

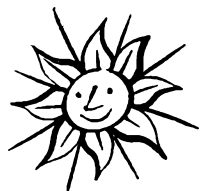


Hana Šklíbová

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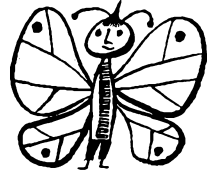
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JOHNNY AND THE BUTTERFLY



1953

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For a long time before it is born, the butterfly sleeps in a regular little sleeping-bag, called a chrysalis. The bag is hung up on the underside of a big leaf, so that the butterfly-to-be is surrounded with fresh air without being too hot or lying in a draught.

And meanwhile the sleeping butterfly enjoys wonderful dreams about the wide world it is going to wake up in when it is strong enough to fly. It dreams about flowers with honey-sweet juices, fat cabbage-leaves which will shelter it from the rain, about birds and about people. It dreams about everything that a proper grown-up butterfly must know.

The chrysalis is cosy and warm inside its skin. Silk-worm chrysalids have little cots woven out of pure silk threads. They turn into fine, proud silk-moths, which live in mulberry trees. When royal princesses in fairy tales get married, they go to the silk-worms to fetch silk for their wedding dresses.

But the insect I am going to tell you about now was

neither fine nor proud; it was a plain, ordinary cabbage-white butterfly, and so it was born, not on a mulberry-tree, but underneath a cabbage leaf.

As soon as it had flown out of its chrysalis, it stretched its legs and spread its wings, looked all around and hurriedly repeated to itself what it had been dreaming, so as not to forget.

“Those are Birds, flying in the air and singing . . . And those things standing on the ground because they can’t fly, those are Flowers. I’ve learnt that it’s better to make friends with the Flowers than with the Birds, because the Flowers are kind-hearted and hospitable. The Birds, they move around the whole time and some of them are clever and know how to sing, but you have to be on your guard with them, because experience shows that they often eat us Butterflies. And then there’s another kind of animal in the world — People.”

The Cabbage White couldn’t remember what it was he had learnt about People. He couldn’t see any of them around, and since his wings were thoroughly dry now he gave them a shake and flew off to the flower bed opposite. There were some white Butterflies sitting there, just like him — and yet no, they weren’t Butterflies, though they

had looked as if they were moving their wings. They were Flowers, and they had green stalks instead of legs. When the Butterfly tried to make friends with them they started to nudge one another and grin.

“So you think you’d like to be one of us? How ridiculous! *You’re* not a Sweet Pea! We’re *Flowers*. We live in the flower bed the whole time, and *you* don’t live anywhere at all. You’re nothing but a Butterfly!”

The Butterfly was a little put out and started to apologise:

“I only wanted to come and let you know that I was born today — under the cabbage-leaf.”

“How terribly uninteresting,” answered the Flowers.

“And I wanted to say how beautiful you are, too, and that you’re just like Butterflies.”

“We know we’re beautiful because People tell us so,” said the Sweet Peas proudly, “and we don’t care in the slightest whether we look like Butterflies.”

The Cabbage White Butterfly shrugged his wings and fluttered off to a flower that looked like a big blue bell. He stuck his nose down into it and sucked up the honey-sweet nectar, but the flower gave a cross jerk and knocked him off.

“What do you think you’re up to, Cabbage White? I’ve got no nectar to spare for you. A Peacock Butterfly and a Red Admiral are coming to take lunch with me today. There’s no room for Cabbage Whites!”

“I’m sorry, Blue Flower! I was only born today and I don’t know the ways of the world yet.”

The blue Bellflower closed up ungraciously and refused to say a word. Puzzled for the second time in his life, the Butterfly shrugged his wings and flew on. He settled on a big brown disc with yellow rays darting out of it in all directions, and said very politely:

“Allow me to pay my respects to you, O Sun!”

But the disc, which was bumpy and prickly to the Butterfly’s bare feet, like corn-stubble, burst out laughing:

“I’m not the Sun, you old rascal! I only turn round to follow the Sun. My name is Sunflower.”

“Please, dear Sunflower,” said the Butterfly entreatingly, “let me drink some of your honey-juice, I’m so hungry. I was only born today.”

The Sunflower explained that her nectar wasn’t nice for Cabbage White Butterflies, and the only thing it was good for was to nourish her own grey seeds, which the Gardener’s

Boy would come and scrape off her disc in the autumn when they were ripe.

“And when will it be autumn?” asked the Butterfly, eager to learn.

“It will be autumn by the time my head droops and my yellow rays wither.”

“And when will that be, Mrs. Sunflower?”

“Soon enough, Cabbage White. The summer flies past only too quickly, so keep your eyes open and mind you remember everything you see!”

Then she advised him to fly to the Lily and ask *her* for some nectar, and she told him where to find the yellow, Rose, who always has a dewdrop hidden under her petals. The Cabbage White thanked her and flew off.

When he got to the white Lily he found a Bumble Bee inside having dinner, and there was no room left for a little Butterfly.

“Me first, me first!” shouted the Bumble Bee. “Why do you offer your nectar to Cabbage Whites, Lady Lily? They’re so common and stupid, they don’t understand politics and they don’t even know how to behave in company. Me first, me first!”

It was the first time the Butterfly had ever heard he was common, or ignorant, or ill-behaved. He was very hurt, and cross with the Bumble Bee too. So without waiting for him to finish eating he rushed off to the yellow Rose to find the dewdrop hidden under her petals.

He sound found the Rose, tall and slender, resting her green crown on a flower-stick. On the top of the stick a blue ball of glass was turning round, reflecting the whole world. A swallow flashed past. The Cabbage White was scared stiff, because he thought she would gobble him up on the spot. But the Swallow didn't even notice him; she just flew round the blue ball admiring herself in it and twittering with pleasure.

As soon as the Butterfly was sure nothing would happen to him, he came closer to the ball so as see his own reflection and to find out if he was as handsome as the Swallow. Looking round, he suddenly noticed a beautiful bud amongst the green rose leaves. It was yellow all over except for the outermost petals, which were faintly pinkish. And underneath one of these pink petals a dewdrop was shimmering. The Cabbage White was so overjoyed with the Rose that he danced his best butterfly-dance all round her.

The bud smiled in welcome and was just about to speak, when suddenly there was a strange crunching and swish-

ing in the distance, and a huge shape approached along the path. The Butterfly stopped in mid-air, motionless with fear. It wasn't a Bird, because it had no wings. It must be something far worse!

It only had two legs, the same as a Bird, but they were long, long legs covered with muddy blue trousers. And instead of wings a couple of poles hung down from the monster's shoulders, fringed with narrow straps at the far ends. It was terrible to watch these poles swinging to and fro. Maybe it was a giant. But there was worse to come . . .

The giant had a huge head, much bigger even than the ball on the top of the stick beside the yellow Rose. And on the head there sat a wide straw hat.

And behind this awful creature there was another one trotting along, exactly the same only it was quite tiny and naked except for a little pair of black bathing trunks. And the tiny one's head, instead of being under a straw hat, was covered with a sort of tousled red stubble.

The two giants, the big one and the little one, walked slowly up to the rose-tree. Then the big one said to the other:

“Look what a lovely bud, Johnny!”

When the Butterfly saw that the giants weren't going to

do it any harm he flew down closer to get a better look at them; but suddenly the small one shouted out:

“Look, Daddy! A Cabbage White!”

The big giant lifted up his pole, fluttered the straps on the end of it and reached out toward the Butterfly.

“Off with you! We don’t need you around here, you rascal!”

But the little giant pleaded with him:

“Daddy, please don’t kill the Cabbage White, look how pretty he is!”

The Butterfly heard no more; he took to his wings and hurtled off towards Mrs. Sunflower. On the way he flew past the Pink Gladiolus, where a waiter was crying out:

“First-rate luncheons and snacks! Low prices, quick service! Eat to the music of our world-famous Fly Orchestra!”

By now the Butterfly had a hungry-pain in his stomach, so he thought it was high time to stop and have lunch at the Pink Gladiolus. The service wasn’t so quick after all, and all the Flies in the orchestra had broken their violin-strings, so the Cabbage White sat quietly wondering who on earth the Big Giant and the Little Giant could have been. Mrs. Sunflower would be sure to know. Suddenly it struck him that they might be People, and he nearly fainted with horror.

After a moment he recovered and started saying to himself:

“What was it I learnt about People when I was still asleep in my sleeping-bag under the cabbage leaf?” He thought and puzzled for a moment — then finally he remembered. “O yes, I know. I learnt that Birds and People are dangerous for Butterflies.” But then he shook his head and feelers. “I don’t know, that little one didn’t seem to be dangerous. After all, he said: ‘Don’t kill the Cabbage White, Daddy, look how pretty he is!’ I must go and ask Mrs. Sunflower about it right away.”

So he flew off, but try as he would he couldn’t find the way to the Sunflower. The brown disc with its yellow rays seemed to have disappeared completely. It was only after he had made a thorough search that he caught sight of the Sunflower smiling at him from the opposite side of the flower bed to where it had been before.

“Silly little thing! Don’t you know that I turn round to follow the sun? Wherever the sun is in the sky, that’s the way I face.”

The Cabbage White started straight away to tell her about everything he had seen and heard, but most of all about the Big Creature and the Little Creature. And he

added, of course, that he had a good idea the big one was actually a Big Man, and the little one a Little Man.

The Sunflower put him right. "The proper name for the Little Man is Boy. The Big Man was the Gardener, and the little one was his son, Johnny. That's the lad who comes and collects the ripe sunflower seeds in the autumn."

The Cabbage White said proudly that the Boy had called him "pretty". "But the Big Man wasn't nice to me at all. He lifted his pole at me."

"That was his *arm*," explained the Sunflower. "Remember that a Man has two arms. He uses them for digging in the ground, planting flowers, picking fruit and putting food into his mouth."

"What, don't Men suck up their food like we do? How peculiar!"

"Oh no, Men aren't nearly so handily made as we are, or as you Butterflies are. They're clumsy in all sorts of ways."

Then the Sunflower turned round a tiny bit, because the Sun had shifted in the sky.

"What do you think, Mrs. Sunflower? Will that Boy grow up into a Big Man?" asked the Butterfly sadly.

"Of course he will," she said very solemnly.

The Cabbage White gave a sigh and added sulkily that he didn't want the Boy to turn into a grown-up Man and be cruel to Butterflies.

"Oh, some Boys are unkind too. I saw a young scamp once pulling a Butterfly's wings off, and another one kicking an ants' nest to bits."

"Why do Boys do that sort of thing?"

The Sunflower shrugged her large green leaves and admitted she didn't know. Perhaps it was just because they were mischievous and didn't realise how much it hurt a Butterfly. But the Gardener's Boy didn't do that kind of thing; he was a good lad altogether. "I like him as much as I like you," she added approvingly.

The Cabbage White preened himself at these words, sighed happily, said goodbye to Mrs. Sunflower and flew off.

On his way he tripped over something fat and green that was sprawling lazily on a leaf:

"Can't you look where you're going?" grumbled the Caterpillar. "And don't you ever say good-morning?"

The Cabbage White had quite a shock. Wherever he looked there were nothing but caterpillars; it was like a swimming pool. There was a black hairy one on the opposite leaf, and a brown one with a black head was chewing

a nettle next to it. A little further off a green caterpillar with red spots and a long green horn was taking its ease. The whole lot were staring at him and shouting over each other's heads:

“What rudeness! Only just hatched out, and he doesn't recognise his own relations! If there were no caterpillars, you young urchin, *you* wouldn't be flying merrily around like this!”

The Cabbage White felt very awkward at being preached to like this and didn't know offhand what to say. So he just remarked politely:

“Good morning, Aunties. And how are you keeping?”

The caterpillars put on their spectacles and looked him up and down from head to wingtip: “Tell me, Mrs. Nettle, don't you agree that that youngster there has a larger black patch on his left upper wing than on the right? Now *my* son, the Peacock Butterfly — his spots are a much nicer color and much more exact.”

“And my nephew the Red Admiral has perfect yellow stripes on his wings. But this very ordinary Cabbage White hasn't even got his eyebrow markings properly drawn in — the one on his right wing is all smudgy.”

The Cabbage White felt sorry for himself, being such an ugly, unimportant kind of Butterfly. Why wasn't he born famous? Why wasn't he beautiful like the Red Admiral? He nearly burst into tears over his sad fate; he was so *very* common.

The caterpillars meanwhile had not noticed that danger was approaching. Without any warning the Gardener was there, rubbing his hands and exclaiming:

"Well, what a nice little collection! I'll show you what's what!" And he started to pick them up one by one, the black hairy one and then the brown and the green one. Only one thin little fellow managed to jump off his leaf and escaped.

The Cabbage White fluttered his wings and was off to the far end of the garden. There he saw Johnny, the Boy, lying in the grass under a red hawthorn tree. As the Butterfly whizzed past he waved to him and cried out:

"Go to bed, Cabbage White! The sun's setting already!"

"All right, I'm going. Good night, Boy!" The Cabbage White wheeled round joyfully, happy to know that he had a friend now.

Evening was coming on. The dew started to fall and the

Butterfly felt drowsy; after all, he had done a lot of flying on that first long day of his. All his legs were aching and he could hardly manage to crawl under his cabbage leaf. The Cabbage was very cross about his coming home so late. "Where have you been all this time, you naughty thing? Didn't you hear the bells ringing for evensong? If you arrive as late as this another time you'll have to sleep outside, you know."

Without a word the Cabbage White crept quickly down the leaf, made himself cosy in a corner, folded his wings carefully so as not to damage the black velvety spots and snuggled up against the stalk of the plant. The great leaf closed up over him.

He was so sleepy that all he could say was: "Good night, Cab . . ." Before he got to the end of the word he was fast asleep. And Johnny, in his own bed, fell asleep at the same time before saying good-night properly to his Daddy and Mummy. And the full moon kept guard over them as they slept, Butterflies and Boys alike.

I'm not sure which of them woke up first, but the moment Johnny stepped out into the garden next morning he saw whole swarms of Cabbage Whites dancing over the

vegetable bed. They reminded him of the wide world — mountains and clouds and snow-flakes. He sat down on the grass border and played to them on his reed-pipe. And then he repeated the same tunes to the birds so that they could learn to sing them. And lastly he took his pencil and paper, as usual, and started to draw everything he saw round him.

The Big Man, with his blue trousers and straw hat, came walking along the path between the beds to have a look at his son. The Cabbage White had long since lost his fear of this hat and sometimes even settled on the brim. The Big Man came up to Johnny, grumbling:

“You’re a fine gardener, you are! Here you are lazing in the grass while the cabbage whites are having the time of their lives among the vegetables! Can’t you chase them away? Mummy’ll give you a piece of her mind when she sees that the caterpillars have eaten up all the greens.”

The Boy stopped drawing and without saying anything handed the sketchbook to his father; he looked at the picture from all angles and instead of being cross, murmured to himself in a pleased voice: “Well I never . . . This is our sunflower you’ve drawn, and these here are the white butterflies.” Then he waved his straw hat at them: “Get away, you wretches!”

The butterflies flew off in all directions, all except the Cabbage White, who circled close round Johnny's head and whispered in his ear:

“Thank you, Boy, for being kind to us and not tearing our wings off. For that I'll tell you some stories about the wonderful world around us.”

It was already midsummer. Every day the Sun passed slowly across the sky, the Sunflower turned round to face it and the children had their school holidays. Some days the Sun would oversleep, and then it rained; the Sunflower would droop its head, the pink Gladiolus stayed shut so that the rain should not mix with its nectar, and the butterflies would keep their velvet wings closed tight. The children would grumble and say that they had lost a day of their holidays. Only the Gardener would point out that they needed rain sometimes so as to water the gardens and meadows and wash them clean.

As soon as the Sun came out they all forgot the rain — birds, flowers and children the same — and were happy again. Johnny would lie in the grass beside the cabbage bed blowing his reed-pipe, and the Cabbage White would tell him all about the grumpy old Spider who had stretched

his web across from the currant bush to the mouldy fence, about the fat Caterpillars and the Rose and the Birds. Johnny put his pipe aside then and quickly drew it all in his sketch-book.

Whenever his mother asked him in the evening what had made him think of this or that, he would say: "My friend the Cabbage White told me about it."

But the summer drew on and the holidays came to an end. One day the children had to go back to school again. They didn't want to at all, but what could they do? It wasn't warm out in the garden any more, the currants and the summer apples had all been picked and the birds were getting ready for their long journey south.

The Sunflower had grown old, her fiery petals were faded and her disc was full of grey-coloured seeds. She no longer turned round to follow the sun, and just bowed her old head lower and lower. The Cabbage White hardly recognised her, she was so hunchbacked now.

He was still merry enough himself as he flew around by day, but he felt cold at night sleeping in the cabbage-head. And it got worse still when the rain started and the wind whistled past. The leaves began falling from the

trees. The flowers disappeared one by one, even the Sunflower; the Cabbage White was left all alone, and even his fat aunts, the Caterpillars, had gone off somewhere.

The Big Man worked alone in the Garden. He was forever bending down over the beds and doing something or other with those "poles" of his. Johnny seldom appeared, and when he did his father asked him how he had been getting on at school.

Johnny would shrug his shoulders and say that it had been more fun during the holidays, when it was nice and warm and the sun was always shining. The Cabbage White quite agreed and wanted to tell Johnny so. He flew down on to his coat-collar.

"Look, Daddy! A Cabbage White!" the Boy shouted out, as pleased as anything. Then he said gently: "What are you doing here, old chap? All the Cabbage Whites have gone away long ago."

He really didn't know what happened to Cabbage Whites in the autumn, but it was nice to imagine that they flew off to some distant, warm country where the sun shone and it was already springtime.

The Cabbage White was bold enough to fly on to the

Boy's hand, but he shut his wings up tight and shivered with cold. Johnny breathed on to him.

"You're cold, aren't you, Cabbage White? You're shivering all over. Come along, I'll take you indoors. You can live on the Geranium on the window sill."

And that's how the Cabbage White came to make his home in the old house, on the red Geranium in the window. Johnny propped up two cabbage leaves against it so that he could have a room of his own.

"You're glad to be indoors with us when it's raining outside, aren't you, Cabbage White?"

But the Butterfly was homesick. He missed the Sun and the Rosebud, Mrs. Sunflower and the other Cabbage Whites. One day he asked:

"Tell me, Boy, where have all the other Cabbage Whites flown to?"

Johnny waved his hands and said: "Oh, somewhere miles and miles away; I don't even know where it is myself, but watch — I'll draw you a picture."

He fetched his box of crayons and started drawing. He drew the Sun and the Flowers, and the Birds in the sky. It was just like summer. The Cabbage White looked at it

and his heart ached; he did so wish it were summer again. One night when he was quaking with cold under the cabbage leaves — for they didn't keep him warm nowadays at all — he decided to fly off to a warm land where the Sun was.

And that's just what happened. Goodness knows how, but strange things happen in the Cabbage White world. When Johnny got up in the morning and walked to the window to have a look at his butterfly, he couldn't find him. He was gone.

“Mummy, mummy! My Cabbage White's disappeared!”

But before his mother could comfort him, a snow storm started outside. The first flakes floated down — great big wet ones. And one of these, white and brittle, settled on the window pane just in front of the Boy.

“Don't you recognise me, Boy? I'm your Cabbage White and I'm flying after the Sun. There's no sweet nectar left in the old Geranium, and the cabbage leaves are cold. So I'm flying off — far, far away!”

Johnny stood at the window and watched the snow-storm. Instead of just one Cabbage White dancing in front of the window there were hundreds and thousands of butterflies now, chasing each other in the wind. Johnny

remembered how he had lain in the garden one day back in the summer and watched the Cabbage Whites over the vegetable bed, and how he had dreamt about these very snow-flakes.

He rushed for his pencil and paper and started drawing snowflakes and Cabbage Whites and everything beautiful he could think of. Then he waved to the snow-storm and shouted out:

“Have a nice journey, Cabbage White!”

And from the distance the Cabbage White answered:

“I shall be back in springtime, Boy! Wait for me, won’t you? I shall be back!”



JOHNNY AND THE BUTTERFLY

One of four stories in Czech by Hana Šklíbová, published by the Association of Czechoslovaks Political Refugees in Germany for Czech and Slovak children in exile.

Cover and illustrations by Miroslav Šašek.

Translated into English by Dr. D. E. Viney.

All four stories have been broadcast by Radio Free Europe in its programs for children in Czechoslovakia.

Printed by the Academic Press, F. Straub, Munich.

No: 