

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXIX – The Adventure of the Norwood Builder

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

1. Life Without Professor Moriarty

"The community is certainly the gainer, and no one the loser, save the poor out-of-work specialist, whose occupation has gone. With that man in the field, one's morning paper presented infinite possibilities. Often it was only the smallest trace, Watson, the faintest indication, and yet it was enough to tell me that the great malignant brain was there, as the gentlest tremors of the edges of the web remind one of the foul spider which lurks in the centre. Petty thefts, wanton assaults, purposeless outrage--to the man who held the clue all could be worked into one connected whole."

With Moriarty gone, London crime is pretty much looking like an episode of "COPS" to Holmes. He sounds like Moriarty was everywhere in the good old days, but in Watson's chronicles we laymen see him nowhere (except for the good people of Granada Television, who wisely spotted his hand in "Red-Headed League"). Of the twenty-four cases that occurred before "The Final Problem," how many might have looked Moriarty-related to the mind of the criminal specialist?

(And is Holmes's "out-of-work" comment one more complaint about the popularity of Watson's writings, and how "Final Problem" has the world certain Holmes is dead despite anything the papers may be reporting?)



2. First A Brother, Now A Cousin . . .

Watson writes: "A young doctor, named Verner, had purchased my small Kensington practice, and given with astonishingly little demur the highest price that I ventured to ask--an incident which only explained itself some years later, when I found that Verner was a distant relation of Holmes, and that it was my friend who had really found the money."

One wonders, after "The Resident Patient," if Sherlock Holmes saw his young cousin as an investment opportunity. Would Holmes have gone with a deal like Blessington did in that tale (sans the "resident" part), would he have made it a loan to his kinsman, or was an outright gift more the detective's style?

3. Watson's New Role ... Or Was It?

"Our months of partnership had not been so uneventful as he had stated, for I find, on looking over my notes, that this period includes the case of the papers of ex-President Murillo, and also the shocking affair of the Dutch steamship Friesland, which so nearly cost us both our lives. His cold and proud nature was always averse, however, from anything in the shape of public applause, and he bound me in the most stringent terms to say no further word of himself, his methods, or his successes--a prohibition which, as I have explained, has only now been removed."

Consider this for a moment: Holmes took Watson back on as a partner and room-mate under the condition that Watson would write and publish no more of his cases. Sure, Holmes would eventually release Watson from it, but was that release spoken of at the time of the prohibition? Why did Holmes shut down Watson's literary career at its most successful point? Wasn't the damage already done? Wouldn't the public find out Holmes was still alive through the newspapers after a case or two?

Is it conceivable that Holmes took Watson back as a partner against crime and that alone? For the first time, Watson is with Holmes as a career choice, having given up his practice -- was this the start of the detective "agency" that Holmes refers to later?

4. Watson Seems To Be Catching On

Holmes observes, of John Hector McFarlane: "Beyond the obvious facts that you are a bachelor, a solicitor, a Freemason, and an asthmatic, I know nothing whatever about you."

Watson then writes: "Familiar as I was with my friend's methods, it was not difficult for me to follow his deductions, and to observe the untidiness of attire, the sheaf of legal papers, the watch-charm, and the breathing which had prompted them."

Is Watson actually showing improvement in his observation/deduction skills? Had this improvement come as the result of studies he undertook after Holmes's "death"? Is he more of a fitting partner for Holmes now than he was in his bachelor days years before?

5. The Upcoming Arrest Of John Hector McFarlane

Holmes is certainly pleased to hear McFarlane may be pursued by the police: "'Arrest you!" he remarks. "This is really most grati--most interesting."

Is it the pressure of having to save an innocent man that excites Holmes about this case? Or is it the chance to compete with Scotland Yard again? Could there have been yet another reason for Holmes's excitement over that one bit of information?

6. Sticking With Your Stick

J.H.M. tells, "I could not find my stick, and he said, 'Never mind, my boy, I shall see a good deal of you now, I hope, and I will keep your stick until you come back to claim it.'"

Were walking sticks more of an affectation in Victorian times than today? Or did John Hector McFarlane have a bum leg we're not told of?

7. The Last Minute Part Of The Plot

"It is curious--is it not?--that a man should draw up so important a document in so haphazard a fashion. It suggests that he did not think it was going to be of much practical importance."

As we know by the tale's end, the will of Jonas Oldacre did have a certain amount of importance to Oldacre's plans. Why wouldn't a man who spent so much time on the other construction that was vital to his plot not spend a little time constructing a will prior to the train ride? What was the hurry?

8. Another Untold Holmes List

"Give me another theory that would fit the facts," Lestrade tells Holmes.

"I could very easily give you half a dozen," Holmes replies. He then proceeds to give Lestrade a free sample of one. Anyone care to enumerate another five that Holmes might have been thinking of?

9. What's In That Boy's Head?

Inspector Lestrade had definitely got some bulldog-like qualities. Once he's decided McFarlane is the culprit, that's that. He notices Holmes giving him a hint like he always does, and even looks at Holmes

curiously about it. Why doesn't he give Holmes's clue another thought? Did he think Holmes was going to Blackheath to look for his theoretical tramp?

10. And While We're On It, What's Holmes Thinking?

Sherlock Holmes's attitude toward Watson's published works has some very curious manifestations. While in "Empty House" last week, we saw Watson returning to partnership with Holmes with a ban on publishing any more stories, months later, we have Holmes saying, "I fear that the Norwood Disappearance Case will not figure in that chronicle of our successes which I foresee that a patient public will sooner or later have to endure."

Was Holmes's irritation with Watson about the publication of *Adventures and Memoirs* a continuing pet peeve in the friendship? While many Watsonians have complained of Holmes's criticism of Watson's writing as unfair or cruel, might Holmes have actually had a grievance over Watson's deal with *Strand Magazine* after the detective's "death"? Were the fans driving Holmes nuts, causing him to shoot the occasional line at his friend like, "Perhaps I shall get the credit also at some distant day, when I permit my zealous historian to lay out his foolscap once more--eh, Watson?"

11. The Murderer In Sunday School

"That is a dangerous argument, my dear Watson. You remember that terrible murderer, Bert Stevens, who wanted us to get him off in '87? Was there ever a more mild-mannered, Sunday-school young man?"

While one wonders how long Holmes handled Bert Stevens's case before he realized the truth and how many people Bert killed to make him so terrible (or was it his method?), there are more important questions here: When did Sunday school get its start, apart from standard church services? And in Victorian London, was it something peculiar to a certain faith or branch of a faith?

12. Teaming Up On Holmes

Whenever three friends spend much time together, two of them are always liable to gang up on the third for the occasional ribbing. And in this tale we see a hint of something that may have happened more often than we are shown.

Lestrade is quite amused by Holmes's frustration over this case, laughing and commenting to Holmes, "You don't like being beaten any more than the rest of us do. A man can't expect always to have it his own way, can he, Dr. Watson?" Given Holmes's cool demeanor and Watson's accessibility, might Lestrade have been closer to Watson than Holmes as time went on?

13. Lestrade And Fingerprint Technology

"You are aware that no two thumb-marks are alike?" Lestrade asks.

"I have heard something of the kind," Holmes replies.

We know Holmes is up on every advance in criminological science, but what does this exchange tell us about Lestrade? In 1894, was he ahead or behind the rest of his colleagues at Scotland Yard? Had Lestrade actually learned of fingerprinting from Holmes and was needling him just a bit more?

14. Um, What Does "Outwardly" Mean?

"Holmes was outwardly calm, but his whole body gave a wriggle of suppressed excitement as he spoke."

Jeremy Brett's critics might have given him grief for a few of his more outlandish physical expressions in playing Sherlock Holmes, but as we see here, Holmes was not above a crazy physical expression or too of his own. But how did Holmes appear calm with his whole body wriggling? If he was gleeful enough to wriggle, wouldn't he also smile just a little bit? (In fact, a non-smiling wriggling man would look a little creepy, wouldn't he?)

15. No Crime Scene Tape In Those Days

"Where was the night constable?"

"He remained on guard in the bedroom where the crime was committed, so a to see that nothing was touched."

Holmes has had enough time to go over the entire house and yard with a fine toothed comb. Wouldn't Scotland Yard have been finished with the scene as well? With the limited forensics of the Victorian era, what more could they have hoped to gain from the guarded crime scene? What damage could an intruder have done to their case?

16. Holmes Likes The Big Fellows

Holmes has a simple question for Lestrade about his three men: "May I ask if they are all large, able-bodied men with powerful voices?"

And Lestrade replies: "I have no doubt they are, though I fail to see what their voices have to do with it."

Personally, I fail to see what their large, able bodies have to do with it. Was Holmes afraid that he, Watson and Lestrade were going to be unable to handle whoever came out of his theorized secret room?

17. Helping Watson Fill In The Details

After Holmes can't get Oldacre to speak, he says, "Well, well, I daresay that a couple of rabbits would account both for the blood and for the charred ashes. If ever you write an account, Watson, you can make rabbits serve your turn."

WHAT!?! Is Holmes suggesting that Watson fictionalizes portions of his accounts? Is all of Sherlockian scholarship threatened by this single statement? Or is this just one more jab at Watson's work?

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