

Descent into Madness: The Truth about Mary Russell

as discovered by David Marcum

INTRODUCTION

*In 1994, I first read *The Beekeeper's Apprentice* by Laurie R.*

King, which tells how fifteen-year-old Mary Russell meets the retired Sherlock Holmes on the Sussex Downs.

Although I had a few overall quibbles with the story, the father/daughter teacher/apprentice relationship in the book was masterfully done.

This, I thought, is the kind of Sherlock Holmes novel for which I've been waiting.

*Imagine my surprise when, at the end of the next book, *A Monstrous Regiment of Women*, Holmes takes Russell in his much-much-older arms and declares his love for the girl.*

I continued to buy the Russell books as they appeared - always a collector! - but I couldn't bring myself to read them because of that pesky romance and subsequent Holmes-Russell marriage.

Although I do not doubt that Holmes has it in him to have a romantic relationship - I am a Baring-Gould disciple, (a "Baring-Gouldist" if you will,) agreeing with the Irene Adler/Montenegro/Nero Wolfe theories, and also realizing that Holmes was human, after all, no matter how much he tried to suppress his emotions - I do not think that Holmes felt that way about Mary Russell.

I eventually realized how to rationalize away my problems with

Mary Russell's narratives, allowing me to read all the other Russell books with much greater enjoyment.

(They are really well-written books!) I shared my theory with some Sherlockian friends, and they agreed that it was quite plausible.

In October 2009, I mustered up the courage to pass along my theory to Ms. King in a series of emails.

She was gracious, tolerant, and - I think - amused.

*While she obviously did not agree with me, she did seem to be pleased that someone was playing *The Game* with her books.*

She went on to post my comments on her website (see <http://www.laurierking.com/the-game.html> October 28, 2009).

The responses from the friends of Mary Russell about my theory were not nearly as gracious, tolerant or amused, and not at all surprising.

In fact, many of the comments were immediate, virulent, and scathing.

After all, these are the folks who claim that "After 1914, he's ours." Russell's defenders are quite passionate.

*I should have known better than to poke that particular *Beekeeper's* nest.*

*In 2011, my own book, *The Papers of Sherlock Holmes*, was published, relating some of Holmes and Watson's adventures as discovered in one of Watson's lost journals.*

The book's publication allowed me to take the next step and track down the truth, determining the specifics of Russell's terrible delusions.

*The following narrative confirms my initial theory about Mary Russell, and with the recent publication of Russell's latest adventure, *Garment of Shadows*, it might help to serve as something of a patch, allowing other Sherlockians who have not previously been able to enjoy the Russell stories to now do so.*

For others, it may simply be an amusing aside (in the same way that Rex Stout asserted that "Watson Was a Woman") while it might even cause some blood-stirring gritting-of-the-teeth.

*Hopefully, Ms. King will continue to feel gracious, tolerant, and amused that *The Game* is still being played with her work...*

Descent Into Madness

The doctor leaned back in his chair and regarded the old - the very old - man across from him.

"Do you wish to see her?"

The old man shook his head and shifted slightly in his seat.

The doctor knew that the gentleman was in his mid-eighties, at least, but he sat with the coiled energy and tension of someone in his prime.

"I don't think that would be wise at all, do you?"

"I tend to agree, Mr. Holmes," said the doctor. "Still, I wanted to make the offer, due to the fact that you have known her for so long."

"Since 1915," replied Holmes.

"We met when she was still in her teens."

"1915," said the doctor.

"During the last time that we squabbled with the Jerrys."

Holmes nodded.

It seemed so long ago, those days of "The Great War." And yet, it also seemed that no time had passed at all.

Of course, it had.

Poor Watson, gone nearly ten years.

And now, in the early summer of 1939, Germany was again pushing Europe toward a war that no one but themselves wanted.

With a shake of his head, Holmes drew his thoughts back to the present, and the bleak room, and the doctor facing him across the wide desk.

"Can you tell me what happened to her?"

"Certainly," said the doctor, glancing at the file before him.

"Let's see. Mary Sue Russell. Born in 1900." He flipped two or three pages.

"When did you lose touch with her?"

"For the most part, in the late nineteen-twenties. It had been obvious for quite a while that her

feelings for me had become... rather obsessive, and finally I thought that it would be better to sever all relations with her."

"How did this obsession manifest itself?" asked the doctor, picking up a pen.

The doctor's action did not go unnoticed by Holmes, but he decided that perfect frankness was the only way to proceed through this distasteful mess.

"I first met Mary Russell in the spring of 1915. At that time, she was living with her aunt near my Sussex home. She was still recovering from the car accident that had killed her family. I did not realize at the time how fragile this had left her mental state.

"Recognizing her unique mental talents, I reluctantly agreed to take her on as an apprentice, although I was far too old for such a task at that point, and of course I had reservations about training a female for the type of work in which I was engaged. I had trained several apprentices over the course of my career, but never a woman.

"Even then, I should have suspected something. She always seemed to be especially jealous of my friend, Dr Watson. She would resent when he would occasionally participate in an investigation, and she sarcastically referred to him as 'Uncle John,' never failing to point out some error on his part in an effort to elevate her standing with me. Of course, Watson and I saw right through that, but we put up with it in order to encourage her intellectual training."

"The file states that she went to Oxford," said the doctor.

"Yes, it was through my influence that she was admitted. I must admit that she had some difficulty settling down to her studies, and that at times she seemed to feel persecuted by the expectations of her teachers. However, she did finish, and she went on to aid me in some of my investigations."

"I see that she was injured during the course of one of these investigations..."

"That is correct. We had laid a trap for the daughter of one of my old enemies, who was manipulating events in order to exact revenge upon me. We were forced to spend quite a bit of time together then, both during the events of the case, and after, during Russell's recovery. Perhaps the trauma of that wound, coming so soon after the death of her family, contributed somewhat to Russell's later madness..."

"Possibly," replied the doctor.

"However, it was a number of years between that incident and the lady's current illness."

"I suppose," said Holmes.

"Still, I blame myself for not seeing the signs earlier, and also for not distancing myself from her when she first appeared to be showing indications of attraction toward me. I never thought of her as more than a student, or at times, I suppose, as a daughter. Sadly, she became obsessed with the idea that there was a romantic relationship between the two of us."

"Yes, yes," said the doctor.

"It seems that the condition was repressed for a number of years, but

after the recent tragedy, it has burst forth to consume her. She believes with great passion that she...that she is your wife."

"Absurd," replied Holmes.

"I have tried throughout my life to separate emotions from the path of pure ratiocination, and I have failed on numerous occasions – in my old age I can freely admit that I am only a man, after all – but there was only one woman that I ever loved. I... even had a son with her." His gaze lost focus for a second, and then sharpened again.

With absolute firmness, he stated, "Russell was not a woman that I ever loved."

"The patient has mentioned your son in some of her ravings," stated the doctor.

He consulted his notes.

"She states that he was an artist whose life was ruined by drug addiction."

"More evidence of her insanity," replied Holmes.

"My son lives in New York now, working as a consulting detective. He is very successful, and I am quite proud of him. He has never been either an artist or a user of drugs. He was born years before I even met Russell. After his mother, there was no one else. Certainly not..." His voice trailed away.

"Nevertheless," said the doctor, "she insists with great certainty that you and she were married in the early 1920's."

"Russell has always been able to insist upon certain erroneous facts quite adamantly," said Holmes.

"When we first met in 1915, I was sixty-one years old. By the time her obsession began to manifest itself, Russell was arguing that I was, in fact, only in my mid-fifties when we first met. This was in spite of the fact that she was quite aware of my correct age. Of course, she was trying to rationalize away our age difference, in order to make her imagined romantic relationship between the two of us somewhat more plausible."

"And at what point did you realize her feelings?" asked the doctor.

"Sometime in the early 1920's, when it became obvious that she was becoming much more possessive. By the end of the decade, her visits had extended to the point where they were becoming intrusive. It was my son who warned me first. While on a visit to my Sussex home, he had seen what I did not. Inexplicably, I had ignored the signs of her irrational feelings. When I finally realized what was happening, I confronted her and forced her to understand that her beliefs about... about the two of us were incorrect and would always be so. It was determined that all contact between us should end."

"And that was your last encounter with her?"

"No, I saw her one more time. Apparently, after our parting, she had moved back to Oxford, and a year or so later, she married, a young scholar of the Talmud. When I next heard from her, in 1930, she was pregnant with her first child.

She reached out to me because her aunt, a Mrs. Heregrove, had been

murdered, and in her condition, she was not able to investigate. I solved the matter, but had no further dealings with her."

"Did you know that she had a second child a year or so later?"

"No," replied Holmes.

"I was unaware of any of the other details regarding her past, until I was summoned today. Can you tell me the circumstances of how she ended up here?"

"Certainly," replied the doctor.

"In short, she was traveling with her husband and children in Germany a month or so ago, when they were accosted by Nazi soldiers. Miss Russell, who apparently refused to take her husband's name, lost her temper and argued with the soldiers. The entire family was arrested and Miss Russell was separated from her husband and children. Three days later, Miss Russell was taken from the prison and transported to the German border, where she was released with no explanation. She tried to re-enter the country, but she was caught and once again expelled.

"She contacted the Foreign Office, who in turn determined that Miss Russell's husband and children all died on the day of their arrest, supposedly due to an accident in the prison. Miss Russell blamed herself for the death of her family, and also began to tell whoever would listen that she was also responsible for the deaths of her parents and brother when she was in her teens. She then attempted to do an injury to herself. Having no remaining family, her few friends were forced to institutionalize her.

“Since she has been here, she has been having delusions that she and you, Mr. Holmes, were the ones who actually had a romantic relationship, marriage, and children, instead of her actual husband, whom she does not seem to remember. She completely denies the facts of her actual marriage, instead reverting to her earlier fascination and obsession for you.”

“And your prognosis?” asked Holmes.

“Based on the rapid deterioration of her condition since she has been here, I believe that the condition is irreversible.”

“I see,” replied Holmes.

The two men sat silently for a moment, Holmes staring into the distance, and the doctor making notes, his pen scratching on the paper.

Finally, Holmes pulled his focus back and spoke.

“I would like to set up a fund for her care,” he said.

“I understand,” said the doctor.

“I do not want to resume any contact with her, but I do feel some sort of responsibility for what has happened. Perhaps, if I had simply let her go on her way that day in 1915, her path would have led in a much different direction.”

The doctor nodded.

“It will be arranged as you wish,” he said.

He gestured toward a stack of journals at the side of his desk.

“These are hers,” he said.

“They refer to the events of some of the past investigations that the two of you shared. Do you wish to see them?”

Holmes stood, surprising the doctor with the quick energy that the old body displayed.

Holmes leaned forward on his cane, as the doctor rose more slowly to his feet, his hand still resting on the stack of journals.

“No,” said Holmes.

“I recall perfectly well the details of each of those cases, and it would be... unpleasant to see how Russell remembers them. Destroy them, or let Russell read them, for as long as she’s able.”

“Certainly,” said the doctor.

“Thank you for coming in today. My secretary will see you out...”

* * *

The nurse unlocked the door and stepped in.

The room was harsh and sunny, and the sunlight through the barred windows cast stripes on the bright white tile floor.

The woman seated in the chair, looking far older than her nearly-forty years, did not raise her eyes.

“I’ve brought you something, Miss Russell,” said the nurse, brightly.

“It’s your notebooks. The ones with your stories in them. Doctor thought that you might enjoy reading them.”

She placed the journals on the table beside Russell.

Initially, there was no reaction.

Then, Russell’s pale right hand moved and lifted the cover of the topmost journal an inch or so before letting it fall shut.

The sleeve of her gown slipped back, revealing a thin red scar, newly healed, running along her inner forearm from wrist to elbow.

“May I –” Russell said, her voice raspy and dry.

“May I,” she said again, “have a pen? I would like to add to these stories.”

The nurse thought for just a second, before replying.

“I don’t see any harm in that, Miss Russell,” she said, pulling a pen from the pocket of her starched white apron.

“Anything to keep you interested in the world around you, that’s what I think. Just you let us know if you need anything, my dear.”

The nurse turned and left the room.

Russell heard the rasp of the lock, and then the slide of the view window at eye level in the door.

She felt the nurse’s gaze on her for a moment, before the slide was shut, and she knew that she was again alone.

The journals told the story of her life.

All the parts that were important to her, anyway.

She knew that if she could just make someone understand, then she would be freed from this place and allowed to return to her husband.

That was where she belonged.

By the side of her husband, Sherlock Holmes.

She shifted toward the table, and leaned forward.

She pulled one of the journals toward her and flipped it open.

Starting to read, she remembered the events of long ago.

But after only a page or two, she found a sentence that caused her distress.

It referred to Sherlock Holmes as her teacher.

She fumbled with the pen, awkwardly opening the cap and adjusting it in her hand.

It felt odd at first, but her muscles soon remembered the correct way to hold it.

She moved her arm and drew a shaky line through the word teacher.

Then, with great care and effort, she wrote above it the word husband.

Soon it was easier to write, and before long she had finished altering the first journal.

With more purpose, she began on the second, changing the long-ago facts to reflect her present descent into madness, a journey from which she would never return.

