SECRETS OF THE BEES

Also by Jane Johnson

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SECRETS OF THE BEES

Jane Johnson



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For the bees and the wild things

I

27 December 2017

The old wooden hive stood at the edge of the orchard within sight of the big house. It was unnaturally quiet today, as if the bees had already heard the news, but he had to carry out his duty. In his hands Ezra Curnow held a piece of fragile black crepe that had been among his father's possessions. It had belonged to his grandfather, and no doubt to *his* father before that. Over a century of unbroken tradition of telling the bees the news of a death, even if the queen and her swarms had changed many times, just as monarchs came and went.

Laying the cloth across the roof-ridge of the hive, he knocked three times and said, 'I bring word from the human world to the Queen of Trengrose and her subjects. Miss Eliza's passed over, my lovelies, and left us behind. She lived so long we all thought she were immortal, but her time came at last. We will mourn her, but don't you take wing. We shall do all right together even though we'll miss her. Best you stay here, in Trengrose, where we all belong.'

He heard nothing but a whisper of sound at the threshold of the audible. Had the queen and her subjects heard him? Were they asleep? Already flown?

Anxiety gripped him. If the bees were gone, all would fail. He

had kept a colony here for the best part of six decades: they were a part of his soul.

The world trembled on a precipice. Then a bee appeared at the lip of the hive and took to the air. Another followed, then a third. For a moment Ezra feared they might all come streaming out, but no, these were just scouts who buzzed lazily around him, then headed further into the orchard. He felt his nerves settle: they were simply heading out to search for sustenance. He knew there was butterbur in flower by the stream, and dead-nettles and cow parsley too, and in his garden he had planted hellebores and cyclamen, and he left the spurge and periwinkle to run riot to ensure that all the bees – not just from his hive, but the wild bees too – had winter food.

He bowed his head in reverence, then straightened up with a grunt – it was cold, and the chill had got into his knees. After a moment he turned for home, missing his old friend already, feeling as bleak as the day.

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April 2018

Ezra was taking a bath in the orchard with Daisy when the estate agent appeared. If he was surprised to see the man approaching through the trees, he didn't show it; the agent, on the other hand, gave a yelp of shock.

'Mornin',' said Ezra.

He ushered Daisy gently over the side onto the grass, where she shook out her feathers and then applied herself to giving each one a good fussing.

'Ah… good morning.' The man clutched his clipboard to himself like a breastplate. 'Are you aware that you're trespassing?'

Ezra leaned back in the bath. The water – brought from the house by watering cans and hosepipe and still being heated by the burning charcoal in a pit beneath the iron tub – had just been getting to a comfortable temperature, but now felt distinctly chilly. 'Trespassing, is it?' He eyed the intruder gravely and waggled his feet, which stuck out over the end.

'This is Trengrose land.'

'Ar,' said Ezra, frowning. He pulled his feet back in and began to lever himself out of the bath.

'No, no! Please stay where you are.'

'T'ent zackly relaxing being watched taking your bath.' Ezra stood up, water streaming off his knotted old body.

The agent stared fixedly at a point between the equally gnarly apple trees.

Ezra followed his gaze. 'Blossom's ansum this year,' he offered.

Daisy pecked experimentally at the visitor's shoes, but finding them of little interest, picked up her petticoats and strutted away into the underbrush. The agent stared at the retreating hen, then back at the old man. 'Ah yes, very "handsome",' he agreed, and when Ezra bent to retrieve his clothing, shuttled his gaze sideways. 'This is, I believe, part of the Trengrose orchard.'

Ezra said nothing. Deciding not to offer the man the entertainment of watching him struggle into his long johns, he used them instead to dry himself, then put on his corduroy trousers and secured them with a belt that must once have belonged to a larger man; the tongue hung down obscenely.

The agent set his jaw. 'You really shouldn't be here. I'm prepared to turn a blind eye on this occasion, but it would be better if you weren't to be found here again, Mr—?'

Ezra pulled on his huge wellies. 'Not from round here, are you?' he said, taking in the man's pristine Barbour jacket, yellow waistcoat and pressed suit trousers.

'Truro,' the agent returned defensively.

'There you go.' Ezra nodded, point proven. He made as if to leave, then turned back. 'Big house going on the market, is it?'

'I'm afraid that's none of your business. Not unless you have a spare million and a half in cash stashed away,' the agent said nastily.

'Million, eh?' Ezra sucked his teeth, then laughed. 'A million! Pounds, is that, or grains of sand?' Before the man could answer, Ezra picked up the watering cans and set off towards the quillet that he counted as his back garden, feeling the agent's eyes on him until he was out of sight.

Reaching the edge of the garden, he stopped briefly to appreciate the wildflowers – new ones every day as spring wore on – and felt his mind settle.

'Fumitory, alkanet, celandine, campion, forget-me-not, dog

violet, groundsel and three-cornered leek, mouse ear, scurvy grass, speedwell and oxalis, dandelion—' his Gram used to call it by its Cornish name – piss-a-bed – but he refused to saddle a fine plant with such a vulgar appellation, 'sow thistle and speedwell.' Sometimes at night, when sleep evaded him, he would list the plants he had noticed that day, and if sleep had still not claimed him by the time he reached the end of his reckoning, he would reorder them by colour category: pinks, blues, yellows.

He noted that today's newcomer was a tiny pink cranesbill and bent to examine it. When he straightened up, he found himself observed by a pair of dunnocks, blinking their handsome copper-red eyes at him.

'Careful, now,' he warned them. 'You may find you're trespassing.'

He wasn't the only observer of the little birds. Stretched out along a bough of the damson tree was a sleek shape, its patchworked coat of tabby, ginger and white a perfect camouflage among the sun-dappled leaves.

Bucca regarded the man lazily, knowing that he was unlikely to disturb his rest; knowing, also, that he had no greater ambition where the dunnocks were concerned than to spectate. He was comfortable, the warm light falling pleasantly upon his back and head, and the effort required to catch and defeather the little birds seemed in that moment beyond him, unless they foolishly wandered below and he could simply roll off the branch and crush them with his falling body. He yawned hugely, enjoying this fantasy for a fleeting moment, his eyes reduced to golden slits, then slipped lightly back into his doze.

Ezra deposited the watering cans in their accustomed place by the back door of the cottage, picked up the empty saucer there,

and took it inside with him. He rinsed it under the tap and stacked it among his drying breakfast things.

Sharp spring light slanted across the framed photographs by the window, illuminating the dust that had fallen over their glass fronts during the winter. Ezra picked each one up and dusted it tenderly. Here his grandparents, Jude and Cecily, he tall and dark, towering over his tiny, pale bride, the sepia of their wedding photo faded so that their expressions were impossible to make out. Another, in a smarter gilt-edged frame, of Jude laughing into the camera, an old-fashioned pitchfork balanced on one shoulder, his dark hair full of straw as if he had just fought his way out of a haystack. It was a remarkably contemporary image, as if a modern photographer had staged it and doctored it to give the impression of age. He wondered, not for the first time, who had taken this candid shot. And there was his father, Ethan, the spitting image of *his* father Jude, with his long straight nose and sharp eyes and tumble of black curls, standing at the door of this very cottage, arm around Tamsin's waist. A picture of the twins in Tamsin's arms. Must be the summer of 1939. Those climbing roses were still going strong: Ma had always said they grew in enchanted earth. '"With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine, there sleeps Titania sometime of the night, lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight",' he murmured to himself.

Another photo lay behind the others, the image it bore imprinted on his memory like a scar. He left it there to gather dust and went to place Gram Cecily's copper kettle on the range to make a brew. Then, while the kettle came slowly to a boil, he went out to relieve himself. He sat in the outhouse, balancing more on one cheek than the other to avoid a nasty nip from the widening crack in the old Bakelite seat, and thought about the man with the clipboard. He'd been anticipating a visitation like this ever since Miss Eliza had died, had been lulled into a false sense of security when winter had passed into spring with no sign of change, and had begun to let himself hope that nothing

would happen to alter the status quo. The world would go on along its natural track, and all would be well.

But a posh Truro agent in a yellow waistcoat mouthing the word 'million' was unexpected, and unwelcome. He experienced a rare moment of anxiety, a sort of inward creep of gooseflesh. A million. Who had that sort of money? And in cash? Gangsters, he thought. Gangsters and bankers. Same thing, really.

Pushing the thought away, he fixed his attention on the slice of his small domain he could see from his throne (the door to the outhouse being open): his vegetable plot, where the potato leaves had pushed up in neat, bright rows, the pea wigwams assailed by clever, twining tendrils, the flourishing rhubarb patch with its umbrella leaves, the early bumblebees progressing royally like mini Zeppelins. It was a timeless scene, one he made sure to enjoy every day. Only the seasons changed the view: blackthorn blossom, apple blossom, hawthorn blossom; golden sun, falling leaves, the grey light of winter.

But this year there had been snow. Snow this far south and west was a rare event: February was usually a wet month, too wet for snow to stick and stay. This February had been cold and dry, and one day when he had been cutting back brambles the noon sky had turned suddenly black, and snow had been dumped on the land as if someone up above had slit open a gigantic pillow and let fall its stuffing of cold, cold feathers. In less than twenty minutes everything had been white, the roads impassable for days.

The Beast from the East, the radio weatherman had dubbed this snowstorm.

Somewhere in the depths of his ancient Celtic soul, Ezra couldn't help but wonder if it had presaged doom.