

An Observance Of Trifles

You know my method. It is founded upon the observance of trifles.

(Arthur Conan Doyle)

snell's interminable ramblings about the canon

His Last Bow Adventure XLV -- The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax

The Disappearance Of Lady Frances Carfax--A Very Pretty Hash, Indeed!

Sherlock Holmes is, no doubt, a great detective, and a great friend of **John Watson**.

Except, of course, when he isn't either of those things.

Which bring us to **The Disappearance Of Lady France Carfax**.

There are a lot of nice touches in this story. The dialogue is crisp, the villains' plan seems clever (until you think about it for 10 seconds), there is great action, and a last-minute rescue.

But boy oh boy, I *really* think that **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** blows this tale in several way. Holmes is a *particular jack**** to Watson, when Watson clearly doesn't deserve it. Holmes behavior in investigating the case is extremely illogical, and in all honesty he does not much to solve the case--if the villains aren't stupid, they get away. The behavior of our little criminal gang makes no sense, as it is never explained why they go from con artists to kidnapppers and murderers. And at the end, Holmes (and Doyle) seem completely disinterested in the fate of the victim of these crimes, and the story gives us zero closure.

All in all, it's very irritating, as the negatives quickly overwhelm the positives in the story.

For the investigation of this case, Holmes sends Watson to do his legwork for him. It's not the first time, and it can be good to see Watson in solo action. But unlike **Hound Of The Baskervilles**, this time when Holmes surprisingly turns up in the middle of the story, he doesn't *praise* Watson, but archly criticizes him:



"A very pretty hash you have made of it...And a singularly consistent investigation you have made, my dear Watson," said he. "I cannot at the moment recall any possible blunder which you have omitted. The total effect of your proceeding has been to give the alarm everywhere and yet to discover nothing."

Well, this may be the most unfair thing Sherlock has ever said to John.

As to *"giving the alarm everywhere,"* how is that? The villains have *no* idea that Watson is on their trail. As to confronting **Philip Green**, Holmes did the *very same thing himself* just a few hours later!! Granted, it didn't end in a violent fight, but that was hardly Watson's fault. And Watson found out that the "Shlessingers" and Lady Carfax had headed for London *weeks* ago--so seriously, what more did he expect Watson to accomplish?

We also cannot fault Watson's identification of Green as the *likeliest* suspect. Given that Watson doesn't have Holmes' encyclopaedic knowledge of European con men, he had no reason to suspect the **Shlessingers**. And Holmes certainly could have been more forthcoming in his cables--he's deliberately leaving Watson at a disadvantage, and then *berating* him for it!

But looked at through modern eyes, Philip Green is clearly--*very clearly*--a dangerous stalker who was a threat to **Lady Frances**, physically and emotionally. In a modern mystery there would be *no doubt* about how dangerous he was (even if he didn't turn out to be the actual culprit).

Note that we never get to consult with Lady Carfax in this story, so the only tale of Green's relationship with her comes from *his* perspective:

I was a wild youngster, I know--not worse than others of my class. But her mind was pure as snow. She could not bear a shadow of coarseness. So, when she came to hear of things that I had done, she would have no more to say to me. And yet she loved me--that is the wonder of it!--loved me well enough to remain single all her sainted days just for my sake alone.

A nice enough story; yet *"she wouldn't marry me, but she wouldn't marry anybody else because of me"* is fairly obviously self-serving, and likely somewhat *delusional*.

Again, we don't hear from Frances, but what are the eyewitness accounts of their meetings on the continent? As Watson tells us, *"He had been seen talking earnestly to Madame on the promenade by the lake. Then he had called. She had refused to see him."* Her maid's account gives us more chilling details: *"With her own eyes she had seen him seize the lady's wrist with great violence on the public promenade by the lake."*

It sure doesn't like as if she loved him, does it? *"...[B]ut many little signs had convinced the maid that her mistress lived in a state of continual nervous apprehension."* And **Marie** added, *"She believed that it was out of dread of him that Lady Frances had accepted the escort of the Shlessingers to London."*

This is *classic* stalker/victim behavior, isn't it? He approaches her, she rebuffs him, he loses his temper, she refuses to see him when he calls again, she seeks protection from being alone with him, and she is clearly in an emotionally upset and fearful state. Add to that the fact that when Frances left Lausanne, "*there had been some secrecy, which confirmed the idea that she had gone with the intention of throwing someone off her track,*" a clear indication that she did not want Mr. Green's company!!

Watson's conclusion, far from being a blunder, rings chillingly true: "*Here was this good and pious lady pursued from place to place by a sinister and unrelenting figure.*

She feared him, or she would not have fled from Lausanne. He had still followed. Sooner or later he would overtake her." Every single part of that was correct.

Green himself admits to some dangerous tendencies, although he tries to make light of it. His violent attack on Watson? "*Indeed, I'm not responsible in these days. My nerves are like live wires.*" Just because the Doctor dared question him about Lady Carfax. And his "wooing" of her? "*I found her at Lausanne and tried all I knew. She weakened, I think, but her will was strong, and when next I called she had left the town.*" By his own words, she said no, and he was trying to break down her will!!

A violence-prone suitor who won't take no for an answer, and follows her across continents, driving her into a state of fear and tension? This is the man in whose care Holmes left lady Carfax at the end of the story: "*And here is someone who has a better right to nurse this lady than we have. Good morning, Mr. Green.*"

GOOD GOD, MAN, HE'S HER STALKER!!!! He's part of the reason she needs to be nursed!?!? What the *hell*, Sherlock?!?!?!?!?

Despite his insistence that he had already done better, Holmes investigation makes little sense, either. Watson telegrams him that the party had left for London three weeks ago. *Why*, in heaven's name then, does Holmes come to Montpellier, when the missing woman and those he thinks responsible for her disappearance are thought to be in London?

His explanation makes little sense: "*...finding that he could get away from London, he determined to head me off at the next obvious point of my travels.*" What? He could have sent you a telegram, John!! Instead, he wastes two days traveling to meet you for *no real purpose*, when he could have spent that time searching for the criminals and their victim! Seriously--the lady is missing, Holmes fears her in the clutches of terrible villains, her life in danger, and knows they left for London. So what possible reason is there to come to France, to a city where Carfax and the Shlessingers *never* went?! Unforgivable, and unexplainable, except that Sir Arthur wanted to have Holmes pull off one of his patented "*disguise that fools even Watson*" tricks.

The other blunder in the story is Sir Arthur's portrayal of what, exactly, **Holy Peters'** plan is.

Holmes initially portrays him as a con man: "*His particular specialty is the beguiling of lonely ladies by playing upon their religious feelings...*" He fleeces lonely women out of money. Yet, somehow, he and his wife graduated to *kidnapping and murder*?

Holmes lays out clearly enough that the kidnapping is motive for the murder: if they let Lady Carfax go, she will of course turn them into the police. Therefore, to keep her silent, they must kill her.

But...Holmes himself tells us that "*these people had never, to my knowledge, done a murder.*" Which means, most likely, they had never resorted to kidnapping before, right? They get women to give them checks and cash for their "*spiritual work,*" maybe in an extreme case actually burgle their jewelry...so what in the heck happened this time? How did they go from being grifters to *physically imprisoning a noblewoman for over 4 weeks, and then trying to kill her,* when Holmes told us they had *never* done anything of the sort before?

Did they discover the her jewels were incredibly valuable, and couldn't find a way to get them peacefully? Did she somehow discover that something nefarious was going on, and was going to the police to tell them of the Peters' scams, and they over-reacted by hitting her or something, and decided that they had no choice now but hold her hostage? Why wait *4+ weeks* to start selling off the jewels? If they had done it weeks earlier, before Holmes got the word out to pawn-brokers, they never would have been caught! Why the very elaborate scheme to kill her, if they had just planned on vanishing afterwards anyway?!?

So Holmes (and Doyle) did indeed make a *very pretty hash* of it. Holmes chastises Watson for a fine investigation, and for zeroing in on the most likely suspect. Holmes' investigation leaves much to be desired, and he ends up leaving the victim in her stalkers' care!! And Holmes can't seem to make up their minds whether the criminals are grifters or sadistic murdering masterminds, or why they make the gruesome transition.

For these reasons, as well as some others we'll discuss below, The Disappearance Of Lady Frances Carfax is rather disappointing, despite some clever touches.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

I've got to get this off my chest first thing: There is an outfit here in America called **CARFAX, that helps you shop for used cars and can (for a fee) provide a complete repair history of the vehicle you're interested in buying. The premise of the commercials is customers demanding that the dealer provide them with a CARFAX report, with the tagline "Show me the CARFAX!"

So, *that* was bouncing around my head the whole time with this story...

The **Granada adaptation once again contained many differences. I'm lazy today, so I'll just cut and paste the Wikipedia summary:

The action takes place entirely in the Lake District of England, where the holidaying Doctor often sees the Lady (and her stalker Philip Green) at the hotel before her disappearance; she has a brother; her jewellery is French rather than Spanish; no mention is made of the maid; Peters is not Australian and does not have a bitten ear, but is in a wheelchair; Green made his fortune in Australia rather than in South Africa; there is no police intervention at the house; the coffin is opened at the cemetery rather than at the house; Lady Frances is traumatised by her experience (though Holmes says that "There is every hope of a full recovery"); and Holmes acknowledges the case as one of his few true failures and refuses to be rewarded by Green.

So, yeah, a *little* bit different.

Sometimes I wonder if the writers of the Granada adaptations were paid by the number of pointless changes they make to the original story...

**This is the first time in some while that we've begun a story with the "*Holmes baffling Watson with some personal deductions*" in awhile. I had thought that Sir Arthur had just grown tired of the device. But it's back!

**Watson getting persnickety at Holmes' sauciness: "*I don't admit that a fresh illustration is an explanation,*" said I with some asperity. "*Bravo, Watson! A very dignified and logical remonstrance.*"

**One of Holmes' most famous epigraphs:

One of the most dangerous classes in the world," said he, "is the drifting and friendless woman. She is the most harmless and often the most useful of mortals, but she is the inevitable inciter of crime in others. She is helpless. She is migratory. She has sufficient means to take her from country to country and from hotel to hotel. She is lost, as often as not, in a maze of obscure pensions and boardinghouses. She is a stray chicken in a world of foxes. When she is gobbled up she is hardly missed."

This *could* have been the starting point for us to have a discussion about the role of single women in Victorian/Edwardian England. But sadly, the story gives us nothing else. We never meet a conscious Lady Frances; we never learn the specifics of how she was entangled with the Shlessingers; we know *precious little* about her life.

Yes, she was pursued by a stalker, but Holmes is unconcerned with that, and it could as likely happened at home. Yes, she fell in with some con men, but they were usually non-violent. And her being "*lost*" initially is her own decision, to hide her movements to put off Green.

So it's hard to say if this is just another example of Holmes' sexism, or if the "*drifting woman*" really was a problem of the era.

****Just how wealthy was Lady Frances Carfax?**

We get conflicting signals. Her family estates went to "*the male line,*" so "*she was left with limited means, but with some very remarkable old Spanish jewellery of silver and curiously cut diamonds to which she was fondly attached.*"

But Lady Frances is traveling the continent, staying in *luxurious* hotels. She gives her maid £50 as a wedding gift. She leaves Lausanne on a day's notice, paying a week's rent for the early departure.

She has the remarkable jewelry, which the criminals coveted; but there is no evidence that they made any attempt to access her bank account. She allowed the Reverend Doctor Shlessinger to pay her hotel bill, and apparently for her travel. Was she *broke* after that extravagant gift?

Despite the fact that Holmes describes Lady Frances as "*the last derelict of what only twenty years ago was a goodly fleet,*" her family certainly isn't poor: "*The family are anxious, and as they are exceedingly wealthy no sum will be spared if we can clear the matter up.*"

That comes in consecutive paragraphs. Sloppy writing? Or is Holmes just speaking *relatively* of her "limited means"--rich to you and I, but a pauper compared to her family?

****Holmes: "*Single ladies must live, and their passbooks are compressed diaries.*"**

A wise observation...although in this case the bank account did *nothing* to solve the mystery. And how did Holmes get that information? Did he get the information from the family? Or did he do another trick to (illegally, no doubt?) wheedle the information out of the bank?

****Apocryphal case: "*old Abrams is in such mortal terror of his life*" that Holmes cannot leave London.**

****Again Holmes is too busy to take up an important case. Not only is the Abrams case keeping him busy, but "*on general principles it is best that I should not leave the country. Scotland Yard feels lonely without me, and it causes an unhealthy excitement among the criminal classes.*"**

Pithy, and perhaps more full of self-praise than we're used to seeing from Holmes. But of course, just a few days later Holmes does leave the country, quite unnecessarily. Was the Abrams case cleared up (or was he *dead?!?*)?

****Victorian con men: Lady Carfax...**

...found the acquaintance of a Dr. Shlessinger and his wife, a missionary from South America. Like most lonely ladies, Lady Frances found her comfort and occupation in religion...Dr. Shlessinger's remarkable personality, his whole hearted devotion, and the fact that he was recovering from a disease contracted in the exercise of his apostolic duties affected her deeply.

Later we learn...

...The Rev. Dr. Shlessinger, missionary from South America, is none other than Holy Peters...His particular specialty is the beguiling of lonely ladies by playing upon their religious feelings, and his so-called wife, an Englishwoman named Fraser, is a worthy helpmate

This is one bit the Granada adaptation keeps, and expands on. "Shlessinger" uses fake slide shows and testimonials of his good works to bilk donations from other guests and the local church.

As to whether "*most lonely ladies*" find solace and occupation in religion? And whether that made them more vulnerable to being scammed? Well, remember, this is *Watson* speaking here, and not *Holmes*, so it shouldn't automatically be dismissed as the same old *Holmes* "misogyny." One suspects that *Doyle* was basing this on stories he had heard, and perhaps even acquaintances...

****More signs that the *Doyle's* presentation of the *Holmes/Watson* relationship is "off" in this tale:**

To Holmes I wrote showing how rapidly and surely I had got down to the roots of the matter. In reply I had a telegram asking for a description of Dr. Shlessinger's left ear. Holmes's ideas of humour are strange and occasionally offensive, so I took no notice of his ill-timed jest...

Yes, *Holmes* could be infuriatingly cryptic. But surely *Watson* wouldn't be so cavalier to reject such a specific request as a "jest," and would have wondered why *Holmes* asked.

*****Watson*: "The situation was awkward, but the most direct way is often the best."** Of course, that most direct way resulted in a violent fight, so...maybe not the *best* way after all?

****Some have questioned *Watson's* losing in the fight. But let's recall that, just a few pages earlier, he had been feeling "rheumatic and old," while every person's description of *Green* is a giant savage. Throw in *John's* war wound(s) and the surprise nature of the attack, it's no surprise that *Green* had an advantage on him.**

*****Holmes* was clearly not being sponsored by the Australian Travel Bureau: "*Holy Peters, one of the most unscrupulous rascals that Australia has ever evolved--and for a young country it has turned out some very finished types.*"**

What did you expect when you sent all of your criminals there?

*****Holmes*:**

It is always possible that she never reached London, or that she has passed through it, but the former is improbable, as, with their system of registration, it is not easy for foreigners to play tricks with the Continental police; and the latter is also unlikely, as these rouges could not hope to find any other place where it would be as easy to keep a person under restraint.

Oh, come now, *Sherlock*! One enduring cliché of the **Canon** is how darned easy it is for thieves, murderers and scalawags of all types to come and go as easy as you please, slipping from country to country

with no one to stop their flight from justice. Seriously, not once is a criminal who flees the country apprehended by authorities in the Canon--not once!

Meanwhile, London is the best place to keep a secret prisoner? *Really?* The biggest city in the continent is the best place to keep her? Again, this flies in the face of the Holmes in **Copper Beeches**, where he says horrid crimes are much easier in rural areas!

The pressure of public opinion can do in the town what the law cannot accomplish. There is no lane so vile that the scream of a tortured child, or the thud of a drunkard's blow, does not beget sympathy and indignation among the neighbours, and then the whole machinery of justice is ever so close that a word of complaint can set it going, and there is but a step between the crime and the dock. But look at these lonely houses, each in its own fields, filled for the most part with poor ignorant folk who know little of the law. Think of the deeds of hellish cruelty, the hidden wickedness which may go on, year in, year out, in such places, and none the wiser. Had this lady who appeals to us for help gone to live in Winchester, I should never have had a fear for her. It is the five miles of country which makes the danger.

So, has recent experience changed Sherlock's mind?

**Some have critiqued whether Green was correct when Holmes asked, "*These people do not know you by sight?*" Remember, Green didn't show up up Baden until "*a week ago,*" two weeks *after* the Shlessingers had left. They had *never* seen him! And they were not at Lausanne when he was their, either.

Still, why not have someone else watch, someone more trustworthy and especially someone notably visually and less prone to violence?

**Holmes, on the legality of rushing in: "*We can do nothing legal without a warrant, and you can serve the cause best by taking this note down to the authorities and getting one.*"

That might seem to fly in the face of *other* excursions where we've seen Holmes not worry about legal niceties. But obviously, he's just trying to get Green out of the way before they start the real rescue business:

We are, as usual, the irregulars, and we must take our own line of action. The situation strikes me as so desperate that the most extreme measures are justified...We simply can't afford to wait for the police or to keep within the four corners of the law.

As usual, Holmes is clear about the limits of legalities, and is willing to bend the law (and risk losing a conviction--or perhaps even facing jail *himself!*) in order to save a life.

**Holmes theory that Lady Frances is already dead, and Peters is trying to bury her to bury the deed:

Surely that they have done her to death in some way which has deceived the doctor and simulated a natural end--poisoning, perhaps. And yet how strange that they should ever let a doctor approach her unless he were a confederate, which is hardly a credible proposition."

Because, of course, there are *no* evil or corrupt doctors...

"Could they have forged a medical certificate?" "Dangerous, Watson, very dangerous. No, I hardly see them doing that."

How dangerous can it forging a medical certificate be, if they've already committed murder? Is the British Medical Association going to come after them?

****Peters is a pretty cool customer:**

"I'd be very glad if you could tell me where that lady may be," Peters answered coolly. "I've a bill against her for a nearly a hundred pounds, and nothing to show for it but a couple of trumpery pendants that the dealer would hardly look at. She attached herself to Mrs. Peters and me at Baden--it is a fact that I was using another name at the time--and she stuck on to us until we came to London. I paid her bill and her ticket. Once in London, she gave us the slip, and, as I say, left these out-of-date jewels to pay her bills."

Since we're never told how much money they received from pawning the jewelry, it's tough to judge how this story might play in court. We're told the jewelry was "*remarkable*." If the pawn shop gave them anything near what they were worth, that would put lie to Peters' claim that these were merely "trumpery pendants."

****Peters' explanation of the dead woman: "Well, if you really must know, she is an old nurse of my wife's, Rose Spender by name, whom we found in the Brixton Workhouse Infirmary."**

Was she *really* the wife's old nurse? Or did they just pluck some random old woman out of the infirmary, hoping she was close to death?

And having her die of natural causes within three days is *frightfully* convenient, no matter what the doctor said. How could they be sure she wouldn't *linger* for weeks? I have a hard time believing they wouldn't nudge her along, perhaps by not feeding her...?

****Our police sergeant is a *good copper*--he defuses the confrontation and gets Holmes to leave--but he lets Holmes know that he believes the detective, and promises to keep an eye on the place until the warrant arrives.**

Too bad he wasn't around the next morning, when the felons flee unobserved...

****Police bureaucracy: "There had been difficulties of procedure in regard to the warrant. Some delay was inevitable. The magistrate's signature might not be obtained until next morning."**

Ah, unexplained technicalities to provide plot complications. How very "*creaky episode of an American cop show*"!

***"It's life or death--a hundred chances on death to one on life."* In this case, the one wins. Too bad you were playing dress-up in Montpelier instead of searching London for her, when the odds might have been more in favor of life...

***Again, I'm not sure why Peters leaves Lady Frances alive as long as he does. If they're caught before the funeral, they're still guilty of robbery and kidnapping, as well as attempted murder in this case, with the victim found sealed in a soon to be interred coffin! Keeping her alive merely increases the chances of their being caught. Bumping attempted murder up to actual murder might have increased the potential legal consequences, but also might have greatly increased the chances of getting away with it. (Although in modern British law, attempted murder has the same maximum penalty as the sentence for actual murder, which would seem to eliminate the advantage of keeping her alive until the last minute. I do not know what the Victorian law said on the matter...)*

Once they have the death certificate and coffin and old woman's body, what reason is there to keep her alive? Why put her *alive* into the coffin, except as an act of *wanton cruelty*? This belies Holmes' guess that, never having murdered before, they might "*shrink from actual violence until the last.*"

Anyone cruel enough to bury a woman alive--in a coffin with an already decaying body!--is not shrinking from much.

You almost wish they had succeeded in their plan, and then been caught, to try this defense in front of a judge and jury. "We don't know *how* she got into the coffin!" "She was *alive* when we put her in there, so we didn't kill her!" Etc.

***Holmes: "Such slips are common to all mortals, and the greatest is he who can recognize and repair them."* Too bad you don't acknowledge the slips of trusting Green, and of abandoning the London search to come play dress-up for Watson in France...

***Holmes: "If our ex-missionary friends escape the clutches of Lestrade, I shall expect to hear of some brilliant incidents in their future career."*

So instead of concern for Lady Frances' final fate--does she recover? Does she ever take up with Green?--Holmes admire the *crooks*, and looks forward to hearing of their later antics?? That's what we get instead of closure for Lady Frances Carfax's story?!? Man, this story irritates me!

Brian Keith Snell

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