

A Common Core State Standards-Aligned Discussion & Activity Guide for

# THE ALARMING CAREER OF SIR RICHARD BLACKSTONE

Written by Lisa Doan  
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Age Range: 8 - 12 years

Grade Level: 2 - 7

Hardcover: 192 pages

## About the Book:

Twelve-year-old Henry Hewitt has been living by his wits on the streets of London, dodging his parents, who are determined to sell him as an apprentice. Searching for a way out of the city, Henry lands a position in Hampshire as an assistant to Sir Richard Blackstone, an aristocratic scientist who performs unorthodox experiments in his country manor. The manor house is comfortable, and the cook is delighted to feed Henry as much as he can eat. Sir Richard is also kind, and Henry knows he has finally found a place where he belongs.

But everything changes when one of Sir Richard's experiments accidentally transforms a normal-sized tarantula into a colossal beast that escapes and roams the neighborhood. After a man goes missing and Sir Richard is accused of witchcraft, it is left to young Henry to find an antidote for the oversized arachnid. Things are not as they seem, and in saving Sir Richard from the gallows, Henry also unravels a mystery about his own identity.

## About the Author:

Author Lisa Doan considers herself to be a 'professional vagabond'. A dual citizen of the U. S. and Ireland, Lisa has traveled throughout Africa, Asia, and Central America. She's backpacked from Morocco to Kenya and once lived on a Caribbean Island for eight years. Lisa has worked as a Master Scuba Diving Instructor, a Wall Street Headhunter, as Owner and Chef of a Restaurant, as the Set Medic for a Reality Show, and the Deputy Prothonotary of a County Court. Lisa's greatest joy is writing novels for kids. She earned her MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts.



## Discussion Questions:

~ Henry's first encounter with Sir Richard Blackstone was when he collided with the gentleman on the stairway, the result of which was the accidental release of a very dangerous poisonous frog. Henry was clearly at fault, and yet Blackstone did not blame him for incident. Consider why for Henry "...kindness stung him with sadness" (pg. 5). Discuss how this quote serves as a theme for the overall story.

~ Examine how Henry's perceived need to "...make sure nobody saw his toes" (pg. 20) created tension in the story. Cite instances in the text where the mention of his toes creates a sense of intrigue, wonder, and concern for Henry's well-being.

~ Explain how the author's choice of the name 'Mr. Snidefellow' reflects the character's true nature. Identify moments in the story in which Mr. Snidefellow acts in a snidely manner.

~ On page 57, Mr. Snidefellow suggests that the devil's work has increased dramatically upon Henry's arrival. Determine how, at this point in the story, Mr. Snidefellow's claim could be considered to be true.

~ Discuss how the statement "Matilda seemed to sense that she had just taken a great step up in the world..." (pg. 70) suggests that the puppy and Henry share a similar sense of appreciation for being chosen to live with generous and kind Sir Richard Blackstone.

*Discussion questions continued on the following page.*

## Discussion questions continued.

~ The members of the Barton Commons community were terrified by the mysterious creature lurking in the Queen's Forest. Snidefellow was "determined to exploit their fears and superstitions" (pg. 85) by claiming the situation to be the work of the devil. To 'exploit' means to take advantage of, manipulate, or misuse. Explain how Snidefellow would benefit by exploiting fear and confusion among the people.

~ Tell what Henry's refusal to accept a reward for saving Harold, the duchess's dog, reveals about his character. Note that Snidefellow is present when the duchess refers to Henry as "...a little gentleman" (pg. 103). Explore Snidefellow's response to her statement.

~ Define humility. List antonyms for the word. Identify moments of humility in the story.

~ Henry is a highly perceptive character, meaning that he is alert and sensitive to others. Discuss scenes during which Henry's actions are kind and led by his intuition. And yet, his toes suggest that he is marked by the devil. Explore the contrast between the two - his physical features and his character.

~ While rushing in effort to save the people of Barton Commons, Henry accidentally sprinkles specks of lupuna powder in Mr. Terrible's, the poisonous frog's, aquarium. Explain the significance of the lupuna powder producing crickets instead of a giant frog (pg. 117). Make a connection between the crickets and Henry's intention to care for others.

~ After breaking into Snidefellow's cottage, Henry flees through the woods on horseback with a stolen metal strongbox in hand. Cantankerous, his horse, becomes spooked by a dark flash in the woods. It is then that Henry discovers his father hiding in the shadows, watching him. Explain why, instead of nabbing Henry with the intent of selling him as a chimney sweep, his father "...turned and disappeared into the trees" (pg. 140).

~ Tell why, instead of exposing them as evidence to Fitzwilliam, Henry buries the letters his father wrote to Snidefellow in the pile of parchments that were removed for the metal strongbox (pg. 145).

~ Examine the significance of the duchess turning to Henry for the truth regarding the outlandish experiments, the giant tarantula hidden in the Queen's Forest, and Blackstone's innocence in the crimes for which he is accused (p. 164).

~ Explain the notion of 'intent' as it relates to the power of the giant lupuna tree (pg. 168). Examine why and how the tree chose to teach Sir Richard 'a lesson', and yet allowed Henry use its power to conquer the giant tarantula and minimize the size of the fly (pg. 171).

~ Discuss "...the mark of St. John" (pg. 181). Explore how the source of Henry's weakness and deepest dread ultimately became his strength and salvation.

~ Explore how the following themes were demonstrated throughout the story — good vs. evil, courage, belonging, overcoming adversity, caring, beliefs, rejection, kindness, loyalty, respect, determination, justice, family, and love.

## Research Topics:

Research the following topics. Write a short informative essay expressing how they served to enhance the believability, authenticity and/or inform the overall plot.

Child Labor during the British Industrial Revolution

Phossy Jaw

Chimey Sweeps

The Legend of the Lupuna Tree

Alkaloid Batrachotoxins

Phyllobates terribilis - The Golden Poison Dart Frog

Theraphosidae - The Tarantula

Padfoot

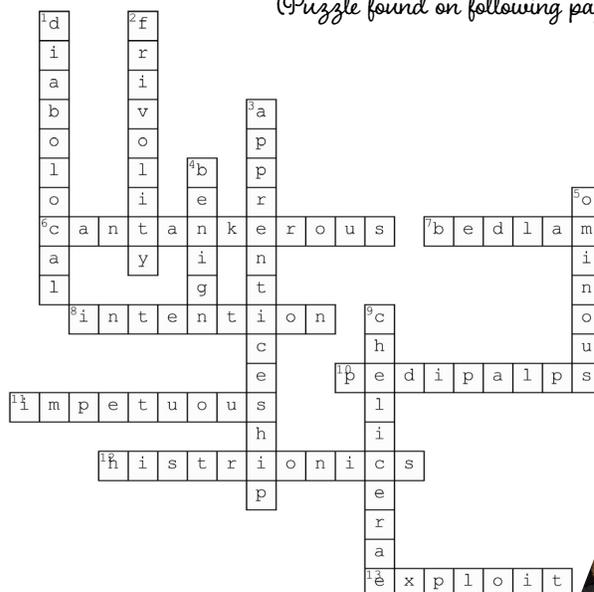
Mary Queen of Scots

The River Thames

Whitechapel, London

## Crossword Puzzle Answers:

(Puzzle found on following page.)

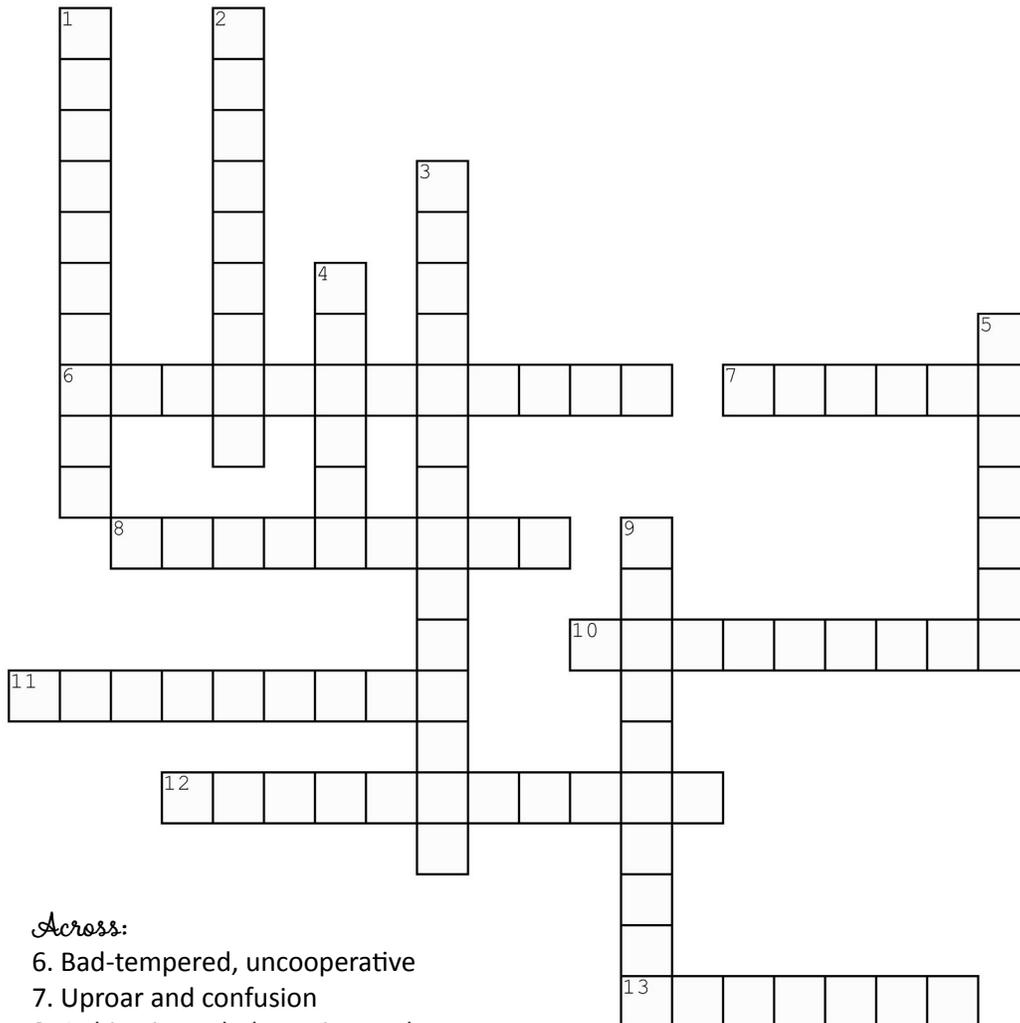


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# The Alarming Career of Sir Richard Blackstone

## Vocabulary Crossword Puzzle



### Across:

6. Bad-tempered, uncooperative
7. Uproar and confusion
8. A thing intended; an aim or plan
10. Second pair of appendages attached to the cephalothorax of most arachnids
11. Done quickly and without thought or care
12. Exaggerated dramatic behavior
13. To use something in a way that benefits you

### Down:

1. Belonging to or so evil as to recall the Devil
2. Lightheartedness
3. Work with employer to learn a trade or profession
4. Gentle; kindly
5. Giving the impression that something bad or unpleasant is going to happen
9. A pair of appendages in front of the mouth in arachnids

### CCSS Anchor Standards:

- English Language Arts Standards-Reading: R.1, R.2, R.3, R.4, R.10  
English Language Arts Standards-Writing: W.2, W.4, W.7  
English Language Arts Standards-Speaking & Listening: SL.1, SL.4, SL.6

