

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

His Last Bow

Adventure XLI – The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. The Pollyanna Of Detectives

“Audacity and romance seem to have passed forever from the criminal world,” bemoans Sherlock Holmes in “The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge,” sounding like a Raffles fan who just watched an episode of “COPS.”

Isn't this view a bit dreamy for a man who has dealt with very real, very vicious criminals for a decade? Was the criminal world ever romantic outside of fiction?

2. The Master And His Class

“Private detectives are a class with whom I have absolutely no sympathy,” states Scott Eccles.

What would a common, conservative citizen of 1892 know of private detectives as a class? Would we expect a fellow like Eccles to encounter on in everyday life?

3. The Backwards Watsonian Storyteller

“You are like my friend, Dr. Watson,” Holmes tells Eccles, “who has a bad habit of telling his stories wrong end foremost.”

Was Holmes speaking of Watson's written work, or merely his habits in daily conversation? Is the Canon told “wrong end first”?



4. Dining Head-To-Head

“Our dinner was tete-a-tete,” Scott Eccles tells of his visit to Garcia.

What was Eccles expecting it to be? Had Garcia led him to believe it was going to be a party? Why was a private meal with one’s host worth remarking about?

5. The Admirable Mr. Baynes

“A woman, as usual, was at the bottom of it,” Baynes comments after his admirable display in finding the discarded note.

For all his promise as a detective, does Baynes also display some heavy shortcomings like a prejudice against women?

6. Petty Cash On Baker Street

"You will show these gentlemen out, Mrs. Hudson, and kindly send the boy with this telegram. He is to pay a five-shilling reply."

Holmes doesn’t hand Mrs. Hudson five shillings to pay for that reply, so where is she getting the money? A standing cash reservoir that Holmes supplies, or would she be expected to use her own money, keep a record, and bill him later?

7. The Adventures Of Another Cowardly Constable

Walters shivers: “And the look of it--the great staring goggle eyes, and the line of white teeth like a hungry beast. I tell you, sir, I couldn't move a finger, nor get my breath, till it whisked away and was gone. Out I ran and through the shrubbery, but thank God there was no one there.”

Would Walters have been carrying a gun for his vigil? Why was he so spooked by a dead chicken, when nobody in the area seemed up on voodoo?

8. And Next, His Monograph On Shoe Sizes

““Yes," Holmes reports, after a short examination of the grass bed, "a number twelve shoe, I should say.”

How might Holmes have been gauging shoe sizes at the scene of the crime without a measuring device? Did he have a method, or was he just using guesswork specifics to make himself sound more skilled?

9. El Mariachi, 1892 Style

“Odds and ends, some pipes, a few novels, two of them in Spanish, an old-fashioned pinfire revolver, and a guitar were among the personal property.”

Was the guitar a particularly Spanish instrument in 1892? Where would one expect to commonly find one in English life of that period?

10. The Baynes System Of Crime Solving

“But we all have our own systems, Mr. Holmes. You have yours, and maybe I have mine,” Baynes explains once he has captured the mulatto cook.

What methods did Baynes plan to use at this point? He had captured his suspect . . . was he going to use extreme measures on his prisoner?

11. Ah, The Leisurely Servant Life!

“For the rest, his house is full of butlers, footmen, maidservants, and the usual overfed, underworked staff of a large English country-house.”

What percentage of the servant class was Holmes referring to here? Did they really have it that easy, or is this Holmes displaying a slight prejudice from his past?

12. Those Savages And Their Filthy Deities

From “Eckermann's Voodooism and the Negroid Religions” we hear:

“The true voodoo-worshipper attempts nothing of importance without certain sacrifices which are intended to propitiate his unclean gods. In extreme cases these rites take the form of human sacrifices followed by cannibalism. The more usual victims are a white cock, which is plucked in pieces alive, or a black goat, whose throat is cut and body burned.”

Okay, that’s the aloof Victorian view of one man’s religion. What was the cook attempting from his point of view? Did his arcane rites have some purpose in voodoo traditions other than the general appeasement of angry gods?

13. Do You Know The Way To San Pedro?

Based on the scan information we have in this tale, would anyone care to hazard some speculation as to where, exactly, San Pedro was? (And while we're at it, where did the voodoo-loving cook come from? The "backwoods of San Pedro"? How about New Orleans, serving up Cajun or Creole food? Or Haiti, serving up whatever Haitian specialties there are?)

14. Like Putting Your Name On A Marquee

"Some six months afterwards the Marquess of Montalva and Signor Rulli, his secretary, were both murdered in their rooms at the Hotel Escurial at Madrid."

Mr. Henderson of High Gable seems to be a low profile sort of guy, with good reason. Wouldn't people be more likely to wonder about the background and credentials of supposed nobility, than a "Mr. Henderson"? Could someone just waltz into Madrid claiming they were a marquis? Why would Don Murillo make such a move?

15. The Colors Of Revolution?

"If you look it up you will find that the San Pedro colours are green and white," Miss Burnet explains.

Wouldn't the colours of a country whose dictator deserved an obsessive quest for vengeance be just the thing they wouldn't be wanting to use? Or did these colors come into use after dictator Don Murillo was gone?

16. The Tell-Tale Signs On The Body

Miss Burnet explains, "I was confined to my room, terrorized by the most horrible threats, cruelly ill-used to break my spirit--see this stab on my shoulder and the bruises from end to end of my arms."

Burnet was seriously abused, to be sure. But what sort of abuse leaves bruises all along her arms, end to end? Would grabbing alone do such damage?

17. Vengeance Of A Voodoo Priest

“Knowing that he would return there, Garcia, who is the son of the former highest dignitary in San Pedro, was waiting with two trusty companions of humble station, all three fired with the same reasons for revenge.”

So if Garcia picked up his cook in his travels, why was the cook so fired up about revenge on Don Murillo? Did he really have any part in this aside from cooking?

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