

Sherlock's Bees: a selection

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In the Doyle Stories: Sherlock Holmes was originally credited as being a beekeeper by Arthur Conan Doyle himself, who explains in his later stories that Holmes has retired to the Sussex Downs, there to keep bees. In Doyle introduction to *His Last Bow* (published 1917) we learn that:

He has, for many years, lived in a small farm upon the Downs five miles from Eastbourne, where his time is divided between philosophy and agriculture.

And in the story “His Last Bow,” we learn what aspect of *agriculture* is meant when Watson says to him—

“But you have retired, Holmes. We heard of you as living the life of a hermit among your bees and your books in a small farm upon the South Downs.”

“Exactly, Watson. Here is the fruit of my leisured ease, the magnum opus of my latter years!” He picked up the volume from the table and read out the whole title, *Practical Handbook of Bee Culture, with Some Observations upon the Segregation of the Queen.*

“Alone I did it. Behold the fruit of pensive nights and laborious days when I watched the little working gangs as once I watched the criminal world of London.”

In “The Lion’s Mane” (set in 1907, and one of two Holmes stories narrated by Holmes himself) the detective says:

“My house is lonely. I, my old housekeeper, and my bees have the estate all to ourselves.”

In the Russell “memoirs”: Bees buzz through the stories, beginning with the very first meeting of these two extraordinary minds—

The Beekeeper’s Apprentice

“I am watching bees,” he said flatly, and turned back to his contemplation of the hillside.

Nothing in the man’s manner showed a madness to correspond with his words.

Nonetheless I kept a wary eye on him as I thrust my book into my coat pocket and dropped to the ground—a safe distance away from him—and studied the movement in the flowers before me.

There were indeed bees, industriously working at stuffing pollen into those leg sacs of theirs, moving from flower to flower. I watched, and was just thinking that there was nothing particularly noteworthy about these bees when my eyes were caught by the arrival of a peculiarly marked specimen. It seemed an ordinary honeybee but had a small red spot on its back. How odd—perhaps what he had been watching? I glanced at the Eccentric, who was now staring intently off into space, and then looked more closely at the bees, interested in spite of myself. I quickly concluded that the spot was no natural phenomenon, but rather paint, for there was another bee, its spot slightly lopsided, and another, and then another odd thing: a bee with a blue

spot as well. As I watched, two red spots flew off in a northwesterly direction. I carefully observed the blue-and-red spot as it filled its pouches and saw it take off towards the northeast.

I thought for a minute, got up, and walked to the top of the hill, scattering ewes and lambs, and when I looked down at a village and river I knew instantly where I was. My house was less than two miles from here. I shook my head ruefully at my inattention, thought for a moment longer about this man and his red and blue-spotted bees, and walked back down to take my leave of him. He did not look up, so I spoke to the back of his head.

“I’d say the blue spots are a better bet, if you’re trying for another hive,” I told him. “The ones you’ve only marked with red are probably from Mr. Warner’s orchard. The blue spots are farther away, but they’re almost sure to be wild ones.” I dug the book from my pocket, and when I looked up to wish him a good day he was looking back at me, and the expression on his face took all words from my lips—no mean accomplishment. He was, as the writers say but people seldom actually are, openmouthed. He looked a bit like a fish, in fact, gaping at me as if I were growing another head. He slowly stood up, his mouth shutting as he rose, but still staring.

“What did you say?”

“I beg your pardon, are you hard of hearing?” I raised my voice somewhat and spoke slowly. “I said, if you want a new hive you’ll have to follow the blue spots, because the reds are sure to be Tom Warner’s.”

“I am not hard of hearing, although I am short of credulity. How do you come to know of my interests?”

“I should have thought it obvious,” I said impatiently, though even at that age I was aware that such things were not obvious to the majority of people. “I see paint on your pocket-handkerchief, and traces on your fingers where you wiped it away. The only reason to mark bees

that I can think of is to enable one to follow them to their hive. You are either interested in gathering honey or in the bees themselves, and it is not the time of year to harvest honey. Three months ago we had an unusual cold spell that killed many hives. Therefore I assume that you are tracking these in order to replenish your own stock.”

The face that looked down at me was no longer fishlike. In fact, it resembled amazingly a captive eagle I had once seen, perched in aloof splendour looking down the ridge of his nose at this lesser creature, cold disdain staring out from his hooded grey eyes.

“My God,” he said in a voice of mock wonder, “it can think.”

We took up our cups, but as I followed him across the room towards the French doors my attention was drawn by an odd object fixed to the room’s south wall: a tall box, only a few inches wide but nearly three feet tall and protruding a good eighteen inches into the room. It appeared to be a solid block of wood but, pausing to examine it, I could see that both sides were sliding panels.

“My observation hive,” Mr. Holmes said.

“Bees?” I exclaimed. “Inside the house?”

Instead of answering he reached past me and slid back one of the side panels, and revealed there a perfect, thin, glass-fronted beehive. I squatted before it, entranced. The comb was thick and even across the middle portion, trailed off at the edges, and was covered by a thick blanket of orange and black. The whole was vibrating with energy, though the individuals seemed to be simply milling about, without purpose.

I watched closely, trying to make sense of their apparently aimless motion. A tube led in at the bottom, with pollen-laden bees coming in and denuded bees going out; a smaller tube at the top, clouded with condensation, I assumed was for ventilation.

“Do you see the queen?” Mr. Holmes asked.

“She’s here? Let me see if I can find her.” I knew that the queen was the largest bee in the hive, and that wherever she went she had a fawning entourage, but it still took me an embarrassingly long time to pick her out from her two hundred or so daughters and sons. Finally I found her, and couldn’t imagine why she had not appeared instantly. Twice the size of the others and imbued with dumb, bristling purpose, she seemed a creature of another race from her hive mates. I asked their keeper a few questions—did they object to the light, was the population as steady here as in a larger hive—and then he slid the cover over the living painting and we went outside.

I remembered belatedly that I was not interested in bees.

A phrase presented itself to my mind, with such stark clarity that it might have been in print before my eyes. It was a remembered phrase, from the speculative or philosophical introductory chapter in Holmes’ book on bee-keeping. He had written, “A hive of bees should be viewed, not as a single species, but as a triumvirate of related types, mutually exclusive in function but utterly and inextricably interdependent upon each other. A single bee separated from its sisters and brothers will die, even if given the ideal food and care. A single bee cannot survive apart from the hive.”

“Beekeeping for Beginners”

“The bees know me, but you haven’t been properly introduced. One or two stings are nothing to worry about, but too many can stop a heart. Even a young one.”

She dressed as he’d told her, and stood back as he picked up the smoker. “The Reverend Lorenzo Langstroth, an American, was the first truly scientific beekeeper. He combined the theory of ‘bee space’—three-eighths of an inch; any other gap, the bees will fill— with the accessibility of moveable frames. His first axiom was, ‘Bees gorged with honey are not inclined to sting.’ Such as these.”

He paused, expectantly; she inched slightly nearer.

“I, however, take as my own First Rule of Beekeeping the dictum: Remain calm. Smoke makes bees drowsy, plentiful food makes them content, but even if they are hungry and even if one doesn’t have a smoker, they will not turn aggressive if one’s movements are slow and deliberate. If you appear calm, they won’t see you as the source of blame for their roof being ripped off, their lives threatened. If you’re calm, you’re invisible.”

With the last frame in place but still uncovered, he squatted next to the box, watching his charges. Then he looked up. “Would you like to feel them?”

“What, put my *hand* in there?”

By way of demonstration, he inserted his fingers—gently, calmly—into the mass of bees flowing over and around the wooden strips. In seconds, his hand was engulfed by furry bodies. Russell swallowed, then squatted down beside him, pulling off a glove.

“Wait.” He raised his arm, permitting the bees to pour back down into the hive. He gently shook off the stragglers, then reached for her hand with both of his, rubbing her fingers and palms briskly between his long, dry, callused hands until his scent was hers. When he was

satisfied, he extended his left hand, palm down, and had her lay her hand atop it. Then he slowly lowered the paired hands to the hive.

In a moment, the tiny prickle of insect feet explored the side of the apprentice's hand, moving up and across its back. She barely noticed when Holmes eased his arm away, leaving her hand engulfed in a warm, pulsating, fragrant glove of bees.

He studied the expression on her bruised face. "Rule Three of beekeeping," he remarked in a quiet voice. "Never cease to feel wonder."

The May night was quiet. Sherlock Holmes sat nursing his pipe, long legs stretched out on the ground, surrounded by his hives. Two hundred and ninety-nine days since War was declared. Fifty-four days since Mary Russell had come across him on the hillside, watching bees and considering suicide.

It would be difficult to say whether War or Russell was having the greater impact on his life.

The air was warm and still—the poor wretches huddled in the trenches seemed to be having a Sunday night's respite from the guns. The hives gave out a pleasing hum as the night watch laboured to cool their charges within. The new queen Russell had helped him install had made a successful maiden flight and looked to prove herself fruitful; he'd check the frames in a day or two, to see how soon he might think about a harvest.

The colony never showed the slightest mistrust of their replacement queen, delivered by his own Almighty Hand. A beekeeper's success often rested on the imperceptibility of his meddling.

Perhaps that should be Rule Four of beekeeping.

People wondered why the Great Detective kept bees. The question should have been, why didn't everyone keep bees? Endlessly entertaining, intellectually satisfying, beekeeping was philosophy made manifest, theories about behaviour (human and bee) given concrete shape. The study of bees—the triumvirate of queen, drone, and worker—was a study of mankind. It provided a continuation of his life's work of keeping the country running smoothly, free of crime and disruption.

Both tasks required an attention to detail, a willingness to get one's hands dirty—and an acceptance that sometimes one got hurt. He put away his pipe. As he climbed to his feet, brushing off his trousers, the odd thought occurred to him that Maurice Maeterlinck, that greatest of literary beekeepers, had also met a youthful muse in his later years.

“A Venomous Death”

I stepped in, keeping a wary eye on the crate. PC Harris, who had summoned Holmes an hour before—as a convenient beekeeper, not a consulting detective—ventured a look in, then retreated briskly into the pale October sunshine. Holmes, however, wasn't even wearing a beekeeper's net: swarming bees were generally not aggressive. Which made this death a puzzle.

“I've heard of swarms following a queen into odd places, but never through the open window of a man's bedroom.”

“They did not. This was murder.”

The Language of Bees

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.

"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 haemorrhaging 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—half the population following a restless queen to freedom—it depleted the population of workers. 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 said, 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 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.

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—.

The Langstroth hive was a wooden structure roughly twenty inches on a side. On the outside it was a stack of plain, whitewashed boxes, but within lay a technological marvel of precise measurements and moving parts, all of them aimed at providing the bees with such perfect surroundings, they would stay put and work. One hive could produce hundreds of pounds of honey, under the right conditions, from bees that would be just as pleased with a rotten tree.

“Your husband's bees tend to be eight parts methodical, one part experimental, and one part equally divided between startling innovation and resounding failure.”

“Er, you mean that his techniques are innovative or failures?”

His head came around the side of the hive. “No, I mean the bees. Reflecting his personality, don't you know?”

“I see.”

He paused to stare off into the distance; my muscles began to quiver. “I recall him describing how he had introduced a peculiar herb out of the Caucasus Mountains that he'd heard had an invigorating effect on the honey. The bees took to it with great enthusiasm, made an effort to spread that herb's nectar evenly throughout the combs, became disconsolate when the flowers began to fade. Unfortunately, as it turned out, the taste of the honey itself was absolutely revolting. Rendered the year's entire production unpalatable.” He shook his head and continued his minute examination.

“So, are you suggesting that this hive’s madness is a reflection of some aspect of their keeper?”

He sat up, startled, and I gratefully allowed the hive to thump to the ground. “No. No, no, no, I shouldn’t have said it has anything to do with him.”

I laughed at the vehemence of his protest. “I’m only joking, Mr Miranker. I should say it’s every bit as likely that the hive decided it didn’t like the subtle emanations coming from the burial mound across the wall.” That outrageous theory silenced him for a moment, and I gathered my things to leave.

But not before he contributed a final shot. “One is always rather concerned when a hive fails to thrive,” he mused. “In Yorkshire and Cornwall they believe that when bees die, the farmer will soon leave his farm.”

I glanced up, and said sharply, “It’s just as likely the bees deserted because nobody bothered to ‘tell’ them Holmes was just away and would return. In any case, if a season is so bad the bees die, I should think it a sign that the farmer’s crops were suffering as well. Good day to you, Mr Miranker,” I told him, and made my escape.

Ridiculous, to feel a sharp frisson of disquiet because of this old man and his folk stories.



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