

# The Seventeen Steps

*Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes*

## The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

### Adventure XIII – The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet

*Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.*

#### 1. The Fine Art Of Pavement-Scraping

Watson writes: "Down the centre of Baker Street it had been ploughed into a brown crumbly band by the traffic, but at either side and on the heaped-up edges of the foot-paths it still lay as white as when it fell. The gray pavement had been cleaned and scraped, but was still dangerously slippery ..."

While snow removal might not be a topic of interest to Hounds in warmer climes, the snow-blower fans among us have to wonder what Victorian Londoners did when the white stuff started to pile up. In this tale, the streets seem to be left for traffic to deal with, but the sidewalks on Baker Street have plainly had a shovel's attention, though salt was not something Londoners wasted on the sidewalks. Was this the general state of things? Did the city government have to clear the streets on occasion, did the city shut down after a big snow, or were the citizens industrious enough to clear things themselves? Holder speaks of the cabs going slow through the snow, so it almost sounds like the streets were left alone -- was this the case?



#### 2. Alexander Holder Syndrome

The client in this case is not a man who handles stress well.

He is running "hard" with "occasional little springs," jerking his hands up and down, wagging his head, contorting his face, swaying his body, plucking at his hair, and beating his head against the wall ... hard. Then, after all this, he mops his brow, composes himself, and tells Holmes a story about one of the "most exalted names in England."

When Holmes and Watson accompany this man home, are they really thinking this is a serious case to be undertaken, or are they just accompanying the loon home to find who cares for him and advise them to keep a tighter rein on him? Is Holder's behaviour within the boundaries of what we could expect from a man in his situation, or is he just plain nuts and will remain so once the business of the coronet is finished?

### **3. Famous Bankers Of London**

After his introduction to Holder, Watson writes: "The name was indeed well known to us as belonging to the senior partner in the second largest private banking concern in the City of London."

Why is Watson so familiar with the senior partners of private banks? Would Holder have been in Watson's social circle? Would Holmes and Watson have known of Holder through some professional matter, and if so, did it involve an untold tale? Or were prominent bankers more of a celebrity then than now?

### **4. Evaluating The Valuables**

Banker Holder, in explaining his work, says: "there are many noble families to whom we have advanced large sums upon the security of their pictures, libraries, or plate."

While we're all familiar with the prices great works of art or precious metals can bring, I'm sure the thought of nobles being advanced great amounts of money based on their libraries intrigues the bookmen and bookwomen among us. What sort of books would the nobles have in their libraries that would be of such high values back in Victorian London? What was their equivalent of a first edition Harry Potter or Beeton's Christmas Annual?

### **5. The Illustrious Beryl Coronet**

In this tale, everyone appears to have heard of everyone and everything that comes up. When Holder's mysterious client asks, "You have doubtless heard of the Beryl Coronet?" Holder recognizes the name immediately, citing it as "One of the most precious public possessions of the empire."

Would a gold coronet of thirty-nine beryls really be that precious in comparison to other crown jewels of England? And if it was that well known, as well as a public possession, wouldn't it have been on display somewhere? Or were such things displayed? Sherlockians have often tried to identify nobles that Watson supposedly changed the names of, but has anyone ever ventured a theory on the true identity of the Beryl Coronet?

## **6. The Strange Scandal Of The Non-Scandal**

Once again we find Sherlock Holmes supposedly averting a massive public scandal, only to have Watson publish the whole mess a few years later in the Strand Magazine. The matter takes a deeper turn, however, when one considers that Alexander Holder called in the police about the missing piece of coronet and had his son arrested. How was it the papers never picked up on that little bit of news? How many people knew of the broken coronet and how it came to be in Holder's hands? If the mystery client was somehow able to cover up the scandal of the broken coronet, would it have been any harder to cover up a coronet with a piece missing?

## **7. Acceptable Security Or Dangerous Game Of Let's Pretend?**

We assume that the fellow who used the Beryl Coronet as collateral showed up on Monday with the 50,000 pounds (and whatever interest was due). But what if something had gone wrong and he hadn't been able to come up with the cash? What would "the second largest private banking concern in the City of London" have been able to do about it? If the Coronet is a "public possession," wouldn't they be charged with receiving stolen property if they tried to sell it or ransom it back to the government somehow? Did the involvement of the Coronet have any true value in this deal, or was Holder merely going through the motions to placate the whims of some impractical royal?

## **8. And The Plot Thickens . . .**

As one delves further into "The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet," one begins to notice further oddities, such as the way Holder's client says plainly of the coronet, "Any injury to it would be almost as serious as its complete loss, for there are no beryls in the world to match these, and it would be impossible to replace them." He seems to make a point of spelling out almost exactly what will wind up happening to the coronet, which makes one wonder if the whole thing wasn't some sort of set-up.

Could Alexander Holder have been the target of some conspiracy to get him thrown out of his position at the second largest private bank in London? Or might such a plot have had more far-reaching effects than that?

## **9. Inbreeding Among Well-Bred Victorians**

"Twice my boy has asked her to marry him, for he loves her devotedly, but each time she has refused him,"

Alexander Holder says of his son Arthur and his adopted daughter Mary (his brother's daughter). As much as we hate to see Mary Holder running off with a scoundrel like Burnwell, she does at least seem to have sense enough to stay away from her first cousin. How common and accepted was marriage between first cousins in the Victorian era? At what point did it gain the social stigma and illegal status it has today?

## **10. The Adventure Of The Streatham Vampire**

Dr. Watson describes Mary Holder thusly: "She was rather above the middle height, slim, with dark hair and eyes, which seemed the darker against the absolute pallor of her skin. I do not think that I have ever seen such deadly paleness in a woman's face. Her lips, too, were bloodless, but her eyes were flushed . . ."

While it's true Mary Holder has every reason to be a little pale, the way a medical doctor describes her as "deadly" pale beyond anything he has seen before tends to make a more fanciful sort such as myself wonder. Was there something more than jewel thievery going on here? Consider the facts about Sir George Burnwell.

He is only encountered at night in this tale. He has a hypnotic "glamour" that is so powerful Alexander Holder can only think about him objectively when he is nowhere nearby. He has the strength to bend and break off a piece of a coronet that a healthy young man cannot bend back into its original state. And associating with him seems to have drained all the blood from Mary Burnwell.

Might "Sir George" have actually been a certain foreign nobleman trying to reclaim a personal treasure stolen from him centuries before? Is the love triangle of Lucy, Arthur, and "Sir George" a bit too close to the triangle of Lucy Westenra, Arthur Holmwood, and Count Dracula? Might the pseudonym "Burnwell" have referred to one of the traditional methods of destroying Dracula's kind? Or, as in the case of a certain Mrs. Ferguson, is this all mere coincidence?

## **11. Crowns Versus Fireplace Pokers**

What exactly was the beryl coronet made of? A little gold, thirty-nine beryls . . . whenever the broken off corner is referred to, gold is the mentioned material. Yet it took the strength of two men to break it between them, and when Sherlock Holmes tries to break off the other corner, it doesn't even bend . . . and here was a man who could bend a fireplace poker.

Why was this thing so tough?

## **12. Mixing Of The Social Strata**

Holmes explains that he "went in the shape of a loafer to Sir George's house, managed to pick up an acquaintance with his valet, learned that his master had cut his head the night before, and, finally, at the expense of six shillings, made all sure by buying a pair of his cast-off shoes."

Just how does a bum strike up an acquaintance with a gentleman's valet? Does he just walk up to the back door and see if any of the hired help wants to loaf with him? And wouldn't the six shilling offer mark Holmes as something other than a loafer, in which case, why the disguise to begin with? Wouldn't the straight-off bribe work just as well?

## **13. The Decor Of The Noble Ruined Gambler's Home**

Sir George Burnwell is said to have "took down a life-preserver from the wall." Now, we know Holmes isn't speaking of a white ring with "S.S. Minnow" printed on it, but why would Sir George have such a thing on his wall? Were such blunt instruments decorative in the least?

## **14. No Bargains For Sherlock Holmes**

Does it strike anyone else as odd that Holmes has a gun to a criminal's head, then offers him a thousand pounds each for stolen gems that the detective could have stolen back with seemingly little criminal consequence? Or that Holmes actually does wind up paying that same amount to a fence to get the gems back, when the police are well aware of the matter and could have accompanied him to just take them back? For a man we often accuse of being overly criminal, Sherlock sure doesn't seem to want to treat the real criminals unfairly in this tale. Or did he actually take the gems and pocket the three thousand when he finally got it? Would Sherlock have had been walking around with three thousand of his own money in his pocket when he went to see Burnwell to begin with?

## **15. A Thousand Pounds And No Tricks**

Whether or not Holmes kept the three thousand he supposedly paid for the gems, he did clear a tidy thousand pounds in this case. He also turns over the gems with very little drama. No breakfast table surprises. No slipping it in the client's coat pocket or back in the dresser. Did the prospect of that thousand pounds take precedence over any dramatics Holmes might have otherwise tried?

## **16. A Time For Snow And Ice**

With all the talk of beryls and snow in this tale, one can't help but think of "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle," another tale featuring winter and jewelry. The matters of the Mazarin Stone and the Borgia pearl both took place in summer. The Musgrave and Agra treasures both appeared (and subsequently disappeared) in the fall. Upon casually surveying the Canon, however, there don't seem to be any tales of precious stones taking place in the spring. Is this just coincidence, or did Watson have something against thinking about gems in the springtime, which made he leave out such chronicles of that season? With his love of the ladies and quick-to-fall-in-love nature, did he steer clear of diamonds in the spring out of bachelor self-defense? (Yes, it's a reach, but at question sixteen, any straw seems quite grabbable.)

## **17. Meanwhile, Back In A Stinking Jail Cell . . .**

While it seems quite natural that Holmes might forego his usual tricks in his haste to get his reward, what about poor young Arthur Holder? Sure, Holmes stops in at the jail at about one a.m. to tell the young fellow that everything is going to be fine, but shouldn't he be doing something about getting the boy out? Holmes then heads home to the comfort of his non-jail-cell bed, and then sometime after nine when Papa Holder finally shows up, Holmes gets his check, tells his tale, and then lets the banker run off to get his son out of the lockup. Couldn't things have been handled a little more expeditiously for the young man's sake?

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