

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXIV – The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. Sherlock Holmes Loses Control

“As Holmes turned up the lamp the light fell upon a card on the table. He glanced at it, and then, with an ejaculation of disgust, threw it on the floor.”

Perhaps the most telling example of Holmes’s total disgust at Milverton is demonstrated in his next question to Watson, who has picked up the card:

“Is anything on the back of the card?”

What? Sherlock Holmes not being observant enough to see a note on the back of a business card? We must give him credit for a fast recovery, as he does Watson about it before Watson thinks to look, but this is still a very telling moment, foreshadowing many professional slips to come in this case. How many other breaks in his usual patterns does Holmes indulge in during this case?



2. How Has He Survived This Long?

“Everything which is in the market goes to Milverton, and there are hundreds in this great city who turn white at his name. No one knows where his grip may fall, for he is far too rich and far too cunning to work from hand to mouth. He will hold a card back for years in order to play it at the moment when the stake is best worth winning.”

Milverton has been in the blackmail business for years. He’s ruined noble families. He routinely blackmails his terrified victims until “he has drained them dry.” How has Milverton managed to milk desperate

people for cash for so long without someone coming after him? Wouldn't someone of wealth and position have other resources to dealing with a blackmailer than paying him? While his victims dare not hit back legally, why hadn't one of the hundreds gone outside the law before now, even if just to hire an arsonist or burglar? (Look at all the lengths the King of Bohemia went to with Irene Adler.)

3. Sherlock Holmes, Discreet Business Negotiator

"An illustrious client has placed her piteous case in my hands ... I have been commissioned to meet him, and--to make the best terms I can."

Why does Lady Eva Blackwell come to Holmes, of all people, if that is all that she wanted? Wouldn't a family member, a trusted solicitor or clergyman do just as well? What else could she have expected from Holmes?

4. Watson And A Little Dickens

Of Milverton, Watson writes: "There was something of Mr. Pickwick's benevolence in his appearance, marred only by the insincerity of the fixed smile and by the hard glitter of those restless and penetrating eyes."

Okay, here's a question that'll test your grip on reality and the outer limits of the Game: Was Watson referring to the character in the Dickens book or the "real" Mr. Pickwick?

5. Hard-Boiled Watson (Nearly) Strikes Again!

As Milverton heads for the door, hand on pistol, Watson writes, "I picked up a chair, but Holmes shook his head, and I laid it down again."

If Holmes found Milverton offensive, his revulsion was nothing compared to Watson's. Usually Holmes has to ask Watson if he's up for a little criminal activity, but in this case, Watson is ready to take Milverton out on his own. Had the doctor not seen Holmes's nod and clobbered Milverton, how might Holmes have proceeded then? Would he have taken advantage of the situation? Would he have allowed Milverton to have Watson arrested?

6. That's Some Courting Conversation, Holmes!

Sherlock's campaign against Milverton began with his campaign against Milverton's housemaid Agatha: "I have walked out with her each evening, and I have talked with her. Good heavens, those talks! However, I have got all I wanted. I know Milverton's house as I know the palm of my hand."

Wouldn't Agatha have been a little suspicious when her new boyfriend kept slipping the topic toward the layout of the house? Or was the maid a willing co-conspirator, hoping to run off with a beau newly rich on the plunderings of Milverton's safe? Holmes was leading her on anyway, wouldn't he have also exploited any greedy moral lapses Agatha might have had?

7. Just How Far Would Holmes Go?

There's a neat little moral dilemma in this week's tale, as Holmes and Watson prepare to burglarize Milverton's house. Holmes explains: "I am never precipitate in my actions, nor would I adopt so energetic and, indeed, so dangerous a course, if any other were possible."

Well, the course Holmes takes isn't possible ... within the confines of the law. What is Holmes's goal in so desperate a course? Is he just doing this to save Lady Eva's marriage, or is he intending to put an end to Milverton's career? And if the latter was the case, how might he have done so, had the burglary been successful and no gunfire was involved? If burglary hadn't worked, what would he have done next? Holmes once said he would die to see the end of Moriarty, but would he kill to see the end of Milverton? (He probably wouldn't take Watson along for that one.)

8. It Probably Wasn't Going To Make The Newspapers

"My self-respect and my reputation are concerned to fight it to a finish," the detective says about this case. His reputation? Would anyone be publicizing the blackmail that he failed to thwart? What did this have to do with being well known for solving mysteries?

9. From Those Bolts Of Cloth Lying Around 221b

"And a mask?" Holmes asks Watson.

"I can make a couple out of black silk," the doctor replies.

Where would a seeming bachelor find black silk lying around his apartment? Did Watson sacrifice some article of clothing for the masks? (And why would a master of disguise like Holmes go for something the King of Bohemia had already proved was worthless?) And why didn't Watson fashion masks that hung low enough to cover his moustache?

10. A DIFFERENT SORT OF GRUNER

"I understood the joy which it gave him to be confronted with this green and gold monster, the dragon which held in its maw the reputations of many fair ladies."

Were Milverton's victims primarily female? After waiting around in his Hugh Hefner outfit for his evening visitor, he greets her with a somewhat sleazy line: "You made me lose a good night's rest, my dear. I hope you'll prove worth it." Not "I hope what you bring proves worth it." While the supposed maid was not one of his victims, it still makes one wonder if this slug demanded more than money from his victims. Was that a part of what made him so absolutely repulsive to Holmes?

11. Once More, The Man Of Action

"In my own mind I had determined that if I were sure, from the rigidity of his gaze, that it had caught his eye, I would at once spring out, throw my great coat over his head, pinion him, and leave the rest to Holmes."

Did Watson actually get himself into situations like that based on sudden action, then rely on Holmes to figure out what to do next? Or was he only a man of action in his own mind, full of "Yeah, I was all ready to hit him with the fireplace poker, Holmes!" but never actually acting on it?

12. There's A Story Here, You Just Know It

"I knew that the opening of safes was a particular hobby with him," Watson writes of Holmes. Among the other things Holmes is doing to open this safe, the detective seems to be drilling ... a common practice in safe-opening. How might one get to practice one's hobby of opening safes when it actually damages the safes one opens? Holmes was always pretty practical in choosing knowledges that suited his profession early in his career -- what use would the opening of safes be to a criminal specialist?

13. That Gleaming Little Revolver

The dark, veiled woman "had drawn a little gleaming revolver, and emptied barrel after barrel into Milverton's body, the muzzle within two feet of his shirt front. He shrank away and then fell forward upon the table, coughing furiously and clawing among the papers. Then he staggered to his feet, received another shot, and rolled upon the floor. 'You've done me,' he cried, and lay still."

Milverton receives five shots to the body at point blank range, but then gets up again. While horror movie creatures do this all the time, in Milverton's case, it's probably the small caliber of the little weapon. How small a caliber would it have to have been for Milverton to get up after taking five shots? Would he have gone down for the final time after a sixth shot to the chest, or did the avenger put the sixth and final shot to his head? Do the facts we have on the weapon suggest a particular model to anyone?

14. Women's Work In The Canon ... It's Not In The Kitchen

What do "Greek Interpreter," "Charles Augustus Milverton," "Second Stain," and "Illustrious Client" all have in common with "Five Orange Pips" and "Resident Patient"?

Both sets rely on an outside agency to deliver final justice to the villains involved. In the latter pair, it's the sea. Are women more likely than men to be justified in murdering someone in the Canon? Are murdering men more often seen as the villain in their acts of vengeance, where women are not?

15. Lestrade's Friendly Offer

"I thought that, perhaps, if you had nothing particular on hand, you might care to assist us in a most remarkable case, which occurred only last night at Hampstead."

Inspector Lestrade seems to be jumping the gun a bit in this case, coming to Holmes before his investigation has barely begun. Why did he think this break-in case might be of interest to Holmes? Had he known the detective was in a dry spell? Was Lestrade that quick to declare himself baffled? Or did he actually have some idea who broke into the house, and was letting Holmes know it without actually accusing him?

16. Just The Neighborhood Blackmailer, That's All

Lestrade says of Milverton: "He is known to have held papers which he used for blackmailing purposes."

What? Scotland Yard knew about Milverton's livelihood? What stopped them from prosecuting him? Those victims he had made examples of when they refused to pay would surely have pressed charges, wouldn't they?

17. Little Shop Of Celebrities

“Here, on the left hand, there stands a shop window filled with photographs of the celebrities and beauties of the day. Holmes's eyes fixed themselves upon one of them, and following his gaze I saw the picture of a regal and stately lady in Court dress, with a high diamond tiara upon her noble head.”

Just what was the nature of the business Watson describes above? If it was a photographer, would it have been the shop of the same photographer who took all the photos mentioned? Or were the pictures bought from another photographer to use as a way to draw in business? Or was this a totally different sort of business using celebrities as a lure?

Brad Keefauver, BSI

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