

A Sherlockian Toast (posted 2017-5-7)

A toast to Carruthers and Woodley's deck of cards
by Ross E. Davies

before a meeting of the Priory Scholars of NYC at The Churchill Tavern on May 6, 2017

Plenty of characters in the Canon play cards or talk about playing cards.

The majority — the vast majority — of that playing and talking about playing is done by good people.

Yes, there are a couple of counter-examples — James Winter of “The Adventure of the Three Garridebs” and Major John Sholto in “The Sign of Four” — but that’s about it.

The rest of the card-playing associations — and there are quite a few of them — are with good, noble, innocent characters.

Consider the great man himself. Sherlock Holmes mentions, while en route to the ambush of John Clay in “The Red-Headed League,” that “I had brought a pack of cards in my pocket, and I thought that, as we were a *partie carrée*, you might have your rubber after all.”¹

And in “The Hound of the Baskervilles,” Holmes’s noble client Henry Baskerville plays *écarté* with his friend and adviser, Dr. James Mortimer.

And it is the brave and clever Birdy Edwards (as Jack McMurdo) who plays cards while in police custody in “The Valley of Fear.”

And that most innocent of victims, Brenda Tregennis of “The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot,” was playing whist with her brothers when she died.

And “The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet” even contains something of a remonstrance against associating card-playing with naughtiness.²

I could go on in the same vein, about empty houses and orange pips and so on, but time is short, and I must get to the point.³

Card-playing in the Canon fairly trembles with good vibrations.

So, in “The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist,” why is it that the nefarious Mr. Carruthers and Mr. Woodley — while en route from Johannesburg, South Africa to London, England — use card-playing to determine which of them will woo and wed the soon-to-be-wealthy heiress, Violet Smith?⁴

¹ Alas, they did not play: “But I see that the enemy’s preparations have gone so far that we cannot risk the presence of a light.”

² Young Arthur Holder “learned,” in the words of his rather hostile, critical, and paranoid father, “to play heavily at cards and to squander money on the turf.” But, as Holmes tells the remorseful father at the end of the story, Arthur had in fact been a “noble lad” who “carried himself in this matter as I should be proud to see my own son do, should I ever chance to have one.” And the father repents: “How cruelly I have misjudged him!”

³ See, for example, “The Adventure of the Empty House,” in which the innocent victim, Ronald Adair, “was fond of cards, playing continually, but never for such stakes as would hurt him,” and “It was shown that after dinner on the day of his death he had played a rubber of whist . . .” See also “The Five Orange Pips” (John Openshaw: “I have heard of you, Mr Holmes. I heard from Major Prendergast how you saved him in the Tankerville Club Scandal.” Holmes: “Ah, of course. He was wrongfully accused of cheating at cards.”)

⁴ As Carruthers later tells Holmes: “We played cards for her on the voyage.”

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The answer is not obvious.

Yes, there is the fundamental ugliness of such an exercise in the objectification of a woman, but the same effect could have been achieved with coin-tossing or arm-wrestling or rock-paper-scissors.

Why card-playing, the favored game of Canonical good gals and good guys?

The answer may not be obvious now, but the message would have been clear to readers when the story was first published in 1903, because in South Africa, card-playing for stakes was for criminals.

Back in 1673, the Dutch colonial government of South Africa banned gambling, and the ban persisted under the British empire up to and through the Victorian era (and, in fact, until 1965!).

Of course, prohibition worked there and then just about as well as it usually does, but still, it meant gambling was strictly against the law in South Africa, including Johannesburg.

And so it should come as no surprise that when newspapers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries portrayed Johannesburg as a lawless, Wild-West-like mining boom-town, their stories often featured unlawful gambling in general, and card sharps in particular.⁵

And there you have it: Carruthers and Woodley were law-breaking Johannesburg card sharps, criminals through and through — like small-time Al Capones of a later Prohibition era on another continent — not just one-time, foolish desperados.

They were steeped in a lawless culture that they brought with them from Johannesburg when they came to England in pursuit of their prey — Violet Smith.

So, Carruthers and Woodley's deck of playing cards played a part in an ugly and abusive — and, fortunately, ineffective — plot.

But that same deck of cards also played a part in an illuminating and intriguing — and, probably, effective — literary allusion.

And so, I invite you to toast decks of cards in the Canon in general — for their associational goodness — and Carruthers and Woodley's deck of cards in particular — but only for its literary usefulness.

To the cards!

One last thought: I invite your appreciation of the fact that I have avoided all puns about the deck of playing cards and the cards who were playing with it.

⁵ See, for example, A Career of Crime, San Francisco Chronicle, Apr. 17, 1895, at 4 (“He was found to be keeping a gambling-house at Johannesburg, South Africa, and he was sent under a strong guard to Cape Town. On his way there he escaped from the train, and his guard, after hunting him for two days, again made him prisoner.”); Late News Notes, Osage City [Kansas] Free Press, Dec. 12, 1895, at 8 (quoting “Ironwood, Mich., men who went to the South African gold fields on promises to receive salaries ranging from \$5 a day to \$5,000 a year” reporting that Johannesburg was a, “human bee-hive, composed principally of sharpers of both sexes.”); San Franciscans in South Africa, San Francisco Chronicle, Dec. 16, 1894, at 11.