

A Case of Identity



Poor Mary Sutherland!

She's good-natured, rather nearsighted, and not exactly the brightest gas-lamp on the street.

We feel sorry for her, and we are as outraged at her stepfather's duplicity as we are frustrated with her failure to see through his disguise.

Still, Mary had just enough sense to ask Sherlock Holmes for help.

Or was that another mistake?

Next up: some of the questions that must be asked whenever Mary Sutherland's case is discussed, plus some thoughts on a few alternative directions for conversation. And by the way, why is it that plumbing and sex seem to go hand in hand in the pages of the Canon?

There's Something About Mary: Let's get them out in the open right at the start: those two questions that everyone wonders about in "A Case of Identity": 1) How could Mary Sutherland be fooled by her stepfather's disguise? and 2) Why didn't Holmes tell her the truth about Hosmer Angel?

We cannot get around these questions, no matter what other spin we might put on the story.

Along with these fundamentals, a few other thoughts come to mind.

Would the Windibank/Sutherland household have been headed for rough waters even without young Mary's inheritance from her Uncle Ned?

What else was going on in that family?

Was Windibank secretly (or openly) attracted to Mary all along?

If so, then why didn't he marry her in the first place, instead of her mother?

Another idea: an abusive husband will sometimes choose to torment his spouse through her children.

Was Windibank's Hosmer Angel scheme part of his on-going abuse of both women?

Did Mary's mother go along with the "joke" because she was afraid?

Or was Windibank merely a greedy and selfish fool, a man who concocted what seemed (to him) a harmless way to keep Mary and her income at home for a bit longer?



Did his own scheme run away with him?

Do you think that Holmes was right or wrong in his assessment of Windibank as a felon in the making?

Do you think his contact with Holmes frightened him into better behavior?

Parallel Cases: Holmes solved the riddle of Hosmer Angel faster than Mary Sutherland could produce a page of typescript, due mainly to his familiarity with those “parallel cases.”

But the most interesting parallel of all may be the case with a completely different sort of woman – that of Irene Adler.

The internal evidence indicates that “A Case of Identity” took place after “A Scandal in Bohemia” and before “The Red-Headed League.”

Irene Adler and Mary Sutherland are nearly side-by-side in the Canon.

Did Watson intend for us to compare the two women?

Consider the following:

Irene Adler	Mary Sutherland
Resolute	Amiable
A face a man might die for	A vacuous face
Happily married at the end of the story	Left in the lurch without an explanation
Temporarily fooled by a disguise, but clever enough to turn the tables on Sherlock Holmes	Totally fooled by a disguise
An “Adventuress” (some might even say that she was a prostitute)	Supplemented her inherited income by doing boring, but honest, work

Yes, Irene had a lot of natural advantages that Mary didn’t have, and we Sherlockians tend to romanticize Irene Adler and shake our heads over Mary Sutherland.

Are we being fair to Mary?

What do you suppose Holmes and Watson thought about the merits and failings of the two women?