

Bambi



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CHAPTER 1

It was in a space in a thicket that he came into the world, in one of those little, hidden places in the wood which seem to be open on every side but which in fact are completely surrounded by foliage. That is why there was so little room there, but just enough for him and his mother. He stood up, he staggered on his thin legs as he wondered what was happening, looked out with eyes which were dull, wondered what was happening but saw nothing, dropped his head, shuddered severely, and was quite numb.

“What a beautiful child!” declared the magpie.

She had rushed to the place, drawn by the breathy groans she heard forced from Bambi’s mother by her pain. Now the magpie sat on a branch nearby. “What a beautiful child!” she exclaimed again. No-one answered her and she continued speaking excitedly. “And he can already stand up and walk. That’s amazing! That’s so interesting! I’ve never seen anything like it in me life. Well, I’m still young of course, it’s only a year since I left the nest, but I expect you know that. But I think it’s wonderful. A child like this ... he’s only been born a second and he can already stand. I think it’s very noble of him. And most of all, I find that everything done by you deer is very noble. Can he already run too?”

“Of course,” answered Bambi’s mother gently. “But you’ll have to excuse me, I’m not really in a good condition to chat with you. There’s a lot that I’ve got to do ... and besides, I’m feeling quite tired.”

“Oh, don’t let me disturb you,” said the magpie, “I’m in a bit of a rush today, too! But it’s not every day that you see something like this. I ask you, think of how awkward it is for us in these things, and how much hard work! The children just can’t do anything when they first hatch from the egg, they just lie there in the nest quite helpless, and need to be looked after, they always need to be looked after I tell you, I’m sure you’ve got no idea what it’s like. It’s so much hard work just to keep ‘em fed, and they need to be protected, it’s so worrying! I ask you, just think how strenuous all that is, getting food for the children and having to watch over them at the same time so that nothing happens to ‘em; if you’re not there they can do nothing for themselves. Am I not right? And you have to wait so long before they start to move, so long before they get their first feathers and start to look a bit decent!”

“Please forgive me,” Bambi’s mother said, “I wasn’t really listening.” The magpie flew away. “Stupid person,” she thought to herself, “noble, but stupid!”

Bambi’s mother barely noticed, and continued vigorously washing her newborn. She washed it with her tongue and so performed several tasks

at once, care for his body, a warming massage and a display of her affection.

The little one staggered a little under the weight of the stroking and pushing that gently touched him all over but he remained still. His red coat, which was still a little unkempt, had a sprinkling of white on it, his face, that of a child, still looked uncomprehending, almost as if he were in a deep sleep.

All around them grew hazel bushes, dogwoods, blackthorn bushes and young elder trees. Lofty maples, beech trees and oaks created a green roof over the thicket and from the firm, dark brown ground there sprouted ferns and wild peas and sage. Down close to the ground were the leaves, close together, of violets which were already in bloom and the leaves of strawberries which were just beginning to bloom. The light of the morning sun pierced its way through the thick foliage like a web of gold. The whole forest was alive with the sounds of countless voices which pierced through the trees with an air of gay excitement. The golden oriole performed a ceaseless song of joy, the doves never stopped cooing, the blackbirds whistled, the finches flapped their wings, the tits chirruped. The quarrelsome screech of the jay penetrated through all this, and the joking laughter of the blue magpie, the bursting, metallic cook-cook of the pheasants. From time to time the harsh short celebrations of a woodpecker would pierce through all the other voices. The shrill, bright call of a falcon would penetrate across the forest canopy and the choir of crows never stopped ringing out their raucous call.

The little one understood not a one of these many songs and calls, not a word of their conversations. He was still too young to listen to them. He also paid no attention to any of the many smells that the forest breathed. He heard only the gentle rustling that ran over his coat as it was washed, warmed and kissed, and he smelt only the body of his mother, close by. He nuzzled close to this body with the lovely smell, and hungrily he searched around it and found the source of life.

As he drank his mother continued to pet him. "Bambi," she whispered. Every few moments she would lift her head, listen, and draw the wind in.

Then she kissed her child again, reassured and happy. "Bambi," she repeated, "my little Bambi."

CHAPTER 2

Now, in the early summer, the trees stood still under the blue sky, they held their arms out wide and received the power of the sun as it streamed down on them. The bushes in the thicket were coming into bloom with stars of white or red or yellow. On many of them the buds of fruit were beginning to be seen again, countless many of them were sitting on the fine tips of the branches, tender and firm and resolute they looked like little clenched fists. The colourful stars of many different flowers came up out of the ground so that the earth, in the subdued light of the forest, was a spray of silent but vigorous and gay colours. Everywhere there was the smell of the fresh foliage, of flowers, of the soil and of green wood. When morning broke, and when the sun went down, the whole wood was alive with a thousand voices, and all day from morning to evening the bees sang, the wasps buzzed, and the bumble-bees buzzed even louder through the fragrant stillness. That is what the days were like when Bambi experienced his earliest childhood.

He followed his mother onto a narrow strip that led between the bushes. It was so pleasant to walk here! The dense foliage stroked his sides gently, and bent slightly to the side. Everywhere you looked the path seemed to be blocked and locked, but it was possible to go forward in the greatest comfort. There were routes like this in the woods, they formed a network going all through the forest. Bambi's mother knew them all, and whenever he stood in front of what seemed to him like an impenetrable green wall she would immediately seek out the place where the path began.

Bambi asked her questions. He was very fond of asking his mother questions. For him, it was the nicest thing in the world to keep asking her questions and to listen to whatever answer she gave. Bambi was not at all surprised that he always thought of one question after another to ask her. It seemed entirely natural to him; it was such a delight for him. It was also a delight to wait, curious, until the answer came, and whatever the answer was he was always satisfied with it. There were times, of course, when he did not understand the answer he was given but that was nice too because he could always ask more questions whenever he wanted to. Sometimes he stopped asking questions and that was nice too because then he was busy trying to understand what he had been told and would work it out in his own way. He often felt certain that his mother had not given him a complete answer, that she deliberately avoided saying everything she knew. And that was very nice, as it left behind a certain kind of curiosity still in him, a feeling of

something mysterious and pleasing that ran through him, an expectation that made him uneasy but cheerful.

Now he asked, "Who owns this path, mother?"

His mother answered, "We do."

Bambi continued asking. "You and me?"

"Yes."

"Both of us?"

"Yes."

"Just you and me?"

"No," said his mother, "we deer own it ..."

"What's a deer?" asked Bambi with a laugh.

His mother looked at him and laughed too. "You're a deer, and I'm a deer. That's what deer are. Do you understand now?"

Bambi jumped into the air with laughter. "Yes, I understand. I'm a little deer and you're a big deer. That's right, isn't it."

His mother nodded. "There, you see now."

Bambi became serious again. "Are we the only ones, or are there other deer?"

"Certainly," said his mother. "There are lots of them."

"Where are they?" Bambi exclaimed.

"They're here, they're all around us."

"But ... I can't see them."

"You'll see them soon enough."

"When?" Bambi's curiosity was so strong that he stopped walking."

"Soon." His mother walked calmly on.

Bambi followed her. He said nothing, for he was trying to work out what she could have meant by "soon." He reached the conclusion that "soon" was certainly not the same as "very soon." But he was not able to decide when it was that this "soon" would stop being "soon" and start to be "a long time yet." Suddenly he asked, "Who was it who made this path?"

"We did," his mother replied.

Bambi was astonished. "We did? You and me?"

His mother said, "Well, yes, ... we deer made it."

"What deer?" Bambi asked.

"All of us," was his mother's curt reply.

They walked on. Bambi had had enough of it and wanted to jump off away from the path, but he was a good child and stayed with his mother. Ahead of them there was a rustling noise, coming from somewhere close to the ground. There was something moving vigorously, something concealed under the ferns and wild lettuce. A little voice, as thin as a thread, let out a pitiful whistle, and then it was quiet. Only the leaves and the blades of grass quivered to show where it was that something had happened. A polecat had caught a mouse. Then he dashed past them, crouched down to one side and set to on his meal.

"What was that?" asked Bambi excitedly.

“Nothing,” his mother reassured him.

“But...” Bambi stuttered, “but ... I saw it.”

“Well, yes,” his mother said, “but don’t be frightened. A polecat killed a mouse.”

But Bambi was terribly frightened. His heart was squeezed within a great, but unfamiliar, horror. It was a long time before he could speak again. Then he asked, “Why did he kill the mouse?”

“Because ...” His mother hesitated. Then she said, “Let’s go a bit faster, shall we?” as if she had suddenly thought of something else and forgotten about the question. She began to trot. Bambi hopped along after her.

A long pause went by and they had stopped walking so fast. Finally Bambi, feeling rather anxious, asked, “Will we ever kill a mouse?”

“No,” his mother answered.

“Never?” asked Bambi.

“No, never,” came her reply.

“Why not?” asked Bambi with some relief.

“Because we never kill anyone,” his mother told him simply.

Bambi became cheerful again.

There was a young ash tree next to their path from which a loud screeching could be heard. His mother paid no attention to it and carried on walking. But Bambi was curious and stopped. High in the tree’s branches there were two jays squabbling over a nest they had just plundered.

“You get out of it, you lout!”

“Don’t get excited, you fool,” the other answered. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“Go and get your own nests, you thief!” yelled the first. “I’ll punch your face in.” He was beside himself. “You’re just vile,” he snapped. “Just vile!”

The other bird had noticed Bambi. He flapped a few twigs down and snarled, “What are you looking at, brat? Get lost!”

Bambi felt intimidated and jumped away from them. Once he had reached his mother he continued walking behind her along the path, obedient and startled. He thought she had not noticed he had stayed behind.

After a while he asked her, “Mother, what does ‘vile’ mean?”

His mother said, “I don’t know.”

Bambi thought about it. And then he began again. “Mother, why were those two being so nasty to each other?”

His mother answered, “They were quarrelling about getting the food.”

Bambi asked, “Will we ever quarrel about food like that?”

“No,” his mother said.

“Why not,” Bambi asked.

His mother replied, “There’s plenty of food for all of us.”

There was something else that Bambi wanted to know. "Mother ...?"
"What is it?"

"Will we ever be nasty to each other too?"

"No, my child," said his mother. "We don't do that sort of thing."

They carried on walking. Suddenly they saw light ahead of them, very bright light. The green confusion of bushes and shrubs came to an end, their path was at its end. Just a few steps further and they came out into the brightly lit free space that opened up ahead of them. Bambi wanted to jump forward, but his mother just stood where she was.

"What's that?" he exclaimed, impatient and quite enchanted.

"The meadow," his mother answered.

"What's that, the meadow?" Bambi insisted.

His mother gave him a curt reply. "You'll see that for yourself soon enough." She had become serious and attentive. She stood there without moving, her head held up high, listening tensely, testing the wind with deep breaths, and she looked almost severe.

"Yes, everything's alright," she finally said, "we can go on out there."

Bambi was about to jump ahead but she blocked his way. "No, you wait until I call you." Bambi did as he was told and immediately stood still.

"Well done, Bambi," his mother praised him. "Now, listen carefully to what I say." Bambi listened carefully as his mother spoke and saw how agitated she was, he became very tense himself. "Going out onto the meadow is not as simple as it seems," his mother continued, "it's difficult and it's dangerous. Don't ask me why. You'll learn that later on. For now, just do exactly what I tell you. Will you do that?"

"Yes," Bambi promised.

"Good. So I'll go out there first by myself. You stay here and wait. And don't take your eyes off me. Keep me in sight and don't look away, not for a second. If you see me start to run back here, then turn round and run away as fast as you can. I'll soon catch up with you." She became silent and seemed to be thinking, then, with much emphasis, she went on. "Whatever happens, run, run, run as fast as you can. Run ... even if something happens ... even if you see ... if you see me fall to the ground ... don't pay any attention to me, understand? ... Whatever you see or hear ... just keep going, without delay and as fast as you can ...! Do you promise me that?"

"Yes," said Bambi quietly.

"But if I call you," his mother continued, "you can come. You come and play on the meadow. It's nice out there, you'll like it. Only ... this is something else you have to promise me ... if I call you, you must be at my side straight away. Whatever the circumstances! Do you hear?"

"Yes," said Bambi, even quieter. His mother was being so serious. She continued speaking. "Out there ... if I call you ... there's to be no running about and no questions, you're to run behind me like the wind! Don't forget. No thinking about it, no hesitating ... if I start to run it

means you get up immediately and get out of there, and you don't stop till we're back here in the woods. You won't forget that, will you!"

"No," said Bambi, feeling rather anxious.

"Alright, now I'll go," his mother told him, and seemed somewhat calmer.

She stepped out onto the meadow. Bambi, who did not take his eyes off her, saw how she went forward with slow and high steps. He stood there full of anticipation, full of fear and curiosity. He saw how his mother listened on every side, he saw her when something startled her and felt startled himself, ready to jump back into the thicket. Then his mother became calm once more and after a minute had passed she became cheerful. She lowered her neck, stretched it out far in front of her, looked contentedly back at Bambi and called, "Come on then!"

Bambi jumped forward. He was gripped with an enormous joy that was so magically strong that he forgot about the anxiety he had felt just before. All he had been able to see while he was in the thicket was the green treetops above him, and he saw the few scraps of blue above them only in short, rare glimpses. Now he could see the whole of the sky, high and wide and blue, and that made him glad, although he did not know why. Among the trees, all he had seen of the sun had been single, broad rays, or the gentle scattering of golden light that played between the branches. Now he suddenly found himself standing in a hot and dazzling power that forced itself on him, he stood within this copious blessing of warmth that closed his eyes and opened his heart. Bambi was exhilarated; he was completely beside himself, it was simply wonderful. He spontaneously jumped into the air, three times, four times, five times on the spot where stood. He could not help himself; he had to do it. Something yanked him up and made him jump. His young limbs had such powerful spring in them, the air went so deep and easily into his lungs that he drank it in, drank in all the fragrances of the meadow with so much overpowering cheer that he simply had to jump. Bambi was a child. If he had been a human child he would have shouted with joy. But he was a young deer, and deer cannot shout, or at least not in the same way as human children do. So he rejoiced in his own way. With his legs, with his whole body that threw him into the air. His mother stood nearby and was glad to watch him. She watched him going crazy. She saw him as he threw himself up high, dropped clumsily back down on the same spot, stared ahead in confusion and exhilaration, and then, in the next moment, threw himself back into the air over and over again. She understood that Bambi had only ever seen the narrow deer paths in the woods, in the few days of his existence had only ever become used to the narrowness of the thicket, and that he therefore did not move from the spot where he stood because he still did not understand that he was free to run around the whole of the meadow. She stretched out her forelegs and lowered herself onto them, gave a little laugh to Bambi, and

she was suddenly away, rushing round in circles so that the tall grass swished loudly. Bambi was startled and remained motionless. Was that meant to mean he should go back into the woods? Don't bother about me, his mother had said, whatever you see, whatever you hear, just get away, get away as fast as you can! He wanted to turn round and run away as he had been told. Then his mother suddenly came galloping towards him making a wonderful noise. She came to within two steps from him, lowered her body as she had done the first time, laughed to him and called, "Try and catch me!" and rushed away from him. Bambi was astonished. What was all this supposed to mean? What had come over his mother all of a sudden? But then she was coming back again at such enormous speed it enough to make you dizzy. She poked him in the side with her nose and quickly said, "Try and catch me!" and rushed away. Bambi stumbled after her. A few steps. But those steps soon became little jumps. They carried him, he thought he was flying; they carried him by themselves. There was space under his steps, space under his jumps, space, space. Bambi was beside himself. The grass made a glorious sound in his ears. It was deliciously soft, as tender as silk as he skimmed across it. His mother stood still for a while as she caught her breath. She only moved in the direction of Bambi as he rushed by. Bambi flew like the wind.

Suddenly it stopped. Bambi stopped running and went over to his mother in an elegant, high stepping trot, where he looked happily into her face. Then they walked along contentedly beside each other. Since he had come out here into the open Bambi had seen the sky, the sun and the wide stretch of green only with his body, only with a blinkered, drunken glance at the sky, with the cosy feeling of the warmth on his back and the invigorating feel of the sun that made him take ever deeper breaths. Now, for the first time, he began to enjoy the glory of the meadow with his eyes which surprised him with new wonders with every step he took. There were no scraps of bare earth that could be seen as there were among the trees. Here every spot was covered in dense grass, every blade cuddling close with others which swelled up in abundant glory, leant gently to one side under each step and immediately sprang back upright with no sense of insult. The broad green plain was starry with white daisies, with violets, with the thick red heads of the clover as it began to blossom, and with the shining majesty of the golden flowers held up high by the dandelions.

"Look, mother," called Bambi, "there's a flower flying away."

"That's not a flower," his mother said. "That's a butterfly."

Bambi was delighted and watched the butterfly as it very gently freed itself from a stalk of grass and, in tumbling flight, floated away. Now Bambi saw that there were many such butterflies flying in the air over the meadow, they seemed to be in a hurry but they were slow, they tumbled up and down in a game that enchanted him. They really did