

The Beekeeper's Apprentice

Preface by Laurie R. King

The first thing I want the reader to know is that I had nothing to do with this book you have in your hand. Yes, I write mystery novels, but even a novelist's fevered imagination has its limits, and mine would reach those limits long before it came up with the farfetched idea of Sherlock Holmes taking on a smart-mouthed, half-American, fifteen-year-old feminist sidekick. I mean, really: If even Conan Doyle hungered to shove Holmes off a tall cliff, surely a young female of obvious intelligence would have brained the detective on first sight.

However, that doesn't explain how this story came into print.

It began several years ago, when the UPS delivery woman came barreling down the driveway and, somewhat to my surprise, began to unload not the order of vegetable seeds I was expecting but a very large, heavily strapped cardboard box that must have stretched UPS's weight restrictions to the limit, because she had to use her dolly to maneuver the thing onto my front porch. After questioning her to no avail and checking carefully that the address on the box was indeed mine, I signed for it and went to get a kitchen knife to cut the tape. I ended up cutting considerably more than the tape, and when I had finished hacking away the cardboard I was ankle-deep in scraps; that knife has never been the same.

Inside was a trunk, a large and much-abused, old-fashioned metal traveling trunk, complete with stickers from hotels familiar and unlikely. (Could there be a Ritz in Ibadan?) Someone had thoughtfully fastened the key into the padlock with a length of Scotch tape, so I removed the tape and turned the key, feeling somewhat like Alice confronted with a "Drink me" bottle. As I stood looking down at the jumbled contents, my curiosity began to take on alarming overtones. I rapidly pulled back my hand and stood away from the trunk, thoughts of madmen and stalkers standing out in my mind like newspaper headlines. I went down the stairs and around the house fully intending to call the police, but when I went in the back door I stopped to make myself a cup of coffee first, and when it was in the cup I walked through the house to look cautiously out the window at the dented metal and the gorgeous purple velvet that lay inside it, and I saw that one of the cats had curled up on top of the velvet. Now, why a sleeping cat should cause fears of explosive devices to fade so quickly I cannot think, but it did, and I was soon on my knees, elbowing the cat out of the way to examine the contents.

They were very strange. Not taken by themselves, but as a collection, there was neither rhyme nor reason: some articles of clothing, including the beaded velvet evening cloak (with a slit near the hem), a drab and disreputable man's bathrobe or dressing gown, and a breath-taking gossamer wool-and-silk embroidered Kashmiri shawl; a cracked magnifying lens; two bits of tinted glass that could only be a pair of peculiarly thick and horribly uncomfortable contact lenses; a length of fabric that a friend later identified as an unwrapped turban; a magnificent emerald necklace, a weight of gold and sparkle that rode my throat like wealth personified until I unhooked it and carried it inside to thrust beneath

my pillow; a man's emerald stick-pin; an empty matchbox; one carved ivory chopstick; one of those English railway timetable books called ABC for the year 1923; three odd stones; a thick two-inch bolt rusted onto its nut; a small wooden box, ornate with carving and inlay depicting palm trees and jungle animals; a slim, gold-leaf, red-letter King James New Testament, bound in white leather that had gone limp with use; a monocle on a black silk ribbon; a box of newspaper clippings, some of which seemed to deal with crimes committed; and an assortment of other odds and ends that had been pushed in around the edges of the trunk.

And, right at the bottom, a layer of what proved to be manuscripts, although only one was immediately recognizable as such, the others being either English-sized foolscap covered top to bottom with tiny, difficult writing or the same hand on an unwieldy pile of mismatched scrap paper. Each was bound with narrow purple ribbon and sealed with wax, stamped R.

Over the next couple of weeks I read through those manuscripts, all the time expecting to find the answer to the puzzle of who had sent them to me, waiting for it to leap out like some written jack-in-the-box, but I found nothing—nothing, that is, but the stories, which I read with equal parts enjoyment and eyestrain.

I did try to trace the shipper through UPS, but all the agent at the New York office where the parcel had originated could tell me was that a young man had brought it in, and paid cash.

With considerable puzzlement, then, I folded the cloak, dressing gown, and manuscripts away and stashed the trunk in my closet. (The emeralds I put in a safe-deposit box at the bank.)

There it sat, month in and month out, for some years, until one bleak day after a too-long series of bleak days when nothing would grow under my pen and money pressures loomed, I remembered with a stir of envy the easy assurance of the voice from the manuscripts in the back of my closet.

I went to the trunk and dug out one of the piles of paper, took it to my study to read again, and then, motivated by despair as much as the roof that was leaking around my ears, set about rewriting it. Shame-faced, I sent it to my editor, but when she rang me some days later with the mild comment that this didn't read like my other stuff, I broke down and confessed, told her to mail it back to me, and went back to staring at a blank page.

The following day she called again, said that she'd had a consultation with the firm's lawyer, that she really liked the story, though she wanted to see the original, and that she'd like to publish it if I were willing to sign my life away in waivers should the actual author appear.

The battle between pride and roof repairs was over before it began. I do, however, have some self-esteem, and still considered the narratives in my possession, as I said, farfetched.

I don't know how much truth there is in them. I don't even know if they were written as fiction or fact, though I cannot rid myself of the feeling that they were meant as fact, absurd as it may be. However, selling them (with disclaimer) is preferable to selling that gorgeous necklace I will probably never wear, and surely if selling the one is acceptable, so is the other.

What follows is the first of those manuscripts, unadorned and as the writer left it (and, presumably, sent it to me). I have only tidied up her atrocious spelling and smoothed out a variety of odd personal shorthand notations. Personally, I don't know what to make of it. I can only hope that with the publication of what the author called *On the Segregation of the Queen* (such a cumbersome title—she was obviously no novelist!) will come, not lawsuits, but a few answers. If anyone out there knows who Mary Russell was, could you let me know? My curiosity is killing me.

—Laurie R. King