

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure LVI – The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier

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

1. The Watson We Never Knew

"Speaking of my old friend and biographer, I would take this opportunity to remark that if I burden myself with a companion in my various little inquiries it is not done out of sentiment or caprice, but it is that Watson has some remarkable characteristics of his own to which in his modesty he has given small attention amid his exaggerated estimates of my own performances."

When Holmes says "characteristics," he surely isn't just speaking of Watson's constant surprise at Holmes's actions -- that alone can't be remarkable enough to mention. Was Holmes keeping Watson's remarkable traits as quiet as Watson himself did? Why might they have been, something along the lines of "the fair sex is your department"?

2. Of Collections And Relative Strangeness

Holmes says this case is "among the strangest happenings in my collection, though it chanced that Watson had no note of it in his collection."

Does this case seem all that strange to us? Perhaps what is strange to Holmes may not be strange to Watson's readership . . . what would the difference be? Is Holmes patronizing us a bit by acting like this is such a weird case, feeling he had to ballyhoo it a bit in Watson's absence?

And what were the differences between Holmes's collection and Watson's collection? Holmes seems to imply that Watson kept notes on cases that the good doctor had no part in, and even makes it sound like he



was checking those notes in Watson's absence before writing up BLAN. Did Watson's collection stay with Holmes when Watson left, possibly because it had become a part of Holmes's criminal data stores?

3. That Old Sunlight Trick

"It is my habit to sit with my back to the window and to place my visitors in the opposite chair, where the light falls full upon them."

Was Holmes doing this to provide light for his observations or add a sense of power to his presence? Is it just a coincidence that Professor Moriarty is said to have the same habit in VALL? And we are also told that Moriarty would shine a lamp in the face of his guest if it was night -- would Holmes have done that as well?

4. The Sherlock Holmes Effect

Holmes has made several amazing deductions in his career, but by 1903 it would seem that his clients are a little too eager for them. Take the case of Mr. James Dodd:

"What has been happening at Tuxbury Old Park?"

"Mr. Holmes-- --!"

"My dear sir, there is no mystery. Your letter came with that heading."

Was Dodd that much of a bonehead, or was he just expecting brilliant observations so much that he forgot he sent Holmes a letter? Had Holmes's legend started causing such conversational irritants whenever Holmes talked to a fan who hadn't met him before? (We see later than Dodd is a reader, using a novel to distract himself -- might he have heard of Holmes via Watson's work?)

5. An Echo Of Earlier Events

James Dodd tells Holmes: "We formed a friendship--the sort of friendship which can only be made when one lives the same life and shares the same joys and sorrows. . . . Then he was hit with a bullet from an elephant gun in the action near Diamond Hill outside Pretoria. I got one letter from the hospital at Cape Town and one from Southampton. Since then not a word--not one word, Mr. Holmes, for six months and more, and he my closest pal."

This tale takes place in January of 1903, just before Watson brought Holmes back to the reading public with HOUN and then revealed Holmes still lived with EMPT.

The Dodd-Emsworth break seems a bit close to the Holmes-Watson break of ten years before, doesn't it? Is Holmes trying to tell Watson something with his choice of tales?

6. And What Was So Queer About Mrs. Ralph?

"... there was his wife, who might have been older. She had been Godfrey's nurse, and I had heard him speak of her as second only to his mother in his affections, so I was drawn to her in spite of her queer appearance."

Dodd says old Ralph the butler seemed as old as the house, and his wife seems older. Does looking old qualify one for a "queer appearance"? Or is there something else Dodd (or chronicler Holmes) has left out?

7. The Roaring Coal Fire

"Then I sat down by the roaring fire with the lamp on a table beside me, and endeavoured to distract my mind with a novel. I was interrupted, however, by Ralph, the old butler, who came in with a fresh supply of coals."

Okay, here's one that puzzles someone ignorant of the low-tech olden days. Why was Ralph bringing coals when there was a roaring fire in the fireplace? Was it stoked with coal rather than wood? Or does "coals" plural imply hot coals of some sort brought in for another purpose?

8. Jim Dodd's Favorite Cheese

"It wasn't merely that ghastly face glimmering as white as cheese in the darkness."

Ask most modern Americans the color of a man's face that's the same color as cheese and they'll surely say "yellow." If Dodd's first thought of cheese is of a white cheese, what kind of cheese is he most likely thinking of? What was the common cheese of Victorian England?

9. Locking Emsworth's Outbuilding

Dodd remarks of the man we later learn is Emsworth's doctor: "To my surprise, he locked it after him and put the key in his pocket."

Is he locking Emsworth in? The night before his patient seemed to have free run of the grounds. Was Emsworth's liberty taken from him for attempting to see his friend?

10. The Longest House-Call Ever

"Opposite to me was seated the little man whom I had seen in the morning. He was smoking a pipe and reading a paper."

We later learn that this man is Mr. Kent, a surgeon who was prepared to stay with Godfrey Emsworth. What good would Kent's constant presence have done for a man with leprosy? Wouldn't a reputable surgeon

have other demands on his time and ambitions beyond sitting around a moping leper, reading the paper and smoking his pipe? Couldn't a servant handle the job?

11. Of Watson, Schools, And Dukes

"It happened that at the moment I was clearing up the case which my friend Watson has described as that of the Abbey School, in which the Duke of Greyminster was so deeply involved."

Here's a classic Canonical puzzle: the case Watson described as that of the Priory School, in which the Duke of Holderness was so deeply involved, took place in May of 1901, at a time when Watson is seemingly at Baker Street. Is this just one of life's odd coincidences? (As Sir James Saunders says, "Yes, Mr. Holmes, the coincidence is a remarkable one. But is it coincidence? Are there not subtle forces at work of which we know little?") Must a thorough Sherlockian reconcile the two slightly different cases as one? Was there still matters in the earlier one that needed clearing up two years later?

12. The Sultan's Concerns In England

"I had also a commission from the Sultan of Turkey which called for immediate action, as political consequences of the gravest kind might arise from its neglect."

What might the Sultan of Turkey have been interested in that could be dealt with in London of January 1903? As Holmes is working the Greyminster case and is back on the Dodd case the beginning of the next week, he didn't really have time to travel much, did he?

13. "Dear Diary, Today I Found A Fake Leper . . ."

Holmes writes, "Therefore it was not until the beginning of the next week, as my diary records . . ."

With all the other things Holmes has going on, he's keeping a diary too? What level of detail would we expect to find in Holmes's diaries? What topics might he cover? Would it be all business, or would innermost thoughts and feelings be recorded therein?

14. That Nasty Bit Of Business Called The Boer War

"We were clearing brother Boer . . ." Godfrey Emsworth remarks.

By "clearing" would Emsworth mean anything but killing Boers?

15. The Attitude Of The Lepers

"In front of me was standing a small, dwarf-like man with a huge, bulbous head, who was jabbering excitedly in Dutch, waving two horrible hands which looked to me like brown sponges. Behind him stood a group of people who seemed to be intensely amused by the situation . . ."

The situation seems to be rather a "three bears" situation in which Emsworth is found sleeping in the bed of the big-headed dwarf, who is rightly upset by the situation. The dwarf's fellow lepers seem vastly amused that Emsworth is in the dwarf's bed and not his. Yet the whole lot are speaking the Dutch of the Boers . . . what would their attitude have been toward a British soldier in their midst? When the English-speaking doctor says "I'll soon have you tied up" does he refer to Emsworth's wounds, or just to tying up an enemy soldier?

16. The Fate Of An English Leper

"But absolute secrecy was necessary, or even in this quiet countryside there would have been an outcry, and I should have been dragged to my horrible doom," says Godfrey Emsworth.

What, indeed, would have been the fate of an Englishman discovered to have leprosy in the heart of the English countryside? Was it indeed a "horrible doom" at the hands of a mob or was Emsworth speaking dramatically of segregation in a leper colony somewhere?

17. It's Just Not The Same Without A Cheering Section

"And here it is that I miss my Watson. By cunning questions and ejaculations of wonder he could elevate my simple art, which is but systematized common sense, into a prodigy."

How humble is Holmes being here? Are Watson's statements of amazement so integral to a Holmes adventure? Wouldn't something like SPEC or REDH have been just as exciting without them?

Brad Keefauver, BSI

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