

An Observance Of Trifles

You know my method. It is founded upon the observance of trifles.

(Arthur Conan Doyle)

snell's interminable ramblings about the canon

The Return of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XXXI -- The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist

The Adventure Of The Solitary Cyclist--Who The Heck IS Bob Carruthers?

There is one big mystery that is left unresolved at the end of **The Adventure of The Solitary Cyclist**--who the heck *is* this **Bob Carruthers**?

We know who he is, of course: **Violet Smith's** employer and would-be bodyguard, who at first participates in a plot to woo her for her inheritance, but then repudiates the plan and tries to protect her.

But we're left with an awful lot of questions about the man, some curious personality traits and other circumstances that make him seem unlikely to play the role he does in this story.

This is relatively unusual for a **Sherlock Holmes** story. **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** usually made sure we had at least some background on the villain, some version of their life story and how they came to be involved in the crime. Hell, early in the **Canon**, he would devote entire chapters (or even 1/3 of the book!) to giving us the histories of the bad guys. Even later in the short stories, it was rare for us not to get a fairly good look at the crooks and their motives (even if sometimes it was only through **Holmes'** speculation).

But *Solitary Cyclist* is *different*. We know virtually nothing about our villains, **Woodley** and **Carruthers**. There is no history for them--what were they doing in South Africa, how did they come to know **Ralph Smith**, how and why they hatched their plot--we barely even get their first names!! This is unusual--in most other Holmes stories, we would have gotten a least a few cursory paragraphs detailing their biography and their motives.

This doesn't matter too much with Woodley--he's nothing but a two-dimensional character. Literally all we know about him is that he was "*the greatest brute and bully in South Africa--a man whose name is a holy*



terror from Kimberley to Johannesburg" and *"had the reputation of being a most dangerous ruffian."* No real history or rap sheet or explanation. Perhaps none is needed--he's only in this story to play the *archetypical blackguard*, twirling his red moustache and menacing Miss Smith.

In other stories, Doyle would have given us *some* of his back story, but we didn't need that information to understand the character.

But Bob Carruthers is *something else*. He's an enigma, a man who has tantalizing hints of much more going on behind the facade. On the surface, he surely doesn't *seem* like the type who would be in league with a notorious bounder and a defrocked priest to put on a marriage under false pretenses so they could swindle the bride out of her inheritance. Holmes notes the curiosity of *"the connection between Carruthers and Woodley, since they appear to be men of such a different type."*

Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean much. Many a con man and cad can put on a respectable exterior--that's a great way to be successful in that *"business."* But somehow Carruthers' role doesn't feel like a "character" he is playing.

He is a widower (or, at least that is what he tells Violet), and has a child. If true, how and when did his wife die? Was it in South Africa, and her passing left him in such straits that he was enticed into this ridiculous scheme? Did she die in England, and her death was the impetus for him going to South Africa in the first place?

Of course, there's no reason a widower with a child in tow couldn't be a con man--see **Paper Moon**. But I don't get that feeling about Carruthers, do you?

Carruthers also wasn't merely a broke con man--he had *some* money, even if he weren't rich. Holmes harped on the fact that he couldn't be *"rich,"* as he had neither carriage nor horses. Still, he was, as Miss Smith said, *"at least fairly well-to-do."* He was able to afford passage for himself and his daughter from South Africa. He was able to afford (*renting?*) a decent enough estate, and paying a housekeeper. Not to mention, of course, over-paying for a music teacher. Yes, there was an ulterior motive, and if their plan worked they wouldn't have had to pay the full £100 yearly wage. But Carruthers clearly had funds for rent and two servants and the upkeep of his family--he must have had *some* money.

According to Violet, *"he goes into the city two or three times a week. He is deeply interested in South African gold shares."* A lie to cover his other movements, or did he actually have some money of his own? If he does have some money, how, then, does he get tempted into this scheme?

And then Carruthers broke the cardinal rule for con men: *he fell for his mark!* It was, as **Watson** pointed out, a selfish love. Nonetheless, it did cause him to almost immediately repudiate the part of their plan allowing Woodley to woo her. And after Carruthers himself proposed and was turned down, he

let the matter lie--no pressure or kidnapping or other means to press his suit. He did his best to keep Woodley away from her, and took up his (ineffective) "*mystery cyclist*" routine to protect her. He even went so far as to attempt to murder his erstwhile partner when he believed Woodley had forced a marriage upon Violet!

These are the unexplored depths to Bob Carruthers. Is he just *the world's worst con man*, a grifter "reformed" by his unrequited love for a good woman? Or was he a decent family man who somehow became swept up in an evil scheme, forced by circumstance or desperate need to throw his lot in with the vile reprobate Woodley? If the latter, how in the world did he get involved with the "holy terror" of South Africa? *How* does a good man end up playing cards for the right to woo an heiress under false pretenses? On the other hand, how does a criminal end up throwing it all away for a "love" he knows will never be returned?

Not that anything said above absolves Carruthers. He *did* voluntarily enter this scheme, no matter what his reasons. And if he truly and honestly repudiated the scheme, we would have told Violet the whole story, or gone to police, and lived with the consequences. Had he done that, he might have earned full leniency from the courts. Instead, the half-measure of "*following her in disguise on a bicycle*" did nothing to protect her, and merely caused her much unease. And the rash attempt to murder Woodley was not terribly ennobling--was he really trying to protect her, or just acting out of jealous rage?

Still, I can't help but be strongly curious about who Bob Carruthers is, and how he came to this point. That's good--it shows that Doyle did a good job of making the character more interesting than a mere cardboard cut out. But it also shows that Sir Arthur failed to do what he usually did, and fill out the villains' backgrounds more fully. So we have no choice but endless speculation, with no real answers...

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

Speaking of underdeveloped villains, what about our defrocked priest, **Williamson? Surely there's a story worth relating there. But the *only* background we get is when Sherlock tells us that his questions at a "clerical agency," which told him that Williamson's "*career has been a singularly dark one.*"

Oh, come on, man--you can't leave us hanging like that?!? What did Williamson do that lead to his ouster? What "*dark*" deeds led to him renting himself out as a forger of marriage licenses and solemnizer of forced weddings? Sure, he's a profane, vile monster (*who packs a pistol!!*), which is great! But would it have killed Doyle to at least give us one paragraph of *real* background? Ahh, not knowing is driving me nuts!!

**Watson writes, "*I confess that I had not up to now taken a very serious view of the case, which had seemed to me rather grotesque and bizarre than dangerous.*"

Oh, Doctor, "*grotesque*" is right--and nothing compared to how the entire case is about to go completely *Grand Guignol*. What started as a quiet, calm case about a possible stalker suddenly turns into violent melodrama!

When the trap turns up empty, Holmes over-the-top cry of "*Watson--abduction! Murder! Heaven knows what!*" sets of a course of thrilling, rapid-fire events: The mystery cyclist shows up; a chase through the trees; the injured groom; "*a woman's shrill scream--a scream which vibrated with a frenzy of horror--burst from the thick, green clump of bushes in front of us. It ended suddenly on its highest note with a choke and a gurgle.*"; the bound and gagged woman, in a forced marriage conducted by a defrocked priest...oh, how Gothic and demented! And then one of the great exchanges in literary history:

"You're too late. She's my wife."

"No, she's your widow."

The revolver cracks! The varlet falls! The false priest pulls a gun!!

And then Holmes has to spoil it all by being the only adult present: "*Enough of this. We'll have no more violence.*"

**Watson writes that, from 1894 to 1901, Sherlock Holmes had "*hundreds of cases*"--hundreds!!--and he had "*preserved full notes on all these cases.*"

Hundreds of cases with full notes!! Doctor, you owe us a good many *more* stories! Get writing!!

**Watson once again explains how he picks cases...

I shall preserve my former rule, and give the preference to those cases which derive their interest not so much from the brutality of the crime as from the ingenuity and dramatic quality of the solution.

Yet, as he has so often done before, after giving that rule, Watson goes on to choose a case that doesn't fit that rule:

It is true that the circumstance did not admit of any striking illustration of those powers for which my friend was famous, but there were some points about the case which made it stand out in those long records of crime from which I gather the material for these little narratives.

So why have the rule to begin with, John?

Ways to drive Holmes chronologists crazy: Watson very clearly and firmly give the date as **Saturday, April 23, 1895. No coy vagueness, no wiggle room.

4/23/1895 was a *Tuesday*.

It's enough to make you think that Doyle was doing it *on purpose* to play with the heads of the playing **The Grand Game**...

**We get mention of two more apocryphal cases: "*the peculiar persecution of John Vincent Harden*," and "*Archie Stamford the forger*."

**Again, Watson follows Holmes' deductions without needing explanation: "*I observed the slight roughening of the side of the sole caused by the friction of the edge of the pedal*." You've come a long way, John Watson!

**So, Holmes deduces that Violet Smith must be either a typist or a musician from the "*spatulation*" of her finger-tips. And Holmes goes on to decide that "*There is a spirituality about the face, however, which the typewriter does not generate. This lady is a musician*."

So, typists can't be "*spiritual*"? What if they're writing enlightened, religious texts? What if the musician plays nothing but crude, vulgar dance hall music?

Of course, given that Doyle himself is a writer, perhaps he is engaging in some self-mockery, here...

**Miss Violet Smith:

[O]ne day we were told that there was an advertisement in the TIMES, inquiring for our whereabouts. You can imagine how excited we were, for we thought that someone had left us a fortune.

Did this kind of thing happen *often*? Seriously? Were there really that many *long-lost relatives leaving surprise bequests*, that merely seeing someone looking for you in the classifieds meant that it was a decent assumption that someone was leaving you a fortune?

Then again, in the pre-personal-mass-communications era, it could be much harder to track someone down, so putting advertisements in the classifieds may have been the best way to find someone. There was no **Facebook**, or **Google**, or even phone books.

We've seen that Holmes has often proceeded under the assumption that most people were checking the advertisements on a daily basis. This might help explain why--you never knew when a rich uncle might have passed, leaving you a tidy inheritance!!

**The story is quite clear that our mysterious cyclist supposedly stayed *200 yards* behind Violet. We're told this several times.

The **Granada** adaptation either didn't think that was dramatic enough, or couldn't measure:

**Hey, wait a minute--*how did Carruthers beat Violet Smith home*? Did he?

Look at the timeline: She leaves the station for home on bicycle. Once she gets near **Charlington Hall**, Carruthers comes out from hiding on his own bike, and follows at a distance of 200 yards. Once she was sufficiently passed Charlington Hall, he would end his shadowing, he would come **BACK** to the Hall gates, take "*several minutes*" to "adjust his necktie"(?), and then go into the Charlington estate.

So after being 200 yards behind, he would backtrack, spend several minutes on his clothes, go into another property altogether...and still beat her home to **Chiltern Grange**? Was there some wonderful shortcut that allowed him to make up that much time?

The same, of course, would apply to her trips from Chiltern Grange to the train station--he would have to leave *before* she did, in order to get to his hiding place and be ready to follow when she cycled by.

So, in other words, he was *always* absent from home when she left or returned? He was *never* around when she had seen the solitary cyclist? Did Miss Smith not think this suspicious at all? Ignoring that is akin to not noticing that **Superman** and **Clark Kent** are never seen together...

This was the second case in a row (in publication order) that Holmes was "*too busy*" to help out immediately. And like the first time (The Dancing Men**), this delay almost resulted in tragedy. Indeed, in this case, it was mere happenstance that no one died.

Perhaps it's time for Sherlock to take on *an intern* or *a partner* to farm out some of these cases to. It can't be good for business if your clients keep dying because you're too busy to leap right into their cases.

**Poor Watson. Holmes is rather a *dick* to him--"*you really have done remarkably badly.*"

Geez, Holmes, he followed your directions *to the letter*: he concealed himself to observe the mystery cyclist, and inquired about the occupants of Charlington House. If you'd wanted him to watch from a particular point of concealment, and inquire from specific places about the guys at Charlington, perhaps you should have given him more specific instructions.

**Holmes boasts of making "*discreet inquiries.*" Which consisted of talking to a "garrulous" bartender while the man you're investigating is within earshot. Not so discreet, methinks.

And yes, Sherlock *did* best Woodley in boxing. But when he woke up later, Woodley and crew now *knew for a certainty* that a stranger was investigating the goings-on at Charlington House. Maybe not the smoothest move, detective.

I suggest that you immediately apologize to Watson, Holmes.

**Holmes berates himself greatly for being late, and for not anticipating the Violet would take an earlier train.

But it should be pointed out that Carruthers, who lived her, loved her, and provided the dog-cart for her, didn't see that coming, either.

How, then, did *Woodley* know she'd be leaving earlier than usual? He had to have been waiting for her, and Williamson waiting to perform the ceremony--that *couldn't* have all been put together on the spot. Was he just watching the road all morning long, or did someone at Chiltern Grange tip him off? **Mrs. Dixon**, the housekeeper?

The ostler, who got a crack in the skull? Nice alibi, but probably not the reward he was waiting for, if it were him...

****Holmes is (partly) wrong about legality of the marriage.**

Defrocked or not, there was no reason to believe that Williamson couldn't perform the sacrament. As I understand it (and many others have actually researched), **Church Of England** canon agreed with Williamson that "*once a clergyman, always a clergyman.*" His status wouldn't invalidate the ceremony, as COE says that the bride and groom "*are actually the ministers of the ceremony, not the priest. The priest is merely a sort of witness...*" (That's quoting the **Reverend Otis Rice**, as quoted in **The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes**, edited by **Lesley Klinger**.)

Of course, the forging of a marriage license and the kidnapping of the bride would make short work of any such wedding from a legal standpoint.

****Once again, for the umpteenth time in the Canon, a woman is exploited for access to her inheritance. I'll let others debate whether this represents a misogynistic view (woman shouldn't have money because they can't protect themselves from predatory men) or a more feminist viewpoint (society needs to enact greater protections for women, because this system isn't working).**

****Carruthers: "*That was when he picked up with this outcast padre here.*"**

It amuses me that "*padre*" was a slang word for priest, in England, in 1903.

I suppose, if you believe Hollywood westerns, the term was in use for decades before hand, at least in the U.S. It's just that, upon reading it coming from the mouth of a proper Victorian gentleman, I was a bit taken aback.

Perhaps Carruthers picked up the term in rough and tumble South Africa...

****Watson acknowledges that he has had problems ending stories, problems that I have complained of earlier:**

[I]t has often been difficult for me, as the reader has probably observed, to round off my narratives, and to give those final details which the curious might expect.

Admitting that you have a problem is the first step, Doctor (and Sir Arthur).

****Not to be a pessimist, but when Williamson and Woodley get out of prison in 7 and 10 years, respectively, mightn't they be looking to cause trouble, both for Carruthers and the now-married Violet Morton and her family? We've already seen one story (**The Resident Patient**) based around crooks who, once released, immediately seek revenge. We can only hop that Carruthers has changed his identity and moved far, far away.**

As for the **Morton** family, well, surely a note from Holmes to Scotland Yard would result in some protective observation, if not a nice friendly sit-down with Woodley to let him know not to try anything. Still, if Sherlock was actually retired by then (1902-1905), well, who would remember to protect Violet?

***Carruthers probably received only "a few months" of jail time (Watson couldn't be bothered to look it up!). Who cared for his daughter?*

The Granada version had Violet Smith take her in for the duration of Carruthers' sentence...

***And Violet married "Cyril Morton, the senior partner of Morton & Kennedy, the famous Westminster electricians."*

Famous electricians? Really? Did Westminster also have famous plumbers and famous carpenters?

Well, I guess before the **Yellow Pages** and **Angie's List**, fame would be helpful in gaining customers.

But *how*, exactly, did Morton & Kennedy become "famous"??

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