



The Healing Place

Early morning sunshine had already chased dew from the meadows when the dragonfly arrived. She rested on the tall grasses, scattering seeds with one drooping wing. *Oh dear!* She gathered her wings, dragging the crumpled one, flapping it to shake it into place. Partly revived she launched herself upward into the still dripping ivy leaves which covered a beech tree at the edge of the wood. A gentle breeze parted the leaves just for a moment and there she saw what she had been searching for - a doorway into the tree. It was curtained by screens of woven ferns and cobwebs. Dragonfly sighed with relief as she read the sign in an array of old leaves, carved out by nibbling caterpillars - *The Healing Place. Hospital For Sick Insects.*

Before she could reach out to tug the blue bell beside the door, the leaves parted and two earwigs strode out, dressed in smart brown uniforms, their wings neatly folded behind them. *What can we do for you?* One of them asked sternly.

It's my wing, the dragonfly explained in a small hurting voice. *I think I've broken my wing.*

And how did you do that? Asked the stern earwig.

I was in the cornfield. A tractor ran into me!

Does it hurt? inquired the other, more sympathetic receptionist.

Not much. But I can't fly straight with it like this. I keep dipping down and turning circles.

The surly earwig stepped forward with a large sycamore leaf notebook and dandelion milk pen. *Well, you're not an emergency, you're an accident. You'll have to wait your turn, but you will have to be seen in two runs of seed time - that's the rule.* He nodded towards a grey-green caterpillar who was curled around a poppy seed head with a small hole in the bottom through which seeds dripped slowly into another seed head.

The hospital time-counter, the earwig explained. *Now, follow me.*

The pleasant earwig, smiled reassuringly and walked beside the dragonfly, holding her wing and guiding her, gently.

I'm sure the doctor will be able to mend it for you, said the friendly earwig. He's very clever. We had a worm in yesterday who had been chopped in half. The doctor patched them up and two worms went out. The earwig laughed. *I don't think they knew which way they were wriggling at first.*

The waiting room spread right across inside the beech tree. The air was fresh with the scent of honeysuckle blossom. Dragonfly thought it a very noisy place. A company of insects were there sneezing and coughing, clicking and chirping – some in pain, others just bored with waiting. A fly sat rubbing his feet together. The whole place was filled with soft green light, created by numerous glow-worms sitting on straw benches around the walls. When one faded there was always another ready to take its place. One side of the room was a lined with beech-leaf beds, each covered in dandelion- down blankets. Opposite, where the light was brighter sat a circle of insects waiting for treatment. Dragonfly joined them, nodding shyly to a black beetle who stared hard at her.

They're cutting down on the glow worms. I've been before, he spoke in a deep grumbly voice. What they tell you about waiting times is nonsense. No-one's in a hurry in this place. We could all be waiting here tomorrow. That's if we last that long! They used to have appointments but nobody came on time. How are you expected to know when you're going to be ill? And the food! All seeds and leaves. Nothing to suit a beetle and we're not allowed to eat each other!

Dragonfly thought it worth the struggle to move a few seats back from the waiting circle. From there she could see two doctor ants in white gloves, straightening a grasshopper's leg, assisted by ladybird nurses. They looked very important with blue spots on their wings and blue gloves and shoes to match. One stood ready with a soft grass bandage covered with rose hip juice, while the other held a large acorn cup full of sharp pine needles. Other ladybird nurses were obviously of lower rank. They had green spots and were busy running to and from the side rooms or tidying the beech-leaf beds. As they worked they sang quietly;

*We are the nurses who make insects well;
Here in our beech tree just under the fell;
We soothe all their pains and bandage their breaks
There's always a cure for all insect aches.*

I think it's broken, said one of the doctors as he carefully touched the grasshopper's leg. *The nurses will put a straw splint on it and bandage it tightly. It will be fine in a couple of days. We'll give you some elm bark to ease the pain.*

Thank goodness for that! A grumpy voice called from the row of beds. *He won't be making that irritating clicking noise with his legs. He's been keeping me awake all day.* It was the centipede who had spoken. He was curled up in a damp corner with all his feet in the air. Many of his feet were bandaged and a nurse was changing the dressings on them.

Ouch! He shouted when the nurse took hold of a foot.

Don't be a baby, said the nurse. *What a fuss you make.*

You'd make a fuss if you had twenty sore feet! Said the centipede.

The grasshopper was being helped away by nurses but he looked back to say, *I may have broken my leg, but I wasn't so stupid as to walk on hot stones in the middle of the day!* The centipede snorted and kicked out at the nurse with one of his good feet.

At last it was dragonfly's turn.

Doh! It's by turn dext! A grey moth flopped down beside her and sat fluttering his wings. He had a large cotton-grass pad on his nose. *I bumped into a hod streed lamb,* he explained. *And I burned by dose! They should ave moth wardings on streed lambs. I thing someone should gib me combensation.*

All right doctor, said a nurse as she whisked the moth away. *We'll finish seeing to this one.* After a careful examination the doctor assured dragonfly that her wing was not broken but dislocated. *Hold tight,* he said, and pulled hard on the dragonfly's wing. *Scream if you want to.* But dragonfly was very brave. The wing clicked back into place. *I had a case like this last harvest-time.* the doctor said confidently to a green spotted nurse. *Get me some spider's web.* The nurse ran across to a corner of the room, pulled on a thread of web hanging there and immediately two spiders popped out of a crack in the wall. They started spinning web which the nurse carefully wound onto a hazel stick. When the stick was full she brought it back to the doctor and together they wound it round the dragonfly's wing. *Just for a couple of days,* said the doctor. *Then it won't slip out again.*

While dragonfly had been waiting she had been looking around and was curious to know more about some of the staff and patients. She wanted to know why a brown furry caterpillar was rolling across the floor. *Oh,* said the doctor. *He's sweeping the floor for us. It's therapy. He has an anxiety disorder about becoming a chrysalis. I'll have to go now,* he said, *I've got some new cases over there.* He pointed to a group of greenfly and a large blue-bottle. *The greenflies have breathing problems from garden spray, and the blue-bottle needs some physiotherapy for his stiff wings. He's lost his buzz! Now, before you go, why don't you go over to the canteen. They've got some new nectar mix in this morning – very sweet but very good!*

Dragonfly went out through the ivy and beech leaves, back into the sunshine, but in a moment was inside again, calling for the doctor ant. *My wing! My wing!* she cried when the doctor rushed across to her. *Out there in the sunshine, it looks all grey with spider's web. It's not sunshine sparkly like the other three.*

The doctor looked cross. *If you want your wing to be better, you'll have to put up with that. It's only a couple of days. We're a hospital,* he said sharply. *We're not into cosmetics here!*

Leave her to me, doctor, said one of the blue-spotted ladybird nurses.

He doesn't understand, complained dragonfly. *It's not long before I have to find a partner. Who's going to look at me, like this?*

I know, said the nurse, sympathetically. She led dragonfly out into the sunshine again. *Wait here. I won't be long.*

She flew out across the field and was soon back again clutching a leg-full of shiny thistle-down. She scattered it across the sticky spider's web before shaking a few drops of water on it from the ivy leaves. Straightaway the wing sparkled in the sunshine.

It's not quite the same, said the nurse. *But it will certainly attract lots of friends for you!*

Thank you! Thank you! cried dragonfly. She flew twice round the beech tree, during which time all the green-spot nurses had come out to see and were singing:

*We are the nurses who make insects well;
Here in our beech tree just under the fell;
We soothe all their pains and bandage their breaks;
There's always a cure for all insect aches.*