

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure LVII – The Adventure of the Lion’s Mane

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of the Lion's Mane" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. Watch Me Pull A Lion’s Mane Out Of My Hat!

“It is a most singular thing that a problem which was certainly as abstruse and unusual as any which I have faced in my long professional career should have come to me after my retirement,” Holmes writes at the beginning of the case, then bemoaning Watson’s absence with, “Ah! had he but been with me, how much he might have made of so wonderful a happening and of my eventual triumph against every difficulty!”

Once again we find Holmes reporting a case of something outside the criminal realm being viewed as a criminal occurrence, and once again Holmes is giving it much hoopla at the story’s start. Was the detective knowingly exaggerating his excitement, just to try to make up for Watson’s missing enthusiasm? Might he be mocking Watson a bit in that last part of his statement? Or had Holmes simply become so jaded with the criminal that only non-criminal cases that seemed at first to be crime-based were the only ones that surprised him?



2. Trouble In Partnership Paradise?

Holmes writes, “I had given myself up entirely to that soothing life of Nature for which I had so often yearned during the long years spent amid the gloom of London. At this period of my life the good Watson had passed almost beyond my ken.”

Does the “gloom of London” refer to the infamous atmosphere of the city itself, or a state of mind that pervaded Holmes’s time there? Followed so quickly by a mention of Watson’s “passing” from his life, is there a slight implication that the partnership was partly responsible for that gloom toward the end?

3. The Good Doctor’s Excuse For Not Visiting

Holmes then says of Watson, “An occasional week-end visit was the most that I ever saw of him.”

Given the fact that Watson always seems to be the one who controlled how much or how little he saw of Holmes, what was keeping Watson away from Holmes at this point? A wife who was less sympathetic toward Holmes than Mary Morstan? Did children enter the picture? Or was Watson just a Londoner who didn’t care to spend that much time in the country?

4. A Man’s Home Is His Fortress

“My villa is situated upon the southern slope of the downs, commanding a great view of the Channel. At this point the coast-line is entirely of chalk cliffs, which can only be descended by a single, long, tortuous path, which is steep and slippery.”

Would Holmes have selected such a location for its defensive qualities as much as its scenic view, with so many criminals who would love to have their revenge upon him? How relatively expensive would such seaside real estate have been?

5. Holmes’s Friend In Sussex

“Stackhurst himself was a well-known rowing Blue in his day, and an excellent all-round scholar. He and I were always friendly from the day I came to the coast, and he was the one man who was on such terms with me that we could drop in on each other in the evenings without an invitation.”

What sorts of things might have caused the two men to hit it off so well from day one? What has caused Holmes to change from the man who didn’t encourage visitors or care for socializing to the sort of fellow who didn’t mind a neighbor dropping in unannounced?

6. Something Not On Watson’s Famous List

“Summer and winter he went for his swim, and, as I am a swimmer myself, I have often joined him.”

Holmes calls himself a swimmer, but one would think his years in London gave him little opportunity to exercise that skill for decades.

Was there any place a urbanite in the heart of London could go for a pleasant swim in the 1880s and 1890s without leaving town? Or was this just a childhood recreation that Holmes reacquainted himself with after retirement?

7. Another Suspicious Mathematics Coach

Ian Murdoch “seemed to live in some high, abstract region of surds and conic sections, with little to connect him with ordinary life.”

What might Murdoch have been doing in that high, abstract region? What sort of adventures and explorations might one have among the surds and conic sections of higher mathematical planes?

8. The Mathematics Of Dog Versus Window

“On one occasion, being plagued by a little dog belonging to McPherson, he had caught the creature up and hurled it through the plate-glass window.”

“Plate glass,” as used in large picture windows, tends do be a thicker glass, does it not? Birds often thump into such windows, thinking it open air, without breaking them. How big would a dog have to be to go all the way through a plate glass window? Could a chihuahua be thrown by the average scholar at a force that would break through plate glass?

9. The Law In Fulworth . . . At Least Until The Boss Shows Up

Anderson, the village constable, admits “This is a big thing for me to handle, and I’ll hear of it from Lewes if I go wrong.” Holmes then tells him to send for his superior, whom one would assume was from the aforementioned Lewes. What sort of hierarchy did the village constable serve under at that time? Did he take orders from a central headquarters in the next larger town, such as a county seat? How much authority did he have on his own?

10. The Most Important Meal Of The Day

When Holmes asks why none of the students were swimming with MacPherson, Stackhurst says, ““Ian Murdoch held them back,” said he. “He would insist upon some algebraic demonstration before breakfast.”

Before breakfast? Was this a school or a boot camp? What was the structure of a coaching establishment that a teacher could just show up at any given moment and demand a performance?

11. Holmes Lives Next To A Tourist Trap?

We are told Fulworth is an “old-fashioned hamlet” with “several modern houses” on the outskirts, all curving around a bay. Yet we also learn that Tom Bellamy “owns all the boats and bathing-cots at Fulworth,” which sounds like the little village does a business in swimming and boating tourists. How lonely is Holmes’s place if it’s only a pleasant (and thyme-scented) walk from a tourist beach?

12. And Then There’s Maud . . .

“There was no gainsaying that she would have graced any assembly in the world. Who could have imagined that so rare a flower would grow from such a root and in such an atmosphere? Women have seldom been an attraction to me, for my brain has always governed my heart, but I could not look upon her perfect clear-cut face, with all the soft freshness of the downlands in her delicate colouring, without realizing that no young man would cross her path unscathed. Such was the girl who had pushed open the door . . .”

We’ve heard Watson describe a lot of women in his time. He’s great at describing their fashions, their figures, their carriage, and every little detail he can delicately divulge. But when it’s Holmes’s turn, how does the great detective do it? He describes the pretty lady in terms of his reaction to her, and by extension, other men’s reactions to her. Why this difference between the doctor and the detective?

13. A Week In July Without A Swim?

A week passes after Fitzroy MacPherson’s death, and yet no one goes to the bathing pool with the dangerous visitor in it? Usually, it seems both the students and Holmes swam in the pool. As they all thought MacPherson had been whipped by an unknown person with a grudge against him, why wouldn’t anyone have encountered MacPherson’s killer while swimming in the interim?

14. The Law In Sussex, Part Two

Inspector Bardle of the Sussex Constabulary shows up a week after the murder is done, convinced he must arrest somebody just to arrest somebody, it seems. Would Bardle have been occupied in some other part of Sussex, and just getting down to Fulworth at last? Would he have come from Lewes, the seat of the village constable’s higher-up, or elsewhere?

15. Holmes's Drug-Free Dwelling

"For God's sake, oil, opium, morphia!" Ian Murdoch cries out in agony after the attack of the tale's villain. Holmes meets this request with cotton soaked in salad oil, along with Watson's standard cure-all, brandy.

Would we expect Holmes to stock anything more potent at this point in his life, or has he gone so drug-free he doesn't even have any leftovers currently in his home?

16. Murdoch's Recovery From The Poison

The venom of Cyanea Capillata is enough to kill a weaker man, and, indeed, causes Ian Murdoch to pass out from the pain. Yet he is up and walking out arm-in-arm with Harold Stackhurst in a period of time that seems nearly under an hour. Was this to be expected? How long should a victim of Cyanea be down for?

17. Not The Handiest Place For A Reference Book

"There is a great garret in my little house which is stuffed with books," Holmes writes, going on to say that is where he retrieves his copy of J. G. Wood's Out of Doors from. As Holmes retired to enjoy the "soothing life of Nature," why wouldn't he keep his nature books in a little handier place?

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