

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure L – The Problem of Thor Bridge

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Problem of Thor Bridge" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. The Legendary Treasure Box

"Somewhere in the vaults of the bank of Cox and Co., at Charing Cross, there is a travel-worn and battered tin dispatch-box with my name, John H. Watson, M.D., Late Indian Army, painted upon the lid. It is crammed with papers, nearly all of which are records of cases to illustrate the curious problems which Mr. Sherlock Holmes had at various times to examine."

These words were first published in February 1922. Can we assume that the famous dispatch-box was still there at the time of publication? Even though Watson uses the present tense, he had to take the box out to prepare "Thor Bridge" for publication, didn't he? Why was Watson keeping this box in a bank vault to begin with?



2. Underestimating The Fortean Occurrence

"A problem without a solution may interest the student, but can hardly fail to annoy the casual reader. Among these unfinished tales is that of Mr. James Phillimore, who, stepping back into his own house to get his umbrella, was never more seen in this world. No less remarkable is that of the cutter Alicia, which sailed one spring morning into a small patch of mist from where she never again emerged, nor was anything further ever heard of herself and her crew. A third case worthy of note is that of Isadora Persano, the well-known journalist and duelist, who was found stark staring mad with a match box in front of him which contained a remarkable worm said to be unknown to science."

Would reading such mysterious, unfathomable tales of mysteries beyond human ken actually annoy the readers? Or is it Holmes that would be annoyed? Did Watson let his Literary Agent have the really strange stuff to publish without the Holmes connection?

3. Watson's Past In America

"You have heard of Neil Gibson, the Gold King?" Holmes asks.

"You mean the American Senator?" Watson replies.

"Well, he was once Senator for some Western state," Holmes corrects.

Would an Englishman who had not spent some time in America know much of an American senator? Is Watson's outdated knowledge further evidence of his time in America?

4. Benedict Arnold, The Gold King

Okay, Neil Gibson is American enough to serve in the Senate. So why does this seeming all-American boy take his Brazilian wife and run off to England? With his money, surely he could live in the climate of his choice, and America offers a much wider selection than Britain. So why would an ex-Senator bail out on his native land?

5. J. Neil Gibson, The Anti-Lincoln

Marlow Bates speaks of soon being free of Gibson's "accursed slavery." Watson's first impression of Gibson a few moments later is that of "an Abraham Lincoln keyed to base uses instead of high ones." Did the thought of Gibson's "slavery" inspire Watson's thoughts of Lincoln? Did Abraham Lincoln leave such an impression on the English, or is this a further sign of Watson's American connections?

6. The Many Faces Of J. Neil

"I could not but admire him, for by a supreme self-command he had turned in a minute from a hot flame of anger to a frigid and contemptuous indifference."

Is what Watson describes here an admirable trait, or the sign of some seriously scary psychosis? We've already heard testimony of how evil this man is by his manager. We've seen his fiendish, knotted fist look. Is this calm just a well-practiced guise from his political career?

7. Plenty Of Room For A Sequel

“You've done yourself no good this morning, Mr. Holmes, for I have broken stronger men than you,” the evil Abe Lincoln says in his “calm” state. “No man ever crossed me and was the better for it.”

If Gibson didn't wind up a reformed man thanks to Miss Dunbar, might he eventually wind up facing Holmes as an adversary? When would he have broken stronger men than Holmes? In politics? In finance? Did he do it within the law or without?

8. A Braggart As Big As They Come

Gibson crows “I can make or break--and it is usually break. It wasn't individuals only. It was communities, cities, even nations.”

Nations? Is Gibson full of himself, or was there a nation he might have broken in the Victorian era? Which one?

9. Where Did The Money Come From?

Grace Dunbar “believed and said that a fortune for one man that was more than he needed should not be built on ten thousand ruined men who were left without the means of life.”

Didn't Gibson get his fortune from gold? How did he ruin ten thousand in gathering his wealth, as Miss Dunbar seems to accuse?

10. Permits! We Don't Need No Steenkin' Permits!

Holmes says, “I have no doubt we can get the necessary permits this morning and reach Winchester by the evening train.”

With few exceptions, Sherlock Holmes didn't seem to bother with warrants and such. J. Neil Gibson was obviously going to allow Holmes access to the murder site. So why did Holmes need to get permits (or “the official pass”) in London for Winchester?

11. The Clutch Of Death

Like so many other murder mystery victims, Maria Pinto Gibson has a note held tight in her dead fist. Now, a shot to the head is a pretty traumatic event . . . would the muscles of the hand still be responding to a brain that had sustained such catastrophic impact?

12. The Grace Dunbar Religious Experience

“I had expected from all that we had heard to see a beautiful woman, but I can never forget the effect which Miss Dunbar produced upon me. It was no wonder that even the masterful millionaire had found in her something more powerful than himself--something which could control and guide him.”

What the heck is Watson talking about here? Is he really raising superficial beauty to the level of a divine power?

13. The Practical Joker Of Baker Street

“Suddenly, however, as we neared our destination he seated himself opposite to me --we had a first-class carriage to ourselves--and laying a hand upon each of my knees he looked into my eyes with the peculiarly mischievous gaze which was characteristic of his more imp-like moods.”

Was Holmes looking at Watson this way because he was sure he had the case solved, or because he was going to attempt to dispose of Watson’s revolver in Thor mere? Could the detective have been actually trying to get the weapon out of the aging doctor’s hands for the safety of all concerned?

14. The Ages Of The Unmentioned Children

“I was young and ardent in those days . . . she was rare and wonderful in her beauty . . . passionate, whole-hearted, tropical, ill-balanced, very different from the American women whom I had known. Well, to make a long story short, I loved her and I married her. It was only when the romance had passed--and it lingered for years . . . But nothing changed her. She adored me in those English woods as she had adored me twenty years ago on the banks of the Amazon.”

Two young passionate lovers are quite naturally going to reproduce, especially in the younger days of their relationship. And since the Gibsons had been married for twenty years, shouldn’t their kids be a bit old for a governess by Grace Dunbar’s day?

15. Beautifully Guilty Or Beautifully Innocent?

“Perhaps you have seen her portrait in the papers. The whole world has proclaimed that she also is a very beautiful woman.”

Where were the newspapers getting their beautiful portraits of Grace Dunbar? Was Gibson giving them to the papers in hopes of her beauty convincing the public of her innocence? Wouldn’t the “think-the-worst” public prefer that this great beauty was really a killer?

16. Couldn't The Sergeant Handle The Details?

“You can let Mr. Gibson know that I will see him in the morning, when steps can be taken for Miss Dunbar's vindication.”

What steps might Holmes have planned to take to prove Grace Dunbar's innocence that Sergeant Coventry couldn't have handled?

17. History Repeating Itself . . .

Holmes speculates about Gibson and Dunbar: “Should they in the future join their forces, as seems not unlikely, the financial world may find that Mr. Neil Gibson has learned something in that schoolroom of sorrow where our earthly lessons are taught.”

Of course, J. Neil Gibson had earlier married a beautiful woman from a country different from his own, and later thought he was too different from her (as different as he had earlier thought she was from American women he had known). Would this relationship be any different in the end? Or would Gibson tire of his British conquest as he had of his North and South American ones?

Brad Keefauver, BSI

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