

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXIV – The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter

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

1. My Roommate Is An Alien

"This reticence upon his part had increased the somewhat inhuman effect which he produced upon me, until sometimes I found myself regarding him as an isolated phenomenon, a brain without a heart, as deficient in human sympathy as he was preeminent in intelligence."

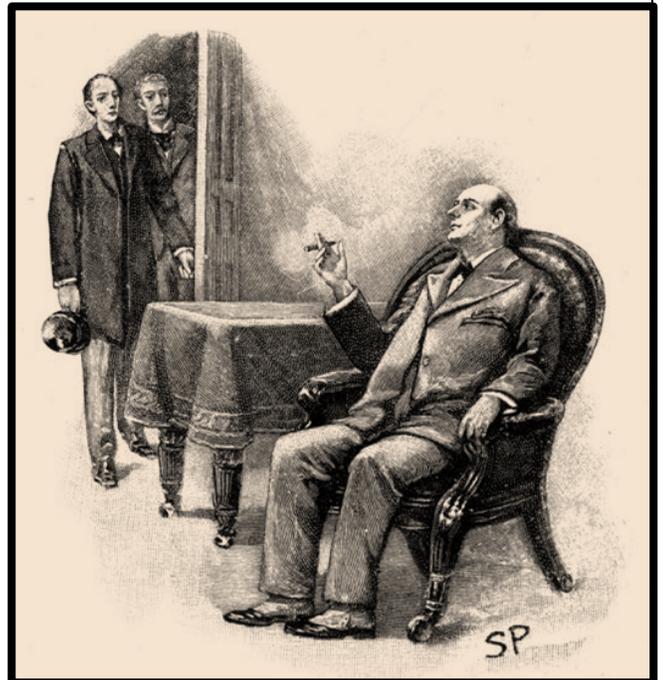
Just how many people have any of us met that had a "somewhat inhuman effect" upon us? Not many, I'd wager, as those are some very strong words. How does one befriend a man who produces such an effect?

And on other side of the coin, if Watson was just over-blown in his prose, how does one speak so about his best friend in good conscience?

2. So Just Who Does He Like?

"His aversion to women and his disinclination to form new friendships were both typical of his unemotional character . . ."

Would the phrase "form new friendships" have applied strictly to fellow males in Victorian times? Is Watson basically saying, "He didn't like women, and he didn't really care for men either"? (Which basically leaves children and dogs, doesn't it?)



3. Nature Versus Nurture

“The point under discussion was, how far any singular gift in an individual was due to his ancestry and how far to his own early training.”

While the science of genetics has come a long way since Holmes’s time (and even gotten the name “genetics,” which it didn’t have then), the question he and Watson were discussing that evening is one we might still debate about today. Is there any more evidence today, however, of the dominance of one over the other? How much of Holmes’s talents would we put down to ancestry, and how much to training, in this day and age?

4. Country Bred Or Town Bred?

“My ancestors were country squires, who appear to have led much the same life as is natural to their class.”

While Sherlockian scholars and pasticheurs have often had Holmes’s parents as country squires, what he says here is not that at all. His words “who appear to have led . . .” do not sound like he had had any contact whatsoever with said country squires. And the comfort and ease with which he moves through London make him seem quite the urban native. Is there any other evidence that Holmes was not a city boy? Or that he was truly London born and raised?

5. Sherlock Holmes, Artist

“But, none the less, my turn that way is in my veins, and may have come with my grandmother, who was the sister of Vernet, the French artist. Art in the blood is liable to take the strangest forms.”

He’s observant. He’s musical. He’s definitely a genius. But how does Sherlock Holmes see himself as an artist? Shouldn’t an artist be creating something? And how are these artist qualities shared with Mycroft?

6. Did Watson Have A Lisp Or What?

This has been mentioned in the 17 Steps before, but here Watson goes again: “If there were another man with such singular powers in England, how was it that neither police nor public had heard of him? I put the question, with a hint that it was my companion's modesty which made him acknowledge his brother as his superior.”

Why is Watson constantly paraphrasing himself or leaving his lines out altogether? Is he modest, or is this a more effective prose style than giving his own words in full quotation? In other words, is this a quirk of personality or a conscious style choice? (Or perhaps even something he was taught?) How does his use of it compare to other writers of then and now?

7. The True Armchair Detective

"If the art of the detective began and ended in reasoning from an armchair, my brother would be the greatest criminal agent that ever lived."

One of Holmes's great abilities as a criminologist was his vast knowledge of the history of crime. In "The Sign of the Four," Holmes speaks of Francois le Villard, saying that the French detective possesses two of the three qualities necessary for the detective: observation and deduction. The third quality, which le Villard lacks, is knowledge. Are we to surmise from Holmes's estimate of Mycroft as a criminal agent that the elder Holmes has just as much criminal knowledge as the younger? And if Sherlock didn't even think of becoming a detective until meeting old Trevor, how is it that he and Mycroft both came to possess such knowledge?

8. So That's Why Holmes Never Mentioned His Brother

"Again and again I have taken a problem to him, and have received an explanation which has afterwards proved to be the correct one."

Wait a minute . . . "again and again"? That sounds fairly often to me. How many times have we seen Holmes disappear for the afternoon, only to come back with the solution to a case? How many times has he had to return to London to come up with an answer? Is Mycroft Holmes the true brains of this outfit after all? Was Sherlock just his Archie Goodwin?

9. From Mycroft's Casebook . . .

Mycroft Holmes apparently takes some interest in crime:

"By the way, Sherlock, I expected to see you round last week to consult me over that Manor House case. I thought you might be a little out of your depth."

"No, I solved it," said my friend, smiling.

"It was Adams, of course."

"Yes, it was Adams."

"I was sure of it from the first."

Mycroft actually solved the case from his armchair, but what was his information source? Was he working solely from the newspapers? Or did he have another channel for data? Who or what might that have been?

10. And While We're On Information Sources ...

"We shall know if you speak of this. We have our own means of information. Now you will find the carriage waiting, and my friend will see you on your way."

Who needs their own means of information when Mycroft Holmes is going to place evidence of Melas's loose tongue in the Daily News? What was Mycroft thinking? But what was Kemp and Latimer's info source other than the newspaper? An insider in Scotland Yard? A spy at Melas's residence? Or something much more malevolent and far-reaching?

11. Something Much More Malevolent And Far-Reaching

No other case prior to "The Final Problem" screams "Moriarty!" more than "The Greek Interpreter." Look at the Kemp/Moriarty similarities:

Moriarty: Pale. Kemp: Pale.

Moriarty: Round shoulders. Kemp: Round shoulders.

Moriarty: Oscillating head. Kemp: Facial twitch.

Sure, Moriarty is "tall" in Holmes's eyes, and Kemp is "small" to Melas's point of view. And Kemp has those glasses and that "thready, ill-nourished" beard, of the sort that a man might think better of and shave off. Any chance they might be the same man?

12. So Who Is This Guy?

If you don't go for the Moriarty theory, then who is Wilson Kemp?

There's nothing about the Latimer-Kratides money-grab that requires this sickly little fellow, is there? Why should a big, smart young fellow like Latimer put up with him? Were they related?

13. Harold Latimer, Confirmed Bachelor?

And speaking of relationships, what exactly is the relationship between Sophy Kratides and Harold Latimer? Are they married, even if it's not by a priest recognized by her brother? If they aren't, how did Latimer have any claim over her property? And if the brother's signature was needed to get Latimer more of said money and property, would his death have done the trick as well?

14. That Marvelous Victorian London Mail Service

One subject that's come up before on Hounds list is the multiple mail deliveries that happened every day in Victorian London. In this story, however, we find a mail delivery happening sometime during the evening. Holmes and Watson call on Mycroft after six, visit with the elder Holmes and Mr. Melas for a time, and the mail is apparently still coming. While seven-ish might now be too far into the night, how late in the evening could ordinary, newspaper-ad-answering letters still get delivered?

15. A Strange Combination Of Writing Instruments

"Have you the slate, Harold?" asks the older villain of the younger." Are his hands loose? Now, then, give him the pencil."

Bad enough they've tortured poor Paul Kratides ... now they want him to write on a slate with a pencil. The sound alone has to be horrific, and how legible is black-on-black going to be? Were white pencils used on slates back then? Where white slates used with black pencils? What goes here?

16. It Sure Isn't A Zip Code . . .

At the end of Mycroft's newspaper ad is this little number: "X 2473."

An actual Holmes's phone number? If so, why does the response to Mycroft's ad come through the mail?

17. More Mysterious Information Sources

"Months afterwards a curious newspaper cutting reached us from Buda-Pesth. It told how two Englishmen who had been travelling with a woman had met with a tragic end."

Who sent this clipping to Holmes and Watson, and why? Could it have been sent by the assassin himself? Did Buda-Pesth have an English newspaper, or was the article in Hungarian? And why, months later, would anyone think this was Latimer, Kemp, and Kratides? (Was Moriarty, still in England, just trying to distract them?)

Brad Keefauver, BSI

2000-2001