

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

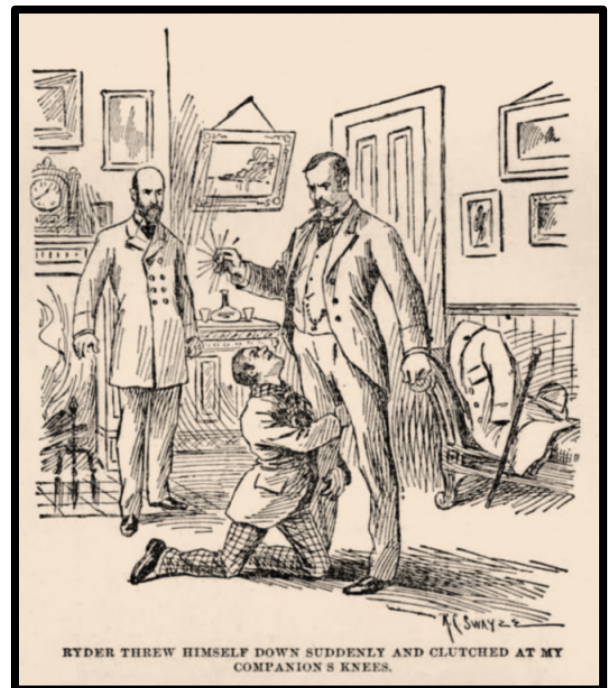
The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure IX – The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. The Watsonian Christmas Celebration

Perhaps it's an all-too basic question that we all pondered on before, but it needs to be asked whenever this story comes up: Why was Watson visiting the man we think of as his best friend on the *second* day after Christmas to wish him a happy holiday? Did Watson have no time to spare in the three or four days prior? Had he invited Holmes to the Watson's Christmas feast? Were he and Mrs. Watson out of town, spending Christmas at her mother's? Or was this at a time when Mrs. Watson wished her husband to have nothing to do with Holmes, and this was the first occasion the doctor could sneak off? Is Watson's tentative "You are engaged, perhaps I interrupt you" a sign that he and Holmes have not been on the best of terms?



2. The Connotations Of Hand Gestures

We are told Holmes "jerked his thumb in the direction of the old hat." Try that gesture out yourself and see how you feel about it. Does it seem particularly "Sherlock" to you? It's hard to point with your thumb without closing your fingers in the traditional "hitchhiker" mode. Doesn't that seem a bit yokelish for Holmes, as compared to the standard forefinger point? Or is the Smash reading far too much into a casual gesture?

3. The Population Density Of London

This case, Holmes says, is "Only one of those whimsical little incidents which will happen when you have four million human beings all jostling each other within the space of a few square miles."

A rough calculation of Holmes's statement shows roughly sixty-three square feet of space per person (3 time 5280 feet, squared and divided by 4,000,000). If all of Holmes's people had sixty-three square feet surrounding them, it doesn't seem like they would jostle very much, does it? While this is an all-too literal interpretation of Holmes's words, just how close was he? And are urban areas of today better or worse, and thus generating more or less whimsical little incidents?

4. We All Know Peterson!

"You know Peterson, the commissionaire?" Holmes asks Watson. Not "Do you remember Peterson?" as though Holmes knew Watson had met him during his time at Baker Street. While we've learned in an earlier tale that such folk as bankers were much more celebrated in those days, commissionaires were still probably only known to you if you lived near one or had dealings with him. So how did Holmes expect that Watson knew Peterson? Of course, a few sentences later, Holmes expects that Watson even knows Peterson is "a very honest fellow." Was the question purely rhetorical?

5. One Heck Of A Jollification!

Peterson, we are told, is returning from "some small jollification" at four in the morning. So is Henry Baker. What kind of parties were these fellows at that lasted until four a.m. Christmas morning? Were the bars open that late on a major holiday? Henry Baker is obviously showing signs of having been drinking all that time, but what of Peterson? Would a commissionaire have been working late on Christmas Eve prior to said jollification, or is his seemingly less-intoxicated state due to some other distraction, perhaps of the feminine variety? Don't even a "little knot of roughs" have somewhere to be at that hour on Christmas morning?

6. Time To Eat The Goose

Holmes's brilliant powers of observation even extend to food, we find this time out, as he says, "there were signs that, in spite of the slight frost, it would be well that it should be eaten without unnecessary delay." What exactly are those signs? Presented with a nice bar-tailed goose road-kill on the second day after Christmas, how might the diehard Sherlockian gourmand tell if it's time to eat it without being too late to eat it?

7. Watson Hides His Light Under A Bushel

Here's what Watson sees:

"It was a very ordinary black hat of the usual round shape, hard and much the worse for wear. The lining had been of red silk, but was a good deal discoloured. There was no maker's name; but, as Holmes had remarked, the initials "H. B." were scrawled upon one side. It was pierced in the brim for a hat-securer, but the elastic was missing. For the rest, it was cracked, exceedingly dusty, and spotted in several places, although there seemed to have been some attempt to hide the discoloured patches by smearing them with ink."

Here's what Watson says:

"I can see nothing."

If ever we wanted evidence that Watson was holding back to glorify Holmes, here it is. Watson sees everything and then acts like he even missed the man's initials . . . a real "gimme." Did Watson actually miss these details the first time, then fill them in for the reader when writing it up? Or did he see them and just play dumb for Holmes's benefit? (Or, a third option: he was just so happy to be reconciled with his friend after their squabble that he was overcome with emotion and didn't care about a silly hat.)

8. Greasy Kid's Stuff Now Comes In Flavors!

Henry Baker anoints his grizzled hair with lime cream. Having been kept in a buzz cut until he could use a blow dryer, the Smash is of a generation completely unfamiliar with the oils and creams of yesteryear.

What was "lime cream" made of? Did the lime smell come from real limes? Sure sounds tasty, but this particular cream has to be more of the "hand cream" variety than the "cream pie" sort. How long had such hair products been in use at the time?

9. Less Frontal Development Than Henry Baker

"For answer Holmes clapped the hat upon his head. It came right over the forehead and settled upon the bridge of his nose. "It is a question of cubic capacity," said he; "a man with so large a brain must have something in it."

The size of a man's head is related to the size of a man's intellect more than once in the Canon of Holmes. Sherlock Holmes's own head is criticized by Professor Moriarty and admired by Dr. Mortimer for its frontal development, so you have to wonder if it wasn't all just in their overlarge heads. Did Holmes really think Baker was smarter than him, just because he had a bigger head? Has any scientific relationship between big skulls and big intellects ever been recorded? Why were otherwise intelligent men like Moriarty, Mortimer, and Holmes so fixated on it in those days?

10. Hat-Brushing Equals Love

Holmes deduces that Henry Baker's wife has ceased to love him because she allows him to go out with dust on his hat. But how many other deductions could one make from that same evidence? His wife is nearsighted. His wife is a poor housekeeper. His wife is very short. Looking at the other details of the hat as told by Watson a few questions back, can we come up with totally different and equally unproveable stories about Baker's life and being?

11. Dr. Watson's Accent

"It was lost, if I remember aright, at the Hotel Cosmopolitan," Watson says in this tale, and his "aright" seems slightly off his normal pattern of speaking. Could this have been an indication of an accent that he largely kept out of the stories? What region would "aright" place him in? Or was it just a common phrase for the time?

12. The Countess's Casket

"The small Morocco casket in which, as it afterwards transpired, the Countess was accustomed to keep her jewel, was lying empty upon the dressing-table."

Morocco, my dictionary tells me, is goatskin or sheepskin treated with sumac. While that description is all well and good, why is it such a lovely thing to keep a priceless gem in? Was this a temporary holding place for the gem, until the Countess could get it mounted on some piece of jewelry, or did jewel owners just walk around with their jewels in leather cases in those days, pulling them out to show off as the mood struck them?

13. Sure, It's A Nice Jewel, But Suicide?

"There have been two murders, a vitriol-throwing, a suicide, and several robberies brought about for the sake of this forty-grain weight of crystallized charcoal." (Not to mention a goose-killing!)

Murder during the course of a robbery, or to accelerate an inheritance, one can understand, but how could the blue carbuncle be responsible for a vitriol-throwing and a suicide? Would vitriol damage the stone if splashed upon it?

14. Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?

Holmes closes Watson's post-Christmas visit with: "Very glad to see you. I dine at seven. There is a woodcock, I believe." Is the first sentence more evidence of a recent rift between them? Is "I dine at seven" an actual dinner invitation, or more of a "come by when I'm done eating"? How often did Holmes know in the morning what Mrs. Hudson would be serving for dinner, and why would he?

15. The Occupations Of A Baker

Henry Baker tells us, "There are a few of us who frequent the Alpha Inn, near the Museum--we are to be found in the Museum itself during the day, you understand." Was this an alcoholic's excuse for wasted days? Why else should he be so concerned that Holmes knows he spends his days at the museum and not the pub? Was he actually doing research there with his big-brained head, and if so, regarding what? Do we have any sense of where Baker's income comes from in this tale, or is he just another retired gentleman spending his days reading and evenings drinking?

16. Cruising The Bad Side Of Town

Watson reports: "We passed across Holborn, down Endell Street, and so through a zigzag of slums to Covent Garden Market." Just how bad were the neighborhoods between Holborn and Covent Garden? Was Watson doing them justice in calling them slums? Were he and Holmes in any danger passing through them on foot if they were?

17. Five Hundred Bodies Of Geese On The Slab, 500 Bodies . . .

Breckinridge the goose salesman tells Holmes he can let him have 500 geese in the morning. Was he serious? Where would he get 500 geese, and could he hope to move them all that quickly a few days after Christmas? (Mrs. Oakshott only sold him twenty-four during the Christmas rush, as it was, though she was hardly his only supplier.)

YOUR CHRISTMAS BONUS: MORE QUESTIONS!

18. A Dangerous Game

While James Ryder was a nervous little man, even nervous little men have been known to carry guns. Was Holmes being foolish in inviting him into 221B and then producing the blue carbuncle? What if Ryder had been armed and demanded the gem? Or worse yet, tried shooting them both outright and taking the gem?

(Two murders have already been committed for it, remember!) Could Holmes and Watson have handled the gun-toting shrimp? Would the story ended have happily?

19. A New Recipe For Goose

Holmes refers to the carbuncle-carrier as “a most unimpeachable Christmas goose.” Would goose be at all impeachable -- in other words, might there be a recipe for that sizeable fowl that involved peaches in the cooking, much like duck ala orange involves oranges? Sure, it’s a horrible twist of the phrase, but entire cookbooks have been based on worse recipes than “peachable Christmas goose.” While this runs dangerously close to being off-topic, this is the season of forgiveness AND feasting after all . . . any more suggestions for holiday dining based on this tale? What-a-shrimp-it-is cocktail, perhaps?

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