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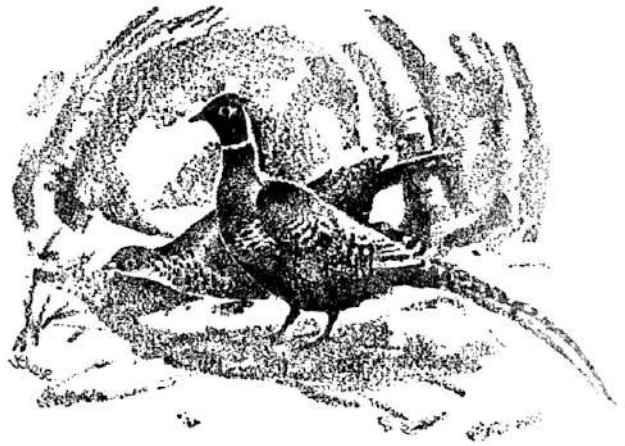
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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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Bambi (24/25)

The cold broke, and there was a warm spell in the middle of the winter. The earth drank great draughts of the melting snows so that wide stretches of soil were everywhere visible. The blackbirds were not singing yet, but when they flew from the ground where they were hunting worms, or when they fluttered from tree to tree, they uttered a long-drawn joyous whistle that was almost a song. The woodpecker began to chatter now and then. Magpies and crows grew more talkative. The titmice chirped more cheerily. And the pheasants, swooping down from their roosts would stand in one spot preening their feathers and uttering their metallic throaty cacklings.



One such morning Bambi was roaming around as usual. In the gray dawn he came to the edge of the hollow. On the farther side where he had lived before something was stirring. Bambi stayed hidden in the thicket and peered across. A deer was wandering slowly to and fro, looking for places where the snow had

melted, and cropping whatever grasses had sprung up so early.

Bambi wanted to turn at once and go away, for he recognized Faline. His first impulse was to spring forward and call her. But he stood as though rooted to the spot. He had not seen Faline for a long time. His heart began to beat faster. Faline moved slowly as though she were tired and sad. She resembled her mother now. She looked as old as Aunt Ena, as Bambi noticed with a strangely pained surprise.

Faline lifted her head and gazed across as though she sensed his presence. Again Bambi started forward, but he stopped again, hesitating and unable to stir.

He saw that Faline had grown old and gray.

"Gay, pert little Faline, how lovely she used to be," he thought, "and how lively!" His whole youth suddenly flashed before his eyes. The meadow, the trails where he walked with his mother, the happy games with Gobo and Faline, the nice grasshoppers and butterflies, the fight with Karus and Ronno when he had won Faline for his own. He felt happy again, and yet he trembled.

Faline wandered on, her head drooped to the ground, walking slowly, sadly and wearily away. At that moment Bambi loved her with an overpowering, tender melancholy. He wanted to rush through the hollow that

separated him from the others. He wanted to overtake her, to talk with her, to talk to her about their youth and about everything that had happened.

He gazed after her as she went off, passing under the bare branches till finally she was lost to sight.

He stood there a long time staring after her.

Then there was a crash like thunder. Bambi shrank together. It came from where he was standing. Not even from a little way off but right beside him.

Then there was a second thunderclap, and right after that another.

Bambi leaped a little farther into the thicket, then stopped and listened. Everything was still. He glided stealthily homewards.

The old stag was there before him. He had not lain down yet, but was standing beside the fallen beech trunk expectantly.

"Where have you been so long?" he asked so seriously that Bambi grew silent.

"Did you hear it?" the old stag went on after a pause.

"Yes," Bambi answered, "three times. He must be in the

woods.”

“Of course,” the old stag nodded, and repeated with a peculiar intonation, “He is in the woods and we must go.”

“Where?” the word escaped Bambi.

“Where He is now,” said the old stag, and his voice was solemn.

Bambi was terrified.

“Don’t be frightened,” the old stag went on, “come with me and don’t be frightened. I’m glad that I can take you and show you the way...” He hesitated and added softly, “Before I go.”

Bambi looked wonderingly at the old stag. And suddenly he noticed how aged he looked. His head was completely gray now. His face was perfectly gaunt. The deep light was extinguished in his eyes, and they had a feeble, greenish luster and seemed to be blind.

Bambi and the old stag had not gone far before they caught the first whiff of that acrid smell that sent such dread and terror to their hearts.

Bambi stopped. But the old stag went on directly towards the scent. Bambi followed hesitantly.

The terrifying scent grew stronger and stronger. But the old stag kept on without stopping. The idea of flight sprang up in Bambi's mind and tugged at his heart. It seethed through his mind and body, and nearly swept him away. But he kept a firm grip on himself and stayed close behind the old stag.

Then the horrible scent grew so strong that it drowned out everything else, and it was hardly possible to breathe.

"Here He is," said the old stag moving to one side.

Through the bare branches, Bambi saw Him lying on the trampled snow a few steps away.

An irresistible burst of terror swept over Bambi and with a sudden bound he started to give in to his impulse to flee.

"Halt!" he heard the old stag calling. Bambi looked around and saw the stag standing calmly where He was lying on the ground. Bambi was amazed and, moved by a sense of obedience, a boundless curiosity and quivering expectancy, he went closer.

"Come near," said the old stag, "don't be afraid."

He was lying with His pale, naked face turned upwards, His hat a little to one side on the snow. Bambi who did

not know anything about hats thought His horrible head was split in two. The poacher's shirt, open at the neck, was pierced where a wound gaped like a small red mouth. Blood was oozing out slowly. Blood was drying on His hair and around His nose. A big pool of it lay on the snow which was melting from the warmth.

"We can stand right beside Him," the old stag began softly, "and it isn't dangerous."

Bambi looked down at the prostrate form whose limbs and skin seemed so mysterious and terrible to him. He gazed at the dead eyes that stared up sightlessly at him. Bambi couldn't understand it all.

"Bambi," the old stag went on, "do you remember what Gobo said and what the dog said, what they all think, do you remember?"

Bambi could not answer.

"Do you see, Bambi," the old stag went on, "do you see how He's lying there dead, like one of us? Listen, Bambi. He isn't all-powerful as they say. Everything that lives and grows doesn't come from Him. He isn't above us. He's just the same as we are. He has the same fears, the same needs, and suffers in the same way. He can be killed like us, and then He lies helpless on the ground like all the rest of us, as you see Him now."

There was a silence.

"Do you understand me, Bambi?" asked the old stag.

"I think so," Bambi said in a whisper.

"Then speak," the old stag commanded.

Bambi was inspired, and said trembling, "There is Another who is over us all, over us and over Him."

"Now I can go," said the old stag.

He turned away, and they wandered side by side for a stretch.

Presently the old stag stopped in front of a tall oak.

"Don't follow me any further, Bambi," he began with a calm voice, "my time is up. Now I have to look for a resting place."

Bambi tried to speak.

"Don't," said the old stag cutting him short, "don't. In the hour which I am approaching we are all alone. Good-bye, my son. I loved you dearly."