

The story of *Pulex imperator* Westwood, 1858

by F.G.A.M. SMIT

Few, if any, of the younger generation of entomologists will know the amusing story of *Pulex imperator*. Recently it has been retold very concisely in the periodical *Vasculum* (1951, 36 [4]: 25-26), apparently by the editor, Prof. J.W. HESLOP HARRISON, since it appears under the heading «Editorial». In this note, however, no references are given to the original description of the Emperor Flea or to any other printed information on the subject, but a thorough search through the literature has yielded several statements on Westwood's «flea» which may prove of interest. First comes the witty record by Thos. Jno. BOLD in his «Notice of Insects added to our Fauna, during the year 1856» (1858, *Trans. Tyneside Nat. Fld Club* 3: 295-297):

P. 295: «Amongst the additions made to our insect fauna, during the year 1856, will be found some species of very great rarity, and which are now for the first time recorded as British. One of these, however, will not, I fear, be regarded as an acquisition, or looked on with much favour, for, belonging to a tribe of insects whose irritating punctures are so familiar to all, I can scarcely hope our members to hail with pleasure the addition to our local fauna of a flea, at least ten times the bulk of the common species, although it comes under their notice with the high-sounding title of Emperor. One consolation, however, I must not omit to mention, to wit, the fact that he was dead when found, and that, so far, no heirs of the Imperial line have turned up to claim the family honours: let us hope that he was the last of his race.»

P. 297: «*Pulex Imperator* Westwood. A friend of mine, resident in Gateshead [Durham], brought an immense flea, which he had found in his bed, for my examination. Not being able to

identify it, I forwarded the creature to J.O. WESTWOOD, Esq., by whom it has been described as new, under the above appellation, in a paper recently read before the Linnaean Society.»

The description by WESTWOOD was not published in one of the publications of the Linnaean Society, as stated by Mr. BOLD, but appeared in *Proc. Ent. Soc. London*, 1858: 70. Here we read that:

«Mr. WESTWOOD also exhibited [May 4, 1857] a gigantic species of flea, for which he proposed the specific name of *imperator*. The specimen, which is about twenty times the size of the common *Pulex irritans*, was found dead in a bed at Gateshead.»

However, the reign of the Emperor of the Fleas did not last long. In *Proc. Ent. Soc. London* 1858-1859: 60, we read that:

«He [Mr. WESTWOOD] also exhibited [March 7, 1859] an insect which he had received some time previously from Mr. BACKHOUSE, of Gateshead, as a gigantic flea, and which he had exhibited to the Society on the 4th of May, 1857 (without, however, having previously had an opportunity of carefully examining it), and for which he then suggested the name of *Pulex Imperator*. He had, however, recently examined the insect more minutely, and had ascertained that it was a very young larva a *Blatta*, much distorted by being crushed flat in rather an oblique position, and with most of the limbs broken off. A small portion of the base of one of the multi-annular antennae was visible in such a situation as to seem like a part of the mouth, but on microscopically examining it, as well as the portions of the legs still remaining, it became evident that the insect was not a flea, and on dissecting the mouth, its true character was at once detected.»

The true identity of the fallen Emperor was ultimately made known by Malcolm BURR in his note «On the British Orthoptera in the Hope Museum, Oxford.» (1900, *Ent. Rec.*, 12 [4]: 98):

«*Blatta orientalis*, L.—...There is one crushed and mutilated nymph, mounted on card with the label «Larva of a *Blatta*, sent »by Mr. Backhouse from Gateshead, as a flea, and exhibited »by J.O.W. at Ent. Soc. as *Pulex imperator*.» This is the original type of Westwood's famous mistake. He exhibited this specimen at the Entomological Society (*Proc. Ent. Soc.*, 2nd series, iv., p. 70) in 1857, as a new species of flea, twenty times the size of the largest flea hitherto known! He corrected his mistake in the following year (*op. cit.*, v., p. 60).»

So the flea with the high-sounding title of Emperor, *Pulex*

imperator WESTWOOD, 1858, was nothing else but a nymph of the vulgar *Blatta orientalis* LINNAEUS, 1758. The description of *Pulex imperator* is technically perfectly valid and, although the two insects in question belong to entirely different orders, the name *Pulex imperator* WESTWOOD is a synonym of *Blatta orientalis* LINNAEUS.

It has long been suggested that the whole affair was some sort of a students' hoax, but Dr. K. JORDAN tells me that he used to know members of the Entomological Society who were present at the meeting of May 4th, 1857, when WESTWOOD showed his new «flea», and —according to these eye-witnesses— he made his communication in all earnest, not at all giving the impression of making a practical joke. Now it has become one of the most famous errors of determination of the past. Do not we all go astray sometimes? Errare humanum est!

SOCIÉTÉ ENTOMOLOGIQUE DE BELGIQUE

Assemblée mensuelle du 7 mars 1953

Présidence de M. C. SEGERS, Président

— La séance est ouverte à 15 heures.

Présents: MM. J. BERNARD, A. COLLART, J. COOREMAN, G. DEMOULIN, J.S. DUBOIS, G. FAGEL, A. JANSSENS, E. JANSSENS, S.G. KIRIAKOFF, G. MATAGNE, J. PASTEELS, C. SEGERS, R. TOLLET.

Nécrologie. — M. le Président annonce le décès de notre collègue, M. Joseph MULLER, Pharmacien à Visé, membre de notre Société depuis 1920. (*Condoléances*.)

Errata: Prière de bien vouloir ajouter à la liste des membres publiée en tête du fascicule I-II:

1951. — PETIT (J.), Pharmacien, 275, rue des Combattants, à Bassenge. — Coléoptères du Congo Belge.

1952. — VAN MOI (Jean-Jacques), Etudiant, 1399, chaussée de Waterloo, à Uccle. — Coléoptères du Congo Belge.

— D'autre part, ajouter la signature de notre collègue J.M. VRYDAGH, au bas de sa communication (p. 35), ayant pour titre: *Présence de Anthaxia manca* L. (Coléopt. Buprestide) dans la vallée de la Lesse, à Furfooz.

Décision du Conseil. — Est admis en qualité de membre associé, M. Maxime BROUSSIER, 80, avenue Pierre Curie, Bruxelles (*Entomologie générale*), présenté par MM. R. MAYNÉ et J. COOREMAN.

Bibliothèque. — M. F. CARPENTIER fait don à la Bibliothèque d'une brochure consacrée à la Liste des travaux publiés de 1910 à 1950 par le D^r C.P. ALEXANDER, le grand spécialiste des Tipulides.

— D'autre part, nous avons reçu divers separata de MM. S. KIRIAKOFF (4), S.L. STRANEO (2) et F.G. OVERLAET (1), ainsi que de M. E. JANSSENS, le bel ouvrage du D^r P.J. DARLINGTON Jr: *The Carabid Beetles of new Guinea, Pt. 2: Agonini*.

(*Remerciements*.)

Travaux pour les Bulletin et Annales. — Sur proposition du Conseil, il est décidé de publier les travaux présentés par MM. V. LALLEMAND et H. SYNAVE (2 articles); par M. J. LECLERCQ, et par M. R. TOLLET.