



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXI -- The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist

It is that sacred year of 1895 — Watson even says so! — and Sherlock Holmes interrupts another case long enough to listen to the story told by Miss Violet Smith, the tall, graceful and queenly music teacher. And for once, Holmes sets aside his precept that a client is “a mere unit, a factor in a problem” (The Sign of Four), and sees her as a person. He touches her face, calls her “Miss Violet,” teases her about her engagement, and takes her problem seriously when even Watson seems inclined to dismiss the matter as bizarre but harmless. Good for Holmes! Maybe he learned something during that Hiatus of his! In a moment, the Hounds mount their own bicycles (an interesting picture — The Hounds of the Bicycles!) to pursue “The Solitary Cyclist.”

Carruthers: Most Sherlockian scholars agree that Bob Carruthers is indeed the title character of the story, and he is certainly one of those people who give the Canon its great depth and breadth. Not quite a bad man, not quite a good man, a hot-headed guy with a mysterious past — and the entire story hinges on his unpredictable actions. By the way, I highly recommend the BBC audio tape (the Clive Merrison series) of this adventure. Bert Coules’s excellent dramatization takes Violet Smith’s phrase, “I play his [Carruthers’s] accompaniments in the evening,” and extrapolates some very plausible possibilities about the relationship between Carruthers and Miss Smith. But whether or not you have heard the tape, here’s a question: Do you think that Violet Smith may have found herself drawn to Carruthers more than she admitted?

Remembering a parallel line of reasoning from “The Copper Beeches,” do you think Holmes deduced anything from Violet Smith’s opinion that Carruthers’s ten year old daughter was “a dear?” But was the girl Carruthers’s daughter, do you think? Or was she hired along with the housekeeper?



Holmes muses, “Then again, how about the connection between Carruthers and Woodley, since they appear to be men of such a different type?” That’s a very good question. How did Carruthers get mixed up with Woodley?

Unexpected tragedy: In the opening lines of the story, Watson writes of “The curious sequel of our investigation, which culminated in unexpected tragedy.” But the end of “The Solitary Cyclist” is a happy one! Surely the shooting of Woodley cannot be considered tragic; even setting aside our guilty pleasure at seeing the odious Woodley get his comeuppance, the incident avoids tragedy because Woodley is not killed or permanently injured. Where, then, is Watson’s tragedy? Was the word nothing more than a slip of Watson’s pen, some confusion over which story he was starting to tell us? What about this idea instead: suppose the story as published omitted certain events that took place some time after the involvement of Holmes and Watson. Why? Well, perhaps the reason depends on the events. Here are some suggested tragedies. The Hounds are welcome to comment on these, or to suggest their own:

Peter the groom suffered permanent brain damage or perhaps even died of a brain hemorrhage.

Williamson and Woodley broke out of jail and “served” Bob Carruthers.

Cyril Morton turned out to be an abusive husband.

Rosemary Michaud