

# The Seventeen Steps

*Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes*

## Adventure I -- A Study in Scarlet

*Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "A Study in Scarlet" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.*

### 1. The Honeymoon Period

"Holmes was certainly not a difficult man to live with. He was quiet in his ways, and his habits were regular."

Watson and Holmes were obviously in their "honeymoon" phase as room-mates -- or was Holmes really a better lodger in those days? When did Sherlock become the sort of room-mate Watson would later call "the very worst tenant in London"? Did Holmes's good behaviour last until Watson's first marriage, or was it over the minute Jefferson Hope crashed through that window? I'd be interested in hearing whether the Hounds think Holmes was putting on a show, or if he actually changed . . . and what caused that change.

### 2. Playing By Ear

Watson on Holmes's abilities with a violin: "That he could play pieces, and difficult pieces, I knew well, because at my request he has played me some of Mendelssohn's Lieder, and other favourites . . . playing in quick succession a whole series of my favourite airs as a slight compensation for the trial upon my patience."

Now, the Smash knows darn little about musicians, but Watson's descriptions would have me believe that Holmes played by ear, and not using sheet music. Performing a rapid succession of known tunes would indicate he was doing it from memory . . . do music readers memorize a jukebox full of numbers, like Holmes seemed to? (Note: he had to be familiar with many more tunes that Watson's favorites, just to be able to select that grouping from his repertoire.)



### **3. Starsky And Hutch, Gregson And Lestrade**

"Gregson is the smartest of the Scotland Yarders," my friend remarked; "he and Lestrade are the pick of a bad lot. . . . There will be some fun over this case if they are both put upon the scent."

Holmes only has a note from Gregson at this point . . . why does he think that Lestrade will also be put on the case? I remember no other time that we see two Scotland Yarders working with/against each other like this; what made the Brixton Road business so important?

### **4. The Business Card**

Holmes tosses his card at John Rance when the constable becomes suspicious of him, along with mentioning Lestrade and Gregson. Apparently his card has some professional description on it . . . but what? Watson never tells us what Holmes had on his cards, and Holmes described his career in many different ways. Using Canonical evidence, what do you think the card said?

### **5. Throwing In The Towel**

"Holmes at once took the prisoner at his word, and loosened the towel which we had bound round his ankles."

Here's an experiment for the kids at home: try binding the ankles of an active person with a towel, especially a person whose ankles are thickened by boots. Maybe you can get the towel around those ankles, and maybe you can tie it a bit, but it's not that hard to get out of the towel is it? At least with modern towels. Any experts on Victorian towels out there?

And why a towel to begin with? An experience man-handler like Holmes, a connoisseur of handcuffs and a well-armed detective as well, doesn't stock a length of rope?

### **6. Filling Billets**

Jefferson Hope, frontiersman, prospector, janitor, and cab-driver, admits to a number of careers in his travels. He also says "I was a fairly good dispenser, so I worked this alkaloid into small, soluble pills." Was this a common skill at the time, or an indication Hope did a little pharmacy work?

### **7. You Are Holding Back, I Presume . . .**

We all recall Sherlock Holmes's second sentence to Dr. Watson, "You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive." From what we learn of Holmes later, this seems remarkably spare for him in the observation department. In his brief conversation with his potential room-mate, the detective undoubtedly observed a

great deal more than that one detail in Watson before he asks, "What have you to confess now?" Was this the ultimate test of the new room-mate? Had Watson not admitted to the bull pup, might the deal not have come off?

### **8. The Cisco Kid Corrals Poncho**

In a classic cowboy moment, the sombrero-wearing Jefferson Hope grabs Lucy Ferrier's bucking mustang Poncho and leads it out of the herd of "steaming" cattle while the normally unemotional Indians are undoubtedly still "marveling" at her beauty. Lucy, though letting loose of the reins as her head began to swim, somehow still retains her riding whip (weapon of choice for both Sherlock Holmes and cowgirls, it would seem).

How much Western wackiness is there in the second half of this novel? Or does it seem pretty straightforward stuff to my fellow Hounds? Me, I'm still laughing at the thought of those Vulcans of the old West, the Indians, and what were surely such gentlemanly comments as "My, Red Coyote, isn't she lovely!"

"Why, yes, Young Cactus, her pale complexion doth remind me of the mountain snow."

### **9. Just Get It Out Of Your System**

Bull pup. Bull pup. Bull pup. Say it over and over to yourself until an image comes to mind. This is what "bull pup" means to you. Now keep it to yourself -- you don't want to spoil anyone else's personal "bull pup" vision.

### **10. Lucy's Old Man (In More Ways Than One)**

This one is contributed by a former discussion leader with the initials MH/SC: "We know that old John Ferrier was not related by blood to Lucy in any way. Why didn't he marry her himself to keep her away from the likes of Drebber and Stangerson? That would have made ol' Brigham Baby happier, too. (Of course, then D&S might have plotted to bushwhack Old John so they could have a go with his widow.)"

### **11. And That's All He Wrote . . .**

"I served at the fatal battle of Maiwand. There I was struck on the shoulder by a Jezail bullet, which shattered the bone and grazed the subclavian artery. I should have fallen into the hands of the murderous Ghazis had it not been for the devotion and courage shown by Murray."

It seems remarkable to me that a man who seemed so happy writing up his adventures in later life is so silent about such a dramatic episode. Surely he would have wanted to glorify Murray a bit, the man who saved

his life. Is this a tin dispatch box tale, or could Watson have had other reasons for not writing, such as battlefield trauma?

## **12. What Goes Around, Comes Around**

Watson writes, "It struck me as being a remarkable mixture of shrewdness and of absurdity. The reasoning was close and intense, but the deductions appeared to me to be far fetched and exaggerated."

And then he cries out, "What ineffable twaddle! I never read such rubbish in my life."

In previous Hounds discussions, we've discussed Holmes's comments about Watson's writing. Looking at the above words on Holmes's writing, I think Watson got off pretty easy!

## **13. G-G-G-Ghosts!**

Constable Rance confesses, "I ain't afeared of anything on this side o' the grave; but I thought that maybe it was him that died o' the typhoid inspecting the drains what killed him."

The thought of any real policeman looking for backup because of a possible spook infestation seems rather absurd to the modern American. But I've always heard that ghosts are quite common to England, and a larger share of the old country's populace claims to have seen them. Any truth to this? Do any of the Hounds think Rance was not an uncommon specimen where ghosts versus Victorian constables are concerned? Or was Rance comic relief then as now?

## **14. The Game Has A Footnote!**

In the third chapter of "The Country of the Saints," we find something quite rare in the Canon: a footnote. The Prophet has just said, "We Elders have many heifers," and someone felt it necessary to point out that this was an actual phrase used by an actual Mormon about his wives. With the novel's allusions to things like mass slaughter in the process of wife-gathering, the need to footnote a simple insult seems ironic. Yet it also has a touch of Watson to it, as we all know of his respect for the fair sex. Ignoring the whole "Who wrote part two?" question, could Watson have written the footnote?

## **15. Take A Memo, Lestrade!**

In the end of the second chapter six, Lestrade is putting "the finishing touches on his shorthand account." In 1881, would he have been trained in some system of shorthand (and still wound up as a lawman?), or was this just Watson's way of saying Lestrade was writing an abbreviated account of Hope's narrative. And if Lestrade was taking the notes, what are the odds that he was the writer behind "The Country

of the Saints” and that he and Watson started out as a writing duo (only to have their Literary Agent say “Sorry, G.” and take Watson alone on to fame and fortune).

### **16. Keeping It To Himself**

“Brag and bounce!” Watson thinks to himself after a comment from Holmes in chapter two (the first chapter two). It seems a very energetic reaction for Watson to be keeping it bottle up inside. Was it just good manners or did Watson really have a problem expressing himself? As we move on through the stories, Watson often seems to say little and writes even less of his own activities. Was this a man with self-esteem problems?

### **17. The Key To 221b**

“Open the door slightly. That will do. Now put the key on the inside.”

In the fifth chapter of *STUD*, we find Holmes and Watson getting ready for company . . . villainous company. It would seem Holmes is getting ready to lock the villain in with he and Watson. But where was the key kept normally, when not waiting in the inner keyhole? Was Mrs. Hudson locked out of 221B on occasion? And if not her, whom was normally being locked out? The tenant in 221C?

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**2000 - 2001**