



Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

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

SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

Ralph Smith went to South Africa and amassed a large fortune in the gold fields. He became gravely ill and only had a few months to live. Violet and her mother were his only living relatives and would inherit his fortune.

Woodley and Carruthers met Smith and upon finding he would soon be dead, decided to come to England with the intention that one of them would marry Violet and both would share her inheritance.

They came to England where they meet Williamson, who had leased Chiltern Grange, and took him into their confidence. They contacted Violet and hired her as an instructor for Carruther's daughter.

Violet stayed at Chiltern Grange and cycled to the train station on weekends to go visit her mother.

Violet was engaged and would have nothing to do, romantically, with any of the villains. Williamson forged a marriage license and forced -- at gunpoint -- Violet to marry Woodley.

Carruthers, who was a widow, had fallen in love with Violet. He followed Violet (in disguise) on her weekly trips to the train station in order to prevent Woodley from harming her. He helped Holmes foil the plot, but not before Carruthers shot Woodley.

Woodley survived and Watson thought Carruthers got a very light sentence. Violet's marriage to Woodley was of course invalid and she married Cyril and inherited her uncle's large fortune.



SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)

In April 1895, Holmes is contacted by a beautiful young music teacher named Violet Smith who lives near Farnham in Surrey. She's worried about a stranger who stalks her when she bicycles to and from the train station when she goes to see her fiancé in London each weekend.

This man appears and disappears mysteriously. Violet Smith and her mother were living in poverty until few months ago, when two friends of her uncle Ralph Smith from South Africa, came to announce that he asked them to take care of his closest relatives. One the two men, Carruthers, is affable.

He offers Violet an excellent wage to live in his house and teach music to his daughter, and he seems to grow fond of the young woman. The other one, Woodley, is rough and makes unwanted advances. Watson, asked by Holmes to visit Farnham and collect information, figures out that the stalking cyclist disappears by hiding in a hedge along the property of Mr. Williamson, a defrocked clergyman, whose residence is known as a place of debauchery, regularly visited by Woodley.

The next day, Holmes gets a letter from Violet Smith informing him that she's about to leave Carruthers's home to live permanently in London. She feels too uncomfortable since she had to turn down Carruthers's proposal, and since Woodley, who had been thrown out, has returned as rude as ever.

Holmes and Watson, worried, rush to Farnham, where they catch the mysterious cyclist, who turns out to be Carruthers, who is trying to protect Violet. The three men unfortunately arrive too late to stop Violet's abduction.

When they find her, she's been forcibly married to Woodley by Williamson. Holmes, who has no doubt this marriage can be annulled, explains that Carruthers and Woodley came back from South Africa to try to get Violet to marry one of them, as her uncle was about to die and she was going to inherit a fortune from him.

The two men would then share the money. But Carruthers's blossoming love for Violet estranged the two accomplices and Woodley resorted to criminal action with the help of Williamson.

SUMMARY (Wikipedia)

Holmes is contacted by Miss Violet Smith of Farnham, Surrey about an unusual turn in her and her mother's lives. Violet's father has recently died and left his wife and daughter rather poor. There was an ad in the news asking about their whereabouts. Answering it, they met Mr. Carruthers and Mr. Woodley, the former a pleasant enough man, but the latter a bullying churl. They had come from South Africa, where they had known Violet's uncle Ralph Smith, who had now also died in poverty and apparently wanted to see that his relatives were provided for. This struck Violet as odd, since she and her family had not heard a word from Smith since his departure for South Africa 25 years ago.

Carruthers and Woodley explained that before dying, Ralph had heard of his brother's death and felt responsible for his survivors' welfare.

Carruthers began by offering Violet a job as a live-in music teacher for his ten-year-old daughter at £100 a year, about twice the going rate. She accepted after Carruthers said that she could visit her mother on weekends. That went well until Mr. Woodley came to stay for a week. He made the most oafish and clumsy sexual advances to her, and boasted that if Violet married him she would have a life of luxury. He even grabbed her and demanded a kiss, precipitating expulsion by his host, Carruthers. Violet has not seen Woodley since.

The specific thing that has brought Violet to seek Holmes's services, however, is the strange man who follows her on his bicycle as she cycles to and from the railway station for her weekend visits to her mother. The strange man always keeps his distance behind her and disappears without a trace, never letting her near him, and always along the same lonely stretch of road. Violet does not recognize him, but he has a black beard. Holmes asks her about her admirers, and other than Woodley, if he can be styled as such, she can only think of Mr. Carruthers, who, although a perfect gentleman at all times, seems attracted to her.

After Violet leaves, Holmes observes that it is odd that a household would pay £100 a year for a music teacher but be too cheap to pay for a horse and trap. He sends Dr. Watson to Surrey to see what he can find out. This turns out to be virtually nothing, except to establish that the lady's story is true, and that the mystery man comes out of and goes back into a local house, Charlington Hall. Holmes upbraids Watson for his lackluster results. They also receive a letter from Violet that evening saying that Carruthers has proposed to her, but she had to refuse since she is already engaged to a man named Cyril Morton, an electrical engineer in Coventry.

Holmes goes to Surrey himself, and gets into a fight in a pub for his troubles; when he returns and tells Watson what happened, he actually considers his experience in Surrey to be hilarious. It seems that Mr. Woodley was in the taproom at the pub and heard his name mentioned in conversation. He came out and demanded to know who Holmes was and what he wanted. The discussion escalated to violence; Holmes emerged with a few bruises, whereas Woodley had to be carried home. The innkeeper merely mentioned that Woodley is a regular weekend guest at Charlington Hall, which is rented by Williamson, who, rumor has it, is a clergyman.

Holmes returns to 221B Baker Street with his face somewhat marred, and another letter arrives from Violet, saying that her situation has become impossible owing to Mr. Carruthers's proposals, and Mr. Woodley's reappearance.

She is quitting. Holmes knows that some intrigue is afoot, and he tells Watson that they must get themselves to Surrey to see that Violet makes it to the station. Carruthers has at last acquired a trap, and she need not ride her bicycle this time.

Failing to realize that Violet might take an earlier train than usual, Holmes discovers that he is too late to meet Violet. The trap comes along the road, but by the time it does, no one is in it: Violet has been abducted. Holmes and Watson board the empty trap in an attempt to go after the kidnappers. They come face-to-face with the mysterious cyclist, who pulls a revolver on them; however, both parties quickly realise that they are on the same side – both have Violet's welfare in mind. The cyclist declares that the abductors are Woodley and Williamson. He evidently knows something of the intrigue.

The group first find an unconscious groom, who was driving the trap, in the bushes, and then they find all three persons that they have been seeking on the Charlington Hall grounds, with the apparently defrocked clergyman performing a wedding ceremony between the other two. The bride is somewhat unwilling, judging from the gag over her mouth. Woodley's boast of having married Violet leads the mysterious cyclist, unmasking himself as Carruthers, to pull out his revolver and shoot Woodley, wounding him.

The intrigue does indeed involve Uncle Ralph in South Africa. He was dying when Carruthers and Woodley left; far from being penniless at his death, it is revealed that in reality, Uncle Ralph had amassed a large fortune. As he was illiterate, he would surely die intestate, and therefore Violet would inherit his wealth as Ralph's next of kin. The two crooks made their way to England in the hopes that one of them would get to marry Violet – Woodley having won the chance in a card game on the ship – and they had to draw Williamson into the plot, promising him a share of the lucre. The plan went awry when first, Woodley proved to be a brute, and next, Carruthers fell in love with Violet, and thereafter wanted nothing to do with his former confederates. He took to disguising himself and following her as she rode her bicycle past Charlington Hall, where he knew Woodley and Williamson might be lying in wait for her.

Heavy penalties await Woodley and Williamson, but Carruthers only gets a few months due to Woodley's less-than-savory reputation. Holmes reassures Carruthers the "marriage" performed by Williamson was void; not only was it performed against Violet's will, but Williamson had been unfrocked and therefore had no authority to legalise a marriage.