

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XVI – The Adventure of the Cardboard Box

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

1. And Now For Something Completely Different

"Ring for our boots and tell them to order a cab. I'll be back in a moment when I have changed my dressing-gown and filled my cigar-case."

Now, we know Holmes's boots aren't going to order a cab. We know that Holmes isn't just changing into a different dressing gown to go out. And we also know that Holmes's grammatical shorthand doesn't extend to his cigar and cigarette cases. As a tobacco connoisseur, Holmes seemed very deliberate with his smoking, matching pipes to moods. So what can we make of his taking cigars along for this particular outing? Were cigars his odor-cover of choice in cases involving severed body parts?

2. A Salting Of The Ears

"Again, carbolic or rectified spirits would be the preservatives which would suggest themselves to the medical mind, certainly not rough salt."

Okay, so you're a mad-dog killer sending severed ears to the woman you blame for your murderous ways.

Why are you even attempting to preserve the ears? Do you think she'll want to save them as keepsakes?

Wouldn't unpreserved ears have much more shock value to the recipient?



3. Well, It Wasn't The Pledge Of Allegiance

Of Jim Browner, we hear: "That was before he broke the pledge ..."

Temperance pledges of Victorian England seem to have come in many levels and varieties. What sort of pledge might we expect a seaman like Browner to have taken? Would he have taken it as a part of his church life? Or a simple promise to his wife?

4. Jim's Relationship With Susan Cushing

Susan says, "First he dropped me, then he quarreled with Sarah, and now that Mary has stopped writing we don't know how things are going with them."

How does she mean that Jim "dropped" her? Just a few lines before she says he only came to visit her once before he started drinking. It doesn't seem like there was much of a relationship there to drop, does it?

5. Brain Fever Strikes Again!

Sarah Cushing's doctor says, "She has been suffering since yesterday from brain symptoms of great severity. As her medical adviser, I cannot possibly take the responsibility of allowing anyone to see her. I should recommend you to call again in ten days."

We've seen and discussed brain fever on many occasions, but in "Cardboard Box" we get some interesting statements from a doctor who's treating it. He mentions "brain symptoms" as though they're commonly recognized, and cites a ten day recovery period. Do we know what brain symptoms are, having seen this ailment so many times in the Canon? And why ten days? Did he pull that number out of his shiny black hat?

6. That Moment The Enthusiast Lives For

"We had a pleasant little meal together, during which Holmes would talk about nothing but violins, narrating with great exultation how he had purchased his own Stradivarius, which was worth at least five hundred guineas, at a Jew broker's in Tottenham Court Road for fifty-five shillings."

Doesn't this sound like something from a dinner with a fellow Sherlockian? The enthusiast whose special knowledge enables him to purchase a rarity for a bargain price is something many a Sherlockian can relate to, and an experience that makes this dinner seem like one we'd enjoy sitting in on. With that in mind, do any Hounds have "rare Sherlockian find" tales they'd care to share with fellow Hounds who are dining as they read their e-mail?

7. Sherlock Holmes, Paganini Fan

"This led him to Paganini, and we sat for an hour over a bottle of claret while he told me anecdote after anecdote of that extraordinary man."

Where would a fan of Nicolo Paganini have picked up tales of that remarkable violinist? From fellow fans, violin instructors, or books? As Paganini and his devil-related reputation are a bit reminiscent of some modern rock star, would the violinist have been favored by young music lovers more than old?

8. Reasoning Backwards, Yes, But Arresting Backwards?

Holmes says, "I have written to Lestrade asking him to supply us with the details which are now wanting, and which he will only get after he has secured his man."

Even Holmes doesn't know the whole story, but on the basis of the consulting detective writing a name on a card, Inspector Lestrade makes an arrest. Was this a case where Holmes was using Scotland Yard's tendency to "arrest first, ask questions later" to his advantage? Why didn't Holmes conjure up some climactic staged capture, as he did in so many other cases?

9. Lestrade, The Mad Dog Of The Yard

"That he may be safely trusted to do, for although he is absolutely devoid of reason, he is as tenacious as a bulldog when he once understands what he has to do."

Devoid of reason? Boy, we talk about Holmes insulting Watson, but this has to be the ultimate Holmes slam of one of his familiars. Is Lestrade, indeed, incapable of basic reasoning of the detective sort? Or is this an affectionate little jibe, spoken to a friend about a friend?

10. The Mystery Of The Mystery Itself

This entire mystery revolves around the fact that the package of ears was addressed to "Miss S. Cushing."

Had Browner addressed the package with the full name of his intended recipient, she may not have been as quick to announce it to the police as she fell into brain fever. So why did our culprit address it so confusingly when he *knew* that there were two "S. Cushing's"? Did addressing etiquette demand a maiden ladies first name not be spelled out?

11. Using The Force To Find Friends

"I therefore sent off a telegram to my friend Algar, of the Liverpool force, and asked him to find out if Mrs. Browner were at home, and if Browner had departed in the May Day."

From Holmes's reference to Algar as a friend, can we assume that he once was involved in a case that Algar was handling? Would there have been any other way Holmes wound up friends with a Liverpool law enforcement officer? Might Holmes have purposefully cultivated relationships with members of key English police forces?

12. The Destination Of The Third Copy

Lestrade's note says about Browner's confession: "We had three copies typewritten, one of which I enclose."

While one has to wonder about what sort of life a Scotland Yard typist had, one also has to wonder if carbon paper had been invented yet (or the typist had to retype the confession), and who that third copy was for. One copy for Holmes, one for Lestrade or his department's records, and the third for whom? The prosecuting attorneys?

13. S. Cushing, G. Lestrade -- Don't These People Ever Learn?

The Scotland Yard inspector signs her note: "With kind regards, Yours very truly, G. Lestrade." Is that the double closing what one would expect of a professional exchange, or is Lestrade kissing up? And why is Lestrade withholding his first name?

14. Didn't Anyone Want Credit On This Case?

"This is his statement as made before Inspector Montgomery at the Shadwell Police Station, and it has the advantage of being verbatim."

First Holmes passes this case and its credit to Lestrade, then Lestrade passes the murderer on to Montgomery for his confession. What was Montgomery's part? Surely Scotland Yard didn't make inspectors of their "shorthand man," did they?

15. Foot Fetishes Of Victorian Seamen

"I thought more of my wife's footmark in the mud than I did of her whole body and soul," confesses Jim Browner.

After Captain Crocker's kissing the deck where Mary Fraser had walked in "Abbey Grange," Browner's statement almost looks like there's a pattern forming here. Does this fixation with footsteps show up in any other writings by Watson or his Literary Agent?

16. The Cushing Income Sources

"Sarah found that she could not make a living in Liverpool," Browner reports, after saying Sarah took a house to let lodgings to sailors. We are also told earlier that Susan Cushing had taken on medical student boarders before. So how did Susan and Sarah make their livings? Wouldn't they have had to have capital to invest in a boarding house to earn a living that way? Or did they rent and sublet?

17. The Sarah Cushing Fixation

"If Sarah had been there, by the Lord, she should have joined them. I pulled out my knife, and--well, there! I've said enough. It gave me a kind of savage joy when I thought how Sarah would feel when she had such signs as these of what her meddling had brought about."

Jim Browner's wife seems to be cheating on him, which naturally throws him into a rage. He's angry enough at her and her lover to kill them both, yet somehow in that rage, he still has room to be irritated by his sister-in-law. If he's that enraged and that fixated on Sarah, why didn't he deliver the ears personally and take his anger out on Sarah as well?

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