

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXI – The Adventure of the Reigate Squire

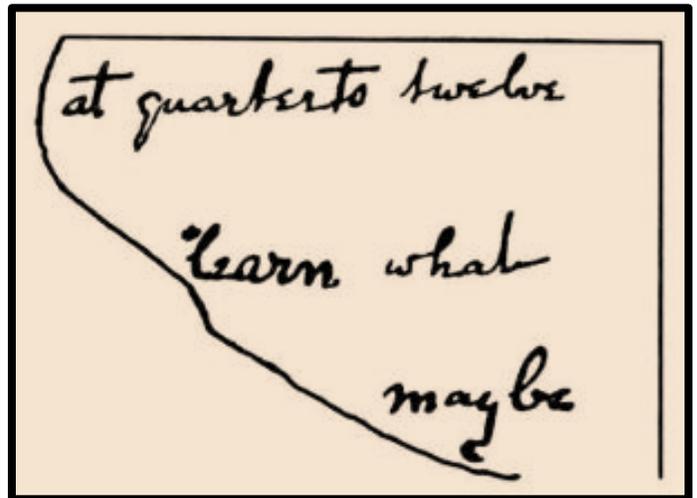
Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of the Reigate Squire" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. Who Cares About The Reigate Squires?

Reading this week's tale is a bit like going to a matinee of "Plan 9 From Outer Space" and getting a preview for "Return of the Jedi"? Who wants to sit through Grade "B" material when your tastes have been tempted by the epic adventure?

Watson gives us an excuse: "The whole question of the Netherland-Sumatra Company and of the colossal schemes of Baron Maupertuis are too recent in the minds of the public, and are too intimately concerned with politics and finance to be fitting subjects for this series of sketches."

But is that the real reason, or is Watson just skipping it because he wasn't involved in the Maupertuis matter, leaving us to settle with the Reigate mischief, in which he was present? Is there any reason we should believe his excuses?



2. The Never-Ending Battle For Truth And Justice

In the opening to this case, Watson refers to Holmes's "lifelong battle against crime." Should readers of the Strand Magazine in 1893 have taken this as an omen that Holmes's life was going to end while he was still fighting crime? Watson plainly knew such was the case when he wrote this tale, but what of Watson's Literary Agent? (Of course, later we all learn that Holmes didn't really die and eventually retired to Sussex . . . so much for the "lifelong" battle.)

3. Almost A Thousand Man-Hours Of What?

Holmes spent a good deal of time on the Maupertuis matter: “Even his iron constitution, however, had broken down under the strain of an investigation which had extended over two months, during which period he had never worked less than fifteen hours a day and had more than once, as he assured me, kept to his task for five days at a stretch.”

We know how Holmes handles his cases. We have a pretty good idea as to his methods. If you do the math on the statement above, roughly fifty days times fifteen hours, added to ten days at twenty-four hours, you get a minimum of 990 hours spent on the case. What was Holmes doing for all that time? Broken into forty hour work weeks, that would be about six months of standard on-the-job time -- a lot of hours in any profession. (Hopefully he was paid well for it!) Was it all investigation, partly setting traps, or what?

4. Dr. Watson To The Rescue

“I found him a prey to the blackest depression,” Watson diagnoses Holmes’s condition. “Even the knowledge that he had succeeded where the police of three countries had failed, and that he had outmanoeuvred at every point the most accomplished swindler in Europe, was insufficient to rouse him from his nervous prostration.”

For Sherlock Holmes not to take some happiness in beating Europe’s greatest swindling mind means things were pretty bad. Yet under Watson’s care we find, “Three days later we were back in Baker Street together.”

What did Watson do for Holmes to get him in shape to travel? Were drugs involved, or was cocaine usage (to keep Holmes working all those hours) a part of the reason for Holmes’s breakdown to begin with?

5. Dr. Watson’s Other Patient

Watson writes of “my old friend, Colonel Hayter, who had come under my professional care in Afghanistan.” Early in this cycle of tales, we discussed Watson’s time in Afghanistan, and how most of it was spent sick and wounded. When did Watson have time to take on Hayter as a patient? Was Hayter also a survivor of the awful battle of Maiwand?

6. Colonel Hayter’s Weapons Collection

“Hayter and I looked over his little armory of Eastern weapons.”

What sort of weapons would we expect to be in such an armory? A Jezail musket perhaps? And at least one pistol, as the Colonel takes it to bed with him.

Why the fascination for Eastern weapons by a man who was seemingly wounded with one at some time, requiring the care of Watson? Where were “Eastern weapons” being made, and how many varieties were there?

7. Methinks Acton Just Misplaced The Twine

“The whole place was turned upside down, drawers burst open, and presses ransacked, with the result that an odd volume of Pope's Homer, two plated candlesticks, an ivory letter-weight, a small oak barometer, and a ball of twine are all that have vanished.”

It has always amazed me that such an exact list could be made up from the ruins of old Acton's library. With the whole place turned upside down, drawers and presses emptied, how long might it take to discover a single book was missing? Plated candlesticks, an ivory letter-weight . . . those were probably fairly unique in a library and easily missed (as well as being the sort of objects to attract thieves). But a single book among hundreds? And a ball of twine? Who would look through the ruins of their library and cry “They took my twine!”? Was Acton really a book-lover, or was this just a library for show?

8. The Burglary Nobody Cared About

Even lying on the sofa at Hayter's, Sherlock Holmes can spot a phony burglary: "The county police ought to make something of that. Why, it is surely obvious that-- --"

At that point Watson cuts him off. Watson and Hayter start talking about something else, and Holmes's ideas are completely ignored. If Colonel Hayter was concerned enough about the burglary to be taking a gun to bed with him, wouldn't he have been interested to hear Holmes's thoughts on the matter? And why does Watson show so little care for a crime going unsolved? Simply letting Holmes voice his thoughts wouldn't tax the detective too much, would it?

Or was Holmes in such bad shape at this point that no one was taking him seriously? Was Watson enjoying having Holmes under his control for once?

9. Taking That Gun To Bed

Colonel Hayter decides, at the last minute, to take a gun to bed with him because of a burglary a full week before. (How do we know it's a full week? Wait for Chronology Corner.) Wouldn't he have the pistol already in his bedroom at that point, so long after the crime? Or is Holmes really acting crazy, as is remarked upon later, and Hayter thinks he might be better off with a gun to protect him from his house guests?

10. That Famous Street

The smart young Inspector Forrester enters with the words: "I hope I don't intrude, but we hear that Mr. Holmes of Baker Street is here."

Not "Mr. Sherlock Holmes" or "Mr. Holmes of London." Was one's street a common way to identify someone in those days, or did Holmes's fame as "the detective at 221B Baker Street" make the address a part of his identity? At what point does an address become part of a person's name, and how important is Baker Street to Holmes's identity? While there is (or was, until people started naming babies after him) only one Sherlock Holmes, we see things like Baring-Gould's book "Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street" all the time. Would he be the same without it?

11. Respect For The Elderly

Was Mother Kirwan really as bad off as Forrester thinks she is?

"She is very old and deaf, and we can get no information from her. The shock has made her half-witted, but I understand that she was never very bright."

Holmes later says that she's old and feeble, and unable to give them much information, but one still has to wonder: Was Mama Kirwan just uncooperative with the smart young Scotland Yard man, resulting in his insulting opinion of her? Did Holmes actually have better luck with her, even though no case-breaking news was gotten from her?

12. Hopefully He Wasn't Mailing Pips

Old Cunningham keeps a bowl of oranges and a carafe of water at the foot of his bed. Was this most likely for breakfast, a late-night snack, or what? And where did these oranges most likely come from? In modern America, we're used to California and Florida oranges, but where did Britain get its citrus in those days?

13. Acton Versus Cunningham

"I have the clearest claim upon half of their present estate," old Acton says of the Cunningham's land, yet gives no details as to why. It all seems, however, to hinge upon a single paper. What might this paper have been, giving Acton "the clearest claim" to so much land, when the usual deeds undoubtedly read otherwise?

14. The Attempted Murder Of Sherlock Holmes

Covering up a late-night murder with no outside witnesses is one thing, but throttling a man to death in a house full of policemen is something else entirely. Did the Cunninghams have any hope whatsoever of getting away with the murder of Sherlock Holmes, had they actually managed to silence and strangle him? It seems to have been an entirely spontaneous attack, with no thought given to it at all, but did the father and son stand any chance of getting away with both murders if they had killed Holmes?

15. His Employers's Handwriting

Wouldn't William Kirwan have recognized the handwriting of his employers, even if they were alternating words? Did he go to that appointment knowing full well that it was they who wrote it, like an obedient servant? (Although obedient servants hardly blackmail their employers.)

16. The Kirwan-Morrison Relationship

What might we deduce from what little clues we have about the William Kirwan - Annie Morrison relationship? The writer of the note promises information which will both surprise Kirwan and be of the greatest service to both he and Morrison. Is the implication that Kirwan is going to be told that Annie Morrison has some affection for him, and that this surprising truth will do them the great service of bringing them together? Or are the two already a couple, and the surprise might be something that will aid them in their future together?

17. Another Watson Promise Unfulfilled . . . Or Is It?

When all is said and done in this tale, one looks back at the opening and finds the description of the Reigate case as, "a singular and complex problem which gave my friend an opportunity of demonstrating the value of a fresh weapon among the many with which he waged his lifelong battle against crime."

In the past, I've taken this to mean the feigning of illness, or falling faint as a ruse. This case also features the trick where Holmes writes a flawed note for approval by the suspect, then lets the suspect correct it to gain a handwriting sample. Was one of these two the "fresh weapon"? Or was it something else in this tale? Or an outright lie on Watson's part?

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