

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Return of Sherlock Holmes

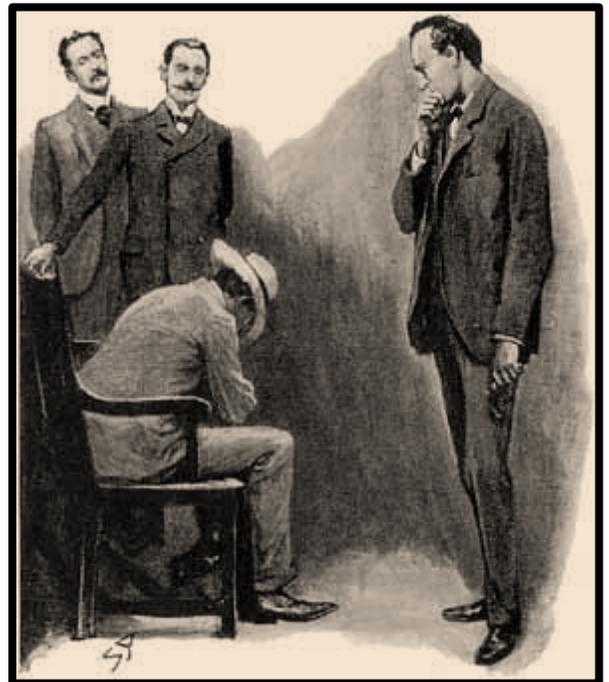
Adventure XXX – The Adventure of the Dancing Men

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

1. The Anatomy Of A Very Large Bird

Watson begins this tale with, "Holmes had been seated for some hours in silence with his long, thin back curved over a chemical vessel in which he was brewing a particularly malodorous product. His head was sunk upon his breast, and he looked from my point of view like a strange, lank bird, with dull gray plumage and a black top-knot."

One would assume the gray plumage is Holmes's clothes, and the black top-knot refers to his hair. Does Holmes have black hair? If not, do we know what color his hair actually is, other than that of the images we have from the actors who played him? Or is this whole "bird" thing the result of Watson inhaling too many chemical fumes and the good doctor is actually seeing a bird?



2. Taking The Long Way To A Deduction

Holmes gives Watson a nicely delineated deduction in this case when he explains how he knew Watson wasn't going to invest in South African securities. The six steps are as follows:

- 1) " You had chalk between your left finger and thumb when you returned from the club last night.
- 2) " You put chalk there when you play billiards, to steady the cue.
- 3) " You never play billiards except with Thurston.
- 4) " You told me, four weeks ago, that Thurston had an option on some South African property which would expire in a month, and which he desired you to share with him.

5) “ Your check book is locked in my drawer, and you have not asked for the key.

6) “ You do not propose to invest your money in this manner.”

Aren't steps one, two, and three just window dressing in this case? Wouldn't four, five, and six stand alone even if Holmes hadn't seen the chalk traces?

3. Choice South African Investments -- But What Choice?

First Holmes says Watson wasn't going to invest in securities, then he refers to Thurston's option on some property. Still later Holmes says the investment was in gold fields? Did this mean the South African gold field property was security on a loan? Was Thurston making the loan, or somehow benefiting from the default on a loan?

4. The Ransom Of Red Cheeks

Watson writes: “There entered a tall, ruddy, clean-shaven gentleman, whose clear eyes and florid cheeks told of a life led far from the fogs of Baker Street.”

If one spent most of one's time outdoors on Baker Street, wouldn't one get rosy-red cheeks? Were the fogs that regular and that heavy? Were the denizens of Baker Street lacking in “clear eyes” due to the pollution content of the air? Aren't red cheeks often genetic, anyway, requiring little sun?

5. Time Again For “What Is It?”

“Holmes examined it for some time, and then, folding it carefully up, he placed it in his pocketbook.”

Reading that sentence, my mental picture is always of Holmes folding the paper up and placing it in between the pages of a small bound book for taking notes ... but is that even close? To a book-lover, it is definitely a more appealing image than Holmes placing the paper in his coin purse. What was meant by a man's “pocketbook” in those days? His wallet? His coin purse? Or an actual pocket book?

6. Hilton Cubitt Takes A Holiday

“Last year I came up to London for the Jubilee,” Cubitt begins his tale, later mentioning that he was in London for a month. What went on during the Jubilee celebrations? Would a month have been plenty of time to enjoy all that was going on, or was Cubitt there for only a part of it? Were the festivities such that more people than just Cubitt found themselves coming home with a spouse?

7. Here We Go Again ...

"Don't you think, Mr. Cubitt," Holmes tells his client, "that your best plan would be to make a direct appeal to your wife, and to ask her to share her secret with you?"

Sound a little bit like "The Yellow Face," or maybe "The Noble Bachelor," to anyone? These American women who came to England to wed always seem to be hiding something, and they give one cause to wonder: how many of Holmes's cases concerned spouses who actually were having an affair? Watson, gentleman that he was, would favor faithful spouses with a secret past over those with a secret present, but why are they all American? Did Englishwomen never have prior marriages where the husband was thought lost at sea or ex-boyfriends who were crooks? Is there some slight on American female virtue in Watson's story selection?

8. Forcing A Secret Out Versus Hiring A Detective To Force A Secret Out

Cubitt is reluctant to make his wife tell her secret: "A promise is a promise, Mr. Holmes. If Elsie wished to tell me she would. If not, it is not for me to force her confidence. But I am justified in taking my own line-- and I will."

Wait a minute -- if his wife wanted the secret to remain a secret, isn't hiring a detective just as much a violation of her will as forcing her to tell? Isn't it actually even worse, as Cubitt is letting his wife believe he's respecting her wishes, when he's going behind her back to defy them? Might Cubitt have been a bit more of a weasel than Watson portrays him? Does Watson glorify Cubitt more because he's dead at the time of writing the case, and the doctor feels a bit guilty about it?

9. A Little Bit Of Country Justice

"My own inclination is to put half a dozen of my farm lads in the shrubbery, and when this fellow comes again to give him such a hiding that he will leave us in peace for the future," Cubitt says.

"I fear it is too deep a case for such simple remedies," Holmes replies.

Why does Holmes think that the graffiti artist behind the dancing men is more dangerous than six farmhands? Might Cubitt's plan have actually been more successful than Holmes's? Cubitt was already seizing his pistol to go after the intruder, so he might have armed his men as well, preparing them for anything. Is Holmes having Moriarty flashbacks here, seeing a plot deeper than one man with some stick drawings?

10. The Grounds Of Glamorous Riding Thorpe Manor

“They had been drawn in chalk upon the black wooden door of the tool-house, which stands beside the lawn in full view of the front windows.”

Wait a minute ... the tool house is off the front yard of the manor house? What kind of estate design is this? Was Riding Thorp more of a working farm than what we'd think of as a stately manor?

11. The Post Office Strikes Again!

Holmes sends Hilton Cubitt a telegram when the detective has deciphered the code, and expects to go see Cubitt the next morning. Instead of sending a telegram back, the country boy writes Holmes a letter that takes two days to find its way to London, and then too late for Holmes to make the evening train.

Sherlockians often fault Holmes for not saving Cubitt's life, but wasn't the fault in Cubitt's frugal decision not to answer a telegram with a telegram?

12. The World's Smallest Ocean

“At last the violet rim of the German Ocean appeared over the green edge of the Norfolk coast ...”

And now an expression of the discussion leader's geographic ignorance: Why is the German Ocean and “ocean” and the larger Mediterranean Sea is just a “sea”? How many other little oceans are lurking out there, waiting to sneak up on poor students used to Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, and Arctic?

13. Dr. Watson's Medical Opinion

Perhaps hoping to ease Holmes's guilt over this case, Watson says of Cubitt: “His death had certainly been instantaneous and painless.”

Does anyone actually believe that? While a bullet to the heart may kill one quickly, it can't be that quick, can it?

14. The Strange Dance Of The Dancing Men

Look at the dancing men characters in the story for a moment, specifically the “A” and the “B.” The “A” has both arms outflung, right leg outflung, and left leg bent. The “B” has no arms, and both legs bent. Now, if you were devising a symbol code (and many of us have, in our younger days) wouldn't you start with “A,” then move on to “B,” and on through the alphabet, in alphabetical order? And, if you were starting with “A,” creating your own stick figure code, would you the character old Patrick used? And then immediately follow it with a no-arm character?

The natural starting character for a stick-man alphabet would be the character Patrick used for the “E” -- the guy with arms and legs all straight and outflung. Didn’t Patrick understand alphabetical order? How do we explain the fall of the characters in this crazy code?

15. Reading Slaney His Rights?

Watson writes: “It is my duty to warn you that it will be used against you,’ cried the inspector, with the magnificent fair play of the British criminal law.”

What exactly did British criminal law call for during an arrest in the 1890’s? How long had this “fair play” warning been in effect? Why didn’t we see more of this during the other arrests in Holmes’s cases?

16. Yeah, He’s Dangerous, But For What?

Abe Slaney is said to be the most dangerous man in Chicago. He and old Patrick are in a gang of seven men, in something called “the Joint.” And Patrick’s daughter doesn’t want anything to do with Slaney as long as he’s involved with the Joint.

So what was the capital “J” Joint? A gambling house? A bordello? Was it an actual building that was headquarters of the gang? And why was Slaney the most dangerous man in a town with plenty of dangerous men?

17. Did They Catch The Bus After Riots?

“A cab had driven up whilst the American had been talking. Two uniformed policemen sat inside. Inspector Martin rose and touched his prisoner on the shoulder.”

As happens so often in the Canon, the police conduct their business with the help of a cab. Didn’t law enforcement have their own vehicles in those days, especially for the transportation of dangerous prisoners?

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