

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure VI – The Boscombe Valley Mystery

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Boscombe Valley Mystery" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. Did This Man Ever Recover From Afghanistan?

"You have been looking a little pale lately," the good Mrs. Watson tells her husband at the beginning of BOSC. "I think that the change would do you good."

Holmes's own telegram to Watson recommends the air and scenery of Boscombe Valley, as one would suggest it to a sick friend. While Watson writes of Holmes working himself to the point of illness on several occasions, it would seem the good doctor downplays his own moments of weakness. Was this indeed the case? Was Watson chronically ill?

"My experience of camp life in Afghanistan had at least had the effect of making me a prompt and ready traveller," Watson writes, and the words "at least" sound very sad indeed. Was his physical condition a reminder that would never let him forget that horrible war?

2. The Origin Of The Deerstalker?

Watson tells of Holmes's "tall, gaunt figure made even gaunter and taller by his long gray travelling-cloak and close-fitting cloth cap" as Sherlock Holmes heads out to the country for the first time in the Canon. Is this the same "ear-flapped travelling-cap" from "Silver Blaze"? What does "close-fitting" imply about the cap's style, if anything? Was "caps in the country, hats in the city" the fashion etiquette of the day?



3. Newspaper Basketball Anyone?

Holmes brings quite a few papers on the train with him. "All the recent papers" is the way Holmes describes them. An "immense litter of papers" is how Watson describes it. But in the end, Holmes rolls the lot up into a gigantic ball which he arcs up into the rack for two points.

How many newspapers does it take to make a gigantic ball? How many newspapers were coming out every day in London at that time? Just how many days worth of papers do the Hounds think Holmes dragged on to that train?

4. The Unusual Case Of How Holmes Got The Case

"There are several people in the neighbourhood, however, and among them Miss Turner, the daughter of the neighbouring land-owner, who believe in his innocence, and who have retained Lestrade, whom you may recollect in connection with 'A Study in Scarlet', to work out the case in his interest. Lestrade, being rather puzzled, has referred the case to me."

James McCarthy's friends have taken up a collection and hired Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard to prove McCarthy's innocence. Lestrade, being used to declaring guilt, finds innocence an angle he needs some help on. Is Holmes now on the payroll of the friends of J.M., or is Lestrade just cutting Holmes in for a piece of his action? And why is Holmes telling Watson "this is the guy from 'A Study in Scarlet'" and referring to the case by Watson's very own title?

5. This Wasn't The Denny's Across The Street

"We drove to our hotel, where we found lunch upon the table," Watson tells us. He and Holmes are staying at the Hereford Arms, where they even have a nice sofa in their room, so surely they don't mean some common boarding-house table, do they? Would they have arranged for lunch to be served to their room at a specific time in this country hotel? And why wasn't Lestrade staying at the same place, if he was the one who arranged for them to come up, and their hotel room had been already procured for them? Did Lestrade feel he had to get Holmes better lodgings than he himself had?

6. That's One Thin Plot!

"I lay upon the sofa and tried to interest myself in a yellow-backed novel. The puny plot of the story was so thin, however, when compared to the deep mystery through which we were groping . . ."

While Watson's married state would seem to indicate that this case occurs after he's spent many years with Holmes, his excitement over this case seems rather over-played . . . or is it just me? Do the rest of the

Hounds find this simple murder as engrossing as Watson seems to? Is this, combined with Holmes's explanation of who Lestrade is, an indication that this tale really occurred earlier in the partnership than most Sherlockians suspect?

7. That Dirty "Rat"

Perhaps the most mysterious part of this mystery is the dying man's reference to "a rat." In the end, we are expected to agree that this was the last two syllables of a six syllable identification of the murderer. Would a dying man silently mumble the first two-thirds of his statement, then force up the last third in his dying breath? And if the poor fellow had enough wits about him to identify his murderer to his son, wouldn't he have used a name his son would have more easily recognized, such as the man's current nomenclature?

If this were an Ellery Queen mystery would we consider this playing fair with the reader? Or would "a rat" be a rather bogus device on the part of the mystery's constructor?

8. Where Was He Headed Otherwise?

"I never hear of such a case as this that I do not think of Baxter's words, and say, 'There, but for the grace of God, goes Sherlock Holmes.'"

While it's nice that Holmes is sympathetic toward a dying old man at this story's conclusion, I've never quite understood just **why** he was particularly sympathetic toward Turner's situation. Did Holmes have a criminal past that he feared might rise up to ruin those he loved? A daughter wanting to marry the son of an enemy? Or was it something involving a former college friend whose father was blackmailed to death?

"Well, it is not for me to judge you," Holmes says. "I pray that we may never be exposed to such a temptation." Again, Holmes seems far too sympathetic with this murderer. Was there a payoff involved on the part of this wealthy landowner? Or can the Hounds find a more noble reason for Holmes's sympathies?

And while we're on that earlier quote: Jack Tracy claims Holmes was confusing Nonconformist Richard Baxter with Protestant John Bradford in his attribution of the paraphrase. Is this a hint toward the detective's theological upbringing?

9. Judge Sherly Makes His First Ruling

Here we are a mere six tales into the sixty, and Sherlock Holmes is already letting a murderer go free. While turning in the killer would probably punish two innocents more than it would the villain himself, Holmes still shows as much disrespect for the criminal justice system here as he does in later cases, where he lets such men as Leon Sterndale and Captain Crocker walk away from their crimes, doesn't he? Or does the future of the two innocents involved excuse him this time?

10. This Sure Isn't Hazzard County

Watson calls for the weekly county paper, which contains "a surgeon's deposition" stating "that the posterior third of the left parietal bone and the left half of the occipital bone had been shattered by a heavy blow from a blunt weapon." This seems like a lot of information for not only a weekly rural paper, but an inquest into a clubbing murder in the late 1800's as well. Why would a surgeon have been called in to look at a man who plainly had his head smashed in? Another local paper prints transcripts of the coroner's hearings -- was that ever done by any newspaper the Hounds have had experience with, be it 1880s vintage or otherwise?

11. Shaving By Sunlight

In this tale, Holmes makes an amazing deduction that Watson's bedroom window is on the right-hand side. He does so with the following explanation:

"You shave every morning, and in this season you shave by the sunlight; but since your shaving is less and less complete as we get farther back on the left side, until it becomes positively slovenly as we get round the angle of the jaw, it is surely very clear that that side is less illuminated than the other. I could not imagine a man of your habits looking at himself in an equal light and being satisfied with such a result."

As with many things in the Canon, it sounds good at first, but starts to weaken when one really considers it. As shaving tends to be done by methodically dragging a sharpened blade across the expanse of one's face on a daily basis, patterns develop. And do any male Hounds shave by looking at the whiskers themselves? And would a man of "military neatness" judge the finished product without running a hand across it? The concept of a shaving job so slovenly that one can actually judge degrees of how bad it is on different parts of the face seems totally incongruous with anyone the least bit neat about it. Personally, I'm thinking Holmes found out about that bedroom window through other means (which may be a clue as to what happened to Watson's marriage).

12. Such Language, Mr. McCarthy!

"I found my father expiring upon the ground, with his head terribly injured. I dropped my gun and held him in my arms, but he almost instantly expired."

Does this seem a bit cold-blooded to anyone? "Expired" is a word for newspaper obituaries, not sons whose fathers have died in their arms. Did the Herefordshire paper clean up McCarthy's true language here for their reading public, or would a young man of that day actually use so dispassionate a term for his father's final moments?

13. And Now For Poetry Time, Like It Or Not

After devouring all the facts of the McCarthy matter from that giant ball of newspapers and relaying them to Watson, Holmes refuses to speak to Watson for the last twenty minutes of the train trip. After spending the first part of the trip silently reading and taking notes, might Holmes and Watson have enjoyed some non-murder-related chat during that time? They were not living together at the time, and surely had a lot to talk about.

Would there have been any urgency in Holmes silently reading the poetry of Petrarch in that twenty minutes? Had he been eagerly awaiting the chance to dive into that book, or was he perturbed with Watson for some reason?

14. The Ballarat Connection

We learned in *The Sign of the Four* that Dr. Watson had once been to Ballarat, and he is very quiet about that fact when he finally comes into the company of someone from that area. Five other men came to England with Black Jack, all rich from their gold heist -- five other men we never hear anything else of. Is Watson's silence suggestive of a brother or father that was one of Black Jack's cohorts? Might that have been the reason that Holmes invited Watson along for a fairly straight forward murder case, then didn't speak to him on the trip down, leaving the doctor to his own thoughts? Might not the true paraphrase have been "There, but for the grace of God, goes John H. Watson?"

15. Is There A Real Doctor In The House?

"Dr. Willows says that he is a wreck and that his nervous system is shattered," Miss Turner tells Holmes of her father. Lestrade says old Turner is "About sixty; but his constitution has been shattered by his life abroad, and he has been in failing health for some time." Finally, Turner himself claims to have had diabetes

for years, and his doctor says he might not live a month. Turner's fellow Australian, Dr. Watson, tells us that Turner died seven months later.

So many different diagnoses: Nerves. Health ruined by life in Australia. Diabetes. Were any of these close to the truth, or just a part of some larger scam which involved Turner eventually dying of everyday old age?

16. Holding A Place

"If you will keep the two corner seats I shall get the tickets," Holmes tells Watson when they reach the train. Apparently Watson did a good job, as the pair had a carriage to themselves. But what did Holmes mean by "corner seats," and why were those so desirable? Was it for the same reasons one might choose the back row in a movie theater? And how odd was it that they had an entire carriage to themselves on an 11:15 train from Paddington Station? (Extra points for anyone who can work that cute little bear into the discussion and stay on topic.)

17. Legal Help Needed!

"He was on Wednesday brought before the magistrates at Ross, who have referred the case to the next assizes. Those are the main facts of the case as they came out before the coroner and the police-court."

Coroner. Police-court. Magistrates. Assizes. Okay, I'm confused. "The Boscombe Valley Mystery" gives us about as much legalese as any other tale in the Canon. Can anyone give a clear, *concise* explanation of this process for we moderns ignorant of the British legal system? Were coroner's jurymen allowed to question suspects?

Brad Keefauver, BSI

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