

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XVIII – The Adventure of the Stockbroker’s Clerk

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of the Stockbroker’s Clerk" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. In The Prime Of His Watsonhood

“I had confidence,” Dr. Watson tells us, “in my own youth and energy and was convinced that in a very few years the concern would be as flourishing as ever.”

After all Watson’s earlier talk of what a weak and beaten man he has been since his return from the Afghan war, this statement is a refreshing change of pace. How young would one expect Watson to be as he stepped enthusiastically into his new practice? And how long would it have taken him to recover from the war?

2. Watson Was Excited All Right . . .

Holmes greets the long absent Watson with, “I trust that Mrs. Watson has entirely recovered from all the little excitements connected with our adventure of the Sign of Four.”

It has always struck me as odd that Watson never mentions Mary Morstan by name at any other time except during The Sign of the Four. In this tale, however, we find the statement that convinces most Sherlockians “Mary Morstan” and “Mrs. Watson” are the same person. But might there be another explanation?

What if Watson was already engaged or married at the beginning of SIGN? And what if the tale happened much as he wrote it, with the excitement of lost treasure, the excitement of a strange mini-assassin, *and* the excitement of falling in love with a pretty blonde client? There is an excitement that it might take Mrs. Watson some time to recover from, and an excitement that might drive Watson to energetically take on a new practice and distance himself from Holmes’s affairs for



three months. While we'd hate to see such a moral lapse in Watson, such a circumstance would explain much marriage (and chronological) confusion. Should we give such a thought any credence? What evidence do we have that Watson was a faithful husband other than our own high hopes?

3. While Holmes Catches Criminals, Watson Catches Cold

"Summer colds are always a little trying," observes Holmes.

"I was confined to the house by a severe chill for three days last week," replies Watson.

What can we diagnose about Watson's "chill"? Common cold or something more? Was he self-confined to the house, kept in by Mrs. Watson, or was his physical condition actually bad enough to keep him down for three days? And how bad off was he to require a fire in June? If he was that ill, how is he a remarkably robust-looking fellow only a week later?

4. How Would You Like Your Feet, Medium Or Well Done?

The soles of Watson's slippers are described as "slightly scorched," which he seemingly acknowledges is because he sat with his feet stuck out toward the fire. How close to a fire would one have to put one's feet to a fire to put visible scorch-marks on the soles of one's slippers? And what effect would that have on one's feet? If Watson had his feet directly touching the flames, could scorching occur before the heat caused him any anguish? (Kids, don't try this at home!)

5. Detective And Client, Delivered Straight To Your Door

Holmes makes a conscious decision, upon hearing Hall Pycroft's problem, to come pick up Dr. Watson on their way to the train station. Holmes hasn't seen Watson for three months, and he doesn't really give a reason why he wants Watson along. Is there something particular about this case that would make Holmes think he would be better for Watson's presence? Or is the detective so confident that he'll succeed brilliantly that he wants to be sure and have it written up? Was he missing his old friend, just as Watson seems to be? Or was there some other reason for Holmes's special efforts to bring Watson in on this one?

6. The Best Of Two Medical Practices

Both the medical practices of Dr. Watson and his neighbor are long-established, as old as the houses themselves. Holmes decides that Watson has the better practice because his steps are worn three inches deeper than the neighbor's. Yet Watson has already told us that the previous resident's practice dropped "from twelve hundred to little more than three hundred a year" due to that doctor's condition. While it may

have once been the better practice, how can Watson believe it still is? Wouldn't all of the previous doctor's missing patients have moved on to other doctors? And if location was the determiner of prosperity, surely Watson and the neighbor have equal chance on that scale, don't they?

Is Holmes just making his severely flawed deduction about the worn steps just to make his friend feel good? He surely knew the steps could have just been worn by the larger size and weight of the family that lived there earlier, didn't he?

7. So What Are You Saying, Watson?

Watson describes Hall Pycroft as "a smart young City man, of the class who have been labelled cockneys, but who give us our crack volunteer regiments, and who turn out more fine athletes and sportsmen than any body of men in these islands."

Was Pycroft a true cockney? Or is Watson saying that he is of a class that gets called cockneys, but are actually something else? Is "cockney" a term that describes a sort of man one would not expect to be a fine soldier or athlete? Or is it strictly geographic in nature?

8. So What Are You Saying, Pycroft?

"I used to have a billet at Coxon & Woodhouse's, of Draper Gardens, but they were let in early in the spring through the Venezuelan loan, as no doubt you remember, and came a nasty cropper."

Okay, the gist of this is that Hall Pycroft lost his job, but why exactly did he lose it?

9. Pulling Things Out Of His Drawers

Hall Pycroft observantly observes, "I stared rather straight at the two deal chairs and one little table, which with a ledger and a waste-paper basket, made up the whole furniture." He seems very clear about it, and yet a moment later, he's saying that Arthur Pinner "took a big red book out of a drawer." Is this a lapse of observation on Pycroft's part? Or is it the thread which we can start unravelling his story like a cheap sweater?

10. Parlez-Vous Francais, Monsieur?

This big red book (big, yet small enough to fit in a drawer that was apparently attached to a small table or a deal chair) that Pinner says is a directory of Paris. He then tells Pycroft that his job is to go through it and mark off all the hardware sellers from the trades listed after the names of the people therein. Wouldn't a directory of Paris trades be in French? Would a man of Pycroft's career and background be expected to know French?

11. Define “Hardware” . . .

After first telling Hall Pycroft to find all hardware sellers in Paris for the Franco-Midland *Hardware* Company, Pinner tells Pycroft that he “will eventually manage the great depot in Paris, which will pour a flood of English crockery into the shops of a hundred and thirty-four agents in France.”

Did “hardware” have a different definition back then? Or is this swerve from hardware to crockery a glitch in Pinner’s tale that Pycroft should have seen through? Or was a hardware company selling crockery the same sort of sideline as the Paris furniture shops had (according to Pinner) selling crockery?

12. The Well-Known Name Of Sherlock Holmes

While we’re used to cases being brought to Holmes by Scotland Yard and referred by past clients, here we find a client who, when perplexed by the strange circumstance of two brothers sharing the same tooth, recognizes it as the kind of thing Sherlock Holmes handles. Does this mean that Pycroft had read *A Study in Scarlet*? Or did he know Holmes from some local reputation, being a city man before he headed to Birmingham? Is there some other possibility for how Pycroft knew of Sherlock?

13. The Point Of Realization

In this case, we can almost pinpoint the moment Sherlock Holmes realizes what’s going on, as he says to Pycroft:

“What qualities have you, my friend, which would make your services so valuable? Or is it possible that...” He then begins biting his fingernails and gazing blankly out the window. Is Holmes’s nervous nail-biting due to the fact he knows devilry is afoot at Mawson & Williams and he’s trapped on a train heading toward Birmingham? If so, why doesn’t he send a telegram back to London the minute they arrive in Birmingham?

14. Rush Hour In Birmingham

At seven o’clock in the evening, Holmes, Watson, and Pycroft are walking along Corporation Street in Birmingham when they see Pinner cross the street to buy a paper:

“As we watched him he looked across at a boy who was bawling out the latest edition of the evening paper, and, running over among the cabs and busses, he bought one from him.”

Why were there so many cabs and busses running through Corporation Street at seven p.m.? Were people just heading home from work at that hour? Just what was the average working day back then?

15. The Skyscraper At 126b Corporation Street

The offices of the Franco-Midland Hardware Company are located at 126B Corporation Street, which unlike 221B Baker Street, does not seem to mean “on the second floor of 126 Corporation Street.” In fact, the offices of the FMHC are five flights up, at the very top of a winding stone staircase at the end of a passageway between two large shops. Was there a five story stone building in Birmingham located behind two shops? Were the shops and the offices part of the same building? How many five-story buildings were there in Birmingham at that time, and did stone staircases run that high?

16. A Rare Emotion Comes Over Pinner

Watson writes, of his first encounter with Pinner: “... as he looked up at us it seemed to me that I had never looked upon a face which bore such marks of grief, and of something beyond grief--of a horror such as comes to few men in a lifetime.”

We later learn that Pinner is reacting to the death of his brother -- yet many men lose brothers, parents, wives, and children during their lifetimes. Why is Pinner’s horror “such as comes to few men in a lifetime”? Did he lose more than a family member with his brother’s capture? Was it something other than his brother’s capture, like a fear of returning to prison? Or was it just the sort of intensity of emotion that would drive one to suicide that Watson speaks of as being so rare?

17. The Hard-Working Staff Of The Evening Standard

Now the Smash knows something of the newspaper business, and what it takes to get news from the keyboard to the press and out to the readers, and the work of London’s Evening Standard in the case of the Mawson & William’s robbery is simply amazing. The discovery of the crime occurs at 1:20 in the afternoon. At that point, the police still have to catch the criminal, drag him to jail, the Standard’s reporters have to find out about it, and get the story back to the paper’s offices. There it must be set in type, run off the press, bundled and distributed. As we saw earlier in the story, the train from London to Birmingham takes at least seventy minutes, at which point the papers have to get from the train to that paperboy who drags them out to Corporation Street and starts to sell them, putting one in Pinner’s hands at seven-o’clock.

While this chain of events might seem very possible if the Mawson & Williams robbery were the only story the newspaper was dealing with, and had no set deadlines nor train schedules to adhere to, the addition of those factors, plus all the other little human delays involved in such a process, make this turnaround something of a wonder.

Was such a turnaround even possible? How many people's hands did the robbery news pass through between the arresting officer and the newsboy on Corporation street? What would the news cut-off deadline have been for the Evening Standard's early edition? Would this "gigantic" robbery have rated special treatment?

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