# RIVIERA GOLD LAURIE R. KING

BOOK CLUB KIT

# A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

#### Dear book club friends,

Since Mary Russell first met Sherlock Holmes back in 1994's *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*, the duo has been a favorite of book clubs and citywide-reads programs the world around.

It makes me <u>so happy</u> to picture groups of people (in person or virtual) reading, enjoying, and talking about my stories. And I think the reason this series has been a hit is that the stories combine rousing adventures and exotic settings with a solid base of research, relationships, and real people.

*Riviera Gold* has all of the above. I loved burrowing into the time, the place, and the lives of those who gathered on the Côte d'Azur—many of whom were American artists and writers, out to enjoy cheap Europe and its lack of Prohibition, but who went on to shape our modern times.

That's right: it's summertime on the Riviera, and the Jazz Age is venturing into France's once-deserted beaches and winter-season hotels. Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes find themselves in this unlikely setting when a convenient accident gives Russell the chance to discover what happened to her beloved Mrs. Hudson, who fled England some months earlier under a cloud of murder accusations.

Before she left, Holmes' long-time housekeeper admitted to being fond of Monte Carlo, that tiny playground for the rich, where fortunes are won, lost, stolen, and sometimes hidden away. But first, the beaches—currently filled with those American expatriates who spend their days baking on the sand, their nights dancing with a drink in their hands, and their every waking hour filled with enthralling conversation. Everyone from Pablo Picasso to Zelda Fitzgerald is there, brought together by Sara and Gerald Murphy, whose gift for building friendships may be opening some sinister doors...

And speaking of building friendships: to make your reading group even more fun, we put together this downloadable kit, with discussion topics—but also recipes for food and drink found in its pages (great for a real <u>or</u> virtual book club meetup!) and some photos of the people and place, odd bits of interesting information, links to essays and film clips, and maybe even a movie to enjoy after your discussion.

Have fun—and do let me know how your group discussion went!

Laure R. King

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. The recurring characters in *Riviera Gold*—Sherlock Holmes, Mrs. Hudson, and the others—are not exactly as they first appeared in the Conan Doyle stories. Even Mary Russell has changed profoundly since her introduction in *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*. Do you find these character developments convincing, as reflections of personal and societal changes?
- 2. This story makes use of two levels of flashback—the opening chapter takes place many years in the past, while others work up to the 1925 present, covering the weeks since Mrs. Hudson arrived in Monaco. Did you find these flashbacks helped explain her past and her chameleon-like nature? Or did you find them distracting?
- 3. Many of the previous Russell and Holmes "memoirs" are set in cold and wintry places. How does the summer weather affect the plot and flavor of Riviera Gold? Did its summertime setting lead to unexpected storylines or reveal new personality traits of the characters?
- 4. Does Riviera Gold capture how you pictured the south of France in 1925? If not, what surprised you, or struck you as anachronistic?
- 5. The language used in the Russell "memoirs" is very formal English. Do you think new readers trip over Russell's voice, or even need to look up words? If so, do you think that's a problem, or does it enrich your sense of her personality?
- 6. Fans of Mary Russell collect her "Russellisms"—short, clever lines that would go well on a coffee mug or t-shirt. What were your favorite read-aloud moments or pithy sayings from *Riviera Gold*?
- 7. Did you guess "who done it" before Russell did? Were there any plot twists and red herrings that surprised you?
- 8. The Russell and Holmes stories are fun, historical entertainments, but they often have serious themes, questions, and ethical dilemmas. In *Riviera Gold*, Russell is uncomfortable working with Mycroft Holmes, outraged at finding a corrupt arms dealer living peaceably in Monaco, and torn between loyalty to her husband and loyalty to a beloved friend. What do you think of these threads? Do you hope Russell solves her conflicts? Can you think of other threads and themes that weave through the story?
- 9. How necessary do you feel it is to have read previous books in the series? Would you recommend this one to someone who hadn't read others? What about recommending it to someone who doesn't read a lot of mysteries in general?

10. Did you learn things from Riviera Gold? The author's research included "White" Russians in Monaco; Americans in the Côte d'Azur; Basil Zaharoff; Sara and Gerald Murphy; Lillie Langtry; the craft of pouring bronze—and more. Do you like to feel you're learning from a novel? Did you have a clear sense of what was research and what was the author's imagination—that is, would you have known that Rafe Ainsley, Count Vasilev, and the once-racy Mrs. Hudson appear only in the world of Mary Russell?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 11. Before reading *Riviera Gold*, did you know about the Murphys and their relationships with everyone from Pablo Picasso to F. Scott Fitzgerald? Why do you suppose these two had such a large effect on the art and literature world of the 20th century? Do you know individuals like them, who attract interesting people though they themselves are not influential artists, or scientists, or the like?
- 12. The murderer in *Riviera Gold* is not the only villain—and is not necessarily the most villainous character. How did you feel when you realized who the killer was? Did you wish it had been another person?
- 13. It is ten years since Russell and Holmes met, and four years since they married. Are some of the choices Russell makes in *Riviera Gold* signs of tension in the marriage? Or do you take them as indications of her growing maturity and independence of thought? How is Holmes going to react when he finds out about Russell's choices here? Do you anticipate problems between them in future stories?
- 14. The book has more than one layer of mystery: the murder itself; the killer's motives; the role of Niko Cassavetes; and Mrs. Hudson's papers. Not all of these have neat, clear endings—but are they satisfying anyway? Why?
- 15. Russell and Holmes react differently to the news of Mrs. Hudson's involvement in a murder. Is Russell too eager to see her as innocent? Is Holmes too willing to mistrust his old landlady? Are their reactions due to knowing different things about the woman and her past? And do you think one or both of them move closer to the other's point of view by the end?
- 16. Mrs. Hudson has gone from a crime-filled youth to a long life of excitement and danger as landlady and housekeeper to Sherlock Holmes. If you were in her shoes, what would you do with a sudden and unexpected retirement?
- 17. Who was the most interesting historical person you met in the story? Was there someone you felt you'd like to know better?
- 18. Why do you think so many great artists and writers were not only in France at this time, but also knew one another? Was it the social 'glue' of people like the Murphys, the attractiveness of Paris and the south of France as places to live after the Great War, a newfound sense of social liberation, or . . . something else?
- 19. Where do you imagine Russell and Holmes will end up next? Do you think they're actually off to Transylvania to investigate vampires? Will Mrs. Hudson turn up in their lives again?
- 20. Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes are very similar, yet also very different. Who do you think has the better detecting mind for a case like *Riviera Gold*?

More about Russell & Holmes, and other Riviera Gold extras, on https://laurierking.com



# SARA'S SWEET BISCUITS

Sara and Gerald Murphy—the real-life characters in *Riviera Gold*—loved to entertain friends. Mornings on the beach saw a break for sweet biscuits and dry sherry. Here's a recipe substantial enough to transport, only faintly sweet, with the satisfying flavor of whole-grain flour. Good by themselves, superb when topped with sharp cheese and a handful of summer fruit. Refreshing after a swim—Amontillado optional . . .



#### Ingredients 1 c. flour <sup>3</sup>⁄<sub>4</sub> c. graham (or whole-wheat) flour <sup>1</sup>⁄<sub>4</sub> t. baking soda <sup>1</sup>⁄<sub>4</sub> t. salt <sup>1</sup>⁄<sub>2</sub> c. light brown sugar, firmly packed <sup>1</sup>⁄<sub>2</sub> c. cold butter, cut in pieces 4-5 t. milk

#### Directions

- 1. In a food processer, pulse dry ingredients and butter until it resembles breadcrumbs.
- 2. Add milk slowly, pulsing rather than continuously running. (Or rub butter into dry mix with fingers or a pastry blender; stir in milk slowly with fork.)
- 3. Test to see if mixture holds together when pressed, and if not, add small amounts of milk, up to another

tablespoon. Wrap ball of dough in plastic, flatten and refrigerate ½ hour or longer.

- 4. Roll out dough 1/8 to ¼ thick, to taste (thinner is crisper.) Cut in 2 ½" circles, lay on ungreased cookie sheet, prick all over or in initials. For glossier look, brush top with beaten egg white.
- 5. Bake 325° for 22-25 minutes, until firm and lightly browned. Let cool. Makes 20.

# JUICE OF A FEW FLOWERS

The Ritz cracker wasn't invented until the 1930s, but Triscuits were born the same year as Mary Russell, so they may be one of the crackers she flings into a bowl in *Riviera Gold*. These crunchy crackers are good by themselves, or under bits of cheese, with fruit and sparkling wine, or spread with a mix of grated cheese, green onions, and mayonnaise and popped under a broiler. Of course, in France, Triscuits were thin on the ground—but there was always a boulangerie in cycling distance. Sara was sure to make use of the bread available, topped with anything from local goat cheese to sardines caught off the coast to preserves from summer fruit. In Italy, you'd call it bruschetta; at Villa America, I imagine they called it toast.

In Antibes and Paris, Gerald and Sara Murphy created a new world of friends who became family. Gerald was a painter, but together, their art was the creation of camaraderie, bringing together a generation of exciting new artists and writers in childlike pleasures. The Riviera was the perfect stage for their creation: undiscovered, beautiful, and cheap, ideal for exciting ideas and simple foods and—this being the Twenties, and Prohibition a thing left behind in America—drinks. Sidecars, Manhattans, whisky sours, martinis, white ladies, and Gerald's signature drink, "Juice of a Few Flowers" (which had no flowers...)

#### Ingredients

<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> c. orange juice
<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> c. grapefruit juice
2 T. lime juice
2 T. lemon juice
<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> c. gin

#### Directions

Pour over ice in a cocktail shaker, shake and strain into two glasses with rims dipped in lemon, then sugar.

And of course, champagne, the drink of the Twenties, is good with sweet biscuits and cheese, or salted nuts, or really anything. Or nothing!



### RECIPES



#### **Dinner Parties**

Sara's friends in America sent her sweet-corn seed, since field corn in France was cattle feed. She served this exotic vegetable at her dinner parties, by itself or creamed and topped with poached eggs. Try roasting it in its husk, then peel back the husk, brush with garlic butter, and sprinkle with Parmesan cheese.

It is gorgeous with that epitome of summer goodness, the fresh tomato tart.



#### **Tomato Tart**

Let a package of frozen puff pastry thaw in the refrigerator overnight. Roll it out a little on a piece of parchment paper, transfer onto a baking sheet, and brush with a tablespoon or so of olive oil into which you've squeezed a clove of garlic and stirred a little Dijon or whole-seed mustard. Prick all over with a fork. Sprinkle with chopped basil. Slice 3-4 large, ripe tomatoes, pat them dry, and arrange on the pastry. Season with salt and pepper, (add herbs, or a little Gruyere or Romano cheese, if you like.) Bake at 375° for half an hour or until golden, let cool and cut into 8 pieces.

# FUN FACTS

- 1. "Breaking the bank" at Monte Carlo, though ceremonial (a black cloth was laid over the table for a time) and definitely lucrative, is not quite as rare as it sounds. The "bank" refers to the cash reserve held at each individual table, and breaking it refers to a temporary suspension of play while more funds are brought from the vault.
- 2. In 1911, when the Prince of Monaco had no official heir, he adopted his illegitimate daughter, requiring the passage of two different laws to make the succession clear. In 2018, a French aristocrat sued to be recognized as the descendent of the rightful heir.
- 3. Sabine Baring-Gould (found in *The Moor*) wrote a guidebook to the Riviera, a place he had never been, describing how "Les Spélunges, a rocky promontory, full of holes and cracks, like a petrified sponge, on which formerly shepherds pastured their goats, has become the world-famed Monte Carlo."
- 4. In 1922, Cole Porter and his wife Linda spent the summer in a villa on the Cap d'Antibes, and invited Cole's college friend Gerald Murphy and his family. The Murphys loved it, returned the following summer, and ended up living there. The Porters, on the other hand, moved on to Venice after that summer and never went back.
- 5. The Villa Soleil on Cap d'Antibes started in 1870 as a writers' retreat in "a place of beauty and inspiration," later becoming the luxury Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc.
- 6. Beneath Monaco's Exotic Gardens of foreign succulents lies an enormous grotto, a cavern fringed with stalactites and stalagmites.
- 7. One of the best views in Monaco, at the end of the promontory on which the palace stands, would be from the building tucked into the cliffs below the oceanographic museum: the principality's tiny prison.
- 8. Sara Murphy was convinced that the sunlight was good for her pearls, so often wore her long string of them to the beach. Picasso was fascinated by her and sketched and painted her several times.

# MOVIES SET IN MONTE CARLO

*The Magician*, filmed in 1925, has a number of scenes in the Monte Carlo casino, beginning 47 minutes in. At around 48 minutes, there is a view of the crowded Café de Paris terrace. (Wait—is that Sherlock Holmes?) (https://youtu.be/xl0dc5cB-8w)

There's a hard to find 1935 comedy, *The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo*, with Ronald Coleman. And of course, *To Catch a Thief*, the Hitchcock film with Cary Grant that introduced Grace Kelly to Monaco.

### OTHER FUN THINGS

For more Russell, Holmes, & Mrs. Hudson—from research videos to "The Illustrated Mrs. Hudson's Case"—go to the *Riviera Gold* web page and click on Reader Tools. https://laurierking.com/books/riviera-gold/reader-tools/

