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The Wasp and the Cricket

Jean-Henri Fabre

At the end of July the Yellow-winged Wasp tears the cocoon that has protected her till then and flies out of her underground cradle. During the whole of August she is often seen flitting about the fields in search of honey. But this careless life does not last long, for by the beginning of September the Wasp must begin to dig her burrows and search for game for her family. For her burrows she usually chooses some sandy soil on the high banks by the side of the road. One thing is necessary: the site must receive plenty of sunshine.

Ten or twelve Yellow-winged Wasps usually work together. They scrape the earth with their fore-feet like mischievous puppies. At the same time, each worker sings her glad song, which is a shrill noise, constantly broken off and rising higher or sinking lower in a regular rhythm. One would think they were a troop of merry companions singing to encourage each other in their work. Meanwhile, the sand flies, falling in a fine dust on their quivering wings; and the too-large gravel, removed bit by bit, rolls far away from the work yard. If a piece seems too heavy to be moved, the insect gets up steam with a shrill note which reminds one of the workman's "Hoo!"

Soon the cave takes shape; the insect dives into it bodily. We still hear underground her untiring song, while every little while we catch a glimpse of her hind-legs, pushing a torrent of sand backwards to the mouth of the burrow. From time to time the Wasp comes outside the entrance to dust herself in the sun, and to rid herself of grains of sand. In spite of these interruptions, she manages to dig the gallery in two or three hours. Then she comes to her threshold to chant her triumph and give the finishing polish to her work by smoothing out some unevenness and carrying away a speck or two of earth.

There are two, three, or four cells in the Yellow-winged Wasp's burrow, in each of which lies an egg. But the Wasp does not content herself with one burrow: she digs about ten, all in the month of September, and she has to get food for all of them. She has not a moment to lose, when, in so short a time, she has to dig her burrows, procure a dozen Crickets or more for food for her families, and stop the burrows up again. Besides, there are gray days and rainy days during the month, when she cannot work.

The Yellow-winged Wasp is not content with comparatively defenseless Beetles and Caterpillars; she hunts the powerful Cricket. Watch her chasing one. The

terrified Cricket takes to flight, hopping as fast as he can; the Wasp pursues him hot-foot, reaches him, rushes upon him. There follows, in the dust, a confused struggle, wherein each fighter is in turn victor and vanquished, on top and underneath. The issue seems doubtful. But at last the Wasp triumphs. In spite of his vigorous kicks, in spite of the snaps of his pincer-like jaws, the Cricket is laid low and stretched upon his back.

The Wasp places herself upon him, belly to belly, but in the opposite direction. She grasps one of the threads at the tip of the Cricket's abdomen with her mouth and masters with her fore-legs the convulsive efforts of his thick hinder-thighs. At the same time her middle-legs hug the heaving sides of the beaten insect, and her hind-legs force the joint of the neck to open wide. The Wasp then curves herself outward so as to offer the Cricket no chance to bite her, and drives her poisoned sting once into the victim's neck, next into the joint of the front two rings of the thorax, or part next the neck, and lastly towards the abdomen. In less time than it takes to tell, the murder is done; and the Wasp, after making herself tidy again, gets ready to haul home the victim.



You must acknowledge she knows how to fight, better even than the Wasps who attack Beetles, or those who capture Caterpillars. Those insects cannot fly, they have no defensive weapons. What a difference between them and the Cricket! The Cricket is armed with dreadful jaws, capable of eating the vitals out of the Wasp if they succeed in seizing her; he has a pair of powerful legs, regular clubs bristling with a double row of sharp spikes, which can be used by the Cricket either to hop out of his enemy's reach, or to send her sprawling with brutal kicks.

Notice, therefore, the precautions the Wasp takes before setting her sting in motion. She turns the Cricket upon his back so that he cannot use his hind-legs to escape. She controls his spurred legs with her fore-feet, so that he cannot kick her; and she keeps his jaws at a distance with her own hind-legs. She makes him motionless by grasping one of the threads at the end of the abdomen. An athlete, an expert wrestler, could not do better.

Consider, also, her science. She wishes to paralyze the prey without killing it, so that it will remain in a fit condition for food for her babies for many weeks. If she should leave the Cricket any power of motion, it would knock the eggs off; if she killed it entirely, it would decay. How does she produce this paralysis? She does just what a surgeon would advise her to do; she strikes the nerve-centers of the different parts of the Cricket's body which are likely to do harm, the three

nervous centers that set the legs in motion.

If we look at the Cricket a week, two weeks, or even longer after the murder, we shall see the abdomen moving slightly, a sign that he is still alive.

After the Wasp has paralyzed her Cricket, she grips him with her feet, holding also one of his antennae in her mouth, and in this manner flies off with him. She has to stop sometimes to take a minute’s rest. Then she once more takes up her burden and, with a great effort, carries him in one flight almost to her home. The Wasp I am watching alights in the middle of a Wasp village. She makes the rest of her way on foot. She bestrides her victim and advances, bearing her head proudly aloft and hauling the Cricket, who trails between her legs, by the antennae held between her jaws. If the ground is bare, she has an easy time; but sometimes she meets with some spreading grass shoots, and then it is curious to see her marches and countermarches, her repeated attempts to get past, which she finally does by some means or other, either by flight or by taking another path.

At last she reaches home and places the Cricket so that his antennae exactly touch the mouth of the burrow. The Wasp then leaves him and goes down hastily to the bottom of the cave, perhaps to see that everything is as it should be and no other Wasp has made her nest there. A few seconds later she reappears, showing her head out of doors and giving a little cry of delight. The Cricket’s antennae are within her reach; she seizes them, and the game is brought quickly down to the lair.

When the Yellow-winged Wasp has stacked up three or four Crickets for each cell, she lays an egg on one of them and closes the burrow. She does this by sweeping the heaped-up sand outside the door down the burrow. She mixes fair-sized bits of gravel with the sand to make it stronger. If she cannot find gravel of the right size within reach, she goes and searches in the neighborhood, and seems to choose the pieces as carefully as a mason would choose the chief stones for his building. In a few moments she has closed up the underground dwelling so carefully that nothing remains to show where it has been. Then she goes on, digs another burrow, catches game for it, and walls it up. And so on. When she is through laying all her eggs, she goes back to the flowers, leading a careless, wandering life until the first cold snap puts an end to her existence, which has been so full of duties and excitements.

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