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Mantis, the Hottentot God

Hotnots-got can do everything. He helps men in trouble. And animals too. If he thinks men will be happier that way, he changes them into animals. If he thinks some animals should see better at night than by day, he gives them special eyes. Hotnots-got is very busy doing all these things, and he often has to change himself into an animal or a man or a bird. But he likes best to go around as a mantis for then he can see not only beasts and men, but also insects. Yes, he helps the small insects too, for they are as important as anyone else.

On the day of which I speak Hotnots-got sat on a [doringbos](#) with Chameleon. He liked Chameleon because he was wise and never did anything rash. Before moving one leg he would think it over carefully and if he decided it was necessary and wise to move his leg, he would. Otherwise he would remain as he was. Chameleon was good company and the only one with whom Hotnots-got felt he could relax. He was sure that Chameleon wouldn't be running here and there and making everybody nervous like the ants or the butterflies or the crazy wasps. As he sat on the thornbush twig evenly balanced on his four legs, Mantis stretched his two strong front arms like a boxer, then withdrew them into their usual attitude, which looked as if he were praying. Leisurely he swept his handsome triangular head from right to left and his big

eyes took in everything that the insects were doing. Near him sat Chameleon, clasping the branch with his supple legs. His long tail was twirled tightly around a lower twig. For ten minutes the two of them sat without moving.

In the dry grass beneath the thornbush the black ants were rushing in long lines to and from their nest. Chameleon broke the silence at last.

“What’s got into the ants today?” No one spoke as fast as Chameleon. The first word was barely out of his mouth and the entire sentence was over.

“Below us on this thornbush there is a [butcherbird](#)’s hoard. The ants have found it,” answered the Mantis. (You must know that the butcherbird goes hunting worms and flies and grubs and instead of eating his dinner when he catches them he stores his food on the sharp spikes of the thornbush. Then it looks like a little butcher shop, and that is why he got the name. The ants are on the lookout for the butcherbird’s hoard and when a scout finds it there is soon a long busy line carrying it off to the antheap.)

Again Chameleon’s long tongue darted forth. “Clever insects . . . ants,” said Chameleon.

“Yes, but they are getting too clever. I have had complaints from the butcherbird that he cannot find a thorn that is safe from them where he can store even a caterpillar,” answered Mantis.

“Butcherbird can look after himself. He doesn’t have to store his food. It’s just greediness.”

Fast as the words followed each other, Hotnots-got understood. “Yes, I am not worrying about it. But there is a much more serious complaint from the Queen of the Termites.”

“I’ve heard rumors,” and Chameleon rolled his eyes knowingly. “Only this morning a mole was telling me about the goings-on under the ground.”

Hotnots-got nodded gloomily. “The Queen Termite says the black ants have been trying to break into her nest again. Several times during the week she has had to send her soldier-termites to defend the passages leading to the inner chamber.”

While they discussed these matters, a couple of young lizards, dozing in the sun, noticed them.

“There must be something serious going on,” said one to the other. “I’ve never seen Mantis talk so much.”

“And I’ve never seen Chameleon talk at all.”

“Yes, it must be serious.”

One of the lizards poked his head under a stone and said, “Scorpion . . . wake up . . . Scorpion.”

“Leave me alone.” Scorpion disliked the heat of the sun, and hated being disturbed at his afternoon nap in the shade of a stone.

“Wait till you hear what I have to say,” said Lizard. “Mantis and Chameleon are up on the thornbush and they are talking their heads off.”

“What! Talking? Chameleon is moving his mouth? . . . No!”

“Something’s up all right, that’s certain,” and Lizard crawled back to where he could watch the discussion. By now the word was getting around that Hotnots-got and Chameleon were weighing over some problem and that developments might be expected.

The tree crickets, or boomsingertjies, chirped with curiosity. The grasshoppers hopped with excitement. Curious butterflies fluttered as near as they could to the thornbush, but they overheard very little, for in addition to Chameleon speaking so fast, they both paused several minutes between their answers

“The termitaria are very well designed,” Hotnots-got was now saying. “The termites are fine planners and builders. Their long passages under the earth are necessary for the ground to breathe and keep its moisture. You know as well as I do, Chameleon, that if the termites die out this land will turn into a sandy waste, like the desert up north. I cannot allow that to happen.”

Chameleon remained motionless, digesting these words of Hotnots-got.

Lizard, in the dust below the bush, poked his head under the stone where Scorpion rested, and whispered, “Hotnots-got has just spoken. Chameleon’s thinking.”

“Tell me when Chameleon speaks,” answered Scorpion. “I would like to see that.”

“You’ll have to be quick; his tongue is fast. Still I think it will be quite awhile before he is ready with his next sentence. I’ll try to warn you when he is about to talk.”

“Right,” said Scorpion. “I would like to see that.” He dozed off in the cool hollow under the stone. The boomsingertjies on the branches of a nearby tree watched the discussion too. They became silent as Chameleon remained deep in thought. The grasshoppers sat nervously rubbing their hind legs across their wings, and this made a strident, chirping sound.

“I wish those grasshoppers would stop fidgeting,” said a ladybird. “They make me nervous.” Her red-brown shield shook with annoyance until the black beauty spots looked as if they would drop off.

Chameleon slowly unclasped his one foot, and moved it a little nearer to Hotnots-got, so slowly that you could count ten for every inch he moved. Then his tongue whipped out, and in a flash his words came rattling forth. “Termites have many enemies. They should be helped to start new nests farther afield. If they cannot get far enough underground, give them wings, Hotnots-got, and let them fly.”

Lizard called to Scorpion, “Chameleon is going to speak.” Before Scorpion could swing his tail Chameleon had finished and was motionless. The crickets chattered to each other and butterflies flitted here and everywhere. None of them could hear a word, of course, but they enjoyed the mystery of it, and became more and more curious as the discussion continued.

Hotnotsgot was well aware of the insects’ interest. He turned his head and surveyed them with dignity. He glanced at a branch above him. “Spider!” called Hotnots-got suddenly. “Spider!”

Spider was so startled that his entire web shivered. “Me? Are you calling me?” and he pointed to himself with all his eight legs. He swung out from his web on a single silken thread, and hung suspended over the thornbush. To raise himself he simply swallowed the thread and soon he was sitting beside Hotnots-got and Chameleon.

“Spider,” said Hotnots-got, “I am worried because the termites are losing ground to their enemies, the black ants. Also they are afraid to travel in the open as they are soft and pale and easily recognized. Besides, they dislike the light, and cannot live long above the ground.” Spider listened attentively. “You are an artist,” Hotnots-got went on. “You can weave the most delicate designs. I charge you to prepare a number of wings for the termites. Be ready when the sun shines in the mid»sky the seventh time from tomorrow. I shall send word to the Queen Termite.”

“Tell the Queen,” confidently answered Spider, “I shall make wings for her young pioneers which will carry them great distances. I am an artist. Though no one has ever seen termites fly, I can already see it happen with my own eight eyes. I can see them disappearing into the distance with the most beautiful,

transparent, light, silky wings that have ever been made. . . . They will be elegant . . . and every insect will cry with delight: 'What an artist is Spider!'" Chameleon focused his roving eyes on the boasting Spider. "Get to work. Words won't make wings!" And Chameleon's elastic tongue shot out and pushed Spider off the branch. The grasshoppers rolled their legs with glee, and the crickets chirped with amusement. But Spider has never been caught unawares. When he had arrived on the branch he had attached his dragline to it. Now as he fell his dragline held him and he swung merrily across to the next branch. "I shall rely on you, Spider," said Hotnots-got.

"When the seventh sun shines high I shall be ready, Hotnots-got," he called. Soon the entire insect colony heard the news. The butterflies overheard Spider's speech and they love nothing better than gossip. From flower to flower they flew telling of the coming flight of the termites. The flowers passed the news on to the other visiting insects.

All week Spider worked. Should the wings be big or small, square or oblong? Hotnots-got advised him on every new design until it was perfect.

The seventh day dawned. The termites inside their great cone-like dwelling were busier than ever. The young pioneers had been chosen and rested until the great moment, but the other activities of the nest continued. The fat Queen in her chamber in the center of the nest must be fed and nothing be allowed to interfere with this important task. Hotnots-got took up his position on the tip of the cone. Here, with his sensitive forepaws he could feel the vibration of the strong walls behind which the workers and soldiers rushed through the passages, orderly and efficient. On the thornbush where the discussion had taken place a week before sat Chameleon. The way he clasped the branch with his four legs, and the lower branch with his tail, was so like the previous time that it seemed as if he had not moved for seven days. Gossiping butterflies flitted here and there.

Lizard lazily turned to Scorpion and said, "I don't believe termites can fly. It's just a silly idea of Chameleon."

Chameleon, on the bush above, heard his cousin's remark. He did not move but he turned black with anger.

"You stupid fool," said Scorpion, raising his tail threateningly. "If Hotnots-got says they will fly, they will fly. Chameleon does not waste words either." Chameleon cooled off and the color of his skin began to lighten.

From the tip of the termitaria Hotnots-got raised his forearms for silence. The buzzing and chirping stopped and in the hush a patch of earth began to crumble. Delicate membranous wings fluttered and a swarm of pale termites flew out of the broken ground! The birds trilled, the crickets chirped, the grasshoppers cheered. Thus encouraged the remainder of the pioneer termites wiggled their wings, which Spider had hinged on to them, and found themselves soaring into the air. It was not easy for them as they had never been in the sunlight before.

As the last winged termite flew away Hotnots-got took off and followed the swarm. It had happened! Chameleon turned a cool green with satisfaction. He unclasped his tail from the lower branch so that he could twist around and face his cousin. Deliberately he rolled his eyes, fixing them firmly on Lizard, then he shot his tongue out at him in triumph. Lizard slunk under the stone with Scorpion.

The termites' wings were not as strong as Spider had said they would be. Or perhaps the termites did not have enough strength to work them, for soon many began to give up. They fell to the ground and were quickly caught by the black and red ants. Hotnots-got became worried, for the swarm was thinning rapidly. Above floated a flock of birds, wishing that Hotnots-got were not there so that they could swoop on the soft insects who flew so awkwardly.

Hotnots-got noticed two little pioneers about to give up and drop from exhaustion. Ahead stood a baobab tree. He called, "You two. Follow me." They did and alighted on the highest branch of the tree. The wings of the termites dropped off. "You will carve a tunnel through this tree until you reach the ground. There settle and build a new nest. You," said he, pointing with his left forearm at the smaller one, "you shall feed your Queen well until you have a great family and as fine a termitaria as the one you left. Then Spider will make new wings for your own pioneers to go further. Be industrious. . . ."

The two pale insects were already burrowing into the bark of the tree and Hotnots-got jumped into the air and flew onwards. Many couples dropped by the way and those that were quick enough dug themselves into the earth before their enemies could reach them. With Hotnots-got's help, the remnants of the swarm reached the dry sandy country. There they worked with all their energy building long underground passages and new homes. Thus Hotnots-got arranged the miracle of the flying termites. And every year the same miracle

happens. Young pioneer termites break into the open and with borrowed wings fly for a brief span in the unwelcome sunlight. At some distant spot they discard their wings and build their own homes.

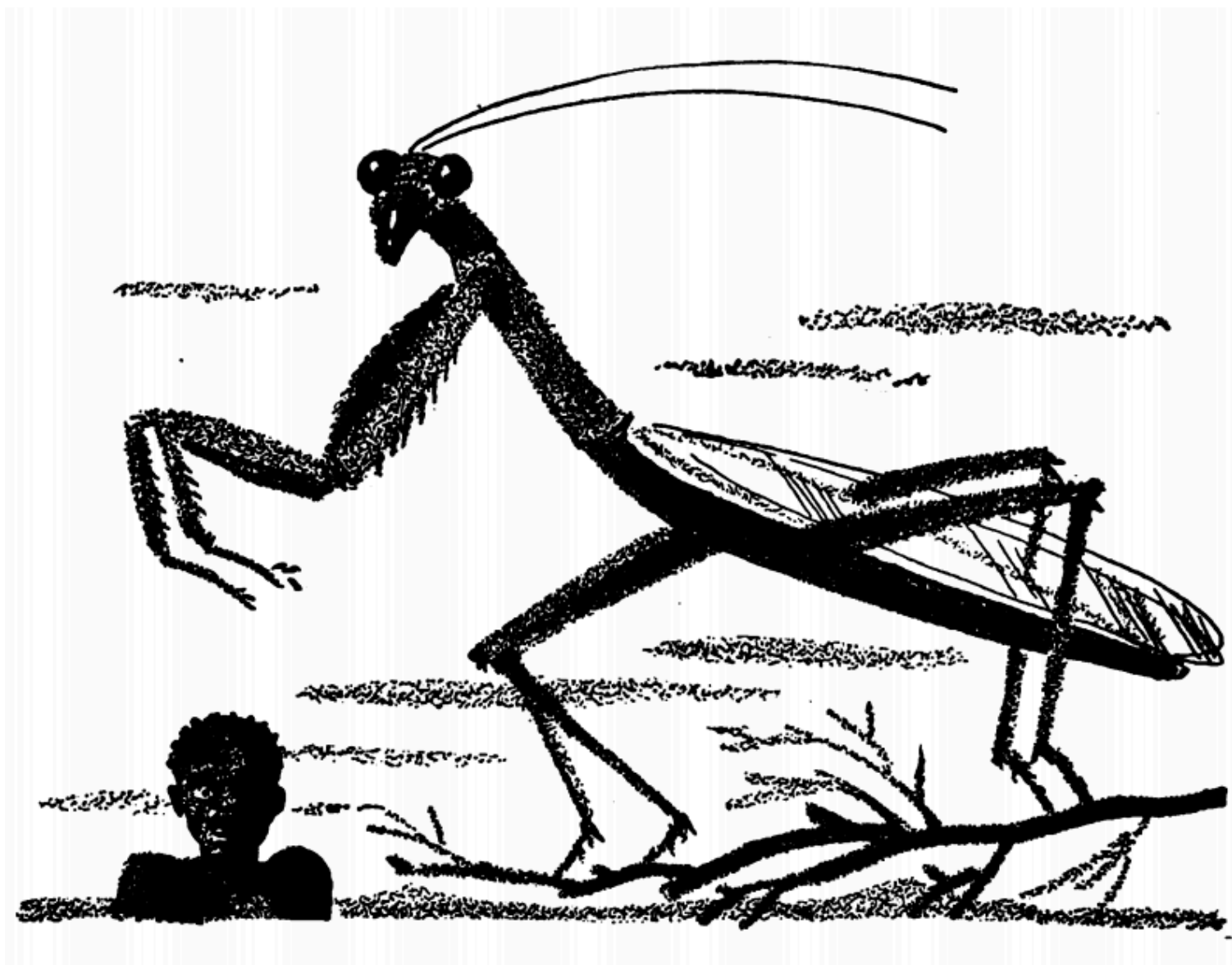


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