

Chapter One

First Birth (1): The boy came into being on a night of celestial alignment, when a comet travelled the firmament and the sky threw forth a million shooting stars to herald his arrival.

Testimony, I:1

As homecomings go, it was not auspicious. The train was late.

Portsmouth sweltered under a fitful breeze.

Sherlock Holmes paced up and down, smoking one cigarette after another, his already bleak mood growing darker by the minute. I sat, sinuses swollen with the dregs of a summer cold I'd picked up in New York, trying to ignore my partner's mood and my own headache.

Patrick, my farm manager, had come to meet the ship with the post, the day's newspapers, and a beaming face; in no time at all the smile was gone, the letters and papers hastily thrust into my hands, and he had vanished to, he claimed, see what the delay was about. Welcome home.

Just as it seemed Holmes was about to fling his coat to the side and set off for home on foot, whistles blew, doors clattered, and the train roused itself from torpor. We boarded, flinging our compartment's windows as far open as they would go. Patrick cast a wary glance at Holmes and claimed an acquaintance in the third- class carriage. We removed as many of our outer garments as propriety would allow, and I tore away the first pages of the newspaper to construct a fan, cooling myself with the announcements and the agony column. Holmes slumped into the seat and reached for his cigarette case yet again. I recognised the symptoms, although I was puzzled as to the cause. Granted, an

uneventful week in New York followed by long days at sea—none of our fellow passengers having been thoughtful enough to bleed to death in the captain’s cabin, drop down dead of a mysterious poison, or vanish over the rails—might cause a man like Holmes to chafe at inactivity, nonetheless, one might imagine that a sea voyage wouldn’t be altogether a burden after seven hard-pressed months abroad.* And in any case, we were now headed for home, where his bees, his newspapers, and the home he had created twenty years before awaited him. One might expect a degree of satisfaction, even anticipation; instead, the man was all gloom and cigarettes.

I had been married to him for long enough that I did not even consider addressing the conundrum then and there, but said merely, “Holmes, if you don’t slow down on that tobacco, your lungs will turn to leather. And mine. Would you prefer the papers, or the post?” I held out the newspaper, which I had already skimmed while we were waiting, and took the first item on the other stack, a picture post-card from Dr Watson showing a village square in Portugal. To my surprise, Holmes reached past the proffered newspaper and snatched the pile of letters from my lap.

Another oddity. In the normal course of events, Holmes was much attached to the daily news—several dailies, in fact, when he could get them. Over the previous months, he had found it so frustrating to be days, even weeks in arrears of current events (current English events, that is) that one day in northern India, when confronted with a threeweek-old Times, he had sworn in disgust and flung the thing onto the fire, declaring, “I scarcely leave England before the criminal classes swarm like cockroaches. I cannot bear to hear of their antics.” Since then he had stuck to local papers and refused all offers of those from London—or, on the rare occasions he had succumbed to their siren call, he had

perused the headlines with the tight- screwed features of a man palpating a wound: fearing the worst but unable to keep his fingers from the injury. Frankly, I had been astonished back in Portsmouth when he hadn't ripped that day's Times out of Patrick's hand.

Now, he dug his way into the post like a tunnelling badger, tossing out behind him the occasional remark and snippet of information. Trying to prise conversation out of Sherlock Holmes when he had his teeth into a project would be akin to tapping said preoccupied badger on the shoulder, so I took out my handkerchief and used it, and addressed myself first to the uninspiring view, then to the unread sections of the papers.

Some minutes passed, then: "Mycroft has no news," my partner and husband grumbled, allowing the single sheet of his brother's ornate calligraphy to drift onto the upholstery beside him.

"Is he well?" I asked.

My only reply was the ripping open of the next envelope. On reflection, I decided that the letter would not say if its writer was well or not: True, Mycroft had been very ill the previous winter, but even if he were at death's door, the only reason he would mention the fact in a letter would be if some urgent piece of business made his impending demise a piece of information he thought we needed.

Holmes read; I read. He dropped the next letter, a considerably thicker one, on top of Mycroft's, and said in a high and irritated voice, "Mrs Hudson spends three pages lamenting that she will not be at home to greet us, two pages giving quite unnecessary details of her friend Mrs Turner's illness that requires her to remain in Surrey, two more

pages reassuring us that her young assistant Lulu is more than capable, and then in the final paragraph deigns to mention that one of my hives is going mad.”

“ ‘Going mad’? What does that mean?”

He gave an eloquent lift of the fingers to indicate that her information was as substantial as the air above, and returned to the post. Now, though, his interest sharpened. He studied the next envelope closely, then held it to his nose, drawing in a deep and appreciative breath.

Some wives might have cast a suspicious eye at the fond expression that came over his features. I went back to my newspapers.

The train rattled, hot wind blew in the window, voices rose and fell from the next compartment, but around us, the silence grew thick with the press of words unsaid and problems unfaced. The two surviving aeroplanes from the American world flight were still in Reykjavík, I noted. And a conference on German war reparations would begin in London during the week- end. There had been another raid on Bright Young Things (including some lesser royals) at a country house gathering where cocaine flowed. Ah— but here was an appropriate interruption to the heavy silence: I read aloud the latest turn in the Leopold and Loeb sentence hearing, two young men who had murdered a boy to alleviate tedium, and to prove they could.

Holmes turned a page.

A few minutes later, I tried again. “Here’s a letter to The Times concerning a Druid suicide at Stonehenge—or, no, there was a suicide somewhere else, and a small riot at Stonehenge. Interesting: I hadn’t realised the Druids had staged a return. I wonder what the Archbishop of Canterbury has to say on the matter?”

He might have been deaf.

I shot a glance at the letter that so engrossed him, but did not recognise either the cream stock or the pinched, antique writing. I set down the newspaper long enough to read first Mrs Hudson's letter, which I had to admit was more tantalising than informative, then Mycroft's brief missive, but when I reached their end, Holmes was still frowning at the lengthy epistle from his unknown correspondent.

Kicking myself for failing to bring a sufficient number of books from New York, I resumed The Times where, for lack of unread Druidical Letters to the Editor, or Dispatches from Reykjavík, or even News from Northumberland, I was driven to a survey of the adverts: Debenhams' sketches delivered the gloomy verdict that I would need my skirt lengths adjusted again; Thomas Cook offered me educational cruises to Egypt, Berlin, and an upcoming solar eclipse; the Morris Motors adverts reminded me that it was high time to think about a new motor-car; and the London Pavilion offered me a Technicolor cowboy adventure called Wanderer in the Wasteland.

"They are swarming," Holmes said.

I looked up from the newsprint to stare first at him, then at the thick document in his hand.

"Who— Ah," I said, struck by enlightenment, or at least, memory. "The bees."

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "You asked what it meant, that the hive had gone mad. It is swarming. The one beside the burial mound in the far field," he added.

"That letter is from your beekeeper friend," I suggested.

By way of response, he handed me the letter.

The cramped writing and the motion of the train combined with the arcane terminology to render the pages somewhat less illuminating than the personal adverts in the paper. Over the years I had become tolerably familiar with the language of keeping bees, and had even from time to time lent an extra pair of arms to some procedure or other, but this writer's interests, and expertise, were far beyond mine. And my nose was too stuffy to detect any odour of honey rising from the pages.

When I had reached its end, I asked, "How does swarming qualify as madness?"

"You read his letter," he said.

"I read the words."

"What did you not—"

"Holmes, just tell me."

"The hive is casting swarms, repeatedly. Under normal circumstances, a hive's swarming indicates prosperity, a sign that it can well afford to lose half its population, but in this case, the hive is hemorrhaging bees. He has cleared the nearby ground, checked for parasites and pests, added a super, even shifted the hive a short distance. The part where he talks about 'tinnitusque cie et Matris quate cymbala circum'? He wanted to warn me that he's hung a couple of bells nearby, that being what Virgil recommends to induce swarms back into a hive."

"Desperate measures."

"He does sound a touch embarrassed. And I cannot picture him standing over the hive 'clashing Our Lady's cymbals,' which is Virgil's next prescription."

"You've had swarms before." When bees swarm—following a restless queen to freedom—it depletes the population of workers. As Holmes had said, this was no problem

early in the season, since they left behind their honey and the next generation of pupae. However, I could see that doing so time and again would be another matter. “The last swarm went due north, and ended up attempting to take over an active hive in the vicar’s garden.”

That, I had to agree, was peculiar: Outright theft was pathological behaviour among bees.

“The combination is extraordinary. Perhaps the colony has some sort of parasite, driving them to madness?” he mused.

“What can you do?” I asked, although I still thought it odd that he should find the behaviour of his insects more engrossing than dead Druids or the evil acts of spoilt young men. Even the drugs problem should have caught his attention—that seemed to have increased since the previous summer, I reflected: How long before Holmes was pulled into that problem once again?

“I may have to kill them,” he declared, folding away the letter.

“Holmes, that seems a trifle extreme,” I protested, and only when he gave me a curious look did I recall that we were talking about bees, not Young Things or religious crackpots.

“You could be right,” he said, and went back to his reading.

I returned to *The Times*, my eye caught again by the farmer’s letter demanding that a guard be mounted on Stonehenge at next year’s solstice, so as to avoid either riots or the threat of a dramatic suicide. I shook my head and turned the page: When it came to communal behaviour, there were many kinds of madness.

Chapter Two

First Birth (2): The boy's mother knew the meteor to be an omen when, at the very height of her birth pangs, one of the celestial celebrants plummeted to earth in a stripe of flame that hit the pond with a crash and a billow of steam. It was still hot, after hours in the water.

Testimony, I:1

We had left our home on the Sussex coastland one freezing, snow-clotted morning back in January, to return on a high summer afternoon when the green-gold countryside was as full and fragrant as a ripe peach in the palm of one's hand.

I was pleased that we had caught the Seaford train rather than the one to Eastbourne. This meant that, rather than push through an endless terrain of seaside villas and sunburnt holiday-makers, we quickly shook off the town to cross the meandering tidal reaches of the Cuckmere, then threw ourselves at the steep hill onto the Downs.

Sussex had always enchanted me, the mix of sea and pasture, open downland giving way to dark forest, the placid face of beach resorts cheek-by-jowl with the blood-drenched site of the Norman conquest. Daily, one encountered history protruding into modern life like boulders from the soil: Any foundation dug here was apt to encounter a bronze age tool or a Neolithic skeleton; ancient monuments dotted the hillsides, requiring ploughs and road-builders to move around them; place-names and phrases in the local dialect bore Medieval, Norse, Roman, Saxon roots. In this land, in the hearts of its people, the past was the present: It did not take much imagination to envision a local shepherd in winter—bearded and cloaked beneath his wide hat, leaning on a crook—as Woden, the one-eyed Norse god who disguised himself as a wanderer.

The motor that had coughed and struggled its way up the hill now seemed to sigh as it entered the tree-lined downgrade towards East Dean. Holmes shifted and reached

for his cigarette case, and the abrupt motion, coming when it, suddenly brought the answer to Holmes' mood as clearly as if he had spoken aloud: He felt Sussex closing in over his head.

Sussex was his chosen retreat from the press of London, the rural home in which he could write and conduct experiments and meditate on his bees yet still venture out for the occasional investigation; now, after seven busy months in free flight across the globe, it had become small, dull, tedious, and claustrophobic.

Sussex was now a trap.

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I had forgot for the moment that Mrs Hudson would not be there to greet us, but when Patrick pulled into the freshly gravelled circle in front of the house and shut off the engine, the front door remained closed.

Holmes climbed down from the car before its noise had died. He tossed his coat across the sun-dial and dropped his hat on top, then set off in shirt-sleeves and city shoes, heading in the direction of the far field near the burial mound.

Patrick was well used to my husband's eccentricities, and merely asked me if I wanted the trunks upstairs.

"Thank you," I told him.

The front door opened then, to reveal Mrs Hudson's helper Lulu, pink and bustling and spilling over with words.

"Ma'am, how good it is to see you, to be sure, Mrs Hudson will be so vexed that she couldn't be here, and I hope you don't mind, but yesterday night a gentleman—"

The sudden appearance of a person who was not the one I wished to see, and a sudden unwillingness to immerse myself in the busy turmoil of homecoming, had me adding my own coat and gloves to the impromptu hat-stand and following in Holmes' wake, out onto the rolling expanse of the South Downs.

Once clear of the flint wall around the gardens, I could see him ahead of me, striding fast. I did not hurry. It mattered not in the least if I caught up with him before he turned back for home, which he would do soon—even a hive infected with madness was bound to shut down with dusk. I merely walked, breathing in the air of the place that, for nine years, had been my home.

My headache faded, and before long my sinuses relaxed enough that I could smell the sea, half a mile away, mingling with rich traces of hay recently cut. I heard the raucous complaint of a gull, then the lowing of a cow—no doubt Daisy, belonging to the next farmer but one, prized because she bore a healthy calf every year like clockwork and gave the creamiest milk that a bowl of porridge had ever known. The rattle of a motorcycle followed the roadway between Eastbourne and Seaford; five minutes later, the evening train from London whistled as it drew near Eastbourne.

I caught sight of a head of white clover being worked over by a late bee, and I watched until the busy creature flew off—in the direction of the orchard behind me, not towards the madness of the far field. I bent down to pick the flower, and as I walked, I plucked its tendrils, sucking out each infinitesimal trace of nectar.

It was a perfect summer's evening in the south of England, and I dawdled. I meandered. Had I not been wearing the formal skirts and stockings of travel, I might have flopped back onto the cropped grass and counted the wisps of cloud.

India was spectacular and Japan was exquisite and California was a part of my bones, but God, I loved this country.

I found Holmes squatting beside the hive, shirt-sleeves rolled to his elbows. At a distance I was concerned that he would come away with a thousand stings, but closer up, I could hear the absence of the deep, working hum of a summer hive. The white Langstroth box was silent, its landing-board empty, and when he lifted the top of the hive, no cloud of winged fury boiled up from within. The only sound was the light jingle of the bells his friend had hung there.

I hoisted myself onto the wall, taking care not to knock stones loose, and waited for him to finish. The nearby burial mound was small enough to have remained undisturbed for four millennia, escaping even the attentions of the ever-curious Victorians. It cast its late afternoon shadow along the ground to the base of the wall. Raising my gaze to the south, I could make out the line carved by six thousand years of feet treading the cliff-side chalk soil; beyond it, the Channel had gone grey with the lowering sun.

Suddenly, the odour of honey was heavy in the air as Holmes began to prise up the frames of the super. Each was laden with dark, neatly sealed hexagons of comb, representing hundreds of millions of trips flown to and from the hive from nectar-bearing flowers. Abandoned now, with not a bee in sight.

More than that, we could not see, although I knew that come morning, Holmes would be out here again, hunting for a clue to the hive's catastrophe. Now, he allowed the frames to fall back into place, and replaced the top.

As I have said, I care not overmuch for *apis mellifera*, but even I held a moment of silent mourning over the desolate rectangular box.

“Dratted creatures,” Holmes grumbled.

I had to laugh as I jumped down from my perch. “Oh, Holmes, admit it: You relish the mystery.”

“I wonder if I can get a message to Miranker this evening?” he mused. “He might be able to come at first light.” He shot the white box an irked glance, then turned back across the Downs towards home. I fell in beside him, grateful that the moody silence between us had loosed its hold a degree.

“Was that who wrote you the letter?” The signature had been less than precise.

“Glen Miranker, yes. He retired and moved here last summer. He’s a valuable resource.”

To tell the truth, I’d never been able to pin down why Holmes found bees so fascinating. Whenever I’d asked him, he would only say that they had much to teach him. About what, other than a flagellant’s acceptance of occasional pain and perpetual frustration, I did not know.

As we walked, he mused about bees—bees, with the sub-topic of death. Alexander the Great’s honey-filled coffin, preserving the conqueror’s body during the long journey back to Alexandria. The honey rituals of the *Iliad* and the *Rig Veda*. The Greek belief that bees communicated with the beings of the underworld. The use of honey in treating suppurating wounds and skin ulcers. An ancient folk custom called “telling the bees,” when a dead beekeeper’s family whispered to the hives of their master’s death. The infamous poison honey that decimated Xenophon’s army—

After a mile of this, I'd had enough of the macabre aspects of the golden substance, and decided to throw him a distraction. "I wonder if Brother Adam might not have some suggestion as to your hive?"

The reminder of the dotty German beekeeper of Dartmoor's Buckfast Abbey cheered Holmes somewhat, and we left behind the shadow-filled hive to speak of easier things. When we reached the walled orchard adjoining the house, the sun was settling itself against the horizon, a relief to our dazzled eyes. The hives here were reassuringly loud as a thousand wings laboured to expel the day's heat and moisture, taking the hoarded nectar a step closer to the consistency of honey.

I watched Holmes make a circuit of the boxes, bending an ear to each one before moving on. How many times over the years had I seen him do that?

The first time was on the day we had met. Holmes and I first encountered each other in the spring of 1915, when I was a raw, bitterly unhappy adolescent and he a frustrated, ageing detective with little aim in life. From this unlikely pairing had sprung an instant communication of kindred spirits. He brought me here that same day, making the rounds of his bees before settling me on the stone terrace and offering me a glass of honey wine. Offering, too, the precious gift of friendship.

Nine years later, I was a different person, and yet recent events in California had brought an uncomfortable resurgence of that prickly and uncertain younger self.

Time, I told myself; healing takes time.

When he returned to where I was standing, I took a breath and said, "Holmes, we don't have to remain in Sussex, if you would rather be elsewhere."

He lifted his chin to study the colours beginning to paint the sky. “Where would I rather be?” he said, but to my relief, there was no sharpness in his question, no bitter edge.

“I don’t know. But simply because you have chosen to live here for the past twenty years doesn’t require that we stay.”

After a minute, I felt more than saw him nod.

Communication is such a complex mechanism, I reflected as we rounded the low terrace wall: A statement that, at another time or in a different intonation, would have set alight his smouldering ill temper had instead magically restored companionship. I was smiling as my feet sought out the steps—then I nearly toppled down them backwards after walking smack into Holmes.

He had stopped dead, staring at the man who stood in the centre of the terrace, half-illuminated by the setting sun.

A tall, thin man in his thirties with a trimmed beard and long, unruly hair, wearing worn corduroy trousers and a shapeless canvas jacket over a linen shirt and bright orange cravat: a Bohemian. I might have imagined a faint aroma of turpentine, but the colour beneath the fingernails playing along the gaudy silk defined him as a painter rather than one of Bohemia’s poets, playwrights, or musicians. The ring on his finger, heavy worked gold, looked positively incongruous.

I felt a spasm of fury, that whatever this stranger wanted of us couldn’t have waited until morning. He didn’t even look like a client—why on earth had Lulu let him in?

I stepped up beside Holmes and prepared to blast this importunate artist off our terrace and, with luck, out of our lives. But as I cast a rueful glance at my companion, the expression on his face made my words die unsaid: a sudden bloom of wonder mingled with apprehension—unlikely on any face, extraordinary on his. My head whipped back to the source of this emotion, looking for what Holmes had seen that I had not.

Unlike many tall men—and this one was a fraction taller even than Holmes—the young man did not slump, and although his hands betrayed a degree of uncertainty, the set of his head and the resolute manner with which he met Holmes’ gaze made one aware of the fierce intelligence in those grey eyes, and a degree of humour. One might even—

The shock of recognition knocked me breathless. I looked quickly down at the familiar shape of those fingers, then peered more closely at his features. If one peeled away all that hair and erased five years, two stone, and the bruise and scratch along the left temple...

I knew him. Rather, I had met him, although I should not have recognised him without Holmes’ reaction to guide me. Five years earlier, the face before us had possessed a delicate, almost feminine beauty; with the beard, the weight, and the self-assurance, he could play a stage Lucifer.

The amusement grew on his features, until it began to look almost like triumph. The lips parted, and when he spoke, the timbre in his voice reminded one that his mother had been a famous contralto.

“Hello, Father,” he said.

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