

First Flight

by Waldemar Bonsels

The elderly lady-bee who helped the baby-bee Maya when she awoke to life and slipped from her cell was called Cassandra and commanded great respect in the hive. Those were exciting days. A rebellion had broken out in the nation of bees, which the queen was unable to suppress.

While the experienced Cassandra wiped Maya's large bright eyes and tried as best she could to arrange her delicate wings, the big hive hummed and buzzed like a threatening thunderstorm, and the baby-bee found it very warm and said so to her companion.

Cassandra looked about troubled, without replying. It astonished her that the child so soon found something to criticize. But really the child was right: the heat and the pushing and crowding were almost unbearable. Maya saw an endless succession of bees go by in such swarming haste that sometimes one climbed up and over another, or several rolled past together clotted in a ball.

Once the queen-bee approached. Cassandra and Maya were jostled aside. A drone, a friendly young fellow of immaculate appearance, came to their assistance. He nodded to Maya and stroked the shining hairs on his breast rather nervously with his foreleg. (The bees use their forelegs as arms and hands.)

"The crash will come," he said to Cassandra. "The revolutionists will leave the city. A new queen has already been proclaimed."

Cassandra scarcely noticed him. She did not even thank him for his help, and Maya felt keenly conscious that the old lady was not a bit nice to the young gentleman. The child was a little afraid to ask questions, the impressions were coming so thick and fast; they threatened to overwhelm her. The general excitement got into her blood, and she set up a fine, distinct buzzing.

"What do you mean by that?" said Cassandra. "Isn't there noise enough as it is?"

Maya subsided at once, and looked at Cassandra questioningly.

"Come here, child, we'll see if we cannot quiet down a bit." Cassandra took Maya by her gleaming wings, which were still soft and new and marvelously transparent, and shoved her into an almost deserted corner beside a few honeycombs filled with honey.

Maya stood still and held on to one of the cells.

"It smells delicious here," she observed.

Her remark seemed to fluster the old lady again.

"You must learn to wait, child," she replied. "I have brought up several hundred young bees this spring and given them lessons for their first flight, but I haven't come across another one that was as pert and forward as you are. You seem to be an exceptional nature."

Maya blushed and stuck the two dainty fingers of her hand in her mouth.

“Exceptional nature—what is an exceptional nature?” she asked shyly.

“Oh, *that’s* not nice,” cried Cassandra, referring not to Maya’s question, which she had scarcely heeded, but to the child’s sticking her fingers in her mouth. “Now, listen. Listen very carefully to what I am going to tell you. I can devote only a short time to you. Other baby-bees have already slipped out, and the only helper I have on this floor is Turka, and Turka is dreadfully overworked and for the last few days has been complaining of a buzzing in her ears. Sit down here.”

Maya obeyed, with great brown eyes fastened on her teacher.

“The first rule that a young bee must learn,” said Cassandra, and sighed, “is that every bee, in whatever it thinks and does, must be like the other bees and must always have the good of all in mind. In our order of society, which we have held to be the right one from time immemorial and which couldn’t have been better preserved than it has been, this rule is the one fundamental basis for the well-being of the state. To-morrow you will fly out of the hive, an older bee will accompany you. At first you will be allowed to fly only short stretches and you will have to observe everything, very carefully, so that you can find your way back home again. Your companion will show you the hundred flowers and blossoms that yield the best nectar. You’ll have to learn them by heart. This is something no bee can escape doing.—Here, you may as well learn the first line right away—clover and honeysuckle. Repeat it. Say ‘clover and honeysuckle.’”

“I can’t,” said little Maya. “It’s awfully hard. I’ll see the flowers later anyway.”

Cassandra opened her old eyes wide and shook her head.

“You’ll come to a bad end,” she sighed. “I can foresee that already.”

“Am I supposed later on to gather nectar all day long?” asked Maya.

Cassandra fetched a deep sigh and gazed at the baby-bee seriously and sadly. She seemed to be thinking of her own toilsome life—toil from beginning to end, nothing but toil. Then she spoke in a changed voice, with a loving look in her eyes for the child.

“My dear little Maya, there will be other things in your life—the sunshine, lofty green trees, flowery heaths, lakes of silver, rushing, glistening waterways, the heavens blue and radiant, and perhaps even human beings, the highest and most perfect of Nature’s creations. Because of all these glories your work will become a joy. Just think—all that lies ahead of you, dear heart. You have good reason to be happy.”

“I’m so glad,” said Maya, “that’s what I want to be.”

Cassandra smiled kindly. In that instant—why, she did not know—she conceived a peculiar affection for the little bee, such as she could not recall ever having felt for any child-bee before. And that, probably, is how it came about that she told Maya more than a bee usually hears on the first day of its life. She gave her various special bits of advice, warned her against the dangers of the wicked world, and named the bees’ most dangerous enemies. At the end she spoke long of human beings, and implanted the first love for them in the child’s heart and the germ of a great longing to know them.

“Be polite and agreeable to every insect you meet,” she said in conclusion, “then you will learn more from them than I have told you to-day. But beware of the wasps and hornets. The hornets are our most formidable enemy, and the wickedest, and the wasps are a useless tribe of thieves, without home or religion. We are a stronger, more powerful nation, while they steal and murder wherever they can. You may use your sting upon insects, to defend yourself and inspire respect, but if you insert it in a warm-blooded animal, especially a human being, you will die, because it will remain sticking in the skin and will break off. So do not sting warm-blooded creatures except in dire need, and then do it without flinching or fear of death. For it is to our courage as well as our wisdom that we bees owe the universal respect and esteem in which we are held. And now good-bye, Maya dear. Good luck to you. Be faithful to your people and your queen.”

The little bee nodded yes, and returned her old monitor’s kiss and embrace. She went to bed in a flutter of secret joy and excitement and could scarcely fall asleep from curiosity. For the next day she was to know the great, wide world, the sun, the sky and the flowers.

Meanwhile the bee-city had quieted down. A large part of the younger bees had now left the kingdom to found a new city; but for a long time the droning of the great swarm could be heard outside in the sunlight. It was not from arrogance or evil intent against the queen that these had quitted; it was because the population had grown to such a size that there was no longer room for all the inhabitants, and it was impossible to store a sufficient food-supply of honey to feed them all over the winter. You see, according to a government treaty of long standing, a large part of the honey gathered in summer had to be delivered up to human beings, who in return assured the welfare of the bee-state, provided for the peace and safety of the bees, and gave them shelter against the cold in winter.

“The sun has risen!”

The joyous call sounding in Maya’s ears awoke her out of sleep the next morning. She jumped up and joined a lady working-bee.

“Delighted,” said the lady cordially. “You may fly with me.”

At the gate, where there was a great pushing and crowding, they were held up by the sentinels, one of whom gave Maya the password without which no bee was admitted into the city.

“Be sure to remember it,” he said, “and good luck to you.”

Outside the city gates, a flood of sunlight assailed the little bee, a brilliance of green and gold, so rich and warm and resplendent that she had to close her eyes, not knowing what to say or do from sheer delight.

“Magnificent! It really is,” she said to her companion. “Do we fly into that?”

“Right ahead!” answered the lady-bee.

Maya raised her little head and moved her pretty new wings. Suddenly she felt the flying-board on which she had been sitting sink down, while the ground seemed to be gliding away behind, and the large green domes of the tree-tops seemed to be coming toward her.

Her eyes sparkled, her heart rejoiced.

“I am flying,” she cried. “It cannot be anything else. What I am doing must be flying. Why, it’s splendid, perfectly splendid!”

“Yes, you’re flying,” said the lady-bee, who had difficulty in keeping up with the child. “Those are linden-trees, those toward which we are flying, the lindens in our castle park. You can always tell where our city is by those lindens. But you’re flying so fast, Maya.”

“Fast?” said Maya. “How can one fly fast enough? Oh, how sweet the sunshine smells!”

“No,” replied her companion, who was rather out of breath, “it’s not the sunshine, it’s the flowers that smell.—But please, don’t go so fast, else I’ll drop behind. Besides, at this pace you won’t observe things and be able to find your way back.”

But little Maya transported by the sunshine and the joy of living, did not hear. She felt as though she were darting like an arrow through a green-shimmering sea of light, to greater and greater splendor. The bright flowers seemed to call to her, the still, sunlit distances lured her on, and the blue sky blessed her joyous young flight.

“Never again will it be as beautiful as it is to-day,” she thought. “I *can’t* turn back. I can’t think of anything except the sun.”

Beneath her the gay pictures kept changing, the peaceful landscape slid by slowly, in broad stretches.

“The sun must be all of gold,” thought the baby-bee.

Coming to a large garden, which seemed to rest in blossoming clouds of cherry-tree, hawthorn, and lilacs, she let herself down to earth, dead-tired, and dropped in a bed of red tulips, where she held on to one of the big flowers. With a great sigh of bliss she pressed herself against the blossom-wall and looked up to the deep blue of the sky through the gleaming edges of the flowers.

“Oh, how beautiful it is out here in the great world, a thousand times more beautiful than in the dark hive. I’ll never go back there again to carry honey or make wax. No, indeed, I’ll never do that. I want to see and know the world in bloom. I am not like the other bees, my heart is meant for pleasure and surprises, experiences and adventures. I will not be afraid of any dangers. Haven’t I got strength and courage and a sting?”

She laughed, bubbling over with delight, and took a deep draught of nectar out of the flower of the tulip.

“Grand,” she thought. “It’s glorious to be alive.”

Ah, if little Maya had had an inkling of the many dangers and hardships that lay ahead of her, she would certainly have thought twice. But never dreaming of such things, she stuck to her resolve.

Soon tiredness overcame her, and she fell asleep. When she awoke, the sun was gone, twilight lay upon the land. A bit of alarm, after all. Maya’s heart went a little faster. Hesitatingly she crept out of

the flower, which was about to close up for the night, and hid herself away under a leaf high up in the top of an old tree, where she went to sleep, thinking in the utmost confidence:

“I’m not afraid. I won’t be afraid right at the very start. The sun is coming round again; that’s certain; Cassandra said so. The thing to do is to go to sleep quietly and sleep well.”

Source:

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