

# The Seventeen Steps

*Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes*

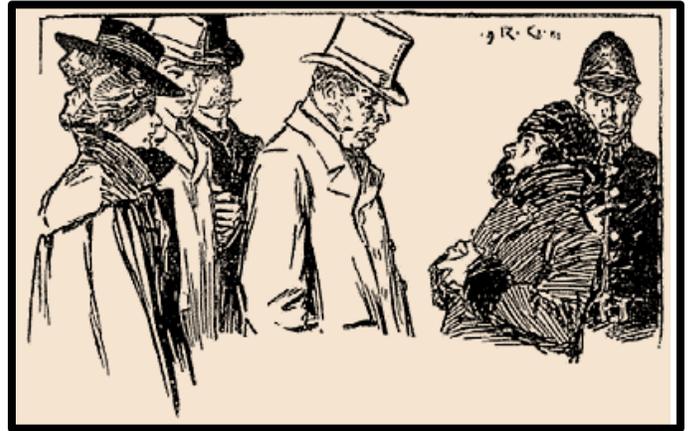
## Adventure II – The Sign of Four

***Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Sign of Four" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.***

### 1. Watson's Flaw

The Sign of the Four begins by showing us a major flaw in our hero's character, his cocaine usage. Watson, it would seem, does not make it through the tale without showing a flaw of his own: "I could have struck the man across the face, so hot was I at this callous and offhand reference to so delicate a matter."

Why is violence Watson's immediate reaction? True, he does not act upon the impulse this time, but were there other times he was not so restrained? Had he previously struck anyone across the face for a remark that offended him? This could give credence for the "bad temper" school of thought on his "bull pup."



### 2. The Doc From Down Under

If Watson did have bad habits like smacking mouthy fellows across the face, it might indicate a childhood in some less civilized land, and SIGN gives us some handy evidence of that in his words: "I have seen something of the sort on the side of a hill near Ballarat, where the prospectors had been at work."

Watson's Australian past is often overlooked by Sherlockians, and it is especially fascinating that he encounters some fellow citizens of good old Ballarat in "Reigate Squires." Did Watson's family wind up coming to England in much the same way that Turner and McCarthy did? Might there even be a connection?

### 3. Gossip Time:

Mrs. Bernstone, the housekeeper at Pondicherry Lodge, says: I have seen Mr. Bartholomew Sholto in joy and in sorrow for ten long years, but I never saw him with such a face on him as that."

Was the housekeeper having a romantic relationship with Bartholomew Sholto? Somehow it seems like she's seen a lot of emotion out of her employer.

#### **4. One More Paying Customer**

"Don't trouble yourself about it, Mr. Sholto," said Holmes; "I think that I can engage to clear you of the charge."

Was Holmes going to charge Sholto? Was his full meaning "I can be engaged for a reasonable fee"? Long before the ambulance-chasing lawyer, was Sherlock the Scotland Yard-chasing detective? It would seem that Athelney Jones alone could have made him quite a bit of money.

#### **5. Just Wondering . . .**

"I shall bring him then," said I. "It is one now. I ought to be back before three if I can get a fresh horse."

Fresh horse? From where?

#### **6. Tonga's Death Warrant**

"I have my stick."

"It is just possible that we may need something of the sort if we get to their lair. Jonathan I shall leave to you, but if the other turns nasty I shall shoot him dead."

Holmes is very definite about his plans for Tonga. Would he have felt the same about a normal Briton criminal, or was the fact that he was dealing with a "wild" pygmy frightening him into thinking of Tonga as a mad dog, less than human? Is Holmes intending self-defense or an excuse for premeditated capital punishment?

#### **7. Up, Up, And Away!**

"What the deuce is the matter with the dog?" growled Holmes. "They surely would not take a cab or go off in a balloon."

Balloon travel at time of SIGN . . . just how common was it? Holmes almost makes it sound as common as cabbing in that line . . . or is he just "eliminating the impossible."

#### **8. Bribe The Rascals**

"I'd like two shillin' better," the prodigy answered after some thought.

"Here you are, then! Catch!--A fine child, Mrs. Smith!"

"Lor' bless you, sir, he is that, and forward."

At this point in his life, we've only seen Sherlock Holmes deal with children one way: throw money at them. Were shillings hard to come by around the Holmes household when he was a child? Or was money just the best calling card for anyone in the lower classes at the time?

### **9. Rowboat For Hire**

"There is a boatman here with a wherry, Watson. We shall take it and cross the river."

While we all remember the steamboat chase in SIGN, this little rowboat trip across the Thames often gets missed. Were small boat ferrymen as common as cabs on the river? Would you yourself cross the Thames in a rowboat?

### **10. Sleep, Give Me Sleep!**

At "between eight and nine o'clock" in the morning after running around all night, Watson describes himself as "limp and weary, befogged in mind and fatigued in body." He has already protested earlier in the story that he still hasn't recovered from Afghanistan. But he takes a bath, changes clothes, comes down for breakfast and seems ready to go some more.

Now, be honest. At this point wouldn't you be going, "You're the detective, I'm going to bed!"? What did Watson hope to contribute/accomplish? And when Holmes does lull him into napping, Watson doesn't even go to his nearby bed . . . just sacking out on the couch. Oh, my aching back/war wound!

### **11. Run For It, Watson!**

"I think that we have had a close shave ourselves of being arrested for the crime."

"So do I. I wouldn't answer for our safety now if he should happen to have another of his attacks of energy."

At this moment there was a loud ring at the bell, and I could hear Mrs. Hudson, our landlady, raising her voice in a wail of expostulation and dismay.

"By heavens, Holmes," I said, half rising, "I believe that they are really after us."

What was Watson about to do? Make a break for it?

### **12. Without A Microwave!**

"Only that I insist upon your dining with us. It will be ready in half an hour. I have oysters and a brace of grouse, with something a little choice in white wines.--Watson, you have never yet recognized my merits as a housekeeper."

Perhaps one of our more grouse and oyster savvy Hounds can help me on this one: I have problems whipping hot dogs and steamed veggies together in a half an hour, how can Holmes can cook oysters and grouse in that time?

### **13. It's In The Other South America**

"We told him nothing; but we paid him well, and he was to get something handsome if we reached our vessel, the Esmeralda, at Gravesend, outward bound for the Brazils."

Someone aid my confusion on this one: was there more than one Brazil in the 1880s??

### **14. Show Me The Money!**

"Pray sit down and tell me all about it, Dr. Watson," said she.

Um, excuse me, Mary, but the man just brought a treasure chest in for you. Polite, I can understand, but I have to ask my fellow Hounds: Isn't she taking polite a bit far here? Wouldn't you want to see what's in the box and THEN hear the story? Ah, but they were better folk then, weren't they?

### **15. And I Haven't Even Touched Mine**

"I must borrow Mrs. Forrester's poker."

Fireplace pokers get a lot of use in the Canon. Watson opens a strongbox with one here, and later prepares to bash Steve Dixie with one. As a murder weapon or a contest of strength, the simple poker gets a lot of mileage in the Canon. Any thoughts on why?

### **16. You Can't Bribe These Guys**

"There goes the reward!" the nameless inspector says. "Where there is no money there is no pay. This night's work would have been worth a tanner each to Sam Brown and me if the treasure had been there."

Scotland Yard working on commission? Along with Lestrade being "retained" in "Boscombe Valley Mystery," this is one of the more puzzling aspects of the London police force. How easily hired were they?

## **17. Unbelievable Small**

Jonathan Small scatters the Agra treasure over "five miles or so" of Thames riverbed. He says he was "half mad" when he did it, but five miles is a long time for temporary insanity. Can you picture any criminal giving up that kind of money, when there was the slightest chance he might have been able to get it back somehow?

An added note: with Holmes's eye for detail and memory for location, might he not have been out the next day with a boatload of Irregulars for a little urban pearl-diving?

**Brad Keefauver, BSI**

**2000-2001**