

Watson's Quick Mysteries

The Case of the Surly Beekeeper

An unusually fragrant zephyr of spring air wafted through our doorway as Mrs. Hudson brought in the note.

"Well, Watson," remarked my friend, Sherlock Holmes, as he perused the contents of the epistle, "it appears that we have another damsel in distress.

"It seems that a Mrs. Violet Epsom, who lives with her husband in a rather dismal corner of Dartmoor, fears for her life."

"Is there some escapee from the prison?"

"God forbid, not that Devil Hound of the Baskervilles again!"

"No, Watson, something even more insidious.

"The young woman has a beast for a husband and his brutality has recently begun to exceed mistreatment.

"She is now living in dread anticipating the possibility of his brutality's actually turning to murderous intent."

"Has she not brought the matter to the attention of the local authorities?" I asked.

"She fears for her life if her husband, Ralph by name, should get wind of any attempt on her part to involve the local constabulary."

"My, my, how dreadful! Exactly what does she expect from you, Holmes?" I asked.

"It seems that she feels that I can either threaten her husband in some way so as to induce him into ceasing his maltreatments, or advise her as to some possible route of escape.

"In any event, Watson, we must be on our way to Dartmoor without delay," Sherlock Holmes announced urgently as he retrieved his cape and cloth cap with the ear flaps from the coat tree beside the door.

The stationmaster reluctantly gave us directions to Ralph Epsom's domicile with the admonition that our visit just might be greeted with a full charge of shotgun pellets and that we should be extremely wary of his "livestock."

Apparently, Mr. Epsom drew his living from selling the small quantities of honey which issued from beekeeping.

The warning noted, we directed our hired dog cart along the road indicated just as night fell.

It was more than an hour before a distant point of light suggested the presence of life upon the desolate moor.

No sooner had we glimpsed that faint flicker than the sound of a distant explosion reached our ears.

"Gunshot, Holmes?" I asked.

"I fear so, my friend," he replied as he switched our rented steed to as near an approximation of a gallop as the beast could muster.

"I do fear so!"

In spite of our increased speed, it took us a full 20 minutes to reach the hovel which provided meager shelter for Epsom and his unfortunate wife.

We burst through the flimsy front door to find a dirty and bedraggled wretch of a man finishing a long draught from a near-empty bottle.

Only Sherlock Holmes' quick action with his riding crop prevented this Epsom person from reaching the shotgun near at hand.

Holmes grabbed the weapon and sniffed its muzzle.

"Very recently fired," Holmes announced, and then asked with stern authority, "Where is your wife, Epsom?"

"I don't know who ye are or what concern it be of yours, but the wench left me two days ago, and good riddance, I say.

"That shrew did nothing but nag and pester, pester and nag!"

"I don't know where she's gone but I'm that glad to be shed of her!"

"She's gone and happy I am of it!"

"May she never darken me door again!"

"Then at what did you shoot with this weapon?" Holmes demanded.

"We heard the shot not 20 minutes ago and it still smells of freshly burned gunpowder."

"I shot at nothing."

"I was just bringing me weapon across my porch when one of those blasted bees flew up and stung me."

"It startled me so and I pulled the trigger by accident."

"Don't try to make a big thing out of it," Epsom replied sarcastically.

"That's your story, then?" Holmes challenged.

"You bet, gov, and you can't prove nothing otherwise!"

"Very well."

"Let us take our leave, Watson."

"There is nothing more we can do here," Holmes directed to my surprise.

As we left the hut, Holmes whispered to me, "Quick Watson, we have to return to the village and report the matter to the constabulary."

"They must search the surrounding bogs for poor Mrs. Epsom's remains."

"Epsom was lying!"

"How do you know that, Holmes?" I asked.

The Answer to the Mystery is on the next page.

Answer to the Quiz

"Oh, Watson, really! If you knew anything about bees, you would know that they never fly at night.

"Epsom's yarn was a complete fabrication," Holmes explained, then added, "You know, as impossible as it may seem, I've suspected that bees

may use the sun as some sort of navigational sign, perhaps...."

After a long silence, saddened by our knowledge of the unfortunate Mrs. Epsom's demise, Holmes mused, "You may be aware that I have committed some effort to the study of bees.

"Fascinating insects! Remarkably industrious; most interesting social structure! You know, Watson, should I ever elect to retire, I have half a mind to take up beekeeping myself.

"The South Downs seems inviting."

