

A WINGED PIRATE

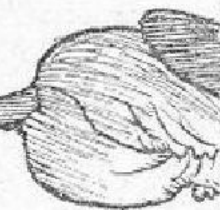
A Short Complete Nature Story

By

CLIVE FENN.



IT had been a long, hard day for the Bee; plenty of housework in the new hive, and any amount of trouble, too, for a most unlucky thing had happened that very morning. It was July, and the poppies were dropping their petals right and left. The brigade of honey getters had their work cut out for them, but the safety of the home was first consideration, after all, but there had been a calamitous occurrence.



GILBERT
REYNOLDS

It was this way. The night before a heavy-weighted snail—it was addressed as *Helix Aspersa* at the learned society meetings—had crawled for shelter into the hive, a most unusual and tactless act on its part, but the colimaçon, as the French call the snail, had been frightened out of its wits by a blackbird, and had slipped into the first shelter, which was the beehive, and—it is a grievous story—had died there from fright. This was what caused the bees to be late the following morning for the honey collecting parade. The dead snail was too heavy to move, and it could not be allowed to remain just as it was. The long and the short of it was the bees had to muster in force and build the ugly object in with wax so that no harm would accrue. It was an emergency measure, and the work was not over till the dawn. Consequently the Bee was fagged out from the first. He is ready for anything, but he is not always on the qui vive for the wasp, and so it was in this case. The Bee was an excellent honey merchant. Time was nothing to him. Trouble did not count. He slaved hard through the summer day, seldom pausing to dream, though he had his dreams, of course, dreams which thrilled him now and then as he darted through a garden where the hollyhocks nodded, and the sunflowers peeped over the wall, for he had his keen interest in life, his myriad duties, his home, and the special job which was his to carry on for a time, then to relinquish to another. So he had not bothered his head specially about the wasp, the pirate of his world.

The wasp was a privateer, often sailed under false colours, frequently showed that he was not really civilised. And it had been a tiring day—a day of working overtime all on account of the miserable and totally unexpected appearance of the snail the night before. How the ugly visitor had managed to pass the sentinels passed understanding. The guard was ordinarily smart enough, and barred every kind of intruder; in fact, brought their rifles down even if a caller had momentarily forgotten the password.

Oh, the unhappy business had caused a pretty commotion one way and another, though there was no risk now, thanks to the steps taken. The Bee had done his day's work at greater speed than usual, hardly stopping to talk at all, or admire itself in the shining waters of the lake in the garden at the squire's. The meadowsweet which grew close to the waterside was a specially favoured hunting ground as a rule, but the Bee was out for bulk, and the sunflowers gave it, also the *Harpalium Rigidum*, with its golden-yellow* flowers, and the giant hollyhocks, which were always a treat to be taken floor by floor. Not much to grumble at, and at last the Bee rested to take breath amidst the poppies.

He had paid great attention to the Shirleys, and regretted in his heart the decline of the summer. It was cheery to meet a ruminative Red Admiral perched close by. There is no serious rivalry in trade between the butterflies and the bees. They understand one another, and they entertain a mutual distrust of the wasp. But something for nothing, or at least for a very little trouble, is the wisdom of the wasp. The Bee was thinking of getting back hiveward. He had exchanged a few chatty nothings with the handsome Red Admiral when—whirr—bizz—the alarm was given, but too late. The wasp was on the alert. It was all so quick, the horrid deed done even before the Red Admiral could flit off for help. Down came the wasp, and its tired and laden victim collapsed under the fierce attack—the Bee was dead in a flash. No help came. The wasp cut away the tender body with its bag full of honey, leaving the hard portion to drop to the ground. Then, carrying its booty, the marauder sailed off in triumph—all the result of a toilsome day's work gained by a moment's murderous work.

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Blame the snail, blame the blackbird, blame the hive staff for letting an overtired bee go out to work; blame anybody. But you will admit the Bee had done its duty to the end!