

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure VIII – The Man with the Twisted Lip

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Man with the Twisted Lip" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. Watson's London Gossip Column

"Isa Whitney, brother of the late Elias Whitney, D. D., Principal of the Theological College of St. George's, was much addicted to opium," this tale begins. While the Hounds have often discussed Watson's protecting the identities of Holmes's clients, here's a case where the doctor seems to be going out of his way to publicly humiliate a public figure whose brother has a problem. What's worse is that Isa's wife is a good friend of Watson's wife. How could Watson bring friends of his family into the tales in such a manner, even if he changed the names? Are we seeing clues to a Watson beloved by his reading public, but hated by anyone who came under the reign of his pen?



2. The Honeymoon Sure Isn't Over!

"There came a ring to my bell, about the hour when a man gives his first yawn and glances at the clock. I sat up in my chair, and my wife laid her needle-work down in her lap and made a little face of disappointment."

While I find it a little chauvinistic that Watson refers to the doorbell as "my bell," even when the ringer is a friend of his wife, I'm encouraged by the fact that Mrs. Watson seems to be making cute little disappointed faces when her husband won't be coming to bed with her. In prim and proper Victorian times, could a yawn and a glance at the clock be a subtle proposition between a husband and a wife? Can we assume the Watsons' marriage is going well based on the data in this story?

3. Working Late Again, Dear?

On the other hand, we have signs of trouble in paradise. Watson says it is the hour of first yawn, yet he is newly come back from a “weary day.” Has the good doctor missed supper at home and taken it elsewhere? Perhaps in the company of someone who might afterwards make him weary?

And then there’s Mrs. Watson, referring to her husband as “James.” Is no one innocent in this den of betrayal? Or is the Smash guilty of vicious slanders that the Hounds must now squash immediately? (If these last two postings seem a bit bawdy, recall that this is the only tale with the word “orgies” in it -- I blame Watson!)

4. A Master Of Disguise!

No, not Neville St. Clair or Sherlock Holmes. Dr. Watson says, “I felt a sudden pluck at my skirt,” as he walks through the opium den. If we eliminate night-shirts and Scottish kilts, at what part of Watson’s clothing was Holmes plucking?

5. The United Nations Of Dope

A Malay attendant. A Danish assistant. An East Indian Lascar. So many cultures, all working together to provide opium for the stressed-out citizens of London at the Bar of Gold! Was Victorian London all as culturally intermingled as this? Watson pays Isa Whitney’s bill at this fine establishment (they even let opium addicts run a tab), and one has to wonder what two days worth of opium cost him. Any guesses? How much money might Watson have been carrying on him during a given evening at home, as it was enough to pay off a drug dealer? Or was the opium much cheaper then?

6. How Rich Was Rich In 1887?

“We should be rich men if we had L1000 for every poor devil who has been done to death in that den,” Holmes says to Watson. Now, as the common version of that phrase in modern day America goes, “If I had a nickel for every time ...” one has to wonder at the sizeable difference between a nickel and a thousand pounds. While it takes a whole lot of nickels to make a man rich in any era, thousand pound notes (if such existed at the time) will make you wealthy a whole lot faster. But how many of them would it have taken back then? And, following that, roughly how many people would we guess had been killed at the Bar of Gold?

7. Toys R Hugh Boone

“She sprang at a small deal box which lay upon the table and tore the lid from it. Out there fell a cascade of children's bricks.”

Toys are always of interest to certain child-like adults among us, including the discussion leader. What manner of bricks did they sell for children in small deal boxes in 1887? Wooden bricks? Clay bricks? Gold bricks? And did children do anything with them that would have been different from what children do now, such as build houses and forts?

8. Inquiries In Kent

“But why are you not conducting the case from Baker Street?” Watson asks.

“Because there are many inquiries which must be made out here,” Holmes replies.

Just last week in reading “Five Orange Pips,” we saw Holmes engage in exactly the opposite behavior, shunning Horsham to stay in London and follow what evidence was there. What might Holmes have found so intriguing in Kent when the crime seems to have definitely occurred in London, to a man who spent his days in London? Did Neville St. Clair have any interests in Kent that could conceivably have caused his disappearance?

9. Gentlemen, Start Your Engines!

“A little blonde woman stood in the opening, clad in some sort of light mousseline de soie, with a touch of fluffy pink chiffon at her neck and wrists. She stood with her figure outlined against the flood of light, one hand upon the door, one half-raised in her eagerness, her body slightly bent, her head and face protruded, with eager eyes and parted lips, a standing question.”

The ladies present will forgive me if I reprint the paragraph above for the benefit of the Lascar and the rest of the young men among us. Watson does such a lovely job verbally painting Mrs. Neville St. Clair within the confines of Victorian sensibilities that it's plain he held that sight near and dear in his visual memory. While the gentlemen of Sherlockiana have been favoring us with their opinions of these ladies for years, perhaps it's time we heard from the other side. How do the female Hounds feel about Watson's descriptions of the fair sex in the Canon? Is he a respectful aficionado or just another gawkin' guy? And what manner of memory was the doctor holding of Mrs. St. Clair at the door? The eager eyes mentioned later or the outlined figure that he comes to first?

10. Watson On The Campaign Trail

“I am an old campaigner,” Watson tells us in this story. What exactly does he mean by that? He’s not really “old” yet is he? And he was only in that one campaign, and for not all that long at that, was he? Could Watson truly be called “an old campaigner,” or was he exaggerating a bit to impress the lady in the mousseline de soie?

11. The Only Paper In The Bar Of Gold

Mrs. St. Clair receives a note “Written in pencil upon the fly-leaf of a book, octavo size, no watermark.”

Apparently the fly-leaf of a book is the only paper available in the Bar of Gold at a moment’s notice. With no other paper in the place, it even seems remarkable that a book was present. Anyone care to speculate on what that lonely tome in the opium den might have been?

12. Marrying Your Psychic Friend

“There is so keen a sympathy between us that I should know if evil came upon him. On the very day that I saw him last he cut himself in the bedroom, and yet I in the dining-room rushed upstairs instantly with the utmost certainty that something had happened.”

Mrs. St. Clair’s telepathic bond with her husband has always fascinated me. Such things between identical twins are almost expected, but between husband and wife? The paranormal question of the hour, however, is this: was Mrs. St. Clair telepathic, sensing her husband’s distress, or was she actually clairvoyant, picking up vibrations of the disappearance about to occur?

13. Who’s Making All The Racket?

Okay, Hounds, let’s curb our Beavis and Butthead impulses for a moment and look at the following statement with no cheap shots: “So he sat as I dropped off to sleep, and so he sat when a sudden ejaculation caused me to wake up, and I found the summer sun shining into the apartment. The pipe was still between his lips . . .”

Watson doesn't say if he understood the shout that woke him or not. He doesn't say if it was Holmes's voice or not. And we find Holmes, innocently close-mouthed with pipe firmly in place, finally removing it to calmly ask, "Awake, Watson?" While the prime shouting suspect seems to be Holmes, what might his shout have been? "Eureka!" or "Hey, Watson!" "YES!!!" or "ACK! Damned burning hot tobacco ash!" Was it embarrassing enough that Holmes had to pretend he was calm and non-yelling by quickly returning to puffing on his pipe?

14. The Dawn Of Dr. Watson

"I found the summer sun shining into the apartment." It is 4:25 A.M. As your leisurely discussion leader rarely experiences consciousness at that hour, I have to ask: does that really happen? Baring-Gould claims the June sunrise in England comes during the hour between 3 and 4 a.m., yet even the earliest risers in the town are only looking out their windows as Holmes and Watson drive by. How does anyone sleep in June with all this bright sunshine? Those poor men who "work from sun to sun," suddenly seem not all that different from the women whose "work is never done."

15. Those Dutiful Men Of Bow Street

It's still very early when Holmes and Watson arrive at the Bow Street police station. Yet when Holmes asks, "Who is on duty?" the officers guarding the front door are respectful enough not to answer, "All of us, you silly popinjay." Beyond that, they actually salute him. Why would police officers salute a known civilian, even if he was highly respected? And what is an inspector doing there at that hour? What were the duties of an inspector in those days?

16. The Fine Art Of Make-Up Removal

Watson writes: "Never in my life have I seen such a sight. The man's face peeled off under the sponge like the bark from a tree. Gone was the coarse brown tint! Gone, too, was the horrid scar which had seamed it across, and the twisted lip which had given the repulsive sneer to the face!"

Watson's not the only one who has never seen such a sight in his life. What kind of fabulous makeup completely distorts a man's features, yet wipes off with a sponge and water in two wipes?

17. Whoops, Watson Does It Again

"If the police are to hush this thing up, there must be no more of Hugh Boone," Inspector Bradstreet tells Neville St. Clair at the tale's end. Yet Bradstreet has no idea that a soon-to-be bestselling writer of tell-all

exposes is standing in their midst. While it's true neither Holmes or Watson promised to keep St. Clair's secret, isn't Watson ruining one more person's life by publishing this story, as he did to the McCarthy/Turner couple a tale or two ago? Why does he keep doing this?

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