

“MAYBE YOU COLLECT YOURSELF, SIR...”

THE TRAIL OF THE SEMI-SOLITARY MANUSCRIPT

by RANDALL STOCK

Despite its singular title, “The Solitary Cyclist” displays some unusual dualities. The story’s manuscript highlights a number of these and is itself the source of others. Thus, it’s not surprising that ambiguities and errata have crept into prior reports about the manuscript. It features two cyclists, two titles, and two names for the villain. It even exists in two parts. One part was bound for the author while the other was not. One of these went from private hands to a well-known university, and then doubled back into a private collection. The other was “lost” for many years before making an impressive reappearance.

Conan Doyle wrote the manuscript in three notebooks with printed covers marked “Paragon Exercise Book.” Each book is 8 x 6¼ inches and consists of decorated wrappers surrounding 20 leaves. The printed words “Written by” appear next to the autograph “Arthur Conan Doyle/Undershaw/Hindhead” on the upper wrapper of each book. He also marked the three front covers in the upper right corner with the Roman numerals I, II, and III respectively.

He wrote only on the rectos of each leaf, using all twenty sheets in books I and II and the first two sheets in the third book. The remainder of the third book is blank. The original manuscript thus consists of 42 pages. In addition to the three wrapper inscriptions, it is signed “Arthur Conan Doyle/Undershaw/Hindhead” at the end of the story on the 42nd page.

Although the manuscript itself isn’t dated, the story was written in 1903. Conan Doyle received an offer from *Collier’s Weekly* in the spring of that year to revive Sherlock Holmes. He accepted the offer and soon began writing the series that would become *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*. By 14 May he had completed “The Empty House,” “The Norwood Builder,” and “The Solitary Cyclist.”

As is typical with Conan Doyle manuscripts, the text is in a clear firm hand with relatively few revisions. However, he did make some changes even while writing his first draft. One example is his use of two names for the same character. He initially called the villain “Murphy” but altered this to “Woodley” later in the story. Other changes are in a lighter ink and may have been made after the first draft was complete.

While there are some 70 revisions in the first two exercise books, the most significant involves a key duality: the story’s two cyclists. The opening page was originally headed “The Return of Sherlock Holmes/III/The Adventure of the

Solitary Man.” Conan Doyle later crossed through “Man” and replaced it with “Cyclist.” He made a similar change on the second page, where the “solitary man of Charlington Common” becomes the “solitary cyclist of Charlington.” Two cyclists are conflated into one as a more colorful and ambiguous second title replaces his initial choice.

After making his early edits, Conan Doyle almost certainly sent the manuscript to a typist. In 1901 he had run into difficulty when writing installments of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* because he did not retain a copy. This appears to have changed when he composed his stories for *The Return*. In correspondence with H. Greenhough Smith, editor of the *Strand*, Conan Doyle states that both “The Dancing Men” and “The Second Stain” were typed.¹

Richard Lancelyn Green goes further and suggests that a typist transcribed all of the stories in *The Return*. Green compared the punctuation and spelling in the original manuscripts with text from the *Strand* and *Collier's*. He found that both published versions were derived from the same typescript.² Green identified the typist as a Miss Neal, who is probably the same woman who handled “The Horror of the Heights” some ten years later.³

Conan Doyle wasn't finished with “The Solitary Cyclist” when it was typed. Smith apparently wrote to him with some concerns about the story, and Conan Doyle replied, “I did not like it so well nor was I satisfied with it & yet I could make no more of it.”⁴ However, he soon decided that he could make the *series* better by publishing “The Dancing Men” third and thereby separating the two “crimeless” stories of “The Norwood Builder” and “The Solitary Cyclist.”

After completing “The Dancing Men,” Conan Doyle reviewed “The Solitary Cyclist” again:

It strikes me as a dramatic & interesting & original story. The weakness lies in Holmes not having more to do. But Watson now prefaces his account by meeting this criticism. I have gone over it carefully & can do no more to strengthen it. I consider that these four stories will beat any four *consecutive* Holmes stories that I have done.⁵

The preface referred to does not appear in the manuscript. It's a single sentence appended to the end of the first paragraph: “It is true that the circumstance did not admit of any striking illustration of those powers for which my friend was famous, but there were some points about the case which made it stand out in those long records of crime from which I gather the material for these little narratives.”⁶ This is only a token change to the story, but it does show that the author thought about his editor's comments.

Front cover of the notebook containing Book I of “The Solitary Cyclist”

Another revision of interest involves an untold tale. In the published text Holmes says, “You remember, Watson, that it was near there that we took Archie Stamford, the forger.” In the original manuscript he continues, “Hughes, the poisoner, also came from there,” but this line doesn’t appear in the final text. In contrast, *Collier’s* did retain the manuscript’s erroneous “seven years” for 1894 to 1901 inclusive found in the story’s opening paragraph. The *Strand* corrected it to “eight years.” This suggests that the “Hughes” change occurred early in the editing process while the “eight” change came later, possibly at the proof stage. The finished tale appeared, fourth in the series, in the 26 December 1903 *Collier’s* and the January 1904 *Strand*.

Conan Doyle had mixed feelings about “The Solitary Cyclist” but didn’t make major changes to the story. He wrote an initial draft, revised the manuscript, and sent it to be typed. After discussions with his editor, he changed the

publication sequence of his stories and made minor changes to the text of “The Solitary Cyclist.” He had a commitment to write more stories and so proceeded to work on the others.

Almost twenty years after writing this story, he decided to sell the manuscript. He sent it to New York where it was sold at auction by the American Art Association on 27 January 1922 for \$120. Their catalogue noted that the manuscript was the property of Conan Doyle and described it:

Original Autograph Manuscript. Sherlock Holmes Series. “The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist. [By] A. Conan Doyle.” Written in ink on 40 4to pages, on one side only, making in all 7,900 words with several corrections and cancellations in the Author’s Autograph. With title-page written by the Author. The text is written in two note-books with printed covers marked “Paragon Exercise Book.” Bound in small 4to volume, vellum. [London, 1905]

The Manuscript and Title-Page, As Above, Are Entirely in the Handwriting of A. Conan Doyle. With the author’s autograph signature and address,—*Arthur Conan Doyle, Undershaw, England [sic]*, on both front wrappers. On the front of the vellum cover is written, in the Author’s Autograph,—*Sherlock Holmes—A. Conan Doyle. The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist.*”

The above work forms Part III. of the collected series of stories known as “The Return of Sherlock Holmes.” It appears as the fourth of the series in the printed edition of the same published in 1905.⁷

The careful reader will notice that certain things have been added to and others lost from the original manuscript. It’s now bound in plain vellum with an autograph inscription in the top left corner of the upper vellum cover. The binder’s name “Spealls” is printed on the inside front cover’s paste-down. The date of this binding isn’t given, but it may have been as early as 1913.

In a letter that year Conan Doyle wrote, “Your remarks about MSS are bearing fruit and I am having mine bound in vellum by Spealls, so as to be ready for the capricious millionaire whom we all hope for and never see.”⁸ While he may not have sent the “The Solitary Cyclist” to Spealls at that point, it was probably no later than 1916. That was when he presented a similar vellum-bound manuscript for “The Golden Pince-nez” to H. Greenhough Smith.

Sir Arthur also added an autograph title page for the bound manuscript, reading, “*Sherlock Holmes Series/The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist/A. Conan Doyle/Original/Manuscript.*” The new vellum upper cover and the title

page are thus both signed “A. Conan Doyle” while the exercise books are signed “Arthur Conan Doyle.”

Rather than extracting the pages from the exercise books, Spealls bound in the entire notebooks with decorated wrappers intact. The volume consists of the upper vellum cover followed by a handwritten title page, exercise book I, exercise book II, and the lower vellum cover.

It’s what the description *doesn’t* say that’s truly surprising. The bound manuscript is not complete. It’s missing the third exercise book containing the last two pages of the story. This isn’t a typographic error. The bound volume with just the first two notebooks still exists.

It’s an open question whether Conan Doyle and the auction house thought that the bound manuscript was complete. The third exercise book could have been overlooked when the others were sent to the binder. The three notebooks’ covers don’t list the story title, and they don’t indicate how many in total were used for the story. There is no continuation notice or story title on the first page of book II or III, nor any continuation notice at end of either books I or II.

The cataloger assembling or reviewing the manuscript has two clues that part of it is missing. The first comes from the word-count mentioned in the catalog description. The opening page of the original manuscript includes a penciled note of “7,900 wds”; the published story does indeed have that many words. However, the first two notebooks provide fewer than 7,600 words.

The other clue comes from the narrative itself at the end of the second notebook. Even that is indeterminate without comparing it to the published text. The second notebook finishes with Holmes’s summary of the case solution and him telling Watson that they can escort Violet Smith to her mother’s home.

This is followed by a final phrase that has been crossed out. Without that phrase, a casual reader could assume that the story was complete. Unfortunately things are not quite that conclusive.

Sotheby’s sold the bound manuscript in 2004; their catalogue says that Conan Doyle began the third notebook by repeating the stricken phrase, “If she is not quite convalescent.” However, the current owner states that this phrase does not appear in the third notebook, which begins with the continuation of that sentence.⁹ It doesn’t make sense that Conan Doyle would have crossed out the phrase in the second notebook while he was writing the story. More likely this was done later, perhaps to make it appear that the story was complete.¹⁰

Three years after its initial sale, the 40-page manuscript was sold again. This time it was handled by Hodgson’s in London and put up for auction on 28 January 1925. It brought £66 in a lot that included the manuscripts for “The Dancing Men” and “The Priory School.” American Art Association in New York sold it yet again two years later on 25 April 1927 for \$160.

Page 1 of "The Solitary Cyclist" manuscript

Edward L. Dean, a New York bookseller, probably owned the manuscript at some point from 1922 to 1927. His brass-colored dealer's label is present on the rear paste-down. It's not mentioned in the 1927 auction catalog, but the label may not have been considered significant. The catalog also failed to mention the missing third notebook.

After the 1927 sale, the 40-page manuscript disappeared from the Sherlockian community for more than 40 years. David Randall prepared a census of Holmes manuscripts for the October 1946 *BAKER STREET JOURNAL* that listed the "Cyclist's" prior sales and described its location as "unknown." He noted the two exercise books but didn't mention that a third was lacking. William Dalliba offered an update to the census in the July 1960 *BSJ* but did not refer to "The Solitary Cyclist." Baring-Gould repeated Randall's information (with some typographic errors) in his 1966 *Annotated Sherlock Holmes*. Although Peter E. Blau reported in his "Brief Census" handout for the 1971 BSI Dinner that its location was still unknown, that was about to change.

Blau learned in a letter of 28 February 1971 from Kellie Driver, who was a member of the Red Circle of Washington in the 1970s, that "The Solitary Cyclist" manuscript might be in the Olin Library at Cornell University. He contacted Andrew J. Peck, a Cornell undergraduate and Sherlockian, who visited the Rare Book Room and confirmed their holding. Peck went on to collate the manuscript with its published text and to write an award-winning article for the June 1972 *BSJ* identifying *the* solitary cyclist as Bob Carruthers.

According to Lancelyn Green, William G. Mennen bought the manuscript in 1927.¹¹ Reports from the 1970s state that Mennen donated it to Cornell in 1967. Although Cornell could not verify the donation date, they did confirm that the manuscript was a gift from Mennen, Cornell class of 1908. Mennen was a major contributor of books and manuscripts to the Cornell library. Among his gifts were a set of all four Shakespeare folios, the 40-page "Solitary Cyclist" manuscript, and another Conan Doyle manuscript, "Danger! Being the Log of Captain John Sirius."¹²

Once again the tale of this manuscript takes an unusual turn. Institutions don't always retain their holdings, and in 1979 Cornell decided to de-accession both "Danger!" and "The Solitary Cyclist." The current Curator of Rare Books did not know the reason for this decision. Others have suggested that Conan Doyle was not a focus for the Cornell collections and that the library needed funds for 18th-century English pamphlets. Since then policies have changed and the university no longer de-accessions any materials unique to its holdings.

Cornell hired Bart Auerbach to sell the manuscripts on a commission basis. Auerbach has a long history of handling Conan Doyle material and was a special consultant to Sotheby's for their 2004 auction of the manuscript. He sold

Cornell's manuscripts in February 1980. Maurice F. Neville, a California book-dealer and collector, bought "The Solitary Cyclist." Another private collector purchased "Danger!" now in the C. Frederick Kittle Collection of Doyleana at the Newberry Library in Chicago.

The missing "Solitary Cyclist" exercise book "III" finally reappeared in 1982, still unbound and in its original decorated wrappers. Adrian Conan Doyle gave some miscellaneous papers of his father's to Pierre Nordon in 1956, including this notebook. Neither he nor Adrian recognized the manuscript at the time and it was many years later that Nordon identified the book as part of "The Solitary Cyclist."¹³

Nordon, whose superb biography and literary analysis of Conan Doyle was published in 1964, sold the third exercise book at Sotheby's in London on 15 December 1982. The pre-sale estimate of £500/600 was greatly exceeded. Neville, the owner of the 40-page manuscript, naturally wanted to complete the set. A rival California dealer and collector, Mark J. Hime, bid aggressively against him using Bernard Quaritch as his bidding agent. Hime won at a realized price of £4,400 (approximately \$7,000).¹⁴ He soon offered it in his own catalogue and within two years sold it to the Santa Barbara bookseller James Pepper, its current owner.

Neville acquired other Conan Doyle material over the years including a leaf from the manuscript for *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and Sidney Paget's original drawing of Holmes and Moriarty at Reichenbach Falls. He put these items, his 40-page "Cyclist" manuscript, and many other rarities up for sale through Sotheby's New York. Part II of that sale featured detective and mystery fiction as well as Hemingway material. It brought more than \$3 million on 16 November 2004. The 40-page "Cyclist" manuscript sold at its high estimate of \$300,000 and realized \$344,000 including the buyer's premium.¹⁵

It is now in a private collection. "The Solitary Cyclist" manuscript has some less than solitary qualities. With its unique history and critical title revision, it provides a fascinating tale in its own right and is an especially desirable piece of Sherlockiana.

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NOTES

1. Cameron Hollyer, "Author to Editor: Arthur Conan Doyle's Correspondence with H. Greenhough Smith," *ACD: The Journal of the Arthur Conan Doyle Society*, Vol. 3 (1992), p. 16.

2. Richard Lancelyn Green, ed., *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. xxxii. None of the typescripts for stories in *The Return* are known to have survived.
3. Phillip Bergem and John Bergquist, eds., *The Horror of the Heights*, by Arthur Conan Doyle, Ashcroft, BC: Calabash Press, 2004, p. 55. Miss Neal worked at Walter House on the *Strand*.
4. Conan Doyle to H. Greenhough Smith, 14 May 1903, quoted in Richard Lancelyn Green, *The Uncollected Sherlock Holmes*, London: Penguin Books, 1983, p. 100. Letter #23 at the Toronto Reference Library.
5. Conan Doyle to Smith, undated, in Lancelyn Green, *Uncollected Sherlock Holmes*, p. 100. Letter #26 at Toronto.
6. Both *Collier's* and the *Strand* include this additional sentence. The first English book edition changes "admit" to "permit" but the first American edition retains "admit."
7. American Art Association, *Novelists and Illustrators of the XIXTH Century*. . .— January 26 & 27, 1922, New York: American Art Association, 1922, Lot 340. The handwritten address is actually "Undershaw, Hindhead."
8. Conan Doyle to an unidentified recipient, 10 Dec. 1913, quoted in Bart Auerbach/House of El Dieff, *The Detective Story Through the Ages*, New York: House of El Dieff, [1978], p. 8, Item #47A. Held by a private collector.
9. James Pepper, e-mail 19 July 2005. Book III begins "probably find that a hint" with "probably" crossed through in the same pen and ink.
10. The current owner (e-mail 30 June 2005) observed that the strike-out for the phrase in book II was done with a different nib and ink than anything used in books I and II.
11. Lancelyn Green, *The Return*, p. 343.
12. Katherine Reagan, Cornell Curator of Rare Books, e-mail 23 Nov. 2004.
13. Pierre Nordon, e-mail 1 March 2005. According to Nordon, the correct date was 1956 and not 1966 as reported elsewhere.
14. Peter E. Blau, "It Is an Old Manuscript: The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist," *Baker Street Miscellanea*, No. 33 (Spring 1983), pp. 30–31. The hammer price was £4,000.
15. More auction details are online: <<http://members.aol.com/shbest>>.