

THE WAYS OF A WASP



MY first serious experiences with wasps began when I was a boy. Like most boys who live in the country, I was keenly interested in birds—and their nests. I had explored the mysteries of the oriole's swinging home, the crude habitation of the nighthawk and the dainty downy retreat of the wren. Barn-swallows, song-sparrows, robins, crows and blue-birds had in turn revealed the marvels of their abodes;

but, as yet, the woodpeckers, great and small, had kept above my reach.

I saw them entering dark holes in lofty dead trees, or branchless stubs, impossible for a small boy to climb. I knew their nests must be in these holes for I could often hear the young woodpeckers clamoring for their dinner. Such a racket they made, too, when the mother bird, with a squirming morsel in her mouth, poked her head in the doorway! She would generally pause with her head cocked to one side, as if enraptured with this delightful music, before diving into the hole and closing one gaping mouth with a fat grub.

But one day I came across a woodpecker's hole in an old beech-tree which leaned over a deep pool in the creek. I saw my chance to explore a woodpecker's nest at last, and eagerly, though carefully, "shinned up" the smooth trunk. Arriving at the hole, I rapped on the tree to arouse the young nestlings. A humming sound greeted me. The birds were at home—and awake; so I thrust in my hand to explore the interior of the dark hole. I touched something; and then something touched me. With a yell I pulled out my hand. A swarm of black-and-yellow demons came tumbling out of that hole and fell upon me. I did not stop to shin down the tree; I just rolled off and fell headfirst into the creek. When I came up to breathe, a yellow-jacket drove his bayonet into the end of my nose. So I submerged, as the submariners say, and managed to propel myself under water to the opposite bank of the creek, where I carefully crawled into the underbrush and so made my escape. It was many moons before I ventured to explore another woodpecker's nest, and then I made sure it was inhabited by woodpeckers.