

# The Seventeen Steps

*Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes*

## The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

### Adventure LI – The Adventure of the Creeping Man

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

#### 1. Vindicated By Monkey Serum!

“Mr. Sherlock Holmes was always of opinion that I should publish the singular facts connected with Professor Presbury, if only to dispel once for all the ugly rumours which some twenty years ago agitated the university and were echoed in the learned societies of London.”

As he has so many times, Watson gives us an introduction that leaves the repeat-reader wondering. Given the facts of the case as Watson tells it, how much uglier could the university rumors have been? As they certainly centered on Presbury, would the revelation that he was an accidental monkey-man be a better alternative to such rumors?



#### 2. Ah, For The Director's Cut

Before telling the tale, Watson explains that “Even now a certain reticence and discretion have to be observed in laying the matter before the public.” In other words, he’s holding back facts and leaving things out. What sort of events might have Watson been leaving out of his public chronicle of the case? Is he holding back for the public’s sake, or some private individual involved in the story?

#### 3. The Clients Must Expect To Get Watson, Too

“The relations between us in those latter days were peculiar. He was a man of habits, narrow and concentrated habits, and I had become one of them.”

Watson makes it sound as if the pair did not get along any more, but only went on cases together out of habit. Was this the reason for Holmes’s brusque telegram, “Come at once if convenient -- if inconvenient

come all the same.”? Had Watson made excuses one too many times? What might have caused the pair to have a falling out?

#### **4. The Return Of A Certain Bad Habit**

“As an institution I was like the violin, the shag tobacco, the old black pipe, the index books, and others perhaps less excusable.”

Watson is still speaking of Holmes’s habits, and the first “less excusable” habit which comes to mind is the detective’s earlier drug use. Could Holmes have returned to cocaine after all this time? Or were his “less excusable” habits something else?

#### **5. The Publications Of Sherlock Holmes**

“I have serious thoughts of writing a small monograph upon the uses of dogs in the work of the detective.”

Here is Holmes, near the end of his career, contemplating another monograph. Were these an ongoing thread throughout his career, or were they previously concentrated at the beginning of his career, when clients were fewer?

#### **6. Perhaps Camford Was The University For Hogwarts Grads**

Watson speaks early on in this case about dispelling rumors that agitated Camford University. How can he be hoping to dispel rumors if “Camford” is a fictional composite of “Oxford” and “Cambridge”? Or should the orthodox Sherlockian take Watson at his word, that Camford was Camford?

#### **7. The May/December Romance Of Presbury And Morphy**

Professor Presbury is sixty-one years old. Watson, ever the gentleman, doesn’t give the lady’s age, and we hear of her both as a “lady” and a “girl.” Given Father Morphy’s approval, daughter Presbury’s disapproval, and Miss Morphy’s “I like him, but he’s just so old!” attitude, can we make a guess as to the girl’s age? Just how scandalous would such a romance be?

#### **8. For Lady’s Man Watson, She’s Same Old, Same Old**

Watson calls Edith Presbury, “a bright, handsome girl of a conventional English type.”

Why would an Englishman refer to an English girl as being of the “conventional English type”? Does this show that Watson thinks of himself as other than English, or is it merely a sign of his “women on three

continents” experiences and the categorizations thereof? How might one recognize a conventional English girl if one were to encounter her elsewhere?

### **9. “We’ll Have Two King-Sized Stone Pallets, Please”**

“Holmes made no allusion to the case until after we had deposited our suitcases at the ancient hostel of which he had spoken.”

As this takes place in a country where “old” is much older than the typical American is used to, roughly how old would an “ancient” hotel be?

### **10. The Author Of Mazarin Stone, Perhaps?**

“Mercer is since your time,” Holmes tells Watson. “He is my general utility man who looks up routine business.”

Holmes never seemed to use a “general utility man” while Watson was around -- did the doctor’s absence necessitate Mercer’s hiring? Might Mercer have even been a replacement Watson?

### **11. One Very Busy Monkey-Man**

Holmes remarks that Presbury’s knuckles are “thick and horny in a way which is quite new in my experience.”

As Holmes realizes this is an important clue, the indication would seem to be that Presbury got calloused knuckles from walking on them as an ape does. How much knuckle-walking would a man have to do to get callouses there? And if he was knuckle-walking \*that\* much, wouldn’t someone have seen him at it before Bennett?

### **12. THE HOUDINI OF WOLFHOUSES**

“It was not the chain that broke, but it was the collar that slipped, for it had been made for a thick-necked Newfoundland.”

Considering Roy has been agitated and is straining to get Professor Presbury, how could he slip out of his collar? Wouldn’t he have to back out of it, when all his instincts surely had him pressing forward against it? And if it was that loose, wouldn’t he have slipped it at many another non-attack-mode moment?

### **13. The Surgeon General, He's Not!**

H. Lowenstein writes Presbury with the following warning about his wares: "I would none the less enjoin caution, as my results have shown that it is not without danger of a kind."

Was Presbury supposed to guess at the danger? Why would Lowenstein make such a vague statement, then hint around about ape behaviours, without coming out and stating the observed side effects? (What a TV commercial disclaimer that would make!)

### **14. The Not-So Secret Ingredient**

Watson recalls, "Lowenstein with the wondrous strength-giving serum, tabooed by the profession because he refused to reveal its source."

Why was Lowenstein suddenly revealing his serum's source to Presbury, after his secrecy had already cost him so much? And suppose Lowenstein had come right out and said, "It's monkey glands, okay? It still works!" Would the medical community have embraced it or shunned his serum due to its source?

### **15. Those Handy Himalayan Apes Down The Street**

Lowenstein writes, "It is possible that the serum of anthropoid would have been better. I have, as I explained to you, used black-faced langur because a specimen was accessible."

Wouldn't a Himalayan langur have been a much rarer species in European captivity than an anthropoid? Why would Lowenstein have access to this type of ape and no other, when it was such an important factor in his serum?

### **16. The Cologne That Drives 'Em Wild! (Dogs, Anyway)**

"The dog, of course, was aware of the change far more quickly than you. His smell would insure that. It was the monkey, not the professor, whom Roy attacked."

Regardless of how Presbury smelled, would a dog attack an ape simply because it smelled like an ape? What common serum ingredients other than ape parts might have been making the Professor smell like a stranger to Roy?

## **17. The Immortal Holmes Speaks On Immortality**

“Consider, Watson, that the material, the sensual, the worldly would all prolong their worthless lives. The spiritual would not avoid the call to something higher. It would be the survival of the least fit. What sort of cesspool may not our poor world become?”

Is Holmes on target about immortality here? Or might the spiritual actually accept the call to something higher resulting from a prolonged life? Wouldn't the sensualists get bored quicker and want to end it all?

**Brad Keefauver, BSI**

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