

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure LIX – The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger

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

1. Forget The Tin Dispatch Box, I'll Take This Collection!

Watson writes, "There is the long row of year-books which fill a shelf, and there are the dispatch-cases filled with documents, a perfect quarry for the student not only of crime but of the social and official scandals of the late Victorian era."

Up until now we've been hearing a lot about Watson's single tin dispatch box, but now he's talking about "dispatch-cases" and a "long row of year-books" (which would, by itself, solve many a chronological problem). Whose materials were



these? What made the tin dispatch box material different from this massive reference?

2. The Return Of A Pesky Politician?

"I deprecate, however, in the strongest way the attempts which have been made lately to get at and to destroy these papers. The source of these outrages is known, and if they are repeated I have Mr. Holmes's authority for saying that the whole story concerning the politician, the lighthouse, and the trained cormorant will be given to the public. There is at least one reader who will understand."

As "Veiled Lodger" appeared in January of 1927, can we use that date as a clue as to who might have been harassing Watson in 1926 regarding the long-passed lighthouse/cormorant scandal, perhaps someone whose career had just taken a turn for the better? Can we take this statement as a sign that Watson was alive and still in contact with Holmes in 1926?

3. Watson's Motives For The Writing

"But the most terrible human tragedies were often involved in those cases which brought him the fewest personal opportunities, and it is one of these which I now desire to record."

Watson has already told us that he has a massive amount of material to choose from, but he desires to record this particular story, a tale about "an example of patient suffering," as Holmes later puts it. Was Watson relating this tale due to some occurrence in his personal life, perhaps for a friend or relative (or offspring!) who now needed such a lesson? Or could this tale somehow be a message for the same person who wanted the lighthouse papers?

4. Sherlock Holmes, Non-Smoker?

"Mrs. Merrilow does not object to tobacco, Watson, if you wish to indulge your filthy habits," Holmes jibes in the beginning of this case. This seems just another of the detective's little pokes at Watson (especially given the smoke-filled room he says it in), but it makes one wonder if Sherlock Holmes actually did ever quit smoking for a time. Might Holmes have tried to give up smoking as a part of some self-betterment campaign in the 1890s? Do we have any records of smokers trying to quit from that era?

5. Two Not-So-Faithful Holmes Readers

"Well," Mrs. Merrilow says to Mrs. Ronder, "if you won't have the regulars, there is this detective man what we read about."

The two ladies have obviously been sharing the same literature in the house library -- but it's 1896, three years after "Final Problem" first saw print and seven years before "Empty House" was released. Why don't they think Holmes is dead? Would a lot of people at that time have read "Adventures" but not "Memoirs"? Or had Holmes's return finally made it into the newspapers? Mrs. Ronder tells Holmes she has followed his work for "some years." Does that make her sound like a reader of the Strand, or the book collections of the tales?

6. When Watson Meets The Buddha On The Road . . .

The good doctor writes: "So excited was he that he did not rise, but sat upon the floor like some strange Buddha, with crossed legs . . ."

How would a Victorian Englishman like Watson have been most familiar with Buddha? Would he know much of Buddhism, or know simply of the little figurines from some Oriental decor fad?

7. And Sometimes Watson Didn't Take Notes

"You may well say so. And yet there were one or two points which worried young Edmunds, of the Berkshire Constabulary. A smart lad that! He was sent later to Allahabad. That was how I came into the matter, for he dropped in and smoked a pipe or two over it."

"A thin, yellow-haired man?"

"Exactly. I was sure you would pick up the trail presently."

Can we assume from the above exchange, as well as Holmes's words, "You were with me then," that Watson was present for the initial Abbas Parva conversation with Edmunds? Was a social evening with an investigator from the official force so commonplace that Watson didn't even bother keeping notes on such casual case discussions?

8. Sherlock Breaks For Lunch

After talking with Mrs. Merrilow and refreshing his memory of the case, Holmes says, "There is a cold partridge on the sideboard, Watson, and a bottle of Montrachet. Let us renew our energies before we make a fresh call upon them."

Would this be a commonplace lunch for the detective, or had he called upon Mrs. Hudson to do something special for Watson's visit?

9. Rich Man's Justice, 1880s Edition

Of Ronder, we learn: "Again and again he was had up for assault, and for cruelty to the beasts, but he had plenty of money and the fines were nothing to him."

Fines for cruelty to animals don't seem unusual, but for repeated assaults? Could Ronder get off easily from "murderous" drunken rages in which he badly beat people just by flashing the cash? Was tying your wife down and beating her with a riding whip so easy for a rich man to get away with?

10. And Then There's Always Leaving . . .

The nightmare that Mrs. Ronder describes as her life is a terrible one, and her love affair with the strong man was her one escape. So why didn't Mrs. Ronder and Leonardo actually escape and go look for work with another circus, as so many others from Ronder's had? Working for a travelling circus was not the most stable, stuck-in-one-place life anyway, so why not hit the road, especially with all of Ronder's tortures? Wouldn't escape be easier than murder?

11. The Manner Of The Lion's Attack

As a creature operating on pure instinct, even in the heat of the blood lust described by Mrs. Ronder, why would a lion go for a person's upper face? Mrs. Ronder's chin and mouth seem unmarked, so the throat was not Sahara King's target. Wouldn't a lion strike first with his front claws, as Eugenia and Leonardo had hoped to imitate? Why bite her head?

12. The Victimization Of Eugenia Ronder

"I never saw him or heard from him again. Perhaps I have been wrong to feel so bitterly against him."

After years of abuse from Ronder, Eugenia even blames herself for Leonardo's betrayal and faithlessness, loving the strong man even in her seclusion. Would a woman of that period had any resources other than her own strength of character for pulling out of such a downward spiral?

13. The Reach Of The Times And Its Kin

"He was drowned last month when bathing near Margate. I saw his death in the paper."

Margate is a goodly distance from London -- would every drowning at the beach there make the London papers, or was Mrs. Ronder reading some other papers? Would a strong man be enough of a celebrity to make his death more newsworthy?

14. The Sea's Last Execution

Leonardo's drowning is the last in a long line of Canonical folk who receive their just desserts from the sea itself. In fact, it almost seems like Sherlock Holmes sometimes has some mystic tie to a great sea beast who cleans up loose ends for him. Is there something symbolic in Holmes's killing of the strange sea creature of "The Lion's Mane" as the last recorded case of his private career, perhaps showing a break between Holmes and the executioner of Leonardo and John Openshaw?

15. Watson Gives Up Beautiful Women

After years of describing attractive women to us, Watson ends his run with this description of Eugenia Ronder's face, "It was horrible. No words can describe the framework of a face when the face itself is gone. Two living and beautiful brown eyes looking sadly out from that grisly ruin did but make the view more awful."

Earlier in the tale, Watson has praised Eugenia's mouth and chin as they showed under the masked portion of her face. Her eyes also seem to both be in one piece. Yet he says her face is "gone." What's left of a

face when you eliminate the mouth, chin, and eyes are the nose and eyebrows -- but how does a lion bite the nose and eyebrows without doing damage to the eyes? Would as much damage have been done to Eugenia's face by infection, as the actual bite?

16. Time To Heal, And More Time To Heal

"It was six months before she was fit to give evidence," Holmes says of Mrs. Ronder's recovery. Surely her physical recovery would have been quicker than that, wouldn't it? Is he speaking of mental recovery, of was Mrs. Ronder simply putting off the questioning by drawing her convalescence out?

17. Choose Your Poison And Send It To Holmes

"Two days later, when I called upon my friend, he pointed with some pride to a small blue bottle upon his mantelpiece."

Mrs. Ronder had planned to kill herself with that small blue bottle of prussic acid. Was it the best choice for suicide in 1896? When non-suicidal people went into the store to buy a small blue bottle of prussic acid, what did they usually use it for?

Brad Keefauver, BSI

2000-2001