

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XLIX – The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone

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

1. Baker Street, Third Person

“He looked round him at the scientific charts upon the wall, the acid-charred bench of chemicals, the violin-case leaning in the corner, the coal-scuttle, which contained of old the pipes and tobacco.”

What sort of scientific charts might Holmes find useful enough to keep on the wall for years? Is the coal-scuttle no longer holding pipes and tobacco?

2. It's Just A Diamond!

“Why, we had the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary both sitting on that very sofa,” Billy tells Watson.

Why would such high level government folk be so concerned about a bauble? If the Mazarin was a part of the Crown Jewels, why weren't more of them stolen? What dire consequences might have come if the diamond was not recovered?



3. Alas, Poor Sherlock! Billy Knew Him Well.

“There was a facsimile of his old friend, dressing-gown and all, the face turned three-quarters towards the window and downward, as though reading an invisible book, while the body was sunk deep in an armchair. Billy detached the head and held it in the air.”

"We put it at different angles, so that it may seem more lifelike," Billy finally says. Do wax replicas ever have adjustable heads, or is this a Holmes innovation?

4. More Residents For The Empty House

"There are folk who watch us from over yonder. I can see a fellow now at the window," Billy says, drawing the curtains apart.

Were there more rooms available for snipers on Baker Street besides Camden House, or was this the same window Sebastian Moran would eventually use? And why is Billy so carefree about opening the curtains? For a man concerned about placing the boy in danger, Holmes would seem rather foolish not to mention the air-gun business to the lad, wouldn't he? Or was Billy just that impulsive?

5. The New, Hen-Pecked Dr. Watson

"Is alcohol permitted?" Holmes asks his friend, then says, "You have not, I hope, learned to despise my pipe and my lamentable tobacco?"

Why would Watson not be permitted alcohol? Why would he suddenly despise tobacco? Is Watson sporting a new medical condition or a strict wife keeping him on a short leash? Or could there be some third reason for Holmes's concerns?

6. The Miss Manners Section Of Italy

Holmes describes Count Sylvius picking up his parasol when the detective is disguised as an old woman: "'By your leave, madame,' said he--half-Italian, you know, and with the Southern graces of manner when in the mood, but a devil incarnate in the other mood."

What does Holmes mean by "Southern graces"? Southern Italy, or Southern somewhere else? Why are those folk so noted for their grace?

7. First, You Get Rid Of The Diamond . . .

Holmes says of Sylvius, "I followed him to old Straubensee's workshop in the Minories. Straubensee made the air-gun--a very pretty bit of work, as I understand, and I rather fancy it is in the opposite window at the present moment. Have you seen the dummy? Of course, Billy showed it to you. Well, it may get a bullet through its beautiful head at any moment."

Okay, suppose you steal one of the Crown jewels. Wouldn't getting rid of the stone be your first priority? Even if one British fence refuses to break it up for you, why not get the thing over to Europe,

especially if you're Italian and have every reason to visit the homeland? Why would you waste time buying a specialized assassination weapon to kill any detectives handling the case?

8. Pest Control In Algeria

"You used to shoot lions in Algeria," Holmes says to the Count, later suggesting he does it to "free the country from a pest." Count Sylvius agrees.

How much pest-control lion hunting went on in Victorian Africa? Was it considered just a part of the march of civilization, the equivalent of killing coyotes to keep the chickens safe?

9. The Duel Of Threatening Gestures

"The Count sprang to his feet, and his hand involuntarily moved back to his hip-pocket," we read, and then later:

"The Count had risen from his chair, and his hand was behind his back. Holmes held something half protruding from the pocket of his dressing-gown."

There's a lot of reaching going on here, but is the Count reaching for a weapon on both occasions? Different weapons for different occasions, even? And if something was "half-protruding" from Holmes's dressing-gown, wouldn't anyone present have been able to see what it was?

10. The Detective Who Cried Wolf

"You can't bluff me, Count Sylvius," Holmes says, and then proceeds to run his own bluff. He pulls out a notebook and starts hinting at complete knowledge of Sylvius's past crimes, only to have the Count stop him:

"No; you're wrong there."

"Then I am right on the others!"

Holmes obviously didn't have all the details he claimed. But then, he proceeds to claim he has a lot more knowledge:

"I have the cabman who took you to Whitehall and the cabman who brought you away. I have the commissionaire who saw you near the case. I have Ikey Sanders, who refused to cut it up for you. Ikey has peached, and the game is up."

Having told Sylvius this, Holmes makes an offer, "But if you hand it over . . . you can go free so long as you behave yourself in the future."

Since Sherlock Holmes opened his verbal duel with a bluff, why should Count Sylvius believe his subsequent “facts”? Could Holmes have been lying on all counts? Was the bluff early on a mistake on the detective’s part?

11. And Tonight Holmes Will Be Playing . . .

“I shall try over the Hoffman 'Barcarole' upon my violin,” Holmes says as he leaves, and our narrator writes that “A few moments later the long-drawn, wailing notes of that most haunting of tunes came faintly through the closed door of the bedroom.”

We later learn that the music comes from a gramophone. Is it more likely that Holmes recorded his own violin concert, or purchased one with his gramophone?

12. The Brand-Name Dummy Critic

“Well, strike me! Madame Tussaud ain't in it. It's the living spit of him, gown and all,” Sam Merton comments upon seeing the Holmes “dummy.”

Is Sam saying that Madame Tussaud’s waxworks aren’t all that realistic? Why is a lunkheaded boxer so down on those artisans of wax?

13. Back To That Diamond . . .

"The stone is here in my secret pocket. I take no chances leaving it about. It can be out of England to-night and cut into four pieces in Amsterdam before Sunday. He knows nothing of Van Seddar."

"I thought Van Seddar was going next week."

"He was. But now he must get off by the next boat. One or other of us must slip round with the stone to Lime Street and tell him."

"But the false bottom ain't ready."

Sylvius doesn’t trust anyone with the diamond. He already has it in his secret pocket. Once again we must ask, why isn’t he leaving the country? What good’s a “false bottom” going to do that a secret pocket can’t, especially if Sylvius isn’t letting anyone else have the diamond?

14. Aw, C’mon Now, Count!

Would this case be a little more interesting if the villains weren’t complete idiots? Bad enough they’re making plans in the detective’s sitting room. But then we get:

"Come over to the window if you want to see the beauty properly. Now hold it to the light! Here!"

Sure, Holmes is playing the violin. But what's to keep Billy or Mrs. Hudson or even a visiting Scotland Yard official from walking in and seeing these clowns holding the diamond up so prominently? Can anyone find a case for Sylvius having anything in his head but bread pudding?

15. The Timing Of The Police

Holmes snatches up the diamond and rings his electric bell, apparently of the sort used to summon servants. A full thirty seconds (time the conversation yourself) or more seem to elapse before the police are heard on the stairs. What takes the London law so long to answer Holmes's summons? For that matter, did Watson have enough time to get to Scotland Yard and back with Youghal in time for the capture? Holmes planned his trap ahead -- might the cops who arrested Sylvius have been waiting in the kitchen even as Watson is sent off to the Yard?

16. Those Old Whiskers Of Much Blackness

"The door opened to admit a thin, austere figure with a hatchet face and drooping mid-Victorian whiskers of a glossy blackness which hardly corresponded with the rounded shoulders and feeble gait."

What style might "mid-Victorian whiskers" be? And this "glossy blackness" -- how did the prominent elder statesman (who had seen "fifty years of official life") color his aging whiskers in those days?

17. The Size Of The Mazarin Stone

A lot of playing around with the yellow Crown diamond goes on in this case, all seeming very visual and giving one the idea that this stone is the size of a walnut, or maybe an egg. If it is truly the "king" of diamonds, the biggest of the big, how big would the Mazarin stone be?

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2000-2001