

The Queen of the Bees

By Erckmann-Chatrian

“As you go from Motiers-Navers to Boudry, on your way to Neufchatel,” said the young professor of botany, “you follow a road between two walls of rocks of immense height; they reach a perpendicular elevation of five or six hundred feet, and are hung with wild plants, the mountain basil (*thymus alpinus*), ferns (*polypodium*), the whortleberry (*vitis idœa*), ground ivy, and other climbing plants producing a wonderful effect.

“The road winds along this defile; it rises, falls, turns, sometimes tolerably level, sometimes broken and abrupt, according to the thousand irregularities of the ground. Grey rocks almost meet in an arch overhead, others stand wide apart, leaving the distant blue visible, and discovering sombre and melancholy-looking depths, and rows of firs as far as the eye could reach.

“The Reuss flows along the bottom, sometimes leaping along in waterfalls, then creeping through thickets, or steaming, foaming, and thundering over precipices, while the echoes prolong the tumult and roar of its torrents in one immense endless hum. Since I left Tubingen the weather had continued fine; but when I reached the summit of this gigantic staircase, about two leagues distant from the little hamlet of Novisaigne, I suddenly noticed great grey clouds begin passing overhead, which soon filled up the defile entirely; this vapour was so dense that it soon penetrated my clothes as a heavy dew would have done.

“Although it was only two in the afternoon, the sky became clouded over as if darkness was coming on; and I foresaw a heavy storm was about to break over my head.

“I consequently began looking about for shelter, and I saw through one of those wide openings which afford you a perspective view of the Alps, about two or three hundred yards distant on the slope leading down to the lake, an ancient-looking grey chalet, moss-covered, with its small round windows and sloping roof loaded with large stones, its stairs outside the house, with a carved rail, and its basket-shaped balcony, on which the Swiss maidens generally hang their snowy linen and scarlet petticoats to dry.

“Precisely as I was looking down, a tall woman in a black cap was folding and collecting the linen which was blowing about in the wind.

“To the left of this building a very large apiary supported on beams, arranged like a balcony, formed a projection above the valley.

“You may easily believe that without the loss of a moment I set off bounding through the heather to seek for shelter from the coming storm, and well it was I lost no time, for I had hardly laid my hand on the handle of the door before the hurricane burst furiously overhead; every gust of wind seemed about to carry the cottage bodily away; but its foundations were strong, and the security of the good people within, by the warmth of their reception, completely reassured me about the probability of any accident.

“The cottage was inhabited by Walter Young, his wife Catherine, and little Rœsel, their only daughter.

“I remained three days with them; for the wind, which went down about midnight, had so filled the valley of Neufchatel with mist, that the mountain where I had taken refuge was completely enveloped in it; it was impossible to walk twenty yards from the door without experiencing great difficulty in finding it again.

“Every morning these good people would say, when they saw me buckle on my knapsack—What are you about, Mr. Hennetius? You cannot mean to go yet; you will never arrive anywhere. In the name of Heaven stay here a little longer!”

“And Young would open the door and exclaim—

“ ‘Look there, sir; you must be tired of your life to risk it among these rocks. Why, the dove itself would be troubled to find the ark again in such a mist as this.’

“One glance at the mountain side was enough for me to make up my mind to put my stick back again in the corner.

“Walter Young was a man of the old times. He was nearly sixty; his grand head wore a calm and benevolent expression—a real Apostle’s head. His wife, who always wore a black silk cap, pale and thoughtful, resembled him much in disposition. Their two profiles, as I looked at them defined sharply against the little panes of glass in the chalet’s windows, recalled to my mind those drawings of Albert Durer the sight of which carried me back to the age of faith and the patriarchal manners of the fifteenth century. The long brown rafters of the ceiling, the deal table, the ashen chairs with the carved backs, the tin drinking-cups, the sideboard with its old-fashioned painted plates and dishes, the crucifix with the Saviour carved in box on an ebony cross, and the wormeaten clock-case with its many weights and its porcelain dial, completed the illusion.

“But the face of their little daughter Roesel was still more touching. I think I can see her now, with her flat horsehair cap and watered black silk ribbons, her trim bodice and broad blue sash down to her knees, her little white hands crossed in the attitude of a dreamer, her long fair curls—all that was graceful, slender, and ethereal in nature. Yes, I can see Roesel now, sitting in a large leathern armchair, close to the blue curtain of the recess at the end of the room, smiling as she listened and meditated.

“Her sweet face had charmed me from the first moment I saw her, and I was continually on the point of inquiring why she wore such an habitually melancholy air, why did she hold her pale face down so invariably, and why did she never raise her eyes when spoken to?

“Alas! the poor child had been blind from her birth.

“She had never seen the lake’s vast expanse, nor its blue sheet blending so harmoniously with the sky, the fishermen’s boats which ploughed its surface, the wooded heights which crowned it and cast their quivering reflection on its waters, the rocks covered with moss, the green Alpine plants in their vivid and brilliant colouring; nor had she ever watched the sun set behind the glaciers, nor the long shades of evening draw across the valleys, nor the golden broom, nor the endless heather—nothing. None of these things had she ever seen; nothing of what we saw every day from the windows of the chalet.

“‘What an ironical commentary on the gifts of Fortune!’ thought I, as I sat looking out of the window at the mist, in expectation of the sun’s appearing once more, ‘to be blind in this place! here in presence of Nature in its sublimest form, of such limitless grandeur! To be blind! Oh, Almighty God, who shall dare to dispute Thy impenetrable decrees, or who shall venture to murmur at the severity of Thy justice, even when its weight falls on an innocent child? But to be thus blind in the presence of Thy grandest creations, of creations which ceaselessly renew our enthusiasm, our love, and our adoration for Thy genius, Thy power, and Thy goodness; of what crime can this poor child have been guilty thus to deserve Thy chastisement?’

“And my reflections continually reverted to this topic

“I asked myself, too, what compensation Divine pity could make its creature for the deprival of its greatest blessing, and, finding none, I began to doubt its power.

“‘Man, in his presumption,’ said the royal poet, ‘dares to glorify himself in his knowledge, and judge the Eternal. But his wisdom is but folly, and his light darkness.’

“On that day one of Nature’s great mysteries was revealed to me, doubtless with the purpose of humbling my vanity, and of teaching me that nothing is impossible to God, and that it is in His power only to multiply our senses, and by so doing gratify those who please Him.”

Here the young professor took a pinch from his tortoiseshell snuff-box, raised his eyes to the ceiling with a contemplative air, and then, after a short pause, continued in these terms:—

“Does it not often happen to you, ladies, when you are in the country in fine weather in summer, especially after a brief storm, when the air is warm, and the exhalations from the ground filling it with the perfume of thousands of plants, and their sweet scent penetrates and warms you; when the foliage from the trees in the solitary avenues, as well as from the hushes, seems to lean over you as if it sought to take you in its arms and embrace you; when the minutest flowers, the humble daisy, the blue forget-me-not, the convolvulus in the hedgerows raise their heads and follow you with a longing look—does it not happen to you to experience an inexpressible sensation of languor, to sigh for no apparent reason, and even to feel inclined to shed tears, and to ask yourselves, ‘Why does this feeling of love oppress me? why do my knees bend under me? whence these tears?’

“Whence indeed, ladies? Why from life, and the thousands of living things which surround you, lean to you, and call to you to stay with them, while they gently murmur, ‘We love you; love us, and do not leave us.’

“You can easily imagine, then, the deep enthusiastic feeling and the religious sentiment of a person always in a similar state of ecstasy. Even if blind, abandoned by his friends, do you think there is nothing to envy in his lot? or that his destiny is not infinitely happier than our own? For my own part I have not the slightest doubt of it.

“But you will, doubtless, say such a condition is impossible—the mind of man would break down under such a load of happiness. And, moreover, whence could such happiness be derived? What organs could transmit, and where could it find, such a sensation of universal life?

“This, ladies, is a question to which I can give you no answer; but I ask you to listen and then judge.

“The very day I arrived at the chalet I had made a singular remark—the blind girl was especially uneasy about the bees.

“While the wind was roaring without Roesel sat with her head on her hands listening attentively.

“‘Father,’ said she, ‘I think at the end of the apiary the third hive on the right is still open. Go and see. The wind blows from the north; all the bees are home; you can shut the hive.’

“And her father having gone out by a side door, when he returned he said—

“‘It is all right, my child; I have closed the hive.

“Half an hour afterwards the girl, rousing herself once more from her reverie, murmured—

“‘There are no more bees about, but under the roof of the apiary there are some waiting; they are in the sixth hive near the door; please go and let them in, father.’

“The old man left the house at once. He was away more than a quarter of an hour; then he came back and told his daughter that everything was as she wished it—the bees had just gone into their hive.

“The child nodded, and replied—

“‘Thank you, father.’

“Then she seemed to doze again.

“I was standing by the stove, lost in a labyrinth of reflections; how could that poor blind girl know that from such or such a hive there were still some bees absent, or that such a hive had been left open? This seemed inexplicable to me; but having been in the house hardly one hour, I did not feel justified in asking my hosts any questions with regard to their daughter, for it is sometimes painful to talk to people on subjects which interest them very nearly. I concluded that Young gave way to his daughter’s fancies in order to induce her to believe she was of some service in the family, and that her forethought protected the bees from several accidents. That seemed the simplest explanation I could imagine, and I thought no more about it.

“About seven we supped on milk and cheese, and when it was time to retire Young led me into a good-sized room on the first floor, with a bed and a few chairs in it, panelled in fir, as is generally the case in the greater number of Swiss châlets. You are only separated from your neighbours by a deal partition, and you can hear every footstep and nearly every word.

“That night I was lulled to sleep by the whistling of the wind and the sound of the rain beating against the window-panes. The next day the wind had gone down and we were enveloped in mist. When I awoke I found my windows quite white, quite padded with mist. When I opened my window the valley looked like an immense stove; the tops of a few fir-trees alone showed their outlines against the sky; below, the clouds were in regular layers down to the surface of the lake; everything was calm, motionless, and silent.

“When I went down to the sitting-room I found my hosts seated at tables about to begin breakfast.

“ ‘We have been waiting for you,’ cried Young gaily.

“ ‘You must excuse us,’ said the mother; ‘this is our regular breakfast hour.’

“ ‘Of course, of course; I am obliged to you for not noticing my laziness.’

“Roesel was much more lively than the preceding evening; she had a fresh colour in her cheeks.

“ ‘The wind has gone down,’ said she; ‘the storm has passed away without doing any harm.’

“ ‘Shall I open the apiary?’ asked Young.

“ ‘No, not yet; the bees would lose themselves in this mist. Besides, everything is drenched with rain; the brambles and mosses are full of water; the least puff of wind would drown many of them. We must wait a little while. I know what is the matter: they feel dull, they want to work; they are tormented at the idea of devouring their honey instead of making it. But I cannot afford to lose them. Many of the hives are weak—they would starve in winter. We will see what the weather is like to-morrow.’

“The two old people sat and listened without making any observations.

“About nine the blind girl proposed to go and visit her bees; Young and Catherine followed her, and I did the same, from a very natural feeling of curiosity.

“We passed through the kitchen by a door which opened on to a terrace. Above us was the roof of the apiary; it was of thatch, and from its ledge honey-suckle and wild grapes hung in magnificent festoons. The hives were arranged on three shelves.

“Roesel went from one to the other, patting them, and murmuring—

“ ‘Have a little patience; there is too much mist this morning. Ah! the greedy ones, how they grumble!’

“And we could hear a vague humming inside the hive, which increased in intensity until she had passed.

“That awoke all my curiosity once more. I felt there was some strange mystery which I could not fathom, but what was my surprise, when, as I went into the sitting-room, I heard the blind girl say in a melancholy tone of voice—

“ ‘No, father, I would rather not see at all to-day than lose my eyes. I will sing, I will do something or other to pass the time, never mind what; but I will not let the bees out.’

“While she was speaking in this strange manner I looked at Walter Young, who glanced out of the window and then quietly replied—

“ ‘You are right, child; I think you are right. Besides, there is nothing to see; the valley is quite white. It is not worth looking at.’

“And while I sat astounded at what I heard, the child continued—

“ ‘What lovely weather we had the day before yesterday! Who would have thought that a storm on the lake would have caused all this mist? Now one must fold up its wings and crawl about like a wretched caterpillar.’

“Then again, after a few moments’ silence—

“ ‘How I enjoyed myself under the lofty pines on the Grinderwald! How the honey-dew dropped from the sky! It fell from every branch. What a harvest we made, and how sweet the air was on the shores of the lake, and in the rich Tannemath pastures—the green moss, and the sweet-smelling herbs! I sang, I laughed, and we filled our cells with wax and, honey. How delightful to lie everywhere, see everything, to fly humming about the woods, the mountains, and the valleys!’

“There was a fresh silence, while I sat, with mouth and eyes open, listening with the greatest attention, not knowing what to think or what to say,

“ ‘And when the shower came,’ she went on, ‘how frightened we were! A great humble-bee, sheltered under the same fern as myself, shut his eyes at every flash; a grasshopper had sheltered itself under its great green branches, and some poor little crickets had scrambled up a poppy to save themselves from drowning. But what was most frightful was a nest of warblers quite close to us in a bush. The mother hovered round about us, and the little ones opened their beaks, yellow as far as their windpipes. How frightened we were! Good lord, we were frightened indeed! Thanks be to Heaven, a puff of wind carried us off to the mountain side; and now the vintage is over we must not expect to get out again so soon.’

“On hearing these descriptions of Nature so true, at this worship of day and light, I could no longer entertain the least doubt on the subject.

“ ‘The blind girl sees,’ said I to myself; ‘she sees through thousands of eyes; the apiary is her life, her soul. Every bee carries a part of her away into space, and then returns drawn to her by thousands of invisible threads. The blind girl penetrates the flowers and the mosses; she revels in their perfume; when the sun shines she is everywhere; in the mountain side, in the valleys, in the forests, as far as her sphere of attraction extends.’

“I sat confounded at this strange magnetic influence, and felt tempted to exclaim—

“ ‘Honour, glory, honour to the power, the wisdom, and the infinite goodness of the Eternal God! For Him nothing is impossible. Every day, every instant of our lives reveals to us His magnificence.’

“While I was lost in these enthusiastic reflections, Roesel addressed me with a quiet smile.

“ ‘Sir,’ said she.

“ ‘What, my child?’

“ ‘You are very much surprised at me, and you are not the first person who has been so. The rector Hegel, of Neufchatel, and other travellers have been here on purpose to see me: they thought I was blind. You thought so too, did you not?’

“ ‘I did indeed, my dear child, and I thank the Lord that I was mistaken.’

“ ‘Yes,’ said she, ‘I know you are a good man—I can tell it by your voice. When the sun shines I shall open my eyes to look at you, and when you leave here I will accompany you to the foot of the mountain.’

“Then she began to laugh most artlessly.

“ ‘Yes,’ said she, ‘you shall have music in your ears, and I will seat myself on your cheek; but you must take care—take care. You must not touch me, or I should sting you. You must promise not to be angry.’

“ ‘I promise you, Roesel, I promise you I will not,’ I said with tears in my eyes, ‘and, moreover, I promise you never to kill a bee or any other insect except those which do harm.’

“ ‘They are the eyes of the Lord,’ she murmured. ‘I can only see by my own poor bees, but He has every hive, every ant’s nest, every leaf, every blade of grass. He lives, He feels, He loves, He suffers, He does good by means of all these. Oh, Monsieur Hennesius, you are right not to pain the Lord, who loves us so much!’

“Never in my life had I been so moved and affected, and it was a full minute before I could ask her—

“ ‘So, my dear child, you see by your bees; will you explain to me how that is?’

“ ‘I cannot tell, Monsieur Hennesius; it may be because I am so fond of them. When I was quite a little child they adopted me, and they have never once hurt me. At first I liked to sit for hours in the apiary all alone and listen to their humming for hours together. I could see nothing then, everything was dark to me; but insensibly light came upon me. At first I could see the sun a little, when it was very hot, then a little more, with the wild vine and the honeysuckle like a shade over me, then the full light of day. I began to emerge from myself; my spirit went forth with the bees. I could see the mountains, the rocks, the lake, the flowers and mosses, and in the evening, when quite alone, I reflected on these things. I thought how beautiful they were, and when people talked of this and that, of whortleberries, and mulberries, and heaths, I said to myself, “I know what all these things are like—they are black, or brown, or green.” I could see them in my mind, and every day I became better acquainted with them, thanks to my dear bees; and therefore I love them dearly, Monsieur Hennesius. If you knew how it grieves me when the time comes for robbing them of their wax and their honey!’

“ ‘I believe you, my child—I believe it does.’

“My delight at this wonderful discovery was boundless.

“Two days longer Roesel entertained me with a description of her impressions. She was acquainted with every flower; every Alpine plant, and gave me an account of a great number which have as yet received no botanical names, and which are probably only to be found in inaccessible situations.

“The poor girl was often much affected when she spoke of her dear friends, some little flowers.

“ ‘Often and often,’ said she, ‘I have talked for hours with the golden broom or the tender blue-eyed forget-me-not, and shared in their troubles. They all wished to quit the earth and fly about; they all complained of their being condemned to dry up in the ground, and of being exposed to wait for days and weeks ere a drop of dew came to refresh them.’

“And so Roesel used to repeat to me endless conversations of this sort. It was marvellous! If you only heard her you would be capable of falling in love with a dogrose, or of feeling a lively sympathy and a profound sentiment of compassion for a violet, its misfortunes and its silent sufferings.

“What more can I tell you, ladies? It is painful to leave a subject where the soul has so many mysterious emanations; there is such a field for conjecture; but as everything in this world must have an end, so must even the pleasantest dreams.

“Early in the morning of the third day of my stay a gentle breeze began to roll away the mist from off the lake. I could see its folds become larger every second as the wind drove them along, leaving one blue corner in the sky, and then another; then the tower of a village church, some green pinnacles on the tops of the mountains, then a row of firs, a valley, all the time the immense mass of vapour slowly floated past us; by ten it had left us behind it, and the great cloud on the dry peaks of the Chasseron still wore a threatening aspect; but a last effort of the wind gave it a different direction, and it disappeared at last in the gorges of Saint-Croix.

“Then the mighty nature of the Alps seemed to me to have grown young again; the heather, the tall pines, the old chestnut-trees dripping with dew, shone with vigorous health; there was something in the view of them joyous, smiling, and serious all at once. One felt the hand of God was in it all—His eternity.

“I went downstairs lost in thought; Roesel was already in the apiary. Young opened the door and pointed her out to me sitting in the shade of the wild vine, with her forehead resting on her hands, as if in a doze.

“‘Be careful,’ said he to me, ‘not to awake her; her mind is elsewhere; she sleeps; she is wandering about; she is happy.’

“The bees were swarming about by thousands, like a flood of gold over a precipice.

“I looked on at this wonderful sight for some seconds, praying the Lord would continue his love for the poor child.

“Then turning round—

“‘Master Young,’ said I, ‘it is time to go.’”

“He buckled my knapsack on for me himself, and, put my stick into my hand.

“Mistress Catherine looked on kindly, and they both accompanied me to the threshold of the chalet.

“‘Farewell!’ said Walter, grasping my hand; ‘a pleasant journey; and think of us sometimes!’

“‘I can never forget you,’ I replied, quite melancholy; ‘may your bees flourish, and may Heaven grant you are as happy as you deserve to be!’

“‘So be it, M. Henneius,’ said good Dame Catherine; ‘amen; a happy journey, and good health to you.’

“I moved off.

“They remained on the terrace until I reached the road.

“Thrice I turned round and waved my cap, and they responded by waving their hands.

“Good people; why cannot we meet with such every day?”

“Little Roesel accompanied me to the foot of the mountain, as she had promised. For a long time her musical hum lightened the fatigue of my journey; I seemed to recognise her in every bee which came buzzing about my ears, and I fancied I could hear her say in a small shrill tone of voice—

“‘Courage, M. Henneius, courage; it is very hot, is it not? Come, let me give you a kiss; don’t be afraid; you know we are very good friends.’

“It was only at the end of the valley that she took leave of me, when the sound of the lake drowned her gentle voice; but her idea followed me all through my journey, nor do I think it will ever leave me.”