

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XX – The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual

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

1. The Young Guys' Apartment

Watson reports that Holmes "was none the less in his personal habits one of the most untidy men that ever drove a fellow-lodger to distraction." Then he admits, "Not that I am in the least conventional in that respect myself." The good doctor then goes on to report some specifics, which we usually attribute to Holmes's eccentricity.

The thing we never take into account, however, is that these were two fairly young guys sharing an apartment. While a forty-year-old might raise his eyebrows if his room-mate pinned the morning mail to the mantle with a knife, a guy in his twenties is a little more liable to take it in stride. How many of these crazy habits of Holmes's were just the extravagances of youth? Do we actually think Holmes didn't eventually get a tobacco humidior or a nice cigar case?

2. There's Got To Be A Story Here . . .

"Our chambers were always full of chemicals and of criminal relics which had a way of wandering into unlikely positions, and of turning up in the butter-dish or in even less desirable places."

Okay, I have to ask. Where is a less desirable place than the butter dish? Chemicals and criminal relics on the dinner table has to be the worst possible place in my book. And as Watson had a separate bedroom, Holmes would have had to make a special effort to get them into the doctor's bed. So what's left? (And what's the story Watson isn't telling us?)



3. Calling Dr. Doyle! Calling Dr. Doyle!

"I have mentioned somewhere in these incoherent memoirs," Watson writes, most coherently. Why is the good doctor so down on his writing abilities? Have Holmes's criticisms actually affected his self-esteem?

Or were his writing skills actually that weak, needing the magic wand of a certain burly fairy godmother with the initials "ACD"?

4. And Speaking Of Writers . . .

What about that Holmes?

"Thus month after month his papers accumulated until every corner of the room was stacked with bundles of manuscript," Watson writes.

Not newspapers. Not correspondence. Manuscript. Bundles of manuscript. Notes for monographs. Drafts of articles like "The Book of Life." Details of cases. Studies of music. Translations of documents from other eras.

How much writing was Holmes doing? Was he doing it during the cases, or while he was lethargically stuck on the couch? Where did it all go? Published or not? (If so, under pseudonyms of course.)

5. Who's Coming Up With The Titles Here?

"These," Holmes explains, "are all that I have left to remind me of the adventure of the Musgrave Ritual."

While it's easy to see that Sherlock Holmes gave Watson the idea for the title "A Study in Scarlet" by his use of the phrase in that novel, up until now I never really considered where Watson got his "The Adventure of" standard. Was it Holmes who thought of his investigations as "adventures" or Watson?

While some of them are not what we'd traditionally think of as action-type adventures, they were definitely adventures in mental gymnastics, which would seem to indicate Holmes as the "adventurer," wouldn't it?

6. The Pipeline To Crime

"Even when you knew me first," Holmes explains to Watson, "I had already established a considerable, though not a very lucrative, connection."

By "connection" we would assume Holmes means a connection to Scotland Yard . . . or should we? What other sorts of connections might have brought a consulting detective business on a regular basis? And if it was the Yard, who or what was that connection?

7. The Power Of Advertising

The master detective recalls, “When I first came up to London I had rooms in Montague Street, just round the corner from the British Museum, and there I waited.”

Like a certain Literary Agent beginning his medical career, the detective was waiting for business to show up in those early days on Montague Street. But Sherlock Holmes was starting a brand new consulting specialty, one the world would have to have explained to it, so just hanging his shingle out might not have been enough to draw in business ... or would it? What was Holmes depending upon to draw in clients as he waited there on Montague Street? A sign? Word of mouth from some earlier canvassing he had done? Newspaper ads?

8. The Death Of Father Musgrave

When asked how he’s doing, Reginald Musgrave answers: “You probably heard of my poor father's death; he was carried off about two years ago.”

Since Holmes eventually visits the Musgrave home and says nothing of giant birds or bandits carrying off the locals, one would deduce the Musgrave means carried off by the undertaker. Or was “carried off” a euphemism for death that had connotations of a certain type of death at that time?

9. He’s Probably Not The Amway Representative

“I am member for my district as well,” says Reginald Musgrave, and while this might be as clear as glass to our British cousins, many of we colonials have to wonder about that one. What was Musgrave a member of, what was his district, and how did he become its member? Are we talking Parliament here, and if so, wasn’t Musgrave pretty young for that? How much of his time would that have taken up?

10. The Early Career Of Butler Brunton

Of Brunton, we read, “He was a young schoolmaster out of place when he was first taken up by my father... and though he has been with us for twenty years he cannot be more than forty now.”

The math is easy enough: forty minus twenty is twenty. If Brunton was an out-of-work school teacher at twenty, does this mean he had ever actually had a job as a teacher? How young did schoolmasters start teaching in Victorian times?

11. The House Band At Hurlstone Manor

“The butler of Hurlstone is always a thing that is remembered by all who visit us,” Sir Reginald says. He has already cited that Brunton is multilingual and can play all sorts of musical instruments. Were serving staff often expected to also serve as entertainers in larger households? Would it have been expected for father Musgrave to call in the butler and request a song to two after dinner? How, other than music, might have Brunton made himself so memorable to the guests? (Ignoring the part about him being a Don Juan who was well satisfied with his position, of course.)

12. A Don Juan Who Was Well Satisfied In His Position

Musgrave speaks of having “no end of trouble” with Brunton after his wife died, as Brunton seemed to be out charming all the girls in the quiet rural area. Would a butler have had much time to romance women outside of the manor? Or was Brunton spending most of his time flirting with the cook and *eight* maids before his engagement to Rachel Howells? Just how much of the female countryside was Brunton tearing up with his languages and music, and where would he meet girls outside of the Hurlstone household?

13. Coming Of Age, Musgrave-Style

“It is a sort of ceremony peculiar to our family, which each Musgrave for centuries past has gone through on his coming of age,” Sir Reginald says of the Musgrave Ritual.

Did fathers begin this ritual by mentioning to their sons what it was really about, only to lose that part to time? Or do we think Sir Ralph himself was purposefully obscure in training his own son about the new family legacy? What if the king returned and the current resident couldn't figure it out? While it makes a handy mystery from the back end of things, from the front end does this ritual make any sense as a tool for hiding the crown? What was Sir Ralph thinking?

14. The Case Of The Battle-Axed Burglar

Seeing a light from the manor library, Reginald Musgrave takes a handy battle-axe from the wall and proceeds to investigate. While events were such that the battle-axe was never put to use, what if it had been? Shooting a burglar is, to this day, seen as an acceptable activity in most jurisdictions, but what of severing the limbs of or beheading an intruder? How would the neighbors have looked upon such a thing even in those days? Would Sir Reginald have had any problems with the law about taking a thief apart in such a manner?

15. The Final Fate Of Crazy Rachel

Losing a fiancé, trapping an ex-fiancé, and coming into the possession of an ancient treasure seems to have driven Rachel Howells around the bend, if she wasn't halfway there to start with. Yet Holmes seems to think that she's in enough command of her faculties to book passage out of the country . . . but was she? Is it more likely that a poor demented servant girl got aboard a ship for the Continent or America, or that she was taken in by some isolated farmer who either nursed her back to mental health or abused her until she died? Would a wandering lunatic have wound up in some low-rent public asylum? What other possible fates awaited a fleeing basket-case?

16. The Real Musgrave Treasure

We know that a bag of nasty-looking old metal and things wound up in the mere. But was this just the "trash" portion of the hidden box? Would anyone only keep a few coins and a few stones in a royal crown?

Did more recognizable pieces of gold and jewels survive, to be kept by the "not as crazy as she seemed" Rachel Howells? Is this why Holmes thought she fled the country? Could a servant girl with a bag of gold and jewels make a life for herself in America or Europe, or was she just fodder for villainy?

17. The Plural Of Musgrave

"They have the crown down at Hurlstone," Holmes says, "though they had some legal bother and a considerable sum to pay before they were allowed to retain it. I am sure that if you mentioned my name they would be happy to show it to you."

Who is this "they" Holmes speaks of, when Sir Reginald was a single man during the time Holmes helped him? Should we infer that Sir Reginald had gained a family by the time Holmes tells the tale to Watson, and that Holmes has kept up on his old schoolmate enough to know this?

Brad Keefauver, BSI

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