

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXIII – The Adventure of the Resident Patient

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

1. Watson Becomes A Bit Jaded

“For in those cases in which Holmes has performed some tour de force of analytical reasoning, and has demonstrated the value of his peculiar methods of investigation, the facts themselves have often been so slight or so commonplace that I could not feel justified in laying them before the public. On the other hand, it has frequently happened that he has been concerned in some research where the facts have been of the most remarkable and dramatic character, but where the share which he has himself taken in determining their causes has been less pronounced than I, as his biographer, could wish. The small matter which I have chronicled under the heading of "A Study in Scarlet," and that other later one connected with the loss of the Gloria Scott, may serve as examples of this Scylla and Charybdis which are forever threatening the historian.”

Okay, that’s one long and complicated quote.

Correct me if I’m wrong here, but isn’t Watson saying that “A Study in Scarlet” was a case where the facts were commonplace or slight? Were American frontiersmen using fifty-fifty poison pills on gal-stealing bigamists every day in Victorian London? Or is Watson thinking less of his initial work as his involvement with Holmes’s cases went on?



2. The Web Of Sherlock Holmes

“He loved to lie in the very centre of five millions of people, with his filaments stretching out and running through them, responsive to every little rumour or suspicion of unsolved crime.”

Sounds a bit like Moriarty, doesn't it? Moriarty, however, had a vast organization behind him. What are Holmes's "filaments" that bring him these little rumors and suspicions of unsolved crime?

3. Watson Gets Passionate

“You were recalling the incidents of Beecher's career. I was well aware that you could not do this without thinking of the mission which he undertook on behalf of the North at the time of the Civil War, for I remember you expressing your passionate indignation at the way in which he was received by the more turbulent of our people.”

Henry Ward Beecher came to London in 1863 to help gain English support for the Northern cause in the Civil War. Reading of what happened during Beecher's speaking engagements at that time will shatter any stereotypes an American might hold of reserved and ultra-civilized Englishmen, and Watson was plainly ashamed of his "more turbulent" countrymen. Beecher's troubles are over twenty years in the past at the time of "Resident Patient," however . . . so why was Watson so passionate about it at this later date? Was a young Watson actually present for one of Beecher's speeches? Why else would he get so passionate about something so long ago?

4. A Performance We'd All Pay To See

Despite the fact Watson claims everyone is out of town, when he and Holmes decide to take a stroll, London seems quite the happening place.

“For three hours we strolled about together, watching the ever-changing kaleidoscope of life as it ebbs and flows through Fleet Street and the Strand. His characteristic talk, with its keen observance of detail and subtle power of inference, held me amused and enthralled.”

Who wouldn't want to spend three hours with Holmes as he rambled off the details of passers-by on London's busy streets? But wouldn't people notice that these two men were glancing at them and talking about them? How dangerous might that have been in urban London?

5. The Tools Of The Trade

When Holmes identifies Trevelyan's brougham as belonging to a doctor, Watson knows it is from "the nature and state of the various medical instruments in the wicker basket which hung in the lamp-light inside the brougham."

One would think that such portable and better known medical instruments as stethoscopes, syringes, and scalpels could be carried in the traditional doctor's bag. What medical instruments would be big enough and commonly used enough that Trevelyan would carry them around in a wicker basket?

6. The Driverless Carriage

Holmes and Watson encounter Trevelyan's brougham sitting outside 221 Baker Street with medical tools clearly visible inside. Yet they never mention a the carriage's driver until Trevelyan himself says something. Where was the coachman? Wouldn't it be a little strange for Holmes to be loudly making deductions about their visitor when the visitor's driver was sitting right there? Where might he have been?

In taking tea with Mrs. Hudson? Down the block a bit chatting up some street wench? Would the contents of the carriage have been safe on a London street at that hour? Not all street urchins wound up in the Irregulars after all . . .

7. The Comment About The Candle

Holmes deduces that Trevelyan hasn't been waiting long due to the state of the candle upon the side-table. Sounds good on the surface, but it would also mean that either a.) Mrs. Hudson started each evening with fresh candles throughout the house, or b.) Holmes observed and remembered the current length of every candle in his abode. Which was the case, or are there other options? And didn't they have gas lighting in 221B at that time?

8. Venture Capitalists Of The Medical Trade

"This was the strange proposal, Mr. Holmes, with which the man Blessington approached me," Trevelyan states. But after hearing the doctor's story of his promising career being held up for lack of funding, Blessington's offer to set him up in a practice for a share of the profits seems like the perfect solution. Such investments were surely common in other businesses at the time. Why should it seem so strange in the medical field? Was the mixture of business and medicine something uncommon then that we've grown accustomed to in the modern day?

9. Oh, Percy's Delicate Ears!

"Who has been in my room?' he cried.

"No one,' said I.

"It's a lie!' he yelled. 'Come up and look!'

"I passed over the grossness of his language, as he seemed half out of his mind with fear," Trevelyan comments on the previous exchange. What was so "gross" about Blessington's language? No obvious coarse words there, are there? Or was the accusation of lying what Percy considered so gross?

10. The Long Walk Home

"A minute later we were in the street and walking for home. We had crossed Oxford Street and were halfway down Harley Street before I could get a word from my companion."

It took something under a quarter of an hour to ride in a carriage to 403 Brook Street. It's now probably between eleven and midnight. Holmes and Watson have already been out for one long walk earlier in the evening. Why didn't they take a cab? How long would the walk home have taken them? Would there have been many people out on the streets at that time of night on their route?

11. The Adventure Of The Cataleptic Detective

"And the catalepsy?" Watson asks.

"A fraudulent imitation, Watson, though I should hardly dare to hint as much to our specialist. It is a very easy complaint to imitate. I have done it myself."

We've seen Holmes pretend to pass out in "Reigate Squires" and seen the use he had for such an act. But catalepsy is a fairly specific sort of losing consciousness involved muscular rigidity -- why would Holmes need to play-act that specific ailment instead of just a general, all-purpose faint? Was he just varying his repertoire, or would there be a situation where just that ailment was called for?

12. The Prophecy Of Sherlock Holmes

"But we may sleep on it now, for I shall be surprised if we do not hear something further from Brook Street in the morning," Holmes says after visiting Blessington. He knows someone wanted something in Blessington's room, probably Blessington himself. But when he says "hear something further," does he mean he expects a change of heart from the less-than-forthcoming resident patient, or does Holmes actually know a break-in will occur before dawn? And if the latter, did he suspect Blessington's criminal nature and leave him to his fate?

13. Lanner, Sociologist And Scotland Yardman

"It's about five in the morning, you know, that suicides are most common," Inspector Lanner says. Any truth to this, or is he just talking off the top of his head? (And from his own experience or from some statistics he'd read?) Late, late at night, perhaps, but by five a.m., wouldn't even the most ambitious suicide be tired enough to put it off until tomorrow?

14. All The Prison Release News

"No doubt the day on which he was so perturbed was the day when he had seen of their release in the newspapers."

Were all the latest prison releases in the papers of the day? While the release of the aging Worthingdon bank gang might be big news in Worthingdon, would it have rated a mention in the London papers that Blessington subscribed to?

15. The Watery Sword Of Justice Strikes Again!

"I have no doubt, Inspector," Holmes observes, "that you will see that, though that shield may fail to guard, the sword of justice is still there to avenge."

Once more Sherlock Holmes speaks of vengeance, and once more the villains meet a mysterious death at sea, just like in "Five Orange Pips." Coincidence? How common were shipwrecks in those days? Enough that we might expect it to occur this often?

16. More Great Detective Work By Villains

How did the newly released convicts find their fellow bank robber? He had changed his name from Sutton to Blessington and moved into a part of London one would never expect an ex-robber to be in. Blessington only went out at one point during the day, and if they had seen him on the street (by some extremely unlikely chance), wouldn't they have just grabbed him there? Or at least have known that was the time he took his walks? The gang's discovery of Blessington is practically more amazing than Holmes's deductions at the end of the case. How did they pull it off?

17. That's A Deal Any Crook Would Go For

Sutton is said to be the worst of the Worthingdon bank gang. He turns informant on the rest, and is, apparently, set free for testifying against them. From the money he had to invest in Trevelyan's career, one would think that Sutton still had the seven thousand pounds the gang stole. Wouldn't the money be the first thing Scotland Yard would have wanted Sutton to tell them about?

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