

Mrs. Hudson: Landlady or Housekeeper

Clearly she is neither, in “Scandal of Bohemia” it is “Mrs. Turner” who attends the sitting room of 221B Baker Street!

Who is “Mrs. Turner”? She is never again mentioned in the Canon.

It would be simple to say that this was another of Conan Doyle’s many errors, but I think (wherever possible) we should seek an alternative explanation to “author’s error”.

My solution is that Mrs. Turner was one Mrs. Hudson’s maids. “Maid” implies a degree of youth, but is a position in service, not of youth by necessity. Mrs. Turner could have been a “maid” in the sense of being somewhat older than Mrs. Hudson’s other usual staff (I myself have lost count of the number and names!), it seems that female staff were often not very permanent. Perhaps Mrs. Turner was not paid to her full satisfaction by Mrs. Hudson, or more likely that Mrs. Turner could not abide the unusual behaviour and mannerisms of Mrs. Hudson’s tenants.

Still, what is difference between a Housekeeper and a Landlady?

My largest dictionary (Concise OED, 2 volumes, 180,000 words with etymologies) offers this:

Housekeeper:

One who keeps a house, a hospitable person, a person in charge of a house

especially the woman in control of the [female] servants.

Landlady:

A woman who has tenants in holding from her, the mistress of a lodging.

Since 1618 the two terms are almost interchangeable.

Mrs. Hudson appears only as Housekeeper in the “Lion’s Mane” and my own stories. She appears as Landlady in “Study in Scarlet”, “Valley of Fear”, “Dying Detective”, “Sign of the Four”, and “Scandal in Bohemia”.

My best interpretation is that distinction between Housekeeper and Landlady is that “who owns the property” - a landlady owns the property (or given the times and sexism then prevalent, it was her husband the Landlord who does), a Housekeeper “runs” i.e. “manages” a property. Most people simply interchange the two terms as since 1618.

In my works, Mrs. Hudson never owned 221B Baker Street (it was owned by Mr. Oswald until 6th April 1891 when Holmes purchased the premises), and it is Mrs. Martha Hudson who Holmes takes to Cuckmere Haven in December 1903 as his Housekeeper. Mrs. Hudson’s given name is never provided in the Canon, nor the circumstance of the absence of a husband.

I think Holmes sold 221B to some Bank, the street numbers of Baker Street have now changed!

Mrs. Hudson appears to have been the cook in 221B

Baker Street, but not that I know any reference explicitly stating this save in my own works. However, this quotation from “Thor Bridge” states facts a little different:

“... but we may discuss it when you have consumed the two hard-boiled eggs with which our new cook has favoured us. Their condition may not be unconnected with the copy of the Family Herald which I observed yesterday upon the hall-table. Even so trivial a matter as cooking an egg demands an attention which is conscious of the passage of time and incompatible with the love romance in that excellent periodical.”

Here I postulate that Mrs. Hudson is temporarily away from Baker Street and that her substitute has demonstrated that the qualities of Mrs. Hudson’s service are missed!