



Robbing Frenzy

WE FOLLOWED THE PROFESSOR'S SMALL, WELL-WORN pickup truck out of the city, winding through pine forests and rocky shorelines dotted with peat bogs. The gray sky had opened up and fingers of sunlight reached through the scattered, cottony clouds. The constant, stiff wind that had buffeted us since our arrival was finally dying down and it looked like the day was going to turn out nice after all.

Twenty miles later, we arrived at a modest, white, wood-frame house sitting about a hundred yards off the road. The gravel driveway was hedged on the left by high, prickly gorse-like bushes sprinkled with small, pale-yellow flowers. To our right sat an old, freshly painted, white, wood-framed garage, which leaned slightly, as if surrendering to the constant ocean breeze. On a small patch of lawn beside the garage, a woman sat in a collapsible lawn chair, spinning wool with a drop spindle. As we drove past, she looked up and smiled. Professor Gaulton swung his little pickup into the garage, and we stopped on the grassy edge of the lane beside it.

Gaulton greeted his wife as he emerged from the garage and then introduced us. Judy was in her late fifties and was rather nice looking. The sunlight splashing on the last remnants of auburn in her graying hair brought out the hazel color in her eyes, while her rosy cheeks gave her

a healthy, vibrant glow. She remained seated on the chair and continued to spin from a woven reed basket full of black wool as she welcomed us. The afternoon weather had become glorious.

“Nice place you have here,” I said, admiring the neatly kept homestead. A small orchard laden with pink and white blossoms could be seen behind the house, and a newly planted vegetable and flower garden practically wrapped itself around the screened porch on one side of the building. Freshly washed tea towels looking like colored prayer flags stirring in the gentle breeze, hung out to dry on a rope strung between two trees in the yard. The blue sea could be seen beyond them in the distance, stretching past small, craggy islands and extending to the horizon. Crimson wildflowers blazed along a fence line that led toward the sea, and white sheep dotted a grassy meadow as if in a Wyeth painting. The smell of salt and sea wafted in the breeze, while the shrill call of sea birds shattered the otherwise quiet sky. The property lay on an inlet protected from the rough seas that pounded the shore further out. Tiny, rocky islands pierced the water in the bay.

“This is gorgeous!” exclaimed Annie, looking toward the verdant meadow and the endless blue sea beyond.

“We’ve been here a long time,” Judy replied, “and we wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. Places like this are hard to find nowadays.”

“You can say that again! How long have you been here?”

Judy glanced at the professor. “How long, Brian? Maybe twenty-five years, don’t you think?”

“About that,” the professor said absentmindedly. “Listen honey, these fine folks are related to Doctor Boggs. You remember her, don’t you? She taught at the University of Montana.”

“Yes, of course I remember. We all had lunch together the last time she was here, a year ago, I think it was.”

“Oh, right. Well, Joe and Annie have come all the way

from Pennsylvania just to visit us and find out about one of Dr. Boggs' pet interests — the robbing frenzy of hive insects. I have to attend to one of my hives right away because it is, in fact, being robbed even as we speak. This is a perfect opportunity for them to witness this unusual behavior. Perfect!" he said, rubbing his hands together excitedly.

Judy paid him little mind, and continued her spinning. "Don't mind him," she said to us. "He gets excited about that sort of thing."

"You folks came at exactly the right time," the professor said. "The chances of coming during an actual robbing frenzy are almost nil. Maybe there's more to that crystal stuff than we realize. So we need to get suited up and over to the apiary immediately. You folks aren't allergic to bee stings, are you?"

"I don't think so," I shrugged.

"Why? Are we going to get stung?" asked Annie.

"Not necessarily. It is possible, but we're going to get suited up in coveralls and bee veils, just in case. I keep extra suits around for my students. Luckily, the weather is perfect. Bees are much friendlier when the skies are clear and the humidity is low. If it was cloudy and humid today, they wouldn't want us to be messing with their hives. They'd be afraid of impending rain, which would be a disaster if their hive was open and the inside got wet. In any case, all we have to do is plug some holes, which won't take long. Come along, I'll show you."

"I'll start dinner. You are staying, aren't you?" asked Judy.

"Of course they are!" the professor answered for us.

We followed him to a shed attachment on the back of the garage, and he fitted us with white coveralls, bee veils, and long gloves that went nearly up to our elbows. He pulled a bee smoker off a shelf, which looked like a cross between a beverage pitcher and a small bellows, and stuffed some burlap inside it. He wadded up a piece of newspaper and stuffed it in the smoker, too, right beside

the burlap. Then he grabbed a pack of matches from a drawer and lit the paper, all the while gently squeezing on the bellows. Soon, a thick white smoke spewed out of the pitcher spout.

“Good, good,” he said. “Perfect! Let’s go before this damn fire goes out.” He grabbed a few more pieces of burlap and stuffed them into a pocket in his coveralls. “Just in case,” he said. “We don’t want to run out of smoke.”

“What’s the smoke for?” I asked.

“It pacifies the bees. They instinctively gorge themselves on honey when exposed to smoke. They must have evolved that behavior over eons as a result of fire in or near their trees, but I don’t know why exactly. It’s good for beekeepers because honeybees can’t sting when gorged on honey. For one thing, they’re not thinking about stinging when they have their little faces buried in a honey cell, and for another, their abdomen becomes so distended they can’t bend it enough to get their stinger into anyone. So I smoke them a little whenever I work with them. All we need now is some duct tape. Where is that damn duct tape?” The professor glanced around the ceiling. “Ah, here it is! Right where it’s supposed to be.” He grabbed the roll of silver tape that was hanging on a nail in a ceiling joist.

We walked, somewhat awkwardly with the bee suits on, through the tall grass behind the house and toward the orchard. A line of white, wooden bee hives stood sentry-like on the edge of the pasture. As we trudged stiffly along in single file, lifting our feet high to get through the hayfield, our bee veils and white garb made us look like astronauts walking on the surface of the moon. Three paces ahead of us, the professor trailed a thin stream of smoke, adding to the strangeness of our parade. As we neared the hives Professor Gaulton suddenly stopped.

“Look. Over there. The hive on the right. Far right. See it?” He pointed a gloved hand in the direction of the hives.

Annie and I stood in awe at the sight. Each of the five hives had a steady stream of honeybees pouring in and out

of what appeared to be a slot on one side of the hive body. The sweet aroma of honey hung thickly in the air. Bees flew out of these slots in droves, rising straight into the air in individual, thick, cloud-like columns, then turning and dissipating. Except something odd was happening at the hive on the far right. It was enveloped in a dense cloud of bees flying every which way.

“That’s the hive being robbed.” The professor pointed. “Those bees aren’t friendly when they’re in the middle of a robbing frenzy like that. Smoke won’t help a whole lot.”

“Won’t they gorge themselves?”

“Not when they’re robbing. Their entire psychology changes. They lose touch with their natural instincts. They become unfriendly, aggressive. The smoke will only keep the non-robbing *resident* bees away from us. On the other hand, the *robbing* bees, which don’t live in the hive being robbed, are so caught up in their pillaging that they won’t want to have much to do with us, anyway. Normal bees would come after us if they thought we were threatening their hive. Robbing bees don’t care about the hive. After all, they’re stealing from it.”

“Why don’t the resident bees defend the hive? Can’t they chase away the robber bees?” I asked him. “What are these robber bees, anyway? Are they honey bees? And why are they robbing only that one hive?”

“That’s what makes this behavior so extraordinary,” explained the professor. “The robber bees *are* honey bees, just like the ones in all of the other hives. They’re robbing *that* particular hive because it has a *hole* in it.”

“What do you mean, a hole?”

“There’s a hole, a back door, so to speak, in the hive. See that opening in the front, that wide slot on the bottom that the bees are going in and out of? That’s the hive door, which is guarded by the resident bees. It should be the *only* door into the hive. There should be no *back* door. The resident bees aren’t naturally programmed to defend an entry hole that isn’t supposed to be there. Yet, sometimes the wooden frame of the hive will rot a bit over time and a

hole will work its way through on the back side of the hive body. When a bee from another hive discovers this unguarded hole, that bee can enter the hive and take honey, sneaking it out the back door. Soon, bees from all over find out about the unguarded hole, and they begin stealing the honey, too. Then a full-scale robbing frenzy begins. The bees go crazy. That's why there's an agitated cloud of bees surrounding that hive. It's the robbing frenzy I was telling you about in my office."

"How often does this happen?"

"Not very. That's why I said you're damn lucky to be seeing this. It only happens when a hole accidentally appears in a hive. If you're a really good beekeeper, you'll never see a robbing frenzy. If you're more relaxed about it, like I am, then this kind of thing can happen once in a while."

"Once a year?"

"I've been keeping bees for fifteen years and this is the third time I've seen a robbing frenzy on one of my hives. Every time for the same reason — an old hive with wood starts to rot and a hole develops in the back of the hive."

"So what do you do about it?"

"That's what I'm going to show you right now. There are only two things that will stop it."

"Which are?"

"Obviously, it will stop when all the honey is gone. That happens much sooner than you may think. An entire hive can be depleted of its honey by the robbing bees in about one week. That's fifty or sixty pounds of honey gone forever. Then the hive will, unfortunately, die because the resident bees will starve during the winter months. For some reason, honeybees, which are normally very organized, efficient creatures, and which have evolved almost a perfectly sustainable lifestyle, will abandon their natural predilections toward sustainability and destroy each other when free honey becomes available. It's like people looting department stores during a riot. This is the perplexing bee psychology, if you will, of the robbing frenzy phenome-

non.”

“How else can it be stopped besides all of the honey being stolen?”

Professor Gaulton reached into his deep coveralls and pulled out the duct tape. Holding it in the air, he answered triumphantly, “Plug the hole.”

The professor walked over to the hive on the right, all the while squeezing away at the bee smoker, which gushed clouds of white smoke in front of him as he moved closer. We stood still. Soon, the entire hive was enveloped in smoke as if a forest fire was blazing nearby. The bee cloud visibly thinned, but did not dissipate completely. Bees bounced off Gaulton’s veil like tiny kamikaze pilots. We decided it was a good idea to keep our distance. Gaulton set the smoker on top of the hive, and then, with some difficulty due to his gloved hands, ripped off a piece of duct tape. He plastered it over the dime-sized hole, the unguarded “back door” to the hive, rubbing it good and hard to be certain it wouldn’t come off.

“That’s all it takes!” he shouted through his bee veil as he picked up the smoker and turned toward us, waving at the bees diving in front of his face. “I hope they didn’t take too much honey, the little bastards. Let’s go. Job done.”

The professor trudged off through the meadow toward the house, and with the buzz of bees behind us, we followed in close pursuit, a little puzzled by what we had just seen. The solution to this potentially self-lethal bee behavior seemed too simple — a piece of duct tape.

“Ah, Brian —,” I began to ask.

The professor sensed that he was about to be inundated with a barrage of questions. “Let’s get these outfits off and we can discuss what you saw in the meadow over a cup of tea in the house. Or better yet, you should try my homemade beer.”

“Sounds good to me!” said Annie. “I make beer, too!”

“She’s a brewmistress,” I explained.

Annie and the professor chatted amicably about their brew-making experiences as we removed our bee suits and

stowed the equipment. Soon we were in the house sampling a black, rich, double stout, the professor's specialty. He gave us a short walking tour of the house and garden, beers in hand, as the sun began to set in a blaze of red across the road. Back inside, we were greeted with the smell of bread fresh out of the oven, and seafood boiling on the stove in a large cast iron pot. Judy bustled around the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on what appeared to be a first class dinner. The professor ushered us into their cozy living room and brought another round of drinks, much to our pleasure. He settled into an overstuffed easy chair, propping his feet up on a matching ottoman. I could see a smile sparkling in his eyes; he already knew what I was dying to ask him.