

# The Seventeen Steps

*Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes*

## The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

### Adventure III – A Scandal in Bohemia

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

#### 1. The Return Of Doctor Watson

After two novels worth of nursing his wounds, John H. Watson suddenly has a home, a wife, AND a job, all his own. But the doctor's exact words are "I had now returned to civil practice." In the opening of "A Study in Scarlet," he seems to have gone straight from medical school into the military. He doesn't seem to have a civil practice in either of the first two books . . . so when was he working as a civilian doctor before this? Some time between the shoulder wound and the leg wound, perhaps? Back when he had to support his *\*first\** wife?

#### 2. The Woo Door

The front door at 221 Baker Street is one that Dr. Watson says he will always associate with his "wooing." Now, the Smash did a little wooing once upon a time himself, and he will always associate a certain front door on Polk Street with that period of time. It's the place one awaits the divine presence one is utterly smitten with. So why is Watson associating the front door to 221 with his dating? One almost imagines Mary Morstan dropping him off, and the two spending a parting moment there, but that would never have been done in Victorian England, would it? Or was did the door just happen to be the same style that Mrs. Cecil Forrester had on the front of her house?



#### 3. The Shoulder Wound? Healed!

Holmes casually tosses a case of cigars at Watson when he comes in the door, perhaps a gesture of celebration at Watson's return. Would Holmes be tossing it at the doctor if Watson was still holding that left

arm in an unnatural manner? And this cigar case . . . am I right in assuming this would be a small, pocket sized case? Or was Holmes tossing a wooden box at his friend, which would definitely require a two-handed catch?

#### **4. Where The Heck?**

Holmes's Continental Gazetteer has convenient listings for Eglow and Eglonitz. In Jack Tracy's "Encyclopaedia Sherlockiana," the late Mr. Tracy has put an asterisk next to each of these references, denoting them as "fictitious." In die-hard Sherlockian terms, this means Mr. Tracy couldn't find them in his researches and simply gave up looking. But the key to all research is knowing where to look. As we know they're on "the Continent" (Europe), we at least have a starting place, but past that where would the Hounds look for these places based on the makeup of their names? My first thought is Eglow, Scotland and Eglonitz, Transylvania, but I'm sure there are better ideas out there.

#### **5. A Pair Of Beauties**

While Watson goes on about how loveless Holmes is, and how immune Holmes is to the charms of women, we do find Sherlock talking about a pair of beauties in this tale. Later, we even find that Holmes was out rubbing down some other specimens of that charming type. Now that I have the Lascar's attention, I would ask the Hounds if they find that Holmes has a special fondness for horses, or that he was just another citizen of a horse-powered world?

#### **6. The Richness Of This Writing!**

In one fabulous sentence, Watson tells us:

"My own complete happiness, and the home-centred interests which rise up around the man who first finds himself master of his own establishment, were sufficient to absorb all my attention, while Holmes, who loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul, remained in our lodgings in Baker Street, buried among his old books, and alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition, the drowsiness of the drug, and the fierce energy of his own keen nature."

The mind whirrs! "Home-centred interests" -- Was Watson buying or renting? If he bought, was he doing home improvements? Or were these interests simply the setting up of a household, complete with boot-slitting servants? Was he helping Mary decorate? Or is "home-centred interests" just Watson's way of saying he was spending every night romancing his new wife? (And we won't even get into the Seinfeld-reminiscent "master of his own establishment.")

And Holmes! “Buried in old books.” Buried! While we’re treated to a lot of books by name in the Canon, what we wouldn’t give to know what those burial piles consisted of. Criminal histories? Old law books? Music? He “loathed every form of society” -- does this mean he hated gatherings of every sort, or is Watson saying he actually hated people? “The drowsiness of the drug” -- don’t know much about cocaine, but my impression was that it was a stimulant. Was Watson mixing up the drowsiness of Holmes’s ambition (“I am the most incurably lazy devil that ever stood in shoe leather ....”) with the fierce energy of the drug?

## **7. King Of His Bohemian Soul**

In the that quote from the last section, we saw how Holmes had a “Bohemian soul.” And here’s the King of Bohemia appearing and offering Holmes unlimited funds to do his bidding, producing a king’s ransom in gold and currency as temptation. The Hounds have discussed the foulness of this tale’s doings before, but taking from a step back, this tale begins to look like “The Devil of All Bachelors and Sherlock Holmes.” Symbolism a-plenty in this tale.

Watson, the tale’s patron saint of marital bliss, begins by telling us how Holmes had no special fondness for women. Mr. Bachelor and Mr. Married seem to have fallen out of touch, leaving Holmes easy prey for the Bachelor King’s offer to pay Holmes to betray an Angel of a Woman. (Irene the adventuress, an angel? Well, she leads Holmes to a church, and later, will only let him in her house if he comes as a holy man.) In the end, Holmes must decide between taking the snake (ring) or the angel(’s photograph). Holmes chooses the angel, no doubt thanks to the recent return of the saintly Watson.

(It must be noted that Holmes later took the King’s “reward,” as we find in “A Case of Identity,” and offered its contents to Watson, symbolically tempting him back into the he-man woman-hater’s club.)

My question for the Hounds: Am I imagining all this in a fit of late-night desperation? Or is there an allegorical aspect to this tale?

## **8. The Serpentine Avenue Irregulars**

We’ve seen Holmes using his gang of street urchins in the previous two tales, but now Holmes has gone a step further and come up with a gang of full grown adults. Shabbily dressed loafers, a scissors-grinder, two guardsmen, a nurse-girl, well-dressed young cigar-smokers, stablehands, serving maids, and ...oh, yes... a certain doctor. Where did Holmes find this bunch, and how much was he paying per person? Did the stablehands come from the ranks he’d been socializing with earlier in the tale?

Apparently they were men and women Holmes trusted, as all it would have taken was one traitor to go up to Briony Lodge and say “I’ll tell you who was behind that mess for a sovereign” to spoil his whole plan. Yet Holmes is confident enough in this bunch that he doesn’t come back until morning. Or was he betrayed?

## 9. The Limits Of An Index

“For many years he had adopted a system of docketing all paragraphs concerning men and things, so that it was difficult to name a subject or a person on which he could not at once furnish information.”

One would suspect these paragraphs came out of the London papers. But the sheer scope of performing one’s own extract service from every daily paper in London seems immense. While his system must have had certain built-in efficiencies, Holmes had to set some criteria for his data gathering. What sort of criteria might that have been? Were the people limited to citizens of London? Were the subjects limited to those he perceived had some point of contact with crime?

## 10. Stop That Brougham!

Time moves strangely in the Canon. In “Copper Beeches,” Violet Hunter arrives at 10:15 in the morning and bids Holmes “goodnight” as she leaves, when nothing seems to have occurred that took all day to take place. And in SCAN, we find this odd passage:

“Then, good-night, your Majesty, and I trust that we shall soon have some good news for you. And good-night, Watson,’ he added, as the wheels of the royal brougham rolled down the street.”

The coachman obviously has as little respect for the King as we do, and decided to take off when his shift was over, king or no king. Of course, we see no indication that the king used the door and the seventeen steps on his way out, perhaps he leapt from the window in that pause between sentences. (What a sight that would have made with his mask and that deep blue cloak flying behind him!)

Do these strange time tricks of the Canon hide moments and conversations that Watson would rather not tell us about? In this tale, might it not be the place where Holmes and Watson reconciled after some disagreement that had kept them apart since Watson’s wedding?

## 11. It’s Hard To Say Good-Bye

Speaking of Holmes’s goodnights, has anybody noticed that when Holmes says “good-bye” or “goodnight” in the Canon, it’s never the end of the sentence? It’s always “Good-night, and I trust that we shall have good news for you,” or “Good-night, and I’ll call upon you tomorrow.” It’s a great little technique, but the Smash has to wonder: Does he do it on purpose? Or were there hard goodbyes in his past, and he can’t let

that be the last thing out of his mouth? The added line always makes it seem like he and the listener will have some future contact, and this could be a sign of Holmes's softer side.

## **12. The Mysterious Mrs. Turner**

One of the most popular bits of Sherlockian trivia originates in SCAN. In the tale previous to this one, and in every tale mentioning Holmes's landlady after this one, her name is "Mrs. Hudson." In "A Scandal in Bohemia," however, it would seem her name is "Mrs. Turner." But is it really? What the story truly contains are two separate statements taken in close succession:

"When Mrs. Turner has brought in the tray I will make it clear to you."

"He turned hungrily on the simple fare that our landlady had provided."

Mrs. Turner brought in the tray. The landlady provided the food. Need they be one in the same? And if they're not one in the same, who's the lady bringing in the food? The cook at 221? Another servant? Or the "Wiggins" of Holmes's Serpentine Avenue Irregulars, hanging around Baker Street to await last minute instructions?

## **13. Cigars, Cigarettes, Peccadillo?**

Upon looking again at the cigar case incident, the Smash notices that Holmes then lights a cigarette. Does this indicate that Watson was a regular cigar smoker, as opposed to Holmes being the cigarette man? These fellows never seem to be too picky in their self-poisonings where tobacco are concerned ... pipes, cigars, cigarettes, snuff (at least they seem to avoid the chew and spit routine), but do more tobacco-conscious Hounds perceive patterns in their tobacco consumption?

## **14. Grossin' Hankies?**

Godfrey Norton's call to the cabbie, "Drive like the devil, first to Gross & Hankey's in Regent Street, and then to the Church of St. Monica in the Edgeware Road," perplexes a bit, as we don't really know what Gross & Hankey's is at all. It's presumed by some to be a jeweler, where Godfrey quickly bought a ring for the wedding that was his next stop. If Godfrey and Irene had gone to the trouble of getting a license, wouldn't they have picked up the ring already as well? Do you see any other possibilities for what Godfrey was doing at the mysterious Gross & Hankey's?

## 15. That “Good For Norton” Irene

Sherlock Holmes holds Irene Adler in high regard. Irene Adler holds Godfrey Norton in high regard. Sherlock must watch Irene marry Godfrey, and even aid in creating that union, because his client’s welfare is best served by the marriage. It’s his job to make sure his ideal woman marries another man -- is this a great plot for a romance, or what? (And not the kind with knights and dragons, either!)

For a man who stole Holmes’s perfect woman, Godfrey Norton is still someone we know darn little about. Was he Irene’s true love or just a convenient hireling willing to take on the role of husband for a time? Why does he pace and wave his arms in that half hour before they head for the church? Is the marriage up for debate, or is he just impatiently waiting for Irene to get dressed?

## 16. Bombs Away!

Holmes has a very simple little task for Watson in this story: “When I raise my hand--so--you will throw into the room what I give you to throw.” And what does Holmes give Watson to throw?

“It is an ordinary plumber’s smoke-rocket, fitted with a cap at either end to make it self-lighting.” Caps are something that seem to be moving further and further away from common usage. Toy cap-guns aren’t in the hands of boys everywhere anymore and blasting caps are for professionals. What kind of caps was Holmes using on his smoke-rocket, and what would use would these have normally been put to? Were such caps sensitive enough to trigger upon hitting a couch or some other object they might encounter, flying through a window?

## 17. Stubborn About Single Women

“Irene Adler, as I will still call her . . .” Watson writes after the part of the narrative where he learns of Irene’s marriage. An interesting choice, as I would think a writer’s natural inclination would be to refer to her by her married name from that point onward. Why would Watson make such a choice? Did he think his readers couldn’t keep up? Or is this his way of passing judgement on the validity of the Norton nuptials.

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