high-pitched whistling that was heard before (and to which the little girl reacted). Drawing his pistol, the cop moves cautiously outside to investigate. We hear two pistol shots, a sudden change in the pitch of the strange noise, then an anguished cry from the cop.

At headquarters, the police chief can make no sense of the evidence. All they have been able to discover is that the caravan belonged to a man called Ellison from Chicago. Ben Peterson is depressed. He blames himself for having left his partner to face whoever it was that murdered him.

The police are investigating a strange footprint. The death of the storekeeper is equally baffling: “If somebody wanted to knock off Gramps, why tear down half the building to do it? Robbery? All that was taken was sugar! And he got off four shots before somebody took the gun from him.”

The police have sent planes out to reconnoiter the desert. Helicopters will be available if necessary – they can be requisitioned from the army. From the fingerprints taken in the destroyed trailer comes new information: Mr. Ellison, who owned it, appears to have been an F.B.I. agent on a two-month vacation with his wife and two children.

Sometime later an F.B.I. agent, Robert Graham, arrives. Having inspected the wreckage of the caravan and the store in the desert, Graham can offer no solution to the mystery. He suggests they send the cast of the mysterious footprint to authorities in Washington.

The county medical officer has performed an autopsy on the body of the storekeeper and arrives with a strange report. The old man could have died as a result of many things. The wounds inflicted on him would have been fatal, but there was also enough formic acid in the corpse “to kill twenty men.”

Later, Graham receives an answer to his Washington inquiries. It is from the Department of Agriculture (why agriculture?). They are sending out two technical experts. Both are doctors – both “Dr. Medford.” Meeting the plane, Bob Graham and Ben discover that one of the doctors is elderly, the second is a young woman, his daughter Patricia.

As the group returns to the police station, Dr. Medford and Patricia examine the evidence and study maps of the area. Graham is eager to find out if the footprint has been identified, but Medford and his daughter refuse to enlighten him. Dr. Medford seems interested in establishing the locations of the tragedy. Isn’t this quite near to the spot on which the first test explosives of the atomic bomb were made in 1945 – nine years ago? “Genetically,” says the doctor to his daughter, “it’s certainly possible.”

Graham, speaking for the F.B.I. and the police, expresses exasperation at the unwillingness on the part of experts to explain what they mean, but the Medfords insist that they must first test the validity of their theory. The old man announces that he wishes to stop at a drugstore before he visits the Ellison child, who is under medical attention in the hospital. She has not yet spoken.

At the hospital, they receive updated reports on the child's condition. The physicians are unwilling to use drugs to bring the little girl out of the catatonic condition which they have diagnosed as a case of hysteria conversion.

While Graham struggles with the incomprehensible technical jargon of the medical explanations, Dr. Medford produces a small flask which he has purchased at the drugstore – formic acid. He waves it under the child's nose. The little girl, reacting, comes abruptly out of shock. "It's them! It's them!" she shrieks loudly. His theory now confirmed, Medford insists on driving at once to the desert locations. "It may be later than you think."

Graham and Ben lead the doctor to the spot where the footprint was found. The dust storm has by now obliterated all the evidence. Medford asks if there have been any reports of "a strange cone-shaped structure, something recently formed." Medford explains to Ben and the F.B.I. man that he wants to explore the surrounding desert thoroughly. "Slim pickings for food, dad," says Patricia. "They may have turned carnivorous for want of their habitual diet."

Graham continues to express annoyance at their obscure language. He protests to the girl. She insists that her father – "one of the world's greatest vermicologists" – will explain as soon as his theory can be proved. "Vermicologist?" Graham doesn't even know what the word means!

They are interrupted by a shout from her father. He has found another print. "It's gigantic! Over twenty centimeters! That would make the creature over eight feet in length!" explains his daughter. "This is monstrous!"

Studying the direction of the print, Medford urges them to explore further. When Graham, for the last time, demands clear explanation, the old man begs indulgence. If this theory is false, no harm is done. If, on the other hand, his suspicions – incredible as they are – prove to be fact, then none of them dare risk revealing it because of "nationwide panic."

As the group advance, we begin to hear, for the third time, the weird whistling sound. It grows louder and louder – introducing the first view of the gigantic ant!

A monstrous creature. The insect is as big as a large horse!

The girl shrieks. Graham and Ben Peterson snatch their weapons, firing blindly at the monstrous creature. "Get the antennas!" Dr. Medford shouts at them. As the men shoot off one of the protuberances from the huge insect's head, Medford cries out, "Get the other antenna! He's helpless without them!"

Having incapacitated the creature, they kill it at last.

They inspect the huge corpse. This is what killed the parents of the little girl and the storekeeper? An Ant? "A fantastic mutation, probably caused by radiation from the first atomic bomb," Medford corroborates.

The doctor now explains the significance of the clues, the formic acid, the sugar, the injuries to the victims: "Ants use their mandibles to rend, hold, and tear their victims, but they kill with that" – he points to the stinger – "by injecting with formic acid."

Now the problem is to find the nest and the rest of the insect colony. “There’s more of them?” Bob reacts with dismay. “Of course! This one was probably just a scout, foraging for food, sending back messages by means of the antennae – the whistling sound.” Dr. Medford becomes solemn. “We may be witnesses to a Biblical prophesy come true. ‘And there shall be destruction and darkness shall come upon all creatures, and the Beast shall reign over the Earth.’”

The two helicopters have been requisitioned from the army which conducts the search. Dr. Medford and Graham fly in the first, accompanied by an army general. In the helicopter are Patricia, Ben and an army pilot.

“How many giant ants may be in the nest?” asks the general of Medford. The doctor is unsure. “If they follow the usual pattern of their species, the nest, depending on its age, may contain anything from several hundred to several thousand.”

The general is nervous. How, if there could be thousands of the huge insects, is it going to be possible to keep the matter secret? Medford pleads that the army should not jump to conclusions. It’s his belief that the monstrous mutation has occurred only very recently. Why has nobody seen the creatures before? Perhaps, suggests Medford, because the thing started here, in New Mexico, surrounded by hundreds of thousands of miles of empty desert. The old man, irritable, tries to use the radio to communicate with his daughter in the second helicopter. Patricia has nothing to report. She is worried about her father. He’s not young. The responsibility is a huge one. She breaks off because she has seen something below the plane. They descend.

It is the cone-shaped structure they have been looking for. An ant colony of fearful proportions. It is the size of a miniature volcano.

Hovering low, the helicopter is able to look down into the crater, the entrance. In it are human skeletons, probably the remains of the Ellison family.

In Washington, an emergency meeting with military chiefs has been called. They have been ordered to take instructions from Medford. The doctor is insisting that two things are equally important – secrecy and time. To discourage Air Force Officers who are eager to fly a squadron of bombers to annihilate the region, Medford delivers a lecture on his special subject, the ant species.

Bombing would only aggravate the situation. Ants live underground. They dislike the heat of the day and come out to forage for food between dusk and dawn. The best time for an attack would be at noon, the hottest part of the day, when virtually all the insects are inside the colony. Producing a chart, Medford points out the subterranean maze of tunnels. Some desert ants of ordinary size dig down as far as thirty feet or more. Creatures of this size might go down hundreds of feet or more. To stop up entrances would only force the ants to dig out at some other location. The nest, he insists, must not be damaged – not yet. The generals and Medford debate strategy. Water could be used to drown the insects in the nest, but no sources of water are available in the New Mexico desert. Heat is a better weapon. It is decided that the army should attack with bazookas and flamethrowers. Then, as the earth cools, they can inject cyanide gas into the tunnels.

“How can you be sure you have got all of them?” asks a general. “We go into the nest and find out,” insists Medford.

Across the Nevada desert the army mounts an attack. Ben Peterson and the army general are a two-man team of a bazooka unit. The general admits that it’s the first time he has ever loaded a bazooka. “That makes it even,” says Ben, who is acting as instructor. “It’s the first time I’ve ever given orders to a general.”

Waiting until the mound has cooled a little, the army contingent, accompanied by Dr. Medford, inject the cyanide gas bombs.

Bob Graham, wearing gas mask and protective clothing, is in charge of the squad that must descend into the labyrinth to make sure every one of the insects are destroyed. When Patricia insists that she accompany the squad, Graham rejects the idea. But, with support from her father, he is forced to recognize that it’s not enough simply to be sure that the creatures are dead. Only an expert on insect pathology will know what to look for. With her father too old to make the climb, the girl must go with the team.

The group descends into the tunnels. Turning a corner, they are confronted by some of the nightmarish things, but Patricia assures them that the creatures are quite dead – “Otherwise they would have attacked at once.”

At a deeper level, however, there is a sudden increase of the whistling sound, warning of survivors. Graham advances, using a flamethrower to kill the creatures. “How come the gas didn’t bring them out?” he asks. “The chamber roof caved in,” says Patricia, “maybe from the first bombing. Sealed in like that, the gas couldn’t reach them.”

Finally, Patricia halts them. “This is it, the queen’s chamber, the eggs.” Inspecting the discarded shells, she announces, “This is what I was afraid of. They’re empty.” Urging Bob to use the flamethrower again to burn out the contents of the chamber, she warns him that some of the giant ants have not yet been destroyed.

As the team returns to the surface, Dr. Medford hears their report. He is disturbed as his daughter explains, “There are no larvae or pupae in the chamber. They all seem to hatch directly from the eggs.”

Did she find no queen ants, only workers? Graham is puzzled at their manner. “You two seem to think it’s the end of the world!”

“Well, it could be,” warns the old man – and explains why. “If the two that have apparently escaped are queen ants, each is probably followed by one or more male ants as they have taken off on ‘the wedding flight.’ While the male ant will die off soon enough, the queen will establish another nest. Each queen is capable of laying thousands of eggs. From these will hatch dozens of other queens who may in turn...” The doctor breaks off, leaving them to consider the dreadful potentialities. “How far can they fly?” demands Graham. Medford is not sure. The smaller species have limited patterns of flight. They rely on wind currents. They have been found in the stratosphere. But these giants... Medford is once more apocalyptic. “No, we haven’t seen the end of them. We’ve only had a close look at what may be the beginning of the end of us.”

Another conference of the Pentagon authorities. Now assigned to the army unit, on leave from his police duties, Ben Peterson is questioned by the authorities. He supports the view held by Dr. Medford and the general. It is imperative that the public does not know of the deaths already caused by “the big ants.” No police force could handle the panic that might result.

Medford embarks on another lecture, this one illustrated with film footage. “It is,” he tells them, “important that they appreciate the nature of the ant species, in order not to underestimate the implications of the new mutation and the threat it may present to humanity.” His commentary to the documentary footage explains that “The ant species hasn’t changed greatly in fifty million years – as evidenced by the ant trapped in amber which we know is at least that old. Big ants, a desert variety similar to the monstrous new creatures, may be carnivorous, feeding on smaller ants. Their sight, smell, and hearing may be weak, but the radar-like antennae locate their enemies. They have enormous power. One ant can shift a pebble twenty times its own weight. Though the male ant, having fertilized the queen, soon dies, the queens live up to fifteen to seventeen years, continuing to produce more eggs and hatch ants.

“Ants are incredibly fierce in combat. One duel between two male ants was observed to last seventy-two hours without stopping. Humans and ants are the only species that wage organized war. The captives which they do not destroy are used as slave labor.”

The doctor sums up: “Unless the two escaped giant queen ants are found, unless their nests are destroyed before new eggs have been hatched, man, as the dominant species of life on earth, will probably be extinct with a year.”

Reporters outside the building besiege senators as they leave, demanding to know what is happening. What is the crisis? Why the secrecy? No comment.

A communications center has been established to monitor incoming information. Bob Graham and Dr. Medford receive a report from Texas and arrange at once to be flown to the location.

At a Texas hospital, the doctors are refusing to release a young pilot who has been brought in after his plane crashed. The pilot is protesting his detention. The doctors are treating him so strangely that he suspects he is being held in a mental institution. Why don’t they believe his report?

Arriving on the scene, Graham reassures the young man. The pilot is asked to repeat his description of three “flying saucers” with which he nearly collided, a sight so terrifying that he made a forced landing in a street, crashing his plane and damaging an old Ford. Much relieved when Graham and Patricia appear to believe his extraordinary adventure, the pilot begs them to persuade the hospital authorities to release him. Graham promises to talk to the doctors.

Privately, however, Graham discusses the case with the doctors and, hearing that they believe that the pilot is quite sane, but probably involved in some hoax for publicity purposes, Graham instructs them to keep his under detention. “See that he has no visitors, no publicity. The governor would appreciate it.”

Returning to their Washington headquarters, Graham and Patricia report that the “flying saucers” – one of the queen ants with two males – were seen flying west. They consult the map, and calculate wind directions. The search must now be continued throughout an area as far south as Panama, as far north as Santa Barbara.

Meanwhile, at sea, a merchant ship, the S.S. Viking, is under attack. Panicking seaman on the deck react in horror as the giant ants hover overhead, like obscene enemy air raiders.

Radio signals from the ship are brought to Dr. Medford and Patricia in the command headquarters. A U.S. Destroyer reports answering a radio S.O.S. from the vessel. The navy has also rescued two seamen from the ocean. Navy rescue ships were unable to board the ship it was infested with the giant ants. On instructions, they sank the vessel with gunfire.

How did the ants get onto the merchant vessel? It appears that the S.S. Viking was docked for several days at Acapulco. During that period, only a skeleton crew guarded it and the hold was left uncovered. Clearly one of the queen ants must have chose it as a spot in which to lay eggs. Later, when the ship was at sea, these must have hatched.

Medford is still concerned over the dangers of widespread panic. He advises that the navy destroyer be kept at sea so that the crew, who have witnessed the affair, are not able to report the event to the media until the crisis is over.

More information has been received from the coast. The decomposed carcass of a male ant has been discovered near Mount Vernon. From Los Angeles, there is an account of a goods truck carrying a consignment of sugar that has been attacked during the night. Bob Graham and Sergeant Ben Peterson are already on their way to the city.

Graham questions a railway official at the Los Angeles railway yard where the theft of sugar has taken place. They are holding the night watchman at the city jail. The police are assuming that the watchman obviously must have been an accomplice. The thieves must have used trucks to make off with forty tons of sugar!

Graham drives to the police station, questions the protesting watchman, and secures his release.

Meanwhile, a weeping woman is also in the station where she is identifying the corpse of her husband. The man has been victim of a brutal assault in which one of his arms was torn off and his body lacerated. He was found at 6.30 in the morning when his car jumped a curb. He had left his house before 6.00 a.m. with his two kids. No sign of the kids yet.

Graham, interrogating the widow, learns that her husband had a Sunday job. He used to take his two small boys out to play very early in the morning before he went to work.

She doesn't know where they went to play – to the zoo, to McArthur Park. “They always got so dirty.” Graham and Ben question the police who found this latest victim, while Medford and the general are flying in from Washington.

Looking for witnesses, Graham insists on interviewing all four arrests made by the police in the early hours: three drunks and a traffic citation. Two drunks know nothing and don't know where they were when picked up.

The traffic citation is a woman, going through a red light to get home before her husband, who works the nightshift returning in the morning. "She was spending the night with a sick friend."

The third drunk is more informative. He's a regular customer, virtually a permanent resident of the alcoholic ward. He rambles about seeing "little aeroplanes, too little for them to get into."

"Too little for who to get into?" demands Bob. "Ants!" says the drunk. Under further questioning, the drunk declares that he has been seeing "Them" for sometime... in the river. The river? Abruptly they realize what the drunk means: the Los Angeles storm drains, leading to the complex of underground sewers below the city.

They investigate the system of underground sewers and discover a tire marks and a toy airplane in the dry riverbed, just outside the entrance to the tunnels of the sewers. Ben Peterson sends a message over the police radio, instructing that the widow be asked if her husband's children owned such a toy. Then another discovery: one of the footprints of the creatures. Over the police car radio comes confirmation. The toy plane belonged to the two vanished children.

Graham and Ben now realize that a search of the sewers under the city has to be made – all seven hundred miles. Newspapermen and television crews are summoned to an emergency press conference at the mayor's office. It is a Sunday. The reporters sense an emergency.

Introducing Dr. Medford and the two generals who represent army and navy intelligence, the mayor makes a live appearance on radio and television: In the interests of public safety, the city is under martial law. There is now a six o'clock curfew. "Gigantic ants... a mutation of the household variety, but ranging in size from ten to twenty feet long... two queen ants escaped... one has been destroyed, but the other has established a nest in the storm drains beneath the city." The astonished television and radio audience hears the mayor's incredible explanation.

The army is assembled in force. On Graham's intervention, the mother of the children is allowed to pass the barriers. The general proposes that gasoline be used to burn out the sewers. Graham, conscious of the presence of the mothers, reminds him that the two kids might be inside.

The general protests. "Are they to endanger the lives of thousands of citizens because of two children who are almost certainly already dead!" Graham invites the general to put the question to the mother. "She's right over there!" Medford supports Bob's argument: they dare not use fire until they can be sure that any new queen ants have been hatched and may have escaped.

Orders are given to start the operation. Entering the sewerage system by different tunnels, the various units proceed, driving jeeps with army personnel. The units keep in walkie-talkie radio contact. They move slowly. In a leading jeep, Bob Graham and Peterson report nothing. They have penetrated about a mile.

Then Ben hears a noise – hammering. Graham orders all vehicles to shut off motors so that they can listen. It could be the children. The noise seems to come from a large pipe which is in the wall of the drain. Checking, they are told that it may be a passage to another drain – one that had been recently under construction but left unfinished. They radio a message: if there are work-lights still connected, they should be switched on. Ben Peterson leaves the jeep to climb into the pipe, crawling through it.

He discovers the two small boys and shouts back to the jeep. Graham transmits the message back to the mother. Her children are safe.

The boys are cowering in a small hole in the wall of the unfinished drain. But as Ben advances into the opening he discovers himself facing two of the giant ants. He cannot use the bazooka because the children are in the line of fire.

The general, accompanied by Medford and his daughter, has now ordered all units to concentrate on the target area. The army is coming to the support of Ben and Graham. To distract the ants from the children, Ben, offering himself, is joined by Graham who helps the boys escape into the pipe. At the same moment Ben, attacked from another direction by a third creature, is badly mauled before Graham manages to destroy it.

Medford, arriving with the main body of troops, demands that the firing stop. They can't risk closing off the nest – it's essential they get through to the egg chamber to find out if any new queens have hatched.

With Ben Peterson wounded, Bob Graham leads the way. As he explores there is a cave-in of the tunnel behind him which cuts him off from the others.

The troops start to dig through. But Graham, on the other side of the cave-in, finds himself under attack from more of the giant ants. He narrowly escapes as the troops manage to reach him.

Graham orders the troops to stop their firing and brings in Dr. Medford. He will be able to tell whether or not they have now reached the real target.

Medford examines it. Yes, this is it – this is the egg chamber! The job will be done when they have destroyed the newly hatched monster insects.

Graham orders the destruction of the nest. As they burn it out, he poses a last question. “If these monsters got started as a result of the first atomic bomb in 1945, what about all the others that have been exploded since then?”

Medford delivers one more homily. “When man entered the Atomic Age, he opened a door into a new world. What we shall eventually find in that new world, nobody can predict.”