

THE SOLE SURVIVOR

I had been having a cup of tea with my elderly friends, Cyril and Chris Lane, at their home in Milton Road, Shipton. I was crossing the sitting room on my way out, when I saw, on the dark boards at the edge of the carpet, an enormous wasp. Cyril, who is almost blind, was by this time on his feet, carrying a tray. "Don't move", I said to him and Chris. "Don't move, I'm going to fetch a jam jar from the larder". Cyril's voice, saying "I nearly died once from a wasp sting", certainly speeded my progress!

At my first attempt with the jar, the wasp gave a sort of boom and disappeared under a standard lamp. I could move that quite easily, and at the next attempt "she" (it must have been a Queen) entered the jar: Lid...on. A-a-h! We could then see that she was yellow and chestnut brown, perfect, pristine and very menacing.

I left with my prisoner, and called on Cissie Carpenter. Her enthusiasm fuelled my interest, and we crossed the road to consult John Duester. He stretched to his shelf and brought down his copy of a book on insects. We looked up wasps in the index, compared illustrations with our specimen, a perfect match,it was a hornet! The book said "The fertilised female hibernates during the Winter, emerges in Spring, and builds part of a nest in a hollow tree or under the eaves of a house. She lays her eggs, feeds the grubs and when they hatch into workers, they help her complete the nest. In the Autumn, they all die, except for one fertilised female".

I marvelled at the occupant of the jar. There she was, the sole survivor of a last year's hornets nest, pregnant and waiting to become the mother, the single parent, of a multitude. I fed her on a drop of honey and set her free to fulfil her destiny, and perhaps be drowned in the thunder-clapping downpour we had next day.

How glad I was that it had been my destiny to spot the danger crawling so near to our oldest inhabitant, Cyril Lane, M.B.E., approaching his 97th year!

One verse of a poem in the Somerset dialect flicks into my memory:-

'Arnet zat in an 'oller tree,
A proper zpiteful zwab wer' zheel!
'Er merrily zung as 'er did zet,
An' 'er zting wer' as zharp as a bay-on-et.

Does anyone know the rest of it?

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