

# The Seventeen Steps

*Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes*

## The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

### Adventure XI – The Adventure of the Engineer’s Thumb

*Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of the Engineer’s Thumb" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.*

#### 1. Watson Versus Journalism

Watson writes of ENGI: “The story has, I believe, been told more than once in the newspapers, but, like all such narratives, its effect is much less striking when set forth en bloc in a single half-column of print ...”

Did newspapers ever carry the full tale of Victor Hatherly? Since the suspected criminals were never found, nor were their counterfeit coins, was there actually more to report than the attack on the engineer and the burning of the house?

Watson claims it’s better “when the facts slowly evolve before your own eyes, and the mystery clears gradually away as each new discovery furnishes a step which leads on to the complete truth,” but is this more of the good doctor’s self-promotion? Does ENGI really evolve slowly, or is it basically a two step tale, the first part being Hatherly’s tale and the second part being the discovery that the villains have gotten away?



#### 2. Painful, Lingering, And Curable

Among Watson’s patients who worked at Paddington Station was a fellow with a “painful and lingering disease” that Watson cured. Given the current state of medicine in 1889, any speculation on what manner of disease might this have been? Something connected with working at a railway station, perhaps?

### **3. Watson's Eccentric Friend**

"I continually visited him and occasionally even persuaded him to forego his Bohemian habits so far as to come and visit us." While the cases of Sherlock Holmes were always the *raison d'être* for Watson's writings, wouldn't you like to know just what went on during a social evening at the Watson's home? In other stories we see the topics Holmes discusses when dining with Watson and Lestrade, but would his subject matter change when dining with Mrs. Watson?

### **4. Hatherly Forces A Card**

"I gave the maid a card," Victor Hatherly tells Watson, "but I see that she has left it upon the side-table."

Watson takes up the card and reads, "Mr. Victor Hatherley, hydraulic engineer, 16A, Victoria Street (3d floor)," then writes, "That was the name, style, and abode of my morning visitor."

Okay, Victor's a little delirious, as he seems to be more concerned with etiquette and presenting his card as an introduction than the fact his thumb's been chopped off ... or was this what one would expect of that day and age?

And then we have Watson, who not only feels the need to explain to us what those nouns, proper and otherwise, on that card are, but then goes on to call Hatherly's occupation his "style." Any Hounds familiar with this usage of the word, or was Watson being a little free with his wordage?

### **5. Let's Get A Second Opinion ...**

Now, we're all used to Watson's universal brandy cure-all, but what about his treatment in this case. As a former army surgeon with training in such things as amputations and traumatic injuries, should he be doing anything more than bandaging that stump? While he's probably not up to plastic surgery, shouldn't he be doing something more to close that thing off?

### **6. She's Got Mono!**

A mysterious and beautiful foreigner appears once Victor Hatherly is on the job, and she tries to persuade him that he'd be better off leaving. Hatherly immediately diagnoses: "This woman might, for all I knew, be a monomaniac." Have Hatherly's experiences with women been that bad? Why would he jump to that conclusion so quickly? Monomania in the family?

## **7. He's An Engineer, Not A Rocket Scientist**

Bad enough Hatherly decides to check out a hydraulic press room by going inside it, but does he really have to start smarting off to his mysterious employer while still inside? Wouldn't he have wanted to check out the workings of the machine first?

## **8. Maybe He Wanted Pancakes**

Colonel Lysander Stark seemed handy enough with edged weapons. Why mess up a perfectly good hydraulic press with engineer goop? And if Hatherly's demise messed the press up any further, he'd have to get yet another engineer. Was this just a fit of temper, or is there any redeeming factors to killing people with a hydraulic press?

## **9. Shades Of The Stapletons!**

Is Elise the wife of Fritz? His sister? Ferguson's girlfriend? What sort of deductions can the Hounds make about the arrangements of the villains' household?

## **10. Forsooth, Knave, A Peasant I Spy!**

Watson writes: "Early that morning a peasant had met a cart containing several people . . ." Okay, I'm an out-of-touch American in the 2000s, but did they still have peasants in Victorian England?

## **11. He Must Have Been Family**

"During two years I have had three consultations and one small job, and that is absolutely all that my profession has brought me. My gross takings amount to L27 10s," Hatherly explains. Yet he seems to have a clerk working for him, bringing him the card of his fourth consultation in two years. What was this clerk doing for three years?

## **12. Where There Are Books ...**

We bookish sorts must identify them. In his client's house, Hatherly "glanced at the books upon the table, and in spite of my ignorance of German I could see that two of them were treatises on science, the others being volumes of poetry."

German poetry? Or a German translation of some other country's poets? If it were indeed poetry in the original German, do we have any speculation on who the poet might have been?

### **13. Not The Ladies Man, This Hatherly**

While he says Elise was beautiful, Victor Hatherly also speaks of: “her eyes glancing back, like those of a frightened horse.” Hopefully, Victor didn’t meet this gal again once Watson had the story published. Or do the ladies present think they’d allow a man to get away with comparing any of their features to a horse?

### **14. The Remarkable Holmes Memory**

In the course of the case, Sherlock Holmes remembers a year-old personal ad: “Lost, on the 9th inst., Mr. Jeremiah Hayling, aged twenty-six, a hydraulic engineer.” If Mr. Hayling was an orphan like Mr. Hatherly, who was advertising in all the papers for him? And why would Holmes remember a single personal ad after all this time? Was Holmes brought in on the disappearance, perhaps? Or was his memory really just THAT good?

### **15. The Degrees Of Piracy**

The villain of the piece is said by Holmes to be “like those out-and-out pirates who will leave no survivor from a captured ship.” Isn’t piracy merely the act of armed robbery on the high seas? Does one become more of a pirate by killing one’s victims?

### **16. Taking The Morning Inspector**

In both TWIS and ENGI, we find Holmes working with Inspector Bradstreet when the case takes an early morning turn. Is Bradstreet a believer in the early bird theory, or is the timing just a coincidence?

### **17. Not The Severed Thumb Story Again!**

Sherlock Holmes, a man known for avoiding social situations that might bore him, advises Hatherly on his experience, "Indirectly it may be of value, you know; you have only to put it into words to gain the reputation of being excellent company for the remainder of your existence."

Is there anything to this advice, or was Holmes just once again showing his disdain for socializing? Is this some backhanded reference to the old “war” stories of some other social acquaintance of Holmes? Perhaps one who occasionally persuaded him to dine with the friend’s wife and himself?

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