

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

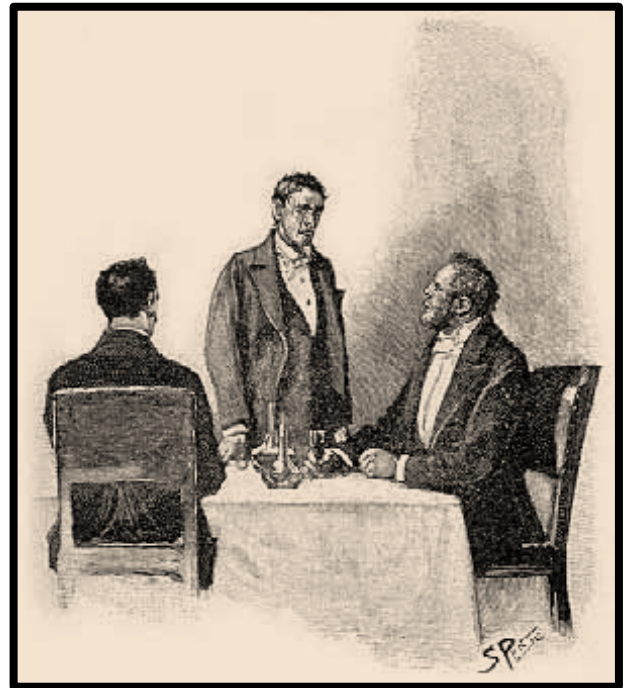
Adventure XIX – The Adventure of the Gloria Scott

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

1. Why Wasn't Holmes Talking?

Watson writes: "I had often endeavoured to elicit from my companion what had first turned his mind in the direction of criminal research, but had never caught him before in a communicative humour."

So basically, Watson has asked Holmes what first made him think he should become a detective. Holmes has also refused to answer. And this happened "often" according to Watson. When a man refuses to tell a friend and room-mate about something in his past, there's usually a reason, isn't there? What reason could Holmes have had for holding back? Was there some painful part of his tale that Holmes had to reconcile before he could bring himself to tell Watson? The way he finally produces his documents on the case is very deliberate, very thoughtful. What is the tale Holmes isn't telling?



2. Where Would Watson Have Heard Holmes Talking?

"You never heard me talk of Victor Trevor?" Sherlock Holmes asks Dr. Watson as the subject comes up.

Not "Did I ever mention Victor Trevor to you?" or "Have I ever told you about my college friend Trevor?"

Why should this subtle difference in phrasing be of concern? Well, the reason the question stands out in my mind is the fact that we so rarely see Holmes and Watson having a non-work conversation with a third party. With whom would Holmes have been talking when Watson might have heard him talk about Victor Trevor?

3. So When Did Things Change, Holmes?

"I was never a very sociable fellow, Watson, always rather fond of moping in my rooms and working out my own little methods of thought, so that I never mixed much with the men of my year."

Holmes speaks of his college days, but is there any part of that statement that isn't still true when he speaks it here? Did Holmes **ever** change?

And a side-query: did college students of the day have more than one room to their lodgings? With the modern college dorms forcing freshman to share a single room with a fellow student, it seems strange that a Victorian college man had a suite available to him . . . or does it?

4. Was Holmes More Active Spiritually In Those Days?

Holmes reports that "Trevor was the only man I knew, and that only through the accident of his bull terrier freezing on to my ankle one morning as I went down to chapel."

Did Holmes attend services in college by choice or by college custom? If by choice, why did he fall away from regular church-going? (Or did he?) If it was an expected part of college life, what was Trevor doing out with the dog when he should have been on his way to chapel, too?

5. Sherlock Holmes's Other Friend

"At first it was only a minute's chat, but soon his visits lengthened, and before the end of the term we were close friends. He was a hearty, full-blooded fellow, full of spirits and energy, the very opposite to me in most respects, but we had some subjects in common, and it was a bond of union when I found that he was as friendless as I. Finally he invited me down to his father's place at Donnithorpe, in Norfolk, and I accepted his hospitality for a month of the long vacation."

The interesting thing about Victor Trevor, is that unlike Watson, he and Holmes were not forced into a situation that would encourage a friendship. Holmes and Trevor just seem to hit it off. They discover things in common, and build a relationship from there, the way some of the best friendships come about. They even continue to correspond, it seems, after Trevor goes to India. (How else would Holmes hear of him?) This is before Holmes became fixated upon criminal investigation, so what might the two college friends have done for fun once Holmes's ankle healed? How might their recreational relationship have been different from that of Holmes and Watson, which seems to center primarily around Holmes's work?

6. A Month In The Country Of The Broads (With No Broads)

“There was excellent wild-duck shooting in the fens, remarkably good fishing, a small but select library, taken over, as I understood, from a former occupant, and a tolerable cook, so that he would be a fastidious man who could not put in a pleasant month there.”

Okay, the two friends hunted ducks, they fished, they read, and they ate well. For a month. Sure, those were slower times, but surely the lads did something else in that month, didn't they? What other past-times might Holmes and Trevor have indulged in during a month of leisure?

7. The Interesting Mr. Trevor

Sherlock Holmes tells Watson, “The father interested me extremely.” A strong, smart, wealthy, well-travelled justice of the peace . . . what's not to be interested in? But this was young Sherlock Holmes, observant, yet not yet interested in crime or criminals. What in particular do you think he found so *extremely* fascinating about Trevor Senior? The success, the knowledge of the world, the leniency on the bench, or something else?

8. Forget The Tin Dispatch Box, Here's The Real Treasure!

Holmes also relates that “young Trevor began to talk about those habits of observation and inference which I had already formed into a system.”

Systemizing anything usually requires documentation, unless said system is simple enough to be memorized in a few basic principles. Holmes already had it all down -- they were habits to him. But forming those habits into a system implies that Holmes was already thinking of educating others, before he was even sure what career field such powers might be useful in. Did Holmes keep his records of this system? Would he have used them in his attempts to educate Watson and others? If not, why would he give them up?

9. The Visible Signs Of Travel

We've seen Holmes deduce Watson's time in Afghanistan from his tan and Jabez Wilson's journey to China from a coin on his watch chain and a tattoo. In this tale, Holmes deduces that old Trevor has been to Japan and New Zealand, then never explains himself. How would he know someone had been to Japan, or, tougher still, New Zealand, just from visible traces on his person?

10. The Strangeness Of A Commonplace Tattoo

While James Armitage's tattoo of "J.A." on the inner bend of his elbow seems not all that odd at first glance, further consideration makes one really wonder about the reasons for such a thing. First, why would anyone bother getting a tattoo with their own initials? And second, getting a tattoo is somewhat painful isn't it? Why pick a sensitive area like the inside of the elbow?

11. The First Recorded Instance Of Holmes And Tobacco

After Holmes spots Trevor's tattoo, the genial JP invites Holmes to, "Come into the billiard-room and have a quiet cigar." While this is perhaps the most courteous way of saying "Shut up!" ever recorded, it does raise an interesting point: At what age was a young man in Victorian London first invited to take up smoking in polite society? How long might Holmes have been smoking before this, and in what form might he have most likely had his first introduction to the evil weed?

12. The Sorry Sailor Versus The Wealthy Jp

Sherlock Holmes gives us quite a terrific impression of the elder Trevor. He's wealthy, he has influence, and is respected by the community. Why should anyone believe a pathetic old seaman's word over his? Couldn't Trevor have brushed off this loser as a crazy man? Was it merely Trevor's own paranoia and guilt that put him under Hudson's power? Could anyone have proven that the JP was the same man Hudson claimed he was, in that day before fingerprint records? And how did Trevor, a fighter and a man of accomplishment, get to the position he's currently in with so little backbone as he shows against Hudson?

13. Mr. Hudson And Mrs. Hudson

A Sherlockian urban legend going all the way back to the Great Morley himself tells of sailor Hudson's wife owning a building on Baker Street where she eventually rented rooms to one Sherlock Holmes. Was the building at 221 Baker Street purchased with the profits of blackmail? Was Sherlock Holmes still looking for old Trevor's blackmailer when he found Hudson's widow and her agreeable rooms for rent?

14. Irene Adler's Transvestite Mother?

Jack Prenderghast is described thusly: "He was a young man with a clear, hairless face." He's in the hold of a prison ship bound for Australia. Surely he wasn't allowed the use of a straight razor. Why doesn't he at least have some patchy stubble on his chin? He's not all *that* young. Is this an indicator of descent from Native Americans or some other beardless gene pool? Or was he allowed to shave while a convict?

15. Putting Armitage To The Test

Armitage writes of Prenderghast, "When he had tested me and sworn me in with all possible solemnity, he let me understand that there really was a plot to gain command of the vessel." Here we have two convicts, sitting in adjoining cells, able to talk to each other and little else. How was it that Prenderghast "tested" Armitage? Was it through questions on his beliefs and actions? Or something a little more demonstrative?

16. Who's The Great Detective In This Tale?

The path of James Armitage from the Gloria Scott to Donnithorpe is a long and winding one: "After an excellent voyage the Hotspur landed us at Sydney, where Evans and I changed our names and made our way to the diggings, where, among the crowds who were gathered from all nations, we had no difficulty in losing our former identities. The rest I need not relate. We prospered, we travelled, we came back as rich colonials to England, and we bought country estates."

How could Hudson have possibly tracked these two men down? It's not like a career seaman would just be wandering through rural England and recognize a man who he'd only known as a scruffy convict many decades before. Any clues as to how Hudson found Armitage?

17. Escape To The Terai Tea-Plantation

When all is said and done, Holmes's friend young Trevor leaves his boyhood home to head for the Indian jungles at the foot of the Himalayan mountains. Why would he do such a thing? His father's crime could bring no punishment down upon him. The family fortune apparently came from the gold fields of Australia. And dark rumors of his father's past hadn't even begun to spring up around him. Did Trevor think India was a good career move? Why was Donnithorpe so hateful to him?

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2000-2001