



Italy and Sherlock Holmes

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The Hunting of the Snark

by Enrico Solito

translated by Paola Wright

The Hunting of the Snark is one of Lewis Carroll's less famous works, but it is, in my opinion, even more fascinating than *Alice*. It recounts the impossible search by a strange group of adventurers for a fantastic animal. The hunters have nothing to rely on except their intelligence and their courage, because there is no compass to help one navigate the realm of fantasy – that is why the map they use is completely blank. Their search will end in tragedy, for instead of the Snark they find the worst danger that could befall them: Professor Moriarty (oh, excuse me, I should have said a Boojum).

I have mentioned this book because as Holmesians, we too are in a way engaged in a fascinating if completely paradoxical hunt, one that takes us into the realms of fantasy, as we try to prove and explain something that does not exist in the known universe, and to demonstrate what cannot be rationally accepted. But, unlike the Snark hunters, we do have maps to help us find our way: the Canon and the historical and geographical references of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. These are the weapons I will use to guide you through this very special hunt, with the hope that in the end it will not be a Boojum with whom we come face to face.

However, before we start, I wish to thank my hunting partner Philip Weller, who accomplished an incredible amount of research in England in order to provide me with the data I needed. This allowed me to remain in my peaceful abode at the Diogenes Club in Florence. When I began my study I had only a few facts gleaned from Italian encyclopaedias and musicology treatises (the knowledge that Patti was in England at the time, her musical activity in 1898, and the book that is universally taken to be her autobiography) at my disposal. It was Philip who very resourcefully ferreted out some of the information I needed. Let me state clearly that, if there is any merit in this work, it is due to his diligent research.

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The Question

“Carina sings to-night at the Albert Hall, and we still have time to dress, dine and enjoy.”

In “The Retired Colourman” (RETI), Holmes and Watson grapple with a strange mystery. Whilst the plot thickens, Holmes suggests to Watson that they take some time off to hear Carina sing. And here we have the leading question: to whom is Holmes referring?

To answer this we must consider the musical world of the time, the tastes of Holmes and Watson, their musical habits and various other references, in terms of the Canon, real history and real geography. But first, we must clearly define our time frame.

The Date

The exact dates of only a very few of Holmes’s cases can be pinned down with any accuracy. We are fortunate, therefore, that RETI is one of these. It is unanimously agreed among scholars that the case took place during the summer of 1898. We know that the main character, Mr Josiah Amberley, is 61 years old, that he retired in 1896, married early in 1897, and that the story that concerns him takes place within two years of these events – before the end of 1898.

We also know that the events of the case occurred during the summer because Watson unequivocally speaks of a “a summer afternoon” (RETI 1114), refers to the weather as being hot during the train journey (RETI 1118) and mentions that one of the characters wore sunglasses (RETI 1116). Whoever Carina was, he or she was singing at the Albert Hall on a summer’s night in 1898.

Musicians at Baker Street

Much has been written on the musical taste of Holmes and Watson, their favorite pieces and the musicians whose performances they frequented. As far as this case is concerned, we need only emphasize that with the sole exception of Carina, all the musicians mentioned in the Canon are famous people of those times. We know (from STUD, REDC and other sources) that Holmes is himself an accomplished violinist and an accomplished composer.

The two friends were passionate about music and regularly frequented the London music scene. A “good concert” often provided relaxation after a case, as in REDC, when the two friends attend a Wagnerian event. But even whilst involved in a case, Holmes would go to a concert to switch off momentarily, returning to his investigations with renewed acumen. He does so in REDH, when he goes to hear Sarasate, the great violinist, and in STUD when he hears that other celebrated violinist, Wilhemine Norman Neruda, under the direction of John Hall, her husband. Indeed, Holmes must have been a regular visitor to Norman Neruda’s concerts, as he declares that “Her attack and bowing are splendid.” (STUD 36), and then hums a piece by Chopin which she had played particularly well.

Additionally, at the end of the Baskerville case, Holmes asked Watson if he had ever heard the brothers De Reszke (a Polish bass and baritone who had made their name at the Metropolitan Opera in New York and lived in London), thus implying that he had (HOUN 766).

It is beyond the scope of this work to expound further on Holmes’s taste in music, or of Watson’s. Suffice it to say that far from being inexperienced spectators, prepared to lend their patronage to any musical event, they were refined connoisseurs accustomed to the finest music the world had to offer.

The name “Carina” does not appear in any contemporary music encyclopedias or in older sources and, therefore, cannot belong to any famous singer. Given Holmes’s great discernment in music, it is unthinkable that he might have suggested to Watson that they should go to a mediocre

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event. Furthermore, the concert was at the Albert Hall, one of the temples of good music. Nor is such a concert listed in the programs of minor theatres, as published in the London newspapers. We can only conclude by this that Carina is not the name of the artist in question.

Carina as a Code Name

If the name of the artist singing at the Albert Hall that summer's night was not "Carina," what could it possibly be? Undoubtedly, Watson knew exactly who "Carina" was. As the name "Carina" is clearly used as though it were a daily occurrence between the two friends, I would like to propose to you the following solution: "Carina" could be *carina*, an Italian adjective of the feminine gender.

Holmes and the Italian Language

Holmes's links with Italy have been debated at length. As Italian Sherlockians, we have naturally enough focused on these aspects at our society, Uno Studio in Holmes. In addition to the many clues we find in the Canon and Holmes's many references to Italy, the clearest indication that Holmes had a good knowledge of the Italian language is to be found in REDC. In this case he immediately identified *attenta* as an Italian word, correctly translated it as "beware" and pointed out to Watson that it is addressed to a woman, as it ends in 'a' (REDC 907). As we shall see, this last point of gender will prove to be very important for our present investigation...

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