

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXI – The Adventure of the Priory School

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

1. Dirt From All Through England

Of Huxtable we are told, "Collar and shirt bore the grime of a long journey, and the hair bristled unkempt from the well-shaped head."

Thornycroft Huxtable had rushed to Baker Street from the north of England. How many chances on how many kinds of transportation did Huxtable have to get his collar and shirt grimey on the way South? Did his haste contribute to the filth? Is it a sign he was travelling economically, and he might have stayed a bit cleaner had he spent a little more, travelled a little slower?

2. The Zenith Of The Priory School

"The Priory is, without exception, the best and most select preparatory school in England. Lord Leverstoke, the Earl of Blackwater, Sir Cathcart Soames--they all have intrusted their sons to me. But I felt that my school had reached its zenith when, three weeks ago, the Duke of Holderness sent Mr. James Wilder, his secretary, with the intimation that young Lord Saltire, ten years old, his only son and heir, was about to be committed to my charge."

So says Thornycroft Huxtable, but if the Priory was truly the best prep school in England, why did it need Lord Saltire to attain its highest point? Might the Priory have been just another decent school, only chosen by the Duke because his marriage had problems and keeping the boy close to home was a display of his dominance to the wife? What do sources of that time say was the best school?



3. DIVORCE, RICH PEOPLE STYLE

“Duke's married life had not been a peaceful one, and the matter had ended in a separation by mutual consent, the Duchess taking up her residence in the south of France. This had occurred very shortly before, and the boy's sympathies are known to have been strongly with his mother.”

Would the Duke and Duchess ever dissolve their union, or was this separation the true end of the marriage for all concerned? Was the discrete taking of lovers following such a separation to be expected, or would the duo expect each other to remain faithful even as their lives moved apart?

4. Fifteen Minutes To Worth With

“In a quarter of an hour, we shall be at your service. If you are telegraphing home, Mr. Huxtable, it would be well to allow the people in your neighbourhood to imagine that the inquiry is still going on in Liverpool.”

Was Holmes expecting the worn Huxtable to telegraph home in those fifteen minutes? And if he was, was there a telegraph office close enough to 221B for Huxtable to get there and back again in fifteen minutes?

5. To Be Demonic, Or Not To Be Demonic?

“Perhaps the scent is not so cold but that two old hounds like Watson and myself may get a sniff of it.” While we usually take the name of our discussion group, the Hounds of the Internet, as a reference to The Hound of the Baskervilles, the Holmes quote above adds the pleasant thought that Holmes and Watson were Hounds themselves, of a non-demonic sort. Since we don't add “sic” the end of our group name like a certain elder Chicago society, and *The* Hound is singular, is there any chance we can start claiming this “hounds” as the inspiration for our group designation? Or do we like being hounds from Hell over hounds from 221B?

6. The Hardest-Working Duke In England

"How many letters did your Grace write that day?"

"Twenty or thirty. I have a large correspondence."

“Large” is a pretty good description for it. If His Grace wrote thirty letters in a day, how many of them could have truly had thought, substance, and time spent on them? And if the remainder were brief notes of no real substance, who were they to and what were they about? Did the Duke have fan mail that had to be answered?

7. Breakfast Of Preparatory School Champions

“Now, Watson, there is cocoa ready in the next room. I must beg you to hurry, for we have a great day before us.”

Did the adults at the Priory get coffee in the morning, or was cocoa the beverage that started the whole school’s day? Would the lads have gotten something besides cocoa for breakfast, and Holmes just didn’t to bring any of the rest of the school breakfast back for Watson? Or was cocoa a special treat served only to guests, delivered to the detecting duo’s quarters?

8. Repeating Holmes’s Work

“I am familiar with forty-two different impressions left by tyres,” Holmes says, and one would think that some enterprising Sherlockian somewhere has attempted to list all forty-two types of tires available at the time. Have they? Was Holmes speaking of just bicycle tires, or bicycle, auto, carriage, and all other varieties of tires available in the 1890’s?

9. The Anatomy Of Bicycle Tires, Pre-1900

“An impression like a fine bundle of telegraph wires ran down the centre of it. It was the Palmer tyres.” Were bicycles of Victorian England designed primarily for urban use or paved roads? Why else would the tread design be straight lines as Watson describes? Wouldn’t cross-country tires with a better tread for riding on dirt have been an early innovation, or did it have to wait until the mountain bikes of a hundred years later?

10. Another Greater Bleeder Of The Canon

“Holmes held up a crumpled branch of flowering gorse. To my horror I perceived that the yellow blossoms were all dabbled with crimson. On the path, too, and among the heather were dark stains of clotted blood.”

While Heidegger’s head wound was an awful one, he still managed to get up and on his bike for a bit so he must have retained some brain integrity. Could he have been bleeding so freely from a head wound as to spackle the local foliage other than that which he came in contact with?

11. Who Was The Peat-Cutter Frightened Of?

Watson writes, of the peat-cutter Holmes spotted, “I brought the peasant across, and Holmes dispatched the frightened man with a note to Dr. Huxtable.”

Was the peasant scared more by the dead body, or the two city fellows who insisted on showing it to him before sending him off to Huxtable? In his enthusiasm for the chase, might Holmes have even failed to mention the police, leaving the poor peasant to wonder if the two strangers might not have killed the man?

12. Advancement In The Coachman Field

"I've less reason to wish the Dook well than most men," Reuben Hayes says, "for I was his head coachman once, and cruel bad he treated me. It was him that sacked me without a character on the word of a lying corn-chandler."

Hayes seems quite the mouthy lout to have once worked his way up to head coachman. How many coachmen might a man as wealthy as the Duke be expected to have on his staff? And how might one advance to head coachman? And what could a corn chandler say about such a ranking member of the household to get him fired on his word alone?

13. The Naming Of The Inn

"Yes, it is an interesting place, this Fighting Cock," Holmes says of the inn less than two miles from Holderness Hall. While an inn might be given a name for many a reason, could this one have been the site of actual cockfights? Did such things happen in England of the day?

14. The Great Detective, Afraid Of Thieves?

"I fancy that I see your Grace's check-book upon the table," Holmes tells the Duke. "I should be glad if you would make me out a check for six thousand pounds. It would be as well, perhaps, for you to cross it. The Capital and Counties Bank, Oxford Street branch are my agents."

Crossing the check means the check must be deposited into Holmes's account in said bank, and that no one can simply cash it anywhere. Why was Holmes afraid he might lose it? Certainly robbery wasn't a fear, as Watson was carrying a gun. Or was Holmes simply indulging in a good habit that he practiced on all checks he collected?

15. The Tricky Morality Of Sherlock Holmes

"I must take the view, your Grace, that when a man embarks upon a crime, he is morally guilty of any other crime which may spring from it."

So Holmes says, but his actions speak otherwise. If Holmes was going to let James Wilder escape the full force of the law in any case, why didn't he take the twelve thousand pounds when offered, instead of the

six? Refusing the extra money may have given him the lever to move the Duke into telling the full tale, but was hearing the full tale worth six thousand pounds to him? Had Holmes taken the twelve, the lad would have been returned and the murderer captured all the same. If the first six thousand was that important to Holmes, why was the second six so inconsequential, when he was going to do what the Duke wanted in any case?

16. The Matter Of The Duke And The Inn

“I could not go there by daylight without provoking comment, but as soon as night fell I hurried off to see my dear Arthur.”

Who would have seen the Duke in daylight that couldn't have seen him come to the Fighting Cock at night, as Holmes did? And what sort of comments would have been provoked? Were there things going on at the Fighting Cock that Watson doesn't tell us about?

17. Making Reuben Hayes Understand

“The gallows awaits him, and I would do nothing to save him from it. What he will divulge I cannot tell, but I have no doubt that your Grace could make him understand that it is to his interest to be silent.”

If the gallows truly awaits Reuben Hayes, a man with a grudge against the Duke in any case, what possible argument could the Duke use to persuade him to be silent? Hayes's “best interest” seems to be a moot point with the noose awaiting him.

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