

City of Golden Wax.



The Story of a Colony of Wild Bees. Condensed from the Book by Frank S. Stuart.

Battle of Giants (*continued*)

YET ROBBERY was not the motive that incited this little creature. Like the bees, it wished to hibernate. It had been lazy, wasting all the summer and autumn days without a thought for the winter. Now it was too cold to start nest building out of doors and most of the nuts were gone. Shelter and food must be found—at another's expense.

Like a flash of light, the mouse darted into the city gateway. He nibbled at the heavy wax defences until presently he had opened a tiny passage—and squeezed through on to the floor beneath the hanging honeycombs.

Overhead he saw the tens of thousands of somnolent, tightly clustered bees and, as he watched, they shrank a little away from him towards the tops of the combs. The mouse sat up hungrily, with tiny forepaws on the bottom of the comb, and nibbled out a taste of honey. The murmuring took a sinister note, but still the bees shrank back.

Here is a strange truth; bees, which will attack headlong when a man, an ox or an elephant threatens their city, are as much afraid of mice as any Victorian lady. Hundreds of bee colonies every winter are starved and annihilated because they dare not attack a mouse which enters their citadel. Something in the mouse odour is incomprehensibly terrifying to them. They will sometimes desert a honey-laden home altogether, when a mouse enters, and swarm out to die in the cold. Sometimes—very rarely—they strike back.

The mouse examined every corner of the lower part of the city, deciding where to place his nest; then, with a skip that made the bees crouch he spun round and went out.

Half an hour later he returned with a young female. Mice are always slender when they enter bee colonies; occasionally they grow so fat that they cannot emerge through the crevice that let them in, and so are trapped for wasted weeks in the spring time.

While the greedy little female squeaked gluttonously through a mouthful of honey, her mate, trying to reach a patch of fragrant pollen, darted a few inches up the centre comb.

The move was fatal. Had the two invaders contented themselves until the colder weather with what they could reach from the floor, the bees would have shrunk timidly further away every day, sinking deeper and deeper into hibernation's trance, yet constantly disturbed, nervously over-eating and so tainting themselves with dysentery and fever. The mice would have eaten and soiled comb after comb; and, before springtime came again, the colony's story would have ended in stillness and decay, while a family of fatted mice triumphed among the ruins. But by chance that sudden rush happened to direct itself straight at the queen's majesty. With a vengeful roar, a thousand bees dropped on to the mouse. Instantly the mouse fell, writhing in awful terror as the poisoned darts pricked him everywhere. He wriggled convulsively an inch or two toward the entrance, looking like a pincushion of white poison bags. He might have dragged through the entrance into the open air, but his mate, racing for her life, spurned him with kicking hind feet so that he rolled over on top of a mass of fallen leaves, and there received a final attack.

In the city the whole community was astir, despite the raw chill of the darkening afternoon. Hundreds went to the gates;

but it was hopeless to try to repair the damage there until a hot day came, when propolis might be gathered, for wax could not be made in the autumn cold. Other bees marched fiercely round the body of the victim mouse. There it lay, on the floor near the entrance gates, on its side, the pure white belly showing vividly in the penetrating light; the handsome russet back glowed in contrast.

There it lay for two days. Then a vagrant sun came pouring down in strength on one of those ineffable late autumn days; and the bees hurried by thousands out of the gates and on the wing, as if this were the height of summer.

Away they went in squadrons and cohorts, seeking propolis. Down the valley a gang of workmen with a steam-roller was mending the road; the swarm settled intently on the new patches of bitumen and filled their sacs with tarry glue, for this was an occasion where trees yielded too slowly; a desperate occasion for a remedy no less desperate.

Innumerable loads of propolis came back to the city all through the day. Over the mouse's body a glazed mausoleum began to take shape, transparent as the tomb of Lenin, exquisite as the Taj Mahal. The giant had been killed indeed—at the cost of many hundreds of precious lives, for rarely indeed can a sting be withdrawn without injury or death to the bee.

However, this titanic body could not be carried outside; not even the efforts of the whole community would serve to cut it to bits and remove it. The body was therefore completely sealed in propolis, red like ruby glass; only so could its decay be prevented and a stench that would carry death with it for them all be bottled up and ensure their safety. But for this precaution, the invader who, whilst living, could not triumph would in death have struck a mortal blow.

The little body lay there all through that winter, and the next summer, and indeed for many years. Whenever the propolis cracked or wore thin it was perfectly repaired. Embalmed, still with a hundred little white poison bags stuck in its side and head, but otherwise looking as perfect as if asleep.

Rebirth.

All that fierce winter, cold held the earth in an iron grip. At last, by slow degrees, the frosts melted before the all-conquering sun.

The buds on hedges and trees grew big; at their tips uncurling layers disclosed shining green points.

The old bees, rearguards of a vanished year, watched the throng of active, eager newcomers from the ever spreading nursery combs. The queen goddess would remain among them; but those who had so arduously toiled and fought that she might bear the flame of life through the darkness shrank to a handful, to a score . . . to one.

Alone with her memories of an earlier time, this last survivor went down slowly to the city gates, then winged her way steadily up the sunny sky. She sought something—a flower—a new honey more perfect than earthly honey had been or could ever be.

She grew very tired before she had gone more than a few hundred yards. Her wings would hardly carry her, but her eyes could still scrutinise every glimmer of colour, every unrecognised shape with clarity and ease. As she looked nearer, a golden star appeared, hidden at the foot of a hedge-row. Instantly the bee recognised that this was what she had set out to seek. With infinite thankfulness she glided down and alighted on the dandelion bloom.

She had found the very first dandelion of the year in flower but could not carry the message back to the golden city; nor did that matter, since thousands of lusty inheritors were there to search for and find and profit from all the dandelions and all the other blossoms that would ensue.

The bee, its dying vision contracting, seemed to stand in the midst of a scented field of the cloth of gold, then she sank down into that yellow, shining forest, content at last to rest.

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