

RESOLVING THE RIDDLE: PLAN BEE

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The discovery by Ronnie B. Kon, which he reported in the Nov. 2010 *Word Ways*, of an earlier, different version of Faith Eckler's refractory "1831" riddle constitutes a breakthrough, I believe, in the decades-old effort to deduce a convincing answer to this stumper. Whereas before, this riddle had seemed (to me, at least) to be intractably baffling, now, suddenly, a satisfactorily suasive solution to it is discernable.

Here is the version of the riddle (to which no answer was given) that Kon reports having found in *Dickson's Balloon Almanac* for 1801 (published in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, presumably in late 1800). The two significant differences in its wording from the 1831 version ("habit" for "habits" and "Neglected" for "Lamented") are shown in boldface type:

A RIDDLE

IN the morn, when I rise, I open my eyes,
Though I sleep not a wink in the night;
If I wake e'er so soon, I still lie till noon,
And I pay no regard to the light.

I am chaste, I am young, I am lusty and strong,
And my **habit** oft change in a day;
To Court I ne'er go, am no Lady or Beau,
Yet as frail and fantastic as they.

I travel abroad, and ne'er miss the road,
Unless I am met by a Stranger:
If you come in my way, as you very well may,
You will always be subject to danger.

I have loss, I have gain, I have pleasure and pain,
And am punish'd with many a stripe:
To diminish my woe, I burn Friend and Foe,
And the ev'ning I close with a pipe.

I live but short time, and die in my prime,
Neglected by all who possess me:
If I say any more, to what's gone before,
I fear you will easily guess me.

Other plausible solutions have been put forward, but if this version of it may be taken as the riddle in its original state, then I think that its intended answer was most probably a **honeybee**—or more precisely, a honeybee of the celibate worker caste, and not a sexually active queen or drone. Note that a honeybee is a familiar, concrete object such as answers to riddles of this era tended to be, and that this is furthermore an answer that does not require any of the riddle's clues to be interpreted in any metaphorical or otherwise

abstruse way. Moreover, this solution takes into due account the easily overlooked fact that, in rhyming riddles of this kind, the nature of clues is often very heavily influenced by constraints of rhyme and meter, which frequently impose inadvertent obstacles to comprehension never intended by the constructor.

Addressing its clues in order, here is my interpretation of the riddle:

*In the morn, when I rise, I open my eyes,
Though I sleep not a wink in the night;*

The first line, I believe, is not intended to be taken too literally; the constructor needed here a pair of rhyming phrases conveying the idea of someone waking up in the morning, and settled for these. This line serves mainly to set up the clever apparent paradox completed in the second line, which has the speaker awakening in the morning despite having not slept a wink in the night. The solution to this seeming paradox is that although bees may experience the insect equivalent of sleep at night, they nonetheless cannot sleep “a wink” because they have no eyelids.

*If I wake e'er so soon, I still lie till noon,
And I pay no regard to the light.*

This clue, surprisingly, is literally true: in chillier climes, honeybees will not stir from their hives until midday brings warmer air temperatures, as they require not just light but warmth to become very active.

I am chaste, I am young, I am lusty and strong,

Sexually inactive, a worker bee is necessarily chaste, and is certainly young by human standards. It is “lusty” in the sense of being vigorous, and that permits the constructor to present another seeming paradox, that of chastity somehow coexisting with lustiness. That bees are strong for their size is manifest.

And my habit oft change in a day;

Bees present a different external appearance (“habit”) in each of the four stages of their metamorphic life cycle: egg, larva, pupa and adult. No doubt some of these changes in appearance occur in less than a day.

*To Court I ne'er go, am no Lady or Beau;
Yet as frail and fantastic as they.*

Being functionally asexual, the worker bee of course never goes courting, and in that sense is neither lady nor beau. And a honeybee might certainly be considered to be at least as “frail and fantastic” as a pair of human lovers; apparently, the constructor could think of no better common adjectives for bees and lovers than these to use in a line which he or she had already decided to end with “they” (to rhyme with “day”).

*I travel abroad, and ne'er miss the road,
Unless I am met by a Stranger;
If you come in my way, as you very well may,
You will always be subject to danger.*

What kind of flights are bees noted for making? Beelines, of course. Bees always seem to know exactly where their next destination lies, and to fly there directly—unless, that is, some more urgent business, such as the repelling of some unfamiliar and potentially threatening person or animal (i.e., a “stranger,” a noun chiefly selected for its rhyme with “danger”) from the vicinity of their hive, should happen to divert

them. Which brings us to the fact that if you should, wittingly or not, approach too closely to a beehive, or otherwise obstruct or annoy one or more of its occupants, you might very well be in some danger.

- (1) *I have loss, I have gain, I have pleasure and pain,*
- (2) *And am punish'd with many a stripe;*
- (3) *To diminish my woe, I burn Friend and Foe,*

(1) The non-specific clues in this line could apply to almost any animate creature, which suggests that the riddle's author might have been running low on clues specific to bees at this point.

(2) Honeybees have striped abdomens, but why are they "punish'd" with stripes, rather than, say, "blazoned" or "painted"? For two reasons, probably: because "punish'd" provides a useful element of misdirection, and because it neatly serves to account for the speaker's "woe" in the next line.

(3) When aroused in defense of its hive, a bee is notorious for not stopping to ascertain an intruder's intentions, friendly or hostile, before attacking. But why does it "burn", instead of, say, "spear" or "stab" him? Probably because any verbs suggestive of "sting" risk giving the game away, because there are no good one-syllable synonyms for the more general verb "attack," and because a bee sting does, after all, produce a burning sensation. But why would such an assault diminish the bee's "woe" instead of, say, its "ire"? Most likely because a one-syllable word rhyming with "foe" (the phrase "friend and foe" being considered indispensable) was needed there, and "woe" was the only such word remotely suitable.

And the ev'ning I close with a pipe.

This clue is a perplexing one until it is realized that the riddle's author was in sore need, at the end of this line, of a word that rhymes with "stripe"—a necessary word in a previous clue, and one which the constructor was not about to forsake solely for the want of the perfect word to rhyme with it. Rhyming dictionaries list only a few one-syllable words rhyming with "stripe," none of which have any particular application to bees; "pipe" was probably chosen in the hope that it could pass as a rough synonym for "hum." Perhaps it is the case that honeybees hum in their hives in the evening.

*I live but short time, and die in my prime,
Neglected by all who possess me;*

Bees' life-spans, compared to ours, are of course quite brief, and they die, if not in their prime, at least still in harness; beekeepers can attest that no idle, retired worker bees are found lolling about in beehives. And no one, whether fellow bee or human owner, waxes very sentimental over an individual bee's passing; a memorial service for a deceased bee typically consists of its corpse being unceremoniously pushed out of the hive by some hive-policing junior bee that has come across it.

As previously indicated, the recent recovery of this riddle in what is probably its original state was crucial to the realization that "a honeybee" could be a viable solution to it. Prior to that event, the two corrupted clues that had crept into its 1831 version had discouraged any serious consideration this answer. With those two clues corrected, it would now appear that all of the riddle's clues comfortably accommodate "a honeybee" as an answer. Given the diversity of those clues, and the scant likelihood that another solution could fit them as well, surely "a honeybee" (or perhaps, simply "a bee") should be regarded as the answer most probably intended for this riddle by its long-ago author.

