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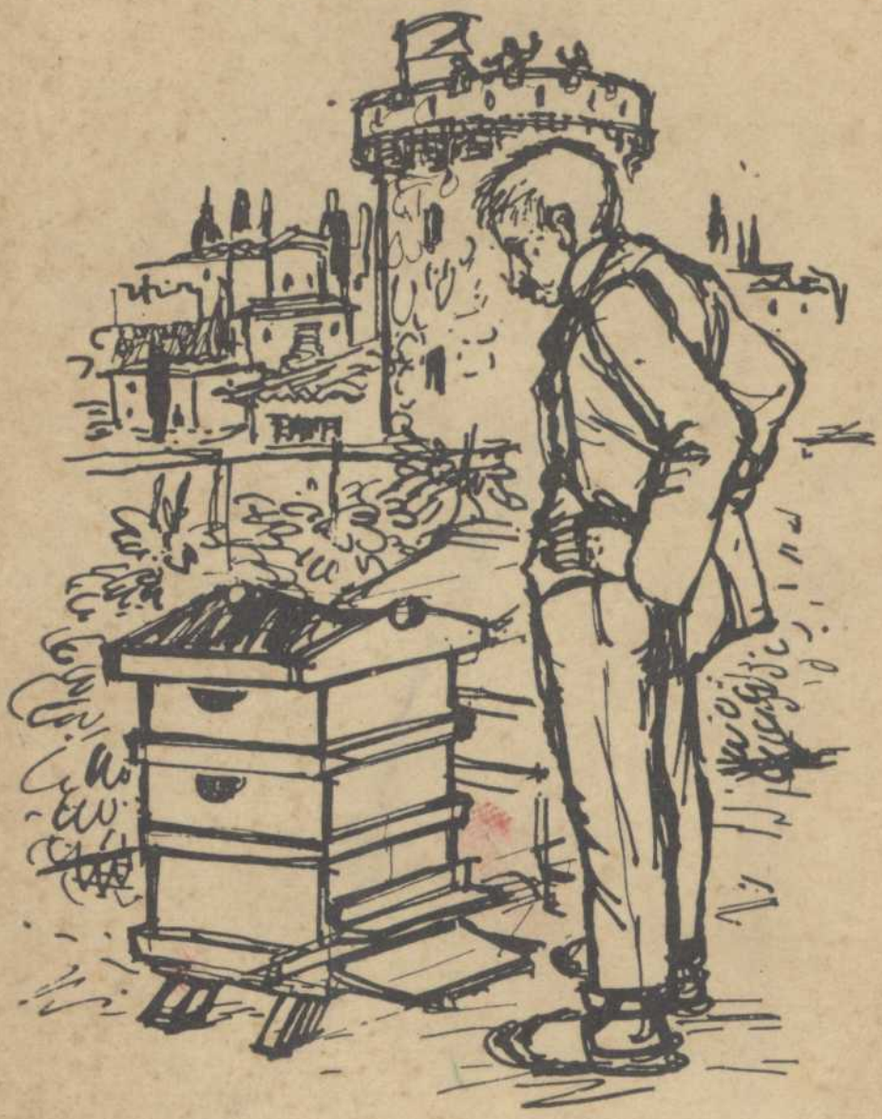
THE HONEY SIEGE



GIL BUHET

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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THE HONEY SIEGE

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Translated from the French
LE CHEVALIER PIERROT
by Geoffrey Sainsbury

PENGUIN BOOKS

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TO CLAUDE BONCOMPAIN

How well I remember that evening when, pacing up and down my room, you told me the story of the Honey Siege.

We were to have written it together. For reasons known only to us that was not to be, and at the first halt you gave me the signal to carry on alone.

Now the work is done, and I bring it to you with just that little twinge of trepidation which we used to feel as students when we laid our essays on the Master's desk.

G. B.

PART ONE

ONE

JUST as the alarm clock was about to ring, M. Grillon forestalled it.

Each morning began like that, with a victory of human punctuality over machinery.

Comforted by this thought, the schoolmaster dragged his thin, hairy legs from under the bedclothes and walked over to the window.

He threw it open to air the room, standing there for a minute to enjoy the freshness of the morning. Autumn was well advanced, but only by the calendar. October was going out in a blaze of sunshine. Outside, the light was so gay and so pure that it made everything look as brightly coloured as in the *Images d'Épinal*.

M. Déodat Grillon took off his nightshirt, rose on his toes, then bent his knees, breathing deeply. This he did ten times, counting out loud.

And each time, as he bent them, his knee-joints creaked.

The deep breathing was of course the important part. It said so in chapter two of the *Manual of Hygiene*. He wasn't a man to enjoin principles upon others which he did not observe himself. His precepts weren't always very original, like 'a place for everything and everything in its place', which happened to be one of his favourites. He carried that one out too, and when he went to shave he could have put his hand on his shaving-brush blindfold. A methodical man, pernickety even, as is so often the case with a man who lives alone.

Going downstairs to the classroom, the schoolmaster opened all the windows wide. His pupils must learn to breathe too. The hands of the clock above his desk were at ten minutes to seven, and he checked their accuracy by the watch in his waistcoat pocket. With a sweeping glance he satisfied himself that everything was in order, then, picking up a piece of chalk, he wrote up on the blackboard the problem that he had composed the previous night before going to sleep.

Work out the interior volume of a beehive with a conical top whose external diameter is 1·25 metres and whose height is 60 centimetres at the circumference and 1 metre in the middle, the walls being 32 millimetres thick.

Writing on the blackboard is an art in itself. He looked approvingly at his upstrokes and downstrokes, clapped his hands to remove the chalk, then retraced his steps up the well-polished, beeswaxed stairs.

'Georget,' he called.

He tapped four times on the door, being eventually answered by a yawn from within.

'Georget ... Come on, Sonny; it's time to get up,' he said in the gentle voice that, since the death of his wife, he had adopted for speaking to his son.

'Thanks, Dad.'

'Slept well?'

'Yes, Dad. And you?'

There was nothing spontaneous about this dialogue. Each day had to begin with it. M. Grillon stood for a while on the landing, listening to the sound of the boy's bare feet on the tiled floor, the creak of the shutters as they were thrown open, the splashing of water. Reassured, he went down to get the breakfast ready. Here, too, each detail was a matter of routine, even of ritual. Yesterday's milk was kept in the cool cupboard under the sink, an enamel coffee-pot stood proudly in the middle of the dresser, while on the second shelf were two bowls, the sugar-basin, and the table napkins. Above them was a long row of pots of honey. From a drawer M. Grillon took a knife and a couple of tablespoons. Finally he lit the gas with his lighter – a souvenir of the trenches, made from a brass cartridge case.

It was never otherwise. Each movement was woven into a pattern that was rarely departed from. To preserve his peace of mind he had, since his wife's death, become a slave to habit. Yet he hated it, hated the barren existence to which it condemned him, a closed circle from which there was no escape. Not even during the holidays. For he was rather like a monk who, though he had lost his faith, was unable to break away from the mode of life he had once and for all adopted.

If there was no room for the passions in such a life, there was at least room for a hobby. M. Déodat kept bees, and they brought light into his day and took his mind off himself. It might almost be said that he loved them. At any rate the sight of them busily at work, guided only by their instinct, was enough to persuade him that the world was an orderly and harmonious creation – and so was his own life.

The air was cool and keen, but so tempting was the early sunshine that he actually deviated from October custom to the extent of opening the kitchen window. Yes, it might have been a real spring morning. M. Grillon's garden, already brown with fallen leaves, was a large rectangle traversed by a single path which led to the beehives. The latter were all turned to face the same way, chosen with the utmost care. The north was too cold, the south too warm, sometimes tempting bees out to their death when the air was still chilly. The west exposed them to driving rain and to the rays of the setting sun.

So Déodat Grillon's bees faced east, and they were surrounded by plants intended to make the garden a little paradise for them – sainfoin, verbena, snapdragon, jasmine, saponaria, and phlox. The hedge was of white thorn, and the wall was covered with wistaria. A clump of Japanese lilacs offered their treacly mauve flowers for well-nigh half the year. The trees were limes and acacias, but M. Grillon kept their branches low so that swarms could easily be captured. Finally he had arranged a supply of running water which trickled gently over some brushwood near the hives, so that the bees could drink.

Watching them, he was often tempted to philosophize.

'What an object lesson to man!' was one of his most frequent observations.

But the siren of the quarry interrupted his reverie. It was answered by another, nearer – that of the distillery. It was seven o'clock.

M. Grillon was in the act of spreading a thick layer of honey on a second piece of bread when he heard a buzz. After a moment's hesitation, a bee flew in and alighted on his knife.

He sat still, gazing in astonishment. It was a fine worker bee, almost black, with grey down on its thorax. It set to work busily, gorging itself with honey.

'There's one that's been taken in by the weather,' thought M. Grillon. 'Thinks the spring's come round again, no doubt.'

Looking very busy and self-important, the bee flew back into the garden, and it was not till M. Grillon was spreading the fourth piece of bread – there were always two for him and two for Georget – that it came back again, accompanied by five or six others whom it had obviously gone off to fetch.

This time Déodat Grillon was so surprised that he forgot all about

the spirit-lamp, and the milk, seizing the opportunity, boiled over, spreading over the oilcloth and soaking the slices of bread. It even dripped complacently over the edge of the table on to the schoolmaster's slippers.

The bees left, only to reappear shortly afterwards in still larger numbers. Having discovered the pot of honey, they seemed determined to recapture its contents to the last drop.

M. Grillon could hardly believe his eyes.

He had lagged the hives so that they should provide warm winter quarters. Only two days previously he had stocked them up with winter food carefully weighed out – five kilos of honey to each and five litres of a special syrup he made himself, following a recipe he had read somewhere, consisting of grape-juice, pears, dried figs, and aromatic plants; it was much better, he maintained, than the ordinary sugar with which so many bee-keepers fed their hives in winter.

'My dear creatures, have you taken leave of your senses? We're within a week of All Saints' Day. Think what you're doing. The morning air will be the death of you.'

But the bees' only response was to buzz more busily than ever as they hovered in a velvety halo round the pot or attacked the sodden slices of bread-and-honey lying in the spilt milk.

Something must be wrong. Déodat felt sure of it. He was assailed by an unreasoning anxiety such as comes to mothers when their children are threatened by mishap. Leaving the kitchen, he strode down the garden path.

Ranavalo came out of her kennel, yawned, stretched herself, then gambolled round Déodat to bid him welcome. A bitch with a yellowish coat, a cross between a cocker spaniel and a *bleu d'Auvergne*. When she ran she seemed all feet and ears.

To her astonishment, M. Grillon didn't stop to pat her, but merely growled:

'Lie down, Ralo ...'

Disconcerted, she crept back into the kennel, from which she studied her master with woeful eyes – they were naturally pathetic – as much as to say:

'What have I done wrong this time?'

But the schoolmaster took no notice. With long strides, he made straight for the hives.

It would be untrue to say that Georget Grillon was not fond of his father, but there are limits to the affection that can be felt for a father who is also one's schoolmaster, a just schoolmaster, but a somewhat sad one, and so anxious to show no favouritism that he was inclined to be stricter with his son than with any of the others.

'Grillon,' he would say, 'the next time I catch you talking to your neighbour, I'll put you outside. Do you hear me?'

And Georget would answer pitifully:

'*Oui, Monsieur.*'

Speaking to his schoolfellows, he called his father by the nickname they all used, Piquet. It wasn't inapt, for M. Grillon was certainly rather a stick, but it never even occurred to Georget that he was being disrespectful.

At home their lives were lived on two different levels.

M. Grillon had his books, his pupils' exercises to correct, his studies in the science of apiculture. His thoughts often wandered into the past, and if he nursed any day-dreams they were not the kind of thing you could discuss with a child. He certainly loved his son, but awkwardly, without knowing how to show it, and the boy suffered from being boxed up with a man who was melancholy and preoccupied. Any real family feeling was obtained from his schoolmates. Full of life and eagerness, his thoughts were all focused on the future.

Since his mother's death there had been no gaiety in the house. The midday meal was taken at the Auberge Daranluz, where they sat facing each other ceremoniously, looking much more like master and pupil than father and son, while at the tables round them sat quarrymen and cork-cutters. Supper they took at home. It consisted of tinned foods and soups made from packets. Between his lessons and his homework, Georget did the shopping or washed up the dishes. Sometimes he even had to sweep out the classroom, when Maria, the servant at the inn, was too busy to come and do it.

From his mother he had inherited a round face with chubby cheeks and a nose which 'bayed to the moon'. He was short but agile. With a tall father as an example, his shortness was his despair. Any resemblance between the man of fifty and the boy of thirteen was confined to a taste for high-sounding phrases. They both, when they got going, liked the sound of their own voices.

That morning, when Georget opened the kitchen door, he found the room swarming with bees. His habit of gesticulating had earned

him many a sting, and he was thoroughly mistrustful of these creatures which his father knew so well how to manage. Quickly he shut the door again and, not knowing what to do with himself, went down to the classroom. Once again Maria had failed to turn up. Stoically, Georget fetched the broom and started to do her work for her. Anyhow, it was better than nothing. He hated doing nothing. Besides, the girl was rather a pal of his and it would save her a scolding at lunch-time. For at the Auberge Daranluz it was she who waited on them. She was a foundling, owned by nobody, but more or less at everybody's beck and call.

Passing in front of the blackboard, he saw the problem which had been set for the class.

'Here's a bit of luck,' he thought. 'I can swot that up beforehand.'

He had no thought of stealing a march on the others. In any case it wouldn't have been any good. He was never top of the class, not even in recitation. His father was too anxious to prove his impartiality.

Snatching up his arithmetic book, Georget soon found the right formula and scribbled it on a bit of blotting-paper, which he stuffed into his pocket, delighted to think of the service which he would presently be able to render to the community.

Hungry, he went up to the loft for some apples.

Déodat always approached a hive from behind, so as not to alarm his little friends. The hives were screened from the bustle of the world by some gooseberry and black-currant bushes, and the whole width of the garden stretched between them and the school yard, which echoed with shrill voices during the morning break.

Five of the hives were plunged in the stillness of hibernation. The sixth, a big one of twenty frames, of which the schoolmaster was justly proud, was the scene of extraordinary agitation.

The entrance was black with worker bees which hurried in and out as busily as when the season was at its height, while a small swarm flew frantically round and round over the roof.

'They've gone crazy,' muttered the schoolmaster, with a worried look on his face. 'They've gone completely crazy.'

It was obvious that the bees were suffering from something, but he was at a loss to know what. This uncalled-for hum of wings was quite

unlike that which preceded swarming and which he liked to call *le chant du départ*. It was more like a hymn of revolt. His ear was attuned to their language; he couldn't be mistaken. He stood there, hesitating, reluctant to open the hive with a slight northerly breeze blowing.

Besides, he never violated the privacy of his little friends without first putting them in a good temper with a ration of syrup, like bribing children with sweets. Not until that was done could he disturb them without wearing either mask or gloves or stupefying them with smoke, only whispering to them with reassuring words and moving with a cautious gravity that made him look like some priest performing a sacrament.

Time was running out, however. He would never be able to give his attention to his class with such a load on his mind. When he went to open the hive, he found the hooks had not been replaced. Such negligence could never be imputed to him. The horrible suspicion dawned on him. Had someone been at the hive during the night?

Déodat Grillon looked round him, bewildered, as though the thief might still be there, lurking behind the gooseberry bushes. Then, looking down, he saw footmarks in the soil in front of the hive. They were short and narrow, left by small, bare feet. Farther off, traces of sabots crossed the cabbage-patch.

Fearing the worst, he opened the hive with trembling hands. What he saw made him groan with pain and indignation. The hive had been ransacked. A clumsy hand had wrenched the combs out of their frames and even upset the bowl of syrup, leaving nothing for the bees but famine.

Suddenly, as though the bees considered M. Grillon responsible for their plight, they went for him, stinging him furiously on the hands and face. He took to flight, pursued by an angry horde. His fingers swelled. The palm of his right hand became hard as wood. His face was burning. But the physical pain was as nothing compared to his mental distress. What a dirty trick! What sacrilege!

Breakfast was forgotten. He made straight for the classroom.

'The wretches!' he cried. 'To do a thing like that to them! To do a thing like that to me!'

And for the first time in his life M. Déodat Grillon vowed vengeance on his pupils.

An apple is much more likely to create appetite than to assuage it, particularly on an empty stomach. Racked by hunger, Georget returned to the kitchen, to find the table in an unholy mess, the spirit lamp still burning.

Seized by anxiety, he ran out into the garden, looking for his father. He didn't like to shout for him. Having often nursed the idea of running away himself, he occasionally dreamt that his father had abandoned him. Had he simply gone off into the unknown? But why should he? And whom would he go with?

He caught sight of him standing by the beehives, and the panic subsided. He regained his breath and his composure, though with them a slight feeling of disillusionment. Childhood fears dramatic events, even as it longs for them.

The year before, he had wandered into his father's room and, finding that the key of the bureau had been accidentally left in the lock, he had peeped inside and discovered a bundle of old letters which had passed between the young schoolmaster and his fiancée.

Dédé chéri ... ma toute petite ... these and other expressions danced before the boy's eyes. Like old and faded photographs the letters none the less conjured up the vision of a young and beautiful girl – his mother – and the shock they gave him was all the stronger for being mixed with a sense of guilt over his prying into someone's secrets. Who has not dreamed of a young and lovely mother whose singing fills the house, the touch of whose gentle hand leaves a delicious coolness on your forehead? *His* memories were quite different. Mme Grillon sitting in the green armchair, counting out the drops of her medicine, which clouded the surface of the glass of water. Mme Grillon coughing, with a handkerchief to her mouth. God, how she coughed! As though she would never stop. In the end, out of breath and with bloodshot eyes, she would nevertheless try to smile at her little boy.

One morning the child had been led to the bed on which she was lying. Her lips were colourless. Her hands, round which a rosary was entwined, would never move again. Nevertheless the face, stern as it was, seemed to be alive. Then ... No, nothing but the flickering of the two candles and the dancing shadows ...

At the moment Georget hadn't been overcome with grief. 'Like that, she won't cough any more,' he had thought.

But when he stumbled on the letters a strange feeling swept him off his feet. Shutting the bureau, he fled, from the house, from the gar-