

ambush just for this. In an instant the forlorn hope of the invaders was trapped, and not one bee escaped.

Now the balcks, smashed into isolated groups and companies, were being slaughtered as whining columns of vengeance cut their ranks to tatters. Nothing could stop the rising tide of yellow savagery. The invaders were swept out on to the alighting place and off its edge. The battle went on, up and down the trunk and in the grass below, till at last the dark horde was wiped out as if it had never been.

Not one invader flew away. The skep colony was wiped out; the black community would perish through lack of numbers within a month. But the encounter, which had lasted, perhaps, two hours, had killed about 50,000 bees, nearly half of whom had belonged to the golden city.

Children of Chalk.

Soon after the attack the queen redoubled her efforts, laying hundreds of eggs each day in answer to the urgent need to increase the numbers of the population before the onset of cold weather, while the nurses kept up their unremitting labour of feeding to each individual larva about 1,300 meals each day, one each minute or so of the 24 hours. At this the heather bloomed, giving off a bitter-sweet perfume that drew bees by the thousands. Presently the harvest of midsummer was supplemented by splendid combs of amber heather honey, far more than the colony would require for its winter sustenance; and on these the wax-builders worked incessantly, sealing over each cell with a lid of wax. Before this was done fanners had evaporated all excess water from the honey; now it would keep for years, if need be.

Then, in the persisting warmth and sunshine of the autumn, when everything seemed well, the old oak was suddenly touched by an impalpable shadow.

The bee nurses had the first news of it. Passing to and fro amongst the nursery combs, they were arrested by a sudden murmur from one of their number. She was feverishly licking a young larva whose small body was already stiff; in place of the normal pearly white and shapely outlines the whole had assumed the texture of solid chalk. Soon other nurses announced similar discoveries. This was not natural death. Occasionally a larva would somehow be accidentally injured in the rushing business of the city and would die; or, even more rarely, one would be somehow improperly fed. But this swift calcination of the dead body boded something far more terrible.

Death among the brood reduces all bees to terror. They will face with infinite courage a disease that strikes only grown bees, yet brood death pierces the communal heart, chilling the zest for labour and the passionate selfishness of defence, for if the brood dies community life itself can be only a thing of weeks, or months at best.

During the ensuing hours two or three score of larvae died. Some were cut out of their cradles and carried outside. Soon the nurses lost heart; fear paralysed them. The thick white shapes were left in the cells where they died, in negation of that first of all laws of bee life; that a passionate cleanliness shall rule above every other habit.

At last a band of nurses went in deputation to the queen. Presently, as if in answer to some communication which had passed between them, they bowed and murmured and, motioning others of their kind to follow, passed through the city gates, then set off in a close-winged cloud into the deepest part of the oak wood where the undergrowth grew thicker and the trees were knarled. Suddenly the bees whirled round in a great circle like the coiling of some great black spring, then poured down on to a dull blue patch beneath a ring of oaks. This blue patch was a straggling root of devil's-bit scabious, with its balls of purple bloom, each consisting of hundreds of tiny florets.

Feverishly the bees moved over the blooms, gathering the pale, astringent nectar. Then they raced back to the oak and deposited their load directly in the comb where the queen was at work.

Before even the first cell was filled the queen's maids came to it and, timidly taking the sharp stuff upon their tongues, offered it to their lady.

For a perceptible second she hesitated; then the fumes of it seemed to dispel all doubts. She who usually sipped so delicately fell upon these offerings with the urgency of a drug fiend. Not until she was gorged and somnolent did the maids cease, reaching out her tongue with drunken imperiousness for more and more.

At last the queen crouched inert, only her great eyes smouldering in doped wakefulness, seeing, perhaps, a procession of fantastic dreams. After an hour or so she rose. The attendants instantly tried to feed her again. This time she turned from the scabious honey with shivering disgust. She moved across the comb, passed right through the centre of the city to the other extreme edge of the nursing comb, and there began to lay her eggs as before.

In the course of the next few days two or three hundred more larvae died and turned to chalk; then suddenly, these occurrences stopped. The queen had somehow cured herself by that banquet of bitter honey. She herself did not know how or why—only that now, the eggs she laid produced normal, healthy, pearly larvae as before.

Battle of Giants.

The first frost of the autumn now glittered on the dead leaves that carpeted the woodland. In the lazy pleasure flights through the warm midday air, the bees watched other creatures preparing for winter. The bats, their insect food vanished, betook themselves to holes in trees and hung up there for their winter sleep. Frogs installed themselves in the mud with the greatest solemnity and earnestness. Newts sought for themselves cold, moist stones under which to sleep out the winter; and spiders spun themselves warm silken blankets.

As the autumn advanced the bees were content with less and less frequent journeys into the air. Somnolence pervaded the city. The noise of industry had died to a faint, contented murmur, most comforting and sedative. There was no longer active movement about the golden streets; those bees who left the clustered centre combs walked lethargically, and when they passed through the gates would stand sleepily for a long time in the sunshine, then take wing with drowsy determination, economising wing beats to the limit.

There came a morning, at last, when the autumn sunshine was clouded and hidden. The world was cold, the sky grey, the colours of the frost-painted leaves dulled. No bee emerged that day. But during the afternoon a new and strange invader made a silent reconnaissance of the outer walls of the city. Quivering along on noiseless, tiny feet, a mouse passed between the grass stems at the base of the oak and stared up with intelligent shining eyes. It remained motionless at the root of the tree for a long time, its nose wrinkled faintly as it smelled the air to try to detect the sharpness of danger.

Then swiftly and without a sound, it flickered up the oak trunk and stood in the gateway of the bees' city. Again it froze into immobility. Its russet ears pricked to the faint and distant murmur of the humming. Had that note changed, it would have flung itself down to earth. Its whiskers vibrated nervously with appetite, for the smell of the loaded honeycombs was attractive and exciting.

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This article will be concluded in the October issue.

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