THE HISTORY OF THE REVEREND DIVER AND THE COLLECTING CEREMONY

by Sybilla Pamela Hunter

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A SHORT HISTORY OF THE REVEREND DIVER AND THE COLLECTING CEREMONY

by Sybilla Pamela Hunter of Vanes 12 years old 1938

A brief history of my family's house and the ceromony which takes place every year.

I'll sing you twelve, O, Twelve come for the comb, O! What are your twelve, O? Twelve for the twelve new hunters, Eleven for the eleven who went to heaven,

Ten for the ten commandments, Nine for the nine bright shiners, Eight for the Spring Collectors, Seven for the seven stars in the sky, Six for the six-sides of the comb, Five for the five proud walkers, Four for the honey makers, Three, three, the rivals, Two, two, the beloved girls, Clothed all in green, 0, One is one and all alone and evermore shall be so.

There was a place of worship on this very spot over a thousand years ago. As you climb up to the cliffs, the ancient woodland winds like a ribbon between the village of Larcombe and the beginning of the moorland. Above these woods at the top of the cliffs someone built a chapel. No one knows quite how the building would have looked, but it was hexgonal, the same shape as a cell in a hive. At some point the building collapsed - it is not known how, but local legend said it was knocked down by a terrible storm one night, the greatest wave ever seen in England which crashed up and over the cliffs. The sea was angry, they said. Locals deserted the church - the lepers, hiding in the woods, had nowhere to go, their hives, on the edge of the wood, were all gone; the tiny rectory, set back from the cliffs, was destroyed too.

Soon after that, some time in the late eighteenth century Caradoc Diver came to the village. He had come across the country in answer to the call of the diocese for help. In the hallway of our house, Vanes, there is a portrait of the Reverend C. Diver. We can see he was a tall, rangy man, with fierce pale- green eyes, their expresion intense, deep set within a protruding skull, against a black backdrop which has now faded to a deep kind of aubergine over the centuries. On the table next to him sit five handbells, his one long index finger resting on the middle one, as if he is about to pick it up and shake it. From books and letters in the house and what the villagers have handed down about him we know various facts about Reverend Diver's early life. He had grown up in Pickering, by the North Yorkshire moors, the son of an apprentice glovemaker. The family was very poor, and as a child Diver sold scraps of kid at the market; this fear of poverty followed him through his life. His father violently opposed the 'New Dissenters' and the visits John Wesley made to the town to spread his message of Nonconformism. I think this made an impresion on him. I think he saw what might be possible. Thanks to the aid of a rich local supporter who recognised the promise in the young man Diver studied at Trinity College, Oxford, where he sang in the choir, and become a keen apiarist which is someone who is a collector of different species of bee and their honey. I was unable to find out how he came to Somerset, how he heard of the living vacancy. But come he did, in the 1780s, and there he found a ruined church, no rectory, no incumbent for over

a decade, no glebe farm.

The parish of Larcombe was rotten. For years no vicar could be found, and the Reverend Culney, vicar at Crowcombe, the neighbouring parish, refused to perform the funerals of either the lepers living in the woods or the battered bodies thrown up onto the rocks by the sea, saying he did not know if they were Christian men or not. So many men lost their lives that way, and the number of services that had to be held was dreadfuly hard on the local inhabitants - watching the ship pitch and roll in the storm, knowing the poor souls on board were doomed but for a miracle, knowing the coast was too trecherous for them to attempt to land. This same vicar also declared he would not oppose any parishioners who burned the woods in an attempt to rid them of the leper colonies - at that time there was a particularly large one, men and women enslaved from Assam and shipwrecked many years

earlier, driven into the woods, who would creep out at night and steal, the poor desparate souls.

Poverty in this wild harsh country was everywhere, and a bad harvest meant certain starvation to some villagers and their families. A blind eye was turned to the foul habit of 'wrecking', where men, women and children risked their own lives on the rocky, violent shoreline, scrabbling for treasure from the shipwrecks. I myself find it disgraceful that such things occurred but they did I am sorry to say. The wreckers would rob dying men of their coins; they once found a heart, pierced on a rock, and one man fed it to his pig. The local landowner around these parts was then a dastardly fellow named Smythe, but he took no interest in the people and his own land, leeching from them to line his own pockets. All was as I say rotten, when Caradoc Diver arrived.

Partly to solve the problem, partly to make it go away, at Diver's entreaties the Bishop agreed a new parish could be

formed, but in his records it was referred to as 'a parish of the damned.' Diver was given some modest rebuilding funds - no one to this day knows where the rest of the money came from, but later people said the Devil left a small bag of gold on the door of the chapel. He rebuilt the chapel around the ancient hexagonal floor (giving it the carved wall panels and the too- elaborate vaulted ceiling which later collapsed), and it was Reverend Diver for whom the house was built - a manse in size and scale comparable to a small Manor House rather than the more modest rectory in Larcombe, greatly to the disgust of the vicar of that parish. And while building went on, every day the Revered Diver (I typed Revered - that is quite appropriate!) went to the farms and cottages, the huts and shacks thereabouts, trying to persuade people to come and worship in their own parish again, not to cross to Crowcombe or, which would be worse, to the Chapel at Winsford. He went to the woods, and talked to the lepers, and invited them to come and worship. The story goes that they gave him some of their honey, and that he carried it back to the house with him.

'We have built a chapel for lost souls,' he said, and it is recorded in the diary of George Red, a farmer's son who became a great pamphleter and abolitionist in Bristol. 'We have raised up a sanctury with money sent from the Lord.'

But no one came. Every Sunday, Reverend Diver would wait at the door, the wind blowing in his face, and no one came. Six long months came and went and no one came - the warmest summer for many years fading into one of the finest autumns in men's memorys, with a rich harvest and much rejoicing, and then the storms began. And every month or so Diver would have to perform the funeral rites of a sailor lost at sea, would have to drag the bodies up from the rocks with only the help of the sexton, a local man called Ned Watchet, whose family had lived in

the district for many generations. The villagers could not plunder shipwrecks any more, not when the vicar was so often down at Larcombe, keeping an eye on them. Ned Watchet told everyone the vicar was a strange one, who beleived things that weren't in the Bible, but a good 'un the same. He told them about the chapel, inlaid with carved stone panels showing scenes from the Bible, Samson breaking open the jaws of the lion and taking the honey from its corpse, St Bartholomew, tending the bees, the leper squint for those who could not come inside, who were shunned, to partake. He told them the vicar had given him, and his family, rost beef and plum pudding on Christmas Day. But still no one came. And then it was winter, cruel and long, and more sailors died, more services were had, and Diver said nothing about his lot, but hauled the bodies up from the rocks himself, his tall frame ripling with sinew, thick hair growing longer. His funds, the mysterious money that had enabled him to build a grander house and chapel than he had ever been allotted money for, had dwindled to nothing. He received no tithe that autumn. Underneath the muscle he was thin. No one came.

And then they say one May morning, when the countryside was at the height of its beauty, when the swallows and swifts dived up and over him as he walked through the fields to the chapel, Reverend Diver found something had come. A vast swarm of bees had landed inside one of the tombs in the chapel that were tightly stacked like hives themselves.

Have you ever seen a swarm of bees, dear reader? One hundred and fifty thousand or more there can be of them. They are not yellow & gold. They are black, like a cloud, like a reptile, moving smoothly, acting as one. They understand each other, and we who have conquered the Earth and understand the skies - we still do not even understand how bees talk to each other, how they know what they know. This swarm did not move, and the Reverend did not ask them to move. With the last of his money he bought from a friend of Ned Watchet's a skep, a hive made of willow reeds, coiled into the hive shape. He caked it with the salty mud from the flats on the beach. Then he kneeled down in the chapel and he said a prayer over them. Standing in the empty space, the sound of the gentle, menasing humming outside, he blessed the bees for finding him, for visiting him, and he asked them to stay. He made a pact with them, in fact.

I will protect you with this vow: if anyone tries to remove you, the Devil will remove them. If anyone takes more than his share of your honey, the Devil take them. If anyone comes here and lies to you, and does not tell you their secrets, the Devil will see his heart's desires and strike him down. Half for us and half for you, else the Devil take us all.

There are those who say he did not invoke the Devil, but it must be true, because of what happened.

That Sunday, and the following, still no one came. And he said the words again, and by now the bees were settled inside the tombs and inside the skep, which he set upon the ground outside the chapel and they did not like being disturbed. They were angry bees, and it remains true to this day.

Finally, he went into the village and bought a slab of sugar and set it upon the wall beside the chapel, and the bees were grateful, but still no one came.

A month went by and he waited at the chapel door to welcome his flock, but no one came, and now Reverend Diver grew angry. He was brown from summer sun. 'I wish I hadn't helped you,' he screamed at the bees, and only Watchet heard him, and he was used to his madness by then.

Then it was the end of summer, 24th August, feast day of St Bartholomew, patron saint of bees and glovemakers, and Reverend Diver came early to the church, his eyes downcast, sunken in their sockets. He stood by the door, waiting.

And then he felt a hand on his arm, and up he jumped, almost out of his wits. There was Ned Watchet and his wife Lily, and their two children. 'We thought we'd worship with you today,' he said. 'Seeing as how the Reverend Culney's been taken ill.'

And as he was seating them inside the small space, he heard a cough, and there was young Amabel Turleigh, the fresh young governess over at the Hall, with Augusta Dawson, the formidable housekeeper, and Amabel could not meet his eye, for she was desperately shy, but Mrs Dawson told him she'd risen that morning with a sudden desire to worship the Lord.

'Come, Mrs Dawson,' he said, kindly. 'Come in and be seated. God is here.'

'Come child,' Mrs Dawson said briskly to Amabel, who raised her dark eyes to his, blushing furiously, and the Reverend clucked her under the chin.

'You are safe here, my dear,' he said, his finger resting underneath her jaw for a moment. 'Be not afraid.'

'Yes, sir,' she said, and Mrs Dawson watched, approvingly, but old Ned saw this, and was troubled.

And more behind them, the Locksleys over at Larcombe Hall, for the curate had been taken ill there too, paralysed in the night they said, and then Pauly Goddard and his family, they'd walked all the way from Tors Head, and more and more until the tiny chapel was full, then finally out of the woods the lepers came, and they stood at the window, and the others watched them with respect, and said nothing, everyone listening to Caradoc Diver preach. He found he had to shout to be heard over the sound of the bees.

'Today a miracle has happened,' he called, to them all. 'You came, in faith, to worship our Lord, to stand devotion, and you came because I - I asked it.'

There was a fresh honeycomb inside one of the tombs. He reached inside and tore off some of the paper- thin comb, and ate it. The sugar burned his tongue, the back of his mouth, and he gave some to old Ned, who closed his eyes.'

'Tis good honey,' the older man said, nodding.

The Reverend Diver thought suddenly of the bees, and the pact he had made, but then brushed it aside. He stared instead at the faces of the congregation, packed so tight in, staring at him. He had them. He had them now. 'Come, take some. Here, and here.' Glancing at Mrs Locksley's scandilized expression he said: 'It is not the communion, Mrs Locksley. It is an honest declaration of thanks for what God has provided. For does not Milton say: Let us with a gladsome mind?'

And he tore of a small piece of the comb, and handed it to her, and when she tasted it, her eyes were lit from within with golden fire, and she smiled.

The Reverend Culney over at Larcombe never recovered from what had ailed him that morning. He was found dead outside his cottage, face down in a rose bush. So those from Larcombe stayed with Reverend Diver. They had tasted the honey, and rumours soon began to abound about its properties. Some said there was magic in it, or a madness, that it made you invincible, that it sent you crazy. But still the congregation swelled.they came, and others joined them.

Reverend Diver was grateful. He reaped the benefit of the bees. He called the chapel St Bees, though it had been dedicated to St Dunstan, an abbot who had apparently several times defeated the Devil. His congregation swelled. It was rumoured that he had cured the lepers in the woods. But this was a rumour I believe was set about by him, the lying Devil.

Smart people, Lord and Lady Lowther and so forth, started to come. The Reverend

I think wanted to be part of history. That is why he set up the ceremony he called the Collecting, to give thanks for the resurrection of the parish and the saving of lost souls, every year at the end of the summer, on St Bartholomew's Day. No one needed to wreck any more. The crops did not fail. The harvest was always good. But there were no more lost souls rescued from the sea, as the Reverend had been begged by Lady Lowther not to risk his own body down there. So the bodies lay pinned on dark spikes through winter and summer, visible from the cliffs above, cut to ribbons as the months went by.

At the end of summer every year on St Bartholomew's day came the procession of villagers, holding beeswax candles. They came up from the old, now- abandoned church in Larcombe through the winding lanes and paths through the wood, high up onto the cairn called the Vane Stones up on the hill where they had lit a beacon to warn of the approaching Spanish Armada over two hundred years ago, then through the garden down to the chapel. The villagers sang, softly, and people who heard it always said it sounded like angels, walking towards you through the old pathways. My own grandmother tells of how as a girl she came across the procession, in the lanes, and the sound of it drove her to follow up, up onto the plain where stood the chapel, and it is there she first saw my grandfather.

Those who were there report that they felt the presence of God, laying His light on them, that they felt His touch upon their shoulders. And then to the chapel, where the Reverend removed the combs from the recesses in the walls, giving the honey that came from them to the assembled guests - some say the ceremony took on a certain Bacchanelian aspect at this point, and madness ensued, others say that is greatly exaggerated. They certainly used the silver spoons Lady Lowther had had commissioned for Caradoc Diver as a gift. But still, some whispered it was sacriligeous, like a taking of communion.

The Reverend Diver was well- known, if the shameful business with the and young governness who went missing and who was found up by the Vane, Stones was of interest to some and if Lady Lowther's absence from the home for six months was remarked upon by no one but noticed by all and if he had a temper and ego that grew through the years, well, people were grateful enough for the miracle of God's presence and the effects of the honey they felt to say nothing more of it. I myself know what both those events were about and leave it to the reader to draw his own conclusions. Everyone who was present at the Collecting when Diver presided over it claims extraordinary events took place. That the Reverend called up the Holy Spirit, that He was there, he answered them, he held them close, they felt all worry and hunger and illness disappear, all because of Reverend Diver.

And then one day, without word to anyone, he hanged himself in the church.

Ned Watchet found him, but he never revealed what was in the note he left behind. As Ned was cutting him down, he was found by the churchwarden, who fainted clean away at the expression on the dead man's face.

They said, in the village, and in the surrounding countryside, that he had been seen muttering to himself out in the lanes and up on the moor late at night in the long summer twilight. They said that he lured the bees using dark magic. That he took too much of their honey, for if you don't leave enough for winter they have nothing to live on, for why else do they make it if not for themselves? Wasn't that the pact he'd made with them, and with the Devil, to leave them their honey?

I am sorry to say some said the little governness had been in an 'interesting condition' when they found her. They said the bees drove Diver mad, that their droning bored into his brain and helped him lose his senses. The five handbells were scattered at his feet. Ned gathered them up, and polished them, and put them back in the bible box of his old master, and the candlesticks and the spoons, and left them in the house.

As a suicide, the Reverend could not be buried in the churchyard. At Ned's suggestion the remains were taken up onto Exmoor, to the Vane Stones high up overlooking the sea, and buried there.

There was often trouble at the village after his death. Larcombe became a black place, where the Good Leper Inn was notorious along the coast and smuggling and all sorts were rife. Reverend Diver's name became sanctified. He was not to be insulted. Vicars would not stay up at Vanes. The house was too lonely, too cold, too wild, but mainly far too grand - how had he persuaded the Church to build such a palace! Still, the bees came back every year, some in greater years than others.

In the end the Church of England was glad to sell it off. My family, the Hunters, had some connection with the house. My great- grandfather Hunter was a beekeeper of some renown and had made money in the mines in Somerset. His father had taken part in the Collecting ceremonies as a boy and had often talked about them with wonder. Great- grandfather Hunter wished to out- do his father, and could find no greater solution than to buy this house. When another bad storm, as bad as the Great Wave before it, destroyed the roof of the chapel, a month after he bought Vanes he did not take it personally. He kept the tradition of the Collecting going, preserved the house, fitting it out with Victorian flourishes. By the time Charles Hunter, my brother, was born in 1925, the ceremony was long re- established. This summer I will, along with my sister Rosalind, take the part of one of The Beloved Girls who process at the rear of the procession, symbolizing the purity of our mission, of the honey, of our lives

here. It is our honour and duty to keep it going. I myself am happy to do so only as long as we Hunters understand the rules : half for us and half for them, else the Devil take us all.

Sybilla Pamela Hunter Vanes, Somerset, 1938