

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Return of Sherlock Holmes

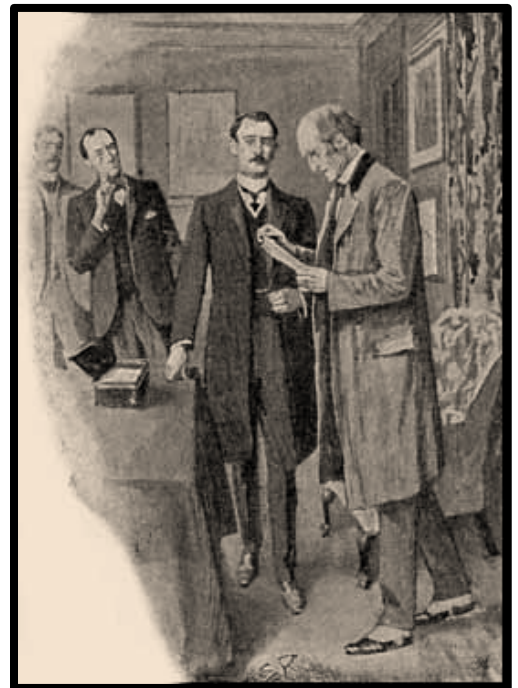
Adventure XL – The Adventure of the Second Stain

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

1. Knowledge Of Timely Advertising -- Nil

Watson begins this tale with the words, "I had intended "The Adventure of the Abbey Grange" to be the last of those exploits of my friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, which I should ever communicate to the public... The real reason lay in the reluctance which Mr. Holmes has shown to the continued publication of his experiences. So long as he was in actual professional practice the records of his successes were of some practical value to him, but since he has definitely retired from London and betaken himself to study and bee-farming on the Sussex Downs, notoriety has become hateful to him, and he has peremptorily requested that his wishes in this matter should be strictly observed."

But a simple comparison of publication dates to the dates give within the stories makes these words somewhat nonsensical. Just as all of the "Adventures" and "Memoirs" were published while Holmes was thought dead, the stories of the "Return" set weren't published until late 1903 -- a time when Holmes would have seemed to be retiring in Sussex. And looking within the stories of "Return," one finds Holmes criticizing the stories and forbidding Watson to publish all through the detective's post-hiatus career. Why would Holmes find value in Watson publishing his cases if he were about to retire? Or was the value he found simply in Watson's writing, and not the actual publishing?



2. This May Have Some Bearing On James Phillimore

“The Premier's thin, blue-veined hands were clasped tightly over the ivory head of his umbrella.”

Would ivory-handled umbrellas have been a common luxury item in Victorian England? Or is the Premier's umbrella something special?

3. Time For Dinner And The Theater

“I actually opened the box while I was dressing for dinner ...”

"What time did you dine?"

"Half-past seven."

"How long was it before you went to bed?"

"My wife had gone to the theatre. I waited up for her. It was half-past eleven before we went to our room."

What was the curtain time of the standard London theatrical production, and did Lady Hilda have time to dine with her husband and still get to the play? (Or pretend she was going to a play.) Would Trelawney Hope have dressed for dinner if he was dining alone?

4. No Listening Devices At That Time, Were There?

“You may safely trust us," Holmes asserts, but the trust he gets is not complete, as the tale is still vaguely told: "The letter, then, is from a certain foreign potentate ...”

Holmes then writes a name upon a slip of paper and hands it to the Premier.

“Exactly,” replies the Premier. “It was he.”

Was Holmes afraid Mrs. Hudson was listening at the keyhole? Or is he actually keeping the potentate's identity a secret from Watson? Would Holmes have continued with the case, had the Premier refused to tell him the identity of the letter writer?

5. They Must Belong To The James Bond School Of Well-Known Spies

“To whom would the thief take it? To one of several international spies and secret agents, whose names are tolerably familiar to me. There are three who may be said to be the heads of their profession. I will begin my research by going round and finding if each of them is at his post.”

Okay, Holmes is a criminal specialist. He knows things. But how effective can spies be if a man to whom espionage was simply a side issue knows who they are and where they can be found?

Given Holmes's knowledge, how many other people in London knew as well? Were spies often as popular and charming in social circles as Eduardo Lucas of this tale and Von Bork from "His Last Bow"?

6. And The Reserve Price On Ebay Would Be . . . ?

"After all, it is a question of money with these fellows, and I have the British treasury behind me. If it's on the market I'll buy it--if it means another penny on the income-tax."

The recovery of the letter never does become a question of money, but just how much might it have gone for if money was what it took to retrieve it? What was the upper limit the government might have been able to afford to pay? How much cash would another penny on the income-tax have brought in? (And what was the going income tax rate in those days anyway?)

7. Whoa! Dude, It's The Most Lovely Woman In London!

"A moment later our modest apartment, already so distinguished that morning, was further honoured by the entrance of the most lovely woman in London. I had often heard of the beauty of the youngest daughter of the Duke of Belminster, but no description of it, and no contemplation of colourless photographs, had prepared me for the subtle, delicate charm and the beautiful colouring of that exquisite head."

Beauty is certainly in the eye of the beholder. If Lady Hilda Trelawney Hope was, according to Watson, the most lovely woman in London, and perhaps the whole Canon, does the use of "lovely" over "beautiful" imply that her visage inspired thoughts of love in Watson's bachelor breast? Had circumstances of social rank and marital status been different, does Watson's reaction tell us he'd have pursued her for a role as the next Mrs. Watson? How enamored was Watson to be listening intently to the very last "frou-frou" of her skirts as she departed?

8. The First And Foremost Consulting Womanologist Of His Day

In this tale we get that classic line from Holmes, "Now, Watson, the fair sex is your department."

How much experience with women must Watson have had for Holmes to casually make such a pronouncement? One late wife? Dalliances in Australia, Asia, or America? Is it the quality or quantity of Watson's experience with the fair sex that makes them his department?

9. Beaten By A Woman Again!

"And you must have observed, Watson, how she manoeuvred to have the light at her back. She did not wish us to read her expression. . . . You remember the woman at Margate whom I suspected for the same

reason. No powder on her nose--that proved to be the correct solution. How can you build on such a quicksand? Their most trivial action may mean volumes, or their most extraordinary conduct may depend upon a hairpin or a curling tongs."

How many times must Holmes have been frustrated by female motives in order to utter such a statement? Or was he fresh from some defeat at feminine hands when this case occurred?

10. The Receptionist At 221b Baker Street

"Do you stay on guard, my good Watson, and receive any fresh visitors."

Is this another hint as to Watson's role in the partnership when he began working with Holmes post-hiatus? With a busy Holmes out gathering clues, were a part of Watson's duties to be present for potential walk-in clients, possibly screening them for Holmes?

11. The Promiscuity Of Eduardo Lucas

Looking over Lucas's things, Holmes pronounces, "As to his relations with women, they appeared to have been promiscuous but superficial. He had many acquaintances among them, but few friends, and no one whom he loved. His habits were regular, his conduct inoffensive."

How would Holmes deduce such data? From letters alone? Is he saying that Lucas was celibate, or just a one-night-stand guy?

12. The Telegrams Of The Daily Telegraph

"Upon the fourth day there appeared a long telegram from Paris which seemed to solve the whole question."

"A discovery has just been made by the Parisian police [said the Daily Telegraph] ..."

Was the Daily Telegraph a newspaper composed entirely of telegrams from afar with no editing? How did one tell a newspaper article from a telegram? Timeliness and distance alone, or was there a special column for telegrams from foreign correspondents?

13. Holmes And Watson Against The Law

Sherlock Holmes complains, "It is a case, my dear Watson, where the law is as dangerous to us as the criminals are. Every man's hand is against us, and yet the interests at stake are colossal."

Why were the forces of the law against them? Wouldn't the powers that put Holmes on the case to begin with have some influence with Scotland Yard, even if they weren't telling the Yardmen exactly what was

going on? Unlike Holmes, couldn't Scotland Yard be ordered to take action even when ignorant of the true circumstances?

14. The Many Sides Of Lady Hilda

While Lady Hilda Trelawney Hope presents a noble, caring front to Holmes and Watson, the side we see of her in Constable MacPherson's report is something else entirely: "Was answering an advertisement about typewriting and came to the wrong number--very pleasant, genteel young woman . . . some would say she was very handsome. 'Oh, officer, do let me have a peep!' says she. She had pretty, coaxing ways, as you might say, and I thought there was no harm in letting her just put her head through the door."

Lady Hilda demonstrates considerable skill at acting and duplicity in her mission to regain the letter. Might there have been more to this woman than just the blackmailed wife? Might she have been a spy in her own right? Was the blackmail story a cover for her true role?

15. The Adventure Of The Second Faint

When confronted by Holmes, we read of Lady Hilda: "Her eyes glazed--she tottered--I thought that she would faint."

After her performance at Godolphin Street, can we believe there is any reality to Lady Hilda's near-faint? Had she sensed it would have worked on Holmes, would she have gone through with it?

16. The Manliness Of Browbeating Lady Hilda

"It is not a very manly thing, Mr. Holmes, to come here and browbeat a woman."

Maybe it's not chivalrous, but not manly? Is this a woman plainly used to using her feminine charms and attacking the manhood of all who don't fall under her sway? The commanding, assertive Holmes who confronts her with the truth seems quite manly enough to this reader. How do the rest of the Hounds call it?

17. The Coolest Ending In The Canon

"The Premier looked at Holmes with twinkling eyes.

"'Come, sir,' said he. 'There is more in this than meets the eye. How came the letter back in the box?'

"Holmes turned away smiling from the keen scrutiny of those wonderful eyes.

“We also have our diplomatic secrets,’ said he and, picking up his hat, he turned to the door.”

Is there any post-climax scene in the Canon that has more cinematic potential than this one? Holmes’s cool reply to the Prime Minister himself, his little smile as he walks away ... it’s the sort of thing a James Bond movie might end with, if one added a half-naked woman on Holmes’s arm. Are there any others that compete?

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2000-2001