

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXIX – The Adventure of the Abbey Grange

1. The Lighting Situation In 1897

Watson writes, of Holmes's first appearance: "The candle in his hand shone upon his eager, stooping face..."

Why a candle? Gaslights and oil lamps were available weren't they? If Holmes was waking Watson so he'd get dressed, why not light up the room? Or is lighting up a whole room just another luxury of modern life?

2. The Pre-Dawnmessenger Service

Stanley Hopkins sends a note to Holmes at 3:30 in the morning, which arrives before dawn. Was he using some established service at such an hour, or would he have had to send his own man? Bonus question: Holmes says Hopkins has called him in seven times at this point. Do we have records of all seven?



3. WHO WAS WATSON WRITING FOR IN 1897?

"You slur over work of the utmost finesse and delicacy, in order to dwell upon sensational details which may excite, but cannot possibly instruct, the reader," Holmes criticizes Watson in a fit of morning grumpiness.

"Why do you not write them yourself?" Watson retorts.

We usually assume Holmes is talking about the stories Watson publishes in the Strand Magazine. But in previous tales we have seen Watson quitting his job to go into partnership with Holmes(NORW). We've seen three "massive volumes" of manuscript on the cases that took place in one year (GOLD). We've also seen that Holmes instructed Watson not to publish any more tales until well after the turn of the century (NORW). Could

Holmes be entirely within his rights to make such criticisms, having actually brought Watson in as a partner or employee to record his cases for instructional purposes (and not the Strand)? Was there ever a time when Holmes was actually Watson's boss? Could the famous tin dispatch box be filled with case records in which Watson attempted to write as Holmes wanted?

4. That Most Rare Of All Sherlockian Books

"At present I am, as you know, fairly busy, but I propose to devote my declining years to the composition of a textbook, which shall focus the whole art of detection into one volume," Holmes promises. But when he has the time, the book he seems to have written is on bees. Why the switch? Or did Holmes never reach his "declining years"?

5. No Need To Protect The Archers Anymore

Watson writes of the Brackenstall home, "the large windows showed that modern changes had been carried out." At what point did large windows come into fashion? Can we tell the age of the house by this detail? Was window size something that ran historically concurrent with the state of law and order in England?

6. Those Cool Lewisham Burglars

"You remember that Lewisham gang of burglars?"

"What, the three Randalls?"

"Exactly; the father and two sons. It's their work. I have not a doubt of it. They did a job at Sydenham a fortnight ago and were seen and described. Rather cool to do another so soon and so near, but it is they, beyond all doubt."

The Randalls are burglars. Everybody knows they're burglars. They haven't been caught yet. Why is the thought that they pulled another job considered so cold-blooded? What would one expect known burglars to be doing?

7. A Soul-Mate For Doctor Watson

Lady Brackenstall admits, "I was brought up in the freer, less conventional atmosphere of South Australia, and this English life, with its proprieties and its primness, is not congenial to me."

Hey, weren't Watson's old stomping grounds in Ballarat, Victoria not far from South Australia? Would the doctor sympathize with such an attitude about English life?

8. Well, It's Not Mousseline De Soie, But ...

“Seldom have I seen so graceful a figure, so womanly a presence, and so beautiful a face.... She was enveloped in a loose dressing-gown of blue and silver, but a black sequin-covered dinner-dress lay upon the couch beside her.”

Would this subtle reference to a lady of some serious attractions having gotten out of her dress have seemed slightly suggestive to a reader of Watson's time? What was Watson trying to tell us?

9. The Certificate Says So

His widow tells Holmes, “Sir Eustace was a confirmed drunkard.”

And now a somewhat silly question: How many witnesses or incidents does it take to confirm a drunkard?

10. The Rounds Of Lady Brackenstall

“Then I walked round to see that all was right before I went upstairs. It was my custom to do this myself, for, as I have explained, Sir Eustace was not always to be trusted. I went into the kitchen, the butler's pantry, the gun-room, the billiard-room, the drawing-room, and finally the dining-room.”

What was the layout of this house that the dining-room was so far from the kitchen? Was there any more to the first floor than just these rooms, or is this all we would expect? (And if there was more, why didn't she check it, too?)

11. Dental Hygiene Of Drunkards

“It was the body of a tall, well-made man, about forty years of age. He lay upon his back, his face upturned, with his white teeth grinning through his short, black beard.”

How did Sir Eustace keep his teeth so white at forty? Did Victorians have a teeth-whitening secret that Sir Eustace might have taken to?

12. Caught In His Spiderman Pajamas

Sir Eustace “had evidently been in his bed when the alarm had broken out, for he wore a foppish, embroidered nightshirt, and his bare feet projected from his trousers.”

What sort of embroidery would make a nightshirt look “foppish” to Watson? Something more elaborate than a monogram, one would think, but what?

13. The Aging Process After Death

“It was a very large and high chamber, with carved oak ceiling, oaken paneling, and a fine array of deer's heads and ancient weapons around the walls.”

We run into old, old houses with hunting trophies a lot in the Canon, or so it seems. The ancient weapons near the deer heads, however, make one wonder how old those heads were. How long did a mounted animal head last in earlier times? Would a really old house like Baskerville Hall have some that were centuries old?

14. Wasn't His Specialty Crime?

“The keen interest had passed out of Holmes's expressive face, and I knew that with the mystery all the charm of the case had departed. There still remained an arrest to be effected, but what were these commonplace rogues that he should soil his hands with them? An abstruse and learned specialist who finds that he has been called in for a case of measles would experience something of the annoyance which I read in my friend's eyes.”

Wait a minute ... the Lewisham gang of burglars was still out there, and nobody seemed to be capturing them. Shouldn't a “criminal specialist” have some brilliant idea about bringing them in? If trapping hidden felons isn't enough of a challenge for Holmes, is there another specialist in actually catching villains once their identity is known? Or is Holmes's attitude towards this case just a carryover of the grumpy mood he was in when the case began?

15. The Turns Of The Screw

“If you will examine the top of the cork, you will observe that the screw was driven in three times before the cork was extracted.”

As an expert at opening wine bottles badly, I can tell you that a bad first corkscrewing pulls out a lot of cork with the screw. A second will just dig the hole deeper. How can Holmes tell the screw went in three times with a failed purchase by a corkscrew does not leave a tidy little hole that another tidy little hole can be next to?

16. The Silence Of The Burning Dogs

“From what I hear, in spite of all his wealth and his title, he very nearly came our way once or twice. There was a scandal about his drenching a dog with petroleum and setting it on fire--her ladyship's dog, to make the matter worse--and that was only hushed up with difficulty.”

Who was being hushed in the Great Burning Dog Scandal? Would someone have actually had to pay off or threaten the local newspapermen? Was it the servants who would have to be sworn to secrecy? Exactly who had to be silenced in this bad business?

17. Was Holmes A Bit Taken With Lady Mary?

“The lady's charming personality must not be permitted to warp our judgment.”

This seems a bit different from the Holmes who didn't notice if Mary Morstan was cute or not. Is he actually admitting that he found Lady Brackenstall charming? Was she actually distracting him from a full consideration of the case?

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