



Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

The Return of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XXXVII -- The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez

SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

One “dark and stormy night,” Stanley Hopkins knocks on the door of 221B. He is investigating a murder which occurred at an isolated country estate (Yoxley Old Place).

Willoughby Smith was found in the library by Susan Tarlton. He was dying. He had been stabbed in the neck with a sealing wax knife. He muttered “The professor – it was she...” just before he died. Clutched in his hand was a pair of golden pince nez with the broken end of a black cord attached. Obviously the glasses belonged to the murderer.

With this as the set-up, the following plot unfolds:

About 30 years previously, the professor was a Russian revolutionary. He had been captured, but informed on his fellow dissenters and was freed. When he left Russia, he took with him letters and papers which would prove the innocence of Alexis. Anna was released, but Alexis remained a prisoner. She came looking for Coram to get the papers which would free Alexis. She was taking them in the library when Willoughby Smith grabbed her. She struck at him with the first thing she could lay her hands on – a sealing-wax knife – with the intent to make him loose his hold. Unfortunately, the blow was fatal, severing his carotid artery.

Realizing that she had killed Willoughby, she attempted to flee the house, but without the aid of her spectacles, took a wrong turn and ended up in Coram's bed room. Coram hid her in a secret closet. Holmes figured everything out and tricked Anna into exposing herself.



Anna poisoned herself and died. Stanley Hopkins went to the Yard to make his report – we all know that Holmes' name will not be mentioned. Holmes and Watson left to take the papers to the Russian embassy. Nothing is said of what became of Coram, but he was near death anyway — No wonder after smoking 70+ cigarettes a day.

SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)

On a stormy night, Inspector Hopkins turns up at Holmes and Watson's home to consult on a strange case: Professor Coram, an old invalid, lived in an isolated house in Yoxley Old Place in Kent with his secretary Willoughby Smith, who was helping him write a book. The young man was found murdered in the professor's study, while the professor was still in bed. The housemaid heard a hoarse scream and found Smith dying, his carotid artery cut, with a pince-nez clutched in his hand.

Examining the glasses, Holmes determines that they belong to a woman of good breeding, with a remarkably thick nose, and who is extremely short-sighted. The next day, Holmes meets Professor Coram, who claims to be totally unable to understand the murder, and then interviews the household and inspects the premises.

That afternoon, the detective tells the professor that he has solved the mystery: A woman came in the study to steal documents, but was caught by Smith who tried to grab her. She hit him with a random object, which turned out to be a knife, and killed him. Then she ran away, but having lost her glasses, she took a wrong turn and ended up in Coram's bedroom. The old man recognized her and helped her hide in a cupboard than Holmes then opens. The woman gets out and admits Holmes is right. She's Anna Coram, the professor's wife. Both of them are Russian and had belonged to a revolutionary and nihilist group that killed a police officer. Coram betrayed his companions and his wife and they were sent to Siberia while he emigrated to England. Among the prisoners was a man, Alexis, whom Anna loved and was innocent. When Anna was released, she came to England to get the papers exonerating Alexis, knowing her husband had them. She was looking for them when Smith found her. She entrusts Holmes with those papers, guessing he's a man of honour, and swallows a phial of deadly poison.

SUMMARY (Wikipedia)

One wretched November night, Inspector Stanley Hopkins visits Holmes at 221B Baker Street to discuss the violent death of Willoughby Smith, secretary to aged invalid Professor Coram. Coram had dismissed his previous two secretaries. The murder happened at Yoxley Old Place near Chatham, Kent, with a sealing-wax knife of the professor's as the weapon. Hopkins can identify no motive for the killing, with Smith having no

enemies or trouble in his past. Smith was found by Coram's maid, who recounts his last words as "The professor; it was she."

The maid further told Hopkins that before the murder, she heard Smith leave his room and walk down to the study; she had been hanging curtains and did not see him, only recognizing his brisk step. The professor was in bed at the time. A minute later, a hoarse scream issued from the study, and the maid, hesitating briefly, inspected and found the murder. She later tells Holmes that Smith went out for a walk not long before the murder.

The murderer's only likely means of entry was through the back door after walking along the path from the road, and Hopkins found some indistinct footmarks running beside the path, the murderer obviously seeking to leave no trail. Hopkins could not tell whether the track was coming or going, made by big or small feet.

The professor's study contained a bureau; nothing seemed to have been stolen. Its drawers were left open, as was normal, and the cupboard in the middle was locked. The professor kept the key.

A lone piece of evidence was found in Willoughby Smith's hand: a pair of golden pince-nez glasses. Holmes examines these and from them alone deduces the following details of the murderer:

- It is a woman;
- She is of some good breeding;
- She dresses like a lady;
- She is a person of refinement and is well dressed
- She has a thick nose;
- Her eyes are close together;
- She has a puckered forehead, a peering look, and likely rounded shoulders;
- She has been to an optician at least twice over the last few months.

Holmes, Dr. Watson, and Hopkins head to Yoxley the next morning, and Holmes carefully examines the site. In the study, he notices a recent scratch on the bureau and reasons the murderer intended to access its contents. Smith was killed as his presence interfered with the burglary. No one saw the murderer leave, nor did anyone hear a door opening. Holmes notes that both the corridors, the one leading from the back door and the one leading to the professor's bedroom, are about the same length and lined with coconut matting

Holmes interviews the professor in his bedroom, smoking many Egyptian cigarettes and dropping the ashes all over the floor. The professor claims utter ignorance regarding the murder and ventures that Smith's death may be suicide. Holmes asks about the locked cupboard in the bureau. The professor hands over the key. Holmes inspects the key and returns it immediately, leaving the bureau sealed.

Watson asks Holmes if he has a clue, and Holmes tells him the cigarette ashes might reveal the truth. Holmes meets the housekeeper in the garden and has a seemingly unimportant chat about the professor's eating habits; apparently, he has eaten heavily today. Come the afternoon, the three men return to the professor in his room, and Holmes deliberately knocks the cigarettes over as an excuse to get a closer look at the floor. Holmes' suspicion is confirmed – there are footprints in the ash. At that moment, the murderer, appearing exactly as Holmes deduced, emerges from a hiding place in a bookcase.

The business unfolded thus: The woman came in secret to the professor's house to obtain some documents, using a duplicate key she gained from one of the former secretaries. She was surprised by Smith, whom she attacked with the nearest object to hand, the sealing-wax knife; she had not intended to kill him. She lost her glasses in the scramble to escape; unable to see clearly, she turned along the wrong corridor and wound up in the professor's room. Although surprised, he hid her. The murderer is, in fact, the professor's estranged wife, Anna, and they are both Russian. Years prior, the pair had been involved with Nihilists; she and a non-violent nihilist friend were both betrayed by the professor for gain. Having finished her jail sentence in Siberia, Anna came in search of evidence that would exonerate her friend.

Anna had met Smith while he was taking his walk, explaining Smith's last words. The professor's increased appetite is, of course, explained by his having to feed a second, hidden person. Shortly after the final revelations, Anna dies from poison she took while in hiding. Her last wish is to ask Holmes to deliver the documents to the Russian Embassy, which he duly fulfills.

