

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXVI – The Adventure of the Final Problem

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

1. The Truth, The Whole Truth, And ... Wait A Minute!

A still-bereaved Watson writes: "My hand has been forced, however, by the recent letters in which Colonel James Moriarty defends the memory of his brother, and I have no choice but to lay the facts before the public exactly as they occurred. I alone know the absolute truth of the matter, and I am satisfied that the time has come when no good purpose is to be served by its suppression."

Two years after Professor Moriarty's death, his brother has suddenly been moved to defend the late Professor's good name. Watson tells us at the story's end that the colonel's defense cast aspersions on Sherlock, and the good doctor appears fairly outraged about those aspersions. But he knows very little about Moriarty, doesn't he? He can't even say for sure that Moriarty killed Holmes or vice versa. Under close cross-examination, Watson couldn't even tell us with any real authority that the detective and the mathematician didn't skip off along some mountain trail to sojourn in Cannes together. Is Watson a truly reliable source in this tale, when it comes to Moriarty?



2. Paranoia May Destroy Ya, Yeah . . .

Holmes is pale, thin, and spooky as he enters this tale. And when Watson asks him what's up, he holds out his scraped knuckles and says: "It's not an airy nothing, you see." Had Watson implied any airiness to Holmes's concerns? Is Holmes perhaps a bit overstressed, a bit over the edge, even for the situation?

Maybe not so far as the cocaine-induced dementia that Nicholas Meyer suggested was behind this tale, but still, this is not the cool, collected Holmes as we have come to know him. Was this the first time that the cerebral consulting detective faced a foe who sent assassins after him?

3. How Much Did He Need To Retire?

“Between ourselves,” Holmes tells Watson, “the recent cases in which I have been of assistance to the royal family of Scandinavia, and to the French republic, have left me in such a position that I could continue to live in the quiet fashion which is most congenial to me, and to concentrate my attention upon my chemical researches.”

Given Holmes’s standard of living, the fact he wasn’t sharing rooms, and the fact he wasn’t all that old, how much money must Holmes have made from those past cases to put him in a position to retire?

4. The Professor Moriarty Story, Next On Biography

“His career has been an extraordinary one. He is a man of good birth and excellent education, endowed by nature with a phenomenal mathematical faculty. At the age of twenty-one he wrote a treatise upon the binomial theorem, which has had a European vogue. On the strength of it he won the mathematical chair at one of our smaller universities, and had, to all appearances, a most brilliant career before him. But the man had hereditary tendencies of the most diabolical kind. A criminal strain ran in his blood, which, instead of being modified, was increased and rendered infinitely more dangerous by his extraordinary mental powers.

Dark rumours gathered round him in the university town, and eventually he was compelled to resign his chair and to come down to London, where he set up as an army coach.”

Where did this young prodigy go wrong? One of the more ingenious parts of this tale is the way Moriarty is described in the vague, terrible fashion of a Lovecraftian horror than a specific sort of criminal. But for the practically-minded Sherlockian student, the paragraph above holds little solid matter for chewing, melting away under close study like cotton candy in the rain.

Diabolical hereditary tendencies means exactly what? A long family chain of addiction? Child abuse? Devil worship? What sort of crimes do we think Moriarty first fell into? Theft? Murder? Sex crimes? What category of crime would have been best served by his extraordinary mathematical mind?

5. The Moriarty Career Path

“He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson. He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city ... his agents are numerous and splendidly organized. Is there a crime to be done,

a paper to be abstracted, we will say, a house to be rifled, a man to be removed--the word is passed to the professor, the matter is organized and carried out. The agent may be caught. In that case money is found for his bail or his defence. But the central power which uses the agent is never caught--never so much as suspected."

In the modern day, there are established criminal organizations that one can work one's way up the ladder in, like any other business. But for a man to build such an organization from the ground up, as Moriarty did, where does one start? Did Moriarty have a business model of that time to work from, or was this a plan all his own? Did he always work through others, or was there a day when he performed the work himself?

6. And Then He Gave Us "Blanched Soldier"

Holmes remarks, "I tell you, my friend, that if a detailed account of that silent contest could be written, it would take its place as the most brilliant bit of thrust-and-parry work in the history of detection."

Why didn't Holmes write up that detailed account? Wouldn't it have been the first choice for a case he would put before the public, the best lessons for students of detection combined with a record of one of the most significant events in the history of crime?

Why do writers of pastiche even shy away from this one? Is Moriarty's influence still active and suppressing it, even now?

7. Covering Moriarty With A Covered Pistol

Holmes tells Watson "I had slipped the revolver from the drawer into my pocket and was covering him through the cloth."

Where are the pockets on a dressing gown? Are they large enough to conceal a pistol, and one that's actually pointed forward, at that? Was Moriarty being especially observant in thinking Holmes had a pistol in his pocket, or was it actually fairly obvious from the gun-barrel-shaped protrusion in the cloth? (Let's keep the Mae West style remarks to a minimum, ladies and gentlemen.)

8. The French Connection

Moriarty reports: "You crossed my path on the fourth of January. On the twenty-third you incommoded me; by the middle of February I was seriously inconvenienced by you; at the end of March I was absolutely hampered in my plans; and now, at the close of April, I find myself placed in such a position through your continual persecution that I am in positive danger of losing my liberty."

Yet earlier in the story, Watson reports that letters and news accounts placed Holmes in France during the early spring. Were they just ruses to cover undercover work Holmes was doing in London? Or did Moriarty have concerns in France that were key to Holmes in bringing down his London organization?

9. The Full Extent Of One Man's Organization

The evil professor brags "You stand in the way not merely of an individual but of a mighty organization, the full extent of which you, with all your cleverness, have been unable to realize."

Might this statement have been made to Moriarty as well? The professor undoubtedly had many a corrupt government official under his cloak, but did he have any idea of the government official we know Holmes had working with him? Did Sherlock Holmes use brother Mycroft as a trump card? Did Mycroft use exposing Moriartian corruption inside the government to further his own career?

10. Just How Bad Was Professor Moriarty?

While the depth of Moriarty's evil is written up in vague and unspecific terms by Watson, Sherlock Holmes surely saw it all. And to me, the outrage it sparked in this cool logical machine of a man can be seen in a single statement that comes after Moriarty says Holmes can't beat him without destroying himself:

"If I were assured of the former eventuality I would, in the interests of the public, cheerfully accept the latter."

Is this just a fine, heroic statement, or a yardstick measuring the depth of the pain and misery Moriarty had inflicted upon London? Sherlock Holmes didn't care enough about rich men's money or the noble classes to give his life to stop embezzlement and theft, did he? Might there have been a single defining moment in Holmes's investigation, an act he traced to Moriarty so vile that Holmes's case immediately became a to-the-death priority?

11. London Itself Turns On Holmes

A two-horse van tries to run the detective down. A brick comes falling from a rooftop at his head. A rough with a bludgeon assaults him on his way to Watson's.

All of these acts imply a certain knowledge of Sherlock Holmes's movements. Was Holmes sticking to his daily routines, even while at war with the Moriarty empire? Was he doing it on purpose? He fears air-guns when he arrives at Watson's house -- why wasn't an air-gun sniper used instead of one of those earlier methods? It's plain that Holmes knew of Moriarty's main assassin, Moran, but was Moran out of town?

12. Detaining The “Suspect”

Holmes tells us a bit about how he dealt with the rough with the bludgeon: “I knocked him down, and the police have him in custody.” We are not told, however, what happened between those two events. How did Holmes detain the man until the police arrived? We know Holmes knocked his teeth in with his fist, but did he then pull a gun and hold him at gunpoint? Would Holmes have handcuffed him once the rough was on the ground? Or just do something as simple as putting a foot on some strategic point and simply pinning the man to the ground while he whistled for the law?

13. The Safety Of Brother Mycroft’s Rooms

Holmes explains, “I took a cab after that and reached my brother's rooms in Pall Mall, where I spent the day.”

Were Sherlock and Mycroft actively plotting, consulting, and deducing the entire day? Or was Holmes just hiding out there, and if so, what made Mycroft’s rooms so safe?

14. Back To Pall Mall Or Where?

"You will spend the night here?" asks Watson.

"No, my friend, you might find me a dangerous guest," replies Holmes.

So where does Sherlock Holmes spend the night on this most dangerous occasion? Not in Baker Street, as Holmes says Moriarty’s men would not have thought him there if they had kept track of him. Did any of his little refuges across London afford him the protection he needed, if he had been followed?

15. The Great Baker Street Fire

“They set fire to our rooms last night. No great harm was done.”

As with so many things in “The Final Problem,” this little statement leaves us begging for the tale behind it. We’ve often heard how 221B Baker Street was a mess, crowded with piles of paper. Was there ever a more perfect place to set fire to? And if Holmes wasn’t home, how was that fire discovered so quickly as to contain it? Did the setting of it involve something like a Molotov cocktail thrown through a window, in which case the mere act of setting it would raise an alarm? Or were Mrs. Hudson, the maid, the cook, the page, etc., all informed of the danger they were in, and thus were on their guard?

(One additional note -- Holmes refers to them as “our” rooms, even when Watson is away and married. If Watson was in the same habit, that throws one more monkey wrench into many a chronological speculation.)

16. Why Does Moriarty Want Holmes So Badly?

“Glancing back, I saw a tall man pushing his way furiously through the crowd, and waving his hand as if he desired to have the train stopped.”

Holmes has told Watson that the tall man was Moriarty himself. After all the subtle attacks we’ve previously seen, and the fact that Moriarty is reputed to distance himself from actual crime, what was the professor going to do if the train had actually stopped? Follow Holmes himself? Kill Holmes there at the train station? Or did he have some new threat to deliver, along the lines of, “We have Watson’s wife and we’ll kill her if you don’t stop the investigation now!”? The apparent need for personal contact would imply a message, wouldn’t it? Or is Holmes’s later supposition of a murderous attack at Canterbury hold true for the train station as well?

17. Why Is Holmes So Surprised At Moriarty’s Escape?

On the Monday morning of his flight from Moriarty, Holmes telegraphs the London police to find Moriarty has escaped capture. He curses and tosses the reply away, apparently expecting a better result. Now, just a few days before, Holmes was telling Watson that Moriarty would hire a special to chase them (which the Professor does), go on to Paris where Holmes’s luggage is, and wait two days for them there. Why is he then so surprised that Moriarty is not in London on Monday? He’s already said he expects the professor to be in Paris. Had Holmes expected that the French police might catch him?

18. It Takes More Than 17 Steps To Get To Reichenbach

“Your memoirs will draw to an end, Watson, upon the day that I crown my career by the capture or extinction of the most dangerous and capable criminal in Europe.”

After these words Watson was still going to end his accounts with “Naval Treaty.” Why leave out Holmes’s crowning achievement?

“We had strict injunctions, however, on no account to pass the falls of Reichenbach, which are about halfway up the hills, without making a small detour to see them.”

Was Peter Steiler the elder really being a helpful tour-guide, or was he actually directing the two into a trap at Moriarty’s command?

“There was Holmes’s Alpine-stock still leaning against the rock by which I had left him.”

What’s the deal with Holmes and Moriarty and their seeming insistence on a fair fight? Even if Holmes wasn’t carrying a gun, why not whack the kill-crazed Moriarty with his stick, something Holmes was an expert with?

“Tell Inspector Patterson that the papers which he needs to convict the gang are in pigeonhole M., done up in a blue envelope and inscribed ‘Moriarty.’”

This statement was left on a note, sitting in the open, that conceivably could have been picked up by a Moriarty who had just killed Sherlock Holmes. Is it the truth or just a ruse?

“An examination by experts leaves little doubt that a personal contest between the two men ended . . .”

What experts? And what was their area of expertise?

“It is due to those injudicious champions who have endeavoured to clear his memory ...”

At the beginning we were told that Colonel James Moriarty, brother to the professor, was the one defending the mastermind. Here it sounds like there were others. Who might they have been?

Brad Keefauver, BSI

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