

Πικρός κομάρου μέλι

(Bitter *Arbutus* honey)

by mazaher

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I find that I'm really rather angry at Arthur Conan Doyle for allowing the link between Holmes and Watson to wear out and become threadbare; for making them fade into reciprocal irrelevance. I am calling him to task here, and trying to work around canon to provide a resolution of sorts, if only by acknowledging the problem-- and the heartbreak. Botanical footnote at the end. Unbetaed and written in a sudden rush.

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I have often wondered, alone at night in my cottage on the Sussex downs, when the bees are asleep and I smoke a meditative pipe in front of the fireplace, an empty chair at my side... I have often wondered what malevolent entity may have decided to bring apart my Watson and I. For apart we have drifted, or I wouldn't be here, alone, wondering.

Oh, he keeps in contact. A letter every few months, perhaps, a visit every couple of years. He always thanks me for the jars of honey I send, and indulges me when I ask him to rate the batches on a scale from 1 to 9. But if I look back with the sharper view the flow of time always bestows, I can see that our path began to diverge as far back as that case in 1888 which he called *The Sign of Four*. Then he met the woman whom he loved and who loved him back, and... No, I'm not going to say that I lost him, or that he lost me. It would be a blasphemy against what happened between us on the fateful trip which ended at Reichenbach, and against his welcome --so undeserved, so warm and forgiving-- when I came back from the dead.

The fact remains, he got married. He left Baker Street. He left me... He left us.

I remember the time of his courtship. He would go for afternoon walks in Regent's Park with Miss Morstan, have tea with her, accompany her home; sometimes he would come back late for dinner. He would be radiant with a light I had never seen. He had found a rose all of his own, a fresh red rose made on purpose for him and him only. Hopes of his which I could never meet were being fulfilled; indeed they were overflowing.

They sometimes asked me to join them; I excused myself, the work as good a reason as any. I congratulated them when they announced their engagement. I was Watson's best man at the wedding. More, I could not presume to be.

Not anymore.

It is bewildering that the last time we were together, neither of us knew. We had no inkling of what was to come; no thought of making it special. It was special all the same: it never failed to be, like each bolt of lightning in the dark of night blazes with a splendour never seen before or after.

Perhaps it was best that way. It ended with a whimper, when I came back one evening from a survey incognito, my bricklayer's clothes drenched by an insistent drizzle, and he, warm and fragrant in his smoking jacket and old corduroy trousers, stood and approached to help me undress. My hand roamed down, as it so often had since we became lovers. He stopped it with his own. He looked at me. I looked away.

How well he knows me! No word was ever uttered.

I told Watson once that he romanticised his stories about us, and in so doing he missed the point. I argued with the opposite instance of an elopement worked into the fifth Euclid's proposition.

I was half-joking at the time, but now I find that, if I want to bring this excruciating uncertainty of mine to an end, I will after all have to take a draught of my own bitter medicine,

and approach the question in a logical way. It seems indeed the only thing I can do well, however hard and long I tried to expand my proficiency to other fields.

Let me start by posing two alternatives, and hope that Occam's Razor will carry me through dealing with them. Preferably without cutting my own throat open in the process.

So, either a superior will engaged itself in separating us, or purely worldly forces were in play. The first alternative is hard to analyse. My early years were not, by any means, happy ones, but --alas-- I have plenty of proof that life is much harder for a large part of my fellows. I muddled through, trying to find my strenghts and play on them, while admittedly avoiding to work on my weaknesses. I managed tolerably well; I thought I had found a place for myself in the web of this world. Then my Watson came, and I was so conceited as to believe I must have done something right, for the mind who gives us flowers for free had sent him to me. But then he was led away.

Have I fallen out of grace? What was my sin, that my companion, my partner, my love, yes, by God! my love, be taken from me?

I can't believe that my sin was to love him. He's made to be loved, and he loved me in turn. I know I'm not mistaken, and I maintain even unto Heaven itself that such love, coming so natural, so hallowed in the face of the hate which taints this green Earth in its every corner, cannot be evil. It made me better; it made him better, because he gave for the both of us, filling in for what I lack.

What I lack: this is the problem. Watson loved me, but who else would, much less an omniscient Ghost? I am a cold thinking machine, an addict to cocaine and even more to my work, acerbic to my fellows, unsociable, uncompassionate, and all too ready to show off my own wits with no mind for the risk or the pain to others. There were times when I wanted to stop myself, and yet I couldn't. There were times when unexpected hardships or setbacks plagued my investigations, others when sudden insights or missing details would surprisingly lighten up the solution. There was that time, under a mossy boulder sprayed by a waterfall, when I opened my mouth to call out at Watson in his desperation, but something robbed me of my voice. There were times when I felt deep in the roots of my being that a Will was at work, more powerful and darker than Moriarty's, playing me like a pawn in a chess match where I had no choices. Yet I can't, I won't believe that such a Will is evil, or idly mischievous, or less than almighty. I can only think of Him as just.

If some higher power has thus decided to keep me alone, only bestowing on me a brief taste of what it means to be intimate with another human being, and then taking it from me, it may be nothing else than what I deserve. I only wish that, my caning given and my lesson learned, I may now be allowed to leave the classroom.

This horn of the dilemma doesn't seem to lend itself to comforting reflections. Let's try the other.

What earthly reason could tear apart my Watson and I? What did Mary give him that I couldn't?

Offspring, it's the first thing that comes to mind. Or at least the hope for offspring, as they didn't have ...time... for children. I am a wasteland in this respect, and a wasteland is no place to raise children. Not even adopted ones.

But Mary died, and they never conceived, yet Watson is lost to me. Her memory is shorter, but stronger than whatever we had between us. The answer must be different.

Who was Mary Morstan? A blonde young lady, small, dainty and attired with taste. She was not classically beautiful, but she had the deeper beauty of kindness. She was gentle by choice, not as an all-too-common feminine ruse; and she was brave, quietly so, in front of both physical danger and the pain of the heart.

Perhaps this is what her Watson loved in her: the courage of the meek. I am, I think, brave enough when the occasion calls for it, but I am not meek. I may be vulnerable, but not unarmed; wounded, but never defenceless. I can fend for myself in ways a woman can't, not in this time and age.

I had laid myself bare before him, in my shame and pride and need. I had given him what I could, equality in our difference. But perhaps he wanted to be the stronger with her, so that he could afford to be her weaker in turn, and this it could never be in my power to give.

So we remain, he a lighthouse, I a passing ship, inextricably linked by a single ray of light, and as irreparably separated by a gulf of night waters.

He tends words, I tend bees. Each has his own loss, and his own comfort. My dilemma is left unsolved. But isn't life itself an unsolvable mystery?

I hear the cry of the little gray owl, Athena's bird, announcing that she's solved her own question tonight.

I tap my pipe empty, and go to bed.

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Note:

Κόμπος is the Greek name of the so-called Apple of Cain (*Arbutus unedo*), growing in the Mediterranean and in southern Ireland, whose flowers give a peculiarly bitter honey. It "returns from the dead" by sprouting coppice shoots after being cut to the ground, and used to be called "the shelter of the wild one" (or "of the fool") because the magical white roebuck (or the outcast of the village) was supposed to hide under its branches.

See <http://www.shadowdrake.com/arbutus.html>.

Image of bumblebee pollinating *Arbutus* flower from Wikimedia commons at:

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bumble_bee_pollinating_Arbutus_unedo_flower.jpg.