

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXII – The Adventure of the Crooked Man

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

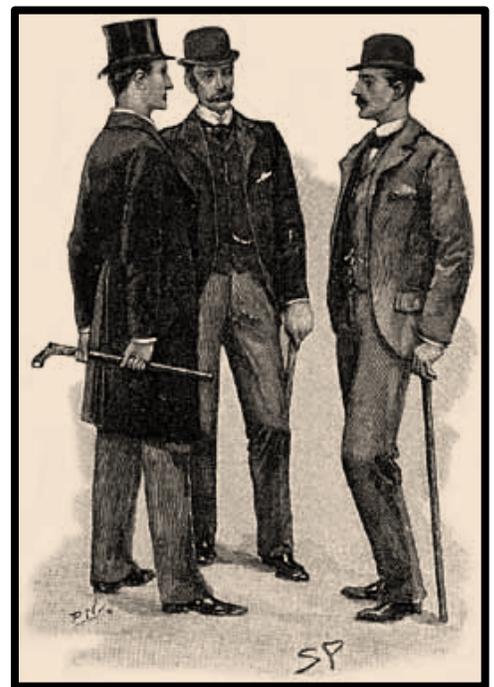
1. Holmes Stops By For An Overnight

Holmes's overnight stay is an item that it is almost too easy to breeze over in "The Crooked Man." The detective shows up on Watson's doorstep at 11:45 at night, asks if he can sleep in the spare room, then invites Watson along on an investigation the next morning. All this would seem to make sense, except for the fact that they don't have to catch the morning train until 11:10 the next day . . . plenty of time for Holmes to return from Baker Street and pick Watson up. Why the need for a sleepover? Was something wrong with 221B? Was Holmes afraid that if he left Watson alone with Mrs. Watson she'd forbid him from accompanying Holmes, yet would be too polite to do it in person?

2. The Machine Or The Man?

"For an instant the veil had lifted upon his keen, intense nature, but for an instant only. When I glanced again his face had resumed that red-Indian composure which had made so many regard him as a machine rather than a man."

Here we find as good a statement of the duality of Holmes's image as any in the Canon (ignoring the antiquated Native American stereotype, of course.). There is the "keen, intense" Holmes, as passionate about his art as any painter or poet. There is also the "Mr. Spock" side of Holmes, cold, logical, and scientific. Seeing Holmes through Watson's eyes, we are privy to both sides of Holmes, and those little emotional outbursts that probably only came out when he was alone or with Watson. But he can't have been a machine to everybody



else, can he? Certainly Lestrade has seen the human side of Holmes, as has Mrs. Hudson. Who were these people who thought of Holmes as a machine? Anyone we know?

3. Watson's Unmentioned Act

Watson is usually quick to condense his own explanations or leave out his responses as he writes up the tales, but in this case he seems to drop something important: food. He quotes Holmes as saying:

"Ah! He has left two nail-marks from his boot upon your linoleum just where the light strikes it. No, thank you, I had some supper at Waterloo, but I'll smoke a pipe with you with pleasure."

Watson doesn't say anything in between the linoleum remark and the supper remark, so we are left wondering. Was he waving a plate of pot roast or a leg of lamb in Holmes's face? Did he actually ask Holmes if he needed something to eat, then left out his own question, but not Holmes's response? (And why, writing the story at a later date, would he put in one but not the other?) Was the food available at Chez Watson so bad that it didn't bear mentioning?

4. The Day Rental Of A Hansom

Holmes tells Watson, "When your round is a short one you walk, and when it is a long one you use a hansom. As I perceive that your boots, although used, are by no means dirty, I cannot doubt that you are at present busy enough to justify the hansom."

Was renting a hansom cab (and driver) for an entire day cost-effective for a doctor making his rounds? From the singular reference, it would seem there was just one, and not a series of cabs . . . or was it?

5. The Changing Of The Guard

"The first battalion of the Royal Munsters (which is the old One Hundred and Seventeenth) has been stationed at Aldershot for some years," Holmes explains. Okay, military buffs, why would the old One Hundred and Seventeenth now be called the Royal Munsters? (And don't tell me it has anything to do with the old TV show.)

6. Isn't She Still A Member?

"Mrs. Barclay was, it appears, a member of the Roman Catholic Church and had interested herself very much in the establishment of the Guild of St. George, which was formed in connection with the Watt Street Chapel for the purpose of supplying the poor with cast-off clothing."

Holmes doesn't usually identify the religion of those involved in a crime, though the follow-up details might seem to give him some reason for doing so. Is his subconscious trying to tell him that her active church status might show him the answer to that "David" clue? And why does he refer to her in the past tense, when she just has brain fever?

7. That Darned Social Friction!

Holmes reports: "There was, therefore, as can be imagined, some little social friction when the young couple (for they were still young) found themselves in their new surroundings."

I'm guessing that "new surroundings" refers to the new social status that James and Nancy Barclay gained when he went from being a sergeant to being an officer. What kind of friction might they have encountered? Was it between the Barclays and the officers and their wives, or between the Barclays themselves?

8. The Tell-Tale Cup Of Tea

After learning of her husband's treachery and her lover's fate, Nancy Barclay enters her house, avoids her husband, and goes into the morning-room. She then rings for the maid and asks for tea, which was "was quite contrary to her usual habits."

Was she attempting to calm her nerves with the tea? Would one even want to speak to anyone at a time like that, to even do so much as order tea?

9. The Security Of Lachine

We are told that the morning room at Lachine "faces the road and opens by a large glass folding-door on to the lawn."

A folding door? Perhaps the Smash has a too-limited experience of folding doors, but I have yet to see one that would serve as an outside entrance to a house. Too easily taken off their tracks and not very conducive to getting a good seal against the elements. Are there good solid folding doors for use against the outdoors? Was this the predecessor to the modern sliding patio door?

10. The Divine Miss "M."

Holmes does something in this case that he does in no other . . . he calls a woman by a nickname of sorts.

"I took the obvious course, therefore, of calling upon Miss M."

Would it be too much to assume that Holmes's turn of phrase indicates a certain happiness of thought when Miss Morrison comes to mind?

The detective describes her as "a little ethereal slip of a girl, with timid eyes and blond hair, but I found her by no means wanting in shrewdness and common sense," which sounds a lot like Mary Morstan, another little blonde that Holmes thought was "one of the most charming young ladies I ever met, and might have been most useful in such work as we have been doing." Of course, Watson stole Miss Morstan away before Holmes had a chance with her. Might things have gone differently this time? Might Holmes have brought Watson into this case simply for a little off-the-record advice on wooing? (That would explain the sudden need for a late-night slumber party at Watson's.)

11. Simpson Is On The Job

"I have one of my Baker Street boys mounting guard over him who would stick to him like a burr, go where he might," Holmes says, and we soon find he has assigned the task to a lad named Simpson. But the job to which Simpson is assigned is far from Baker Street. Did Holmes take Simpson up to Aldershot with him to begin with, come back and get him, or send him up on a Tuesday night train and expect him to find Wood on his own?

12. Calling All Coroners

"The inquest is just over. The medical evidence showed conclusively that death was due to apoplexy."

Okay, medically-minded Hounds, what's the conclusive evidence of death due to apoplexy?

13. The Worst Life In The Canon

While we've seen a lot of hard-luck cases in the Canon, there is no one who compares with Henry Wood. Anyone for whom the job description of "slave" was a step up in life is really hurting, and for poor Wood "hurting" is an understatement. The mind boggles at what sort of tortures result in a twisting of the spine, and there are other aspects of his imprisonment that one doesn't even want to bring up on a family list. Add to this the almost incidental fact that his one true love was stolen from him by the man who condemned him to Hell on Earth, and you get the one man who deserved revenge above any other that Sherlock Holmes encountered.

So what if Colonel Barclay had not been struck dead upon seeing him? Would Henry Wood have attempted to kill him? Or was Wood such a broken man at this point that he was incapable of taking his revenge?

14. How Twisted Was Barclay?

His regiment is trapped by ten thousand rebels. The water has run out. He needs to send word to General Neill. Barclay then sets up his one volunteer to die by having his servant run out and tell the rebels of the volunteer's path.

Trying to destroy a rival is one thing, but risking the lives of men, women and children just to get a clear path toward a member of the opposite sex? Either Barclay was psychotically obsessed with Nancy Devoy or he knew something that no one else did about Neill getting there. Did he know, or was he just that crazy about Nancy?

15. Nancy Barclay's Options

We've already supposed what would have happened had Colonel Barclay not had his attack from Henry Wood's point of view. But what if the attack never came, and Henry Wood had not come either? What could Nancy Barclay have done in that day and age to free herself from the lie her entire life had become?

16. Watson And The Animal Kingdom

"It's a mongoose," Watson cries out, upon seeing Teddy.

Had he seen such creatures before while in India? Would the London Zoo have sufficed? Or one of J.G. Wood's picture books? Why didn't he think of the mongoose sooner, as in "If this were India, I'd think it was a mongoose."

17. The Hedges Henry Loved

"For years I've been dreaming of the bright green fields and the hedges of England. At last I determined to see them before I died," Henry Wood says. How important a part of the English countryside are hedges? Enough so that Wood would be nostalgic for them, it would seem. Does this give us some indication of the part of the country he's from?

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