

## Collecting Recollections

Long years ago in primary school I collected cigaret cards as other boys did then. We swapped cards for other items and if we had duplicate cards we tried to swap those for ones we had not did not have. Then there was the possibility of winning cards; the game consisted of flicking the cards and if one landed on top of one of your opponent's, you collected his card as you retrieved yours. It was also, of course, a way of losing cards. But collecting cigaret cards lasted only as long as the craze lasted among us.

Also, like many boys of the time, I collected stamps. I had a stamp album and would save up money to buy packs of special stamps and carefully mount them with stamp hinges. I seem to recollect that on some pages I had almost complete collections of certain sets of stamps, but other pages were a good deal more meagrely filled. I never stuck at it and as I became more involved with other things at grammar school, the stamps became more and more neglected. I do not recall what happened to my partially filled stamp album; it was possibly thrown out or given to one of the many village jumble sales.

Alas, I have never been a systematic collector. But it was while I was at grammar school that I became friendly with a *real* collector. He was, if I recall correctly, a year older than me. He and his sister and three brothers, all younger than him, had been brought up in southern India where his father had been a missionary. But now his parents had returned to England and had settled in our village.

He was – and I am sure still is – a keen biologist. He had two sets of collections, both begun some years before when he lived in India. One, which he kept in a green house, were collections of succulents and cacti. He looked after them with great care; each plant should receive its proper amount of water at the correct intervals and he waged determined war against mealybugs. I helped him with the latter. Whenever cacti did decide to flower, it is true their flowers were very pretty. But if you really want flowers, cacti are not what you go for.

I do not know how many of them came from the wild in India; for, although in Britain we have succulents such as sedums, houseleeks and hen-and-chicken plants, cacti are not exactly common. Presumably many of his plants had been bought. But, I confess, I never really warmed to these somewhat inert green things.

His other and greater passion was insects. He had large collections of Coleoptera and Lepidoptera or, in lay terms: beetles, butterflies and moths. They were all dead and carefully pinned out and labelled in many different trays. The collection had clearly begun in India, as I could see from exotic and colourful beetles and butterflies in the collections.

But now in Britain he had more insects to collect. I found insects considerably more interesting than succulents and cacti. They were, in my view, more colourful and more varied; and, before my friend put them in a killing jar, they moved and flew and did interesting things. My friend's enthusiasm for insects rubbed off on me and I have retained an interest in, and respect for, insects of all kinds right up to the present day. They are, in my opinion, fascinating creatures.

But I digress. I learnt how to use a butterfly net properly and though I could put any selected creature into a killing jar – not exactly difficult to do – I left the mounting, labelling and so forth to him. Luckily for many insects, I am

sure, I never got the collecting bug – certainly not to have row upon row of dead insects.

I did, however, learn a good deal from my friend about insects of all sorts, not just Coleoptera and Lepidoptera, and about their habits. I learnt much on the long walks we took in the summer holidays. We would go for the whole day, walking some twenty miles or more across the Sussex Weald and, more often than not, reaching the South Downs before returning home. Looking back now over more than half a century, these walks all become confused into one long glorious summer day of walking. Did the sun really always shine? I guess if the weather was going to be bad we would put off any walking till another day.

Indispensable for these walks was a good Ordnance Survey map; though I recall more than one occasion when some farmer disagreed with our interpretation of the map and we had to retrace our steps.

The butterfly net was also another essential piece of equipment, as well as a killing jar and some other jars to put insects in, both dead and alive. A magnifying glass or two were included and we always took with us a large umbrella. This sometimes caused comments from people we met, as there was little or no chance of rain on the days we chose.

The umbrella, however, was very useful when it was *inverted*. If we came to an interesting looking tree, the opened and inverted umbrella was placed beneath it as a branch or two were shaken. If we were lucky the umbrella would fill with all sorts of creepy crawlies which would then be sorted through.

Caterpillars were always interesting. They were either returned to the tree or, if my friend wanted to keep some, they would be placed in a suitable jar, large enough to accommodate them with leaves and twigs from the tree. These would then be raised by my friend until they pupated and eventually emerged as adult butterflies or moths.

I learnt that caterpillars are voracious eaters, stuffing themselves non-stop from the day they hatch till the day when they have glutted themselves enough and are ready to pupate. It is fascinating holding a leaf with a hungry caterpillar on it next to one's ear; you can really *hear* the creature munching non-stop. But, although they are such voracious eaters, they are also very fussy. It is simply no good putting caterpillars into a jar and stuffing in just any old leaves; they insist on the ones they have been devouring since birth; generally nothing else will do.

The umbrella also caught other interesting things, but adult insects had a habit of flying off, though beetles often waited around long enough to be looked at or even handled.

It was on these walks I learnt the names of many butterflies: the orange tips, large whites and marbled whites, meadow browns and common blues, brimstones, the various fritillaries, tortoiseshells, peacocks, red admirals, commas, coppers and skippers, and doubtless others I have forgotten.

Moths, being for the most part nocturnal, were not normally encountered on these walks. Their caterpillars, on the other hand, often caused excitement – especially the various hawk moth caterpillars. But for the adults, there was a moth trap which my friend would place overnight in his garden. It was, if I remember correctly, a large round canvass bag in which a mercury bulb was placed; the light attracted the moths and the bag was so designed that any that entered could not escape.

As soon as possible in the morning we would examine the trap; any interesting moths might then meet their fate as additions to my friend's

collection. Other moths were released, either finding somewhere to rest up during the day or providing the local birds with extra protein.

Certainly some moths are dowdy, but I discovered there are interesting and colourful moths: the cinnabar moths, the buff tips and the lovely tiger moths and, of course, those hawk moths – privet hawk, poplar hawk, elephant hawk and, most prized of all, the death's head hawk, the largest of all British moths with its patch of short yellow hairs on its thorax looking just like a skull.

Nor was his collecting confined to Coleoptera and Lepidoptera; it might include other insects, though these were not killed and mounted. One in particular I remember was a dragonfly larva fished out of a pond near his house. He kept it in an aquarium, suitably furnished with mud, weed and rocks to make it feel at home. But dragonfly larvae are both voracious and carnivorous. It meant that every day we had to go to the pond and collect enough invertebrates to keep the hungry creature fed. I do not recall what happened to it in the end; I do not remember there being any Odonata in his collection of pinned and labelled insects and I think it was returned to the pond before it was ready to climb out of the water and metamorphose into an adult.

Eventually, his family moved from the village down to the south coast and I began to lose touch. He went to Trinity College, Cambridge, to read Entomology while I went to Southampton University to read Classics and we lost complete touch with one another.

I rather expect he has remained a collector, but I have never become a serious collector. I like cooking and collect interesting recipes, mainly for ideas and inspiration rather than simply to follow them; but there is no system in this, nor are the recipes kept in any one place as a proper collection.

Also, having been interested in languages and their structure ever since I can remember, I do have a collection of books on about fifty different languages. These books, however, have not been collected in any systematic way and, as there are more than seven thousand known living languages on our planet, I am sure a serious collector would scorn the paltry number I have.

There *is*, however, one complete collection that do I have: the stories, poems and memoirs I have written for the Moles.