

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure VII – The Adventure of the Five Orange Pips

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of the Five Orange Pips" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. The Man With The Watch

We all love an untold tale, and this case gives us a few. Among them we find “the Camberwell poisoning case” in which, Watson tells us, “Sherlock Holmes was able, by winding up the dead man's watch, to prove that it had been wound up two hours before, and that therefore the deceased had gone to bed within that time--a deduction which was of the greatest importance in clearing up the case.”

Okay, let me get this straight: the man was dead, undoubtedly poisoned as we are told this was a case of poisoning. How many times do we remember Sherlock Holmes getting to a murder scene within two hours of the death? As the man had gone to bed, he wouldn't have been discovered until morning, would he? And death by poison wouldn't immediately noticeable, would it? So how was it Sherlock Holmes was winding up a murder victim's watch only two hours after the man was still alive?

2. The Doom That Came To Openshaw By Dr. John H.(P. Lovecraft)

“... we were forced to raise our minds for the instant from the routine of life, and to recognize the presence of those great elemental forces which shriek at mankind through the bars of his civilization, like untamed beasts in a cage.”

The secret cult, death by agents unseen, is this a horror story or what? Do those great elemental beasts Watson mentions early in the story foreshadow the deaths of Captain Calhoun and his boatload of Finns and Germans? Or is there a supernatural subtext to this story that's telling us the destruction of the Lone Star was not entirely due to natural causes? And might that detective moodily poring over his personal tomes be somehow involved?



3. Knowledge Of Nautical Novels -- Nil?

Okay, Hounds, tough question: It's 1887. John H. Watson is reading a sea story by W. Clark Russell, the man the Army and Navy Register called "the Fenimore Cooper and Captain Marryatt of his time rolled into one." Watson tells us merely that "the howl of the gale from without seemed to blend with the text, and the splash of the rain to lengthen out into the long swash of the sea waves."

Based on that limited description and the year involved, can we make any sort of reasonable estimation of what exactly Watson was reading? Did his calling it a story, rather than a book or novel, indicate short fiction from a magazine? (And did Russell have any in any magazines in 1887?) Certainly Watson would have mentioned a classic Russell novel like "The Wreck of the Grosvenor" by name, wouldn't he? Might this indicate a lesser known Russell work, like "The Lady Maud," "An Ocean Free Lance," or "The Copsford Mystery"?

4. Another Age-Old Question . . .

"My wife was on a visit to her mother's ..." Watson says in this tale.

"My mother was dead ..." Mary Morstan said in SIGN.

So what's the deal? While we might attribute dates to Watson's carelessness, married men tend to be very (and sometimes painfully) aware of their mother-in-law's status. Does sheer logic dictate that the wife Watson speaks of was *not* Mary Morstan? And why is Mary Morstan's name never mentioned in the same tale where Watson's wife is mentioned?

5. It's All In The Presentation

"Who is this K. K. K.?" Watson asks.

A simple question. But watch Holmes in the paragraphs that follow:

"Sherlock Holmes closed his eyes and placed his elbows upon the arms of his chair, with his finger-tips together. 'The ideal reasoner,' he remarked, 'would, when he had once been shown a single fact in all its bearings, deduce from it ...'" And on and on it goes. Holmes refers to Cuvier, he speaks of art and how he has honed his skills to their highest degree, he refers to Watson's earlier analysis of the detective's knowledge, talks about what a great place Florida is, and mentions brain-attics and lumber room libraries. And when all is said and done, what does he do?

He takes down the encyclopedia and looks up K.K.K.

For a case where Holmes fails miserably, he's certainly showboating. Is this a matter of pride going before a fall? Or did Watson beef up this tale with Holmes lectures from elsewhere to make Holmes look better (or feel better when he read it)?

6. And He Was Complaining About The Criminals Post-Moriarty!

"A single man could not have carried out two deaths in such a way as to deceive a coroner's jury," Holmes says in this tale, as his reason for suspecting multiple perpetrators (aside from the fact that "K.K.K." the name of a *society* was on the letters). Is Holmes still pumping up the case for Watson's benefit? Or do the Hounds honestly think a single man could not have killed two men in such a sneaky fashion?

7. Oh, Stop It Holmes!!!

As if the previous two bits weren't enough:

"Have you never--" said Sherlock Holmes, bending forward and sinking his voice--"have you never heard of the Ku Klux Klan?"

Is this more melodramatics, or is Holmes actually afraid of the Ku Klux Klan? And does that fear totally come from his readings about the Klan? Or is there any reason to think Holmes actually had some disastrous previous encounter with the secret society?

8. The Head Bones Connected To The . . .

That Cuvier reference: "As Cuvier could correctly describe a whole animal by the contemplation of a single bone, so the observer who has thoroughly understood one link in a series of incidents should be able to accurately state all the other ones, both before and after."

Since Holmes seemed to concentrate on studies that would help him in his work, what could we think he gained from the French naturalist's work?

9. Strong Reasons For Leaving America

Colonel Openshaw's departure from America after the Civil War seems to be taken as unusual by Holmes, who attributes it to fear of someone. Anyone who has done much reading on the fortunes of plantation owners after the war, however, quickly realizes that there were a great many reasons for a former Confederate citizen with money to get out of the South during the Reconstruction, especially a man like the Colonel, who had roots back in England.

Does Holmes's lack of knowledge about America hurt him in this case? He seems to ignore young Openshaw's remarks about the Colonel leaving due to Republican policies. Might he have been too eager to assign this all to the mysterious and foreign Klan?

10. Burning Crosses On Shipboard?

And while we're on the subject of motivations, what's the story behind Captain James Calhoun? A sea captain commanding a ship full of men from countries different from him seems like the sort of fellow whose entire life has been at sea. He's familiar with different cultures, and must have some sympathy for all the Finns and Germans he spends his every waking moment with. So how are we supposed to think that this fellow became a devoted member of the Ku Klux Klan, a group of land-bound ethnocentrists? Was Calhoun an innocent man, who might have eventually returned to London to see what Holmes was sending him orange seeds for, had he lived?

11. Savannah Sheriff Gets Telegram, Laughs

One of the more astounding actions by Sherlock Holmes in this tale is his sending a telegram to the Savannah, Georgia police department, a telegram which tells them that the three Americans aboard the Lone Star are wanted for murder in England. Holmes's charges are based on the most circumstantial of evidence, and he seems to lump all three men together for no other reason than that they are shipmates and countrymen. Just what actions would the Savannah police be expected to take based on an accusation from an English private detective? Something as ambitious as extradition, or just keeping a close eye on the three in case they pulled anything in Savannah?

12. Three Down, Several More To Go

You just can't get away from the wild statements Holmes seems to be making in this case. Holmes speaks of the Ku Klux Klan as a gang, and Calhoun as their leader, then says "I shall have the others, but he is the first." What others? And how was Holmes expecting to find them, when he barely found Calhoun and his mates by ship's records?

13. The Colonel's Chess Game

"I'll checkmate them still," Elias Openshaw says, and does two things. First, he burns the papers that the Florida Klansmen seem to be after. Second, he leaves his worldly goods to his brother. How does this checkmate the Klan? If they were seeking the papers for fear of blackmail or criminal arrest, Elias was doing

their job for them. And what good would a will do? Who would the estate have gone to without a will? Surely the only person who might claim a man's estate before his brother would be a wife or offspring . . . was Elias being stalked by in-laws he left behind in Florida? Might the "Paramore" of March 1869 been a "paramour"?

14. The Partnership Stays Firm

As much as poet Vincent Starrett liked the year 1895 as a classic year of Canonical lore, I don't think it will ever surpass 1887 in my mind. It's a year at the very heart of the early half of the partnership, and full of many great moments. As Watson says in FIVE, "The year '87 furnished us with a long series of cases of greater or less interest, of which I retain the records."

Note the use of the word "us" in that sentence. Despite the fact that he's married and carrying on a full medical practice in this tale, he is still very much a part of the detective team. Is this a touch of egotism on Watson's part, something he might have wrote after Holmes's demise but not while the detective was living? Have we seen much evidence of a partnership before now?

15. The Small Estate In Sussex

Elias leaves his estate to Joseph. Joseph leaves his estate to John. John dies with no known heir. Elias seemed to think that passing on his estate could be passing on a sort of curse. Sherlock Holmes swore to follow up on the Openshaw case, and one would think that he travelled down to Horsham after the events of the story to do exactly that. Did the Openshaw curse pass on to the next residents of that Sussex estate? Would Holmes have warned the next residents of possible trouble heading their way? Or checked those occupants out to see if they were involved in the wholesale extermination of Openshaws?

16. Major Prendergast Strikes!

"I spoke to Major Prendergast about my troubles and was advised by him to come to you," John Openshaw tells Holmes. The only other Prendergast we hear of in the Canon is Jack Prendergast of "The Gloria Scott," an ingenious criminal schemer of good family who may or may not have been killed on a prison ship in 1855. Now Holmes supposedly cleared the Major of a card cheating scandal at the Tankerville Club. The only other mention we hear of the Tankerville Club is in "The Adventure of the Empty House," where we learn Colonel Sebastian Moran, known card cheat, is a member. Might both Prendergasts and Moran be one in the same, and this whole Openshaw business be a set-up designed to test a still-naive Holmes by one Professor Moriarty? Or is all this just a series of amazing coincidences?

17. The Maid Brings Up The Coffee

This, we would guess, is the same maid at 221B whose footsteps Watson heard pattering off to bed in “A Study in Scarlet.” Might she also be the Mrs. Turner of “A Scandal in Bohemia”? Would a live-in maid have been a married woman or possibly a young widow?

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2000-2001