

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

His Last Bow

Adventure XLII – The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. How Were These People Still Alive?

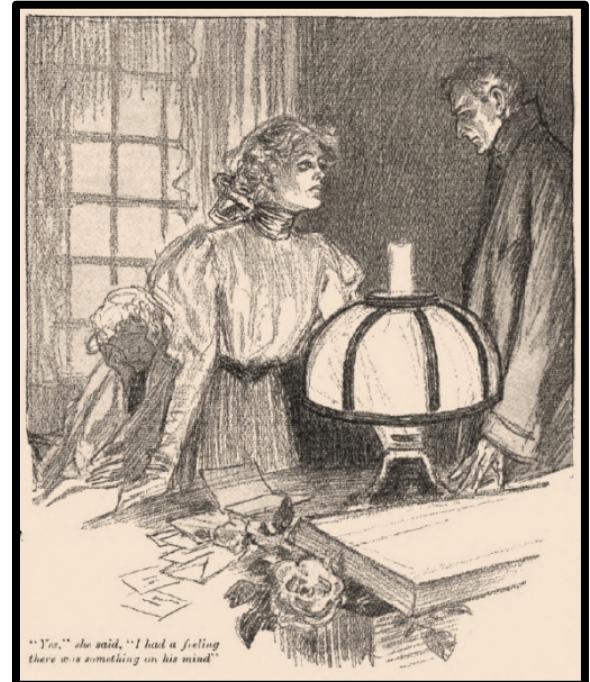
"In the third week of November, in the year 1895, a dense yellow fog settled down upon London. From the Monday to the Thursday I doubt whether it was ever possible from our windows in Baker Street to see the loom of the opposite houses But when, for the fourth time, after pushing back our chairs from breakfast we saw the greasy, heavy brown swirl still drifting past us and condensing in oily drops upon the windowpanes"

Watson gives us a few descriptions of the noxious vapors that hung over London on one occasion or another, and this one is particularly odious-sounding. How bad a health hazard were these poison gases?

2. Yes, But Was It A *Really* Good Reason?

Holmes brags, "Suppose that I were Brooks or Woodhouse, or any of the fifty men who have good reason for taking my life, how long could I survive against my own pursuit?"

So why didn't Brooks or Woodhouse, or any of the fifty, take a stab at killing Holmes? It's not like he was hard to find. And even if they weren't the cleverest fellows around, how much brain does it take to find a spot on Baker Street one can take a rifle to and wait for Holmes to come out? Is Holmes over-exaggerating their desire to rid the world of him?



"Yes," she said, "I had a feeling there was something on his mind."

3. The Not-So-Secret Secret Plans

"The papers which this wretched youth had in his pocket were the plans of the Bruce-Partington submarine . . . Surely you have heard of it? I thought everyone had heard of it."

Mycroft Holmes, whose specialty is omniscience, seems to think that not only Sherlock should recognize the name of the sub, but that the newspapers would too. Yet we are told they are "the most jealously guarded of all government secrets." Wouldn't the name, and the fact they were plans for a submarine, be secret as well? How would they have gotten out?

4. Great Influence Or Merely A Great Opportunity?

"If you have a fancy to see your name in the next honours list-- --"

Is Mycroft making his brother an offer with that question, or just pointing out the chance for him to get a knighthood? Or possibly a little of both?

5. The Economics Of Train-Shuffling

When Holmes asks: "Would it be possible for me to inspect the train which contained the passenger who heard the thud of a fall in the fog?"

"I fear not, Mr. Holmes," the railroad rep replies. "The train has been broken up before now, and the carriages redistributed."

Why would a passenger line be broken up as a matter of course and its carriages redistributed? Was it that line's last run? Wouldn't a regularly running passenger train keep its cars day after day?

6. Sir James's Prime Real Estate

When Holmes and Watson visit Sir James Walter, we are told, "The house of the famous official was a fine villa with green lawns stretching down to the Thames."

Were there many mansions with lawns along the Thames? Where might one expect to find such choice riverfront property? What were the flooding risks, and wouldn't they make it hard to keep a nice green lawn there?

7. Oh, Those Awful Stains!

Of Valentine Walter, we are told: "His wild eyes, stained cheeks, and unkempt hair all spoke of the sudden blow which had fallen upon the household."

How did he get stains on his cheeks? The implication is surely some sort of tear-stains, but tears don't leave stains, do they? Or has that awful London reek altered the biochemistry of Londoners to the point where their tears do stain their cheeks?

8. They Didn't Want To Pay The Married Rate Tax

Violet Westbury says her fiancé had "saved a few hundreds, and we were to marry at the New Year."

Did she actually mean they were marrying on New Year's Day? Was there some advantage to waiting until the New Year to marry, like an income tax loophole, or would it have just been a purely sentimental choice?

9. Inspiring, Maybe, But Commanding?

"Mr. Sidney Johnson, the senior clerk, met us at the office and received us with that respect which my companion's card always commanded."

Why did Sherlock Holmes's card "command" respect? It's not like Holmes had any real authority. Wouldn't it have more likely have inspired shock in 1895, when most people thought he was dead?

10. The Business Card As A Skeleton Key

"I think, with your permission, I will now take a stroll round the premises," Holmes tells Sidney Johnson, then proceeds to inspect the most secret part of the Woolwich Arsenal. Sure, a few of the Bruce-Partington plans have been stolen, but wouldn't those offices still contain quite a few secrets that one wouldn't want just anyone looking at? Holmes seems to have gained entry to this stronghold of British secrets with just a business card -- could spies have taken advantage of the office's state of confusion and get a look around the same way Holmes did?

11. AND FOR HIS NEXT LEARNED QUOTATION . . .

"I'm afraid," said Holmes, smiling, "that all the queen's horses and all the queen's men cannot avail in this matter."

Is Holmes truly paraphrasing "Humpty-Dumpty" here? Any other nursery rhymes in his repertoire? Or just another indication that the post-hiatus Sherlock wasn't up to the speed of pre-hiatus Holmes?

12. Try The Lasagna, Watson!

Holmes summons Watson to Goldini's Restaurant, a "garish Italian" place, where Holmes seems to have just finished dinner, and is indulging in coffee and curacao and a cigar. Watson has already eaten, so we get to see nothing of the restaurant's main course offerings.

What would one expect from an Italian restaurant in 1895 London? What might Holmes have dined on prior to Watson's arrival? Pasta? Sandwiches? Pizza?

13. How Many Times Does Watson Pull This Trick?

When Watson finally agrees to burgle the Oberstein place with Holmes, the doctor says, "for a moment I saw something in his eyes which was nearer to tenderness than I had ever seen."

In considering how much the ladies like these little moments in Watson's writings, and considering how Watson raves about their rarity every time he writes one (when he's got Holmes emoting all over the place the rest of the time), it's easy to see what Watson's "natural advantages" with the ladies might have been. He's manly, he's got war wounds and a moustache, he's a best-selling author, and yet he's so sensitive . . . unlike that cold fish Holmes.

Is Watson over-playing these scenes a bit? Or do men actually look into each other's eyes for tenderness when about to break into a house?

14. Someone Put Those Kids To Bed!

"Next door there appeared to be a children's party, for the merry buzz of young voices and the clatter of a piano resounded through the night."

Wait a minute ... Holmes summoned Watson to the restaurant well after nine. They discussed things for a bit, then walked to Caulfield Gardens. How late in the night was this children's party going on? Didn't Victorians have decent bed-times for their children?

15. Putting Two And Two Together . . .

"Mycroft Holmes and Lestrade had come round by appointment after breakfast next day and Sherlock Holmes had recounted to them our proceedings of the day before. The professional shook his head over our confessed burglary."

Lestrade doesn't like that Holmes and Watson burgled Oberstein's, but he isn't arresting them for it. He does, however, seem to see it as a pattern of behaviour and not a unique incident. If he didn't know it then, has Lestrade finally figured out why that fellow escaping the Milverton crime scene looked so much like Watson?

16. The Battle Cry Of The British Burglar

"For England, home and beauty--eh, Watson?"

Anyone know the pedigree of this statement? Rousing one's spirits by crying "for England and home," I understand, but what "beauty" was Holmes speaking of? Did he mean beauty as an abstract, or was he saying, "for country, home, and pretty girls!"?

17. The Distracting Power Of Lassus

Watson comments on Holmes's ability to switch his thoughts from their important case to a hobbyish matter as they wait for night and their trap to be set, saying: "I remember that during the whole of that memorable day he lost himself in a monograph which he had undertaken upon the Polyphonic Motets of Lassus."

What was it about those motets that could have intrigued a man of Holmes's faculties enough to write a monograph upon them? Surely he wouldn't have bothered unless he had some new theory to prove, or some new data to expose to the world, would he?

18. Mycroft And His Little Buddy

"It was a relief to me when at last, after a light dinner, we set out upon our expedition. Lestrade and Mycroft met us by appointment at the outside of Gloucester Road Station."

I don't know which is stranger: the way Mycroft actually cares enough about this case to go on a late night vigil, or the way he has Lestrade in tow every time he shows up. Was Lestrade assigned to Mycroft's side for the duration of this case by his superiors? Was there a connection there that extended beyond this tale, one that may have been the reason Lestrade had a tighter bond with Sherlock than any other man at the yard?

19. The Day At Windsor

"Some weeks afterwards I learned incidentally that my friend spent a day at Windsor, whence he returned with a remarkably fine emerald tie-pin. When I asked him if he had bought it, he answered that it was a present from a certain gracious lady in whose interests he had once been fortunate enough to carry out a small commission. He said no more; but I fancy that I could guess at that lady's august name, and I have little doubt that the emerald pin will forever recall to my friend's memory the adventure of the Bruce-Partington plans."

Watson's making a bit of an assumption here, of course. Did "a certain gracious lady" usually entertain worthies for a whole day, or might Holmes have been at Windsor actually undertaking the commission that got him the tie-pin?

Brad Keefauver, BSI

2000-2001