

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

His Last Bow

Adventure XLVII – His Last Bow

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "His Last Bow" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. The Record Holder For Terrible

Watson begins this tale, published in 1917 with: "It was nine o'clock at night upon the second of August--the most terrible August in the history of the world." And indeed it was -- at that time. Has the world had a more terrible August in the eight decades and more since them? And, not to branch off into pastiche too much, what might undercover Holmes have been doing to best aid England on those terrible days?

2. The Kaiser's Own Speed Racer

"One of these was his present companion, Baron Von Herling, the chief secretary of the legation, whose huge 100-horse-power Benz car was blocking the country lane as it waited to waft its owner back to London."

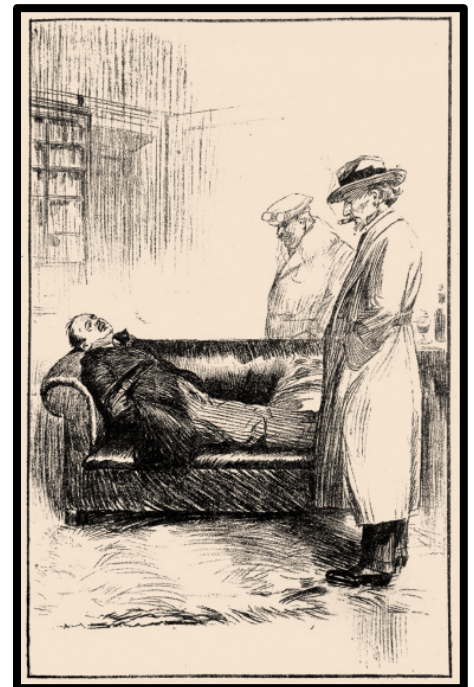
Story problem time: If Baron Von Herling owns a 100-horse Benz in 1914 and goes as fast as the law allows, how long will it take him to hit London? How long if he cuts loose and leaves all local constables along the way in a cloud of dust?

3. The German Living In Britain

"They have, for example, their insular conventions which simply must be observed," Baron Von Herling comments on the English citizenry.

"Meaning, 'good form' and that sort of thing?" Von Bork then sighs as "one who had suffered much."

Von Bork is obviously living the good life, yet having to deal with the residents of Great Britain seems to give him pain. What cultural differences might be most irritating to a German visitor to that country?



4. When Is Holmes Going To Show Up?

Having written these seventeen questions for a good many stories now, the discussion leader is finding this one a bit harder than most ... simply due to the absence of our usual main character. Would the Scarlet Pimpernel have been more popular if he had appeared in his stories more often, instead of letting unfamiliar characters hog the tale until mid-story, like Holmes does in this one? What must the readers of the original tale have thought, when a magazine booms "His Last Bow" as a Sherlock Holmes story, and they find none of the usual Holmes-story features? Is the surprise in this tale worth leaving that comfortable Watsonian form we've all come to know and love?

5. The Germans Have Much To Answer For

Von Bork asks, "How, then, can England come in, especially when we have stirred her up such a devil's brew of Irish civil war, window-breaking Furies, and God knows what to keep her thoughts at home."

Is he taking credit for all of England's domestic troubles? Did the Germans actually have anything to do with Britain's unrest, either in encouraging what was already there or starting things altogether?

6. Areas Of German Interest

"Each pigeon-hole had its label, and his eyes as he glanced along them read a long series of such titles as 'Fords,' 'Harbour-defences,' 'Aeroplanes,' 'Ireland,' 'Egypt,' 'Portsmouth forts,' 'The Channel,' 'Rosythe,' and a score of others. Each compartment was bristling with papers and plans."

While some of these topics of German spy research make perfect sense to the modern reader, a few of them seem a bit odd. What interest did the Germans have in Fords and Egypt? What data might they have gained from the British on such subjects?

7. Is Holmes There Yet? Is Holmes There Yet?

Von Bork says of Altamont, "You see he poses as a motor expert and I keep a full garage."

What might a "full garage" consisted of in 1917? Multiple motorcars, or just all the parts and tools to keep just one in perfect order?

8. The Pfennig-Pinching Baron

Baron Von Herling comments "They are useful, these traitors, but I grudge them their blood money."

Was the Baron so involved in the German cause that he actually expected foreigners to see the light and work for free? Was Germany that strapped for cash that it pained him to see any of it paying off people like Altamont? Or was the Baron just cheap?

9. Who Is At War With Whom Here?

Von Bork says of Altamont, "Besides he is not a traitor. I assure you that our most pan-Germanic Junker is a sucking dove in his feelings towards England as compared with a real bitter Irish-American . . . He seems to have declared war on the King's English as well as on the English king."

Why would an Irish-American be at war with England? Wouldn't the fact that he was now an American remove him a bit from Irish-English antipathies? Or is there something behind his move to America that would make him even more bitter than a regular Irishman?

10. In Heaven Or On Earth?

"The heavens, too, may not be quite so peaceful if all that the good Zeppelin promises us comes true," Von Herling says.

Was Zeppelin promising something other than Zeppelins, that slow and peaceful-looking airship? Would the dirigibles really disturb the heavens so much, or were the bombing targets on Earth the true place things would change?

11. The Canon's Real Woman Of Mystery

She is "a dear old ruddy-faced woman in a country cap." She knits and she likes cats. Her presence keeps Holmes "easy in my mind." And her name is Martha.

Forget Irene Adler -- Martha is the real wonder woman of the Canon, undertaking two-year missions for Holmes. And he actually seems to trust her, too, something a younger Holmes might not have felt about any female.

Do we have any clues about the origin of this amazing woman? Could she have been someone we have met elsewhere? Or did she come from some unwritten part of Holmes's life?

12. Uncle Sam Wants You, Sherlock Holmes!

“He was a tall, gaunt man of sixty, with clear-cut features and a small goatee beard which gave him a general resemblance to the caricatures of Uncle Sam.”

Sherlock Holmes has always had American sympathies, but his time in the U.S. of A. seems to have completed his conversion. He now looks like Uncle Sam, he seems to think he'll be talking like an American forever, and he's now had some exposure to just how popular the Holmes tales were on the other side of the pond. What are the chances that Holmes is going to decide to move to America when his war service is over? Would the younger country have appeals for him?

13. Hopefully He Didn't Find It In The Road

“A half-smoked, sodden cigar hung from the corner of his mouth, and as he sat down he struck a match and relit it.”

We know “Altamont” has never had the best smoking habits, but running around with a “sodden” cigar butt in his mouth seems rather disgusting. Do cigars suddenly go out during a car ride and need relighting when one stops? Or would Altamont have snuffed it getting into the car, to pick it up upon getting out again?

14. Von Bork's Spy Network

Von Bork seems to use a lot of mercenary non-Germans in his espionage activities: Jack James, the bone-headed American. Hollis the role-playing madman with a hundred suspicious men around him. And Steiner . . . was he a storekeeper, or was it just his “store” of papers that got raided?

If one isn't using one's own countrymen for a spy network, isn't it a bit like setting up a criminal empire, using the flawed souls that exist locally? How close might Von Bork have been to the late Professor Moriarty in evil management skills?

15. Altamont's Area Of Residence

“My landlady down Fratton way had some inquiries, and when I heard of it I guessed it was time for me to hustle.”

What was the Irish-American spy doing “down Fratton way”? Did it have anything to do with the signals and codes he was stealing, and how so?

16. Altamont's Next Port Of Call

"It's me for little Holland, and the sooner the better," Altamont says.

Von Bork replies, "by all means, go to Holland," but was Rotterdam Altamont's true meaning? Isn't putting "little" in front of a place usually an indication you mean some urban neighborhood full of immigrants from that place? Or was Holland just known for being small?

17. More Cases From The Tin Dispatch Box

"I have done a good deal of business in Germany in the past," Holmes tells Von Bork.

Perhaps my mind just isn't too quick at the moment, but when did Holmes or Watson ever mention a case that took Holmes to Germany? Sure, he's dealt with Germans in London, but when did Holmes have time to be "in Germany"?

18. The Taverns In The Town

"Well, you realize your position, you and your accomplice here. If I were to shout for help as we pass through the village-- --"

"My dear sir, if you did anything so foolish you would probably enlarge the two limited titles of our village inns by giving us 'The Dangling Prussian' as a signpost."

Anyone have any ideas on what the two village inns were in the nearby village?

19. That Last Quiet Talk

On the terrace, Holmes and Watson have what may or may not have been their last words together: "The two friends chatted in intimate converse for a few minutes, recalling once again the days of the past."

Given that they aren't spending too much time here, what might they have recalled in those moments? What times might have meant the most to the two men? What else might they have talked about in those last moments before transporting Von Bork?

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