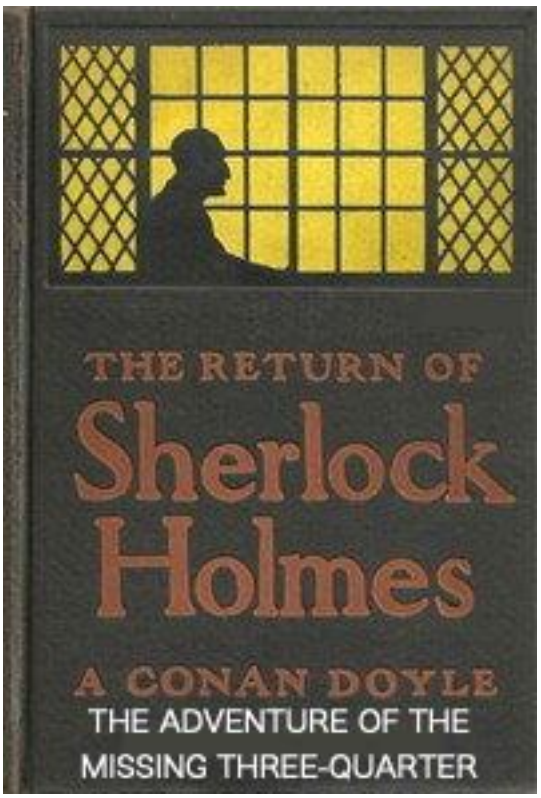

The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter

B1 Version

Part 1: A Telegram from Cambridge

One February morning a telegram arrived at Baker Street that puzzled Holmes considerably. It was from a Cyril Overton of Trinity College, Cambridge, and read: 'Terrible misfortune. Right wing three-quarter missing, indispensable tomorrow.' Holmes had no idea what it meant. He did not follow rugby football — the sport in which forwards pack together in a scrum while backs, including the three-quarter backs, play out in the open field. He had never heard of Godfrey Staunton.

Overton arrived in person shortly afterwards — an enormous young man, a rugby captain, in a state of desperate anxiety. The Cambridge University team was playing Oxford the next day, the most important university match of the year, and their best player had vanished overnight. Godfrey Staunton was also heir to a great fortune: his uncle, Lord Mount-James, was one of the richest men in England, though famously miserly and unwilling to give Staunton a penny.

The previous evening, a rough-looking bearded man had arrived at their hotel with a note for Staunton. Reading it, Staunton had gone pale as a sheet, then recovered, spoken briefly to the man in the hall, and the two of them had walked rapidly away together into the dark streets. Staunton had not been seen since.

Part 2: The Telegram

Holmes investigated. From the hotel porter he learned that Staunton had received a telegram at six o'clock that afternoon and had immediately written a reply, which he had taken himself to the telegraph office nearby. Holmes visited the office and — with characteristic ingenuity, pretending to be the sender anxious about a missing signature — persuaded the young woman behind the counter to show him the counterfoil, the copy retained at the office. The telegram had been sent to Dr. Leslie Armstrong of Cambridge.

Holmes and Watson took the next train to Cambridge. Dr. Armstrong was a formidable figure — square-faced, broad-shouldered, one of the most respected physicians and scholars in the university. He received Holmes with unconcealed hostility. He knew Staunton and would say nothing about him. He accused Holmes of prying into private matters for a disagreeable employer, and had them shown out.

Part 3: The Chase

Holmes observed that Armstrong made a long journey by carriage every day, always alone, and always careful to detect whether he was being followed. Holmes hired a bicycle and tried to trail the carriage, but Armstrong spotted him immediately, waited for him to pass, and disappeared down a side road. Watson suggested following by bicycle the next day, but Holmes felt they needed something more reliable.

His solution was elegant. He borrowed a dog named Pompey from a local hunt — a stocky, slow but extraordinarily persistent hound — and at dawn he crept into Armstrong's stable yard and sprayed aniseed, a strong-smelling oil, onto the back wheel of the doctor's carriage. Aniseed is irresistible to tracking dogs, who will follow its scent for miles. When Armstrong set off that morning, Pompey led Holmes and Watson unerringly along the route, through the flat Cambridgeshire countryside, past several villages, and finally to a remote cottage at the edge of the fens — the low, marshy land that covers much of Cambridgeshire.

Part 4: A Private Grief

Holmes and Watson entered the cottage before Armstrong returned. Upstairs they found the explanation for everything. On the bed lay a young woman, recently dead, her golden hair spread across the pillow. Kneeling at the foot of the bed, weeping with total abandon, was Godfrey Staunton.

When Armstrong arrived moments later he was furious, but Holmes spoke to him calmly and privately, and the doctor's anger transformed into something like respect. He explained the whole story.

A year earlier Godfrey Staunton had fallen passionately in love with his landlady's daughter in London and secretly married her. She was, by all accounts, an exceptional woman — good, beautiful, and intelligent. But Staunton was heir to Lord Mount-James's fortune, and had there been any announcement of the marriage, the famously cold old nobleman would certainly have cut him off entirely. So they kept it secret. The couple lived in this remote cottage near Cambridge, and Staunton visited whenever he could.

Then the young wife fell gravely ill with tuberculosis — a serious and then often fatal disease of the lungs. Armstrong had been treating her. That afternoon, knowing the end was very close, he had sent Staunton an urgent telegram. Staunton had received it just in time to rush back and be with his wife in her last hours. The rough-looking man who came to the hotel had been Armstrong's own messenger.

There was no crime. There was only a young man's private tragedy. Holmes shook Armstrong's hand, expressed his condolences, and left quietly with Watson. He had no intention of making any of this public.