

A Sherlockian Toast (posted 2020-10-30)

A Toast to “THE Woman” — and also to the Other Irene Adler
The Sons of the Copper Beeches – 30 October 2020
Zoom

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Dr. John Watson introduces us to Irene Adler at the very beginning of “A Scandal in Bohemia.” He writes:

“To Sherlock Holmes she is always THE woman.”

And at the end of the story, Dr. Watson returns to the subject of Irene Adler, and reports that,

“when he [that is, Sherlock Holmes] speaks of Irene Adler, . . . it is always under the honourable title of THE woman.”

Permit me to emphasize the point: Always, says, Watson, Holmes always refers to Adler as “THE woman.”

And yet, throughout the rest of the Canon, whenever Sherlock Holmes speaks the words “THE woman” — something he does a total of 29 times in 16 stories¹ — it is clear from the context of each of those uses of the words “THE woman” that Holmes is referring to someone other than Irene Adler.

Permit me to emphasize this point as well: Holmes never refers to Irene Adler as “THE woman” after “A Scandal in Bohemia.”

And yet in three other stories, Holmes does use the words “Irene Adler” — in “A Case of Identity,” in “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle,” and in “His Last Bow.”

This is troubling. This evidence from the Canon seems to suggest either that Watson does not know much about Sherlock Holmes — which is unacceptable — or that Watson is lying — a possibility only to be considered when no other explanation, no matter how far-fetched, will do.

Fortunately, there is just such an other explanation.

What is this other explanation?

¹ In “The Beryl Coronet” (twice), “The Musgrave Ritual” (twice), “The Crooked Man” (twice), “The Naval Treaty” (twice), “The Hound of the Baskervilles” (once), “The Dancing Men” (once), “Charles Augustus Milverton” (once), “The Golden Pince-Nez” (once), “The Second Stain” (once), “Wisteria Lodge” (once), “The Devil’s Foot” (once), “The Red Circle” (thrice), “The Valley of Fear” (once), “The Illustrious Client” (four times), “The Veiled Lodger” (four times), and “Shoscombe Old Place” (twice).

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The Irene Adler who appears in “A Scandal in Bohemia” and the “Irene Adler” to whom Holmes refers in later stories are two different people. Surely this is no more implausible than the various theories about how many women Watson wed, or how many wounds Watson bore. If Watson could’ve had multiple wounds or wives, surely Holmes could’ve known or known of multiple Irene Adlers.

It is, I admit, an odd and improbable theory, but it has the benefit of comporting with all the evidence in the Canon. And, as well all know,

“when you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”²

I like to think of Watson as knowledgeable and forthright, and so I embrace the multiple Irene Adlers theory.

And yet, I do have one misgiving about this solution to the puzzle of Irene Adler and THE woman: The second Irene Adler has suffered much neglect over the years — through no fault of her own — merely because she shared a name with the formidable person who bested Holmes in “A Scandal in Bohemia.”

And so I propose tonight to toast both Irene Adlers: the one Holmes invariably referred to as “THE woman” (but whom he never mentioned in any of the stories Watson reported other than “A Scandal in Bohemia”) and the one Holmes repeatedly referred to as Irene Adler in later stories. Please raise your glasses to THE Woman, and also to the other Irene Adler, who was, I am sure, a remarkable woman in her own right. To the Irene Adlers!

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² “The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier.”