

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XIV – The Adventure of the Copper Beeches

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

1. The Really Well-Known Untold Cases

While most good Sherlockians know Holmes's quote, "you have given prominence not so much to the many causes celebres and sensational trials in which I have figured," it's not often we strip off the rest of the sentence in which it appears and look at just that part alone. In it, Holmes is telling us two things: First, that he was involved in celebrated causes and trials as sensational as anything Johnnie Cochran ever handled, and second, that Watson didn't write about his involvement in them.

What might these famous cases have been? Is this a clue that Holmes was actually involved in such famed investigations as the hunt for Jack the Ripper?



2. The Classic Holmes Smoke

"Taking up a glowing cinder with the tongs and lighting with it the long cherry-wood pipe which was wont to replace his clay when he was in a disputatious rather than a meditative mood."

Watson writes that he and Holmes sat on either side of a cheery fire, and we assume that means "in chairs."

Yet Holmes is close enough to the fire to reach a cinder with his tongs. Was he kneeling, then returning to his chair, or was Holmes actually sitting cross-legged in front of the hearth? Otherwise, why the cinder-lighting instead of gas-jets or matches?

And that disputatious cherry-wood ... why that choice for that mood? Was the clay so lengthy that there was danger of smacking innocent bystanders with his hand gestures during a spirited debate?

3. The Difference Between The Canon And "Cops"

"Crime is common. Logic is rare. Therefore it is upon the logic rather than upon the crime that you should dwell."

Nowhere have we seen Holmes's dictum proven so well as the Fox TV show "COPS." Crime is common enough to fill as much television time as any group of cable networks would care to devote to it. Yet logical crime investigation is rare among our televised entertainments, except possibly on a certain Granada-produced hour on the A&E network. But how logical are the tales of Holmes? In what percent of the sixty stories did Watson actually concentrate on logic over sensationalism?

4. A Letter From Home?

Violet Hunter's letter was dated from Montague Place, a street that runs along the northern side of the British Museum. Sherlock Holmes, pre-221B, lived on Montague Street, "just round the corner from the British Museum." Did Watson slip up on the difference between "Place" and "Street," and this is really further evidence for the classic "Violet Hunter is Holmes's sister" theory? Were there other members of the family still living on Montague Street/Place?

5. Ah, The Lure Of The Copper Beeches!

"Oh, if you could see him killing cockroaches with a slipper! Smack! smack! smack! Three gone before you could wink!" Jephro Rucastle raves about his son. We've seen what this says of the son, and by extrapolation, the father, but what does this say about the house? What is it they say about cockroaches ... for every one you see there's a dozen you don't? Or is it a hundred? The fact that three specimens of the reclusive cockroach were all out in the plain sight, in a small enough area for a six-year-old to nail all three of them with a slipper doesn't bode well for "the dearest old country house." How bad a roach problem can we extrapolate from these three?

6. The Governess Gong Show

When Miss Stoper of Westaway's decides to dump a governess from the roles, she bangs her desktop gong and the page comes in to show the reject out. Were gongs a common piece of office equipment in Victorian London, or was this an affectation on the part of a tyrannical agency queen bee?

7. Vanity Versus Employee Dress Code

When Violet Hunter turns down Rucastle's offer because of the haircut requirement, Miss Stoper asks if Violet wants to stay on the books at Westaway's, basically telling her if she doesn't take Rucastle's offer she'll be dumped. Miss Stoper obviously sees the haircut as a perfectly reasonable request. Was it? Would Victorian readers have sided with Stoper or Hunter on the matter of hair?

8. The Sister Theory Revisited

"And yet he would always wind up by muttering that no sister of his should ever have accepted such a situation," Watson writes.

How many times does "always" mean? This is no simple statement preceded by "If I had a sister ..." This is Sherlock Holmes saying, "No sister of mine should ever have accepted such a situation," over and over. Angered in a way that a brother would be.

Her knowledges includes French, German, music, and drawing -- just the sort of things a sister of Sherlock and descendant of the Vernet bloodline might have. As to why Violet writes Sherlock as "Mr. Holmes," and Watson never seems to be let in on the secret, wouldn't London's foremost criminal agent want to keep his family hidden from his enemies?

9. That Job In Halifax

Colonel Spence Munro, we are told, received an appointment at Halifax, in Nova Scotia. Does the phrase "received an appointment" necessarily mean government work, and if so, what sort of task would the colonel be put to in Halifax? What sort of offices might Her Majesty's government have had there in the 1880s?

10. Art In The Blood, Art In The Hair

"As you may observe, Mr. Holmes, my hair is somewhat luxuriant, and of a rather peculiar tint of chestnut. It has been considered artistic."

How can one's natural hair color be considered "artistic"? Is this a hint from Miss Hunter that she colors her hair? Would such a chestnut tint have been possible with the current state of hair-coloring art at the time? Or is this phrase an indication that Violet had a former lover who was an artist?

11. Alice Rucastle Visits The Liberty Bell

Jephro Rucastle's story about his daughter's absence goes like this: she hated her step-mother, so she went to Philadelphia. A lot of people hate their step-parents, but most of them don't leave the country because of it. Jephro's Philadelphia story is fictitious, but why didn't he make up something a little less extreme?

Couldn't Alice have come to London to work as a typist or gone to live with an aunt in Scotland? Why Philadelphia?

12. The Canon's Only Stand-Up Comic

There are a lot of moments in the writings of Watson that we wish we could experience first-hand, and for me one of them is Jephro Rucastle's stand-up routine. We are told:

"Mr. Rucastle, walking up and down on the other side of the room, began to tell me a series of the funniest stories that I have ever listened to. You cannot imagine how comical he was, and I laughed until I was quite weary."

What sort of jokes might a man have told his children's governess in those days? Rucastle is said to have had an "immense repertoire." Was skill something he used in his business relations? Or was there some other nefarious purpose for this fine felon to have a wealth of jokes at his disposal?

13. Sherlock Pulls More Data From Thin Air

We're used to Holmes making observations that seem near-psychic, and in this tale he makes one that's definitely got me baffled, when he says: "Mr. Fowler being a persevering man, as a good seaman should be, blockaded the house." Maybe the Smash is missing something here, but how does Holmes know that Fowler is a seaman? Was his gray suit an indicator of something?

14. The Hell-Hound Of Southampton Road

Carlo is "a giant dog, as large as a calf, tawny tinted, with hanging jowl, black muzzle, and huge projecting bones." We are told that "Toller lets him loose every night, and God help the trespasser whom he lays his fangs upon."

We also know that Southampton Road, an important highway which usually has people upon it, runs close enough to the Rucastle house that one can clearly see people on it reflected in a mirror shard. Carlo is quite a bloodthirsty fellow, if his attack on Jephro is any sign, and the busy thoroughfare in front of the house surely had people on it at night. Were the railings that bordered Copper Beeches enough to keep Carlo from attacking night-time travellers? Or was he kept in check some other way?

15. Violet Hunter's Blackout

"He glared down at me with the face of a demon," Violet tells us of Rucastle's discovery of her little investigation. She then says:

"I was so terrified that I do not know what I did. I suppose that I must have rushed past him into my room. I remember nothing until I found myself lying on my bed trembling all over."

What is so hard to remember about running past someone and shutting yourself in your room? Could Violet have had some sort of seizure in her panic-stricken state? It has been suggested before that she might be suppressing memories of abuse by Rucastle, but consider another theory: when Holmes and Watson later come to Copper Beeches, Violet Hunter is in control of the house. Mrs. Toller is locked in the basement. Mr. Toller is unconscious on the kitchen floor. And after a brief appearance, Jephro Rucastle is in the backyard with his throat torn out, so bad that he is "barely alive" from that day forth. Watson has a soft spot for the ladies ... might he have been covering for Violet with that business about the dog? Might she have been the one responsible for Rucastle's torn throat and Toller's unconsciousness, an episode blacked out of her "Violet Hunter" persona by the sorely afflicted schizophrenic mind of Alice Rucastle?

We never seen Alice and Violet together in this story. We know Alice was stricken with "brain fever" as a result of her father's abuse. Might Alice have created her "Violet Hunter" identity to seek help for a fictitious plight that was easier to explain than the unspeakable true state of her life, then gone completely homicidal when her father learned what she had done?

16. Why Isn't Toller Dead?

"Recently he has been drinking hard, and yesterday evening he was very drunk," Violet says of Toller.

"Is Toller still drunk?" Holmes asks her.

"Yes," Violet replies. "I heard his wife tell Mrs. Rucastle that she could do nothing with him."

Twenty-four hours after starting "very drunk" and moved on to a point where his wife could do nothing with him, Toller is passed out and snoring on the kitchen rug. Why would Holmes expect a man to stay drunk for 24 hours? And if he did, how could he be sober in an instant when the dog starts running wild? Does Toller's imbibing pattern make sense to anyone?

17. Miss Hunter's Private School For Young Somethings

Of the final fate of Violet Hunter, Watson writes: "She is now the head of a private school at Walsall, where I believe that she has met with considerable success." How would a governess with modest skills become head of a private school in a few years time? Were there gender barriers to such a position at that time? Wouldn't the head of such a school also be its owner?

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