

AN EXTRAORDINARY ELIXIR

ROB STEPHENSON

ON THE EVENING OF May 4th, 1984, The Speckled Band had the unprecedented pleasure of being invited to partake in a thimbleful of an extraordinary elixir, a honey-based liqueur of noble birth and lineage, dispatched by Dora Diener, a London bookseller, to Robert Stephenson and the members of the The Speckled Band. A package wrapped in brown paper was opened at the dinner table and a bottle with an old hand-lettered label was withdrawn. Accompanying the bottle was the letter reprinted below which was read by Mr. Stephenson. The bottle's rare contents were imbibed with a mixture of relish and awe befitting the historic nature of the occasion.

Dear Mr. Stephenson and members of The Speckled Band:

What I am about to relate, you may very well view with a measure of incredulity, but be assured that it is all quite true. And up to now also quite unknown, either to the academic and literary communities or to the world at large.

The story begins long ago; for me, though, it commenced in 1926 when I was born in a country cottage high on the Sussex Downs, not far from the little village of Cuckmere Haven. Both my parents had, at the suggestion of my grandfather, removed there from London shortly after the War, my father having served as an army doctor (as had, in fact, his father before him). Father had been badly gassed in the trenches and would never be entirely well again, and so after the Armistice his condition called for good air and an unhurried life. He undertook a practice - albeit a very limited one - while mother raised the family which included myself and later my brother James.

As our cottage was somewhat remote my brother and I, as children, had no choice but to devise our own amusements and pastimes. Above all else natural history became a passion for us. We were continually outside, undertaking expeditions, adding to our collections of bugs and plants and curiosities. As we grew older we each worked at neighboring farms after school and during summer holidays.

Every now and then my father would look in at "Fulworth," a cottage nearby, to visit - both professionally and socially—its occupant, an aging white-haired man who had long before been my grandfather's close friend and colleague in London. Father often took James and me with him on these visits. I can remember how fascinated I was with the strange apparatus in the study where we would share tea and the cakes that mother had sent with us. There were glass bottles and tubes of all shapes; papers and books everywhere. The old man was always very kind to me and invariably had some sort of mental puzzle for me to ponder on while he conversed with father.

Because of James' and my interest in natural history, the old man encouraged our visits as we grew older because he, too, was very keen on flowers and birds and bees. Especially bees! He had many hives at the top of his garden and I would often see their occupants dancing round the flowers bordering our own cottage. Each summer I would spend several days helping out in the collecting of the honey and was always invited to take home with me a great crock of it.

In time I became quite proficient as a beekeeper and did much of the work myself. Increasingly the old man devoted his time to the scientific study of his bees, their behavior and physiological attributes. He once showed me the little book he had earlier authored entitled *Practical Handbook of Bee Culture with Some Observations upon the Segregation of the Queen* (a nice copy came through the shop just the other day; it immediately sold at a very high price). He was now studying the properties of what he called Royal Jelly. His experiments, which he alluded to from time-to-time but which I was never asked to assist with, led him to conclude that Royal Jelly, properly prepared and taken, would preserve and prolong the processes of human life.

Another area of apiary experimentation that I *was* allowed to assist with was the distillation of honey. My old neighbor enjoyed a touch of brandy at the end of the day or sometimes a glass of the fruit wine that Martha, his devoted housekeeper, made each autumn. He was, of course, fond of honey as well and consequently accepted the challenge of satisfying both tastes in a single manner. Success was almost immediate and in later years he continually refined and improved the process. Although clearly a diversion from his more serious enquiries, he nonetheless gleaned much enjoyment from the activity, both the making of this liqueur and, of course, the disposing of it afterwards!

I helped with the honey extraction, the setting up of the apparatus, the timing and temperature taking. Most importantly I did most of the bottling and labeling. Each Christmas I would pack bottles which he would send to friends and relatives both here and abroad. My parents always received a large case each year which was never half consumed by the time the next one arrived. In time, an excess of bottles overflowed our cupboards and cellar.

In time I went away to school and then university and when my father died, mother gave up the cottage and moved north to live with her sister. I never returned to my childhood locale and lost all contact with my old neighbor. The precious supply of that marvelous elixir was divided between James and myself, the bottles dwindling in number over the years until, at the moment, only a mere eight remain. (James I'm sorry to say, long ago exhausted his share.)

Of course I now know who our neighbor really was ... that is, what he was and what he accomplished for England and the world. I also now know that he was *far* more than just a neighbor to us. These days I only occasionally take a sip of the stuff and just on these dates: the 6th of January (two drams), the 24th of July, the 8th of October and the 19th of November. (Do these dates ring in your mind as they do in mine?)

It will all surely be gone soon but as the old man had such a fondness for America and for Americans - and as many of our family are now citizens of your country—I really do think some of this "dwindling stock" should find its way across the sea...and what better place than to Boston and to what better an assemblage than the "Speckled Band?"

I trust you now all have a small precious sample before you. Savor it as you do me the pleasure of raising a toast to the *greatest* of beekeepers!

Yours faithfully,
Dora Diener (nee Watson)

P.S. Although it would be better left to another time, I will give you at least a sketchy inkling of my parentage. You can, of course, guess from the above who my grandfather on my father's side was. My father's brother, Thomas, was raised by relatives in Ohio—an involved story in itself—and was quite successful, I believe, in the field of computers and business machines, as was his son, my cousin, Thomas, Jr.

My mother's side of the family is even more interesting: You may recall her mother, Agatha Bond, as being in service to a certain Charles Augustus Milverton. (My brother, James, was later to take her maiden name when called upon by the government to undertake certain delicate tasks.) You may also recall Agatha's short engagement to a certain "rakish young workman."

With those as clues perhaps I should leave the remaining details for you to flesh out on your own.

D.W.D.

Appeared in *The Fifth Cab* (Boston: Stoke Moran Publishers, 1988)