

The Seventeen Steps

Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes

The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure LX – The Adventure of the Shoscombe Old Place

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. The Scotland Yard Forensics Department

"Is it one of your cases?" Watson asks Holmes of his microscope study.

"No; my friend, Merivale, of the Yard, asked me to look into the case."

If the matter of the dead policeman wasn't Holmes's case, it would seem Merivale only brought the cap to Holmes for forensic work. Was he the only outlet Scotland Yard had for the scientific study of evidence at the time? Or was this a sign of his friendship for Merivale?

2. A Man And His Cuffs With A Parting Of The WAYS

"Since I ran down that coiner by the zinc and copper filings in the seam of his cuff they have begun to realize the importance of the microscope."

Wouldn't Holmes have had the culprit if he had his cuff? Could Scotland Yard search a suspect's home and take his shirt?



3. Watson Won't Be The Jury On This One

Did Holmes purposely stay "forensics only" with the picture-frame maker case because it involved a cop-killing and he wanted to allow the police to deal with the murder of one of their own? Would the men of the Yard have worried too much about corroborating evidence once they had someone they thought had killed a fellow cop? Or was Merivale trying to make sure his fellow officers didn't come down with a vengeance on an innocent man?

4. Government Racetrack Betting Relief

"By the way, Watson, you know something of racing?"

"I ought to. I pay for it with about half my wound pension."

Obviously, Watson's not hurting for cash if he fritters his pension money away at the track. So what were his sources of income at the time of this case? Did he have any responsibilities to worry about saving money for? What age would he have had to have been to be collecting a wound pension?

5. Watson's Summer Home

"He lives at Shoscombe Old Place, and I know it well, for my summer quarters were down there once."

Is Watson referring to a place he stayed for a single vacation, or a place he owned and returned to for several seasons? If the latter, when in his life could this have occurred?

6. The Spaniel Herds Of Shoscombe

"There are the Shoscombe spaniels. You hear of them at every dog show. The most exclusive breed in England. They are the special pride of the lady of Shoscombe Old Place."

Were the Shoscombe spaniels a breed unto themselves? What qualities would make one set of spaniels more desirable than another, and how exclusive would they have been? How long could a particular breed be expected to breed true?

7. Forty Lashes And Then Some

"It was when he horsewhipped Sam Brewer, the well-known Curzon Street money-lender, on Newmarket Heath. He nearly killed the man."

Would the horsewhip referred to be a stiff buggy-whip type or more of the bullwhip variety? What manner of abuse would it take to nearly kill a man with a such a whip? Wouldn't it have taken a lot of time? Why wouldn't someone intervene in that time?

8. Those Horses Are Quite A Handful, Aren't They?

Watson writes, "The door had opened and the page had shown in a tall, clean-shaven man with the firm, austere expression which is only seen upon those who have to control horses or boys."

Riding herd on a family of wound-up boys can take the humor out of a person surely enough, but horses? Are they that hard to get along with, that one would expect a horse trainer to be so austere?

9. The Adventure Of The Flaming Skeleton

"It was burned to a black cinder, but there could be no question as to its anatomical significance."

"It's the upper condyle of a human femur,' said I."

Can one burn an entire skeleton in the standard heating furnace? Would we have expect more than a femur to be left?

10. Definition Quiz For The Week

"A highly coloured young woman with flaxen hair and impudent eyes sat on the left."

Okay, we know by the "flaxen" hair that Carrie Evans is a blonde. But what does Watson mean by "highly coloured"? Lots of make-up or lots of freckles? Rosy red cheeks or flashy outfits?

11. The Fishing Detective

"My companion seemed to have no further plans for the day, and we did actually use our fishing tackle in the mill-stream, with the result that we had a dish of trout for our supper."

When Holmes shows a skill not related to the field of detection, one can't help but wonder if it relates to his childhood. Does trout-fishing give us a clue as to where Sherlock Holmes grew up? When might he have learned to fish, if not as a child, and why would he have taken it up during his crime-obsessed years?

12. The Fishing Detective, Part Two

"The rack above us was covered with a formidable litter of rods, reels, and baskets. On reaching our destination a short drive took us to an old-fashioned tavern, where a sporting host, Josiah Barnes, entered eagerly into our plans for the extirpation of the fish of the neighbourhood."

While Holmes and Watson wind up going after trout, there is much talk of pike, jack, eels, and dace. How much different equipment would they need for all these different types of fish?

13. The Lantern That Shined Yellow

"Holmes had lit his lantern, which shot a tiny tunnel of vivid yellow light upon the mournful scene."

From the fact it has a directed beam, one would guess Holmes is using a dark lantern. But would such a lamp put out a yellow-colored beam? Isn't firelight basically white?

14. Was This A Crypt Or The Catacombs Of Rome?

"Holmes set to work making a very careful examination of the graves, ranging from a very ancient one, which appeared to be Saxon, in the centre, through a long line of Norman Hugos and Odos, until we reached the Sir William and Sir Denis Falder of the eighteenth century."

Considering the hundreds and hundreds of years represented in this crypt, wouldn't it have had to be pretty large? Whose remains would have been allowed in it, and whose wouldn't?

15. And He Did It Without An Actor As Mycroft

Sir Robert explains, "I am running a dark horse for the Derby and that everything depends upon my success. If I win, all is easy. If I lose--well, I dare not think of that!"

"I understand the position," Holmes replies.

What does this statement say, if anything, about Holmes's actions in "Silver Blaze"? Had Holmes invested a large share of his worldly possessions at that time on his inside knowledge about Silver Blaze, just as Sir Robert was doing this time?

16. Payoffs For Everyone!

"Shoscombe Prince did win the Derby, the sporting owner did net eighty thousand pounds in bets, and the creditors did hold their hand until the race was over, when they were paid in full, and enough was left to reestablish Sir Robert in a fair position in life."

Earlier, we were told the odds were "forties now, but it was nearer the hundred when he began to back him." So how much did Sir Robert have to bet to get his net profits, allowing for the fact he probably borrowed most, if not all of it? How much of the profits would have to be left for him to be in "a fair position for life"?

17. So Maybe It Wasn't A Bribe, But ...

"Both police and coroner took a lenient view of the transaction, and beyond a mild censure for the delay in registering the lady's decease, the lucky owner got away scatheless from this strange incident in a career which has now outlived its shadows and promises to end in an honoured old age."

Did the leniency of all involved have anything to do with inside info on Sir Robert's "dark horse"? Would he have to have told them the full situation, or could he have kept the money-making part of his scheme quiet?

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