A Toast to Irene Adler

– Evelyn Herzog

One of the wise old sayings we learned years ago – and which no one seems to use anymore – is "A cat may look at a king." I used it in a conversation a while back, and there was a pause, followed by the question, "Just what does that actually mean?" Then there was another pause while I tried to figure out just what it does mean and how to put it in other words.

It seems to me that to say "A cat may look at a king" is to give some acknowledgment to the judgments that each of us makes about the world around us. A king, at least in olden times, was an immensely powerful person – he would have power of life and death over everybody. A cat (again, at least in olden times) was an utterly powerless creature. And yet even an alley cat, as the king's procession was going by, could look at that king and size him up – does he look like someone who would kick a cat or someone who would give a cat a bit of the royal scampi?

To look is to observe (there's our Canonical keyword), and to observe is to judge. We recall from a story we also learned years ago – The Emperor's New Clothes – that it is sometimes the powerless and disinterested observer (in that case the little child) who observes and judges best.

And so it was that, when Sherlock Holmes wanted to gain a comprehensive understanding of Irene Adler, he not only listened to the first-hand but slanted story told by the King of Bohemia, he not only looked Ms. Adler up on the web – I mean, in the press accounts pasted into his Commonplace Book, he not only went to observe her from a distance himself, but he also interviewed the men-in-the-street – or I should say, the men-in-the-mews – people hardly more noticeable and hardly more powerful than the children he called the Baker Street Irregulars – to learn what the neighborhood working people had to say about her.

So if a cat may look at a king, an ostler may look at a diva, and let us now toast the lady who turned all their heads and whom they judged to be the daintiest thing under a bonnet on this planet: Irene Adler.