



An Inquiry into: “The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist”

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“The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist” was first published in *Collier’s Weekly Magazine* on December 26, 1903, and in *The Strand Magazine* in January 1904. It is part of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*.

Even though this is one of those rare instances in which Doctor Watson provides us with an exact date—Saturday, April 23, 1895—he was mistaken, because

that date was a Tuesday. Perhaps our biographer was thinking of the day in which Miss Violet Smith went home, which *was* a Saturday. As reflected by the table, this was sufficient to give our chronologists a field day in calculating the actual date.

In 1895 Sherlock Holmes was 41 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 43.

Main Characters:

Violet Smith, an impoverished young lady working as a governess and Sherlock Holmes’ client. Bob Carruthers, the solitary cyclist of Charlington, former prospector in South Africa and a widower with a daughter, Sarah.

Jack Woodley, blackguard, partner in crime with Carruthers, recently returned from South Africa. Mr. Williamson, a disgraced unfrocked clergyman. Cyril Morton, Violet’s fiancée and electrical engineer.

Notable Quotes:

“It is part of the settled order of Nature that such a girl should have followers.”

“Who are you, then?”

“My name is Sherlock Holmes.”

“Good Lord!”

The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist

Chronologist	Date of the Adventure
Canon	Saturday [sic] April 23, 1895
Baring-Gould	Saturday, April 13, 1895
Bell	April 1895
Blakeney	Saturday, April 13, 1895
Brend	April 1895
Christ	Saturday, March 23, 1895
Dakin	Saturday, April 13, 1895
Folsom	Saturday, April 13, 1895
Hall	April 13, 1895
Keefauver	Saturday, April 20, 1895
Klinger	1895
Zeisler	Saturday, April 23, 1895

Please note that Canon chronologists may differ on pivotal dates and comparative periods between cases, thus a simple majority is not necessarily correct. Most Canon scholars settle on a single chronologist’s results for their research framework.

A Moment of Weakness?

Watson tells us that all it took was for Holmes to glance at Violet Smith's face to unerringly deduce that the young lady's "spatulate finger-ends," common to musicians and typists, argued for a musical,



rather than secretarial endeavor, because "there is a spirituality about the face which the typewriter does not generate." He later added to this somewhat poetical observation a most atypical remark regarding beautiful young women and the settled order of Nature.

I often wonder whether Watson sometimes overstepped the writer's natural tendency towards poetic license, exaggerating Holmes' attitude towards the fair sex in order to make him seem more aloof and formidable.

Although from the very beginning of the Great Friendship Holmes displayed aversion towards marriage, he never gave any indication of being a misogynist. In *SIGN*, he admits Mary Morstan's attraction, while expressing his thinking on marriage: "I think she is one of the most charming young ladies I ever met. . . . But love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true cold reason which I place above all things. I should never marry myself, lest I bias my judgment."

There are instances in the Canon in which the Great Detective has exhibited a distinct un-Holmesian reaction stimulated by some sweet creature. In *SCAN*, for example, he describes his first look of Irene Adler, "I only caught a glimpse of her at the moment, but she was a lovely woman, with a face that a man might die for." There is considerably more than simple description in this.

The Splendid Governess Position

Regardless of method, one always ventures into unknown territory whenever attempting to translate into today's terms the value of salaries in the Victorian Era. The effort is further complicated by the strength of the currency and by the prices of objects back then and today. As is the case with all gold-backed currencies, the raw purchasing power of the golden pound was far higher than that of today's fiat paper dollar. A pound coin was 92% gold—some 0.257 troy ounces—worth about \$462 today.



Regardless, Victorian salaries often appear to have been much lower than what they are now. In 1890, the average income was about £50 (≈\$16,300) a year. Although this seems low by today's

standards, it should be remembered that back then income tax was about 2.5%, and those earning less than £150 (≈\$49,000), were exempt.

Depending upon the number of children that she was expected to be responsible for, the standard salary for a governess was £30 to £40 (≈\$9,700 to ≈\$13,000 in today's currency). Certainly, an offer of £100 (≈\$33,000) to care for a single child plus weekends off—highly unusual—is indeed “splendid pay,” as Violet Smith put it. Even so, within the context of the time a single young lady seemingly lacking in connections and relatives—except for an aging mother—like Miss Smith would have been so anxious to accept the proffered position. Because the matter was not brought up, it is unlikely that Miss Violet in this case, was as destitute as the Miss Violet in COPP. Unlike her poorer colleague, she certainly was not lacking in marriage prospects.

The Ineffectual Doctor and the Pugilistic Detective

One must wonder why, in view of his sad Canonical record in this type of thing, Holmes continues to send Watson to reconnoiter and acquire information in sites important to the investigation. There has hardly been a time when the Great Detective had been satisfied with the results obtained by the Good Doctor whenever he has returned from such an endeavor.

How is it possible that Watson could have been so consistently ineffectual? We know that he was no



fool and a resourceful man—physician and soldier—a good companion in a tight situation. The only way to reconcile this is by concluding that it was our medico's doing: It made Holmes seem considerably more formidable. Viewing this from the perspective of a literary work it certainly worked very well.

Of course, it can be overdone. This case features one of my most favorite examples of our biographer over gilding the lily. When he re-

turns from his exploration and reports to Holmes, he is reprimanded by our sleuth: “Your hiding-place, my dear Watson, was very faulty. You should have been behind the hedge; then you would have had a close view of this interesting person. As it is you were some hundreds of yards away, and can tell me even less than Miss Smith.”

Hundreds of yards? Watson surely did not realize how much he was exaggerating things. Had Holmes' complaint been accurate, it would have meant that Watson must have been had to have been hanging about no less than three or four hundred yards from where he ought to have been. A city block averages 88 yards, so that would have meant that he was keeping watch some three-and-a-half to four-and-a-half city blocks away from where he expected the action to take place.

Not even Nigel Bruce, that noted *Boobus britannicus*, would have committed a blunder of that magnitude!

Watson's description of Holmes' pugilistic encounter with Jack Woodley sadly lacks description. Because seeing surpasses description, I have attached a (now classic) clip from the Granada episode, showing Jeremy Brett displaying his best footwork, as he comments on the proper way in which a gentleman engages in fisticuffs.

Thank heaven for recordings! Although there always is the bittersweet regret that, regardless of his wishes, his health kept him from filming the entire Canon.



The Puzzling Pointless Effort

Woodley's attempt to force Violet Smith into marriage is extremely puzzling, because it is not necessary to have a law degree in order to realize that even if Williamson—a mockery of a clergyman—had not been unfrocked, that travesty of a marriage would have lacked in any legal force from the very start. To begin with, even if the license had been legal, it would have had to have been obtained under false pretenses, which would have rendered it worthless. And even if the clergyman had been a practicing one, a marriage ceremony in which the bride has been coerced by threatening a close relative with great harm of death is illegal, how much more so one in which she is physically forced, with her mouth tied with a handkerchief, making her



unable to make the necessary responses.

How could Woodley think that he could get away with this?

What else happened in 1895:

Empire

Freetown, Sierra Leone, granted municipal status and privileges.

Anglo-French interests begin to conflict in Nile Valley.

U.S. intervenes in Anglo-Venezuelan border dispute, arbitration in Britain's favor.

Construction of Uganda railway commenced.

British East Africa Company surrenders Kenya as British protectorate.

Jameson Raid in South Africa in 1895—failed attempt to overthrow the Afrikaans government.

Britain

First automobile exhibition in London.

Electrification of first mainline railway.

Liberals defeated at general election, Salisbury forms his third Unionist ministry.

Compulsory retirement of aged Duke of Cambridge as C-in-C of British Army.

London School of Economics and Political Science founded.

World

Japan takes Formosa (now Taiwan).

Germany, France, and Russia unite to compel Japan to return Liaotung peninsula to China.



Treaty of Simonoseki, end of Sino-Japanese war.

Cuban rebellions begin, U.S.A. protests brutal suppression.

◀ Dreyfus refused new trial by French President Faure.

National League founded in Poland; aimed at autonomy under Russian suzerainty.

Nyssens Law extended to Belgian provinces and communes.

Armenian demonstration in Constantinople leads to massacre of 50,000 Armenians.

Frontiers of Pamirs fixed by commission of Russians, Afghans, and British.

Introduction of diphtheria antitoxin.

Completion of Kiel Canal (61 miles) makes Germany North Sea power.

Volleyball invented.

French troops capture Antananarivo in Madagascar.

Abyssinia defeats Italy in the First Italo-Ethiopian War (1885-1896).

Art

Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* debuts. Later that year, Wilde is imprisoned.

Corelli publishes *The Sorrows of Satan*.

H.G. Wells publishes *The Time Machine*.

Science and Technology



Wilhelm Konrad Röntgen, German physicist, experiments with Crooke's tubes and discovers X-rays.

◀ Guglielmo Marconi, an Italian electrical engineer, transmits the first wireless signal.

Ramsey obtains helium, first identified by its spectrum in the sun, in 1868.

On December 28th, in the Hotel Scribe, in Paris, the first public cinema show takes place.

Thomas Armat, of Washington, develops modern cinema projection.

King Gillette (U.S.) invents safety razor.

Next week's case: PRIO.

Respectfully submitted,

Murray, the Courageous Orderly

(a.k.a. Alexander E. Braun)

"I should have fallen into the hands
of the murderous Ghazis had it not
been for the devotion and courage
shown by Murray, my orderly..."

All Sherlock Holmes illustrations have been published by courtesy of ITV Granada.

If you would like to join the Hounds of the Internet, email us at CourageousMurray@aol.com.

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