ROYAL JELLY

“IT worries me to death, Albert, it really does,” Mrs Taylor said.

She kept her eyes fixed on the baby who was now lying absolutely motionless in the crook of her left arm.

“I just know there’s something wrong.”

The skin on the baby’s face had a pearly translucent quality and was stretched very tightly over the bones.

“Try again,” Albert Taylor said.

“It won’t do any good.”

“You have to keep trying, Mabel,” he said.

She lifted the bottle out of the saucepan of hot water and shook a few drops of milk on to the inside of her wrist, testing for temperature.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Come on, my baby. Wake up and take a bit more of this.”

There was a small lamp on the table close by that made a soft yellow glow all around her.

“Please,” she said. “Take just a weeny bit more.”

The husband watched her over the top of his magazine. She was half dead with exhaustion, he could see that, and the pale oval face, usually so grave and serene, had taken on a kind of pinched and desperate look. But even so, the drop of her head as she gazed down at the child was curiously beautiful.

“You see,” she murmured. “It’s no good. She won’t have it.”

She held the bottle up to the light, squinting at the calibrations.

“One ounce again. That’s all she’s taken. No it isn’t even that. It’s only three-quarters. It’s not enough to keep body and soul together, Albert, it really isn’t. It worries me to death.”

“I know,” he said.

“If only they could find out what was wrong.”

“There’s nothing wrong, Mabel. It’s just a matter of time.”

“Of course there’s something wrong.”

“Dr Robinson says no.”

“Look,” she said, standing up. “You can’t tell me it’s natural for a six-week-old child to weigh less, less by more than two whole pounds than she did when she was born! Just look at those legs! They’re nothing but skin and bone!”

The tiny baby lay limply on her arm, not moving.

“Dr Robinson said you was to stop worrying, Mabel. So did that other one.”

“Ha!” she said. “Isn’t that wonderful! I’m to stop worrying!”

“Now, Mabel.”

“What does he want me to do? Treat it as some sort of a joke?”

“He didn’t say that.”

“I hate doctors! I hate them all!” she cried, and she swung away from him and walked quickly out of the room towards the stairs, carrying the baby with her.

Albert Taylor stayed where he was and let her go.

In a little while he heard her moving about in the bedroom directly over his head, quick nervous footsteps going tap tap tap on the linoleum above. Soon the footsteps would stop, and then he would have to get up and follow her, and when he went into the bedroom he would find her sitting beside the cot as usual, staring at the child and crying softly to herself and refusing to move.

“She’s starving, Albert,” she would say.

“Of course she’s not starving.”

“She is starving. I know she is. And Albert?”

“Yes?”

“I believe you know it too, but you won’t admit it. Isn’t that right?”

Every night now it was like this.

Last week they had taken the child back to the hospital, and the doctor had examined it carefully and told them that there was nothing the matter.

“It took us nine years to get this baby, Doctor,” Mabel had said. “I think it would kill me if anything should happen to her.”

That was six days ago and since then it had lost another five ounces.

But worrying about it wasn’t going to help anybody, Albert Taylor told himself. One simply had to trust the doctor on a thing like this. He picked up the magazine that was still lying on his lap and glanced idly down the list of contents to see what it had to offer this week: Among the Bees in May Honey Cookery The Bee Farmer and the B. Pharm. Experiences in the Control of Nosema The Latest on Royal jelly This Week in the Apiary The Healing Power of Propolis Regurgitations British Beekeepers Annual Dinner Association News.

All his life Albert Taylor had been fascinated by anything that had to do with bees. As a small boy he often used to catch them in his bare hands and go running with them into the house to show to his mother, and sometimes he would put them on his face and let them crawl about over his cheeks and neck, and the astonishing thing about it all was that he never got stung. On the contrary, the bees seemed to enjoy being with him. They never tried to fly away, and to get rid of them he would have to brush them off gently with his fingers. Even then they would frequently return and settle again on his arm or hand or knee, any place where the skin was bare.

His father, who was a bricklayer, said there must be some witch’s stench about the boy, something noxious that came oozing out through the pores of the skin, and that no good would ever come of it, hypnotizing insects like that. But the mother said it was a gift given him by God, and even went so far as to compare him With St Francis and the birds.

As he grew older, Albert Taylor’s fascination with bees developed into an obsession, and by the time he was twelve he had built his first hive. The following summer he had captured his first swarm. Two years later, at the age of fourteen, he had no less than five hives standing neatly in a row against the fence in his father’s small back yard, and already-apart from the normal task of producing honey-he was practising the delicate and complicated business of rearing his own queens, grafting larvae into artificial cell cups, and all the rest of it.

He never had to use smoke when there was work to do inside a hive, and he never wore gloves on his hands or a net over his head. Clearly there was some strange sympathy between this boy and the bees, and down in the village, in the shops and pubs, they began to speak about him with a certain kind of respect, and people started coming up to the house to buy his honey.

When he was eighteen, he had rented one acre of rough pasture alongside a cherry orchard down the valley about a mile from the village, and there he had set out to establish his own business. Now, eleven years later, he was still in the same spot, but he had six acres of ground instead of one, two hundred and forty well-stocked hives, and a small house he'd built mainly with his own hands. He had married at the age of twenty and that, apart from the fact that it had taken them over nine years to get a child, had also been a success. In fact, everything had gone pretty well for Albert until this strange little baby girl came along and started frightening them out of their wits by refusing to eat properly and losing weight every day.

He looked up from the magazine and began thinking about his daughter.

That evening, for instance, when she had opened her eyes at the beginning of the feed, he had gazed into them and seen something that frightened him to death a kind of misty vacant stare, as though the eyes themselves were not connected to the brain at all but were just lying loose in their sockets like a couple of small grey marbles.

Did those doctors really know what they were talking about?

He reached for an ash-tray and started slowly picking the ashes out from the bowl of his pipe with a matchstick.

One could always take her along to another hospital, somewhere in Oxford perhaps. He might suggest that to Mabel when he went upstairs.

He could still hear her moving around in the bedroom, but she must have taken off her shoes now and put on slippers because the noise was very faint.

He switched his attention back to the magazine and went on with his reading. He finished the article called "Experiences in the Control of Nosema', then turned over the page and began reading the next one, "The Latest on Royal Jelly'. He doubted very much whether there would be anything in this that he didn't know already: What is this wonderful substance called royal jelly?

He reached for the tin of tobacco on the table beside him and began filling his pipe, still reading.

Royal jelly is a glandular secretion produced by the nurse bees to feed the larvae immediately they have hatched from the egg. The pharyngeal glands of bees produce this substance in much the same way as the mammary glands of vertebrates produce milk. The fact is of great biological interest because no other insects in the world are known to have evolved such a process.

All old stuff, he told himself, but for want of anything better to do, he continued to read.

Royal jelly is fed in concentrated form to all bee larvae for the first three days after hatching from the egg; but beyond that point, for all those who are destined to become drones or workers, this precious food is greatly diluted with honey and pollen. On the other hand, the larvae which are destined to become queens are fed throughout the whole of their larval period on a concentrated diet of pure royal jelly. Hence the name.

Above him, up in the bedroom, the noise of the footsteps had stopped altogether. The house was quiet. He struck a match and put it to his pipe.

Royal jelly must be a substance of tremendous nourishing power, for on this diet alone, the honey-bee larva increases in weight fifteen hundred times in five days.

That was probably about right, he thought, although for some reason it had never occurred to him to consider larval growth in terms of weight before.

This is as if a seven-and-a-half-pound baby should increase in that time to five tons.

Albert Taylor stopped and read that sentence again. He read it a third time.

This is as if a seven-and-a-half-pound baby “Mabel!” he cried, jumping up from his chair. “Mabel! Come here!”

He went out into the hall and stood at the foot of the stairs calling for her to come down.

There was no answer.

He ran up the stairs and switched on the light on the landing. The bedroom door was closed. He crossed the landing and opened it and stood in the doorway looking into the dark room. “Mabel,” he said. “Come downstairs a moment, will you please? I’ve just had a bit of an idea. It’s about the baby.”

The light from the landing behind him cast a faint glow over the bed and he could see her dimly now, lying on her stomach with her face buried in the pillow and her arms up over her head. She was crying again.

“Mabel,” he said, going over to her, touching her shoulder. “Please come down a moment. This may be important.”

“Go away,” she said. “Leave me alone.”

“Don’t you want to hear about my idea?”

“Oh, Albert, I’m tired,” she sobbed. “I’m so tired I don’t know what I’m doing any more. I don’t think I can go on. I don’t think I can stand it.”

There was a pause. Albert Taylor turned away from her and walked slowly over to the cradle where the baby was lying, and peered in. It was too dark for him to see the child’s face, but when he bent down close he could hear the sound of breathing, very faint and quick. “What time is the next feed?” he asked.

“Two o’clock, I suppose.”

“And the one after that?”

“Six in the morning.”

“I’ll do them both,” he said. “You go to sleep.”

She didn’t answer.

“You get properly into bed, Mabel, and go straight to sleep, you understand? And stop worrying. I’m taking over completely for the next twelve hours. You’ll give yourself a nervous breakdown going on like this.”

“Yes,” she said. “I know.”

“I’m taking the nipper and myself and the alarm clock into the spare room this very moment, so you just lie down and relax and forget all about us. Right?” Already he was pushing the cradle out through the door.

“Oh, Albert,” she sobbed.

“Don’t you worry about a thing. Leave it to me.”

“Albert “Yes?”

“I love you, Albert.”

“I love you too, Mabel. Now go to sleep.”

Albert Taylor didn’t see his wife again until nearly eleven o’clock the next morning.

“Good gracious me!” she cried, rushing down the stairs in dressing-gown and slippers. “Albert! Just look at the time! I must have slept twelve hours at least! Is everything all right? What happened?”

He was sitting quietly in his armchair, smoking a pipe and reading the morning paper. The baby was in a sort of carry-cot on the floor at his feet, sleeping.

“Hullo, dear,” he said, smiling.

She ran over to the cot and looked in. “Did she take anything, Albert? How many times have you fed her? She was due for another one at ten o’clock, did you know that?

Albert Taylor folded the newspaper neatly into a square and put it away on the side table. “I fed her at two in the morning,” he said, “and she took about half an ounce, no more. I fed her again at six and she did a bit better that time, two ounces… “

“Two ounces! Oh, Albert, that’s marvellous!”

“And we just finished the last feed ten minutes ago. There’s the bottle on the mantelpiece. Only one ounce left. She drank three. How’s that?” He was grinning proudly, delighted with his achievement.

The woman quickly got down on her knees and peered at the baby.

“Don’t she look better?” he asked eagerly. “Don’t she look fatter in the face?”

“It may sound silly,” the wife said, “but I actually think she does. Oh, Albert, you’re a marvel! How did you do it?”

“She’s turning the corner,” he said. “That’s all it is. Just like the doctor prophesied, she’s turning the corner.”

“I pray to God you’re right, Albert.”

“Of course I’m right. From now on, you watch her go.”

The woman was gazing lovingly at the baby.

“You look a lot better yourself too, Mabel.”

“I feel wonderful. I’m sorry about last night.”

“Let’s keep it this way,” he said. “I’ll do all the night feeds in future. You do the day ones.”

She looked up at him across the cot, frowning. “No,” she said. “Oh no, I wouldn’t allow you to do that.”

“I don’t want you to have a breakdown, Mabel.”

“I won’t, not now I’ve had some sleep.”

“Much better we share it.”

“No, Albert. This is my job and I intend to do it. Last night won’t happen again.”

There was a pause. Albert Taylor took the pipe out of his mouth and examined the grain on the bowl. “All right,” he said. “In that case I’ll just relieve you of the donkey work, I’ll do all the sterilizing and the mixing of the food and getting everything ready. That’ll help you a bit, anyway.”

She looked at him carefully, wondering what could have come over him all of a sudden.

“You see, Mabel, I’ve been thinking “Yes, dear.”

“I’ve been thinking that up until last night I’ve never even raised a finger to help you with this baby.”

“That isn’t true.”

“Oh yes it is. So I’ve decided that from now on I’m going to do my share of the work. I’m going to be the feed-mixer and the bottle-sterilizer. Right?”

“It’s very sweet of you, dear, but I really don’t think it’s necessary… “Come on!” he cried. “Don’t change the luck! I done it the last three times and just look what happened! When’s the next one? Two o’clock, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“It’s all mixed,” he said. “Everything’s all mixed and ready and all you’ve got to do when the time comes is to go out there to the larder and take it off the shelf and warm it up. That’s some help, isn’t it?”

The woman got up off her knees and went over to him and kissed him on the cheek.

You're such a nice man," she said. "I love you more and more every day I know you."

Later, in the middle of the afternoon, when Albert was outside in the sunshine working among the hives, he heard her calling to him from the house.

"Albert!" she shouted. "Albert, come here!" She was running through the buttercups towards him.

He started forward to meet her, wondering what was wrong.

"Oh, Albert! Guess what!"

"I've just finished giving her the two-o'clock feed and she's taken the whole lot!"

"No!"

"Every drop of it! Oh, Albert, I'm so happy! She's going to be all right! She's turned the corner just like you said!" She came up to him and threw her arms around his neck and hugged him, and he clapped her on the back and laughed and said what a marvellous little mother she was.

"Will you come in and watch the next one and see if she does it again, Albert?"

He told her he wouldn't miss it for anything, and she hugged him again, then turned and ran back to the house, skipping over the grass and singing all the way.

Naturally, there was a certain amount of suspense in the air as the time approached for the sixo'clock feed. By five thirty both parents were already seated in the living-room waiting for the moment to arrive. The bottle with the milk formula in it was standing in a saucepan of warm water on the mantelpiece. The baby was asleep in its carry-cot on the sofa.

At twenty minutes to six it woke up and started screaming its head off.

"There you are!" Mrs Taylor cried. "She's asking for the bottle. Pick her up quick, Albert, and hand her to me here. Give me the bottle first."

He gave her the bottle, then placed the baby on the woman's lap. Cautiously, she touched the baby's lips with the end of the nipple. The baby seized the nipple between its gums and began to suck ravenously with a rapid powerful action.

"Oh, Albert, isn't it wonderful?" she said, laughing.

“It’s terrific, Mabel.”

In seven or eight minutes, the entire contents of the bottle had disappeared down the baby’s throat.

“You clever girl,” Mrs Taylor said. “Four ounces again.”

Albert Taylor was leaning forward in his chair, peering intently into the baby’s face. “You know what?” he said. “She even seems as though she’s put on a touch of weight already. What do you think?”

The mother looked down at the child.

“Don’t she seem bigger and fatter to you, Mabel, than she was yesterday?”

“Maybe she does, Albert. I’m not sure. Although actually there couldn’t be any real gain in such a short time as this. The important thing is that she’s eating normally.”

“She’s turned the corner,” Albert said. “I don’t think you need worry about her any more.”

“I certainly won’t.”

“You want me to go up and fetch the cradle back into our own bedroom, Mabel?”

“Yes, please,” she said.

Albert went upstairs and moved the cradle. The woman followed with the baby, and after changing its nappy, she laid it gently down on its bed. Then she covered it with sheet and blanket.

“Doesn’t she look lovely, Albert?” she whispered. “Isn’t that the most beautiful baby you’ve ever seen in your entire life?”

“Leave her be now, Mabel,” he said. “Come on downstairs and cook us a bit of supper. We both deserve it.”

After they had finished eating, the parents settled themselves in armchairs in the livingroom, Albert with his magazine and his pipe, Mrs Taylor with her knitting. But this was a very different scene from the one of the night before. Suddenly, all tensions had vanished. Mrs Taylor’s handsome oval face was glowing with pleasure, her cheeks were pink, her eyes were sparkling bright, and her mouth was fixed in a little dreamy smile of pure content. Every now and again she would glance up from her knitting and

gaze affectionately at her husband. Occasionally, she would stop the clicking of her needles altogether for a few seconds and sit quite still, looking at the ceiling, listening for a cry or a whimper from upstairs. But all was quiet.

“Albert,” she said after a while.

“Yes, dear?”

“What was it you were going to tell me last night when you came rushing up to the bedroom? You said you had an idea for the baby.”

Albert Taylor lowered the magazine on to his lap and gave her a long sly look.

“Did I?” he said.

“Yes.” She waited for him to go on, but he didn’t.

“What’s the big joke?” she asked. “Why are you grinning like that?”

“It’s a joke all right,” he said.

“Tell it to me, dear.”

“I’m not sure I ought to,” he said. “You might call me a liar.”

She had seldom seen him looking so pleased with himself as he was now, and she smiled back at him, egging him on.

“I’d just like to see your face when you hear it, Mabel, that’s all.”

“Albert, what is all this?”

He paused, refusing to be hurried.

“You do think the baby’s better, don’t you?” he asked.

“Of course I do.”

“You agree with me that all of a sudden she’s feeding marvellously and looking one-hundredpercent different?”

“I do, Albert, yes.”

“That’s good,” he said, the grin widening. You see, it’s me that did it.”

“Did what?”

” I cured the baby.

“Yes, dear, I’m sure you did.” Mrs Taylor went right on with her knitting.

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“Of course I believe you, Albert. I give you all the credit, every bit of it.”

“Then how did I do it?”

“Well,” she said, pausing a moment to think. “I suppose it’s simply that you’re a brilliant feedmixer. Ever since you started mixing the feeds she’s got better and better.”

“You mean there’s some sort of an art in mixing the feeds?”

“Apparently there is.” She was knitting away and smiling quietly to herself, thinking how funny men were.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” he said. “You’re absolutely right. Although, mind you, it isn’t so much how you mix it that counts. It’s what you put in. You realize that, don’t you, Mabel?”

Mrs Taylor stopped knitting and looked up sharply at her husband. “Albert,” she said, “don’t tell me you’ve been putting things into that child’s milk?”

He sat there grinning.

“Well, have you or haven’t you?”

“It’s possible,” he said.

“I don’t believe it.”

He had a strange fierce way of grinning that showed his teeth.

“Albert,” she said. “Stop playing with me like this.”

“Yes, dear, all right.”

“You haven’t really put anything into her milk, have you? Answer me properly, Albert.

This could be serious with such a tiny baby."

"The answer is yes, Mabel."

"Albert Taylor! How could you?"

"Now don't get excited," he said. "I'll tell you all about it if you really want me to, but for heaven's sake keep your hair on."

"It was beer!" she cried. "I just know it was beer!"

"Don't be so daft, Mabel, please."

"Then what was it?"

Albert laid his pipe down carefully on the table beside him and leaned back in his chair. "Tell me," he said, "did you ever by any chance happen to hear me mentioning something called royal jelly?"

"I did not."

"It's magic," he said. "Pure magic. And last night I suddenly got the idea that if I was to put some of this into the baby's milk… "

"How dare you!"

"Now, Mabel, you don't even know what it is yet."

"I don't care what it is," she said. "You can't go putting foreign bodies like that into a tiny baby's milk. You must be mad."

"It's perfectly harmless, Mabel, otherwise I wouldn't have done it. It comes from bees."

"I might have guessed that."

"And it's so precious that practically no one can afford to take it. When they do, it's only one little drop at a time."

"And how much did you give to our baby, might I ask?"

"Al,. tin, he said, "that's the whole point. That's where the difference lies. I reckon that our baby, just in the last four feeds, has already swallowed about fifty times as much

royal jelly as anyone else in the world has ever swallowed before. How about that?”

“Albert, stop pulling my leg.”

“I swear it,” he said proudly.

She sat there staring at him, her brow wrinkled, her mouth slightly open.

“You know what this stuff actually costs, Mabel, if you want to buy it? There’s a place in America advertising it for sale at this very moment for something like five hundred dollars a pound jar! Five hundred dollars! That’s more than gold, you know!”

She hadn’t the faintest idea what he was talking about.

“I’ll prove it,” he said, and he jumped up and went across to the large bookcase where he kept all his literature about bees. On the top shelf, the back numbers of the American Bee journal were neatly stacked alongside those of the British Bee Journal, Beecraft, and other magazines. He took down the last issue of the American Bee Journal and turned to a page of small classified advertisements at the back.

“Here you are,” he said. “Exactly as I told you. “We sell royal jelly-$480 per lb. jar wholesale.”

He handed her the magazine so she could read it herself.

“Now do you believe me? This is an actual shop in New York, Mabel. It says so.”

“It doesn’t say you can go stirring it into the milk of a practically new-born baby,” she said. “I don’t know what’s come over you, Albert, I really don’t.”

“It’s curing her, isn’t it?”

“I’m not so sure about that, now.”

“Don’t be so damn silly, Mabel. You know it is.”

“Then why haven’t other people done it with their babies?”

“I keep telling you,” he said. “It’s too expensive. Practically nobody in the world can afford to buy royal jelly just for eating except maybe one or two multimillionaires. The people who buy it are the big companies that make women’s face creams and things like that. They’re using it as a stunt. They mix a tiny pinch of it into a big jar of face cream and it’s selling like hot cakes for absolutely enormous prices. They claim it takes out the wrinkles.”

“And does it?”

“Now how on earth would I know that, Mabel? Anyway,” he said, returning to his chair, “that’s not the point. The point is this. It’s done so much good to our little baby just in the last few hours that I think we ought to go right on giving it to her. Now don’t interrupt, Mabel. Let me finish. I’ve got two hundred and forty hives out there and if I turn over maybe a hundred of them to making royal jelly, we ought to be able to supply her with all she wants.”

“Albert Taylor,” the woman said, stretching her eyes wide and staring at him. “Have you gone out of your mind?”

“Just hear me through, will you please?”

“I forbid it,” she said, “absolutely. You’re not to give my baby another drop of that horrid jelly, you understand?”

“Now, Mabel “And quite apart from that, we had a shocking honey crop last year, and if you go fooling around with those hives now, there’s no telling what might not happen.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my hives, Mabel.”

“You know very well we had only half the normal crop last year.”

“Do me a favour, will you?” he said. “Let me explain some of the marvellous things this stuff does.”

“You haven’t even told me what it is yet.”

“All right, Mabel. I’ll do that too. Will you listen? Will you give me a chance to explain it?”

She sighed and picked up her knitting once more. “I suppose you might as well get it off your chest, Albert. Go on and tell me.”

He paused, a bit uncertain now how to begin. It wasn’t going to be easy to explain something like this to a person with no detailed knowledge of apiculture at all.

“You know, don’t you,” he said, “that each colony has only one queen?”

“Yes.”

“And that this queen lays all the eggs?”

“Yes, dear. That much I know.”

“All right. Now the queen can actually lay two different kinds of eggs. You didn’t know that, but she can. It’s what we call one of the miracles of the hive. She can lay eggs that produce drones, and she can lay eggs that produce workers. Now if that isn’t a miracle, Mabel, I don’t know what is.”

“Yes, Albert, all right.”

“The drones are the males. We don’t have to worry about them. The workers are all females. So is the queen, of course. But the workers are unsexed females, if you see what I mean. Their organs are completely undeveloped, whereas the queen is tremendously sexy. She can actually lay her own weight in eggs in a single day.”

He hesitated, marshalling his thoughts.

“Now what happens is this. The queen crawls around on the comb and lays her eggs in what we call cells. You know all those hundreds of little holes you see in a honeycomb? Well, a brood comb is just about the same except the cells don’t have honey in them, they have eggs. She lays one egg to each cell, and in three days each of these eggs hatches out into a tiny grub. We call it a larva.

“Now, as soon as this larva appears, the nurse bees-they’re young workers all crowd round and start feeding it like mad. And you know what they feed it on?”

“Royal jelly,” Mabel answered patiently.

“Right!” he cried. “That’s exactly what they do feed it on. They get this stuff out of a gland in their heads and they start pumping it into the cell to feed the larva. And what happens then?”

He paused dramatically, blinking at her with his small watery-grey eyes. Then he turned slowly in his chair and reached for the magazine that he had been reading the night before.

“You want to know what happens then?” he asked, wetting his lips.

“I can hardly wait.”

“Royal jelly,” he read aloud, “must be a substance of tremendous nourishing power, for on this diet alone, the honeybee larva increases in weight fifteen hundred times in five days!”

“How much?”

“Fifteen hundred times, Mabel. And you know what that means if you put it in terms of a human being? It means,” he said, lowering his voice, leaning forward, fixing her with those small pale eyes, “it means that in five days a baby weighing seven and a half pounds to start off with would increase in weight to five tons!”

For the second time, Mrs Taylor stopped knitting.

“Now you mustn’t take that too literally, Mabel.”

“Who says I mustn’t?”

“It’s just a scientific way of putting it, that’s all.”

“Very well, Albert. Go on.”

“But that’s only half the story,” he said. “There’s more to come. The really amazing thing about royal jelly, I haven’t told you yet. I’m going to show you now how it can transform a plain dulllooking little worker bee with practically no sex organs at all into a great big beautiful fertile queen.”

“Are you saying our baby is dull-looking and plain?” she asked sharply.

“Now don’t go putting words into my mouth, Mabel, please. Just listen to this. Did you know that the queen bee and the worker bee, although they are completely different when they grow up, are both hatched out of exactly the same kind of egg?”

“I don’t believe that,” she said.

“It’s as true as I’m sitting here, Mabel, honest it is. Any time the bees want a queen to hatch out of the egg instead of a worker, they can do it.”

“How?”

“Ah,” he said, shaking a thick forefinger in her direction. “That’s just what I’m coming to. That’s the secret of the whole thing. Now what do you think it is, Mabel, that makes this miracle happen?”

“Royal jelly,” she answered. “You already told me.”

“Royal jelly it is!” he cried, clapping his hands and bouncing up on his seat. His big round face was glowing with excitement now, and two vivid patches of scarlet had

appeared high up on each cheek.

“Here’s how it works. I’ll put it very simply for you. The bees want a new queen. So they build an extra-large cell, a queen cell we call it, and they get the old queen to lay one of her eggs in there, The other one thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine eggs she lays in ordinary worker cells. Now. As soon as these eggs hatch into larvae, the nurse bees rally round and start Pumping in the royal jelly. All of them get it, workers as well as queen. But here’s the vital thing, Mabel, so listen carefully. Here’s where the difference comes. The worker larvae only receive this special marvellous food for the first three days of their larval life, After that they have a complete change of diet. “What really happens is they get weaned, except that it’s not like an ordinary weaning because it’s so sudden. After the third day they’re put straight away on to more or less routine bees’ food-a mixture of honey and pollen and then about two weeks later they emerge from the cells as workers.

“But not so the larva in the queen cell! This one gets royal jelly all the way through its larval life. The nurse bees simply pour it into the cell, so much so in fact that the little larva is literally floating in it. And that’s what makes it into a queen!”

“You can’t prove it,” she said.

“Don’t talk so damn silly, Mabel, please. Thousands of people have proved it time and time again, famous scientists in every country in the world. All you have to do is take a larva out of a worker cell and put it in a queen cell that’s what we call grafting-and just so long as the nurse bees keep it well supplied with royal jelly, then presto!-it’ll grow up into a queen! And what makes it more marvellous still is the absolutely enormous difference between a queen and a worker when they grow up. The abdomen is a different shape. The sting is different. The legs are different. The…

“In what way are the legs different?” she asked, testing him.

“The legs? Well, the workers have little pollen baskets on their legs for carrying the pollen. The queen has none. Now here’s another thing. The queen has fully developed sex organs. The workers don’t. And most amazing of all, Mabel, the queen lives for an average of four to six years. The worker hardly lives that many months. And all this difference simply because one of them got royal jelly and the other didn’t!”

“It’s pretty hard to believe,” she said, “that a food can do all that.”

“Of course it’s hard to believe. It’s another of the miracles of the hive. In fact it’s the biggest ruddy miracle of them all. It’s such a hell of a big miracle that it’s baffled the greatest men of science for hundreds of years. Wait a moment. Stay here. Don’t move.”

Again he jumped up and went over to the bookcase and started rummaging among the books and magazines.

“I’m going to find you a few of the reports. Here we are. Here’s one of them. Listen to this.” He started reading aloud from a copy of the American Bee journal: “Living in Toronto at the head of a fine research laboratory given to him by the people of Canada in recognition of his truly great contribution to humanity in the discovery of insulin, Dr Frederick A. Banting became curious about royal jelly. He requested his staff to do a basic fractional analysis…

He paused.

“Well, there’s no need to read it all, but here’s what happened. Dr Banting and his people took some royal jelly from queen cells that contained two-day-old larvae, and then they started analysing it. And what d’you think they found?

“They found,” he said, “that royal jelly contained phenols; sterols, glycerils, dextrose, and-now here it comes-and eighty to eighty-five per cent unidentified acids!”

He stood beside the bookcase with the magazine in his hand, smiling a funny little furtive smile of triumph, and his wife watched him, bewildered.

He was not a tall man; he had a thick plump pulpy-looking body that was built close to the ground on abbreviated legs. The legs were slightly bowed. The head was huge and round, covered with bristly short-cut hair, and the greater part of the face-now that he had given up shaving altogether-was hidden by a brownish yellow fuzz about an inch long. In one way and another, he was rather grotesque to look at, there was no denying that.

“Eighty to eighty-five per cent,” he said, “unidentified acids. Isn’t that fantastic?” He turned back to the bookshelf and began hunting through the other magazines.

“What does it mean, unidentified acids?”

“That’s the whole point! No one knows! Not even Banting could find out. You’ve heard of Banting?”

“No.11 “He just happens to be about the most famous living doctor in the world today, that’s all.”

Looking at him now as he buzzed around in front of the bookcase with his bristly head and his hairy face and his plump pulpy body, she couldn’t help thinking that somehow, in some curious way, there was a touch of the bee about this man. She had often seen women grow to look like the horses that they rode, and she had noticed that people

who bred birds or bull terriers or pomeranians frequently resembled in some small but startling manner the creature of their choice. But up until now it had never occurred to her that her husband might look like a bee. It shocked her a bit.

“And did Banting ever try to eat it,” she asked, “this royal jelly?”

“Of course he didn’t eat it, Mabel. He didn’t have enough for that. It’s too precious.”

“You know something?” she said, staring at him but smiling a little all the same. “You’re getting to look just a teeny bit like a bee yourself, did you know that?”

He turned and looked at her.

“I suppose it’s the beard mostly,” she said. “I do wish you’d stop wearing it. Even the colour is sort of bee-ish, don’t you think?”

“What the hell are you talking about, Mabel?”

“Albert,” she said. “Your language.”

“Do you want to hear any more of this or don’t you?”

“Yes, dear, I’m sorry. I was only joking. Do go on.,, He turned away again and pulled another magazine out of the bookcase and began leafing through the pages. “Now just listen to this, Mabel. “In 1939, Heyl experimented with twenty-one-day-old rats, injecting them with royal jelly in varying amounts. As a result, he found a precocious follicular development of the ovaries directly in proportion to the quantity of royal jelly injected.”

“There!” she cried. “I knew it!”

“Knew what?”

“I knew something terrible would happen.”

“Nonsense. There’s nothing wrong with that. Now here’s another, Mabel. “Still and Burden found that a male rat which hitherto had been unable to breed, upon receiving a minute daily dose of royal jelly, became a father many times over.”

“Albert,” she cried, “this stuff is much too strong to give to a baby! I don’t like it at all.”

“Nonsense, Mabel.”

“Then why do they only try it out on rats, tell me that? Why don’t some of these famous scientists take it themselves? They’re too clever, that’s why. Do you think Dr Banting is going to risk finishing up with precious ovaries? Not him.”

“But they have given it to people, Mabel. Here’s a whole article about it. Listen.” He turned the page and again began reading from the magazine. “In Mexico, in 1953, a group of enlightened physicians began prescribing minute doses of royal jelly for such things as cerebral neuritis, arthritis, diabetes, autointoxication from tobacco, impotence in men, asthma, croup, and gout…There are stacks of signed testimonials.

A celebrated stockbroker in Mexico City contracted a particularly stubborn case of psoriasis. He became physically unattractive. His clients began to forsake him. His business began to suffer. In desperation he turned to royal jelly-one drop with every meal-and presto! he was cured in a fortnight. A waiter in the CafŽ Jena, also in Mexico City, reported that his father, after taking minute doses of this wonder substance in capsule form, sired a healthy boy child at the age of ninety. A bullfight promoter in Acapulco, finding himself landed with a rather lethargic-looking bull, injected it with one gramme of royal jelly (an excessive dose) just before it entered the arena. Thereupon, the beast became so swift and savage that it promptly dispatched two picadors, three horses, and a matador, and finally.

“Listen!” Mrs Taylor said, interrupting him. “I think the baby’s crying.”

Albert glanced up from his reading. Sure enough, a lusty yelling noise was coming from the bedroom above.

“She must be hungry,” he said.

His wife looked at the clock. “Good gracious me!” she cried, jumping up. “It’s past her time again already! You mix the feed, Albert, quickly, while I bring her down! But hurry! I don’t want to keep her waiting.”

In half a minute, Mrs Taylor was back, carrying the screaming infant in her arms. She was flustered now, still quite unaccustomed to the ghastly nonstop racket that a healthy baby makes when it wants its food. “Do be quick, Albert!” she called, settling herself in the armchair and arranging the child on her lap. “Please hurry!”

Albert entered from the kitchen and handed her the bottle of warm milk. “It’s just right,” he said. “You don’t have to test it.”

She hitched the baby’s head a little higher in the crook of her arm, then pushed the rubber teat straight into the wide-open yelling mouth. The baby grabbed the teat and began to suck. The yelling stopped. Mrs Taylor relaxed.

“Oh, Albert, isn’t she lovely?”

“She’s terrific, Mabel-thanks to royal jelly.”

“Now, dear, I don’t want to hear another word about that nasty stuff. It frightens me to death.”

“You’re making a big mistake,” he said.

“We’ll see about that.”

The baby went on sucking the bottle.

“I do believe she’s going to finish the whole lot again, Albert.”

“I’m sure she is,” he said.

And a few minutes later, the milk was all gone.

“Oh, what a good girl you are!” Mrs Taylor cried, as very gently she started to withdraw the nipple. The baby sensed what she was doing and sucked harder, trying to hold on. The woman gave a quick little tug, and plop, out it came.

“Waa! Waa! Waa! Waa! Waa!” the baby yelled.

“Nasty old wind,” Mrs Taylor said, hoisting the child on to her shoulder and patting its back.

It belched twice in quick succession.

“There you are, my darling, you’ll be all right now.”

For a few seconds, the yelling stopped. Then it started again.

“Keep belching her,” Albert said. “She’s drunk it too quick.”

His wife lifted the baby back on to her shoulder. She rubbed its spine. She changed it from one shoulder to the other. She laid it on its stomach on her lap. She sat it up on her knee. But it didn’t belch again, and the yelling became louder and more insistent every minute.

“Good for the lungs,” Albert Taylor said, grinning. “That’s the way they exercise their lungs, Mabel, did you know that?”

“There, there, there,” the wife said, kissing it all over the face. “There, there, there.”

They waited another five minutes, but not for one moment did the screaming stop.

“Change the nappy,” Albert said. “It’s got a wet nappy, that’s all it is.” He fetched a clean one from the kitchen, and Mrs Taylor took the old one off and put the new one on.

This made no difference at all.

“Waa! Waa! Waa! Waa! Waa!” the baby yelled.

“You didn’t stick the safety pin through the skin, did you, Mabel?”

“Of course I didn’t,” she said, feeling under the nappy with her fingers to make sure.

The parents sat opposite one another in their armchairs, smiling nervously, watching the baby on the mother’s lap, waiting for it to tire and stop screaming.

“You know what?” Albert Taylor said at last.

“I’ll bet she’s still hungry. I’ll bet all she wants is another swig at that bottle. How about me fetching her an extra lot?”

“I don’t think we ought to do that, Albert.”

“It’ll do her good,” he said, getting up from his chair. “I’m going to warm her up a second helping.”

He went into the kitchen, and was away several minutes. “When he returned he was holding a bottle brimful of milk.

“I made her a double,” he announced. “Eight ounces. Just in case.”

“Albert! Are you mad? Don’t you know it’s just as bad to overfeed as it is to underfeed?”

“You don’t have to give her the lot, Mabel. You can stop any time you like. Go on,” he said, standing over her. “Give her a drink.”

Mrs Taylor began to tease the baby’s upper lip with the end of the nipple. The tiny mouth closed like a trap over the rubber teat and suddenly there was silence in the room. The baby’s whole body relaxed and a look of absolute bliss came over its face as it started to drink.

“There you are, Mabel! “What did I tell you?”

The woman didn’t answer.

“She’s ravenous, that’s what she is. Just look at her suck.”

Mrs Taylor was watching the level of the milk in the bottle: It was dropping fast, and before long three or four ounces out of the eight had disappeared.

“There,” she said. “That’!! do.”

“You can’t pull it away now, Mabel.”

“Yes, dear. I must.”

“Go on, woman. Give her the rest and stop fussing.”

“But Albert.

“She’s famished, can’t you see that? Go on, my beauty,” he said. “You finish that bottle.”

“I don’t like it, Albert,” the wife said, but she didn’t pull the bottle away.

“She’s making up for lost time, Mabel, that’s a!1 she’s doing.”

Five minutes later the bottle was empty. Slowly, Mrs Taylor withdrew the nipple, and this time there was no protest from the baby, no sound at a!!. It! ay peacefully on the mother’s lap, the eyes glazed with contentment, the mouth half-open, the lips smeared with milk.

“Twelve whole ounces, Mabel!” Albert Taylor said. “Three times the normal amount! Isn’t that amazing!”

The woman was staring down at the baby. And now the old anxious tight-lipped look of the frightened mother was slowly returning to her face.

“What’s the matter with you?” Albert asked. “You’re not worried by that, are you? You can’t expect her to get back to normal on a lousy four ounces, don’t be ridiculous.”

“Come here, Albert,” she said.

“What?”

“I said come here.”

He went over and stood beside her.

“Take a good look and tell me if you see anything different.”

He peered closely at the baby. “She seems bigger, Mabel, if that’s what you mean. Bigger and fatter.”

“Hold her,” she ordered. “Go on, pick her up.”

He reached out and lifted the baby up off the mother’s lap. “Good God!” he cried. “She weighs a ton!”

“Exactly.”

“Now isn’t that marvellous!” he cried, beaming. “I’ll bet she must be back to normal already!”

“It frightens me, Albert. It’s too quick.”

“Nonsense, woman.”

“It’s that disgusting jelly that’s done it,” she said. “I hate the stuff.”

“There’s nothing disgusting about royal jelly,” he answered, indignant.

“Don’t be a fool, Albert! You think it’s normal for a child to start putting on weight at this speed?”

“You’re never satisfied!” he cried. “You’re scared stiff when she’s losing and now you’re absolutely terrified because she’s gaining! What’s the matter with you, Mabel?”

The woman got up from her chair with the baby in her arms and started towards the door. “All I can say is,” she said, “it’s lucky I’m here to see you don’t give her any more of it, that’s all I can say.” She went out, and Albert watched her through the open door as she crossed the hail to the foot of the stairs and started to ascend, and when she reached the third or fourth step she suddenly stopped and stood quite still for several seconds as though remembering something. Then she turned and came down again rather quickly and re-entered the room.

“Albert,” she said.

“Yes?”

“I assume there wasn’t any royal jelly in this last feed we’ve just given her?”

“I don’t see why you should assume that, Mabel.”

“Albert!”

“What’s wrong?” he asked, soft and innocent.

“How dare you!” she cried.

Albert Taylor’s great bearded face took on a pained and puzzled look. “I think you ought to be very glad she’s got another big dose of it inside her,” he said. “Honest I do. And this is a very big dose, Mabel, believe you me.”

The woman was standing just inside the doorway clasping the sleeping baby in her arms and staring at her husband with huge eyes. She stood very erect, her body absolutely still with fury, her face paler, more tight-lipped than ever.

“You mark my words,” Albert was saying, You’re going to have a nipper there soon that’ll win first prize in any baby show in the entire country. Hey, why don’t you weigh her now and see what she is? You want me to get the scales, Mabel, so you can weigh her?”

The woman walked straight over to the large table in the centre of the room and laid the baby down and quickly started taking off its clothes. “Yes!” she snapped. “Get the scales!” Off came the little nightgown, then the undervest.

Then she unpinned the nappy and she drew it away and the baby lay naked on the table.

“But Mabel!” Albert cried. “It’s a miracle! She’s fat as a puppy!”

Indeed, the amount of flesh the child had put on since the day before was astounding. The small sunken chest with the rib bones showing all over it was now plump and round as a barrel, and the belly was bulging high in the air. Curiously, though, the arms and legs did not seem to have grown in proportion. Still short and skinny, they looked like little sticks protruding from a ball of fat.

“Look!” Albert said. “She’s even beginning to get a bit of fuzz on the tummy to keep her warm!” He put out a hand and was about to run the tips of his fingers over the powdering of silky yellowy-brown hairs that had suddenly appeared on the baby’s stomach.

“Don’t you touch her!” the woman cried. She turned and faced him, her eyes blazing, and she looked suddenly like some kind of little fighting bird with her neck arched over towards him as though she were about to fly at his face and peck his eyes out.

“Now wait a minute,” he said, retreating.

“You must be mad!” she cried.

“Now wait just one minute, Mabel, will you please, because if you’re still thinking this stuff is dangerous… That is what you’re thinking, isn’t it? All right, then. Listen carefully. I shall now proceed to prove to you once and for all, Mabel, that royal jelly is absolutely harmless to human beings, even in enormous doses. For example-why do you think we had only half the usual honey crop last summer? Tell me that.”

His retreat, walking backwards, had taken him three or four yards away from her, where he seemed to feel more comfortable.

“The reason we had only half the usual crop last summer,” he said slowly, lowering his voice, “was because I turned one hundred of my hives over to the production of royal jelly.”

“You what?”

“Ah,” he whispered. “I thought that might surprise you a bit. And I’ve been making it ever since right under your very nose.” His small eyes were glinting at her, and a slow sly smile was creeping around the corners of his mouth.

“You’ll never guess the reason, either,” he said. “I’ve been afraid to mention it up to now because I thought it might…well…sort of embarrass you.”

There was a slight pause. He had his hands clasped high in front of him, level with his chest, and he was rubbing one palm against the other, making a soft scraping noise.

“You remember that bit I read you out of the magazine? That bit about the rat? Let me see now, how does it go? “Still and Burden found that a male rat which hitherto had been unable to breed… ” He hesitated, the grin widening, showing his teeth.

“You get the message, Mabel?”

She stood quite still, facing him.

“The very first time I ever read that sentence, Mabel, I jumped straight out of my chair and I said to myself if it’ll work with a lousy rat, I said, then there’s no reason on earth

why it shouldn’t work with Albert Taylor.”

He paused again, craning his head forward and turning one ear slightly in his wife’s direction, waiting for her to say something, But she didn’t.

“And here’s another thing,” he went on. “It made me feel so absolutely marvellous, Mabel, and so sort of completely different to what I was before that I went right on taking it even after you’d announced the joyful tidings. Buckets of it I must have swallowed during the last twelve months.”

The big heavy haunted-looking eyes of the woman were moving intently over the man’s face and neck. There was no skin showing at all on the neck, not even at the sides below the ears. The whole of it, to a point where it disappeared into the collar of the shirt, was covered all the way around with those shortish silky hairs, yellowy black.

“Mind you,” he said, turning away from her, gazing lovingly now at the baby, “it’s going to work far better on a tiny infant than on a fully developed man like me. You’ve only got to look at her to see that, don’t you agree?”

The woman’s eyes travelled slowly downward and settled on the baby. The baby was lying naked on the table, fat and white and comatose, like some gigantic grub that was approaching the end of its larval life and would soon emerge into the world complete with mandibles and wings.

“Why don’t you cover her up, Mabel?” he said. “We don’t want our little queen to catch a cold.”