**Hospitality**

by jessikast

**Summary**

*Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.*

Mary Russell is living out her later years in her South Downs cottage. She is all too pleased to take on the challenge of deducing some things about her new neighbours.

(Mary Russell may be a detective, but she is also a student of theology.)

**Notes**

I love the South Downs trope, but of course, it's been done before - the great detective did it first!

It's pure self indulgence to ramble about how Mary - student of theology and the Bible - would react if she allowed herself to deduce the fact that her neighbours are, in fact, ethereal (or occult) beings.

I've obviously taken some liberty with the timeline. Mary was born about 1900, so would be nearing 120 now. I'm going to place this at "it's 2019 and post-Apocawasn't; Mary Russell is old but still independent and sharp as ever".

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I found myself often alone in my later years, and this was a state entirely to my liking. I had always enjoyed the bustle of London, but that metropolis had simply become too busy. Even the academic refuge of my beloved Oxford seemed overwhelming fast and young, and the appeal of our South Downs cottage – a little remote, known, beloved and quiet - simply too enticing.

I was alone, but not lonely. I occupied myself with writing my memoirs and sending them to my American agent, and indulging in the occasional academic review or reply. Students and family (some by blood, some by adoption, but no less dear) came to visit, for an afternoon or a weekend. A woman from the village came to keep the house clean and restock the prepared meals in my fridge. Between those, my ability to make a decent sandwich, the occasional meal at the pub and the excitement when UberEats reached the village, I did very well.

I liked to keep up with the neighbours. A lot of the families nearby were descendants of people I’d known since my girlhood. Of course, houses were bought and sold; people came from London, realised the idea of being remote and windswept was better than the reality, and let their houses on Airbnb. I knew people talked, but the locals were loyal, and inclined to keep my privacy. These days, when people came looking for Sherlock Holmes, they thought they were chasing a literary invention, not a real person. Anyone who was told “that’s the house the detective lived in, his wife still lives there” – well, they’d dismiss it, go take a photo of the Lions Mane rockpool for their Instagram, and go off again.

New people who came to actually live in the community were a welcome challenge to me. I was settled in to enjoy my habits, but that didn’t mean I didn’t like the opportunity to stretch my old deductive abilities on new people.

It was Spring when the couple from London moved into the cottage closest to mine. It had been empty for a while, the absent owners trying to keep it as a holiday house or Airbnb, but evidently they’d given in and sold it – it was slightly too far from the village or the beach for an easy stroll to either, and only the most dedicated holidaymakers had bothered. I couldn’t actually see the cottage from my own house, but I’d watched with interest as several moving trucks trundled down the road, followed by an old Bentley. A blast from the past, as they say! I’d always enjoyed owning my own car, something fast and modern, but I had a soft spot for the large machines I learned to drive in and first owned myself.

The new owners didn’t make an appearance for a week or so, settling in and unpacking, I assumed, although I saw the Bentley come and go. My housekeeper brought gossip from the village – they were Londoners, they thought one was a rock star and the other was a professor but no one knew for sure, and they were most definitely a couple. My little corner of England, beloved as it was, was still a little traditional about such things – they weren’t exactly prejudiced, but it was certainly gossip to be reported in the most breathless way.

I had my own opportunity to form an opinion a few days later. I was certainly quite curious by this point, and more than happy to take advantage of the fact that old ladies were given some leeway when it came to being cheerfully forward. I was sitting on the flagged patio, enjoying a brandy and a book in the cooling early evening, a blanket over my lap to ward off the spring chill, when I heard a murmur of conversation and, peering over the hedge, saw my new neighbours meandering down towards the village.

I could see why the locals had formed the opinions that they had – the two men were as opposite as could be, one lanky and all in black with those ‘skinny jeans’ that are so in vogue these days, and the
other did indeed look like a professor, one of those funny, fussy ones from the fifties, complete with bowtie. They weren’t walking hand-in-hand but I was in no doubt that the rumours about their being a couple were correct – there was something about the way they walked close enough that shoulders or elbows brushed, their heads were tilted towards each other, their mutual attention completely focussed, and even though I couldn’t make out their words (blast the affects of age on one’s hearing!) I could tell it was the kind of debate where the arguments were well-worn, made for the love of the conversation, neither expected to win but neither lost. For a moment, I missed my husband dreadfully.

“Hallo!” I called as they passed my gate. “You must be my new neighbours!” The men stopped, startled to be interrupted.

“Yeah, hi,” said the one in black.

“Oh, hello!” said the other. “We’d love to stay and chat but we’re on our way to dinner-“

“Now, now,” said rockstar. “We don’t want to be unfriendly to our neighbours, do we?” I could see a flash of frustration cross the otherwise mild expression of the professor.

“Are you heading to the pub for a meal?” I asked. “It’s still early, I’d recommend waiting an hour or two. On Thursday, Ben Rowe starts his shift in the kitchen at 7pm, and I’m afraid he’s a far better cook than Emily, who has the shift before him. If you’re peckish, I was about to have some cheese and crackers – you’d be very welcome to join me.”

Professor looked charmed. Clearly food was the way to his heart. “Well, in that case, we’d be delighted to join you! Wouldn’t we, dear?” he nudged his companion with an elbow. Rockstar sighed, but I could tell his heart wasn’t in it. “All right, meet the neighbours. Good stuff.”

“Excellent!” I hurried back into the house and gathered a tray with a packet of crackers and a lovely ripe Stilton, together with a bottle of wine and some glasses. There, very hospitable!

Back outside, my neighbours had let themselves through the gate and were settling at my little table. “I’m Mary,” I said. “Mary Russell-“

“Mary Russell?” said the professor, sitting straighter and staring at me. Oh dear, I thought, he’s a Holmesian or something. “Are you the same Mary Russell who taught theology at Oxford some years ago?”

Somewhat relieved, I sat down and started opening the wine. “Yes, that was me. Were you one of my students? I’m afraid I don’t-“

“Oh no, nothing of the sort! I’ve just read some of your books. Absolutely brilliant!”

“Thank you,” I said, rather pleased. “It’s been a while since I wrote a whole book, but I’m still sending out the occasional article-“

“You must let me know when your next one is published,” Professor said. “Oh, Stilton!”

Rockstar sighed as Professor helped himself to the cheese. “Where are your manners, angel,” he said, and turned pointedly to me. “Thank you for inviting us to join you. My name’s Crowley, and this is-“

“Mr Fell” said the other, quickly patting his lips with a pocket handkerchief, and reaching out to shake my hand. “We’re just down from London. I’m-“
“No, let me guess!” I said. “Deduction. It’s a little game of mine. Do indulge me?”

“Oh, like magic!” said Mr Fell, wriggling a little in his seat. “Lovely!” Crowley helped himself to a glass of wine, and sat back in his chair with an assenting wave of his fingers.

I had, of course, made quite a few observations already. I had been wearing my reading glasses, and switched them for my usual spectacles – both hanging on chains around my neck, and it could be a dreadful tangle sometimes, but I loathed the awkward head-tilt that bifocals forced on me.

Let’s see – mid-to-late forties, both quite healthy and fit, moving easily, no signs of any injuries or impediments. Indeed, Crowley moved very fluidly indeed. Mr Fell had round-lensed reading glasses in his pocket, but I’d noticed him reading the label of the wine bottle without any difficulty, so I suspected the glasses were an affectation. His clothes were worn but cared for – here was a man who liked and appreciated quality, but perhaps couldn’t afford to replace items? No – a gold ring on his smallest finger, his nails were neatly and professionally manicured, the slight scent of cologne I detected wasn’t a cheap brand. He could afford new clothes, he just chose not to. The line of his jacket was slightly spoiled at one pocket by a small book – an odd-sized book, too small and square to be a modern paperback. The name rang a bell.

“Mr Fell,” I murmured, “not of A. Z. Fell and Co. bookshop, by any chance?”

“Oh, yes, very clever!” he said.

“Lovely place,” I said, “I used to stop in when I lived in London. Excellent collection of some very rare books. It must have been run by…your father? You have the look of him, now I think of it.”

Mr Fell cleared his throat. “Ah, my father, of course. Yes. Well, the bookshop is still there, but it’s temporarily closed while we settle our move.”

“Hmm,” I said, already continuing my examination. Mr Fell clearly liked his food, but the fit and wear of his clothes showed that he’d kept the same shape for some time – none of the weight gain I would have expected, especially since he didn’t have the musculature that indicated regular exercise. There was also something about his hands… “May I?” I asked, and switching for my reading glasses, took his right hand to look more closely. (Again, the curious whims of old ladies! How handy!) As I’d noted, the nails were neatly manicured. The ring looked old – the gold worn thin on the wings that formed the band and I couldn’t make out the image on the signet. He had callouses on his right hand – where one would hold a pen, that was ordinary enough, but also on the sides of his middle and index fingers. The only action I could imagine was…turning pages? But even a heavy reader in old age like myself doesn’t have anything like that – how many pages over how many years? Decades…? And there was something about the whorls of his finger prints. I squinted at them. They were all absolutely symmetrical, and the exact same pattern.

I gave him his hand back and turned my attention to Crowley. Even through his glasses I could tell his was staring at me challengingly. A sceptic, excellent! “Is this some kind of…Sherlock Holmes deduction thing?” he asked.

“….yes,” I said, quellingly. “Something like that.”

Now, Crowley was a bit more challenging. The snake tattoo on his face spoke to a bold choice in his youth, and he was still very fashionable. Hardly the kind of man to retire to a quiet South Downs cottage, surely? The boots, stretched out in front of him, were real snakeskin, but there was something odd about them – lack of seams, perhaps? His clothes were, at first glance, expensive but – again, like the boots, something was slightly off. They were too well-made, the seams too even, none of the discreet but visible little labels or logos that I was used to seeing on modern designer
clothes. It reminded me of my own garments, back when the Elves tailored everything to me exactly, but it was hardly done these days to have a whole wardrobe tailored for you. There was something too smooth about him.

I sat back and had a sip of my brandy as I collected my thoughts. There was something churning at the back of my mind. I could, of course, come out with my usual little deductions – how far they’d walked, that Crowley was the Bentley’s driver, the plants they’d inspected in the cottage garden before setting out, but…. But.

Perhaps it was being old that did something to me, tipped my mind slightly more to the mystical or spiritual. There was something about Mr Fell that somehow reminded me of Margery Childe, the way the light fell on him, and the dichotomy of their appearances… Little things that didn’t quite fit. Somehow, even though I couldn’t point to any particular thing I felt like they were old – my contemporaries at least. But they weren’t, if I trusted the evidence of my own eyes. And there was that still, small voice…

I think Crowley saw something in my expression before Mr Fell did, and was starting to sit up. “Sorry, did you say you were a professor of theology?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, taking another sip of brandy. I felt I needed it.

“What, ah, what flavour?”

“Translations of the testaments; Rabbinic texts,” I said. “The place of women in the Bible.”

“Oh yes, you wrote that lovely paper about feminine Divine,” said Mr Fell before he sensed his partner’s attitude and tore his attention from the crackers. “I thought it very…insightful…” he trailed off.

This was ridiculous. For all that I was spiritual, and I had devoted hours of study to the Bible I was still a woman who lived in the world and trusted the practical evidence of my own eyes. But hadn’t I also seen what could only be explained as a miracle when I was involved with Margery? I knew that sometimes, deductions and evidence that I hadn’t even consciously noticed would fit together to create gut feelings, and it was preposterous but I was having one now.

“Tes philoxenias me epilanthanesthe, dia tautes gar elathon tines xenisantes aggelous,” I said, consideringly.

Mr Fell looked flustered. “Is that…ah…I’m afraid I don’t understand Greek…”

Crowley was starting to laugh. “You do, you old fraud,” he said. “And you know exactly what inspired that verse.”

Mr Fell looked at him wide-eyed, then nodded meaningfully at me. “Yes, but…!” He raised his hand like he was about to click his fingers, but the other man (was he a man?) reached out to cover his hand with his own.

“You can’t do that to an old lady,” he said. “Besides, it won’t work right on her. She’s too sharp. Aren’t you?” he looked at me, dipping his head slightly. Behind his glasses I thought I saw a flash of yellow.

“If I deduced it once, I’ll deduce it again,” I said. I somehow felt at the same time very satisfied, and slightly detached. This was surreal. I helped myself to a cracker and cheese. The Stilton helped
Deep down, I have always been an academic. I had chosen to study a field where I didn’t expect to encounter a primary source until after it was too late to write any kind of paper about it. My degrees wouldn’t be worth the vellum they were printed on if I let an opportunity like this pass me by.

“I don’t suppose,” I said, “that you’d be able to answer a few questions for me? There’s some passages with ambiguous translations, minor theological differences…”

Crowley was refilling his wine. “Oh, go on, angel,” he said. “An opportunity to talk about old books? The old book? That’s your idea of a good time.”

“Perhaps you’d like to see my library?” I offered, standing. It suddenly clicked that it was quite likely that this A. Z. Fell was the original. “If you’re interested I have some first editions of my husband’s monographs, and some of the adventures signed by the author…”

“Oh, well, that’s very tempting…” said Mr Fell. Crowley snorted into his wine. “I do like a first edition…but forgive me, who was your husband?”

“You don’t already know?” I asked, slightly surprised.

“We’re not omniscient,” said Mr Fell, stiffly. (“Oh, really, I’ll remember that one,” muttered Crowley.)

“No, I just thought that you would have been here long enough for the local gossip network to get to you,” I said, bemused. “You’ve already mentioned him after all; my husband was Sherlock Holmes.”

Mr Fell put his hand on my arm. “You have first editions?” he said, intently. “My dear girl, do lead the way!”

“Will you join us?” I said to Crowley, who was still seated.

He nodded his head slightly at the mezuzah by my door. “Maybe another time,” he said, with a slight twist of his lips. “I’ll be fine out here for a while.”

Oh. Not aggelous plural, then.

I led Mr Fell into the library and started pulling down volumes while he turned a slow circle. “Splendid! What a collection!” he said. “This room is very well loved, I can feel it.”

“Hmm,” I said, distracted looking for a particular reference volume. “I suppose the first thing I want to ask is-“

I spun on my heel when I heard a peculiar whoosh. The angel – for that was now very definitely what he was, I would be a very poor detective if I couldn’t deduce the meaning of giant white wings – smiled at me. “The wings, yes? Humans – the ones who figure it out, few and far between these days – they always want to see the wings.” He beamed at me.

I managed to gather my jaw and my wits. “Actually,” I said faintly, “I was going to ask if I would be correct in thinking that you read Ancient Greek and Hebrew, because there’s a few manuscripts I have copies of where the dialects are unclear, and-“

“Oh!” He blushed and the wings vanished. “Of course. Translations! Not an issue, I might be a little rusty but they’re quite familiar to me.”
“And,” I continued, a little stronger. “There’s that theological question about the divine as feminine which perhaps you could clear up, Mr Fell?”

“Oh, that’s easy, you were spot-on there!” he said. “And do call me Aziraphale.”

I stood for a moment, almost outraged. Years of scholarship, working on my own translations, combing through text until my eyes felt like sandpaper and I was spot-on. Just like that! Then his name filtered through, and I nearly squeaked – a sound that was undignified when I was young, let alone in a woman of my advanced years. I hurried to the binders where I had mimeographs and photocopies of some of the rarer texts, the ones held in museums and libraries which I had requested copies of over my years of study. There was one passage…ah hah!

“Aziraphale,” I said, finding the page I wanted. “As in—” I translated awkwardly as I read, finger tracing the text. “And the Principality who was called Aziraphale stood…it’s torn there…something something Wall of the Eastern Gate and God said to him where is the blazing…flaming?…sword – see it’s quite clear there that it’s feminine, that’s why I have a copy of this – and Aziraphale answered that he had it not but She did not reply and then…it’s stained here, but I think it says something like…and angel quickly left that place and the serpent did leave after him until…I couldn’t figure it out, it looks like wine—”

Aziraphale looked at the copy and turned a little pink. “Yes, it’s wine. The word and the stain. I thought I’d try my hand at a little writing myself but we were a tad drunk at the time…”

“You wrote this. You—” This was a little much, and I sank down on my little sofa. Angels – or whatever Crowley was – I could handle. I had a spiritual framework. But to have an author of a four-thousand-year-old text telling me he wrote it?

“Well, I was dictating to Crowley, he was the serpent in question, you see…oh my dear, are you all right?” He sat down next to me and anxiously patted my hand. I tried to gather myself. “I knew I should have miracled you, humans find it so hard these days, I can still—”

“Don’t you dare,” I managed, and reached over to my desk, until I found my notebook and pen. “Now, tell me everything. What was the concept of gender that the old testament authors were working with? And how does, er, the Almighty…feel about it? Was the apple a metaphor for something? How accurate are Heaven and Hell as concepts for the afterlife, because I’m Jewish and you must know our understanding is a little different. And…”

Aziraphale smiled at me. “Oh, I do love a good story. Well…!”

By the time my hand cramped from writing, the sun had set. With a start I realised that it was dark outside and we’d left poor Crowley out there. “It’s just gone seven!” I said, looking at the clock and shaking out my wrist. “If you head down to the pub now you’ll get a decent meal.”

“Thank you, I am a tad peckish.” The angel looked longingly at the small pile of books written by my husband which he hadn’t managed to look at. “Perhaps I could call on you again sometime, Miss Russell?”

“Call me Mary,” I said. “And why don’t you stop in on your way home and borrow them? I don’t imagine they could be in safer hands than the proprietor of A. Z. Fell and Co. Not likely to dog-ear pages or…spill wine on them?”

“Heaven forfend!” said Aziraphale.

“…really?” My hands itched for my notebook again. “Because…”
“Oi! Aziraphale, are you coming?” came a yell from outside. “I’ve been talking to the bees for ages and I’m bored now!”

“Dear me, I must be off!” Aziraphale jumped to his feet. “Thanks ever so much for your hospitality-“

“Philoxenias,” I interrupted, as we made our way back outside.

He pursed his lips at me, then smiled a little. “Indeed. I would be very glad to stop in and borrow those volumes-“

We were outside now, and Crowley groaned on hearing this. “More books? We’re still unpacking the ones you brought with you!” I thought for a moment he was really annoyed, then realised that the tone was teasing.

“I’m so sorry we left you outside for so long, Mr Crowley,” I said. The talk of hospitality had cut through my academic excitement a little and reminded me of my duties as hostess. “Perhaps sometime you could stop by when you’re going past in that lovely old car of yours? It’s been an absolute age since I’ve seen one.”

“It would be my pleasure, Mrs Holmes,” he said, bowing slightly.

“Miss Russell, if you please!”

“Of course, Mrs Holmes.” He smirked, then leaned in a little closer to me as Aziraphale went to empty his abandoned wine glass before they left. “You understand that…whatever he was telling you, you can’t publish? It wouldn’t be an…opportune time to introduce any new theological texts to the world right now.”

I sighed. “I know. But I can’t help just wanting to learn.”

“Yeah. I get that.” He seemed pensive for a moment before shaking it off and politely offering his hand to me in farewell. “Well, nice to meet you, neighbour. We’ll stop in again sometime.”

Aziraphale joined him, linking his arm through his companion’s. “Oh yes, it’s been fascinating! It’s so nice to have good neighbours, don’t you think? To borrow a cup of sugar or some such.”

I thought of my embarrassingly empty pantry. Mrs Hudson’s baking lessons were long lost on me. “Or some such, yes.”

I waved them off on their way, feeling quite peculiar, and needing to sort it all out in my own head – hence this tale, which I will not send off to my faithful agent, but keep locked safely away. It feels like a treat – a miracle of my own – to have such interesting beings appear on my doorstep, the opportunity to seek answers for some of those questions that I couldn’t quite detangle, and, at the very least, interesting neighbours with a decent collection of books.

And, a gift – the amusing mental exercise of imagining how my husband would have reacted to the whole thing. Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Visiting Angel?

I smiled at the image, and went inside to make myself some tea.

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

(Do I know the Bible? Not at all. I googled "biblical quotes about angels", and this was so perfect for the story. Little miracle of my own!)

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