To the Woman

– John Baesch, ASH, BSI

Toasting "The Woman" has been part of the commemorative ceremony of organized Sherlock Holmes activity from the earliest days of the Baker Street Irregulars. The practice was enshrined in the BSI constitution by Elmer Davis in the mid-thirties. The traditions of toasting The Woman and reading the constitution are still observed to this very day at the annual dinner of the Baker Street Irregulars in New York, and by many scion societies of the BSI throughout the country. We love our ritual. It is part of what makes us – us! The toast is an expression of unity with people like us. The toast is a positive link with all who have gone before us in our admiration of Sherlock Holmes, Doctor Watson, Mrs. Hudson, and – of course – The Woman.

Toasting to women is a matter of great chivalry and irony. Even though he refused the honor at the Queen's hand, Holmes was in every case an exemplar of knightly chivalry. Holmes was courteous to women. He respected, protected, and on several occasions, exculpated women in the stories set down by Dr. Watson. He behaved like a knight, even without the Queen's knighthood.

There lies the irony of toasting "The Woman." There are not all that many of them. The Baker Street Irregulars who solemnly toasted The Woman had no women of their own. The dinners were for men only. A ritual developed that the BSI's *woman* (usually a long-suffering Sherlockian wife, who put up with the clutter of books, pipes, and deerstalkers around an otherwise normal house) would come to the pre-dinner cocktail hour, be toasted with solemnity, and then hustled off to a dinner elsewhere. That same ritual is observed to this very day.

There is another ironic twist to The Woman we toast so loyally. This was the woman who bested Holmes. It can be argued that though there are many good women in the Canon worthy of a knight's protection; there are not a lot of smart women and no one who could be considered his equal by any stretch of the imagination. Enter Irene Adler from New Jersey and the paradigm of the Sherlock Holmes stories changes irrevocably. The floodgates are open to the suggestion of partnerships, romantic love, and a son of a son who grew to one-seventh of a ton.

And so it is, we lift our glasses to the All-American Girl, that vessel of the BSI's devotion, and that inspiration to pastiche writers throughout the world. I give you "The Woman."