



1.

Hard as it is to believe, fifteen years have passed since Ms Laurie King published—under her name—the first volume of the Mary Russell memoirs. She recounts (in her Editor’s Preface to that volume, which was given the title *The Beekeeper’s Apprentice*) her puzzlement as to what these manuscripts were and why she was the recipient of these multiple volumes of hand-written (for the most part) manuscripts recounting the life of a stranger and, moreover, a stranger who claims to have been married to one Sherlock Holmes.

Now, the fifteenth anniversary of the publication of *The Beekeeper’s Apprentice*, may be as good a time as any to answer that puzzle.

It began in the winter of 1989, when a bout with a troublesome although ultimately meaningless illness left me with an awareness that, in my ninetieth year, I was perhaps not to be immortal. It was time to gather my thoughts for posterity and make some arrangement for their preservation.

I might have done it long before, truth to tell, but for the identity of my husband. When one is married to a person of considerable fame, one tends to choose invisibility over all else. And since any memoirs I was to pass on would be of occasionally inflammatory nature, I needed to choose my literary agent with care.

Little did I realize that what that decision would cost me.

14.

I do not know if our American pursuers were actively watching for us, or if they had decided to make the best of their visit and take in the May Day festivities while waiting for us to emerge, but at the corner of the Botanic Gardens, where Rose Lane comes into the High, the straining silence was broken by loud American accents: “Hey! There he is!”

And the hunt was on again.

I spoke in Holmes’ ear, ordering him to abandon me. He hesitated, being neither cowardly nor disloyal, but even he could see the logic in my suggestion. He bent down enough to vanish in the crowd, while I appropriated a nearby furred umbrella (in any English crowd, there will always be a man who doubts the clear sky overhead) and tripped one attacker, jabbed the second in the stomach, and nudged the third into the large, intoxicated Rugby player beside him.

With that trio temporarily disposed of, and making certain they had seen me, their unlikely assailant, I pushed into the crowd, crossing to the Magdalene side of the High and making for Magdalene Bridge.

Halfway across, I ducked down to make my way back up the human stream, ducking into the grounds of the Botanic Garden and making for the river.

Holmes had located a punt, worked its anchoring pole out of the bottom, and was waiting for me. I heard a shout behind me—English, not American—and tumbled into the boat. He pushed off, and I turned to face the boat’s irate owners.

“Terribly sorry,” I called to them. “There’s a trio of Americans just behind you who said they’d be happy to repay you for the hire cost. You take it up with them, there’s a good lad.”

A sweet old lady in a boat; how could he argue with me?

15.

Had our pursuers been familiar with Oxford, they could have caught us up several times over. As it was, by the time they extricated themselves from the young man whose boat we had stolen, then consulted their maps, we were away from the river-side path in Christchurch meadow—by this time, I was punting—and down the new cut to the Isis proper.

By the time they had located the Thames path, gone back up to Folly Bridge, and crossed the river to get to the path, the current had moved us briskly downstream. They nearly caught us up at Illey, when the lockkeeper protested about working the locks for one solitary punt, but a flash of gold in his hand changed his mind, and we were away.

The day was warm, the cushions were comfortable, and the merest touch of the pole kept us moving in the right direction. We stopped from time to time to take refreshment. And at one such stop, I bought an antique post-card, thinking to amuse Ms King in California.

When evening came upon us, I changed into raiment that would draw less notice than trousers on a woman my age, and we abandoned our vessel. In a fit of whimsy, I left the day’s clothing folded in the boat, fiction knows that suicides always remove their spectacles. Thus, the explanation of how Ms King came to possess my memoirs. I may at a later time recount the story of our subsequent communications: What I meant by the antique postcard that she read as, More to follow; why we were in Utrecht when I sent it; and why, most puzzling of all, The Times did not publish its account of the punt found in central London for an entire three years.

Is it not satisfying to know that there is always more to any tale?