

Dronings from a Queen Bee

Pants Are Overrated

By Charlotte Hubbard

I'm on a swarm list, and crave calls from people hoping I'll take away the stinging insects swaying under their picnic table, or from their kids' swing set. Most beekeepers love to capture swarms, but the timing can be tricky. You have to be ready to drop everything and go after them.

I've solved this timing challenge, because I now know when and where swarms will occur. *When?* Whenever I'm going out of town I'll get plenty of calls about bushel basket-sized swarms on low branches. *And where?* Always within a few miles of my home. (Golly, maybe they're my bees swarming!)

As an example, I travelled to Kentucky in early June. The first swarm call came within hours after leaving Michigan. A woman three miles from my house had a basketball-sized swarm of honeybees hanging from a tomato cage, which I also could have if I'd please-please-please take the bees away. Would I pretty please come get them? Soon??!

No, and I apologized to her profusely. I was truly, very, very sorry that I couldn't get that swarm, or the tomato cage.

Upon awakening in Kentucky the next day, I checked my phone. Two new messages. Two new swarms. Both allegedly mammoth; both within ten feet of the ground. I like to think that honeybees don't plot ways to mock me, but the second caller said the swarm giggled as they handed him my phone number on a small piece of paper.

We returned from Kentucky three days later. My phone, like the cat pouting because we abandoned him (with a cat sitter nonetheless) for three days, was oddly silent.

The next day I awoke to a sunshiny, low humidity, perfect Michigan day, and a phone call. Glory bee! The caller, a spirited, delightful retiree named Jimmy, had a swarm. Jimmy lived only a mile away. The swarm was huge. It was swaying a few feet off the ground on a dwarf tree in his backyard. It seemed too good to be true.



And it was.

We were there in 25 minutes, but the swarm was not. We wandered with Jimmy about his picturesque backyard, hoping to find the bees on a nearby, low-hanging branch.

We'd just met the chatty Jimmy, but he insisted on sharing a few important things with us. First, he loved the Lord. Second, he was afraid of bees. And third, he carried at least one gun with him at all times for protection. In fact, he had a pistol in his pocket right then. Jimmy seemed perplexed that his many guns were useless against the invading honeybees.

Rounding a corner, we heard buzzing (and I swear, giggling.) Bees were swirling about a nearby pine, and then settled about 15 feet up.

My husband Marshall, Jimmy, and I stared at the nice-sized cluster for several minutes. Marshall and I stared from directly under it. Jimmy stared, er, peeked from a barn door 20 feet away. Staring doesn't do anything to get them out of the tree, but every beekeeper I've ever seen capture a swarm spends several minutes just bee-holding it.

Of course this was too good to be true.

After more staring, Marshall and I considered going after them. We discussed where to precariously place the ladder, which branches we might have to prune, etc. Jimmy was very agreeable to our plan, because it involved making the stinging insects go away.

As a precaution, we suited up. Marshall donned his protective jacket, and oops, in our haste, he'd left the house wearing shorts.

I offered to dash home and fetch a pair of pants for him. Our home, containing pants, was a mere mile away.

"Don't bother. Pants are overrated," shrugged Marshall with a smile.

Jimmy, who was hopping up and down from stinging insect anxiety, gasped. "That's just not right!"

You know what else isn't right? Overanxious guys with guns in their pockets.

Marshall assured Jimmy he'd be fine, explaining the typical demeanor of swarms. Even if the swarm hadn't read the same books though, Marshall had a cranky ankle and knee. If there were stings, they'd be helpful.

That only increased Jimmy's already extremely high agitation. "They might sting you!! Marshall, it would tickle me pink if I could please lend you some pants," he reiterated.

Marshall again declined. For a few seconds I wondered if Jimmy would grab ones of his guns and insist that Marshall put on pants.



Marshall demonstrates that pants are overrated.

Marshall (minus pants), started up the ladder.

"By the way," whispered Jimmy loudly from his barn hiding place, "what church do you attend?"

I found that an interesting question at an interesting time. Did he want to be sure that if Marshall tumbled off the ladder he knew who his Maker was? Or that the bees were going to a good Christian home?

Sometimes swarm captures go as planned, and this was one of them. Marshall went up the ladder; the bees on a branch came down with him; none of them even thought about stinging. Jimmy resumed breathing regularly.

Thank God for bees, people who care for them, and people who call when they want them out of their backyards.