

JOEL LESSON EIGHT



The Plague of Grasshoppers.

Story of an Eye-Witness—Summing Up the Damage.

From time to time brief reference has been made to the plague of grasshoppers with which the West has been afflicted, but the full story has never been told. The extent and fearfulness of the visitation yet remains to be pictured. The best description of the invasion of these winged foes is from the pen of a clergyman, resident at Lawrence, Kansas, who writes as follows: Living in the midst of the grasshopper region, I have taken some pains to collect facts in regard to them. Their invasion and ravages are as wonderful as anything connected with this "wonderful West." The "grasshopper region" extends from the Indian Territory on the south, to Minnesota on the north, and from the arid plains of the Rocky Mountains on the west, whence they originate, to the Mississippi on the east. It is not often, however, that they reach the latter boundaries, as frost generally overtakes them on the way. This year, however, they are earlier than usual, and they reach the rivers before frost comes. So their ravages this year will extend, with an occasional break and omission, over a region nearly one thousand miles square.

Their number is simply appalling. The national debt and the wonders of geometrical progression are completely left in the shade. Take your little pencil while I give you the materials of a problem. An army of them is passing over my house as I am writing, going eastward. Looking up, the air is filled with them as high as you can see. The lower strata look like snow flakes in the air. Higher up they look like silver dust sprinkled on the sky. This immense multitude has been moving rapidly all day. On Saturday, two days ago, another army, equally vast, passed over the city southward, and were seven hours going over. Now, remember that the army extends, with a few breaks in the line, nearly one thousand miles, and while your pencil and figures may fail, you can form some conception of the reality.

Their destructiveness is as wonderful as their numbers. When they light, they come down like a snow-storm, covering the ground. As soon as they strike they begin to eat, and they keep eating till food grows scarce, and then they move on. In some places their destructiveness is more complete than in others, as their stay varies from three days to three weeks. They have

excellent appetites and a wide range of diet. Onions, tobacco, peppers, cabbages and other strong and pungent articles, are their favorites; but they can accommodate themselves to circumstances, and when these luxuries fail, thrive very well on such substantial as corn or grass, or leaves of fruit or forest trees; and even as a last resort they devour the twigs and bark of the trees and the stalks of the corn, as the hard-tack of the campaign. The rapacity of their work is almost incredible. The great corn fields of these prairies seem to melt before them almost while you are looking at them; orchards and forests exhibit the baldness of winter, and the whole country looks as though a fire had passed over it. A farmer told me he had one hundred acres of corn in one field so rank you could not see through it. The grasshoppers struck it about noon, and in a few hours only bare stalks were standing. "It just melted away before my eyes," he said. And what they have done for him, they have done for all. The bottom lands of the Kaw (Kansas) river, which for one hundred miles west of here are almost one unbroken corn field, show nothing but bare stalks.

I drove several miles through fields on the Kaw bottom while the grasshoppers were working. The sound of their eating was as if a drove of cattle were in the field. In my own yard you could hear them distinctly eating among the trees. At any hour of the night you could go to the door and hear the work going on. It took but a few days to strip the trees of their leaves; the yards of their grass; the gardens of their plants, and the fields of their harvests. When food becomes scarce, they all rise together, as if by word of command, and pass on "to greener fields," if not to "milder skies." It is the best appointed army ever known. They move and camp and work in concert, as if directed by some common voice. They forage on the country as they move. If one of them gets hurt or killed his companions at once eat him up. So they need neither baggage-wagon nor stores, ambulance nor surgeon.

The insect itself differs from the common grasshopper. In addition to its jump-apparatus, it is furnished with four white wings, which do not simply help it to hop, but on which it flies indefinite distances—miles—perhaps hundreds of miles. It is no doubt nearly identical with the locust of Scripture. The second chapter of Joel contains a very fine poetical description of an invasion of locusts. It might be all literally applied to these Western plains to-day. They come like "a strong people in battle array"—with a noise like "chariots on the top of the mountains—or fire that devoureth the stubble." "They march every-one in his own way, and do not break their ranks." "They run upon the wall, climb upon the houses, and enter in at the windows." Before them the people are "pained, and all faces gather blackness." "The land is a garden of Eden before them, behind them a desolate wilderness." Man is helpless before them as before the elements of God. There is no resisting, or destroying, or turning them. They come like fire or flood, sweeping all before them. There seems to be no limit to their numbers or destructiveness. No matter how rich a country may be, they can lay it waste while we are looking at them.

The grasshopper is bound to play an important part in our history. He is already an element in our politics, and parties may yet ride into power on his back. They are certainly a mighty people, and whatever we may think of them, we have ceased to despise them. We have learned to fear them, and almost to stand in awe of them. We fear them for their power, and we stand in awe at the evident intelligence that underlies and guides their movements.

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