



THE BEEKEEPER'S  
APPRENTICE

OR  
ON THE SEGREGATION OF THE QUEEN

LAURIE R. KING

Allison & Busby Limited  
13 Charlotte Mews  
London W1T 4EJ  
*www.allisonandbusby.com*

This paperback edition first published in 2010.

First published in the US in 1994 by St Martin's Press.  
Published in the US in 1996 by Bantam,  
a division of Random House, Inc., New York, New York.

Copyright © 1994 by LAURIE R. KING

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication,  
*other than those clearly in the public domain,*  
*are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons,*  
*living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

*Chapter epigraphs are from Maurice Maeterlinck,*  
*The Life of the Bee, copyright © 1901 and 1928,*  
*published by Dodd, Mead & Co., New York, 1970.*  
*Translation by Alfred Sutro.*

*All efforts have been made to contact the copyright*  
*owners of these extracts but without success.*  
*The Publisher would be pleased to hear from the copyright holder*  
*to rectify any errors or omissions at their earliest opportunity.*

This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not,  
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or  
otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior  
written consent in any form of binding or cover other than  
that in which it is published and without a similar condition  
being imposed upon the subsequent  
purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-0852-9

Typeset in 10.5/15 pt Sabon by  
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication  
has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced  
from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound in the UK by  
CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, CR0 4TD

## CHAPTER ONE

---

### Two Shabby Figures

*The discovery of a sign of true intellect outside ourselves procures us something of the emotion Robinson Crusoe felt when he saw the imprint of a human foot on the sandy beach of his island.*

I WAS FIFTEEN WHEN I FIRST met Sherlock Holmes, fifteen years old with my nose in a book as I walked the Sussex Downs, and nearly stepped on him. In my defence I must say it was an engrossing book, and it was very rare to come across another person in that particular part of the world in that war year of 1915. In my seven weeks of peripatetic reading amongst the sheep (which tended to move out of my way) and the gorse bushes (to which I had painfully developed an instinctive awareness) I had never before stepped on a person.

It was a cool, sunny day in early April, and the book

was by Virgil. I had set out at dawn from the silent farmhouse, chosen a different direction from my usual—in this case south-easterly, towards the sea—and had spent the intervening hours wrestling with Latin verbs, climbing unconsciously over stone walls, and unthinkingly circling hedgerows, and would probably not have noticed the sea until I stepped off one of the chalk cliffs into it.

As it was, my first awareness that there was another soul in the universe was when a male throat cleared itself loudly not four feet from me. The Latin text flew into the air, followed closely by an Anglo-Saxon oath. Heart pounding, I hastily pulled together what dignity I could and glared down through my spectacles at this figure hunched up at my feet: a gaunt, greying man in his fifties wearing a cloth cap, ancient tweed greatcoat, and decent shoes, with a threadbare Army rucksack on the ground beside him. A tramp perhaps, who had left the rest of his possessions stashed beneath a bush. Or an Eccentric. Certainly no shepherd.

He said nothing. Very sarcastically. I snatched up my book and brushed it off.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ I demanded. ‘Lying in wait for someone?’

He raised one eyebrow at that, smiled in a singularly condescending and irritating manner, and opened his mouth to speak in that precise drawl which is the trademark of the overly educated upper-class English gentleman. A high voice; a biting one: definitely an Eccentric.

‘I should think that I can hardly be accused of “lying” anywhere,’ he said, ‘as I am seated openly on an uncluttered

hillside, minding my own business. When, that is, I am not having to fend off those who propose to crush me underfoot.’ He rolled the penultimate *r* to put me in my place.

Had he said almost anything else, or even said the same words in another manner, I should merely have made a brusque apology and a purposeful exit, and my life would have been a very different thing. However, he had, all unknowing, hit squarely on a highly sensitive spot. My reason for leaving the house at first light had been to avoid my aunt, and the reason (the most recent of many reasons) for wishing to avoid my aunt was the violent row we’d had the night before, a row sparked by the undeniable fact that my feet had outgrown their shoes, for the second time since my arrival three months before. My aunt was small, neat, shrewish, sharp-tongued, quick-witted, and proud of her petite hands and feet. She invariably made me feel clumsy, uncouth, and unreasonably touchy about my height and the corresponding size of my feet. Worse, in the ensuing argument over finances, she had won.

His innocent words and his far-from-innocent manner hit my smouldering temper like a splash of petrol. My shoulders went back, my chin up, as I stiffened for combat. I had no idea where I was, or who this man was, whether I was standing on his land or he on mine, if he was a dangerous lunatic or an escaped convict or the lord of the manor, and I did not care. I was furious.

‘You have not answered my question, sir,’ I bit off.

He ignored my fury. Worse than that, he seemed unaware of it. He looked merely bored, as if he wished I might go away.

‘What am I doing here, do you mean?’

‘Exactly.’

‘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 north-westerly direction. I carefully observed the blue-and-red spot as it filled its pouches and saw it take off towards the north-east.

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, open-mouthed. 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.'

My anger had abated somewhat while watching the bees, but at this casual insult it erupted. Why was this tall, thin, infuriating old man so set on provoking an unoffending stranger? My chin went up again, only in part because he was taller than I, and I mocked him in return.

'My God, it can recognise another human being when it's hit over the head with one.' For good measure I added, 'And to think that I was raised to believe that old people had decent manners.'

I stood back to watch my blows strike home, and as I faced him squarely my mind's eye finally linked him up with rumours I had heard and the reading I had done during my recent long convalescence, and I knew who he was, and I was appalled.

I had, I should mention, always assumed that a large part of Dr Watson's adulatory stories were a product of that gentleman's inferior imagination. Certainly he always regarded the reader to be as slow as himself. Most irritating. Nonetheless, behind the stuff and nonsense of the biographer there towered a figure of pure genius, one of the great minds of his generation. A Legend.

And I was horrified: here I was, standing before a



Legend, flinging insults at him, yapping about his ankles like a small dog worrying a bear. I suppressed a cringe and braced myself for the casual swat that would send me flying.

To my amazement, however, and considerable dismay, instead of counter-attacking he just smiled condescendingly and bent down to pick up his rucksack. I heard the faint rattle of the paint bottles within. He straightened, pushed his old-fashioned cap back on his greying hair, and looked at me with tired eyes.

‘Young man, I—’

“*Young man!*” That did it. Rage swept into my veins, filling me with power. Granted I was far from voluptuous, granted I was dressed in practical, that is, male, clothing—but this was not to be borne. Fear aside, Legend aside, the yapping lapdog attacked with all the utter contempt only an adolescent can muster. With a surge of glee I seized the weapon he had placed in my hands and drew back for the coup de grâce. “*Young man?*” I repeated. ‘It’s a damned good thing that you did retire, if that’s all that remains of the great detective’s mind!’ With that I reached for the brim of my oversized cap and my long blonde plaits slithered down over my shoulders.

A series of emotions crossed his face, rich reward for my victory. Simple surprise was followed by a rueful admission of defeat, and then, as he reviewed the entire discussion, he surprised me. His face relaxed, his thin lips twitched, his grey eyes crinkled into unexpected lines, and at last he threw back his head and gave a great shout of delighted laughter. That was the first time I heard Sherlock Holmes laugh, and although it was far from the last, it

never ceased to surprise me, seeing that proud, ascetic face dissolve into helpless laughter. His amusement was always at least partially at himself, and this time was no exception. I was totally disarmed.

He wiped his eyes with the handkerchief I had seen poking from his coat pocket; a slight smear of blue paint was transferred to the bridge of his angular nose. He looked at me then, seeing me for the first time. After a minute he gestured at the flowers.

‘You know something about bees, then?’

‘Very little,’ I admitted.

‘But they interest you?’ he suggested.

‘No.’

This time both eyebrows raised.

‘And, pray tell, why such a firm opinion?’

‘From what I know of them they are mindless creatures, little more than a tool for putting fruit on trees. The females do all the work; the males do...well, they do little. And the queen, the only one who might amount to something, is condemned for the sake of the hive to spend her days as an egg machine. And,’ I said, warming to the topic, ‘what happens when her equal comes along, another queen with which she might have something in common? They are both forced—for the good of the hive—to fight to the death. Bees are great workers, it is true, but does not the production of each bee’s total lifetime amount to a single dessertspoonful of honey? Each hive puts up with having hundreds of thousands of bee-hours stolen regularly, to be spread on toast and formed into candles, instead of declaring war or going on strike as any sensible, self-respecting race would do. A bit too close to the human race for my taste.’

Mr Holmes had sat down upon his heels during my tirade, watching a blue spot. When I had finished, he said nothing, but put out one long, thin finger and gently touched the fuzzy body, disturbing it not at all. There was silence for several minutes until the laden bee flew off—north-east, towards the copse two miles away, I was certain. He watched it disappear and murmured almost to himself, ‘Yes, they are very like *Homo sapiens*. Perhaps that is why they so interest me.’

‘I don’t know how sapient you find most *Homines*, but I for one find the classification an optimistic misnomer.’ I was on familiar ground now, that of the mind and opinions, a beloved ground I had not trod for many months. That some of the opinions were those of an obnoxious teenager made them nonetheless comfortable or easy to defend. To my pleasure, he responded.

‘*Homo* in general, or simply *vir*?’ he asked, with a solemnity that made me suspect that he was laughing at me. Well, at least I had taught him to be subtle with it.

‘Oh, no. I am a feminist, but no man hater. A misanthrope in general, I suppose like yourself, sir. However, unlike you I find women to be the marginally more rational half of the race.’

He laughed again, a gentler version of the earlier outburst, and I realised that I had been trying to provoke it this time.

‘Young lady,’ he stressed the second word with gentle irony, ‘you have caused me amusement twice in one day, which is more than anyone else has done in some time. I have little humour to offer in return, but if you would

care to accompany me home, I could at least give you a cup of tea.'

'I should be very pleased to do so, Mr Holmes.'

'Ah, you have the advantage over me. You obviously know my name, yet there is no one present of whom I might beg an introduction to yourself.' The formality of his speech was faintly ludicrous considering that we were two shabby figures facing each other on an otherwise deserted hillside.

'My name is Mary Russell.' I held out my hand, which he took in his thin, dry one. We shook as if cementing a peace pact, which I suppose we were.

'Mary,' he said, tasting it. He pronounced it in the Irish manner, his mouth caressing the long first syllable. 'A suitably orthodox name for such a passive individual as yourself.'

'I believe I was named after the Magdalene, rather than the Virgin.'

'Ah, that explains it then. Shall we go, Miss Russell? My housekeeper ought to have something to put in front of us.'

It was a lovely walk, that, nearly four miles over the downs. We thumbed over a variety of topics strung lightly on the common thread of apiculture. He gestured wildly atop a knoll when comparing the management of hives with Machiavellian theories of government, and cows ran snorting away. He paused in the middle of a stream to illustrate his theory juxtaposing the swarming of hives and the economic roots of war, using examples of the German invasion of France and the visceral patriotism of the English. Our boots squelched for the next mile. He

reached the heights of his peroration at the top of a hill and launched himself down the other side at such a speed that he resembled some great flapping thing about to take off.

He stopped to look around for me, took in my stiffening gait and my inability to keep up with him, both literally and metaphorically, and shifted into a less manic mode. He did seem to have a good practical basis for his flights of fancy and, it turned out, had even written a book on the apiary arts entitled *A Practical Handbook of Bee Culture*. It had been well received, he said with pride (this from a man who, I remembered, had respectfully declined a knighthood from the late queen), particularly his experimental but highly successful placement within the hive of what he called the Royal Quarters, which had given the book its provocative subtitle: *With Some Observations Upon the Segregation of the Queen*.

We walked, he talked, and under the sun and his soothing if occasionally incomprehensible monologue I began to feel something hard and tight within me relax slightly, and an urge I had thought killed began to make the first tentative stirrings towards life. When we arrived at his cottage we had known each other forever.

Other more immediate stirrings had begun to assert themselves as well, with increasing insistence. I had taught myself in recent months to ignore hunger, but a healthy young person after a long day in the open air with only a sandwich since morning is likely to find it difficult to concentrate on anything other than the thought of food. I prayed that the cup of tea would be a substantial one, and was considering the problem of how to suggest such

a thing should it not be immediately offered, when we reached his house, and the housekeeper herself appeared at the door, and for a moment I forgot my preoccupation. It was none other than the long-suffering Mrs Hudson, whom I had long considered the most underrated figure in all of Dr Watson's stories. Yet another example of the man's obtuseness, this inability to know a gem unless it be set in gaudy gold.

Dear Mrs Hudson, who was to become such a friend to me. At that first meeting she was, as always, imperturbable. She saw in an instant what her employer did not, that I was desperately hungry, and proceeded to empty her stores of food to feed a vigorous appetite. Mr Holmes protested as she appeared with plate after platter of bread, cheeses, relishes, and cakes, but watched thoughtfully as I put large dents in every selection. I was grateful that he did not embarrass me by commenting on my appetite, as my aunt was wont to do, but to the contrary he made an effort to keep up the appearance of eating with me. By the time I sat back with my third cup of tea, the inner woman satisfied as she had not been for many weeks, his manner was respectful, and that of Mrs Hudson contented as she cleared away the débris.

'I thank you very much, Madam,' I told her.

'I like to see my cooking appreciated, I do,' she said, not looking at Mr Holmes. 'I rarely have the chance to fuss, unless Dr Watson comes. This one,' she inclined her head to the man opposite me, who had brought out a pipe from his coat pocket, 'he doesn't eat enough to keep a cat from starving. Doesn't appreciate me at all, he doesn't.'

'Now, Mrs Hudson,' he protested, but gently, as at an

old argument, 'I eat as I always have; it is you who will cook as if there were a household of ten.'

'A cat would starve,' she repeated firmly. 'But you have eaten something today, I'm glad to see. If you've finished, Will wants a word with you before he goes, something about the far hedge.'

'I care not a jot for the far hedge,' he complained. 'I pay him a great deal to fret about the hedges and the walls and the rest of it for me.'

'He needs a word with you,' she said again. Firm repetition seemed her preferred method of dealing with him, I noted.

'Oh, blast! Why did I ever leave London? I ought to have put my hives in an allotment and stayed in Baker Street. Help yourself to the bookshelves, Miss Russell. I'll be back in a few minutes.' He snatched up his tobacco and matches and stalked out, Mrs Hudson rolled her eyes and disappeared into the kitchen, and I found myself alone in the quiet room.

Sherlock Holmes' house was a typical ageless Sussex cottage, flint walls and red tile roof. This main room, on the ground floor, had once been two rooms, but was now a large square with a huge stone fireplace at one end, dark, high beams, an oak floor that gave way to slate through the kitchen door, and a surprising expanse of windows on the south side where the downs rolled on to the sea. A sofa, two wing chairs, and a frayed basket chair gathered around the fireplace, a round table and four chairs occupied the sunny south bay window (where I sat), and a work desk piled high with papers and objects stood beneath a leaded, diamond-paned window in the west: a room of

many purposes. The walls were solid with bookshelves and cupboards.

Today I was more interested in my host than in his books, and I looked curiously at the titles (*Blood Flukes of Borneo* sat between *The Thought of Goethe* and *Crimes of Passion in Eighteenth-Century Italy*) with him in mind rather than with an eye to borrowing. I made a circuit of the room (tobacco still in a Persian slipper at the fireplace, I smiled to see; on one table a small crate stencilled LIMONES DE ESPAÑA and containing several disassembled revolvers; on another table three nearly identical pocket watches laid with great precision, chains and fobs stretched out in parallel lines, with a powerful magnifying glass, a set of calipers, and a paper and pad covered with figures to one side) before ending up in front of his desk.

I had no time for more than a cursory glance at his neat handwriting before his voice startled me from the door.

‘Shall we sit out on the terrace?’

I quickly put down the sheet in my hand, which seemed to be a discourse on seven formulae for plaster and their relative effectiveness in recording tyre marks from different kinds of earth, and agreed that it would be pleasant in the garden. 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.

Outside the french doors lay an expanse of flagstones, sheltered from the wind by a glass conservatory that grew

off the kitchen wall and by an old stone wall with a herbaceous border that curved around the remaining two sides. The terrace gathered in the heat until its air danced, and I was relieved when he continued down to a group of comfortable-looking wooden chairs in the shade of an enormous copper beech. I chose a chair that looked down towards the Channel, over the head of a small orchard that lay in a hollow below us. There were tidy hive boxes arranged among the trees and bees working the early flowers of the border. A bird sang. Two men's voices came and receded along the other side of the wall. Dishes rattled distantly from the kitchen. A small fishing boat appeared on the horizon and gradually worked its way towards us.

I suddenly came to myself with the realisation that I was neglecting my conversational responsibilities as a guest. I moved my cold tea from the arm of my chair to the table and turned to my host.

'Is this your handiwork?' I asked, indicating the garden.

He smiled ironically, though whether at the doubt in my voice or at the social impulse that drove me to break the silence, I was not certain.

'No, it is a collaboration on the part of Mrs Hudson and old Will Thompson, who used to be head gardener at the manor. I took an interest in gardening when I first came here, but my work tends to distract me for days on end. I would reappear to find whole beds dead of drought or buried in bramble. But Mrs Hudson enjoys it, and it gives her something to do other than pester me to eat her concoctions. I find it a pleasant spot to sit and think. It

also feeds my bees—most of the flowers are chosen because of the quality of honey they produce.’

‘It is a very pleasant spot. It reminds me of a garden we once had when I was small.’

‘Tell me about yourself, Miss Russell.’

I started to give him the obligatory response, first the demurral and then the reluctant flat autobiography, but some slight air of polite inattention in his manner stopped me. Instead, I found myself grinning at him.

‘Why don’t you tell me about myself, Mr Holmes?’

‘Aha, a challenge, eh?’ There was a flare of interest in his eyes.

‘Exactly.’

‘Very well, on two conditions. First, that you forgive my old and much-abused brain if it is slow and creaking, for such thought patterns as I once lived by are a habit and become rusty without continual use. Daily life here with Mrs Hudson and Will is a poor whetting stone for sharp wit.’

‘I don’t entirely believe that your brain is under-used, but I grant the condition. And the other?’

‘That you do the same for me when I have finished with you.’

‘Oh. All right. I shall try, even if I lay myself open to your ridicule.’ Perhaps I had not escaped the edge of his tongue after all.

‘Good.’ He rubbed his thin dry hands together, and suddenly I was fixed with the probing eye of an entomologist. ‘I see before me one Mary Russell, named after her paternal grandmother.’

I was taken aback for a moment, then reached up and

fingered the antique locket, engraved MMR, that had slipped out from the buttons of my shirt. I nodded.

‘She is, let us see, sixteen? Fifteen, I think? Yes, fifteen years of age, and despite her youth and the fact that she is not at school she intends to pass the university entrance examinations.’ I touched the book in my pocket and nodded appreciatively. ‘She is obviously left-handed, one of her parents was Jewish—her mother, I think? Yes, definitely her mother—and she reads and writes Hebrew. She is at present four inches shorter than her American father—that was his suit? All right so far?’ he asked complacently.

I thought furiously. ‘The Hebrew?’ I asked.

‘The ink marks on your fingers could only come with writing right to left.’

‘Of course.’ I looked at the accumulation of smears near my left thumbnail. ‘That is very impressive.’

He waved it aside. ‘Parlour games. But the accents are not without interest.’ He eyed me again, then sat back with his elbows on the chair’s armrests, steepled his fingers, rested them lightly on his lips for a moment, closed his eyes, and spoke.

‘The accents. She has come recently from her father’s home in the western United States, most likely northern California. Her mother was one generation away from Cockney Jew, and Miss Russell herself grew up in the south-western edges of London. She moved, as I said, to California, within the last, oh, two years. Say the word “martyr,” please.’ I did so. ‘Yes, two years. Sometime between then and December both parents died, very possibly in the same accident in which Miss Russell was involved last September or October, an accident which

has left scar tissue on her throat, scalp, and right hand, a residual weakness in that same hand, and a slight stiffness in the left knee.'

The game had suddenly stopped being entertaining. I sat frozen, my heart ceasing to beat while I listened to the cool, dry recitation of his voice.

'After her recovery she was sent back home to her mother's family, to a tight-fisted and unsympathetic relative who feeds her rather less than she needs. This last,' he added parenthetically, 'is I admit largely conjecture, but as a working hypothesis serves to explain her well-nourished frame poorly covered by flesh, and the reason why she appears at a stranger's table to consume somewhat more than she might if ruled strictly by her obvious good manners. I am willing to consider an alternative explanation,' he offered, and opened his eyes, and saw my face.

'Oh, dear.' His voice was an odd mixture of sympathy and irritation. 'I have been warned about this tendency of mine. I do apologise for any distress I have caused you.'

I shook my head and reached for the cold dregs in my teacup. It was difficult to speak through the lump in my throat.

Mr Holmes stood up and went into the house, where I heard his voice and that of the housekeeper trading a few unintelligible phrases before he returned, carrying two delicate glasses and an open bottle of the palest of wines. He poured it into the glasses and handed me one, identifying it as honey wine—his own, of course. He sat down and we both sipped the fragrant liquor. In a few minutes the lump faded, and I heard the birds again. I took a deep breath and shot him a glance.

‘Two hundred years ago you would have been burnt.’ I was trying for dry humour but was not entirely successful.

‘I have been told that before today,’ he said, ‘though I cannot say I have ever fancied myself in the rôle of a witch, cackling over my pot.’

‘Actually, the book of Leviticus calls for burning, but for the stoning of a man or a woman who speaks with the spirits—*i-ōb*, a necromancer or medium—or who is a *yid-ōni*, from the verb “to know,” a person who achieves knowledge and power other than through the grace of the Lord God of Israel, er, well, a sorcerer.’ My voice trailed off as I realised that he was eyeing me with the apprehension normally reserved for mumbling strangers in one’s railway compartment or acquaintances with incomprehensible and tiresome passions. My recitation had been an automatic response, triggered by the entry of a theological point into our discussion. I smiled a weak reassurance. He cleared his throat.

‘Er, shall I finish?’ he asked.

‘As you wish,’ I said, with trepidation.

‘This young lady’s parents were relatively well-to-do, and their daughter inherited, which, combined with her daunting intelligence, makes it impossible for this penurious relative to bring her to heel. Hence, she wanders the downs without a chaperone and remains away until all hours.’

He seemed to be drawing to a close, so I gathered my tattered thoughts.

‘You are quite right, Mr Holmes. I have inherited, and my aunt does find my actions contrary to her idea of how a young lady should act. And because she holds the keys to the pantry and tries to buy my obedience with food, I

occasionally go with less than I would choose. Two minor flaws in your reasoning, however.'

'Oh?'

'First, I did not come to Sussex to live with my aunt. The house and farm belonged to my mother. We used to spend summers here when I was small—some of the happiest times of my life—and when I was sent back to England I made it a condition of accepting her as guardian that we live here. She had no house, so she reluctantly agreed. Although she will control the finances for another six years, strictly speaking *she* lives with *me*, not I with her.' Another might have missed the loathing in my voice, but not he. I dropped the subject quickly before I gave away any more of my life. 'Second, I have been carefully judging the time by which I must depart in order to arrive home before dark, so the lateness of the hour does not really enter in. I shall have to take my leave soon, as it will be dark in slightly over two hours, and my home is two miles north of where we met.'

'Miss Russell, you may take your time with your half of our agreement,' he said calmly, allowing me to shelve the previous topic. 'One of my neighbours subsidises his passion for automobiles by providing what he insists on calling a taxi service. Mrs Hudson has gone to arrange for him to motor you home. You may rest for another hour and a quarter before he arrives to whisk you off to the arms of your dear aunt.'

I looked down, discomfited. 'Mr Holmes, I'm afraid my allowance is not large enough to allow for such luxuries. In fact, I have already spent this week's monies on the Virgil.'

‘Miss Russell, I am a man with considerable funds and very little to spend them on. Please allow me to indulge in a whim.’

‘No, I cannot do that.’ He looked at my face and gave in.

‘Very well, then, I propose a compromise. I shall pay for this and any subsequent expenses of the sort, but as a loan. I assume that your future inheritance will be sufficient to absorb such an accumulation of sums?’

‘Oh, yes.’ I laughed as I recalled vividly the scene in the law office, my aunt’s eyes turning dark with greed. ‘There would be no problem.’ He glanced at me sharply, hesitated, and spoke with some delicacy.

‘Miss Russell, forgive my intrusion, but I tend towards a rather dim view of human nature. If I might enquire as to your will...?’ A mind reader, with a solid grasp of the basics of life. I smiled grimly.

‘In the event of my death my aunt would get only an adequate yearly amount. Hardly more than she gets now.’

He looked relieved. ‘I see. Now, about the loan. Your feet will suffer if you insist on walking the distance home in those shoes. At least for today, use the taxi. I am even willing to charge you interest if you like.’

There was an odd air about his final, ironic offer that in another, less self-possessed person might have verged on a plea. We sat and studied each other, there in the quiet garden of early evening, and it occurred to me that he might have found this yapping dog an appealing companion. It could even be the beginnings of affection I saw in his face, and God knows that the joy of finding as



quick and uncluttered a mind as his had begun to sing in me. We made an odd pair, a gangling, bespectacled girl and a tall, sardonic recluse, blessed or cursed with minds of hard brilliance that alienated all but the most tenacious. It never occurred to me that there might not be subsequent visits to this household. I spoke, and acknowledged his oblique offer of friendship.

‘Spending three or four hours a day in travel does leave little time for other things. I accept your offer of a loan. Shall Mrs Hudson keep the record?’

‘She is scrupulously careful with figures, unlike myself. Come, have another glass of my wine, and tell Sherlock Holmes about himself.’

‘Are you finished, then?’

‘Other than obvious things such as the shoes and reading late by inadequate light, that you have few bad habits, though your father smoked, and that unlike most Americans he preferred quality to fashion in his clothing—other than the obvious things, I will rest for the moment. It is your move. But mind you, I want to hear from you, not what you have picked up from my enthusiastic friend Watson.’

‘I shall try to avoid borrowing his incisive observations,’ I said drily, ‘though I have to wonder if using the stories to write your biography wouldn’t prove to be a two-edged sword. The illustrations are certainly deceptive; they make you look considerably older. I’m not very good at guessing ages, but you don’t look much more than, what, fifty? Oh, I’m sorry. Some people don’t like to talk about their age.’

‘I am now fifty-four. Conan Doyle and his accomplices

at *The Strand* thought to make me more dignified by exaggerating my age. Youth does not inspire confidence, in life or in stories, as I found to my annoyance when I set up residence in Baker Street. I was not yet twenty-one, and at first found the cases few and far between. Incidentally, I hope you do not make a habit of guessing. Guessing is a weakness brought on by indolence and should never be confused with intuition.'

'I will keep that in mind,' I said, and reached for my glass to take a swallow of wine while thinking about what I had seen in the room. I assembled my words with care. 'To begin: you come from a moderately wealthy background, though your relationship with your parents was not entirely a happy one. To this day you wonder about them and try to come to grips with that part of your past.' To his raised eyebrow I explained, 'That is why you keep the much-handled formal photograph of your family on the shelf close to your chair, slightly obscured to other eyes by books, rather than openly mounting it on the wall and forgetting them.' Ah, how sweet was the pleasure of seeing the look of appreciation spread over his face and hearing his murmured phrase, 'Very good, very good indeed.' It was like coming home.

'I could add that it explains why you never spoke to Dr Watson about your childhood, as someone so solid and from such a blatantly normal background as he is would doubtless have difficulty understanding the special burdens of a gifted mind. However, that would be using his words, or rather lack of them, so it doesn't count. Without being too prying, I should venture to say that it contributed to your early decision to distance yourself

from women, for I suspect that someone such as yourself would find it impossible to have an other than all-inclusive relationship with a woman, one that totally integrated all parts of your lives, unlike the unequal and somewhat whimsical partnership you have had with Dr Watson.’ The expression on his face was indescribable, wandering between amusement and affrontery, with a touch each of anger and exasperation. It finally settled on the quizzical. I felt considerably better about the casual hurt he had done me, and plunged on.

‘However, as I said, I don’t mean to intrude on your privacy. It was necessary to have the past as it contributes to the present. You are here to escape the disagreeable sensation of being surrounded by inferior minds, minds that can never understand because they are just not built that way. You took a remarkably early retirement twelve years ago, apparently in order to study the perfection and unity of bees and to work on your magnum opus on detection. I see from the bookshelf near your writing desk that you have completed seven volumes to date, and I presume, from the boxes of notes under the completed books, that there are at least an equal number yet to be written up.’ He nodded and poured us both more wine. The bottle was nearly empty.

‘Between yourself and Dr Watson, however, you have left me with little to deduce. I could hardly assume that you would leave behind your chemical experiments, for example, though the state of your cuffs does indicate that you have been active recently—those acid burns are too fresh to have frayed much in the wash. You no longer smoke cigarettes, your fingers show, though obviously

your pipe is used often, and the calluses on your fingertips indicate that you have kept up with the violin. You seem to be as unconcerned about bee stings as you are about finances and gardening, for your skin shows the marks of stings both old and new, and your suppleness indicates that the theories about bee stings as a therapy for rheumatism have some basis. Or is it arthritis?’

‘Rheumatism, in my case.’

‘Also, I think it possible that you have not entirely given up your former life, or perhaps it has not entirely given you up. I see a vague area of pale skin on your chin, which shows that some time last summer you had a goatee, since shaven off. There hasn’t been enough sun yet to erase the line completely. As you don’t normally wear a beard, and would, in my opinion, look unpleasant with one, I can assume it was for the purpose of a disguise, in a rôle which lasted some months. Probably it had to do with the early stages of the war. Spying against the Kaiser, I should venture to say.’

His face went blank, and he studied me without any trace of expression for a long minute. I squelched a self-conscious smile. At last he spoke.

‘I did ask for it, did I not? Are you familiar with the work of Dr Sigmund Freud?’

‘Yes, although I find the work of the next, as it were, generation more helpful. Freud is overly obsessed with exceptional behavior: an aid to your line of work, perhaps, but not as useful for a generalist.’

There was a sudden commotion in the flower bed. Two orange cats shot out and raced along the lawn and disappeared through the opening in the garden wall. His

eyes followed them, and he sat squinting into the low sun.

‘Twenty years ago,’ he murmured. ‘Even ten. But here? Now?’ He shook his head and focused again on me. ‘What will you read at university?’

I smiled. I couldn’t help it; I knew just how he was going to react, and I smiled, anticipating his dismay.

‘Theology.’

His reaction was as violent as I had known it would be, but if I was sure of anything in my life, it was that. We took a walk through the gloaming to the cliffs, and I had my look at the sea while he wrestled with the idea, and by the time we returned he had decided that it was no worse than anything else, though he considered it a waste, and said so. I did not respond.

The automobile arrived shortly thereafter, and Mrs Hudson came out to pay for it. Holmes explained our agreement, to her amusement, and she promised to make a note of it.

‘I have an experiment to finish tonight, so you must pardon me,’ he said, though it did not take many visits before I knew that he disliked saying goodbye. I put out my hand and nearly snatched it back when he raised it to his lips rather than shaking it as he had before. He held on to it, brushed it with his cool lips, and let it go.

‘Please come to see us anytime you wish. We are on the telephone, by the way. Ask the exchange for Mrs Hudson, though; the good ladies sometimes decide to protect me by pretending ignorance, but they will usually permit calls to go through to her.’ With a nod he began to turn away, but I interrupted his exit.

‘Mr Holmes,’ I said, feeling myself go pink, ‘may I ask you a question?’

‘Certainly, Miss Russell.’

‘How does *The Valley of Fear* end?’ I blurted out.

‘The *what?*’ He sounded astonished.

‘*Valley of Fear*. In *The Strand*. I hate these serials, and next month is the end of it, but I just wondered if you could tell me, well, how it turned out.’

‘This is one of Watson’s tales, I take it?’

‘Of course. It’s the case of Birlstone and the Scowrers and John McMurdo and Professor Moriarty and—’

‘Yes, I believe I can identify the case, although I have often wondered why, if Conan Doyle so likes pseudonyms, he couldn’t have given them to Watson and myself as well.’

‘So how did it end?’

‘I haven’t the faintest notion. You would have to ask Watson.’

‘But surely you know how the case ended,’ I said, amazed.

‘The case, certainly. But what Watson has made of it, I couldn’t begin to guess, except that there is bound to be gore and passion and secret handshakes. Oh, and some sort of love interest. I deduce, Miss Russell; Watson transforms. Good day.’ He went back into the cottage.

Mrs Hudson, who had stood listening to the exchange, did not comment, but pressed a package into my hands, ‘for the trip back,’ although from the weight of it the eating would take longer than the driving, even if I were to find the interior space for it. However, if I could get it

past my aunt's eyes it would make a welcome supplement to my rations. I thanked her warmly.

'Thank you for coming here, dear child,' she said. 'There's more life in him than I've seen for a good many months. Please come again, and soon?'

I promised, and climbed into the car. The driver spun off in a rattle of gravel, and so began my long association with Mr Sherlock Holmes.

I find it necessary to interrupt my narrative and say a few words concerning an individual whom I had wanted to omit entirely. I find, however, that her total absence grants her undue emphasis by the vacuum it creates. I speak of my aunt.

For just under seven years, from the time my parents were killed until my twenty-first birthday, she lived in my house, spent my money, managed my life, limited my freedom, and tried her worst to control me. Twice during that time I had to appeal to the executors of my parents' estate, and both times won both my case and her vindictive animosity. I do not know precisely how much of my parents' money she took from me, but I do know that she purchased a terrace house in London after she left me, though she came to me nearly penniless. I let her know that I considered it payment for her years of service, and left it. I did not go to her funeral some years later and arranged for the house to go to a poor cousin.

Mostly I ignored her while she lived with me, which maddened her further. She was, I think, gifted enough herself to recognise greatness in others, but instead of rejoicing generously she tried to bring her superior down

to her own level. A twisted person, very sad, really, but my sympathy for her has been taken from me by her actions. I shall, therefore, continue to ignore her by leaving her out of my account whenever possible. It is my revenge.

It was only in my association with Holmes that her interference troubled me. It became apparent in the following weeks that I had found something I valued and, what was worse in her eyes, it offered me a life and a freedom away from her. I freely used my loan privileges with Mrs Hudson and had run up a considerable debt by the time I came into my majority. (Incidentally, my first act at the law offices was to draw up a cheque for the amount I owed the Holmes household, with five percent more for Mrs Hudson. I don't know if she gave it to charity or to the gardener, but she took it. Eventually.)

My aunt's chief weapon against my hours with Holmes was the threat to stir up talk and rumours in the community, which even I had to admit would have been inconvenient. About once a year this would come up, subtle threats would give way to blatant ones, until finally I would have to counter-attack, usually by blackmail or bribery. Once I was forced to ask Holmes to produce evidence that he was still too highly regarded, despite having been purportedly retired for over a decade, for any official to believe her low gossip. The letter that reached her, and particularly the address from which it had been written, silenced her for eighteen months. The entire campaign reached its head when I proposed to accompany Holmes to the Continent for six weeks. She would very likely have succeeded in, if not preventing my going, at least delaying me inconveniently. By that time, however, I had traced her bank account, and



I had no further trouble from her before my twenty-first birthday.

So much for my mother's only sister. I shall leave her here, frustrated and unnamed, and hope she does not intrude further on my narrative.