

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XV – The Adventure of Silver Blaze

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of Silver Blazes" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

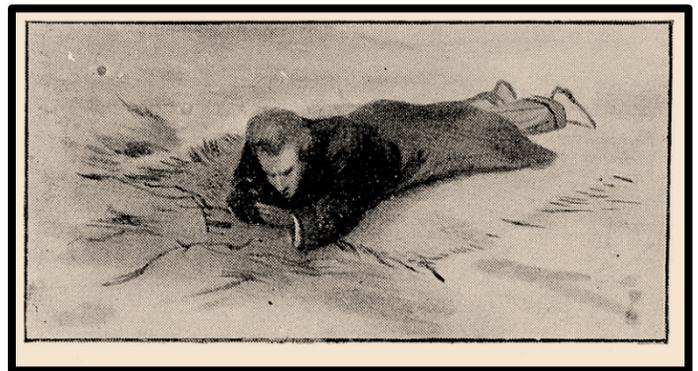
1. His Own Personal Cnn

“Fresh editions of every paper had been sent up by our news agent,” Watson writes.

We all know London had a lot of papers in those days, but did everyone have a newsagent to deal with their newsprint needs? Or did most folks get by with a paperboy or two?

2. Very Excellent For What?

Holmes asks Watson to bring his “very excellent field glass” to King’s Pyland with him, but never makes use of it. What would Holmes have expected to do with it? Scan the moors for the missing horse? While Holmes does use the glass four days later at the big race, it never seems to come into play during that first trip. Was Holmes just planning ahead, or was there an earlier purpose for taking it?



3. Flying Along To Exeter First Class

As the classic Paget illustration for this tale so beautifully shows, Holmes and Watson had window seats in a first class carriage on the train to Dartmoor. What exactly were the amenities to be expected in first class rail transport of that era? Was anything but privacy included for the price?

4. Holmes’s Blunder

If ever we wondered whether Holmes was more devoted to the “art” of detection or the actual cause of justice, this tale has some pretty heavy evidence for the former. Both Silver Blaze’s owner and Inspector Gregory ask Holmes on Tuesday to investigate the trainer’s murder and the horse’s theft.

Holmes, however, expects the matter to take care of himself, and waits until Thursday to head to the scene of the crime. When Scotland Yard asks for help with a murder, isn't it the prerogative of every red-blooded, patriotic, justice-loving son of England to answer the call? What's with Holmes's prima donna act?

5. Nothing Sinister About Sherlock

"Holmes, leaning forward, with his long, thin forefinger checking off the points upon the palm of his left hand."

Can we therefore assume Holmes is right-handed?

6. Hadn't Straker Heard Of Weight Watchers?

After only five years of being a jockey, John Straker is forced to retire because he's become too heavy. Couldn't this guy say "no" to second helpings, even if his career depended on it? Did anyone go on diets back then? How much did Straker's age have to do with his weight?

7. The Invalid Subdivision Next Door

"About half a mile to the north there is a small cluster of villas which have been built by a Tavistock contractor for the use of invalids and others who may wish to enjoy the pure Dartmoor air."

The term "villa" has implications of elegance and upscale living. Were there enough wealthy invalids who wanted to live in Dartmoor to make such a business venture viable? Was the pure Dartmoor air noted for healthful benefits, or was the London reek so bad that any countryside would have been equally healthful to city folk?

8. The Other Missing Horse

"You've two horses in for the Wessex Cup--Silver Blaze and Bayard," the tout tells the stable-boy. Yet when we look down the card on the day of the race, Bayard is nowhere to be found. What happened? With Silver Blaze's whereabouts unknown, wouldn't Colonel Ross have left Bayard in for the Wessex Cup?

9. Keep Your Eye On The Tout's Hand

The visiting tout takes a piece of white paper folded up" out of his pocket. Later, Edith Baxter notices "the corner of the little paper packet protruding from his closed hand." So what was it? Folded paper, as a note would be, or a packet, as would contain opium or money? Or was the word "packet" just a terminology red herring dropped in by Watson or his literary agent?"

10. Victorian Forensic Chemistry

“Finally, an analysis has shown that the remains of his supper left by the stable-lad contained an appreciable quantity of powdered opium ...”

How would the stableboy’s dinner have been tested for opium in that period? An actual chemical test or something as simple as feeding it to a dog?

11. The Lion Of Scotland Yard

While poor Lestrade is always compared to smaller creatures like rats and bulldogs, Inspector Gregory is said to have “lion-like” hair and beard. What exactly does that mean? Lion-like in color, style, or what?

12. It Doesn’t Get Any More Circumstantial Than This

We are told of Silas Brown and his stable: “As Desborough, their horse, was second in the betting, they had an interest in the disappearance of the favourite. Silas Brown, the trainer, is known to have had large bets upon the event, and he was no friend to poor Straker.”

Add the possession of the stolen horse to those facts, and you come up with quite a case against Silas Brown. Had Scotland Yard been the ones who discovered Silver Blaze at Mapleton, there is little doubt the trainer would have been behind bars and found guilty of murder and horse theft. Wouldn’t Brown have taken this into consideration upon finding Silver Blaze on the moor?

Holmes’s manipulation of the events surrounding the Straker murder are so heavy-handed that one might even wonder if he was helping the true murderer escape by pointing the finger at Silver Blaze, who can’t defend himself or tell where he’s been held. Was Brown another Leon Sterndale, whom Holmes let escape the consequences of his crime? What motive might Holmes have had for helping Brown get away with murder?

13. Exit, Stage Left!

When the carriage leaves King’s Pyland, who is in it? If only Holmes and Watson, we are treated to a failed dramatic moment as Holmes says:

"Gregory, let me recommend to your attention this singular epidemic among the sheep. Drive on, coachman!"

The coachman then ignores Holmes, and the carriage stays put. Instead of dropping his vague exit-line and being whisked away, Holmes is left sitting in front of an audience that wants more. Colonel Ross just looks disgusted at this ploy, and Inspector Gregory gets a chance to ask more questions.

Holmes recovers quickly in one of the most memorable exchanges in the Canon, but was it his original attempt to leave matters with the line above? If Colonel Ross and Inspector Gregory are also in the carriage, and the coachman did obey Holmes and was driving the lot of them away as Gregory asks his questions, why was Holmes commanding Ross's driver?

14. Sherlock Holmes And The Garden Party

"Surely I met you in Plymouth at a garden-party some little time ago, Mrs. Straker?" Holmes asks the victim's widow. We know he's lying of course, especially as a garden-party was most certainly one of those "unwelcome social summonses which call upon a man to either be bored or to lie."

Time for the more socially enlightened Hounds to fill us in on this thing called the garden-party. What makes a garden party? Is it merely a cocktail party with flowers and sunlight? Would Sherlock Holmes have ever attended one for real? Of what social standing would we expect the attendees of a garden party to be? Would a horse trainer's wife be included, or was Holmes flattering Mrs. Straker?

15. The Tout Who Carried A Purse

"He says that it was a ten-pound note. One was found in his purse."

Purses appear in male possession several times in the Canon, and I've always assumed that these were something like a large clasp coin purse. Where did men carry their purses back then? Trousers pockets? Coat pockets? Did the purse contain anything besides money?

16. The Milliner's Bill And That Fancy Dress

William Derbyshire's bill from Madame Lesurier of Bond Street is made out for thirty-seven pounds fifteen. We're told of a twenty-two guinea dress, which accounts for about twenty-three pounds of that bill, but that leaves fourteen pounds of unknown merchandise. Was it another dress? Or accessories for that dove-colored, ostrich-feathered monstrosity? What sort of added items of clothing might Straker's mistress have made him buy her at Madame Lesurier's to go with the dress? Would said dress have been bought for attending a special occasion, or just as an impressive gift?

17. The Latest Thing In Driveway Paving

Watson writes of “the paving of asphalt which led up to the gates of the Mapleton stables.” We don’t usually think of asphalt driveways in association with Holmes’s era, but there you have it. How common was asphalt paving in those days, and was it an indication of wealth or progressive thinking?

Brad Keefauver, BSI

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