

# The Seventeen Steps

*Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes*

## The Return of Sherlock Holmes

### Adventure XXXVI – The Adventure of the Three Students

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

#### 1. The Modern Application Of Ancient Charters

Watson writes of this case-within-a-case: "We were residing at the time in furnished lodgings close to a library where Sherlock Holmes was pursuing some laborious researches in early English charters -- researches which led to results so striking that they may be the subject of one of my future narratives."

As Watson's chronicles tend to concern current crimes, or at least a problem currently perplexing someone, one has to wonder what effect early English charters could be having on one of Holmes's fellow citizens, especially if it was so obscure as to require laborious researches. Any ideas?

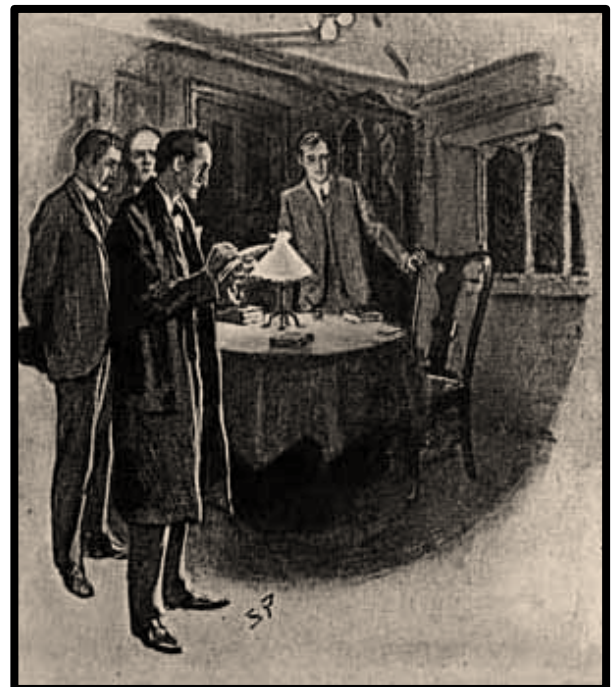
#### 2. The Easiest Job In At St. Luke's College

"The only duplicate which existed, so far as I knew, was that which belonged to my servant, Bannister--a man who has looked after my room for ten years, and whose honesty is absolutely above suspicion."

Hilton Soames has a servant, which doesn't seem all that odd. His servant looks after his "room." Just the one room? What might the extent of Bannister's full duties have been?

#### 3. For The Encouragement Of Greek Interpreters

Of the Fortescue examination, Soames says: "A large sum of money is at stake, for the scholarship is a very valuable one, and an unscrupulous man might very well run a risk in order to gain an advantage over his fellows."



All that cash over translations of half a chapter of Thucydides? Wouldn't picking a winner involve some serious judgement calls in comparing one good translation with another? And why so much money based on Greek interpreter skills?

#### **4. Give That Man A Speed-Copying Prize Anyway!**

Holmes tells of the culprits actions: "Well, he carried over this one first, and he copied it. How long would it take him to do that, using every possible contraction? A quarter of an hour, not less."

How long would it take someone to copy a sixth of a chapter of Thucydides in Greek by hand? Fifteen minutes sounds pretty quick (especially when you have to sharpen your pencil with a dull knife) ... anyone tried this little experiment?

#### **5. The Well-Dressed Lecturer's Wardrobe**

"As a matter of fact, the drawn curtain disclosed nothing but three or four suits of clothes hanging from a line of pegs."

What would we expect the make-up of a man like Hilton Soames's wardrobe to be? Is "three or four suits" about right, or was he a clothes horse? Would he have worn a suit to lecture, or something more specifically academic?

#### **6. "Warning: To Clean Windows, Do Not Lick."**

"Lattice-paned, lead framework, three separate windows, one swinging on hinge, and large enough to admit a man."

Here's something we don't see much of in the modern day. Would lead have made up the entire window frame, or just act a sort of caulking agent to seal the glass to the metal that actually made up the core of the frame?

#### **7. The Status Of Upper Stories**

Can we make any judgements as to the status of the tale's three students by the story they were placed on in their building? Gilchrist is poor, but otherwise of good character, and on the first floor. Ras is the average fellow in the middle. And McLaren is the almost-expelled fellow on the top floor. Was a higher or lower floor valued by students, or did it really matter? Does the fact that they were in the oldest rooms at the college tell us anything about these three?

## 8. Hilton Soames, Respected #%@\*>#@!! Lecturer

When Soames knocks on McClaren's door, the young man swears up a blue streak and doesn't let him in. Soames says, "Of course, he did not realize that it was I who was knocking, but none the less his conduct was very uncourteous, and, indeed, under the circumstances rather suspicious."

Was Soames just trying to save face, and this was McClaren's usual way of greeting him? Would disciplinary action be taken for such an offense?

## 9. Watson Seals Gilchrist's Doom

Holmes tells Watson this case is "Quite a little parlour game--sort of three-card trick, is it not? There are your three men. It must be one of them. You take your choice. Which is yours?"

Hedging his bets, the good doctor Watson chooses \*both\* McLaren and Ras. At this point in the tale, do we have any doubt that the culprit is Gilchrist, the fair-haired innocent?

## 10. The Eddie Haskell Of St. Luke's College

Shocked by the time, Holmes exclaims: "By Jove! my dear fellow, it is nearly nine, and the landlady babbled of green peas at seven-thirty. What with your eternal tobacco, Watson, and your irregularity at meals, I expect that you will get notice to quit, and that I shall share your downfall ..."

Holmes's charm with the ladies has been mentioned by Watson before, but how often did Holmes use Watson to make himself look better? One can just see him smoking a pipe all night long, then faking a cough as he tells the landlady how that tobacco addict Watson just can't leave the pipe alone.

## 11. Nothing Like A Little Morning Exercise

Holmes reports: "It is not for nothing that I have turned myself out of bed at the untimely hour of six. I have put in two hours' hard work and covered at least five miles, with something to show for it."

A five mile walk takes well over an hour, and is an excellent way to start the morning. Might Holmes have been a regular walker, which was not regarded by Watson as true "exercise" in his chronicles? How good could a man's physical condition be from a walking regimen alone?

## 12. Those Shoes Are Just Asking For Trouble

"He returned carrying his jumping-shoes, which are provided, as you are aware, with several sharp spikes."

Most of us have seen spiked shoes, be they golf spikes, track spikes, or even aerating garden shoes ... but how many of these shoes actually have \*sharp\* spikes? Would sharpened spikes be of any advantage in turf or sawdust?

### **13. The St. Luke's Rpf Recruiter Wants You!**

Gilchrist says: "I have been offered a commission in the Rhodesian Police, and I am going out to South Africa at once."

Who's hanging around the university offering commissions in the Rhodesian Police? Did Gilchrist actually have to seek out the person responsible for such things, write a letter to Rhodesia, or what?

### **14. Probably Not The Best Career Move**

Bannister says: "Time was, sir, when I was butler to old Sir Jabez Gilchrist, this young gentleman's father. When he was ruined I came to the college as servant ..."

Was the butler business that bad, that Bannister had to come care for Soames "room"? Were the positions similar, or was Bannister taking a step down?

### **15. His Future's So Bright ... Or Is It?**

"As to you, sir," Holmes tells Gilchrist. "I trust that a bright future awaits you in Rhodesia."

How well could Gilchrist have hoped to do in Rhodesia at that time? Did he actually have a shot at a bright future, or was it pretty much over for him?

### **16. I Suppose He Was Lucky He Wasn't Executed ...**

Now let's stop and think about this for a minute ... Gilchrist cheats on a test. No one is told he cheated, but he's quietly going to leave school for his crime. Isn't that enough? Was cheating on a test such a horrific thing at a British university that you had to leave the country for fear someone would find out about your shameful secret?

Gilchrist isn't even taking a job that requires a college education. Why couldn't he go into law enforcement in Sussex or somewhere else in his own country? Did they pay more in Rhodesia?

## **17. Meanwhile, Back On The Subject Of Rhodesia**

This Rhodesia business ... was it a hoax Gilchrist wrote up in his note just to slip away quietly? If he actually did put in for a commission, wouldn't he have done so before he decided to cheat on the test? And fraud or no fraud, why Rhodesia? Had it been in the papers of late?

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