

# The Swarm.

## A story by Rosemary Henson

It had been warm and sunny all week. The apple blossom and the dandelions were over now, but the oilseed rape flowers were in full bloom and all the bees were hard at work.

The oldest workers were flying backwards and forwards as fast as they could go, fetching nectar and pollen from the golden yellow fields, doing their message dance on the combs inside the hive to tell their sisters where they had found all this lovely food, and hurrying back for more.

Some of the younger ones were on guard duty at the entrance, keeping watch for strangers who might try to steal the finished honey. Others were packing pollen into the cells close to the brood nest, where it would be handy for feeding to the babies, or fanning the runny nectar with their wings to dry off the extra water and turn it into thick, sticky honey that could be stored away for the winter.

Even the youngest bees had something to do. They were busy feeding the babies, cleaning out used cells and building new ones with wax that oozed from special glands under their skin.

As for the babies, they were growing like anything, the way babies do; some still looked like shiny white caterpillars, lying in rows in open cells, and some were already hidden away under wax covers spread right through the hive.

"A swarm!"

"We're going on a swarm."

"We're going NOW!"

"Hurry, hurry, or you'll get left behind."

Once they had made up their minds to join in the big adventure, all the bees who intended to go with the swarming party went to the nearest open honey cell and loaded up with as much food as they could carry. At a pinch, it would last them for about three days, if the weather turned nasty and they couldn't fly to look for more. Bees don't usually swarm if it is about to rain, but even they get caught out sometimes, and that is when a beekeeper ready to help them out can make all the difference.

When they were ready, they went outside to wait for the others, and soon the air was black with bees flying round in circles until everyone was ready.

Inside the hive, the queen's personal attendants stopped feeding and grooming her, and hustled her towards the door instead.

"Come on, they said."Never mind about that now. You're coming with us. There'll be plenty of space for you to lay when we get there."

"Where is that?" she asked.

It was a reasonable enough question, but no-one seemed to be worried about the answer.

As soon as they could smell that the queen was outside the hive, the waiting bees gathered round her to make sure that she was safely in the middle of the buzzing cloud, and then they all set off together on their great adventure.

The first thing they had to do was to get right away from the home hive, so that they could settle down and think clearly, without worrying about the duties they had left behind. This was going to be a completely new beginning.

Up they went, higher and higher, until they were out of the way of the incoming bees returning from the fields; then away, over the first hedge and then the next. As they flew, they kept circling round and round the queen, so the whole swarm seemed to be spinning like a top as it went along. Then they came to a really tall hawthorn hedge that had never been knocked about by a flail cutter. This would do nicely for a first stop on their journey.

At first they settled in small groups on separate branches, just to get their breath back, but as the bees in each little group realized that the queen was not with them, they took off again and flew around until they found her. So the main group gradually grew bigger and bigger, until the branch was bending under the weight of the bees clinging to it.

They got themselves organized, too. Those who were too far away from the branch to cling onto that clung onto each other instead, and they arranged themselves into a hollow rugby-ball shape. The queen and the youngest bees were in the middle and the oldest ones, the ones with the

strongest muscles ( and the strongest stings!) formed a shell on the outside. Each of these bees in the outer shell had her head tucked under the body of the one above her, so that all their wings overlapped like tiles on a roof; if it did start to rain, the water would run off and the inside of the cluster would stay dry. Then the excitement died away, and they settled down to wait.

Later that afternoon, the farmer's little girl saw them hanging in a tree. As soon as her Daddy stopped for his tea, she told him what she had seen. At first he thought she had made a mistake, but he walked across the field with her to have a look, and, sure enough, there they were. They were not in any danger, as they were high up in the tree and on the sheltered side of the hedge. They were not in anybody's way, either, so he left them alone and went back to his grass-cutting.

While the main swarm rested quietly, saving their strength, and their food supply, for the big building job that was still to come, a few scouts set out in all directions.

This time they were not looking for food but for a good place to build their new home. It had to be just right: big enough to hold at least twice as many of them as there were now, plus enough food to last them through the winter, with plenty to spare in case the spring was late. It had to be dry and warm, airy but not draughty, and solid enough not to shake on a windy day; something that might fall to bits in a storm was no use at all. And the entrance had to be small enough to give the guards a fair chance of keeping the wasps out. It was a lot to ask.

The scouts really tried hard. They flew far and wide, crawling into every likely looking hole. From time to time they returned to the swarm with a dance message, inviting the others to come and have a look at what they had found, so that they could vote on it. But the answer was always the same: "It's no good - it won't do."

All the best holes had already been taken. They were too late. But they kept on searching anyway; there was nothing else they could do.

Two days later, as the farmer was hurrying out to the field with his last load of cut grass for making into silage, he saw that the bees were still hanging there and he felt sorry for them, because now there were thick rain clouds covering the sky, so he telephoned a beekeeper to ask for help.

Soon afterwards two beekeepers arrived, all dressed up in their special clothing: white overalls, with zips instead of buttons to keep the bees out, leather gloves with long cuffs to close off the ends of their sleeves and big black veils to keep the bees away from their faces.

The ends of their trouser legs were tucked into wellies, to stop the bees from crawling up inside.

They had brought a nice new empty hive, which they set up ready at the side of the field, and a big cardboard box from the supermarket.

The branch where the bees were hanging was too high to reach, so they borrowed a long handled rake to pull it down. Then one of them held up the box as close to the swarm as she could reach, hoping it was directly underneath, while the other caught hold of the branch with the rake and shook it hard.

It worked. The clustering bees lost their grip on each other and the branch and flopped into the cardboard box. With a cloth over the top to keep them inside, the box of bees was carried over to the empty hive and tipped into it. A couple of sharp taps on the bottom of the box made sure they all fell out into the hive before they knew what was happening.

Then the beekeepers gently lowered some wooden frames holding sheets of wax foundation in on top of the bees, giving them time to move aside so as not to squash them. The frames all had spacing pieces on the ends to keep them parallel to each other and the right distance apart. The bees would build nice neat combs on them, and they soon started climbing up on them to have a look.

As soon as the last frame was in place the beekeepers put on the inner cover and then the roof of the hive. Eventually the bees would stick all the pieces together with sticky bud glue gathered from trees, but for the time being the beekeepers put a strong strap right round the hive to keep it safe

Then they stepped back to watch

Of course, not all the bees had fallen neatly into the box when they were shaken off the branch, and a lot of the ones that had been shaken into the hive had climbed straight out again before it was covered, so there were still a lot of bees flying about feeling lost and unhappy. Some of them went back to the places where they had first settled, but of course

the queen wasn't there any more, so that didn't make them feel any better.

As soon as the bees inside the new hive had recovered from their surprise and were sure that the queen was inside with them, they set about getting their new home organized.

Meanwhile some of them went and stood in the entrance to call their sisters in from the hedge. This they did by facing the inside, with their tails up in the air and their scent glands showing. They held on tightly with their feet, to stop themselves from flying away, and beat their wings like fans so that the family smell spread away from the hive like a signpost for the others to follow.

Soon other bees began to arrive , guided in by the smell - just a few at first, then more and more, until they looked like a brown moving carpet on the ground. They landed in the grass, walked up to the entrance and began to disappear inside just as the first raindrops were starting to fall.

It was going to be all right after all.