



Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XIV -- The Adventure of the Copper Beeches

SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

Violet has lost her position with Col. Munro and has applied to Westways for a position. There she meets Rucastle who offers her over twice what she was earning before. However he tells her that he wants her to have her hair cut short and that he might require her to wear a blue dress of which he is very fond, but will not require her to do anything unbecoming a lady. Violet smells a rat and she doesn't want to cut off her hair so she hesitates. Mrs. Stoper tells her this is the opportunity of a lifetime. Violet has no living relations so she asks Holmes what to do. She has already decided to do it. Holmes says, "It is not a position I should want a sister of mine to accept." He promises to come and help her if she sends him a telegram.

She wires two weeks later and has Holmes and Watson meet her at the Black Swan Hotel in Manchester. She tells Holmes that the Rucastles have on several occasions required her to wear the blue dress and to sit prominently in a bay window with her back to it. There she is amused to laughter and reads to them. She conceals a piece of mirror in her hanky and sees a bearded man standing in the road. She is asked to stand and face him and to then motion for him to go away. She does so and Mrs. Rucastle quickly pulls down the blind.



One wing of the house is locked off from the rest. Toller has a key to this area. One day, when in his cups, he leaves the door open. Violet explores and finds a locked room with someone inside.

Rucastle catches her in the wing and tells her that if he finds her there again, he will throw her to Carlo. Violet wires Holmes at this point.

In the train, Holmes tells Watson that he has formed “seven separate explanations of the facts as they are known.” It is obvious that Violet has been hired to impersonate someone who is being held prisoner in the room. The Rucastles are going out for the evening. Mr. Toller is on a drinking binge. This means that he will not let Carlo out of his pen. Violet says that she will send Mrs. Toller into the cellar on an errand and lock her in. Then they will be able to free the prisoner.

They break into the secret room only to find it empty, the occupant having escaped via a skylight onto the roof and a light ladder to the ground. At this point, Rucastle returns and Holmes accuses him of kidnapping. Rucastle accuses him of the same thing and goes to release the dog. Holmes locks the exterior doors and after Rucastle releases Carlo, the dog turns on him. Watson blows the dog’s brains out and carries Rucastle to the sofa. Violet lets Mrs. Toller out of the cellar and she tells them that Fowler bribed her to put the ladder up and that he and Alice made a getaway. She said Rucastle wanted Alice to sign her inheritance over to him, but she refused.

The case being solved, Holmes loses all interest in Violet, much to Watson’s disappointment. Rucastle survived, but was a broken man. The Tollers remained in his employ. Alice and Fowler were married and he accepted a government appointment on the island of Mauritius. Violet became manager of a successful private school at Walsall. We are not told what became of young Edward.

SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)

Miss Violet Hunter seeks advice from Holmes about his commitment as governess at The Copper Beeches, a house near Winchester.

His employer Jephro Rucastle, offered her very high wages but ask strange requirements: having her hair cut and wearing a specific dress. She refused at first but Mr. Rucastle offered even more money. Holmes promises to help if the need arises and Violet accepts the job.

A few days later, Holmes receives a telegram from Miss Hunter who asks him to come quickly to Winchester. She says the Rucastle's elder daughter, Alice, is said to have travelled to Philadelphia because of a dislike of her stepmother, Mrs. Rucastle. Violet cut her hair and was invited to sit, wearing an electric blue dress in front of a window.

When she saw a man watching from afar through the window, the order was given to her to make him a sign to leave out. On another day, she realized with horror that a person was kidnapped in a secret room.

Holmes concluded that Violet is used to play the role of Alice Rucastle and the man who observe from outside is Alice's fiancé, Mr. Fowler.

Holmes, Watson enter the house, taking advantage of the absence of Mr. Rucastle and find the secret room empty. But Mr. Rucastle arrives and launch his hungry dog at their heels. Unfortunately, the dog turns against him and seriously injured his master.

Watson kills the dog in time to prevent the death of Rucastle. They then learn that Mr. Fowler had just liberate Alice from her parents. The latter locked up her to have Fowler believe she was gone and for he stops to woo her.

SUMMARY (Wikipedia)

Violet Hunter consults Holmes after being offered a governess job subject to a number of unusual conditions, including cutting her hair short. The wage is extremely high, £120, and she decides to accept the job, though Holmes tells her to contact him if she needs to. After a number of strange occurrences, including the discovery of a sealed-off wing of the house, she does so. Holmes discovers that someone had been kept prisoner in the wing, but when Holmes, Watson and Hunter enter, it is empty. They are accused of freeing the prisoner, who was the daughter of Hunter's employer, who sets his dog on them, though it attacks him instead. It is revealed that Hunter had been hired to impersonate her employer's daughter so that her fiancé would believe she was no longer interested in seeing him, but the daughter had escaped and the pair later married.

Violet Hunter visits Holmes, asking whether she should accept a job as governess—a job with extraordinary conditions. She is enticed by the phenomenal salary which, as originally offered, is £100 a year, later increased to £120 when Miss Hunter balks at having to cut her long copper-coloured hair short (her previous position paid £48 a year). This is only one of many peculiar provisos to which she must agree. The employer, Jephro Rucastle, seems pleasant enough, yet Miss Hunter obviously has her suspicions.

She announces to Holmes, after the raised salary offer, that she will take the job, and Holmes suggests that if he is needed, a telegram will bring him to Hampshire, where Mr. Rucastle's country estate, the Copper Beeches, is situated.

After a fortnight, Holmes receives such a message, beseeching him to come and see her in Winchester. Miss Hunter tells them one of the most singular stories that they have ever heard. Mr. Rucastle would sometimes have Miss Hunter wear a particular electric blue dress and sit in the front room reading, with her back to the front window. She began to suspect that she was not supposed to see something outside the window, and a small mirror shard hidden in her handkerchief showed her that she was right: a man was standing there on the road looking towards the house.

At another such session, Mr. Rucastle told a series of funny stories that made Miss Hunter laugh until she was quite weary. The one astonishing thing about this was that Mrs. Rucastle not only did not laugh but did not even smile.

There were other unsavoury things about the household. The six-year-old child that she was supposed to look after was astonishingly cruel to small animals. The servants, Mr. and Mrs. Toller, were quite a sour pair. A great mastiff was kept on the property and always kept hungry. It was let out to prowl the grounds at night, and Miss Hunter was warned not to cross the threshold after dark. Also, Toller, who was quite often drunk, was the only one who had control over the dog.

There was also the odd discovery by Miss Hunter of what appeared to be her own trusses in a locked drawer. Upon checking her own luggage, however, they turned out to be another woman's, but identical in every way to Miss Hunter's, even to the unusual colour.

However, the most disturbing thing of all about the household was the mystery wing. Miss Hunter had observed a part of the house that did not seem to be used. The windows were either dirty or shuttered, and once she saw Mr. Rucastle coming out of the door leading into the wing looking most perturbed. Later, he explained that he used the rooms as a photographic darkroom, but Miss Hunter was not convinced.

When he is drunk, Toller leaves the keys in the door to the mystery wing. Miss Hunter sneaks in. She finds the place spooky, and when she spots a shadow moving on the other side of a locked door, she panics and runs out into Mr. Rucastle's waiting arms. Mr. Rucastle does not reproach her; instead, he pretends to comfort her. However, he overdoes his act and alerts her suspicions, causing her to claim that she saw nothing. In an instant, his expression changes from comfort to rage.

With the great detective's aid, it is discovered that someone has been kept a prisoner in the forbidden wing. The purpose of hiring Miss Hunter becomes clear: her presence is to convince the man watching from the road that Rucastle's daughter Alice, previously unknown to Miss Hunter and whom she resembles, is no longer interested in seeing him.

Holmes, Watson, and Miss Hunter find Miss Rucastle's secret room empty; Rucastle arrives and thinks the trio has helped his daughter escape and goes to fetch the mastiff to set upon the trespassers. Unfortunately for Rucastle, the dog has been accidentally starved for longer than usual and attacks him instead. Watson shoots the dog with his revolver. Later, Mrs. Toller confirms Holmes' theory about Rucastle's daughter and reveals that when Alice came of age, she was to receive an annuity from her late mother's will; Rucastle tried to force his daughter to sign control of the inheritance over to him, which only resulted in Alice becoming ill with brain fever; hence, the cut hair. Rucastle then tried to keep Alice away from her fiancé by locking her up in the mystery wing and hiring Miss Hunter to impersonate Alice.

Rucastle's daughter escapes with her fiancé, and they marry soon after. Watson notes that Holmes appears to have been drawn to Miss Hunter. However, to his disappointment, Holmes does not show any interest in Miss Hunter after the mystery has been solved, which was the real force behind his feelings. Rucastle survives as an invalid, kept alive solely by his second wife. Miss Hunter later becomes principal of a girls' school, where she meets with "considerable success."