

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure V – A Case of Identity

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "A Case of Identity" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. Friends With Things In Common

In this tale Watson refers to Holmes's "position of unofficial adviser and helper to everybody who is absolutely puzzled, throughout three continents."

Does this coincide with Watson's 3 continents? Is this also, perhaps, evidence that Watson was in the habit of seducing Holmes's clients? And while we've often mused upon the identity of Watson's three continents, what were Holmes's three?

2. That's A Plumb Good Business Ya Got Thar!

Miss Mary Sutherland tells us, "Father was a plumber in the Tottenham Court Road, and he left a tidy business behind him, which mother carried on with Mr. Hardy, the foreman; but when Mr. Windibank came he made her sell the business. . . . They got L4700 for the goodwill and interest . . ."

Nearly 5000 pounds for a plumber's business without a plumber? Perhaps Escott's "rising business" in CHAS shouldn't have been abandoned so hastily by Holmes! How big a business must Sutherland have owned? How many more employees besides Hardy the foreman might he have had?

3. With Pound Signs In His Eyes

"You interest me extremely," Holmes says before he hears anything at all about Miss Sutherland's problem, but having just heard about her monetary situation. Was the rent due at 221B? Were his royal clients giving him too many baubles and not enough cash? Or is Holmes just greedy?



4. But Maybe It Wasn't The Money

"Quite an interesting study, that maiden," he observed. "I found her more interesting than her little problem." Compare this statement to Sherlock's comments after Mary Morstan leaves in SIGN, as he barely notices she's female. Is Sutherland the anti-Morstan? Does Holmes actually find her attractive? Is there significance in the fact that Sutherland is the only female in the Canon that Holmes refers to with old-fashioned gallantry as "a maiden"? Could Watson's Irene Adler praises have been red herrings to cover Holmes's true love?

5. You See But You Do Not . . . Well, Maybe You Do Observe!

"Well, she had a slate-coloured, broad-brimmed straw hat, with a feather of a brickish red. Her jacket was black, with black beads sewn upon it, and a fringe of little black jet ornaments. Her dress was brown, rather darker than coffee colour, with a little purple plush at the neck and sleeves. Her gloves were grayish and were worn through at the right forefinger. Her boots I didn't observe. She had small round, hanging gold earrings, and a general air of being fairly well-to-do in a vulgar, comfortable, easy-going way."

Who says Watson does not observe? Is this amazing attention to detail a sign that Watson was actually learning under Holmes's tutelage?

The critique from his teacher isn't too bad, for Holmes: "It is true that you have missed everything of importance, but you have hit upon the method, and you have a quick eye for colour." Watson has actually hit upon Holmes's method! Did Watson attempt to be a true partner in the detective business, before eventually settling in as chronicler and publicist? Is this part of a larger pattern of Holmes the teacher/Watson the student running throughout the tales?

6. The Brother, The Uncle, Or Cousin Earl?

"It is just as well that we should do business with the male relatives," Holmes announces as he's about to wrap up the case. Why the plural? Is he making a policy statement for the future, or had Holmes contacted other male relatives of Mary Sutherland in hopes of letting them finish the thrashing that Holmes almost starts on Windibank?

7. Everybody Has To Impress Somebody

For an ice-cold reasoning machine, Holmes does seem to make an effort to show off his new snuff-box and ring to his friend. And why not? If your best friend stops over after you've recently been given some pretty

swanky merchandise (in contrast to your “homely ways and simple life” as Watson puts it), wouldn’t you show it off? And would you do it as Holmes did, or just say, “Hey, Watson, look at this neat snuffbox I got!”

Or was Holmes just wearing a pricey ring around the house and waving a jeweled snuffbox without thinking about it?

8. Calling Dr. Qwerty!

“I find that I can do pretty well with what I earn at typewriting. It brings me twopence a sheet, and I can often do from fifteen to twenty sheets in a day.” Fifteen to twenty sheets a day? Was this a reasonable speed for a Victorian typist? How long a day was she putting in? And was she using all ten fingers, or was the whole world still hunting and pecking back then?

9. The Gasfitter’s Cinderella

Mary Sutherland meets her Prince Charming at the gasfitter’s ball. Sounds like dancing, but what kind of band were the gasfitters likely to have at their ball? A couple of fiddles and a tambourine? We always see the grand affairs of royalty in movies, but what was the typical combo of the working man’s dance party?

10. This One’s Got A Job

As the Canon moves on, we shall see many a step-father scheming to hang on to his step-daughter’s money, but James Windibank is unusual in that he actually seems to have a job. He also doesn’t seem to have a large family estate to keep up. Why was he so desperate for the extra cash that he’d head for the very first social event his step-daughter goes to? This is a guy who’s seriously afraid of losing that income. Why?

11. Diagnosis: Liar?

Hosmer Angel tells his date that “He'd had the quinsy and swollen glands when he was young, he told me, and it had left him with a weak throat, and a hesitating, whispering fashion of speech.” Okay, medical experts, we know Hosmer isn’t telling the truth, but is this a credible fib? Might a fellow have existed with such a speech impediment as the result of quinsy?

12. Could They Only Afford The One?

The Smash may be showing his own dreadful ignorance here, but the phrase, “He was in dreadful earnest and made me swear, with my hands on the Testament . . .” strikes me odd. Does the mention of a single Testament indicate one particular religious persuasion or another for the Windibanks? I’m betting

they're not Mormons, despite the near-bigamy thing, but wonder if the Hounds can clear the meaning of this usage up for me.

13. The Adventure Of The Common Spinster

“A Case of Identity” makes a nice pairing with “The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor,” doesn't it? Both feature clients whose betrothed disappears on the wedding day, and as Holmes says in the later tale, “They often vanish before the ceremony, and occasionally during the honeymoon . . .” He also tells of working on a similar case for the King of Scandinavia. And, in this tale, parallel cases in Andover in '77 and at The Hague the previous year.

Was this another reason he frequented the personal ads? Was the tracking of marital escapees a specialty of his? Would Scotland Yard concern themselves with this sort of thing at all, or did they leave the field open to the private investigator?

14. A Little Something For The Scientists . . .

Watson comes into 221B and smells “the pungent cleanly smell of hydrochloric acid.” Holmes soon tells him the result of his chemical experiment was identifying bisulphate of baryta. How would the hydrochloric acid figure into such an investigation?

15. Talk Of Ages

James Windibank is “some thirty years of age.” His wife, then, is about forty-five, and his step-daughter around twenty-five. Holmes is only around thirty himself, and Watson a few years older. Was Holmes's treatment of Windibank affected by their common ages? Did Holmes and Watson see Windibank as a lesser creature for marrying a woman they may have regarded as far too old? And would Holmes have taken up the hunting crop and started after a man who was more plainly his senior? And were Holmes and Watson comparing observations on Mary simply because she was a female of an age that suited their fancy?

16. The Bald Truth

“About five feet seven inches in height; strongly built, sallow complexion, black hair, a little bald in the centre, bushy, black side-whiskers and moustache; tinted glasses, slight infirmity of speech.”

So reads the printed description of Hosmer Angel.

“I eliminated everything from it which could be the result of a disguise--the whiskers, the glasses, the voice, and I sent it to the firm, with a request that they would inform me whether it answered to the description of any of their travellers.”

So sayeth Sherlock. Which leaves us a five-seven, strongly-built, sallow-skinned fellow with a bald spot. Enough data for Westhouse and Marbank to identify one of their employees? Perhaps, with that bald spot. But the bald-spot isn't mentioned by Watson when he sees Windibank, and it would seem a dead giveaway to the step-daughter. Could Windibank have faked a bald spot with Victorian make-up technology?

17. Criminal Typists Beware!

“I think of writing another little monograph some of these days on the typewriter and its relation to crime,” Holmes says, after explaining how he used the distinctive characteristics of type to match up Hosmer Angel's letters with Windibank's note. How many other criminal activities could possibly be related to the typewriter?

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