

Dreaming Spies: A Novel of Suspense Featuring Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes

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Laurie R. King's novels of suspense featuring Mary Russell and her husband, Sherlock Holmes, are critically acclaimed and beloved by readers for the author's adept interplay of history and adventure. Now the intrepid duo is finally trying to take a little time for themselves—only to be swept up in a baffling case that will lead them from the idyllic panoramas of Japan to the depths of Oxford's most revered institution.

Laurie R. King is the New York Times bestselling author of thirteen Mary Russell mysteries, five contemporary novels featuring Kate Martinelli, the Stuyvesant & Grey novels Touchstone and The Bones of Paris, and the acclaimed A Darker Place, Folly, and Keeping Watch. She lives in Northern California.

Chapter One

Old grey stone travels

Moss-covered, cradled in straw,

Blinks at English spring.

"It's a rock, Holmes."

Sherlock Holmes raised his tea-cup to his lips. He swallowed absently, then glanced down in surprise, as if the homecoming drink had brought to mind the face of a long-forgotten friend. "Is it the water from our well that makes Mrs Hudson's tea so distinctive," he mused, "or the milk from Mrs Philpott's cows?"

My lack of reply had no effect on his pursuit of the idea.

"It would make for an interesting monograph," he continued. "The significance of a society's hallmark beverage. Tea: Moroccan mint, Japanese green, English black. In America, there is—well, one can hardly call it 'coffee.' The Bedouin, of course . . ."

I only half-listened to his reverie. Truth to tell, I was enjoying not only the contents of my cup, but the lack of fretting waves beneath my feet and the peace of this cool spring afternoon. We had just returned, after what began as a brief, light-hearted trip to Lisbon became (need I even add the word "inevitably"?) tumultuous months in several countries. This was far from the first time I had stood on the terrace with a cup of tea, appreciating not being elsewhere. Although it did seem that no sooner was I enjoying the peace than something would come along to shatter it: an urgent telegram, a bleeding stranger at the door. I stirred.

"Holmes, the rock."

"You are right, it's probably best to leave America out of the matter. Although possibly—"

"Holmes!"

"Yes, Russell, it is a rock. A rather fine rock, would you not agree? An almost . . . Japanese sort of a rock?"

I turned my eyes from husband to granitic intruder.

Higher than my knee, with an interesting pattern of moss and lichen and a tracery of dark veins running through it, the stone had been planted— for "planted" was the word— in the flower bed encircling the terrace. And not in a central position, but asymmetrically, half— concealed behind a rounded juniper. In the spring, it would almost disappear beneath Mrs Hudson's peonies.

Almost disappear. As it was almost Japanese. As I reflected on the massive and permanent shape, I realised that it looked as if it had risen from the Sussex earth long before juniper and peony were introduced. Before the old flint house behind me was built, for that matter— although it had definitely not been there when I left for Portugal the previous November.

"It was most peculiar." Mrs Hudson's voice behind us sounded apologetic. "These four Oriental gentlemen drove up in a lorry, and while the three young ones began to unpack the thing— it was wearing a sort of straw overcoat!— the older one marched back here to look at the terrace. He poked at the ground for a few minutes— hard as stone itself, it being that cold snap we had in December— and asked me what colour my peonies were. It's beyond me how he knew there were peonies at all. He was polite, you understand, but a little . . . quiet."

We both turned sharply to look at her. "Did he threaten you?" Holmes demanded.

"Heavens, no. I told you he was polite. Just . . . well, once or twice you've had folk here who, shall we say, give one the feeling that it's good they're on your side. If you know what I mean?"

"Dangerous."

"I suppose. Although honestly, it was only his nature, not in the least aimed at us. In any event, Patrick was here." A complete non— sequitur, since our farm— manager looked about as threatening as one of his draught horses. "But the fellow clearly wasn't about to explain. So I told him—what colour they were, that is—and he said he was terribly sorry, his men would need to move one of them, but that the darker one should be fine where it was, and that's what they did. They were careful, give them that. Seemed to know what they were doing. After they left, I'd have had Patrick put Daisy into harness and drag the thing away into the orchard, but I thought it might be something you'd arranged and forgot to mention. In any event, once I'd lived with it for a few days, it grew on me, like. Peculiar ornament for an herbaceous border, but not all that bad. And I could see that the peony would be better where the Oriental gentlemen put it. So, shall I have Patrick remove it?"

"No!"

Under other circumstances, I'd have read Holmes' quick reply as an urgent need to keep

her from danger, but I thought it pretty unlikely that this massive object could be hiding a bomb. Instead, I took his fast refusal to mean that this drastic addition to our accustomed view was having the same effect on him as it was on me: once the eyes had accepted the shape, the mind began to rearrange the entire garden around it. In less than the time it took to drain one cup of tea, I was beginning to suspect that, were Patrick to hitch up his horse and haul this foreign stone into the fields, our terrace would forever be a lesser place.

As Mrs Hudson said, the thing grew on a person.

"They didn't leave a message?" I asked our housekeeper.

"Not as such. Although he did say one odd thing. When they were done, the others went back to the lorry but he sat, all cross-legged and right on the paving stones, just looking at his rock. In the cold! I brought him out a travelling rug, I was that worried that he would freeze, but he took no notice.

"I went back inside, looking out at him every so often, and I was just wondering if what I needed was Constable Beckett or the doctor, when the fellow stood up again. He walked all the way around the thing, then came and knocked on the kitchen door to give me back the rug. Neatly folded, too. I offered him a cup of tea, but he said thank you, he had to be getting on. And then he said, 'Tell your master he has a chrysanthemum in his garden,' although how he'd know that at this time of-

At the name of the flower, Holmes and I looked at each other, startled.

"Mrs Hudson," I interrupted, "what did the fellow look like? Other than being Oriental."

"Well, I suppose he was a bit taller than usual. Certainly he was bigger than the other three."

"With a scar on his hand?" Holmes asked.

"Yes, now that you ask. All down the back of his hand, it was-

But we didn't wait to hear the rest of it. As one, we set our cups upon the table and strode across the terrace to the steps leading to the orchard and the Downs beyond. At the small inner gate, we turned to look. This, the more hidden side, looked as if someone had tried to carve a flower on it, a thousand years before.

Not a chrysanthemum: the Chrysanthemum.

A venerable stone we had last seen a year ago in the Emperor's garden in Tokyo.

Chapter Two

Scholar-² gipsy, I.

Homecoming to a strange land.

Trinity Term's mist.

The following morning was wet and blustery. We took our breakfast in front of the fire, reading an accumulation of newspapers. Inevitably, the news was all about the horrors of the weather (a woman killed when a tree fell across her house), imminent threats to world peace, and the attempts at good-humoured news that convince one the human race is a lost cause. With yesterday's reminder of Japan, my eyes were caught no fewer than three times by the country's name: an art display in London, the Japanese-² Russian treaty that was going into effect soon, and the results of an inquest into a drowned Japanese translator named Hirakawa. At this last, I glanced out the window at the rain-² soaked rock, and closed the newspaper.

Minutes later, I abandoned Holmes to The Mystery of the Emperor's Stone (as well as a meeting he had that afternoon in London, concerning Turkey's upcoming Hat Law) to turn my face towards Oxford. I took the Morris, having tasks to do along the way, and although the drive promised to be difficult, as I passed through tiny East Dean, I found myself humming in time with the pistons. When I crossed the Cuckmere, I was singing aloud-² tunelessly, yes, but with modern music, who cares?

Once my business in Eastleigh was concluded (an elderly tutor, installed there and in need of good cheer and enticing reading material), I turned north. Traffic crept around an overturned wagon outside of Winchester, and again slowed out in the countryside twenty miles later, for some reason I never did see. As a result, although I'd intended to be in Oxford before tea-² time, I could tell that it would not be until after dark. I was glumly bent over the wheel, bleary-² eyed and trying to ignore the growing headache (a bad knock in December had yet to heal completely), when a snug and ancient building rose up alongside the road ahead: grey stone, heavy vines, yellow glow from ancient windows, wood-² smoke curling from a chimney dating to Elizabeth. With Japan so recently in my mind, for a brief instant I saw the building as a ryokan-² an ancient inn, with steaming baths and a waiting masseur. A cook who had worked there his entire life, a welcoming tray of pale, scalding, deliciously bitter tea . . . But no, it was just a pub.

Still, my arms were already turning the steering wheel. The quiet of shutting down the engine made my ears tingle. I picked up my bag and, coat pinched over my head against the heavy drops, scurried for the door.

Heaven lay within, an ancient gathering space that could only be in England, every breath testifying to its centuries of smoke and beer, damp dogs, and the sweat of working men. I made for the massive stone fireplace, and stood close enough to feel the scorch of the glowing coals through the back of my coat. A placid barmaid took my order, while I continued to stand, revolving slowly, divesting myself bit by bit of the layers. Heavy gloves, woollen scarf, and fur hat migrated to a nearby chair, eventually joined by my fur-² lined

driving coat. When my food came, I was down to a heavy cardigan, and my bright pink fingers were restored enough to grasp fork and knife.

After a few bites, I paused to retrieve a pair of books from the bag. The first was an unlikely but colourful novel I had bought in the Gare de Lyon two days earlier, by an Englishman named Forster. It was a year since Holmes and I had watched Bombay fade behind us— almost exactly a year, come to that: seemed like a decade— and I'd bought it thinking that Forster's *Passage* might remind me of the pleasanter aspects of our trip. Instead, I was finding the plot increasingly difficult, and after another chapter I closed the covers on Dr Aziz and the criminally ridiculous Adela, to pick up the other volume, a melancholy old friend.

What is it about Oxford that puts one in a poetical state of mind? One would think that a long— time resident like me would grow inured to Oxford poetry, if for no other reason than the sheer volume of the stuff. Every undergraduate (and most tourists) who walked through one of her doors found it necessary to sit down and compose verse about the experience, all of it romantic and most of it twaddle. But still, in private moments, Matthew Arnold crept under my guard. Who would not wish to be a scholar— gipsy, leaving the safe walls— this strange disease of modern life, with its sick hurry, its divided aims— to learn the eternal secrets of the gipsies, like some latter— day Merlin? Which of us had not deliberately chosen to return to the city by way of Boar's Hill, in hopes of glimpsing one of the few remaining views of the city below, and thus be given an excuse to murmur Arnold's enchanting phrase:

And that sweet city with her dreaming spires,

She needs not June for beauty's heightening.

I sighed, and squinted at the pub's rain— streaked window. Not much of June's beauty— heightening today. Were it not for the pull of Oxford— less its dreaming spires than its comfortable bed and waiting fire— I would have taken a room here and ordered another pint of the man's very decent beer. Instead, warm through and well fed, I paid for my meal and dashed back through the rain, wishing I had Arnold's luck. This winter— eve is warm, Humid the air; leafless, yet soft as spring.

It was spring by the calendar alone, with no softness in sight. I got the wiper— blades going and turned cautiously back out onto the road, hoping the headlamps would last until I got in.

Newbury. Abingdon. Here came I often, in old days. Too rare, too rare grow now my visits . . .

Rare, indeed. Every time I set out with the firm intention of installing myself as a fixture amongst the stacks in Oxford's ever— blessed libraries, some figurative bomb went off under my feet and hauled me away. Once, a literal bomb.

Littlemore; Iffley. The morning's singing had long given way to groans of tedium. To keep myself awake, I recited mathematical formulae, irregular verbs, and poetry. Haiku was ideal for the purpose, being both mathematical and poetic: the 5/7/5 structure was deceptively simple, which I supposed was why old Bashō came up with so many of them on his wanderings. What would the man have produced if he'd been driving through rain? Perhaps—

Sweet city of minds:

Her spires dream, wrapped in earth's folds.

June gilds the lily.

Or what about:

Dark tyres splash along.

Wanting nothing better than

A place for the night.

I snorted. Matsuo Bashō need feel no threat from me.

The tyres did indeed splash along, down the darkening road, until the edges of civilisation came down to greet me. Much more of this weather and the two Hinkseys would again be separated by swamp— despite the efforts of that other poet, Oscar Wilde, during his unlikely road— building days at Magdalene. I noticed (as Matthew Arnold had foretold) that yet more houses had been raised since I last drove this way: the dreaming spires would soon vanish beneath a tide of suburban villas.

At Folly Bridge, the heavy raindrops turned to sleet. Grandpont was all but afloat. Christchurch probably had a lake at its door instead of a meadow. Even the Scholar— Gipsy would require a roof over his head tonight. The shops on the High were shuttered, the restaurants closing, and only the drinking establishments glowed in contentment.

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Other Books

Girl's Guide To Hunting & Fishing.

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