



An Inquiry into: “The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax”

Vol. XII No. 83 • April 14, 2022

“The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax,” was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in December 1911. The first American publication was in *American Magazine* the same month and year. It is part of *His Last Bow*.

Because, as the table shows, the chronology for this case

is far from being unanimous, as a matter of personal preference I default to Baring-Gould’s scholarship, whose estimate in this instance is 1902. Therefore, if the case took place then, as he concluded, then at the time Holmes was 48 years old and Watson 50.

Main Characters:

Lady Frances Carfax, a solitary noble woman of modest means; the Honorable Philip Green, an Englishman whose love was refused by Lady Frances, and left to make his fortune in South Africa; Dr. Shlessinger, dangerous confidence man posing as a convalescent missionary recently returned from South America; Mrs.

Shlessinger, his wife; Marie Devine, Lady Frances’ maid; Jules Vibart, Devine’s fiancé.

Notable Quotes:

“One of the most dangerous classes in the world 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.”

“Single ladies must live, and their passbooks are compressed diaries.”

The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax

<i>Chronologist</i>	<i>Date of the Adventure</i>
<i>Canon</i>	<i>1890 or later</i>
<i>Baring-Gould</i>	<i>Tuesday, July 1, 1902</i>
<i>Bell</i>	<i>Summer 1895</i>
<i>Blakeney</i>	<i>Spring 1896</i>
<i>Brend</i>	<i>Summer 1899</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>Wednesday, September 2, 1903</i>
<i>Dakin</i>	<i>Summer 1897</i>
<i>Folsom</i>	<i>July 1901</i>
<i>Hall</i>	<i>Summer 1901</i>
<i>Keefauver</i>	<i>Saturday, July 26, 1902</i>
<i>Klinger</i>	<i>1901</i>
<i>Zeisler</i>	<i>August 1895 or 1897-1901</i>

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.

“You know that I cannot possibly leave London while old Abrahams is in such mortal terror of his life. Besides, 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.”

“And a singularly consistent investigation you have made, my dear Watson. 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.”

Lady Frances Carfax

Whenever we look into this case, I am always puzzled by the lonely life that Lady Frances Carfax led. According to Holmes, she was “a beautiful woman, still in fresh middle age.” We have no indication that she and her family had had a falling out, especially considering that it was her family who asked Holmes to locate her. As the Great Detective stated, “The family are anxious, and as they are exceedingly wealthy no sum will be spared if we can clear the matter up.” They have, in fact, given our sleuth *carte blanche* to find her.

This brings us to an interesting point. Although Holmes describes her family as “exceedingly wealthy,” he tells us that 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 . . . and always carried them about with her.” This would incline one to think Lady Frances existence, although not penurious, was financially limited.

However, her lifestyle appears to contradict his. We learn that she gave Marie Devine, her maid, £50 (≈\$20,000) for a wedding gift! Additionally, Watson tells us that “Two days later found me at the Hotel National at Lausanne, where I received every courtesy at the hands of M. Moser, the well-known manager.”

If M. Moser was indeed “the well-known manager,” then it had to have been The Grand Hotel National, a 5-Star luxury hotel in Lucerne, founded in 1870. If, as we are informed, the lady spent “several weeks” at that world-class establishment, she could not have been as destitute as we are led to believe. First-rate hotels charged an average of 12s (≈\$225.00) per day with amenities (dinner, drinks) extra. A stay of “several weeks” would soon have added up to a substantial sum. Could her “poverty” have been a matter of perception rather than fact? To some of the poorest, living in Third World Countries, all Americans are “rich.”

Why, then, would such an attractive gentlewoman of means, who has seen a good portion of the world, have been so lacking in friends—male and female—and admirers, and been limited solely to corresponding with her old former governess? There appears to have been no scandal or even the hint of one to taint her reputation; why then although she seemed inclined to talk to and mingle with people, was she so unusually alone?

We are only left with the most unsatisfactory conjecture that her supposedly traumatizing experience with Philip Green left her with such a pronounced loathing of men that it crippled in her any possi-

bility of accepting the attentions of even the best of that sex. , she still could have formed some close relationships with other women of her class and not be left with only one person close to her, Miss Dobney, her old retired governess.

According to Green, he had been “a wild youngster” at the time she rejected him for his coarseness. If Lady Frances was now in her forties, that might imply a passage of time of about twenty years. This, of course, originates yet another unanswered question: what could the Hon. Philip Green have done to psychologically affect her so completely and permanently?

Not to sound too sarcastic, but whatever happened to “Time heals all wounds”?

Green’s Unforgivable Sin

Many students of the Canon enjoy speculating what poor Philip Green could have done that so outraged Lady Frances’ delicacy. His confession to our two friends that as a young man he “led a wild life,” tells us nothing—it is a nebulous description left wide open to interpretation. What was it he did? Gambling and womanizing? Hardly shocking, especially when the highest in the land (HRH the Prince of Wales, for instance) were well-known for such indulgences, often to stratospherically scandalous levels.

While it is true that pointing to the bad conduct of one’s betters did not excuse one’s own bad behavior, the fact is that although the mind of a Victorian lady was expected to be “...as pure as snow,” usually this tended to be a thin covering of the reality of things. These were the same ladies who accompanied their families and husbands to remote and dangerous parts of the Empire.

If, indeed, Lady Frances “could not bear a shadow of coarseness” and

“when she came to hear of things that I had done, she would have no more to say to me,” one would have to conclude that whatever it was that Green did was incredibly, indescribably coarse, vulgar. It would have been truly dreadful behavior if it forced him to escape to South Africa. Of course, there exists the possibility that the lady exaggerated her feelings of delicacy to a nearly psychotic level. Otherwise, what could have moved her to refuse him, yet still love him so much that she never married someone else?



A Case of Uneven Results

Of all the instances in the Canon in which Holmes has criticized Watson for his lack of success in obtaining the information he was supposed to get, this is perhaps a moment in which the Great Detective was justified in reading the riot act to his friend. Regarding our sleuth’s telegram inquiring about Shlessinger’s ear, Watson comments with a considerable amount of asperity that “Holmes’s ideas of humour are strange and occasionally offensive, so I took no notice of his ill-timed jest.”

Because all the Sacred Writings do not reflect anything about Sherlock Holmes’ offensive humor we are left in the dark as to what Watson could have been referring to. Holmes joking? And about an investigation about a life-or-death matter? Knowing Holmes’ personality and habits as he did by

then, how could the Good Doctor have ignored his telegram asking for information regarding Schlesinger's left ear?

The only explanation that one can come up with is that perhaps our biographer did not care to set down examples of the Great Detective's offensive humor, and these are therefore these are lost to us.

However, one should not be too harsh regarding the Good Doctor's failure. In his defense, as he almost always does, he performed well in finding the information that Holmes sent him off to find out.



Yes, he did fail to inquire about Holy Peter's left ear, but then, the Great Detective could have been a trifle more explicit in his telegram.

Strangely enough, it seems that regardless of his reliance on the Watson, at times Holmes does not appear to trust him. In this case, after sending off his colleague alone to gather information, it appears that he distrusted him enough to follow him as he conducted his inquiries. I base this on his seemingly providential intervention when it seemed that Green was going to choke Watson—it almost seems as if he had been following his friend. Also, why the seemingly unnecessary disguise—a French *ouvrier* in a blue blouse? We

get an indication of how soon after Watson left, Holmes began to follow him: it would have taken two to three days of avoiding the razor for him to acquire an "unshaven" appearance. Maybe he simply wanted to display his prowess at coming up with varied disguises.

It has been suggested that perhaps our sleuth was pursuing in France a matter unrevealed to us, unconnected to this case, unrevealed to us, and, once he had accomplished his purpose he decided to join Watson in the latter's pursuits.

Any way one looks at it, his stinging rebuke to Watson, "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" seems uncalled for and completely beyond the pale.

Although Holmes' deductive dazzling genius leads to the solving of this case, paradoxically the results are not very satisfactory. Unquestionably, Holmes not only finds Lady Frances, but also saves her life. It is unfortunate that the two dangerous and heartless criminals—would-be murderers—managed to escape their just deserts, leaving the free to doubtless to continue their out-



rageous careers. Holmes himself acknowledged this when he concluded that, "If our ex-missionary friends escape the clutches of Lestrade, I shall expect to hear of some brilliant incidents in their future career." Somehow, the idea that Inspector Lestrade was Dame Justice's agent in bringing the

nefarious pair to their deserved end, gives one but little confidence that punishment will be meted out.

Not According to Pathology

Watson tells us that when they opened the coffin that Lady Frances had been hidden in, her head was “all wreathed in cotton-wool, which had been soaked in [chloroform],” yet, after artificial respiration and an injection of ether our Aesculapius managed to bring her back from the brink. Truly a miraculous recovery!

I once queried a forensic doctor (who is a rabid Holmesian) about this, and he slowly shook his head. “Neither chloroform or ether act instantaneously,” he said. “All those instances in literature or the



movies where someone is attacked from behind and a cloth saturated in either of these is put over the face and he immediately becomes unconscious are sheer nonsense. It takes a good five minutes or more of inhaling the stuff for it to work and you must keep pouring more of it on the cloth. In Lady Frances’ case, she was inside a hermetic coffin practically floating on the stuff. There is no possible way she could have lasted more than a few minutes.”

“Of course,” he added judiciously, “she should thank her lucky stars that Watson was such an exceptional physician. Anyway, Lady Frances would not have emerged unscathed

after such a massive exposure. Such an exposure can cause heart problems, fits, unconsciousness, and sometimes death. Delayed effects, some 48 hours after, are liver and kidney damage. A fatal oral dose of chloroform may be as little as 10 mL (14.8 g), with death due to respiratory or cardiac arrest.”

What else happened in 1902:

Empire

First celebration of Empire Day (renamed “Commonwealth Day” in 1959).

Joseph Chamberlain advocates return to Protection and Imperial Preference.

Anglo-German fleet seizes Venezuelan fleet to recover debts and reparations.

Peace of Vereeniging, ends Boer War.

Britain



Salisbury resigns, succeeded as PM by Arthur Balfour.

Anglo-Japanese Treaty for mutual defense and to maintain status quo in Far East.

◀ Sir Giles Gilbert Scott designs Liverpool Cathedral.

Institution of the Order of Merit for distinguished service to the state; limited to 24 holders at one time.

Education Act abolishes School Board system. Local control goes to town and county councils.

Secondary Education authorized out of rates.

British Academy granted Royal Charter.

Esperanto introduced to England.

Establishment of Metropolitan Water Board, supplying London.

Arthur Conan Doyle is knighted.

World

Franco-Italian secret treaty; Italy to remain neutral if France were attacked by a third power.

Failure of second Belgian General Strike.

Italian designs on Tripoli conditionally approved by France and Austria.



F.A. Krupp takes over Germania shipbuilding yard at Kiel; great armaments firm develops.

◀ Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria, and Italy) renewed to 1914.

Russo-Japanese Convention, Russia agrees to evacuate Manchuria in 18 months.

French work day reduced to 9½ hours.

Public Health Act in France improves artisan living conditions.

White settlement of Kenya begins.

St. Pierre, Martinique, destroyed by earthquake.

Abdul Hamid gives Germany concessions to build railway to Baghdad; rail system to stretch from Hamburg to the Persian Gulf.

Tientsin Sanitary Police established; first Chinese public health measure.

Art

Conan Doyle publishes *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Kipling publishes *Just So Stories*.

Arthur Edward Woodley Mason publishes *The Four Feathers*.

Beatrix Potter publishes *Peter Rabbit*.

Enrico Caruso makes his first gramophone record—154 recordings in all.

Gauguin paints *The Call*.

Debussy composes *Pelléas et Mélisandé*.

Picasso paints *Nude, Back View*.

Elgar composes *Coronation Ode*.

Science and Technology

Wireless telegraphy applied to ships.

Trans-Pacific Cable laid.

Completion of Aswan Dam in Egypt.

Next week's case: DYIN.

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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