

# The Seventeen Steps

*Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes*

## The Return of Sherlock Holmes

### Adventure XXXI – The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist

*Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.*

#### 1. Previews Of Coming Attractions -- Or Not

“For this reason I will now lay before the reader the facts connected with Miss Violet Smith, the solitary cyclist of Charlington, and the curious sequel of our investigation, which culminated in unexpected tragedy.”

Once again, Watson gives us an exciting teaser that doesn't exactly line up with the tale that follows ... or is “the curious sequel” something that happened after the tale was over? Or is the wounding of a criminal a tragic thing to Watson's mind? Was there a part of this tale he's not telling?

#### 2. The Watsonian Case Record System

The good author writes: “there were some points about the case which made it stand out in those long records of crime from which I gather the material for these little narratives.”

Watson is referring to his notes as something a little more substantial in this case. In fact, this time around Watson almost makes it seem like the published stories are a subset of some more substantial chronicles. All this occurs at a time when Holmes had prohibited from Watson from further publishing, too. Were the “long records” Watson's contribution to the criminological partnership that began after Holmes's return? How much of the records were Holmes's work, and how much Watson's?



### **3. Another Brilliant Deduction, But ...**

Holmes gives Violet Smith a once over and announces that she's a bicyclist. We then find that Violet "glanced down in surprise at her own feet, and I observed the slight roughening of the side of the sole caused by the friction of the edge of the pedal."

Was Holmes becoming less discreet in his old age? Did Violet see him staring at her shoes, and then followed his gaze? Or was it the shoes he was staring at -- could even an eagle-eyed fellow like Holmes make out the differences a toned lower body would make beneath all that Victorian cloth?

### **4. Was That From Sears Or Montgomery Wards?**

"He had ordered a horse and trap .... The horse and trap were to have come this week, but for some reason they were not delivered."

Mr. Carruthers has supposedly ordered some decent transport for Violet Smith, and whether or not her really did, Violet seems to think it's a reasonable order. Where would one order a trap complete with horse, that took over a week to deliver? A mail order catalog? The local livery stable?

### **5. Some Accompaniments With Dinner?**

"I play his accompaniments in the evening," Miss Smith says of Mr. Carruthers. Accepting that a nice young woman like Miss Smith was NOT making the sort of suggestive remark some members of our list are reading that as, what would Carruthers most likely be accompanied in doing? Would he have been singing? Playing an instrument? Or just enjoying a pleasant dinner?

### **6. The Transportation Situation At Chiltern Grange**

Six miles from the station, no horse, but apparently a piano and some other accoutrements of a well-kept house. Did Mrs. Dixon and her employer walk to town for all their needs? Could they get deliveries of their heavier supplies? They couldn't have been using a bicycle, or else Carruthers would have been quickly suspected by his employee. And while Miss Smith refers to "my bicycle," is there any indication that she had a bicycle before her new job? Did she take it on the train with her, or leave it at the station?

### **7. The Junior Partner Is On The Case**

"No, my dear fellow, you will go down," Holmes tells Watson. "This may be some trifling intrigue, and I cannot break my other important research for the sake of it."

As Holmes's business increased in the 1890's, having Watson pre-screen the less dangerous cases seems a smart move. Was this an exceptional case, or did Watson do this on a regular basis? Or a better question: Could Watson do such a thing on a regular basis under Holmes's critical eye without ruining the friendship?

### **8. Watson May Have Been Better Off Wrong**

"What should I have done?" Watson cries after Holmes criticizes his work.

"Gone to the nearest public-house," Holmes replies.

Well, Sherlock Holmes followed his own advice, and we saw what happened. What would have been the result had Dr. Watson done the same and wound up going up against Roaring Jack Woodley? Would Watson have fared any better than Carruthers or come to "very ignominious grief"?

### **9. Partnership Or Boss-Employee?**

Holmes gives Watson a thorough dressing-down in this case, stating Watson's results and asking: "Who's the better for that? Well, well, my dear sir, don't look so depressed. We can do little more until next Saturday, and in the meantime I may make one or two inquiries myself."

Does that sound like a friend or a boss? Was Holmes actually Watson's employer, rather than partner, at this point in their relationship?

### **10. Did Carruthers Have A Chance?**

Violet Smith writes, regarding her employer: "I am convinced that his feelings are most deep and most honourable. At the same time, my promise is of course given."

Does that mean that if she didn't already have Cyril, she might have married Carruthers? How much of that decision might have been romantic and how much economic?

### **11. The Make-Up Of The Country Pub**

While Holmes is in the bar of the local pub, Woodley comes in from the tap-room. Was the bar for distilled beverages, while the tap-room was for beer or ale? Was this a pub of fairly decent size to have separate rooms for separate beverages, or was this the common state of pubs?

## 12. The Handiwork Of Holmes

Violet Smith describes the beaten Jack Woodley: "He was always hideous, but he looks more awful than ever now, for he appears to have had an accident, and he is much disfigured."

Is Miss Smith reacting to minor abrasions due to her delicate nature, or did Holmes do serious damage to Woodley's face? What sort of disfigurements would we expect from Holmes's straight left?

## 13. Living The Life Of Watson

Watson tells us, "we hastened onward at such a pace that my sedentary life began to tell upon me, and I was compelled to fall behind."

What *is* Watson doing with himself these days? Writing? Studying criminology? Lounging around until Thurston is ready to play pool? Is he really sitting all the time, or does he just mean that he's not involved in active physical exercise? What about "the whirl of our incessant activity" he writes of later?

## 14. That Doesn't Sound Healthy

"As he spoke, a woman's shrill scream--a scream which vibrated with a frenzy of horror--burst from the thick, green clump of bushes in front of us. It ended suddenly on its highest note with a choke and a gurgle."

Miss Smith is soon found with a handkerchief in her mouth. But what did they do to her to end her scream with a choke and a "gurgle"? Wouldn't that latter imply something awful like blood in the lungs or something equally deadly? Might Woodley have poured whiskey down her throat, or some other liquor in an attempt to calm her?

## 15. Holmes's Fame Precedes Him

"Who are you, then?" asks Bob Carruthers.

"My name is Sherlock Holmes."

"Good Lord!"

While Carruthers may have heard of Sherlock Holmes, the consulting detective, why does Holmes rate a "Good Lord!" Do criminals fear him that much? Did Carruthers think he was dead? Or what Carruthers's reaction just a general "Good Lord!" in the sense of "What else could go wrong?"

## 16. The Virgin Ears Of Watson

When Carruthers shoots Woodley, Williamson erupts in "such a string of foul oaths" as Watson never heard before. Considering Watson had been in the Afghan War, among cursing military men, might Williamson

have been swearing oaths he picked up in South Africa that were new to Watson? Might they have involved jungle creatures or African tribal deities?

### **17. How Wide Was Woodley's Swath?**

Roaring Jack Woodley was "the greatest brute and bully in South Africa--a man whose name is a holy terror from Kimberley to Johannesburg." Quite a reputation for a man so young ... given the cities mentioned, how big an area was Woodley the greatest brute in? Was it all of South Africa?

**Brad Keefauver, BSI**

**2000-2001**