

The Year of the Bee

3/9/95

I guess you could call it the year of the bee, although, as it turned out, we weren't always dealing with bees.

It began with our contracting to have the house painted by an ashram of students who had an excellent reputation for a job well done. When they inspected the outside of the house, they noticed a number of bees hovering around the upper corner outside our bedroom. We observed the coming and going of the bees long enough to be sure that they had swarmed under the eave. Since the painters understandably didn't want to deal with bees three floors up in the air and we wanted to save the bees, if possible, we began investigating local bee keepers who might want to transfer the colony to their own property. Several looked at the situation and decided the location was too remote for them. Finally, one hardy soul actually climbed to the corner and discovered that the bees were inside the wall of the house, making it impossible for him to isolate and remove the queen bee and thereby move the entire hive. We would have to get an exterminator.

The exterminator came, discussed the difficulty of reaching the corner where the bees resided, and declared that it would take several applications of insecticide to eliminate the pests. His first attempt entertained me; he drove his car to the corner of the house, stuck a long wand out the window as far as possible, and squirted the distant corner with a strong, continuous blast of liquid. After that, he returned to repeat the operation, this time standing outside the car. After one more such treatment, he declared his job done.

The painters arrived, starting their painting on the opposite side of the house. By the time they reached the crucial point, we saw a few vagrant bees buzzing in confused fashion about the site. The young men didn't want to wait for the return of the exterminator and decided to eliminate the few survivors themselves. They enlisted my help in outfitting one of them for the safari. With his jeans snugly inside his socks, his collar turned up and his sleeves rolled down, he still felt vulnerable. I found a pair of gardening gloves. But his face was still bare. My broad-brimmed straw hat and several yards of nylon net finished his costume. With the net draped over the hat and tied around his shoulders, he was a parody of the orthodox bee keeper. He scaled the ladder with a spray can of insecticide, squirted the angry remnant of the colony, and descended with the declaration that all was ready. After lunch, the painters returned, sans bee-keeping impedimenta, and finished painting the last corner of the house. Paul and I fully expected to find honey dripping into our closet, but it never has. However, it did "bleed" through the bricks on the outside some time later.

The bees were just a memory when Paul came in one day a few months later, nursing a number of stings about his ankles and one of his hands. We were especially worried about one sting on the ring finger of his left hand, and he asked me to saw off his wedding band. The finger was grossly swollen and turning blue, making the ring inaccessible to my jewelry saws. We set off for the emergency room at Chippenham Hospital, where we got instant service. Bee stings are not to be fooled with. He was

whisked off for treatment while I registered him at the desk. The entering clerk, when she heard the circumstances, explained to me that the doctor would have to cut off the ring. I thought that was why we had come and agreed that the ring would have to go. She was horrified at my attitude. "But that's his wedding ring!" she exclaimed. I felt his finger was more important than a ring which, after all, could be soldered back together, but she kept on looking at me as though I was some kind of monster.

Meantime, Paul was getting similar treatment in the emergency operating room. When he agreed to their removing the ring, he too was treated like an uncaring, unromantic, callous monster. Nevertheless, the nurse did produce a cunning instrument designed for that particular task. A thin curved metal piece went under the ring to protect his finger, while a cutting wheel cut efficiently through the ring. The nurse handed him the pieces of his ring, the doctor had already injected him with Benadryl to counteract the effect of the sting, and he was cast back to his uncaring spouse, with advice to keep Benadryl on hand for any future problems with bees.

On the way to the hospital, Paul had decided that he must have run over bees nesting in the ground. By the time the mower had passed over them and he was walking over their spot, they were angry enough to seek revenge up his pants legs and on his bare hand on the mower handle. Back at home, we verified his hypothesis and recontacted our bee keeper friend. The bee keeper laughed and said he didn't need to come out because it was obvious to him that we had a nest of "yeller" jackets, not bees. He suggested waiting until dark until all the yellow jackets had returned to the hive, then pouring kerosene into their hole. One application was guaranteed to take care of the whole colony, and it did.

We've not had any more stings, but we have had other stinging types, notably mud-daubers which yearly build their nests at our front door. Oh yes, Paul took his ring to a jeweler who soldered the parts so that the ring looks as good as new. The repair, after he had worn the ring for thirty years, cost more than the ring had originally.