

May-Day in Oxford is an ancient ritual, which has been suspended from time to time over the centuries due to excessive turmoil. It begins well before dawn, when from all directions people trickle into the high street, making their way in the direction of the Magdalene College tower.

At dawn, choir-boys raise their voices to the day, their sweet, high chorus trailing down over the packed street of families and homeless men, passing tradesmen and beer-sodden undergraduates, antiquarians and tourists. Participants of the previous night's college balls, held upright by the press of the throng, pass around half-empty bottles of cheap champagne, most of them bedraggled, tieless, sometimes shoeless, and often sodden from the puzzling ritual of leaping out of punts or off of bridges in their evening dress. When the snatches of song finish drifting down from on high, the crowd shakes off its attentive silence, gives a noisy pulse, and reverses its progress, out from Magdalene College. Morris dancers bounce and rattle on the paving stones surrounding the Radcliffe Camera, Hobby horses give the kiss of fertility to doomed young women, odd foodstuffs are sold, the manifold clergy of the town looks on fondly at the pagan frenzy, and the rites of spring are officially ushered in.

When the sky was still dark overhead, Holmes and I let ourselves out of the gate and joined the trickle, soon stream, of May Day celebrants.

However, before the Magdalene choir had finished, we had been spotted.

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You need to remember, this was 1992, and the number of people who knew that Sherlock Holmes had a wife was relatively small. No doubt our pursuing Sherlockians thought I was a housekeeper, or a nurse—they were standing watch outside of the gate, and began to bay wildly when first I set foot out of the house. I feigned great age—admittedly not a difficult act, at ninety two years—and hobbled to the car, back bent with apparent arthritis and a large straw hat pulled down, not so much to hide my features as to explain why I hadn't noticed ten jumping figures thirty feet away. I got the door open with my ancient hands, bent slowly—slowly, to retrieve some small object from the door pocket, then inadequately closed the door and, crouching low, crept back into the house.

Thus, before dawn the next morning, the three who had been set to watch overnight from their hire car recognised the hatted old lady behind the wheel of the motor that pulled out of the gate, and hastened to follow—it being too dark to see that the person at the wheel was a foot shorter and seventy years younger. Nor did they notice that the brisk young man closing the gate was in fact the old woman they thought they were following.

Whistling, I went to finish my coffee and leave the house, on what promised to be a perfectly lovely May-Day morn.

Any literary agent whom I put in charge of my memoirs needed to be, first of all a woman. She needed to be strong-minded enough to resist the blandishments and threats unleashed upon her once the nature of these manuscripts came to light. And since I thought it best to begin with someone with links to Mary Russell above any links to Sherlock Holmes, I cast my mind over my relatives: consins of various stripe abound, but search as I might, I could find no combination of literary interest and common sense.

Next, I sought out the descendants of my university friend, Veronica Beaconsfield, only to find that the current generation lacked the wit of their grandparents.

So I went further back, to my childhood in San Francisco, and there, in the early weeks of 1992, I found the person I sought. The granddaughter of a childhood friend, she was in the early stages of a literary career—her first novel had been accepted at a New York publisher—but she was also sensible enough to balance the demands of children, travel, a husband with his own career, and a complex household. And an untold benefit: She had a backgound in Old Testament theology!

Without delay, I began to assemble the manuscripts and prepared to send them off to Ms King in California—but before I could do so, catastrophe struck.

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I doubt it will come as a surprise to the reader when I say that my husband's popularity in the world of letters approximates that of a lesser divinity. More than a century ago, when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had an attack of pique and sent Holmes to his death over the Reichenbach Falls, readers protested with black arm-bands, cancelled subscriptions to The Strand, and outrage to Conan Doyle's face. Were that story to be published now, I should expect Molotov Cocktails to be thrown.

This degree of renown brings, as you might expect, considerable problems. The cooperation of our neighbours is essential, and elaborate ploys are occasionally necessary to turn would-be visitors from our door in Sussex—although we have found that the most effective of these is encouraging the world to think of us as fictional characters. This weeds out all but the overly whimsical and the truly insane and, until one cool spring morning in April of 1992, permitted us to maintain our privacy.

I was in the downstairs sitting room finishing the task of assembling and sealing together the pages of my various memoirs, when my eye was attracted by motion at the window. I looked up, and saw to my horror that our rural home was being invaded, by none other than a ravening pack of Sherlockians.