



## The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist

*Simplified from the original story by Arthur Conan Doyle*

### Version 1: CEFR B2 — Upper Intermediate

*Cultural notes are woven into the text where helpful.*

#### ***Part 1: A Young Woman Asks for Help***

It was April 1895, and Sherlock Holmes was deep in another investigation when a young woman arrived unannounced at his apartment at 221B Baker Street in London. Her name was Miss Violet Smith, and although Holmes was irritated by the interruption, he could not bring himself to turn away someone so clearly distressed.

Holmes studied her carefully before she had said a word, as was his habit. He noticed a slight roughening on the sole of her shoe from repeated contact with a bicycle pedal, and slightly flattened fingertips that are common among musicians. 'You bicycle a good deal,' he said, 'and you are a music teacher.' Both were correct.

Violet told her story. Her father had recently died, leaving her and her mother in poverty. Then one day they saw an advertisement in *The Times* — Britain's most respected newspaper, read widely by professional people — placed by a lawyer, asking for the whereabouts of the Smith family. Hoping they had inherited a fortune from a lost relative, they rushed to the lawyer's office.

There they met two men recently returned from South Africa: Mr. Carruthers, a quiet, well-mannered older man, and Mr. Woodley, a loud, red-moustached bully. The men said that Violet's uncle, Ralph Smith, had died in poverty in Johannesburg, but had asked them on his deathbed to find his family and make sure they were all right.

Violet found Woodley revolting — he pestered her aggressively with unwanted attention. But Carruthers seemed genuinely kind. He offered her a very well-paid position — one hundred pounds a year, which was considered a generous salary at the time — teaching music to his young daughter at his country house, Chiltern Grange, near Farnham in Surrey, a county south-west of London. She accepted, and Carruthers arranged for her to travel home to her mother in London every weekend.

The arrangement worked well until Woodley arrived for a week's visit. He became increasingly threatening towards Violet, and one evening he grabbed her and refused to release her until she kissed him. Carruthers intervened, physically pulled Woodley away, and Woodley, enraged, punched his own host before storming out. Violet had not seen Woodley since.

## ***Part 2: The Mystery Cyclist***

But Violet had come to Holmes for a different reason. Every Saturday morning she cycled alone through a long, isolated stretch of road between Charlington Heath and the woods around an old house called Charlington Hall, on her way to the station to catch the train to London. For several weeks in a row, on both the Saturday and the Monday of her return journey, she had noticed a man on a bicycle following her at a distance of about two hundred yards.

He always kept far enough back that she could not see his face clearly, only his dark beard and dark clothing. When she slowed down, he slowed down. When she stopped, he stopped. Once she turned suddenly and rode straight at him — he fled immediately. When she looked back from further down the road, he was gone, even though there were no side roads where he could have turned off. Holmes deduced that he must have slipped through a gap in the hedge and entered the grounds of Charlington Hall.

Holmes asked whether she had any male admirers. She mentioned Woodley, naturally. Then, with some hesitation, she said she thought her employer, Mr. Carruthers, seemed to have feelings for her, though he had always behaved like a perfect gentleman. Holmes listened carefully. He noted three suspicious things: why was the mysterious cyclist always at exactly that one isolated stretch of road? Why did Carruthers and Woodley — two very different men — share such a keen interest in finding the obscure relatives of a penniless man in South Africa? And why did Carruthers pay such an unusually high salary yet apparently live without horses or a carriage, despite being six miles from the nearest station?

Holmes was too busy with other work to investigate himself, so he sent Watson down to the area the following Monday to observe and gather information.

### ***Part 3: Watson's Investigation***

Watson positioned himself on the heath and watched. He saw a man with a black beard arrive from the direction of Charlington Hall and hide his bicycle just inside the hedge near the entrance to the Hall's grounds. Shortly afterwards, Violet appeared cycling from the station. The bearded man immediately emerged, mounted his bicycle, and followed her at a careful distance. When Violet turned and rode directly at him, he fled back through the hedge into the Hall grounds.

After Violet had continued on her way, Watson watched the man reappear and ride back towards Charlington Hall. Watson noticed that as the man passed through the gateway, he paused for a moment with his hands raised — Watson thought he was adjusting his necktie — before disappearing up the drive towards the old house.

To find out who lived at Charlington Hall, Watson made enquiries at a London estate agent, which is a business that rents and sells houses. He was told that the Hall had recently been rented to a man named Williamson, described as a respectable elderly gentleman. Holmes was unimpressed with Watson's detective work. He pointed out that Watson should have asked at the local pub, where country gossip would have given him far more useful information. He also criticised Watson's observation post as too distant.

Holmes then went down to Surrey himself the following week. At the local pub, he confirmed that Williamson was a white-haired, white-bearded old man — clearly not the same person as the active, dark-bearded cyclist. He also learnt that Williamson was rumoured to have once been a clergyman, a member of the Christian church who performs religious services, but that his past was shadowy and dishonest. And every weekend, a group of rough visitors came to the Hall — including, always, a man with a red moustache named Woodley.

While Holmes was gathering this information in the pub, Woodley himself walked in, heard Holmes asking questions, and attacked him without warning. Holmes, who was an accomplished boxer, won the fight, but returned to London with a cut lip and a bruise on his head.

### ***Part 4: The Crisis***

Violet then wrote to say that Carruthers had proposed marriage to her, that she had refused him, and that the situation at the house had become uncomfortable. Then Woodley reappeared in the area — bruised and disfigured from his fight with Holmes, but lurking around the property. She was frightened of him. She decided to leave her position and return to London permanently that Saturday.

Holmes took this news seriously. He and Watson travelled down to Surrey on the Saturday morning to make sure Violet reached the station safely. They arrived on the road just in time to see an empty horse-drawn carriage, called a dog-cart, coming towards them with no driver and the reins trailing loose. The horse was running freely, and there was no sign of Violet.

Holmes realised immediately what had happened: Violet had been kidnapped. He and Watson jumped into the dog-cart and drove fast back along the road. They encountered a bearded man cycling furiously towards them — the same mysterious cyclist. He stopped them at gunpoint, demanding to know where the dog-cart had come from. When Holmes explained, the man identified himself as someone who also wanted to rescue Violet. He said that Woodley and 'a blackguard parson' — a dishonest man posing as a church minister — had taken her.

### ***Part 5: The Forced Wedding — and the Truth Revealed***

The three men ran through a gap in the hedge into the grounds of Charlington Hall. Near the hedge they found a young stable boy, who looks after horses, lying unconscious in the bushes — he had been knocked off Violet's carriage and beaten. They pressed further and came to a clearing surrounded by trees. There they found a shocking scene.

Violet stood trembling against a tree, a handkerchief tied around her mouth to gag her. Woodley stood opposite her, grinning triumphantly with a riding crop in his hand. Between them stood an elderly grey-bearded man in a white surplice — the loose white robe worn by a clergyman — who had evidently just performed a marriage ceremony, because he was putting away his prayer book and congratulating Woodley.

The bearded man who had guided Holmes and Watson there then ripped off his dark beard, revealing it to be a disguise. He was Carruthers. He drew a revolver and shot Woodley, who fell wounded. Holmes immediately pointed his own gun at the old man in the surplice, who turned out to be Williamson.

Holmes then explained the full picture to Inspector Martin of the local police, who arrived shortly afterwards. Carruthers and Woodley had known Violet's uncle Ralph Smith in South Africa. They knew he was dying and that he had no will — a legal document saying who should receive his money — and they discovered that Violet, as his closest living relative, would inherit everything he owned. Their plan was for one of them to marry her before Ralph Smith died, so that the husband would control her inheritance. On the voyage back to England, they had actually played cards to decide which of them would try to marry her — and Woodley had won.

Carruthers had taken Violet into his employment so that Woodley could court her. But Violet found Woodley repulsive, and meanwhile Carruthers had genuinely fallen in love with her himself. When Carruthers refused to go along with the plan any longer, Woodley had knocked him down and gone ahead independently. Woodley had recruited Williamson — an elderly man who had once been a genuine clergyman but had been removed from his position for dishonest conduct — to perform a false wedding ceremony.

The telegram in Carruthers's pocket, reading simply 'The old man is dead,' had been the signal that Ralph Smith had died and the inheritance was now available. This was what had forced Woodley to act. Carruthers, knowing what was coming, had secretly followed Violet on his bicycle every single time she had passed near Charlington Hall. He wore a false beard so she would not recognise him. When Watson had seen him apparently

adjusting his necktie at the Hall gateway, Carruthers had actually been removing his disguise before going inside.

Holmes pointed out that the forced marriage was not legally valid for two reasons: Williamson had been stripped of his right to perform marriages, and a marriage conducted by force is not a real marriage under British law.

### ***Ending***

Woodley survived his wound. Both he and Williamson were convicted of abduction and assault — Woodley was sentenced to ten years in prison and Williamson to seven. Carruthers received a lighter sentence, as the court recognised that Woodley was a genuinely dangerous man and that Carruthers had ultimately tried to protect Violet.

Violet Smith inherited her uncle's large fortune. She married Cyril Morton, the electrical engineer she had been engaged to throughout the whole frightening affair, and the two became a successful couple in London.