



Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

His Last Bow

Adventure XLV -- The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax

SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

Lady Frances is a wealthy maiden-lady of 40 who goes from resort to resort as the season changes. She has some unique Spanish jewelry of which she is extremely fond and proud. She corresponds regularly with Miss Dobney and when her letters cease, Miss Dobney consults Holmes. Holmes sends Watson to France to see if he can find out what became of her. Watson gets things all fouled up and Holmes arrives on the scene to straighten them out.

Lady Frances has fallen under the influence of the Shlessingers who take her as a prisoner to London. The Shlessingers find Rose Spender in the poor house near death. They adopt her and care for her until she dies. They plan to wait until Rose dies and get a nice legal death certificate for her. Then they plan to murder lady Frances and bury them both in the same coffin. Holmes spoils their dastardly plot at the last moment and Frances and Philip are reunited.



During the excitement of resuscitating Lady Frances, the Shlessingers escape. Holmes is sure he will hear of them again.

SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)

Miss Dobney, Lady Frances Carfax's former housekeeper, who was used to get letters from her mistress on a regular basis, is alarmed by her sudden silence. She asks Sherlock Holmes to ascertain her whereabouts. The detective is quite worried about this young woman, who's travelling on her own, carrying

valuable jewellery with her. He sends Watson to Lausanne where Lady Frances has been staying lately. On site, the doctor learns that she left in a hurry for Baden after a strange bearded man payed her a visit. Watson then tracks her into Germany where she apparently formed friendship with two missionaries, Dr. Schlessinger and his wife. The three of them left town at the same time, but Watson also learns that the bearded man preceded him in Baden to ask the same questions.

Clueless, Watson heads to Montpellier to speak to Marie Devine, Lady Frances's former chambermaid, who left her mistress in Lausanne to get married. As Watson notices he's spied by the bearded man, he goes after him and they fight. He's rescued by a workman, who turns out to be Holmes in a disguise. The detective conducted a parallel investigation and discovered the identity of the bearded man. This is Philip Green, Lady Frances's former suitor, who left England few years ago after some misdemeanours, but is now back to propose her.

Back in London, Holmes gets his suspicions about Schlessinger confirmed. He is Holy Peters, a crook whose targets are young, lonely and wealthy ladies. With the help of Green, Holmes and Watson locate him and learn he has just ordered a special coffin. Fearing the worst, they toughly visit the crook, but to no avail, as it's Peters old nanny who lays in the coffin. Holmes spends the night brooding over his failure and then has an epiphany. He wakes Watson up in the wee hours of the morning and takes him to the nanny's funeral. The detective forcibly opens the coffin and find Lady Frances, unconscious but alive, in the double-bottom in which Peters was about to bury her.

SUMMARY (Wikipedia)

Sherlock Holmes sends Dr. Watson to Lausanne to investigate Lady Frances Carfax's disappearance since he himself is too busy in London. Lady Frances is a lone, unwed woman denied a rich inheritance on account of her gender. She does, however, carry valuable jewels with her. It is also her habit to write to her old governess, Miss Dobney, every other week, but for the past five weeks, there has not been a word from her. She has left the Hôtel National in Lausanne for parts unknown. Her last two bank transactions were cheques, one to pay her hotel bill, and another for £50 to her maid, Miss Marie Devine.

In Switzerland, Watson finds out that Lady Frances stayed at the Hôtel National for several weeks, but then suddenly left in a hurry one day. Only one witness could suggest an explanation, one involving a big, bearded man who kept hounding her. It also emerges that Lady Frances's maid has left her employ, although it is not known why.

Watson finds out where Lady Frances went, and inquires at the Englischer Hof in Baden-Baden, Germany. She stayed there for a fortnight and met a couple described as Dr. Shlessinger, a convalescent

missionary and biblical scholar from South America, and his wife. Lady Frances left with them three weeks ago for London, and nothing has been heard of her since. Watson also finds out that the big bearded man, the "savage", came about a week ago looking for her. Watson telegraphs Holmes about his progress, and oddly, Holmes wires back asking for a description of Dr. Shlessinger's left ear. Watson believes this to be Holmes's attempt at humour. Holmes is actually in earnest.

Watson visits Marie Devine, the former maid, in Montpellier, France, and it turns out that her upcoming wedding was why she left Lady Frances's employ. The £50 was a wedding present. She, too, believes that the bearded man was the reason that her former mistress left Lausanne. He was quite a rough man. During this interview, Marie sees the very man in question in the street. Watson rushes out and demands to know who he is and what he has done with Lady Frances. A fight ensues and Watson is nearly strangled. A French workman breaks the fight up with his cudgel and the bearded man withdraws. It then turns out that the workman is a disguised Holmes, who suggests that Watson accompany him back to London, and wryly observes that there is no blunder which Watson has failed to commit in this investigation.

Before leaving, however, Holmes interviews someone. It is the bearded man, the Honourable Philip Green, an old suitor of Lady Frances's. Yes, he is seeking Lady Frances, but he still wants to win her heart. As a younger man, despite being the son of a famous Admiral, he was not rich. Now that he has made his fortune in South Africa, he hopes she will see him differently, but he is still rather churlish and clearly Lady Frances is unwilling. Holmes recommends that he go back to London.

Once Holmes and Watson are back at 221B Baker Street, Holmes reads a telegram from Baden-Baden about Dr. Shlessinger's left ear—"jagged or torn". This confirms Holmes's suspicion that Dr. Shlessinger is in fact "Holy" Henry Peters, a vicious rascal from Australia (his earlobe was chewed away in a bar brawl). His so-called wife's real name is Annie Fraser. He beguiles young women by playing to their religious beliefs, as Shlessinger did with Lady Frances. This suggested his true identity to Holmes. Holmes believes that Lady Frances is in London, and quite possibly dead, or if not, confined in some way.

The search seems hopeless. The police follow known associates, Holmes places advertisements hoping to learn something, but nothing happens. Then, a pawnshop reports that someone matching Shlessinger's description has pawned a pendant very much like one owned by Lady Frances. He gave a false address, but this gives Holmes what he needs. He has Philip Green wait in the pawnshop, knowing that Henry Peters will want to pawn more jewellery. It takes a few days, but he is not disappointed. His wife shows up this time to pawn a matching pendant, and Green follows her, first to an undertaker's, where he finds Peters's wife discussing an "out of the ordinary" order, and later to an address in Brixton. He watches the house and sees some men deliver a coffin.

Holmes writes Green a note and sends him to the police to fetch a warrant. Meanwhile, Holmes and Watson go first to the undertaker's to ask about the funeral—it is at eight o'clock the next morning—and then to Brixton where they demand to see Dr. Shlessinger, or whatever he may call himself. Once inside, in the absence of a warrant, Holmes is obliged to resort to force to search Peters's house. He finds the coffin, and deep inside it is a small, emaciated, very old, dead woman. It is certainly not Lady Frances. Peters explains that it is his wife's old nurse. The police come and tell Holmes and Watson that they must leave. Peters gloats over Holmes's obvious humiliation.

The day ends in apparent failure. Nothing suspicious can be found about the household, no warrant arrives, and Holmes and Watson go back to Baker Street. Holmes does not sleep that night, preferring to go over the case in his mind.

Finally, early the next morning, Holmes realises what is going on. He and Watson rush to Brixton and make sure that the coffin is not removed from the house to go for burial. They unscrew the coffin lid and find Lady Frances inside, chloroformed. The Peterses, while dishonest enough to kidnap someone to steal her jewels, were too squeamish to commit murder directly. Watson manages to revive her, and the Peterses are found to have fled. It was the remark heard by Green at the undertaker's that helped Holmes deduce the truth. The woman there had been talking about an unusual coffin, and Holmes then also remembered that it was a big coffin for a very small woman, the idea being to obtain the necessary legal documents for the old woman, and then "legitimise" the burial of a coffin containing two bodies.