

A LETTER OF MARY

A MARY RUSSELL
NOVEL

LAURIE R. KING





Laurie R. King is the Edgar Award–winning author of five contemporary novels featuring Kate Martinelli, eight acclaimed Mary Russell mysteries, and four stand-alone mysteries, including the highly praised *A Darker Place*. She lives in Northern California.

www.laurierking.com

BY LAURIE R. KING

A Darker Place
Folly
Keeping Watch
Califia's Daughters (writing as Leigh Richards)

MARY RUSSELL MYSTERIES

The Beekeeper's Apprentice
A Monstrous Regiment of Women
A Letter of Mary
The Moor
O Jerusalem
Justice Hall
The Game
Locked Rooms

KATE MARTINELLI MYSTERIES

A Grave Talent
To Play the Fool
With Child
Night Work
The Art of Detection

PRAISE FOR OTHER MARY RUSSELL MYSTERIES

The Beekeeper's Apprentice

“Laurie R. King has stepped onto the sacred literary preserve of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, poached Holmes, and brilliantly brought him to life again.”

—*The Washington Post Book World*

“Enchanting...*The Beekeeper's Apprentice* is real Laurie R. King, not *faux* Conan Doyle, and for my money, it's better than the original.”

—*San Jose Mercury News*

“Rousing...Riveting...Suspenseful.”

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

“Worthy and welcome, *The Beekeeper's Apprentice* has the power to charm the most grizzled Baker Street Irregular.”

—*Daily News* (New York)

A Monstrous Regiment of Women

“Beguiling...Tantalizing.”

—*The Boston Globe*

“As audacious as it is entertaining and moving...What gives Laurie R. King's books such a rich and original texture is the character of Mary—totally believable in her own right, a tall and gangling orphan with a restless intellect and a great store of moral and physical courage.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“[Mary Russell] makes a triumphant return.... Thoroughly enjoyable.”

—*Booklist*

“Remarkable...delightful.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Extraordinary...a delight.”

—*The Washington Times*

The Moor

“There's no resisting the appeal of King's thrillingly moody scenes of Dartmoor and her lovely evocations of its legends.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Mary’s description of how she thinks through all the elements of a mystery—so deep in thought as if she were in a trance—is excellent.”

—*Salon.com*

“*Dazzling* may be the word to describe King’s latest Mary Russell–Sherlock Holmes adventure.... Add King’s devilishly clever plot and eccentric characters, her ability to achieve a perfect balance between serious mystery and lighthearted humor, and the charm with which she develops the captivating relationship between Holmes and Russell, and the result is a superbly rich read that would please Doyle himself.”

—*Booklist*

“Erudite, fascinating...by all odds the most successful recreation of the famous inhabitant of 221B Baker Street ever attempted.”

—*Houston Chronicle*

A LETTER OF MARY

A Mary Russell Novel

LAURIE R. KING

Picador
Thomas Dunne Books
St. Martin's Press
New York

For my brother Leahcim Drawde Nosdrahcir and his family

From his sister Eiraul EEL

EDITOR'S PREFACE

THIS IS THE third in a series of manuscripts taken from a trunk full of odds and ends that was sent to me a few years ago. The puzzle of its origin and why I was its recipient is far from solved. In fact, it becomes more mysterious with each manuscript I publish.

After the first of Mary Russell's stories (*The Beekeeper's Apprentice*) came out, I received a cryptic postcard that said merely: "More to follow." After the second (*A Monstrous Regiment of Women*), the following newspaper clipping arrived in the mail:

A group of Japanese businessmen on a river cruise yesterday caught and towed to Hampton Court a punt which police have determined originated at Folly Bridge in Oxford. In it were found clothing and a pair of glasses. The Thames Authority has no suggestion as yet how a punt could manoeuvre the locks and deeper stretches of river.

I rose to the challenge. A bit of research determined that the clipping was a filler in the London *Times*, dated three weeks before the book's publication date. The subsequent phone calls to England cost me an arm and a leg, but eventually I discovered that the clothing (trousers, sensible shoes, and a blouse) was that of a tall, thin woman, and it had been found carefully folded on the cushions, with the glasses on top. There was no suicide note. The pole was in the boat (a punt is not rowed or motorized, I gather, but shoved along with a wooden pole). Downstream from Oxford, the river becomes too deep for the punter to reach the bottom.

I even found out that the police dusted the thing for prints, which sounded like a joke until my informant told me how much a wooden punt costs nowadays. With a vague idea that this might someday help me find where my trunk had come from, I asked for a set of the prints. It took a while to clear this with the higher authorities, but I did after some months receive a copy of the forensic report, which informed me that they had been made by two people, both with long, thin hands, one of them slightly bigger and thus probably male, the other with a scar across one of the pads. The scarred ones had been found on the glasses.

Interestingly enough, the fingerprints taken from the sides of the punt match those on a filthy clay pipe that was in the trunk with the manuscripts.

I should also mention that the inlaid box described in the following pages does exist, although when it reached me, there was no manuscript inside. It did hold a pair of black-lensed glasses, a dainty handkerchief embroidered with the letter *M*, and a key.

The key, I have been told, is to a safety-deposit box. There is absolutely no way of knowing where that box is.

—Laurie R. King

...I would terrify you by letters.

—THE SECOND LETTER OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS 10:9

CONTENTS

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

PART TWO

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PART THREE

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PART FOUR

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PART FIVE

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PART SIX

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

PART SEVEN

POSTSCRIPT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

PART ONE

TUESDAY, 14 AUGUST 1923—FRIDAY, 24 AUGUST 1923

A pen is certainly an excellent instrument to fix a man's attention and to inflame his ambition.

—JOHN ADAMS

ONE

α

alpha

THE ENVELOPE SLAPPED down onto the desk ten inches from my much-abused eyes, instantly obscuring the black lines of Hebrew letters that had begun to quiver an hour before. With the shock of the sudden change, my vision stuttered, attempted a valiant rally, then slid into complete rebellion and would not focus at all.

I leant back in my chair with an ill-stifled groan, peeled my wire-rimmed spectacles from my ears and dropped them onto the stack of notes, and sat for a long minute with the heels of both hands pressed into my eye sockets. The person who had so unceremoniously delivered this grubby interruption moved off across the room, where I heard him sort a series of envelopes *chuk-chuk-chuk* into the wastepaper basket, then stepped into the front hallway to drop a heavy envelope onto the table there (Mrs Hudson's monthly letter from her son in Australia, I noted, two days early) before coming back to take up a position beside my desk, one shoulder dug into the bookshelf, eyes gazing, no doubt, out the window at the Downs rolling down to the Channel. I replaced the heels of my hands with the backs of my fingers, cool against the hectic flesh, and addressed my husband.

"Do you know, Holmes, I had a great-uncle in Chicago whose promising medical career was cut short when he began to go blind over his books. It must be extremely frustrating to have one's future betrayed by a tiny web of optical muscles. Though he did go on to make a fortune selling eggs and trousers to the gold miners," I added. "Whom is it from?"

"Shall I read it to you, Russell, so as to save your optic muscles for the *metheg* and your beloved furtive *patach*?" His solicitous words were spoilt by the sardonic, almost querulous edge to his voice. "Alas, I have become a mere secretary to my wife's ambitions. Kindly do not snort, Russell. It is an unbecoming sound. Let me see." I felt his arm come across my desk, and I heard the letter whisper as it was plucked up. "The envelope is from the Hôtel Imperial in Paris, a name which contains distinct overtones of sagging mattresses and ominous nocturnal rustling noises in the wardrobe. It is addressed simply to Mary Russell, no title whatsoever. The hand is worthy of some attention. A woman's writing, surely, though almost masculine in the way the fingers grasp the pen. The writer is obviously highly educated, a 'professional woman,' to use the somewhat misleading modern phrase; I venture to say that this particular lady does not depend on her womanliness for a livelihood. Her *t*'s reveal her to be an impatient person, and there is passion in the sweeps of her uprights, yet her *s*'s and *a*'s speak of precision and the lower edge of each line is as exact as it is

authoritative. She also either has great faith in the French and English postal systems or else is so self-assured as to consider the insurance of placing her name or room number on the envelope unnecessary. I lean toward the latter theory.”

As this analysis progressed, I recovered my glasses, the better to study my companion where he stood in the bright window, bent over the envelope like a jeweller with some rare uncut stone, and I was hit by one of those odd moments of analytical apartness, when one looks with a stranger’s eyes on something infinitely familiar. Physically, Sherlock Holmes had changed little since we had first met on these same Sussex Downs a bit more than eight years before. His hair was slightly thinner, certainly greyer, and his grey eyes had become even more deeply hooded, so that the resemblance to some far-seeing, sharp-beaked raptor was more marked than ever. No, his body had only exaggerated itself; the greatest changes were internal. The fierce passions that had driven him in his early years, years before I was even born, had subsided, and the agonies of frustration he had felt when without a challenge, frustration that had led him to needles filled with cocaine and morphia, were now in abeyance. Or so I had thought.

I watched him as his long fingers caressed the much-travelled envelope and his eyes drew significance from every smudge, every characteristic of paper and ink and stamp, and it occurred to me suddenly that Sherlock Holmes was bored.

The thought was not a happy one. No person, certainly no woman, likes to think that her marriage has lessened the happiness of her partner. I thrust the troublesome idea from me, reached up to rub a twinge from my right shoulder, and spoke with a shade more irritation than was called for.

“My dear Holmes, this verges on *deductio ad absurdum*. Were you to open the envelope and identify the writer, it just might simplify matters.”

“All in good time, Russell. I further note a partial set of grimy fingerprints along the back of the envelope, with a matching thumbprint on the front. However, I believe we can discount them, as they have the familiar look of the hands of our very own postal-delivery boy, whose bicycle chain is in constant need of repair.”

“Holmes, my furtive *patachs* await me. The letter?”

“Patience is a necessary attribute of the detective’s makeup, Russell. And, I should have thought, the scholar’s. However, as you say.” He turned away, and the sharp zip of a knife through cheap paper was followed by a dull thud as the knife was reintroduced into the frayed wood of the mantelpiece. There was a thin rustle. His voice sounded amused as he began to read. “‘Dear Miss Russell,’ it begins, dated four days ago.

Dear Miss Russell,

I trust you will not be offended by my form of address. I am aware that you have married, but I cannot bring myself to assign a woman her husband’s name unless I have been told that such is her desire. If you are offended, please forgive my unintentional faux pas.

You will perhaps remember me, Dorothy Ruskin, from your visit to Palestine several years ago. I have remained in that land since then, assisting at three preliminary digs until such time as I can arrange funding for my own

excavations. I have been called back home for an interview by my potential sponsors, as well as to see my mother, who seems to be on her deathbed. There is a matter of some interest which I wish to lay before you while I am in England, and I would appreciate it if you would allow me to come and disturb your peace for a few hours. It would have to be on the twenty-second or twenty-third, as I return to Palestine directly my business is completed. Please confirm the day and time by telegram at the address below.

I believe the matter to be of some interest and potentially considerable importance to your chosen field of study, or I would not be bothering you and your husband.

I remain,

*Most affectionately yours,
Dorothy Ruskin*

“The address below is that of the Hôtel Imperial,” Holmes added.

I took the letter from Holmes and quickly skimmed the singular hand that strode across the flimsy hotel paper. “A decent pen, though,” I noted absently. “Shall we see her?”

“We? My dear Russell, I am the husband of an emancipated woman who, although she may not yet vote in an election, is at least allowed to see her own friends without male chaperonage.”

“Don’t be an ass, Holmes. She obviously wants to see both of us, or she would not have written that last sentence. We’ll have her for tea, then. Wednesday or Thursday?”

“Wednesday is Mrs Hudson’s half day. Miss Ruskin might have a better tea if she came Thursday.”

“Thank you, Holmes,” I said with asperity. I admit that cooking is not my strong point, but I object to having my nose rubbed in the fact. “I’ll write to let her know either day is fine but that Thursday is slightly better. I wonder what she wants.”

“Funding for an all-woman archaeological dig, I shouldn’t wonder. That would be popular with the British authorities and the Zionists, would it not? And think of the attraction it would have for the pilgrims and the tourists. It’s a wonder the Americans haven’t thought of it.”

“Holmes, enough! Begone! I have work to do.”

“Come for a walk.”

“Not just now. Perhaps this evening I could take an hour off.”

“By this evening, you will be bogged down to the axles in the prophet Isaiah’s mud and too irritable to make a decent walking companion. You’ve been rubbing your bad shoulder for the last forty minutes although it is a warm afternoon, which means you need to get out and breathe some fresh air. Come.”

He held out one long hand to me. I looked down at the cramped lines marching across the page, capped my pen, and allowed him to pull me to my feet.

WE WALKED ALONG the cliffs rather than descending the precipitous beach path, and

listened to the gulls cry and the waves surge on the shingle below. The good salt air filled my lungs, cleared my head, and took the ache from my collarbone, and eventually my thoughts turned, not to the intricacies of Hebrew grammar but to the implications of the letter that lay on my desk.

“What do you know of the archaeology of Palestine, Holmes?”

“Other than what we discovered when we were there four and a half years ago—which trip, as I recall, was dominated by an extraordinary number of damp and hazardous underground chambers—almost nothing. I suspect that I shall know a great deal more before too much longer.”

“You think there is something to Miss Ruskin’s letter, then?”

“My dear Russell, I have not been a consulting detective for more than forty years for nothing. I can spot a case sniffing around my door even before it knows itself to be one. Despite what I said about allowing you to see her alone, your Miss Ruskin—yes, I know she is not yours, but she thinks she is—your Miss Ruskin wishes to present a puzzle to the partnership of Holmes and Russell, not merely to Mary Russell, a brilliant young star on the horizon of academic theology. Unless you think my standard degree of megalomania is becoming compounded by senility,” he added politely.

“Megalomania, perhaps; senility, never.” I stood and watched a small fishing boat lying off shore, and I wondered what to do. The work was going slowly, and I could ill afford to take even half a day away from it. On the other hand, it would be a joy to spend some time with that peculiar old lady, whom I indeed remembered very well. Also, Holmes seemed interested. It would at least provide a distraction until I could decide what needed doing for him. “All right, we’ll have her here a day sooner, then, on the Wednesday. I’ll suggest the noon train. I’m certain Mrs Hudson can be persuaded to leave something for our tea, so we need not risk our visitor’s health. I also think I’ll go to Town tomorrow and drop by the British Museum for a while. Will you come?”

“Only if we can stay for the evening. They’re playing Tchaikovsky’s D at Covent Garden.”

“And dinner at Simpson’s?” I said lightly, ruthlessly ignoring the internal wail at the waste of time.

“But of course.”

“Will you go to the BM with me?”

“Briefly, perhaps. I had a note from the owner of a rather bijou little gallery up the street, inviting me to view the canvas of that Spaniard, Picasso, that I retrieved for them last month. I should be interested to see it in its natural habitat, as it were, to determine if it makes any more sense there than it did in that warehouse on the docks where I found it. Although, frankly, I have my doubts.”

“That’s fine, then,” I said politely. Suddenly, Holmes was not at my side but blocking my way, his hands on my shoulders and his face inches from mine.

“Admit it, Russell. You’ve been bored.”

His words so echoed my own analysis of his mental state that I could only gape at him.

“You’ve been tucked into your books for a solid year now, ever since we came back from France. You might be able to convince yourself that you’re nothing but a

scholar, Russell, but you can't fool me. You're as hungry as I am for something to do."

Damn the man, he was right. He was wrong, too, of course—men have a powerful drive to simplify matters, and it would be convenient for him to dismiss the side of my life that did not involve him—but as soon as he said it, I could feel the hunger he was talking about, waking in me. I had in the past discovered the immense appeal of a life on the edge of things—walking a precipice, pitting oneself against a dangerous enemy, throwing one's mind against an impenetrable puzzle.

The waking was brief, as I ruthlessly knocked the phantasy back into its hole. If Dorothy Ruskin had a puzzle, it was not likely to be anything but mild and elderly. I sighed, and then, realising that Holmes was still staring into my face, I had to laugh.

"Holmes, we're a pair of hopeless romantics," I said, and we turned and walked back to the cottage.

TWO

β

beta

SHORTLY BEFORE MIDDAY on the appointed Wednesday, I drove my faithful Morris to the station to meet Miss Ruskin's train. It was four and a half years since we had met near Jericho, and though I would have known her anywhere, she had changed. Her chopped-off hair was now completely white. She wore a pair of glasses, the lenses of which were so black as to seem opaque, and she favoured her right leg as she stepped down from the train. She did not see me at first, but stood peering about her, a large khaki canvas bag clutched in one hand. I crossed the platform towards her and corrected myself—some things had changed not at all. Her face was still burnt to brown leather by the desert sun, her posture still that of a soldier on parade, her clothing the same idiosyncratic variation on the early suffragist uniform of loose pantaloons, tailored shirt, jacket, and high boots that I had seen her wear in Palestine. The boots and clothing looked new, and somehow ineffably French, despite their lack of anything resembling fashion.

“Good day, Miss Ruskin,” I called out. “Welcome to Sussex.”

Her head spun around and the deep voice, accustomed to wide spaces and the command of native diggers, boomed out across the rustic station.

“Miss Russell, is that you? Delighted to see you. Very good of you to have me at such short notice.” She grasped my hand in her heavily calloused one. The top of her squashed hat barely reached my chin, but she dominated the entire area. I led her to the car, helped her climb in, started the engine, and enquired about her leg.

“Oh, yes, most annoying. Fell into a trench when the props collapsed. Bad break, spent a month in Jerusalem flat on my back. Stupid luck. Right in the middle of the season, too. Wasted half the year's dig. Use better wood now for the props.” She laughed, short coughs of humour that made me grin in response.

“I saw some of your finds in the British Museum recently,” I told her. “That Hittite slab was magnificent, and of course the mosaic floor. How on earth did they make those amazing blues?”

She was pleased, and she launched off on a highly technical explanation of the art and craft of mosaics that went far above my head and lasted until I pulled into the circular drive in front of the cottage. Holmes heard the car and came to meet us. Our guest climbed awkwardly out and marched over to greet him, hand extended and talking all the while as we moved inside and through the house.

“Mr Holmes, good to see you, as yourself this time, and in your own home.

Though I do admit that you wear the djellaba better than most white men, and the skin dye was very good. You are looking remarkably well. How old are you? Rude question, I know, one of the advantages of getting old—people are forced to overlook rudeness. You are? Only a few years younger than I am, looks more like twenty. Maybe I should have married. A bit late now, don't you think? Miss Russell—all right if I call you that? Or do you prefer Mrs Holmes? Miss Russell, then—d'you know, you've married one of the three sensible men I've ever met. Brains are wasted on most men—do nothing with their minds but play games and make money. Never see what's in front of their noses, too busy making sweeping generalisations. What's that? The other two? Oh, yes, one was a winemaker in Provence, tiny vineyard, a red wine to make you weep. The other's dead now, an Arab sheikh with seven wives. Couldn't write his name, but his children all went to university. Girls, too. I made him. Ha! Ha!" The barking laugh bounced off the walls in the room and set the ears to ringing. We took our lunch outside, under the great copper beech.

During the meal, our guest regaled us with stories of archaeology in Palestine, which was just getting under way now in the postwar years. The British Mandate in Palestine was giving its approval to the beginnings of archaeology as a science and a discipline.

"Shocking, it was, before the war. No sense of the way to do things. Had people out there rummaging about, destroying more than they found, native diggers coming in with these magnificent finds, no way of dating them or knowing where they came from. All that could be done with 'em was to stick 'em in a museum, prop up a card saying SOURCE: UNKNOWN; DATE: UNKNOWN. Utter waste."

"Didn't Petrie say something about museums being morgues, or tombs?" I asked.

"Charnel houses," she corrected me. "He calls them 'ghastly charnel houses of murdered evidence.' Isn't that a fine phrase? Wish I'd written it." She repeated it, relishing the shape of the words in her mouth. "And during the war, my God! I spent those years doing nothing but stopping soldiers from using walls and statues for target practice! Incredible stupidity. Found one encampment using a Bronze Age well as their privy and rubbish tip. Course, the idiots didn't realise their own water supply was connected to it. Should've told 'em, I know, but who am I to interfere in divine justice? Ha! Ha!"

"Surely, though, most of the digs are more carefully run now," I suggested. "Even before the war, Reisner's stratigraphic techniques were becoming more widely used. And doesn't the Department of Antiquities keep an eye on things?" My rapid tutorial at the hands of one of the British Museum's more helpful experts at least enabled me to ask intelligent questions.

"Oh, yes indeed, improving rapidly, things are. Of course, there's no room for amateurs like myself now, though I'll be allowed to make drawings and notes when I get back. There's talk of opening the City of David, really exciting. But still, we get Bedouins wandering in with sacks of amazing things, pottery and bronze statuettes, last month a heart-stopping ivory carving, magnificent thing, part of a processional scene, completely worthless from a historical point of view, of course. He wouldn't tell us where in the desert it came from, so it can't be put in its proper archaeological setting. A pity. Oh, yes, that's more or less why I'm here. Where's my bag?"

I brought it from the sitting room, where she had casually dumped it on a table.

She opened it and dug through various books, articles of clothing, and papers, finally coming out with a squarish object wrapped securely in an Arab man's black-and-white head covering.

"Here we are," she said with satisfaction as she displayed a small intricately carved and inlaid wooden box. She laid it in front of me, then bent to replace various objects into the bag.

"I'd like you to look at this and tell me what you think. Already gave it to two so-called experts, both men of course, who each took one look and said it was a fake, couldn't possibly be a first-century papyrus. I'm not so sure. Really I'm not. May be worthless, but thought of you when I wondered whom to give it to. Show it to whomever you like. Do what you can with it. Let me know what you think. Yes, yes, take a look. Any more tea in that pot, Mr Holmes?"

The box fit into one hand and opened smoothly. Inside was nestled, secure in a tissue bed, a small roll of papyrus, deeply discoloured at the top and bottom edges. I touched it delicately with my finger. The tissue rustled slightly.

"Oh, it's quite sturdy. I've had it unrolled, and the two 'experts' didn't coddle it any. One said it was a clever modern forgery, which is absurd, considering how I got it. The other said it was probably from a madwoman during the Crusades. Experts!" She threw up her hands eloquently, eliciting a sympathetic laugh from Holmes. "At any rate, the experts deny it, so we amateurs can do as we please with it. It's all yours. I started on it, but my eyes are no good now for fine work." She took off her dark glasses, and we saw the clouds that edged onto the brilliant blue of her eyes. "The doctors in Paris say it's because of the sun, that if I wear these troublesome things and stay inside all the time, it'll be five years before they have to operate. Told them there was no point in having the years if I couldn't work, but, being men, they didn't understand. Ah well, five years will get me going, if I can get the money to start my dig, and after that I'll retire happy. Which has nothing to do with you, of course, but that's why I'm giving you the manuscript."

I took the delicate roll from its box and gently spread it out on the table. Holmes pinned the right end down with two fingers and I looked at the beginning, which, as the language was Greek, began at the upper left. The spiky script was neat, though the whole eighteen inches were badly stained and the edges deeply worn, in places obscuring the text. I bent over the first words, then paused. Odd; I could not be reading them correctly. I went back to the opening words, got the same results, and finally looked up at Miss Ruskin, perplexed. Her eyes were sparkling with mischief and amusement as she looked over the top of her cup at me.

"You see why the experts denied it, then?"

"That is obvious, but—"

"But why do I doubt them?"

"You couldn't seriously think—"

"Oh, but I do. It is not impossible. I agree it's unlikely, but if you leave aside all preconceived notions of what leadership could have been in the first century, it's not at all impossible. I've been poking my nose into manuscripts like this for half a century, and though it's somewhat out of my period, I'm sorry, this does not smell like a recent forgery or a crusader's wife's dream."

It finally got through to me that she was indeed serious. I stared at her, aghast and