

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure LIV – The Adventure of the Illustrious Client

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

1. The Ever-Persistent Watson

“‘It can't hurt now,’ was Mr. Sherlock Holmes's comment when, for the tenth time in as many years.”

What was it about this case that had Watson asking to publish it on an annual basis? Did he find Gruner so loathsome that he wanted to punish him further in print? Did he want to remind Violet de Merville of her foolishness? Was he so fond of his chance to play the role as Dr. Hill Barton? Or was he trying to gain sympathy for poor Miss Kitty Winter? Or some other reason?



2. The Club Secretary Or The Club As Secretary?

The Carlton Club writes Holmes a letter saying, that Sir James “trusts, therefore, that Mr. Holmes will make every effort to grant this interview, and that he will confirm it over the telephone to the Carlton Club.”

Did a man’s club serve as his social secretary, making appointments and accepting RSVPs for him? Or was this a special situation, demonstrating some special position Damery held in the club?

3. Was This An Untold Case Or Not?

“You may remember his negotiations with Sir George Lewis over the Hammerford Will case,” Holmes says to Watson, only moments after asking him, “Do you know anything of this man Damery?”

If the Hammerford Will case was indeed one of Holmes's cases that Watson should remember, the good doctor would certainly know something of him, wouldn't he? Or was the Hammerford Will case just a prominent matter in the papers, in which case we have to wonder how great a job Sir James did of keeping it out of the papers?

4. The Case Of The Irish Aristocrat

"Frankness shone from his gray Irish eyes, and good humour played round his mobile, smiling lips. His lucent top-hat, his dark frock-coat, indeed, every detail, from the pearl pin in the black satin cravat to the lavender spats over the varnished shoes, spoke of the meticulous care in dress for which he was famous. The big, masterful aristocrat dominated the little room."

Not to be slurring the Irish, being a good part the same myself, but my impression was always that Ireland's native sons and daughters were the common folk of the Empire. Were there many Irish aristocrats moving among the swells of London in those days?

5. Shaking Hands With Danger

"If your man is more dangerous than the late Professor Moriarty, or than the living Colonel Sebastian Moran, then he is indeed worth meeting," Holmes says. (Though if you think about it, most of us are more dangerous than a dead Moriarty and a jailed Moran.) Did Holmes mean he actually enjoyed meeting dangerous criminals, outside of matching wits with them? Would he have enjoyed sitting outside Hannibal Lecter's cell, conversing with the fictional serial killer? Or having Lizzie Borden for tea? (There was that winning woman who poisoned her kids he spoke so highly of.)

6. Retiring To England To Escape Publicity

"Who could possibly have read what happened at Prague and have any doubts as to the man's guilt!" Holmes says of Gruner. "I knew, also, that he had come to England and had a presentiment that sooner or later he would find me some work to do."

Could a man tried for murder in Prague come to England and mingle with high society free of any stigma? While Holmes tracked European crime, how many other Londoners might have even been aware of Gruner's trial?

7. The Man Behind The Curtain

“It is important that I should be able to assure him that his honoured name has been in no way dragged into the matter. His motives are, to the last degree, honourable and chivalrous, but he prefers to remain unknown.”

What consequences might this tale’s mystery client have seen if he were to have hired Holmes himself to stop the Gruner-De Merville wedding? Or was he afraid of Gruner himself?

8. Her Accomplishments Were Many

Sir James explains, “He has a daughter, Violet de Merville, young, rich, beautiful, accomplished, a wonder-woman in every way.”

What might Violet have done to make herself an “accomplished” woman of the age? Education? Social reform? Business success? Would her wealth have been all her own, or is Sir James speaking of her father’s wealth?

9. The Upper Crust Cruise Line

“It was on a Mediterranean yachting voyage. The company, though select, paid their own passages. No doubt the promoters hardly realized the Baron's true character until it was too late.”

Were the promoters of this trip members of high society themselves? Did the best travel agencies arrange exclusive “invitation only” cruises? Or did one put in one’s name for a cruise only to be rejected if one’s credentials weren’t up to snuff?

10. Well, Maybe She’s Not A Wonder Woman ...

Of dear Violet we hear: “To say that she loves him hardly expresses it. She dotes upon him; she is obsessed by him. Outside of him there is nothing on earth. She will not hear one word against him.”

The amazing Miss Violet has a couple major flaws, it seems: obsessing over her man and being “indescribably annoying,” as Holmes tells us later. Would a woman truly as accomplished and strong as Damery portrays become that wildly obsessed with any man? Wouldn’t she be used to good-looking dandies who were not all they seemed? Were there aspects of her character Sir James had missed completely, as demonstrated by the ease with which Gruner captivated her? (Especially if he was portraying himself as the innocent in numerous public scandals that just happened to arise around him.)

11. The Beaten Member Of The Family

“I could deceive you by saying so, Mr. Holmes, but it would not be true. De Merville is a broken man. The strong soldier has been utterly demoralized by this incident. He has lost the nerve which never failed him on the battlefield and has become a weak, doddering old man, utterly incapable of contending with a brilliant, forceful rascal like this Austrian.”

Did De Merville’s daughter’s poor choice in men really ruin the general all by itself? Or did Gruner do something to General De Merville, unbeknownst to Violet, to keep the old man out of it? Could Gruner have applied some threat or humiliation to tame his future father-in-law ahead of time? Wouldn’t a general have his own backstage resources for dealing with an unwanted blackguard?

12. One More Number In His Personal Directory

Damery tells Holmes, “The Carlton Club will find me. But in case of emergency, there is a private telephone call, 'XX.31.'”

Holmes then notes it in his memorandum-book, continuing to smile after deciding to take the case with a mystery client. Does the collection of a private phone number to such a man as Sir James Damery please Holmes? Might he be thinking of some future favor he can call in from this man who usually screens his calls through the Carlton Club?

13. The Friends Of One’s Youth

“My old friend Charlie Peace was a violin virtuoso,” Holmes quips.

Sure, he’s probably speaking figuratively, but what are the chances that Sherlock Holmes actually met Charlie Peace before Peace’s death in 1879?

14. The Phases Of The Consulting Detective

Watson writes: “I have not had occasion to mention Shinwell Johnson in these memoirs because I have seldom drawn my cases from the latter phases of my friend's career.”

What’s Watson talking about when he says “latter phases”? If one looks at the dates of Watson’s chronicles, they seem pretty evenly spread across Holmes’s active years of practice, even during the later years. Was there a phase of Holmes’s business that we know nothing of? Did Watson stick to Holmes-Watson partnership cases when the detective agency had grown far beyond two employees just because he’d established the formula early on? Were the 1890s more of a time for teamwork at the Holmes agency?

15. The Career Of Shinwell Johnson

“Had Johnson been a "nark" of the police he would soon have been exposed, but as he dealt with cases which never came directly into the courts, his activities were never realized by his companions.”

Was Johnson the reason Holmes held Watson back from publishing this case for so many years? Did the underworld agent remain active in the decade when Holmes retired to Sussex, perhaps even rejoining Holmes for the set-up to “His Last Bow”?

16. Let’s Call A Moustache A Moustache

“The Baron has little waxed tips of hair under his nose, like the short antennae of an insect,” Holmes says. But I have to ask: was there any fashion in male facial hair other than a moustache which fits Holmes’s description? Is Holmes impugning Gruner’s manliness by refusing to call his moustache by that name? (Especially compared to Watson’s macho sub-nasal brush.)

17. She Sounds Like She’s From “Falmouth”

"Hell, London, gets me every time," Kitty Winter says, "Same address for Porky Shinwell."

Where exactly is the “Hell” section of London? Would Watson’s Victorian readers have been shocked by Miss Winter’s statement?

18. Regular Customers At Simpson’s

“I did not see Holmes again until the following evening when we dined once more at our Strand restaurant.”

Two nights in a row at Simpson’s. What is a handy point between Queen Anne Street and Baker Street? Was Mrs. Hudson refusing to cook for Watson now that he had moved out? Or had the landlady’s cook continued her reading of the Family Herald when she should have been improving her skills, to the detriment of Baker Street diners?

19. She’s So High Above Them, She’s A Problem

“Miss Winter’s advent rather amazed her, I think, but she waved us into our respective chairs like a reverend abbess receiving two rather leprous mendicants. If your head is inclined to swell, my dear Watson, take a course of Miss Violet de Merville.”

Wouldn’t an abbess be nicer to leprous mendicants? Is Holmes’s “leprous” line a subconscious reference to some disease Kitty Winter might have been afflicted with of the social sort?

20. Newsprint Of The Victorian Age

“There, black upon yellow, was the terrible news-sheet ...”

Did Victorian newspapers start out yellow, and just get yellower with time? Or was this news-sheet a specially colored paper?

21. Escaping Holmes Or Violet?

The evening papers say that “among the passengers on the Cunard boat Ruritania, starting from Liverpool on Friday, was the Baron Adelbert Gruner, who had some important financial business to settle in the States before his impending wedding to Miss Violet de Merville, only daughter of, etc., etc.”

Why was Gruner, a man so self-assured and so dangerous, running off to America? Was he a believer in “absence makes the heart grow fonder”? Did he need to put some distance between him and his fiancée to make a few sexual conquests before his wedding day? (Here’s a guy whose bachelor party I want to see -- from a safe distance, of course.)

22. First Thurston, Now Lomax

“Finally I drove to the London Library in St. James's Square, put the matter to my friend Lomax, the sublibrarian, and departed to my rooms with a goodly volume under my arm.”

Where might Watson have met a sublibrarian? Would a fellow in that line of work be a club man?

23. Is This A Great Story Or What?

Sure, it’s not a whodunnit, but does any other tale in the Canon feature such a wealth of colorful characters and details as “Illustrious Client”? It’s not often that the “17 Steps” run into overtime and I have to actually shut them down, but this case certainly brought it out. Anyone wanting to jump in on dynasties of pottery or any other parts of the story I didn’t get to, feel free.

Brad Keefauver, BSI

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