

# TEEMING HOUSEHOLD

BY JACK SMITH

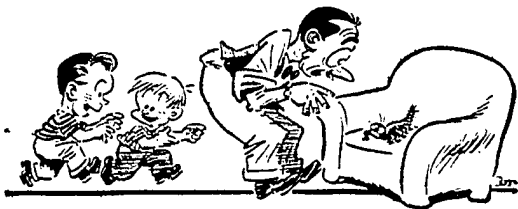
Any man blessed with a small boy of his own is certain to have his life peopled, pardon the word, with live things. Not just comfortable beasts one has learned to live with, like dogs and cats. We mean things of a lower order. Slick gray things encountered in the garden under damp leaves. Brown scaly things lifted lovingly from

Superbug, Slimey, Shaggy. And only God and the boys know what they mean. We are shaken, we tell you, when a name like that is dropped in the household. Put yourself in our place, in an all too usual crisis:

"Psst! (stage whispering) It's got away!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's not in the cigar box."



rocks. Wounded feathered things.

Being blessed with not one but two small boys, we live in a fearsome and ever-changing jungle, and no Hemingway us. We never know how many hearts may beat beneath our roof at any given time. We walk the rugs lightly, with eyes downcast, alert as any hunter, wary at the thought of treading on some member of the family.

At night the house is alive with imagined sounds as we lie awake in the dark. The infinitesimal inhale and exhale of who knows what; the pump pumpeta pump of tiny yellow hearts. We ache to spring to the door and lock it and build a campfire by the bed.

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We can prove nothing. But, deep inside, we know. The voice of the cricket. Does it come from outside the window? Or from down the hall. That furtive scratching like a small wire dragged across the floor. We will not investigate, and play the fool. If we plunged into the heart of the matter, and switched on the light, we would find only two boys asleep in their beds with crafty dreamless faces; and nothing more horrible than a soft movement under the covers, a sign that one had smuggled in the cat again.

But nothing will relieve our uneasy feeling that somehow the balance of nature has been tampered with in our own castle. Behind our back, surreptitiously, nature's cycle has been spirited inside from out of doors, and goes on in its immemorial way within the cozy jungle of the boys' bedroom, among the piles of toys. Procreation and birth and the struggle for existence and death are accomplished while the boys see all with wonderment and growing wisdom.

An amiable insect scrapes out his days at the bottom of a coffee can, glutting on cooky crumbs and lettuce salvaged from the table, drenched with oil and vinegar and garlic salt. Only to expire, finally, of old age, or malaise de segment, or whatever kind of ill a bug is heir to. As secretly as he came, then, he departs, his body borne in sorrow or wonder or reverence to the earth from which he was borrowed by the boy.

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Regarding us, of course, as the pestilence, the boys husband their creatures with stealth, emerging from their crawling underworld to confront the master of the house with empty hands and faces of sly innocence. But now and then a word of evidence slips out, a name dropped sotto voce in hurried conference. For all the beasts have names.

Squeakie, Brownie, Blackie,

"Did you look under the leaves?"

"Uh huh. Only Whiskers is there now."

"Maybe the rat got him."

"No. I know where the rat is."

"Where?"

"Under my shirt."

"Oh."

"Did you look in daddy's bedroom?"

"Yeh. He wasn't there. Lizzie was, though."

That's enough, we say, for any man.

"BOYS!" we shout. "What in the name of . . . WHAT'S got away?"

"Crispie."

"Crispie?"

"Uh huh. He was in the cigar box."

"He's about this big and has . . ."

"No, Doug. THIS big."

"Are you counting when he's curled up or when he spreads out?"

"BOYS! What in the name of . . . What is this thing?"

"Well, I don't know exactly. It has six legs, I think."

"No, Curt. Eight legs, I counted."

"Some of those are feelers, 'Doug."

"Anyway, he only has two eyes."

"Thank God for that! All right, boys, listen to me! You find that thing . . . Crispie . . . whatever it is, and GET IT OUT OF HERE!"

"All right, daddy."

"All right, daddy."

"Psst! Curt, look."

"Where?"

"There, on daddy's chair."

"CRISPIE!"

You see?