

# Mary's Christmas



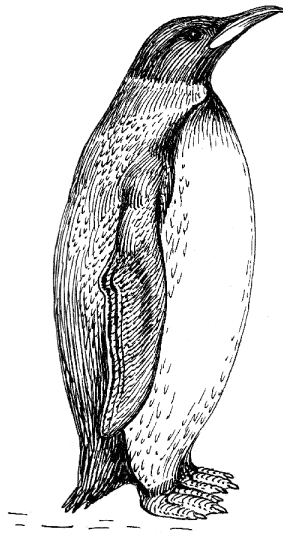
Laurie R. King

## Author's Note

For those new to the world of Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes (a saga that began with *The Beekeeper's Apprentice* in 1994) this story offers glimpses both of Mary's childhood, and of her partnership—indeed, her marriage—with Sherlock Holmes. This story is taken from the collection *Mary Russell's War*, with illustrations added.

I hope you enjoy it.

—Laurie R. King



# Mary's Christmas

by Laurie R. King

Every little girl should have an Uncle Jake.

The black sheep, the family rogue, whose exploits filled my childhood with admonitions over the dire and delicious consequences of misbehaviour. When Uncle Jake wandered away from a family train-trip at the age of four, he was taken by Indians. When an adolescent Uncle Jake ran away to join the circus, he was nearly eaten by the lion. When Uncle Jake received a collection of Sherlock Holmes stories for his fourteenth birthday and began following suspected criminals around Boston, one of them turned his pistol on the boy at his heels.

Most astounding of all, every one of these cautionary tales turned out to be true.



“Russell, I find that difficult to believe.”

I blinked, pulling my gaze from the fire to the man slumped into the basket chair across the hearth. “Lower your eyebrow, Holmes. All those stories were quite true. At least, they all had factual elements.”

“Why have I never heard of this mythic uncle before this?”

“And how many years did you know Watson before you told him you had a brother?”

“That is not at all the same thing.”

“No, of course not. Perhaps I wished to be certain you could not flee in horror, and needed to wait until you had made an honest woman of me.”

At that, his other eyebrow went up, either at the idea of Sherlock Holmes fleeing in horror, or at my being made honest. I relented.

“Jake’s been gone a long time. And I suppose...well, I tend not to dwell on things that remind me of my parents.”

He returned to the pipe he had been filling before my thoughts had broken into the amiable murmur of the evening fire.

“Although I’ll admit,” I continued, “you may be right to some degree: I have little way of knowing if all the stories told about Jake were completely true. But I did confirm some of them, and I did know the man. Little about him would surprise me.”

Holmes dropped his spent match into the pieced-together Roman bowl that Old Will had dug up in the garden. “He died?”

“I think so.” The outstretched hand paused, the right eyebrow quirking upward again. “Jake loved me. I can imagine nothing short of death that would keep him from coming to see me.”

“Truly? There could be any number—”

“Yes, I know. And it’s true, prison is by no means impossible. Perhaps I should simply tell you about him.”

The basket chair emitted a symphony of creaks as he stretched his long legs towards the fire. He threaded his fingers together across the front of his once-bright dressing gown, preparing to listen.



However, once interrupted, my tongue hesitated to go on. What could I say about my father’s brother that did not come back to: *He* left me, too? Uncle Jake had tried hard to keep me from pain, but in the end...

“So,” prodded Holmes, “did those stories about the lad’s troubles help to keep you in line?”

I had to smile at the thought.

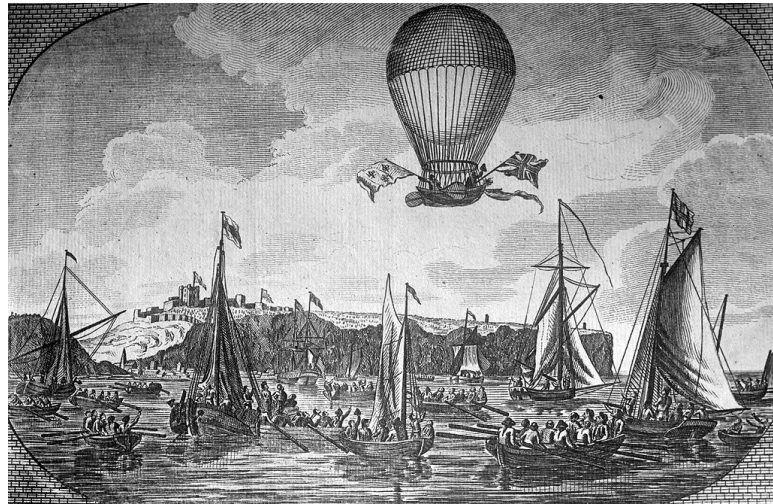
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The cautionary tales about Jake’s near-disasters had quite the opposite effect on my impressionable mind: namely, the temptation to follow in his footsteps became irresistible. Especially after he was banned from family mention in 1908, following an episode too shocking for consideration—“family” meaning, in the hearing of my grandparents.

For some reason, my mother had a soft place for her brother-in-law. His few actual appearances were memorable—no doubt explaining why they were few. I could

have been no older than seven or eight when he arrived on a summer breeze, borne across the Channel to Sussex in an air balloon. He even managed to come down a) on dry land and b) within a mile of the house.

Because there was the other thing about Uncle Jake: even my mother, who had theological objections to the concept, was forced to agree that Jake possessed a guardian angel. The Indians returned him, the lion did not like the taste of his shoes, the criminal's hand was stayed by young Jake's blond, blue-eyed innocence—and, years later, the changeable breeze of the Channel held steady for the requisite hours of the



crossing. By the time the dot on the horizon had grown, neared, become recognisable, then begun to descend, half the population of East Dean was scurrying along below, eyes lifted and feet stumbling.

Had this been 1914, he'd have been shot down. But war was half a dozen years away, as far off as any tragedy could be, and so the amateur aeronaut came down towards the earth, skipping over rooftops, narrowly missing a collision with the church tower. The basket snagged among the tops of the trees along the Eastbourne road, shook itself free without quite coming to grief, and cleared a very solid wall by the breadth of a hair before the great bag collapsed, its basket thumping down in the Padgetts' front garden. It would be hard to say who had the widest grin: the small man who climbed out of the



wicker gondola, or the children bouncing around him like an overturned bucket of hard-rubber balls. Even my father, attempting an expression of adult disapproval, found it difficult to keep his mouth under control. Uncle Jack pressed through the front row of witnesses, patting excited heads all the way, to come to a halt at the toes of the taller, older man. My father stood firm, enforcing the scowl on his face. Uncle Jack cocked his head, the mischief on his face only growing, until Papa gave up, meeting his brother in a hard embrace.

Jake stayed with us for a week that time, teaching us how to make those miniature hot-air balloons called sky lanterns, foot-wide paper shells lifted by the heat of a tiny



flame: it was pure magic, watching a glowing orb lift into the night sky and meander away. For the rest of that summer (which, fortunately for the fields and thatch rooftops, saw regular rain) it was difficult to find a candle in any shop of the South Downs.

Then on the eighth day—again, typical of Jake—he was gone, leaving behind the folded-up balloon, a community of fervent young lantern-makers, and a wistful awareness of having been the recipients of a Visit.

Still, my brother and I were more able to absorb the disappointment than others because it was already nearly September, which meant that Christmas was only a few pages away on the calendar.

Some explanation may be required. Levi and I were Jewish, because Mother was. Papa's American Christianity rode lightly on his shoulders, so that when the two were married—or long before, if I know Mama—he freely agreed that any children from their union would be raised according to her traditions, not his.



Except when it came to Christmas. He did not mind what the holiday was called—generally, Mama termed it Winter Solstice in private and “the holidays” in talking to others, although she had been known to slip and give December 25<sup>th</sup> its traditional name—but he did insist on most of the trappings: roast goose, mince tarts, mistletoe springs, and morning presents—everything short of church services and the more religious carols.

It was, for children, the best of both worlds. Better still, in order to celebrate far from the eye of Mama's rabbinical father, we quietly took ourselves from London to our holiday home on the South Downs for the entire month, there to decorate a tree, fill the house with delicious smells, and wait for Papa to arrive.

You see, we went long periods during my childhood without our father. My mother, my brother, and I had left our home in San Francisco for England (the full reasons for this I was not to understand until much later) a few months after the 1906



earthquake and fire. Until 1912, when we returned to the Pacific coast, England was where the three of us lived, while my father, tied to family business interests in California and Boston, would make the trip across a continent and an ocean twice a year: for the long summer holiday, and for a too-brief winter visit.

Thus, even without Uncle Jake's contribution, December was a period rich with significance. As the year faded, anticipation grew. In early December, our tutors were dismissed, our trunks dispatched, and we boarded a south-bound train for Eastbourne.

Sometimes, packages were already waiting for us, collected by the village woman who kept the house both when we were there and in our absence: packages large and small, with numerous stamps or none at all, bearing return addresses from London, from America, or from the world beyond. The tidiest—always rectangular—were from our grandmother in Boston, predictably ill-suited for our age (the toys), our bodies (clothing), or our interests (books). Only slightly less boring would be those



from the London shops, purchased by Mother, who never really understood that Christmas was about thrill, and thus could be depended on to produce the next book in a series, a packet of our respectively preferred sweets, and any piece of clothing or equipment we had taken care to mention to her in November. Father's were considerably better, although they were as apt to be puzzling as exciting (such as the year he decided I

might enjoy learning to fly-fish) and often did not reach us until we had returned to London in the new year.

But the very essence of Christmas throughout my childhood were the well-travelled parcels that arrived with Jake's bold handwriting on them. Never neat, rarely rectangular, almost always from some unexpected corner of the globe, Jake's presents might have been specifically designed for the purpose of driving parents mad. What adult would send a collection of explosive, corrosive, and poisonous chemicals to a five year-old boy—even if that five year-old was Levi Russell? Or the shrunken head with the postmark from Ecuador?



Or the tall crate covered with mysterious ink designs that arrived late on Christmas Eve, with my name on it, and kept me from sleep all the long night. It proved, once I had burrowed through the excelsior the next morning, to contain an antiquated Japanese air rifle, magnificently engraved, wickedly accurate.

Uncle Jake's gifts tended to mysteriously disappear soon after our return to London. A few of them turned up, years later, in a storage shed down in Eastbourne I had not known the family possessed. Others I suspected had been anonymously donated

to one museum or another: one New Guinean spear in the Pitt Rivers looks remarkably familiar. But other gifts were less tangible, and stayed with the family forever.

For example. One snowy Christmas Morning, probably 1909, a knock on our door heralded, not neighbours or carollers, but a heavily-wrapped individual (wrapped in woollen garments, that is, not decorative paper) with snow on his boots and a sheaf of pages clutched between his icy fingers. Mother pulled him inside, thawed him out, gave him food and a couple of powerful drinks, then sat in bemusement as the hairy young fellow rose to his feet, cleared his throat, and read to her a series of poems written on the sheets of paper. He then laid down the poems, resumed his garments, tipped his hat to her, and said, “I am asked to say that your brother-in-law wishes you many happy returns of the day, and much poetry in the coming year.” Then he trudged off through the snow in the direction of Eastbourne.



Another year, a shipment of penguins bound for the London zoo went inexplicably astray, ending up at our front door. Since it was Christmas day, with limited trains to London, and since the poor creatures were clearly in need of both exercise and a meal, the entire village was treated to the spectacle of seventeen Antarctic natives gobbling English herring and tobogganing in their feathered evening wear along the snow-covered Downs.

“Your uncle was banned from family mention, yet your grandparents continued to support him financially? Vintage air rifles and waylaying a flock of penguins suggest considerable resources.”

“Oh, yes: Jake was as banned from the family coffers as he was from their conversations. I suspect that whatever it was he got away with in that 1908 episode might have set another man up for life, but not someone who abandons once-used hot-air balloons or gives away Rolls Royces to a gipsy king. No, Jake lived by his wits—which, while considerable, were weighted towards the larcenous. The final straw, the event that had my mother reluctantly accepting the opinions of her parents-in-law, brought me and my brother into matters. A young introduction into a life of crime.”

“Hence your remark, long ago, that had you not met me, you might easily have become an expert forger or second-storey man. Woman.”

“Precisely.”



It began in the summer of 1911. At the time, there was nothing to suggest that this would be our last year of familial separation. It was a July like any of those previously spent beneath the Sussex sun, weeks of running wild through Downland lanes and villages. I was eleven, Levi six, and by this time we were well known to every farmer and housewife in the triangle formed by the Lewes road to the north and the Cuckmere River to the west, with the road from Eastbourne to Newhaven our southern

boundary. (Thus, slightly outside the customary haunts of our famous neighbour, Sherlock Holmes.)

To most of them, we were simply two of a gang of free-ranging children—with better shoes and manners than some, perhaps, but every bit as likely to be at the centre of any complex bits of troublemaking. Some would drive us away with shouts, a few went so far as to report a misdemeanour to our parents, but most would merely shake their heads at our antics and shoo us off.

Not all. There were two or three among our neighbours to whom we gave wide berth, although we would have loved to torment them, could we have been certain of anonymity. But after a conversation with our parents, Levi and I agreed that the punishment of these few villains was beyond the responsibility of minors.

One of them was an old woman in East Dean with a bitter tongue and a large and vicious dog. The other was the owner of a run-down public house and inn along the Lewes road, whose threat to turn a shotgun on miscreants was all too widely believed.

This latter individual was a person with a blithe intolerance for foreigners of all stripes and newcomers to Sussex in particular, and an open abhorrence for those of the Hebrew faith. I had never been inside the place, although my Uncle Jake was a regular whenever he was in Sussex—less for the company, I had figured out the previous year, than for the card games that kept the publican in business.



An overheard conversation in the village shop told me that poker, exotic for rural England, was responsible for the shiny motorcars with London plates that assembled outside of the inn on the occasional Friday night: letting out rooms made it easier to get around licensing hours.

My parents had long since forbidden to us the Lewes road for a mile in either direction of the establishment, whenever we were on our own. This was easily enough done, since most of our social life lay to the south and west of where we lived, but then in the summer of 1911, this person made purchase of a motorcar, a sleek and shiny machine on which he showered all the care and attention he did not show his place of business. He drove too fast, and after rumour began to spread that he had deliberately swerved in the direction of a neighbour's affable and arthritic dog, Mother warned us to take great care along the better-kept roads and lanes, where his tendency to speed might give two Jewish children little warning of his approach.

Fortunately, the summer passed without so much as a close call, or I'd have ended up in an uncomfortable conversation with my father about a stone going through the publican's windscreen. We returned to London for the autumn, my father sailed for America, and Mother, Levi, and I buckled down to the twelve long weeks that lay between us and our next freedom.

December came at last, and with it, a sensation I had never before felt in the Sussex air: a touch of bitter to the sweet. The next summer, we would *not* board the train to Sussex. We would not spend three blissful months running wild, swimming with Father at Beachy Head, picking wild berries, and transforming into brown-skinned,



scabby-kneed, wild-haired urchins. Instead, Mother had agreed, after six long years, to join Father in San Francisco, reuniting our family at last.

We were overjoyed—and yet...

This December might well be our last time here, at my mother's beloved Sussex farm.

The three of us went down a few days earlier than usual, since the prospect of an



extended absence would require a lot of planning with the farm manager, Patrick Mason. Or so Mother said. It seemed to me that Patrick ran the farm quite nicely with very little advice from its owner, but I was not about to object to a few extra days in Sussex.

Perhaps Mother, too, was impelled by emotion rather than practicality.

In any event, we went early, which made it one of the years that Father was not there at the

start. And because Father was not with us at the start, there were several of his usual tasks that Mother took on instead.

One of those involved a trip to the Evil Publican, to order a small barrel of beer to offer the numerous visitors entertained by both house and kitchen during the holidays. One might have thought that the Russell family would impose economic sanctions against the man, but for some reason, both parents agreed that a campaign of bland

kindness might bring him around where open warfare would not. Personally, I'd have dropped rat poison in his tea kettle, but then, I have never been a forgiving person.

Two days after we arrived, under skies leaden with the threat of snow, Mother cautiously steered the motorcar down the lane towards the main road. She was not a comfortable driver, but she believed in meeting her fears head-on, which made waiting for Father, or having Patrick drive us, unacceptable. Levi and I huddled under heavy travelling rugs in the back while she peered forward through the misty windscreen, convinced that any instant, a child on a bicycle or a straying pony would dash out before her.

Mother drove at the speed of a brisk walk.

As a part of meeting one's fears, she also preferred to face unpleasant things immediately. So our first stop would be at the home of the Evil Publican—and, lest one think that she might believe children are to be protected, when we came to a halt, she turned and told us to come in with her.

Being a child of Judith Russell was not always an easy thing.

Levi and I stayed well back as Mother walked across the saloon bar to where the publican glowered. She laid down a piece of paper with Father's name on it and counted out the cost of the barrel, making polite conversation to his silence all the while. When the money was on the surface of the bar, she put away her purse, rested her hands on the wood, and looked expectantly at him. Levi and I held our breath, but since his choice was to take Mother's order or lose our family's business, he reluctantly reached down for his order book and wrote down the information.

Mother thanked him, politely added that her friends always enjoyed his winter ale, and turned to go.

One had to know her very well to see how relieved she was.

She was nearly at the door when the man added a parting shot, in a voice that might have been telling a jest. “Don’t know why you people celebrate the Saviour’s birth when it was you who killed him.”

In the two seconds before anger came, even a complete stranger would have read the shock on her face. She came to a halt. I expected her to turn and go after the man with all the wits and scorn in her armament—I gleefully waited for it—but instead she merely lifted her chin, gathered us up, and left.

“Why did he say that?” I asked her.

“Ignorant people spout a lot of nonsense, Mary.”

“If he’s ignorant, why didn’t you stay and argue?” This was, after all, her technique for dealing with the occasional ignorance of her children.

“When there is an emotional element in a belief, argument rarely has much effect. Particularly when it’s a man who feels threatened by a woman’s words.”

“But, what he was saying! Why does he think we killed Jesus?”

She did not reply, not then and there. Instead, we piled back into the motor and continued the day’s tasks—although she did buy us an unexpectedly generous treat in the Alfriston tea-house. However, once we were back home, she sent me to fetch a copy of the New Testament, and we began to work our way through the relevant parts. The next two days were spent addressing my question of why the man blamed us for a political act

two thousand years in the past,  
until the long table in the library  
was buried in books, maps, and  
notes in several languages.

Not that the question was  
answered, exactly, except to  
convince me that the Gospel



authors might have been more careful with their choice of words, had they known people  
would read them as the immortal word of God.

On the third day, life resumed. Father's ship was due the next morning, and none  
of us wanted to see a look of disappointment at our lack of mince tarts and mistletoe.

Every corner of the house smelled of baking—Mother had just pulled Father's favourite



ginger cake from the oven, only slightly  
scorched—when a knock came on the kitchen  
door. I pulled it open to find a very bedraggled  
Uncle Jake, wearing a rueful expression, a quarter

inch of beard hair, and a beautifully tailored coat, misshapen by damp, that he'd clearly  
been sleeping in for days.

Also, a black eye going green around the edges.

Mother exclaimed and reached to pull him inside, then let go of his arm when he  
made a sound of distress. "Sore shoulder," he said, taking the step up to the kitchen as if  
it was a great height. As he went past me, I hesitated about shutting the door: the kitchen  
no longer smelled so sweet.

Mother put on the kettle, laid a slab of the cake on a plate, and had him fed and refreshed in two minutes flat. It took somewhat longer to get him upstairs to the bath, but she asked no questions, made no protest, merely provided clean clothing, left a napkin-wrapped pair of sandwiches and a bottle of beer on the guestroom table, and resumed her kitchen tasks.

“What happened to Uncle Jake?” Levi asked.

“I’m sure we’ll find out when he’s had a rest,” Mother said, and directed us back to our construction of many meters of colourful paper chain.

But nothing more was heard from our resident black sheep, all that day and through the evening. The following morning, I came downstairs to find my mother placidly reading, teacup at hand.

“Do you think Uncle Jake has died?” I asked her.

“I heard him moving around during the night,” she replied, to my relief.

“What happened to him?”

“I’m sure that if he wants us to know, he’ll tell us. Would you rather stay here when I go to get your father, or come with Levi and me?”

That was a difficult decision, but in the end, my curiosity about Jake (and my conviction that I could get him to tell me first) overcame my eagerness to see Father.

An hour after Mother and Levi had driven away, with the house still silent, I was regretting my decision.

An hour after that, motion came at last.

I managed to get the coffee made before I heard his feet on the stairs. I was sweeping up the last of the spilt grounds when he appeared in the doorway, shaven now

and wearing an assortment of clothing—old trousers of his from a previous visit, a heavy sweater with rolled-up sleeves belonging to Father, and a pair of Mother’s too-large bedroom slippers.

“Mary, Mary, my favouritest niece,” he said, coming to wrap his arms around me. “Good heavens, child, you’re nearly as tall as I am! Who gave you permission to become such a beautiful young woman?”

It was true that I had to shrink down a little to nestle into his shoulder, but if I had changed, he had not: still tautly muscled, and still warmer than other people seemed to be, his natural odour had returned. I breathed it in, the smell of uncles and exotic places, and I might have stood there forever had his stomach not given a loud grumble.

“Oh!” I said, standing back, “you must be starving. Can I get you something to eat?”

“Let’s see what there is in the pantry,” he said, and was soon merrily stirring eggs and herbs into a perfect omelette, grating just the right amount of cheese over it, and snatching the toast from beneath the grill a moment before the brown went too dark. He put one serving in front of me, replicated it for himself, and sat down at the kitchen table, emptying his plate in what seemed one rapid swipe of the fork. He washed it down with a swallow of coffee, ignoring the odd bits that floated on top.

We washed and dried the dishes, wiped down the stove and table, talking all the while. Perhaps I did the majority of the talking. In any event, he did not reply to my none-too-subtle queries as to his eye and shoulder (Come to think of it, I never did learn what had happened to him.) although he did hear all about Mother’s decision to return to California. When the kitchen was restored, we went into the sitting room where I



carefully arranged more wood onto the fire (my domestic incompetence, then as now, being largely confined to the kitchen). He lowered himself onto the divan, stifling a groan. I fetched a rug so he could put up his feet.

“So, Mary, what’s new in your life?”

Unlike most adults, Jake seemed genuinely interested in what children were doing. He listened with the occasional comment as I told him about my tutorials during the autumn, my decision about the future (I was torn between being a surgeon and a mountain climber, realising that the latter as a hobby might negate the former as a profession, what with the liability of frost-bite) and the ridiculous antics of one of my older friends who had recently discovered boys.

He nodded, he shook his head, he sympathised, but he also half-drowsed in the growing warmth—until I started telling him about the Evil Publican. His eyes came open as he watched my face. He said nothing, and although with someone else I might have downplayed the insult, I did not mind Uncle Jake seeing how upset I was. At the end, I plucked at a frayed spot on my sleeve, and listened to the crackling fire.



“That wasn’t a nice thing to say,” he told me after a time.

“It was nasty. Although Mother explained to me the history of what it meant, and how it came about. Uncle Jake, do you have to go there and play cards any more?”

His hand came out to give a sharp tug to the nearest plait. “I might have to. But if I do, I promise not to give him any of my money. Is that the car I hear in the drive?”

It was.

After my enthusiastic greetings, the hand-shake between Father and Jake seemed particularly subdued, and during luncheon, some large Presence loomed at the back of the room. When we had finished, Father and Jake left us and walked up to Jake’s room, where they spent a very long time behind the closed door, broken at one point by Father’s retrieval of the first aid box and a bowl of water.

Nothing more was said about the black eye, the sore shoulder, or the state of the overcoat.

That afternoon, I heard Jake leave his room to go down the hallway, and after the flush of the toilet, go back. When his door shut again, Levi and I looked at each other, then put down our books and ventured upstairs. I tapped on the door. In a moment, Jake looked out.



“Your father’s ordered me to stay in bed today. But he didn’t say I had to be alone. You two want to come in?”

We did.

We spent a happy hour playing Faro on the counterpane. When Levi grew tired of losing, Jake had me put the footed breakfast tray over his legs and showed us card tricks—how to snap-change a card, then how to vanish one from the table. His hands were good—in fact, looking back, I can say that his hands were great. Even knowing

how the tricks worked, neither of us could catch the card snapping back, or flicking beneath his outstretched arm to his lap. As we practiced, he amused himself by shooting cards across the room into the waste-basket, only missing twice out of the entire deck.

I watched in fascination, then demanded, “Show me how you do that!”

So he showed me. I had a good arm for throwing, but at first, the cards flew wildly over. Jake picked up one that had landed on his pillow—well behind my back, and said, “You’re thinking too hard. Don’t throw the card; let it throw itself.”

I focussed closely on his arm, his fingers: relaxed and sure. On my tenth try, the slick paper seemed to find a pathway cut through the air: instead of fluttering up or sideways, it spun, its corner tapping against the wallpaper twelve feet away.

My whoop attracted attention from downstairs, and Mother came up, sending Levi and me away to let the patient rest. The cards went with me.

By the end of the afternoon, I could hit a waste-basket twelve feet away nineteen times out of twenty. By the time I went to bed, I could get the entire deck in at fifteen feet.

The next morning, Jake was impressed.

That afternoon, he was well enough for a walk over the snow-sprinkled Downs.

And by evening, he felt recovered enough to go up to the Evil Publican’s inn for a few hands of poker.



I was, frankly, hurt: why would my beloved uncle turn his back on us to socialise with That Person?

The next day, I asked him.

He and I had graduated to throwing competitions by now: who could get the most cards in the basket, the fastest, and the farthest away. There in the sitting room, in a house redolent with cinnamon and evergreen boughs, I ventured a suggestion that Jake was being a touch disloyal to us.

He did not reply, not directly, merely finished his run of tosses (he missed two, to my one) and then said, “Let’s try something else.”

He took a tall, thin glass vase from the mantelpiece and stood it on the low table. Backing away a few feet, he held a card between his fingers, made a couple of practice runs, then snapped his hand out—and the card magically appeared between vase and table. The effect was like a magician whipping away a laden tablecloth, in reverse. He handed me the deck of cards, watched me knock the vase over a few times, suggested a correction of my elbow, and said, “When you can feed a sequence of cards under the vase, ask me again about my poker games.”

Perfection took me two days, by which time my fingers were somewhat raw.

It was now December 20, a Wednesday. I took Uncle Jake into the dining room, balanced a ½ inch wooden dowel upright, and let a series of ten cards take up residence between the dowel and the tablecloth, each one shooting the previous card to the floor beyond.

I felt Jake’s strong, supple fingers come down on my shoulder, gripping it in approval. I had never felt prouder of anything in my life.

Then the work began.

I listened with something near awe as my uncle casually suggested to his older brother (his experienced, and hence suspicious, older brother) that Charles really ought to take advantage of having another adult in the house and take Judith for a night out. In London, even. Wasn't there something at the theatre that she'd mentioned wanting to see? Yes, he supposed it would make for a late night—unless they stayed in Town. In an hotel even, so as not to face the currently cold and empty London house?

Oh, certainly, whatever Charles thought—it was merely an idea...

His apparent indifference set the hook. But when Jake went on to point out that it would of course mean that he couldn't drink or go out—couldn't so much as take his eyes off either of us until we were tucked into our beds—well, then the hook was truly buried.

Maternal suspicions flared when Father surprised her with the proposal of twenty-four hours of adult freedom, but when Jake swore to her that he would be responsible, that he would not have more than one drink, or two at the most, that he would watch over his charges as if they were his own, she let herself be convinced. My parents set off for the Eastbourne station on Friday morning, trailing an air of giddy anticipation.

Jake rubbed his hands together, and put his team to work.



Walking towards the inn that night, well bundled against the cold, we saw the gleam of expensive motorcars from down the road. As we grew near, we heard men's voices, then saw a hand-lettered sign pinned to the door: CLOSED TONIGHT FOR PRIVATE PARTY.

Jake pushed open the saloon-bar door and walked into the warmth and brightness. Half a dozen men in expensive suits looked around at our entrance, their faces first lighting up as they saw who it was, then going confused when they saw Levi and me.

“You can’t bring those two in here,” the Evil Publican declared.

“I didn’t think you’d be keen on it,” Jake said easily, “but I’m afraid I’m stuck with them for the night. Playing nursemaid, you know. So unless you want to give them a bottle of lemonade and let them sit in the corner for a while, I won’t be joining you tonight.”

Protest arose, most vehemently from the Evil Publican who had planned this evening for some weeks (and, no doubt, intended to reap financial benefits from it.) But Jake stood firm: he’d promised his brother that he wouldn’t take his eyes off the kids, so...

Having seen Uncle Jake’s wiles at work on my parents, I was not surprised when his ploy of innocence worked on men with drinks in their hands and gambling on their minds. Levi and I were settled into a corner with lemonade and a packet of stale biscuits. Since we had come armed with books, we were content.

The evening wore on. Empty bottles collected on the bar, neck-ties were loosened. For the most part, the men only recalled our presence when one or the other of them shushed some thoughtless language. After Levi curled up on the cushions with a travelling rug pulled up over him, we became even less visible.





That would not have been the case had I been even a year older, but being some days short of my twelfth birthday, I was a child, not a young woman. And when I put down my book and wandered up to look over my uncle's shoulder, one of the men called me Jake's good luck charm—which that night, Jake Russel surely needed. He won occasionally, but when he lost, it was big. Gradually, he slid deeper into the hole. All the while, the Publican's winnings grew. The room grew warmer. Jake irritably ripped off his tie and loosened his collar. His hand movements grew more clumsy, his voice louder.

I walked back to Levi's corner and picked up my book again, but the voices were growing too loud, the vocabulary a touch uncontrolled. I went back to Jake, leaning against his left shoulder.

"Uncle Jake, can we go soon?"

"Not until I win back my stake, honey."

"You're a long way from that, Yank," the Publican sneered. "You're just about cleaned out!"

But the Yank was not quite without resources.

Jake reached down to his pocket, then laid his fist on the table. He withdrew his hand, revealing a mound of brilliant green and pale gold. I gasped: “Mama’s emeralds! Oh, Uncle Jake, you can’t—”



“Just borrowing them, Mary,” he said. “They’ll be back before your mother is.”

The necklace was old, heavy, and valuable—extremely valuable. I watched these strangers pass my mother’s treasure along the table, debating its value as if they were talking about horseflesh or a grain shipment. Two of the men had a lot of experience in buying ladies’ jewels, and both agreed that the piece was worth more than everything on the table. More than everything *around* the table, for that matter.

“I don’t care,” Jake declared, looking flushed and sounding desperate. “My luck’s about to turn, I can feel it.”

The others looked at each other, then sat up with renewed interest. Playing commenced, wagers climbed. One player folded, and another. And then with a convulsive motion, Jake shoved forward his entire bankroll—including my mother’s emerald necklace. “All,” he said.

A third player put his cards down immediately. The fourth mulled it over for a minute before he too decided that discretion was the better part of poker.

That left Jake and the innkeeper. As was his habit, well known to anyone who played against him, the man picked up his cards, checked them, and laid them down again on the table to his right side. “I’m in.”

“Like everyone says, there’s not enough on the table to match my sparklies,” Jake pointed out. “So what’ll you add? That pretty new motor of yours? I’d really like a new motorcar.” However, I thought that his voice and face did not quite match the confidence of his words. Also, his left leg was jittering beneath the table, a thing I’d noticed he did when his hand was questionable.

The innkeeper saw it, too. “You’re bluffing,” he scoffed.

“Then match the bet. What can you put up but the car? This joint, maybe? Yeah, okay, how about the keys to this place? Or should I...” Jake wrapped a hand across the heap of gems and gold, pulling it a fraction towards himself. When his arm rose again, the necklace had hit upon a stray beam from the overhead lamp, and sparkled all the brighter.

The innkeeper stood up to go around behind his bar, coming back with a heavy ring of keys. He unthreaded one and dropped it into his pocket, tossing the remainder atop his bank notes and coins.

He sat down. But just as he reached for his cards, there came a crash and a cry from where Levi had been sleeping. Everyone turned to look, and I detached myself from Uncle Jake’s shoulder to scurry around the table to his rescue. The card players, seeing that the damage was more to the boy’s dignity than his person, laughed and resumed their glasses, or their cards...

The Evil Publican's shock sent an almost palpable wave through the room. He pawed his cards in confusion, then disbelief, before slapping them face-up onto the table and rising in fury. His chair crashed to the floor. Drinks were spilt, curses emitted, and Jake's own cards went flying as he scrambled away from the table, where the enraged innkeeper looked about to launch himself across it. "What the hell did you do, you little bastard?" the man snarled. "I had a straight flush with a jack on top! How the *hell* did you—"

"Language!" Jake protested.

"Look!" The man jabbed a finger at his five cards, which could only have been mistaken for a straight flush if one read the eight of hearts as a jack of spades. As it was, all he had was a pair of eights.

Jake looked with the others, then lifted his gaze. "You need your eyes checked, man," he taunted.

The publican did come for him then, starting around the table with a roar while Jake circled nimbly ahead of his meaty outstretched hands. Levi and I joined the tumult with voices raised (me pausing briefly at the two fallen chairs to set them aright) until the other men had extricated themselves from their own seats to seize the Evil Publican, pressing him back into his chair with a glass full enough to sedate a rhinoceros.

Jake returned cautiously to his place, stooping to retrieve his cards. He laid them out deliberately, one at a time, beside the emeralds.

I thought the innkeeper would explode when the jack of spades appeared. He demanded the whole deck be collected for counting, but there were 52, with no duplicates. And although in the confusion, any number of cards could have traded

places, there was no doubt that his claim to a seven, eight, nine, ten, and jack of spades was absurd. How could Jake have touched his cards? He'd been sitting right there until the innkeeper picked them up.

Perhaps if the others actually liked the Evil Publican, his claims might have held a bit more weight. However, his hosting of this card game had always been more avaricious than sociable, and no one put his claimed straight flush against Jake's mere pair of queens. (Two of the four others ruefully admired the skilful bluff, having themselves held hands that could have won.) If they had to lose to someone, make it Jake. At least it made for a good story.

Bank notes, coins, and the set of keys dutifully crossed the table. Jake Russell was now the owner of a derelict public house in rural Sussex.

He gave the inn's former proprietor thirty pounds and an hour to load the shiny motorcar with personal belongings. Before first light the following morning, while five mostly contented London poker players snored in their beds above, three Russells stood in the inn's ancient doorway and watched the car's lights fade in the direction of Lewes.

\*



"Quite a gamble," Holmes remarked.

"There were any number of hands that would have beaten your uncle even after losing a card. And others that your thrown eight of hearts would actually have improved."

"Credit Jake's guardian angel. And I suppose if he'd lost, the emeralds would simply have disappeared from the inn's strongbox, and Jake from Sussex."

“Which, I suspect, would not have been the first time the police were notified as to his activities?”

“Nor the last. But you’re right, it was a gamble. It wouldn’t have worked at all, had I not been a child.”

“A highly intelligent, cool-headed, left-handed child.”

I laughed. “With a brother who could fall off a bench on command.”

“The Russell gang: Scotland Yard’s despair. So what cards did your uncle have?”

“It wasn’t bad—a full house, three eights and a pair of queens, so he ended up with two pairs and that jack of spades. It was all a bluff, including his nervous leg.”

“He indicated to you the eight of hearts in his own hand, then stretched out play while you stepped aside to fetch that card from a matching deck you’d brought. When you returned and were propped on his shoulder, your little brother conveniently fell off his makeshift bed. Your card toss kicked the jack of spades out of the publican’s hand, leaving it on the floor.”

“I retrieved it when I bent down for his chair, then left it with those Uncle Jake had dropped, when I set his chair upright. The fellow knew the change had been made somehow, but since no one saw anything, the only faintly suspicious act was Jake dropping his cards—and even then, everyone else had jumped, too, when the innkeeper came out of his chair. In the end, they decided it was the empty claim of a losing blowhard.”

“I always wondered about that inn’s abrupt change of ownership. I was away at the time.”

“Jake sold it for next to nothing to a lady in Eastbourne whose cooking he was fond of.”

“Tillie Whiteneck.”

“She wanted to call the place ‘Jake’s Hand’ but he said no, so she dusted off the oldest name she could find for it. Thus, the Monk’s Tun.”

“What did your parents say?”

“They didn’t find out until after Christmas. Levi nearly let it slip twice, but fortunately I was there to kick his shins under the table. And then Jake was gone—he didn’t even stay for Christmas, to our vast disappointment. He never came back to Sussex, although the presents continued for a couple of years, and the occasional letter.”

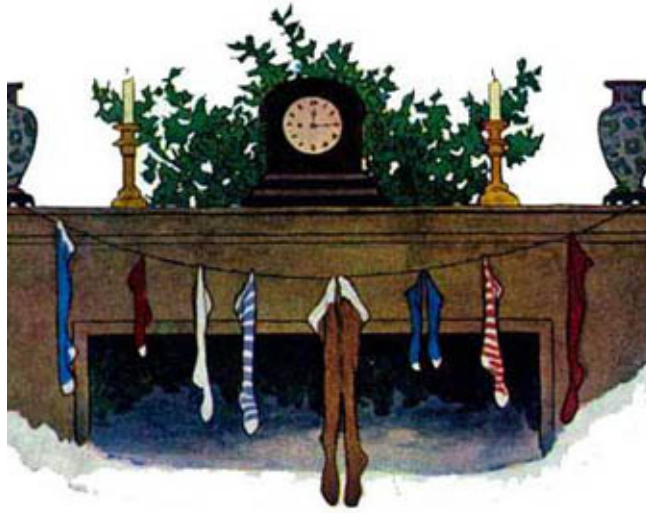
Before he left, however my uncle had left behind a gift for each of us. Levi received a set of magician’s props, with joining rings, a magic bouquet, and a genuine child-sized folding silk hat.

And for me? An object that I carry to this day, despite my father’s disapproval and my mother’s dismay: a slim piece of wickedly sharp steel with a rosewood handle that was just a fraction large for my eleven-year-old hand. It rested in a curious sort of sheath with straps at both ends which, after some thought, I fitted to my ankle. There it lay, invisible beneath trouser legs, a long skirt, or a pair of high boots.



Still lies. Now, all these years later, my eyes came to rest on the pile of logs beside the fire. My hand went down to the sheath, and with the flick of a hand, I let the wicked, brilliant little knife throw itself at the target.

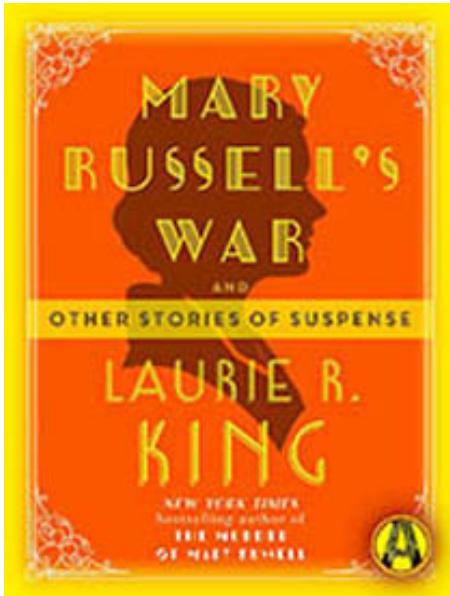
Every young woman should have had an Uncle Jake.



- end -



## Afterword



I hope you enjoyed my illustrated edition of “Mary’s Christmas.” The story is from the collection *Mary Russell’s War*, which also includes tales of a teen-aged Russell’s war work, a case involving an American invasion of the Russell & Holmes home in Sussex, details of one of the more dangerous acts of Miss Russell’s long and exciting life—her wedding—and a second Christmas story, “Stately Holmes”, which concerns Sherlock Holmes and a very, very young assistant. *Mary Russell’s War* contains:

**Mary’s Christmas**

**Mary Russell’s War**

**Beekeeping for Beginners**

**Mrs Hudson’s Case**

**The Marriage of Mary Russell**

**Birth of a Green Man**

**A Venomous Death**

**My Story**

**A Case in Correspondence**

**Stately Holmes**



And a very merry reading experience to you, your friends, and your family.

—Laurie