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Maria-Fly

by

Walter de la Mare

(from his *Collected Stories for Children* [1947])

Little Maria that morning—and this is a good many years ago now—was dressed in a black and white frock with a flounce to it. Her hair was tied back over her small ears with a white ribbon, and she was sitting in the drawing-room on a low armchair with a blue-cushioned seat; her stockinged legs dangling down in front of her. She was all by herself. She had wandered in there—nobody by; and after walking about for a little while looking at the things in the room, and sniffing at a bowl of red damask roses, she had sat down, looking so sleek and demure you might almost have supposed that company was present and she was 'behaving'.

But she was not; she was only thinking. It was a quiet morning. The room, with its two square-paned bow windows, was rather long. There was sunshine in it, and it was still, and though, as it appeared, there was no other living thing between its walls except herself, it seemed to be happy too. And Maria had begun to think—or rather not exactly to think and not exactly to dream, but (if that is possible) to do both together; though she could not have told anyone what she was thinking and dreaming about.

She had had a bowl of bread and milk for breakfast, half an apple, and two slices of bread and jam. She felt comfortable. Her piano practice in the old room by the nursery was over, and now she was alone. But she was alone more than usual. It was as if she were not only sitting there in her blue-cushioned armchair with her legs dangling down, but that she could see herself sitting there. It startled her a little when that notion occurred to her. It was almost as if at that moment she must have really slipped into a dream. And she glanced up quickly with her rather round face and clear, darting eyes to make sure. And on the white paint at the side of the door, not very far away, she saw a fly.

It was just a fly. But simply because at that moment everything was so quiet in the world, and because, maybe, unlike the chairs and tables around her, it was alive, Maria fixed her eyes on the fly. It was nevertheless a perfectly ordinary fly—a housefly. It stood there alone on its six brushy legs and clawed feet, their small, nimble pads adhering to the white gloss of the paint. But, though ordinary, it was conspicuous—just in the same way as a man in black clothes with immense boots and a high cap on the enormous dazzling snow-slopes of a mountain is conspicuous—and Maria seemed to be seeing the fly much more clearly and minutely than you would have supposed possible, considering the distance between herself and it.

On the other hand, the fly was not standing there doing nothing, as Maria was sitting there doing nothing. It was not, for example, merely standing on the paint in *its* drawing-room and looking across at another fly infinitely tinier on the white paint of the minute door to that drawing-room. It was busy as flies usually are in the warm, sunny months.

Maria had been up and had dressed herself hours and hours ago; but flies seem to be dressing, or at least to be toileting and titivating themselves all the time when they are not prowling about on a table in search of food, or roving about, or sucking up water, or standing like mock flies asleep, or angling to and fro in the air under a chandelier or a fly-charm in one another's company.

Not that Maria was by any means fond of flies. She shooed them away with her spoon when they came buzzing about over her blancmange or red-currant-and-raspberry tart, or alighted on her bare arms, or walked rapidly about over her bedclothes. Once she had pulled off the wings of a fly, and had never forgotten how suffocatingly fusty and hot she had felt after doing so.

And if there was one thing Maria couldn't abide, it was a fly floating in her bath. It was extraordinary that though its carcass was such a minute thing you could at such a moment see absolutely nothing else. It was extraordinary that the whole of the water at such a moment seemed like fly-water.

She would ask her nurse to take the ill-happed creature's corpse out of the bath and put it on the window-sill in case it was not quite dead and might come-to again.

And if she remembered to look next morning, maybe it was not, or maybe it *was*, there still—just its body. She had more than once, too, heard the dismal languishing drone a fly utters when it has been decoyed into a web and sees the spider come sallying out of its round, silken lair in the corner. It had filled her with horror and hatred and a miserable pity. Yet it had not made her any fonder of flies just for their own sakes alone. But then, one doesn't always feel exactly the same about anything. It depends on where you are, and what kind of mood you are in, and where the other thing is, and what kind of mood *that* is in.

So it was this morning. For some reason, this particular fly was different; and Maria sat watching it with the closest attention. It seemed to be that just as Maria herself was one particular little girl, so this was one particular fly. A fly by itself. A fly living its own one life; confident, alert, alone in its own Fly World.

To judge from its solitude, and the easy, careless, busy way in which it was spending its time, it might be supposed indeed that it had the whole universe to itself. It might be supposed it was Sirius—and not another star in the sky. And after a while, so intent did Maria become that she seemed to be doing a great deal more than merely watching the fly. She became engrossed.

She was now stooping together in her chair almost as if she were a pin-cushion and her eyes were black-headed pins in it. She seemed almost to have *become* the fly—Maria-Fly. If it is possible, that is, she had become two things at once, or one thing at twice. It was an odd experience—and it lasted at least three minutes by the little gold clock, with the gilt goggling fish on either side its dial under the glass-case on the chimney-piece. Three minutes, that is, of ordinary clock-time.

For when Maria herself came-to, it seemed she had been away for at least three centuries—as if, like the stranger in the rhyme, she had been with her candle all the way to Babylon; aye, and back again: as if she had gone away Maria, come back Maria-Fly and now was just Maria again. But yet, when she came-to, everything was a little different.

She could not possibly have explained why, but she felt surprisingly gay and joyful. It was as if a voice, sweet and shrill as the angel Israfel's, had been singing in her mind from a very long way off. She looked about her in sheer astonishment. If anything, the things in the room were stiller than ever, and yet she would almost have supposed that up to a moment ago they had been alive and watching her, and were now merely pretending to be not-alive again.

She looked at the roses in the bowl: they were floating there filled with their fragrance and beauty as a dew-drop is with light. The fishes on either side the little clock seemed to be made of flames rather than gilded plaster. There was a patch of sunshine, too—just an oblong patch resting on the carpet and part of a chair. It seemed to be lovelier than words could tell and to be resting there as if in adoration of its own beauty. Maria saw all this with her young eyes, and could not realize what had happened to her. She was glad she was alone. She had never felt like it before. It was as if she had ceased to be herself altogether in her black and white frock and had become just a tied-up parcel marked 'Pure Happiness', with the date on it.

And as she gradually became aware how very still the room was, almost stealthy—and all quiet things, of course, seem in a way a little watchful—she felt she must go out of it. She felt she must go out of it at once. So she scrambled down off her chair. On purpose, she didn't even glance again at her friend the fly. She most particularly (though she didn't know why) wished not to see it again. So she walked sidelong a little, her head turned to one side, so that no part of her eye should see the fly again even by accident.

She went out of the room, walked along down the hall, and went down the rather dark side-stairs into the kitchen. There was a fire burning in the great burnished range. A green tree showed at the window, and a glass jar half-full of beer and wasps was twinkling on its sill. Mrs. Poulton, the cook, was rolling a piece of dough on her pastry or dough-board, with an apron tied with all its tape round her waist. There was an immense flour dredger like a pepper-pot beside the board, and a hare, its fur soft as wool, cinnamon and snow-white, lay at the farther end of the table. Its long white teeth gleamed like ivory between its parted lips.

'Mrs. Poulton,' Maria said, 'I have seen a fly.'

'Now, *have* you?' said the cook. And the 'have' was like a valley or a meadow that slopes up and down with wild

flowers all over it. 'And did the fly see you?'

That hadn't occurred to Maria. She frowned a little. 'It's got lots of kind of eyes, you know,' she said. 'But what I mean is, I *sawn* it.'

'And that was a queer thing, too,' said cook, deftly lifting up the dough and arranging its limp folds over the fat, dark, sugary plums in the shallow pie-dish, with an inverted egg-cup in the middle. She gave a look at it; and then took up her kitchen knife and, deft as a barber, whipped the knife clean round the edge of the dish to cut away what dough hung over. 'Would you like a dolly, dear?' she said.

'No, thank you,' said Maria, a little primly, not wishing to have the subject changed. 'I have told you about the fly,' she repeated, 'and you don't seem to take a bit of notice of it.'

The cook lifted her doughy knife, turned her round face and looked at the little girl. She had small, lively, light blue eyes and the hair under her cap was as fair and light in colour as new straw. It was a plump face, and yet sharp. 'And what do you mean by that, may I ask?' she said, eyeing Maria.

'I mean,' said Maria stubbornly, 'I *sawn* a fly. It was on the paint of the door of the droring-room, and it was all by itself.'

'Whereabouts?' said Mrs. Poulton, trying to think of something else to say.

'I said,' said Maria, 'on the door.'

'Yes; but whereabouts on the door?' persisted the cook.

'On the side where it's cut in and the other part comes.'

'Oh, on the jamb,' said Mrs. Poulton.

'Jam!' said Maria. 'How could there be jam on the door?'

'Well, I'm not so sure about that, Miss Sticky-fingers,' said the cook. 'But by jamb I meant *door*-jamb, though it's spelt different—leastwise, I think so. And what was the fly doing?—nasty creatures.'

Maria looked at her. 'That's what everybody says,' she said. '*My* fly—wasn't doing anything.' This was not exactly the truth; and feeling a little uneasy about it, Maria remarked in a little voice, 'But I am going now, thank you.'

'That's right,' said the cook. 'And be sure and mind them steep stairs, my precious.'

Maria glanced at the wasps hovering over the bottle, she glanced at Mrs. Poulton, at the fire in the range, at the dish-covers on the walls—and then she went out of the door.

She minded the steep kitchen stairs just as much as usual, though she was a little indignant after her talk with the cook. When she reached the top of them, she went on along the slippery hall, past the grandfather's clock, with the white moon's-face in the blue over its hands, past the table with the pink-flowering pelargonium on it, and climbed on up the wide, shallow staircase, taking hold of the balusters one by one, but treading as near as possible in the middle of the soft, rose-patterned stair carpet.

And when she got to the top she came to a room where she knew she would find a guest who was staying in the house. His name was Mr. Kittleson; he was a clergyman, and this Saturday morning he was writing his sermon for Sunday, and his text was 'Consider the lilies of the field....They toil not neither do they spin'.

After fumbling with the handle a little, Maria pushed the door open and looked in. And there sat the old gentleman in a round leather chair, with his silvery-grey beard spreading down over his chest, his sermon-paper on the blotting book in front of him, and a brass inkstand beyond that. His lips were moving as he wrote. But on hearing the door open he stayed his writing, and with stooping head looked round over his gold spectacles at Maria.

'Well, well, my dear, this is a very pleasant sight, and what can I do for you?' he said, being one of those peculiar old gentlemen who don't mind being interrupted even when they are writing sermons.

'I,' said Maria, edging a little into the room, 'I have just seen a fly! It was standing all by itself on the—the jamb of the

door in the droring-room.'

'In the drawing-room? Indeed!' said the old gentleman, still peering over his gold spectacles. 'And a very fortunate fly it was, to be in your company, my dear. And how very kind of you to come and tell me.'

Maria was almost as little pleased by the old gentleman's politeness as she had been with her talk with the cook. 'Yes,' she said, 'but this was not a norinary fly. It was all by itself, and I looked at it.'

The old gentleman peeped down a little absently at his clear, sloping handwriting on the paper. 'Is that *so*?' he said. 'But then, my dear little Maria, no fly is really ordinary. They are remarkable creatures if you look at them attentively. And especially through a microscope. What does the Book say: "fearfully and wonderfully made"? They have what is called a proboscis—trunks, you know, just like elephants. And they can walk upside down. Eh? How about that?'

At that moment, out of its shadowy lair a silvery clothes-moth came flitting across the sunlight over his table. The old gentleman threw up his hands at it, but it wavered, soared, and escaped out of his clutches.

'Cook says flies are nasty creatures,' said Maria.

'Ah,' said the old clergyman, 'and I've no doubt cook avoids them in our food. But they have their ways, which may not please us, just as we have our ways, which may not please somebody else. But even a fly, my dear, enjoys its own small life and does what it is intended to do in it. "Little busy, thirsty fly",' he began, but Maria, who was looking at him as attentively as she had looked at the insect itself (before, that is, it had actually become a Maria-Fly), at once interrupted him. 'It's a *beau*tiful rhyme,' she said, nodding her head. 'I know it very well, thank you. But that was all I wanted to say. Just that I had sawn it—seen it. I don't think I could tell you anything else—so, I mean, that it would be 'xplained to you.'

The old gentleman, pen in hand, continued to smile at his visitor over his beard in the same bland cautious way he always did, until she had slid round the door out of his sight, and had firmly closed it after her.

On her way back along the corridor Maria passed the door of the workroom; it was ajar, and she peeped in. Miss Salmon, in her black stuff dress, sat there beside a table on which stood a sewing-machine. At this moment she was at work with her needle. She always smelt fresh, but a little faint; though also of camphor. She had an immensely long white face—high forehead and pointed chin—with rather protruding eyes and elbows; and she and Maria were old friends.

'And what can I do for you, madam, this morning?' she cried in a deep voice like a man's.

'Well, I just looked in, madam, to tell you I seen a fly.'

'If you was to look through the eye of the smallest needle in that work-basket you would see the gates of Paradise,' said Miss Salmon, stitching away again with a click that sounded almost as loud as if a carpenter were at work in the room.

'Give it me,' said Maria.

'Ah ha!' cried Miss Salmon, 'such things need looking for.'

'Ah ha!' chirped Maria, 'and that means tidying all the basket up.'

'Nothing seek, nothing find,' cried Miss Salmon, 'as the cat said to the stickleback, which is far better than Latin, madam. And what, may I ask, was the name of Mr. Jasper Fly Esquire? If you would kindly ask the gentleman to step this way I will make him a paper house with bars to it, and we'll feed him on strawberries and cream.'

Maria's spirits seemed to sink into her shoes. 'It was not that kind of fly at all,' she said, 'and—and I don't wish to tell you the name, thank you very much.'

'*Good* morning,' said Miss Salmon lifting her needle and opening wide her eyes, 'and don't forget closing time's at seven.'

It was strange that Maria should feel so dismal at this turn of the conversation, considering that she and Miss Salmon were such very old friends and always had their little bit of fun together. Maria looked at her sitting bolt upright there in her high-collared black stuff dress, with her high head.

'*Good* morning, madam,' said Miss Salmon.

And Maria withdrew.

Opposite the workroom there was a portrait hanging on the landing in a large gilt frame. Maria looked at the lady painted in it, in her queer clothes, with a dome of muslin draped on high over her head, and she said, under her breath, though not out loud, 'Mm, *you* don't know I've seen a fly.' And then she ran off downstairs again and met her father at that moment issuing out of his den with the topmost joint of a fishing-rod in his hand. He had on his ugly brown suit and thick-soled brown shoes.

'Daddy,' she called at him, 'I've just been telling him I have seen a fly.'

'Oh, have you,' said he, 'you black-eyed young ragamuffin. And what business had you to be mousing into his room this time of morning, I should like to know? And talking of flies, Miss Black-and-White, what would you recommend for this afternoon, so as to make quite sure of a certain Mrs. Fat Trout I wot of?'

'You see, Daddy,' said Maria stiffly, 'you always turn things off like that. And it was something so very special I wanted to tell you.'

'Now see here,' said her father, flicking with the tip of his tapering rod-piece, 'what we'll do is this, we will. You shall tell me all about that fly of yours when I come in to say good-night to-night. And perhaps by then you will have seen lots of other things. And you shall have a penny for every one that begins with a Q. There's plenty of flies,' he added.

'I don't think I shall *care* to see lots of other things,' said Maria—'but I'll see.' And she walked off, more sedately even than little old Queen Victoria, into the garden.

Up till then it had been a morning like a blue-framed looking-glass, but now a fleece of cloud was spread over the immense sky. Far away in the kitchen-garden she came across the gardener, Mr. Pratt. With his striped cotton shirt-sleeves turned up over his elbows, he was spraying a rose-tree on which that day's sun even if it came out in full splendour again would shine no more. Maria watched him.

'What are you doing that for?' she said. 'Let me!'

'Steady, steady, my dear,' said Mr. Pratt—'you can't manage the great thing all by yourself.' But he put the syringe with a little drop of the liquid left in its brass cylinder into her hands. 'Now, push!' he said, 'all your might.'

Maria pushed hard, till her knuckles on her fat hands went white, and she was plum-red in the face. But nothing came. So Mr. Pratt put his thick brown hands over hers, clutched the tube, and they pushed together. And an exquisite little puff of water jetted like a tiny cloud out of the nozzle.

'It came out then,' said Maria triumphantly. 'I could do it if I tried really hard. What, please, are you doing it *for*?'

'Ah,' said Mr. Pratt, 'them's secrets.'

'Ah,' said Maria imitating him, 'and I've got a secret, too.'

'What's that?' said the gardener.

She held up her finger at him. 'I—have—just—seen—a—fly. It had wings like as you see oil on water, and a red face with straight silver eyes, and it wasn't buzzing or nothing, but it was scraping with its front legs over its wings, then rubbing them like corkscrews. Then it took its head off and on, and then it began again—but I don't mean all that. I mean I sawn the fly—saw it, I mean.'

'Ah,' said Mr. Pratt, the perspiration glistening on his brown face, and his eyes at least two shades a paler blue than Mrs. Poulton's, as though the sun and the jealous skies had bleached most of the colour out of them. 'Ah,' he said. 'A fly now? And that's something to see too. But what about them pretty little Meadow Browns over there, and that Painted Lady—quiet, now, see—on that there mallow-bloom! There's a beauty! And look at all them yaller ragamuffins over the winter cabbage yonder. We won't get much greens, Missie, if you can underconstumble, if *they* have their little way.'

Maria could perfectly underconstumble. But she hated greens. She hated them as much as if she had eaten them on cold plates in another world. It was odd too that nobody had the smallest notion of what she wanted to say about the Fly. No one. How stupid. But she looked at the Painted Lady none the less. It was limply perched on the pale paper-like flower

of the mallow, with its ball-tipped antennae, and sucking up its secret nectar for all the world like the Queen in her parlour enjoying her thick slice of bread and honey. And then the sunshine stole out again into the heavens above them, and drew itself like a pale golden veil over the shimmering garden. The Painted Lady's wings, all ribbed and dappled orange and black and white, trembled a little in its gentle heat, as if with inexpressible happiness and desire.

But though Maria admired the creature in its flaunting beauty more than she could say, this was not her Fly—this, at least, was no *Maria*-Fly. It was merely a butterfly—lovely as light, lovely as a coloured floating vapour, exquisitely stirring, its bended legs clutching the gauzy platform beneath it and supporting its lightly poised frail plumy body on this swaying pedestal as if the world it knew were solid as marble and without any change; even though it now appeared as gentle as a dream.

Maria was not even thinking as she watched the butterfly, except that she was saying over to herself, though not using any words, that she did not want to go into the drawing-room any more just now; that she had no wish to see her fly again; that she didn't want ever to be grown-up; that grown-ups never could underconstumble in the very least what you were really saying; that if only they wouldn't try to be smiling and patient as though the least cold puff of breath might blow you away, you might prove you were grown-up too and much older than they—even though you had to eat greens and do what you were told and not interrupt old gentlemen writing sermons, and must wait for bed-time—*no*, she was not really thinking any of these things. But her small bosom rose and fell with a prolonged deep sigh as she once more glanced up at Mr. Pratt.

He was hard at work again with his syringe, and now, because the sun was shining between herself and its watery vapour, it had formed a marvellous little rainbow in the air, almost circular, with the green in it fully as vivid as that of the myriad aphides clustering like animated beads round the stems of the rosebuds.

'I told you,' she quavered a little sorrowfully, though she was trying to speak as usual, 'I told you about something and you didn't take any notice.'

'Well, well, well,' said the gardener. But he hadn't time to finish his sentence before Maria was already stalking down the path, and in a moment had disappeared round the corner of the green-house.

And there, a moment or two afterwards, she happened to come across patient Job, the gardener's boy. Job was an oaf to look at, with his scrub of hair and his snub nose and silly mouth. He was little short of what the village people called a half-wit or natural. He laughed at whatever you said to him, even when you frowned double-daggers at him. But there was no gardener's boy like him; the very roots of the flowers he handled seemed to want to net themselves about his clumsy fingers, and he was 'a fair magician' with bees. Three little steel mole-traps lay on the gravel beside him where he knelt, and he was scouring flower-pots with a scrubbling-brush, and as Maria appeared he looked up with a face like a good-humoured pumpkin, and he grinned at her with all his teeth.

'Marning, missie,' he said.

'Good morning, Job,' said Maria. She stood looking at him, looking at his tiny pig-like eyes in the great expanse of his good-humoured face, and hesitated. Then she stooped a little and all but whispered at him.

'Have you ever seen a fly?'

'Oi, miss, seen a floi?' he replied, opening his mouth. 'Oi, missie, oi've seed a floi.'

'But have you,' and Maria all but let all her breath go—over just those first three words, 'But have you, Job, ever seen the only teeny tiny fly there ever was: *your* Fly?'

Job scratched his head and looked so serious for an instant that Maria feared he was going to burst out crying. 'Oi, missie,' he suddenly shouted at last with a great guffaw of laughter, 'that oi 'ave, and avore I could catch un ee was gawn loike a knoifejack clean down Red Lane ee wor. Oi and ee *wor* a floi, ee wor.'

Maria burst out laughing: they laughed in chorus; and then she found tears were standing in her eyes and she suddenly felt silent and mournful. 'And now,' she said, 'you had better get on with your pots.'

She turned away, her small head filled as if with a tune ages old, and as sorrowful as the sounds of the tide on the unvisited shores of the ocean. There was a little old earwiggy arbour not far away that always smelt damp even after

weeks of fine hot weather—though then it smelt dry-damp.

Maria went into its shadow and stood there by herself a moment. Why she had gone in she didn't know. It was very still. But mustily, stuffily, gloomily still—quite different from the sunny coloured stillness of the drawing-room. There was a wide droning in the air outside. Millions of minute voices were sounding in concert like the twangling of the strings of an enormous viol. A bird hopped on to the roof of the arbour; she could hear its claws on the wood. Its impact dislodged a tiny clot of dust. It fell into the yet finer dust at her feet. The arbour's corners were festooned with cobwebs.

Maria gave yet another deep sigh, and then looked up around her almost as if in hopes of somebody else to whom she might tell her secret tale—about the fly—about Maria-Fly. She paused—staring. And then, as if at a signal, she hopped down suddenly out of the arbour, almost as lightly as a thin-legged bird herself, and was off flying over the emerald green grass into the burning delightful sunshine without in the least knowing why, or where to.

[End of *Maria-Fly* by Walter de la Mare]