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Arthur Conan Doyle

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The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax

By

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

"But why Turkish?" asked Mr. Sherlock Holmes, gazing fixedly at my

boots. I was reclining in a cane-backed chair at the moment, and my

protruded feet had attracted his ever-active attention.

"English," I answered in some surprise. "I got them at Latimer's, in

Oxford Street."

Holmes smiled with an expression of weary patience.

"The bath!" he said; "the bath! Why the relaxing and expensive Turkish

rather than the invigorating home-made article?"

"Because for the last few days I have been feeling rheumatic and old. A

Turkish bath is what we call an alterative in medicine--a fresh

starting-point, a cleanser of the system.

"By the way, Holmes," I added, "I have no doubt the connection between

my boots and a Turkish bath is a perfectly self-evident one to a

logical mind, and yet I should be obliged to you if you would indicate

it."

"The train of reasoning is not very obscure, Watson," said Holmes with

a mischievous twinkle. "It belongs to the same elementary class of

deduction which I should illustrate if I were to ask you who shared

your cab in your drive this morning."

"I don't admit that a fresh illustration is an explanation," said I

with some asperity.

"Bravo, Watson! A very dignified and logical remonstrance. Let me

see, what were the points? Take the last one first--the cab. You

observe that you have some splashes on the left sleeve and shoulder of

your coat. Had you sat in the centre of a hansom you would probably

have had no splashes, and if you had they would certainly have been

symmetrical. Therefore it is clear that you sat at the side.

Therefore it is equally clear that you had a companion."

"That is very evident."

"Absurdly commonplace, is it not?"

"But the boots and the bath?"

"Equally childish. You are in the habit of doing up your boots in a

certain way. I see them on this occasion fastened with an elaborate

double bow, which is not your usual method of tying them. You have,

therefore, had them off. Who has tied them? A bootmaker--or the boy

at the bath. It is unlikely that it is the bootmaker, since your boots

are nearly new. Well, what remains? The bath. Absurd, is it not?

But, for all that, the Turkish bath has served a purpose."

"What is that?"

"You say that you have had it because you need a change. Let me

suggest that you take one. How would Lausanne do, my dear

Watson--first-class tickets and all expenses paid on a princely scale?"

"Splendid! But why?"

Holmes leaned back in his armchair and took his notebook from his

pocket.

"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. I much fear that some evil has come

to the Lady Frances Carfax."

I was relieved at this sudden descent from the general to the

particular. Holmes consulted his notes.

"Lady Frances," he continued, "is the sole survivor of the direct

family of the late Earl of Rufton. The estates went, as you may

remember, in the male line. 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--too attached, for she

refused to leave them with her banker and always carried them about

with her. A rather pathetic figure, the Lady Frances, a beautiful

woman, still in fresh middle age, and yet, by a strange change, the

last derelict of what only twenty years ago was a goodly fleet."

"What has happened to her, then?"

"Ah, what has happened to the Lady Frances? Is she alive or dead?

There is our problem. She is a lady of precise habits, and for four

years it has been her invariable custom to write every second week to

Miss Dobney, her old governess, who has long retired and lives in

Camberwell. It is this Miss Dobney who has consulted me. Nearly five

weeks have passed without a word. The last letter was from the Hotel

National at Lausanne. Lady Frances seems to have left there and given

no address. The family are anxious, and as they are exceedingly

wealthy no sum will be spared if we can clear the matter up."

"Is Miss Dobney the only source of information? Surely she had other

correspondents?"

"There is one correspondent who is a sure draw, Watson. That is the

bank. Single ladies must live, and their passbooks are compressed

diaries. She banks at Silvester's. I have glanced over her account.

The last check but one paid her bill at Lausanne, but it was a large

one and probably left her with cash in hand. Only one check has been

drawn since."

"To whom, and where?"

"To Miss Marie Devine. There is nothing to show where the check was

drawn. It was cashed at the Credit Lyonnais at Montpellier less than

three weeks ago. The sum was fifty pounds."

"And who is Miss Marie Devine?"

"That also I have been able to discover. Miss Marie Devine was the

maid of Lady Frances Carfax. Why she should have paid her this check

we have not yet determined. I have no doubt, however, that your

researches will soon clear the matter up."

"MY researches!"

"Hence the health-giving expedition to Lausanne. 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. Go,

then, my dear Watson, and if my humble counsel can ever be valued at so

extravagant a rate as two pence a word, it waits your disposal night

and day at the end of the Continental wire."

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. Lady Frances, as he informed me, had stayed there for several

weeks. She had been much liked by all who met her. Her age was not

more than forty. She was still handsome and bore every sign of having

in her youth been a very lovely woman. M. Moser knew nothing of any

valuable jewellery, but it had been remarked by the servants that the

heavy trunk in the lady's bedroom was always scrupulously locked.

Marie Devine, the maid, was as popular as her mistress. She was

actually engaged to one of the head waiters in the hotel, and there was

no difficulty in getting her address. It was 11 Rue de Trajan,

Montpellier. All this I jotted down and felt that Holmes himself could

not have been more adroit in collecting his facts.

Only one corner still remained in the shadow. No light which I

possessed could clear up the cause for the lady's sudden departure.

She was very happy at Lausanne. There was every reason to believe that

she intended to remain for the season in her luxurious rooms

overlooking the lake. And yet she had left at a single day's notice,

which involved her in the useless payment of a week's rent. Only Jules

Vibart, the lover of the maid, had any suggestion to offer. He

connected the sudden departure with the visit to the hotel a day or two

before of a tall, dark, bearded man. "Un sauvage--un veritable

sauvage!" cried Jules Vibart. The man had rooms somewhere in the town.

He had been seen talking earnestly to Madame on the promenade by the

lake. Then he had called. She had refused to see him. He was

English, but of his name there was no record. Madame had left the

place immediately afterwards. Jules Vibart, and, what was of more

importance, Jules Vibart's sweetheart, thought that this call and the

departure were cause and effect. Only one thing Jules would not

discuss. That was the reason why Marie had left her mistress. Of that

he could or would say nothing. If I wished to know, I must go to

Montpellier and ask her.

So ended the first chapter of my inquiry. The second was devoted to

the place which Lady Frances Carfax had sought when she left Lausanne.

Concerning this there had been some secrecy, which confirmed the idea

that she had gone with the intention of throwing someone off her track.

Otherwise why should not her luggage have been openly labelled for

Baden? Both she and it reached the Rhenish spa by some circuitous

route. This much I gathered from the manager of Cook's local office.

So to Baden I went, after dispatching to Holmes an account of all my

proceedings and receiving in reply a telegram of half-humorous

commendation.

At Baden the track was not difficult to follow. Lady Frances had

stayed at the Englischer Hof for a fortnight. While there she had made

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. She had helped Mrs. Shlessinger in the nursing of the

convalescent saint. He spent his day, as the manager described it to

me, upon a lounge-chair on the veranda, with an attendant lady upon

either side of him. He was preparing a map of the Holy Land, with

special reference to the kingdom of the Midianites, upon which he was

writing a monograph. Finally, having improved much in health, he and

his wife had returned to London, and Lady Frances had started thither

in their company. This was just three weeks before, and the manager

had heard nothing since. As to the maid, Marie, she had gone off some

days beforehand in floods of tears, after informing the other maids

that she was leaving service forever. Dr. Shlessinger had paid the

bill of the whole party before his departure.

"By the way," said the landlord in conclusion, "you are not the only

friend of Lady Frances Carfax who is inquiring after her just now.

Only a week or so ago we had a man here upon the same errand."

"Did he give a name?" I asked.

"None; but he was an Englishman, though of an unusual type."

"A savage?" said I, linking my facts after the fashion of my

illustrious friend.

"Exactly. That describes him very well. He is a bulky, bearded,

sunburned fellow, who looks as if he would be more at home in a

farmers' inn than in a fashionable hotel. A hard, fierce man, I should

think, and one whom I should be sorry to offend."

Already the mystery began to define itself, as figures grow clearer

with the lifting of a fog. 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. Had he already overtaken her?

Was THAT the secret of her continued silence? Could the good people

who were her companions not screen her from his violence or his

blackmail? What horrible purpose, what deep design, lay behind this

long pursuit? There was the problem which I had to solve.

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--indeed, I had already reached Montpellier in my pursuit

of the maid, Marie, before his message came.

I had no difficulty in finding the ex-servant and in learning all that

she could tell me. She was a devoted creature, who had only left her

mistress because she was sure that she was in good hands, and because

her own approaching marriage made a separation inevitable in any case.

Her mistress had, as she confessed with distress, shown some

irritability of temper towards her during their stay in Baden, and had

even questioned her once as if she had suspicions of her honesty, and

this had made the parting easier than it would otherwise have been.

Lady Frances had given her fifty pounds as a wedding-present. Like me,

Marie viewed with deep distrust the stranger who had driven her

mistress from Lausanne. With her own eyes she had seen him seize the

lady's wrist with great violence on the public promenade by the lake.

He was a fierce and terrible man. She believed that it was out of

dread of him that Lady Frances had accepted the escort of the

Shlessingers to London. She had never spoken to Marie about it, but

many little signs had convinced the maid that her mistress lived in a

state of continual nervous apprehension. So far she had got in her

narrative, when suddenly she sprang from her chair and her face was

convulsed with surprise and fear. "See!" she cried. "The miscreant

follows still! There is the very man of whom I speak."

Through the open sitting-room window I saw a huge, swarthy man with a

bristling black beard walking slowly down the centre of the street and

staring eagerly at the numbers of the houses. It was clear that, like

myself, he was on the track of the maid. Acting upon the impulse of the

moment, I rushed out and accosted him.

"You are an Englishman," I said.

"What if I am?" he asked with a most villainous scowl.

"May I ask what your name is?"

"No, you may not," said he with decision.

The situation was awkward, but the most direct way is often the best.

"Where is the Lady Frances Carfax?" I asked.

He stared at me with amazement.

"What have you done with her? Why have you pursued her? I insist upon

an answer!" said I.

The fellow gave a bellow of anger and sprang upon me like a tiger. I

have held my own in many a struggle, but the man had a grip of iron and

the fury of a fiend. His hand was on my throat and my senses were

nearly gone before an unshaven French ouvrier in a blue blouse darted

out from a cabaret opposite, with a cudgel in his hand, and struck my

assailant a sharp crack over the forearm, which made him leave go his

hold. He stood for an instant fuming with rage and uncertain whether

he should not renew his attack. Then, with a snarl of anger, he left me

and entered the cottage from which I had just come. I turned to thank

my preserver, who stood beside me in the roadway.

"Well, Watson," said he, "a very pretty hash you have made of it! I

rather think you had better come back with me to London by the night

express."

An hour afterwards, Sherlock Holmes, in his usual garb and style, was

seated in my private room at the hotel. His explanation of his sudden

and opportune appearance was simplicity itself, for, finding that he

could get away from London, he determined to head me off at the next

obvious point of my travels. In the disguise of a workingman he had

sat in the cabaret waiting for my appearance.

"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."

"Perhaps you would have done no better," I answered bitterly.

"There is no 'perhaps' about it. I HAVE done better. Here is the Hon.

Philip Green, who is a fellow-lodger with you in this hotel, and we may

find him the starting-point for a more successful investigation."

A card had come up on a salver, and it was followed by the same bearded

ruffian who had attacked me in the street. He started when he saw me.

"What is this, Mr. Holmes?" he asked. "I had your note and I have

come. But what has this man to do with the matter?"

"This is my old friend and associate, Dr. Watson, who is helping us in

this affair."

The stranger held out a huge, sunburned hand, with a few words of

apology.

"I hope I didn't harm you. When you accused me of hurting her I lost

my grip of myself. Indeed, I'm not responsible in these days. My

nerves are like live wires. But this situation is beyond me. What I

want to know, in the first place, Mr. Holmes, is, how in the world you

came to hear of my existence at all."

"I am in touch with Miss Dobney, Lady Frances's governess."

"Old Susan Dobney with the mob cap! I remember her well."

"And she remembers you. It was in the days before--before you found it

better to go to South Africa."

"Ah, I see you know my whole story. I need hide nothing from you. I

swear to you, Mr. Holmes, that there never was in this world a man who

loved a woman with a more wholehearted love than I had for Frances. 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. When the years had passed and I had made my money

at Barberton I thought perhaps I could seek her out and soften her. I

had heard that she was still unmarried, 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. I traced her to Baden, and

then after a time heard that her maid was here. I'm a rough fellow,

fresh from a rough life, and when Dr. Watson spoke to me as he did I

lost hold of myself for a moment. But for God's sake tell me what has

become of the Lady Frances."

"That is for us to find out," said Sherlock Holmes with peculiar

gravity. "What is your London address, Mr. Green?"

"The Langham Hotel will find me."

"Then may I recommend that you return there and be on hand in case I

should want you? I have no desire to encourage false hopes, but you

may rest assured that all that can be done will be done for the safety

of Lady Frances. I can say no more for the instant. I will leave you

this card so that you may be able to keep in touch with us. Now,

Watson, if you will pack your bag I will cable to Mrs. Hudson to make

one of her best efforts for two hungry travellers at 7:30 to-morrow."

A telegram was awaiting us when we reached our Baker Street rooms,

which Holmes read with an exclamation of interest and threw across to

me. "Jagged or torn," was the message, and the place of origin, Baden.

"What is this?" I asked.

"It is everything," Holmes answered. "You may remember my seemingly

irrelevant question as to this clerical gentleman's left ear. You did

not answer it."

"I had left Baden and could not inquire."

"Exactly. For this reason I sent a duplicate to the manager of the

Englischer Hof, whose answer lies here."

"What does it show?"

"It shows, my dear Watson, that we are dealing with an exceptionally

astute and dangerous man. The Rev. Dr. Shlessinger, missionary from

South America, is none other than 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. 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. The nature of his tactics suggested his

identity to me, and this physical peculiarity--he was badly bitten in a

saloon-fight at Adelaide in '89--confirmed my suspicion. This poor

lady is in the hands of a most infernal couple, who will stick at

nothing, Watson. That she is already dead is a very likely

supposition. If not, she is undoubtedly in some sort of confinement

and unable to write to Miss Dobney or her other friends. 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. All my instincts tell me that she is in

London, but as we have at present no possible means of telling where,

we can only take the obvious steps, eat our dinner, and possess our

souls in patience. Later in the evening I will stroll down and have a

word with friend Lestrade at Scotland Yard."

But neither the official police nor Holmes's own small but very

efficient organization sufficed to clear away the mystery. Amid the

crowded millions of London the three persons we sought were as

completely obliterated as if they had never lived. Advertisements were

tried, and failed. Clues were followed, and led to nothing. Every

criminal resort which Shlessinger might frequent was drawn in vain.

His old associates were watched, but they kept clear of him. And then

suddenly, after a week of helpless suspense there came a flash of

light. A silver-and-brilliant pendant of old Spanish design had been

pawned at Bovington's, in Westminster Road. The pawner was a large,

clean-shaven man of clerical appearance. His name and address were

demonstrably false. The ear had escaped notice, but the description

was surely that of Shlessinger.

Three times had our bearded friend from the Langham called for

news--the third time within an hour of this fresh development. His

clothes were getting looser on his great body. He seemed to be wilting

away in his anxiety. "If you will only give me something to do!" was

his constant wail. At last Holmes could oblige him.

"He has begun to pawn the jewels. We should get him now."

"But does this mean that any harm has befallen the Lady Frances?"

Holmes shook his head very gravely.

"Supposing that they have held her prisoner up to now, it is clear that

they cannot let her loose without their own destruction. We must

prepare for the worst."

"What can I do?"

"These people do not know you by sight?"

"No."

"It is possible that he will go to some other pawnbroker in the future.

In that case, we must begin again. On the other hand, he has had a

fair price and no questions asked, so if he is in need of ready-money

he will probably come back to Bovington's. I will give you a note to

them, and they will let you wait in the shop. If the fellow comes you

will follow him home. But no indiscretion, and, above all, no

violence. I put you on your honour that you will take no step without

my knowledge and consent."

For two days the Hon. Philip Green (he was, I may mention, the son of

the famous admiral of that name who commanded the Sea of Azof fleet in

the Crimean War) brought us no news. On the evening of the third he

rushed into our sitting-room, pale, trembling, with every muscle of his

powerful frame quivering with excitement.

"We have him! We have him!" he cried.

He was incoherent in his agitation. Holmes soothed him with a few

words and thrust him into an armchair.

"Come, now, give us the order of events," said he.

"She came only an hour ago. It was the wife, this time, but the

pendant she brought was the fellow of the other. She is a tall, pale

woman, with ferret eyes."

"That is the lady," said Holmes.

"She left the office and I followed her. She walked up the Kennington

Road, and I kept behind her. Presently she went into a shop. Mr.

Holmes, it was an undertaker's."

My companion started. "Well?" he asked in that vibrant voice which

told of the fiery soul behind the cold gray face.

"She was talking to the woman behind the counter. I entered as well.

'It is late,' I heard her say, or words to that effect. The woman was

excusing herself. 'It should be there before now,' she answered. 'It

took longer, being out of the ordinary.' They both stopped and looked

at me, so I asked some questions and then left the shop."

"You did excellently well. What happened next?"

"The woman came out, but I had hid myself in a doorway. Her suspicions

had been aroused, I think, for she looked round her. Then she called a

cab and got in. I was lucky enough to get another and so to follow

her. She got down at last at No. 36, Poultney Square, Brixton. I

drove past, left my cab at the corner of the square, and watched the

house."

"Did you see anyone?"

"The windows were all in darkness save one on the lower floor. The

blind was down, and I could not see in. I was standing there,

wondering what I should do next, when a covered van drove up with two

men in it. They descended, took something out of the van, and carried

it up the steps to the hall door. Mr. Holmes, it was a coffin."

"Ah!"

"For an instant I was on the point of rushing in. The door had been

opened to admit the men and their burden. It was the woman who had

opened it. But as I stood there she caught a glimpse of me, and I

think that she recognized me. I saw her start, and she hastily closed

the door. I remembered my promise to you, and here I am."

"You have done excellent work," said Holmes, scribbling a few words

upon a half-sheet of paper. "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. There may be some difficulty, but I

should think that the sale of the jewellery should be sufficient.

Lestrade will see to all details."

"But they may murder her in the meanwhile. What could the coffin mean,

and for whom could it be but for her?"

"We will do all that can be done, Mr. Green. Not a moment will be

lost. Leave it in our hands. Now Watson," he added as our client

hurried away, "he will set the regular forces on the move. 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. Not a moment is to be lost in getting to Poultney Square.

"Let us try to reconstruct the situation," said he as we drove swiftly

past the Houses of Parliament and over Westminster Bridge. "These

villains have coaxed this unhappy lady to London, after first

alienating her from her faithful maid. If she has written any letters

they have been intercepted. Through some confederate they have engaged

a furnished house. Once inside it, they have made her a prisoner, and

they have become possessed of the valuable jewellery which has been

their object from the first. Already they have begun to sell part of

it, which seems safe enough to them, since they have no reason to think

that anyone is interested in the lady's fate. When she is released she

will, of course, denounce them. Therefore, she must not be released.

But they cannot keep her under lock and key forever. So murder is their

only solution."

"That seems very clear."

"Now we will take another line of reasoning. When you follow two

separate chains of thought, Watson, you will find some point of

intersection which should approximate to the truth. We will start now,

not from the lady but from the coffin and argue backward. That

incident proves, I fear, beyond all doubt that the lady is dead. It

points also to an orthodox burial with proper accompaniment of medical

certificate and official sanction. Had the lady been obviously

murdered, they would have buried her in a hole in the back garden. But

here all is open and regular. What does this mean? 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."

"Could they have forged a medical certificate?"

"Dangerous, Watson, very dangerous. No, I hardly see them doing that.

Pull up, cabby! This is evidently the undertaker's, for we have just

passed the pawnbroker's. Would you go in, Watson? Your appearance

inspires confidence. Ask what hour the Poultney Square funeral takes

place to-morrow."

The woman in the shop answered me without hesitation that it was to be

at eight o'clock in the morning. "You see, Watson, no mystery;

everything above-board! In some way the legal forms have undoubtedly

been complied with, and they think that they have little to fear.

Well, there's nothing for it now but a direct frontal attack. Are you

armed?"

"My stick!"

"Well, well, we shall be strong enough. 'Thrice is he armed who hath

his quarrel just.' We simply can't afford to wait for the police or to

keep within the four corners of the law. You can drive off, cabby.

Now, Watson, we'll just take our luck together, as we have occasionally

in the past."

He had rung loudly at the door of a great dark house in the centre of

Poultney Square. It was opened immediately, and the figure of a tall

woman was outlined against the dim-lit hall.

"Well, what do you want?" she asked sharply, peering at us through the

darkness.

"I want to speak to Dr. Shlessinger," said Holmes.

"There is no such person here," she answered, and tried to close the

door, but Holmes had jammed it with his foot.

"Well, I want to see the man who lives here, whatever he may call

himself," said Holmes firmly.

She hesitated. Then she threw open the door. "Well, come in!" said

she. "My husband is not afraid to face any man in the world." She

closed the door behind us and showed us into a sitting-room on the

right side of the hall, turning up the gas as she left us. "Mr. Peters

will be with you in an instant," she said.

Her words were literally true, for we had hardly time to look around

the dusty and moth-eaten apartment in which we found ourselves before

the door opened and a big, clean-shaven bald-headed man stepped lightly

into the room. He had a large red face, with pendulous cheeks, and a

general air of superficial benevolence which was marred by a cruel,

vicious mouth.

"There is surely some mistake here, gentlemen," he said in an unctuous,

make-everything-easy voice. "I fancy that you have been misdirected.

Possibly if you tried farther down the street--"

"That will do; we have no time to waste," said my companion firmly.

"You are Henry Peters, of Adelaide, late the Rev. Dr. Shlessinger, of

Baden and South America. I am as sure of that as that my own name is

Sherlock Holmes."

Peters, as I will now call him, started and stared hard at his

formidable pursuer. "I guess your name does not frighten me, Mr.

Holmes," said he coolly. "When a man's conscience is easy you can't

rattle him. What is your business in my house?"

"I want to know what you have done with the Lady Frances Carfax, whom

you brought away with you from Baden."

"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 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. You find her, Mr.

Holmes, and I'm your debtor."

"I MEAN to find her," said Sherlock Holmes. "I'm going through this

house till I do find her."

"Where is your warrant?"

Holmes half drew a revolver from his pocket. "This will have to serve

till a better one comes."

"Why, you're a common burglar."

"So you might describe me," said Holmes cheerfully. "My companion is

also a dangerous ruffian. And together we are going through your

house."

Our opponent opened the door.

"Fetch a policeman, Annie!" said he. There was a whisk of feminine

skirts down the passage, and the hall door was opened and shut.

"Our time is limited, Watson," said Holmes. "If you try to stop us,

Peters, you will most certainly get hurt. Where is that coffin which

was brought into your house?"

"What do you want with the coffin? It is in use. There is a body in

it."

"I must see the body."

"Never with my consent."

"Then without it." With a quick movement Holmes pushed the fellow to

one side and passed into the hall. A door half opened stood

immediately before us. We entered. It was the dining-room. On the

table, under a half-lit chandelier, the coffin was lying. Holmes

turned up the gas and raised the lid. Deep down in the recesses of the

coffin lay an emaciated figure. The glare from the lights above beat

down upon an aged and withered face. By no possible process of cruelty,

starvation, or disease could this worn-out wreck be the still beautiful

Lady Frances. Holmes's face showed his amazement, and also his relief.

"Thank God!" he muttered. "It's someone else."

"Ah, you've blundered badly for once, Mr. Sherlock Holmes," said

Peters, who had followed us into the room.

"Who is 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. We

brought her round here, called in Dr. Horsom, of 13 Firbank

Villas--mind you take the address, Mr. Holmes--and had her carefully

tended, as Christian folk should. On the third day she

died--certificate says senile decay--but that's only the doctor's

opinion, and of course you know better. We ordered her funeral to be

carried out by Stimson and Co., of the Kennington Road, who will bury

her at eight o'clock to-morrow morning. Can you pick any hole in that,

Mr. Holmes? You've made a silly blunder, and you may as well own up to

it. I'd give something for a photograph of your gaping, staring face

when you pulled aside that lid expecting to see the Lady Frances Carfax

and only found a poor old woman of ninety."

Holmes's expression was as impassive as ever under the jeers of his

antagonist, but his clenched hands betrayed his acute annoyance.

"I am going through your house," said he.

"Are you, though!" cried Peters as a woman's voice and heavy steps

sounded in the passage. "We'll soon see about that. This way,

officers, if you please. These men have forced their way into my

house, and I cannot get rid of them. Help me to put them out."

A sergeant and a constable stood in the doorway. Holmes drew his card

from his case.

"This is my name and address. This is my friend, Dr. Watson."

"Bless you, sir, we know you very well," said the sergeant, "but you

can't stay here without a warrant."

"Of course not. I quite understand that."

"Arrest him!" cried Peters.

"We know where to lay our hands on this gentleman if he is wanted,"

said the sergeant majestically, "but you'll have to go, Mr. Holmes."

"Yes, Watson, we shall have to go."

A minute later we were in the street once more. Holmes was as cool as

ever, but I was hot with anger and humiliation. The sergeant had

followed us.

"Sorry, Mr. Holmes, but that's the law."

"Exactly, Sergeant, you could not do otherwise."

"I expect there was good reason for your presence there. If there is

anything I can do--"

"It's a missing lady, Sergeant, and we think she is in that house. I

expect a warrant presently."

"Then I'll keep my eye on the parties, Mr. Holmes. If anything comes

along, I will surely let you know."

It was only nine o'clock, and we were off full cry upon the trail at

once. First we drove to Brixton Workhouse Infirmary, where we found

that it was indeed the truth that a charitable couple had called some

days before, that they had claimed an imbecile old woman as a former

servant, and that they had obtained permission to take her away with

them. No surprise was expressed at the news that she had since died.

The doctor was our next goal. He had been called in, had found the

woman dying of pure senility, had actually seen her pass away, and had

signed the certificate in due form. "I assure you that everything was

perfectly normal and there was no room for foul play in the matter,"

said he. Nothing in the house had struck him as suspicious save that

for people of their class it was remarkable that they should have no

servant. So far and no further went the doctor.

Finally we found our way to Scotland Yard. 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. If

Holmes would call about nine he could go down with Lestrade and see it

acted upon. So ended the day, save that near midnight our friend, the

sergeant, called to say that he had seen flickering lights here and

there in the windows of the great dark house, but that no one had left

it and none had entered. We could but pray for patience and wait for

the morrow.

Sherlock Holmes was too irritable for conversation and too restless for

sleep. I left him smoking hard, with his heavy, dark brows knotted

together, and his long, nervous fingers tapping upon the arms of his

chair, as he turned over in his mind every possible solution of the

mystery. Several times in the course of the night I heard him prowling

about the house. Finally, just after I had been called in the morning,

he rushed into my room. He was in his dressing-gown, but his pale,

hollow-eyed face told me that his night had been a sleepless one.

"What time was the funeral? Eight, was it not?" he asked eagerly.

"Well, it is 7:20 now. Good heavens, Watson, what has become of any

brains that God has given me? Quick, man, quick! It's life or death--a

hundred chances on death to one on life. I'll never forgive myself,

never, if we are too late!"

Five minutes had not passed before we were flying in a hansom down

Baker Street. But even so it was twenty-five to eight as we passed Big

Ben, and eight struck as we tore down the Brixton Road. But others

were late as well as we. Ten minutes after the hour the hearse was

still standing at the door of the house, and even as our foaming horse

came to a halt the coffin, supported by three men, appeared on the

threshold. Holmes darted forward and barred their way.

"Take it back!" he cried, laying his hand on the breast of the

foremost. "Take it back this instant!"

"What the devil do you mean? Once again I ask you, where is your

warrant?" shouted the furious Peters, his big red face glaring over the

farther end of the coffin.

"The warrant is on its way. The coffin shall remain in the house until

it comes."

The authority in Holmes's voice had its effect upon the bearers. Peters

had suddenly vanished into the house, and they obeyed these new orders.

"Quick, Watson, quick! Here is a screw-driver!" he shouted as the

coffin was replaced upon the table. "Here's one for you, my man! A

sovereign if the lid comes off in a minute! Ask no questions--work

away! That's good! Another! And another! Now pull all together!

It's giving! It's giving! Ah, that does it at last."

With a united effort we tore off the coffin-lid. As we did so there

came from the inside a stupefying and overpowering smell of chloroform.

A body lay within, its head all wreathed in cotton-wool, which had been

soaked in the narcotic. Holmes plucked it off and disclosed the

statuesque face of a handsome and spiritual woman of middle age. In an

instant he had passed his arm round the figure and raised her to a

sitting position.

"Is she gone, Watson? Is there a spark left? Surely we are not too

late!"

For half an hour it seemed that we were. What with actual suffocation,

and what with the poisonous fumes of the chloroform, the Lady Frances

seemed to have passed the last point of recall. And then, at last, with

artificial respiration, with injected ether, and with every device that

science could suggest, some flutter of life, some quiver of the

eyelids, some dimming of a mirror, spoke of the slowly returning life.

A cab had driven up, and Holmes, parting the blind, looked out at it.

"Here is Lestrade with his warrant," said he. "He will find that his

birds have flown. And here," he added as a heavy step hurried along

the passage, "is someone who has a better right to nurse this lady than

we have. Good morning, Mr. Green; I think that the sooner we can move

the Lady Frances the better. Meanwhile, the funeral may proceed, and

the poor old woman who still lies in that coffin may go to her last

resting-place alone."

"Should you care to add the case to your annals, my dear Watson," said

Holmes that evening, "it can only be as an example of that temporary

eclipse to which even the best-balanced mind may be exposed. Such

slips are common to all mortals, and the greatest is he who can

recognize and repair them. To this modified credit I may, perhaps,

make some claim. My night was haunted by the thought that somewhere a

clue, a strange sentence, a curious observation, had come under my

notice and had been too easily dismissed. Then, suddenly, in the gray

of the morning, the words came back to me. It was the remark of the

undertaker's wife, as reported by Philip Green. She had said, 'It

should be there before now. It took longer, being out of the

ordinary.' It was the coffin of which she spoke. It had been out of

the ordinary. That could only mean that it had been made to some

special measurement. But why? Why? Then in an instant I remembered

the deep sides, and the little wasted figure at the bottom. Why so

large a coffin for so small a body? To leave room for another body.

Both would be buried under the one certificate. It had all been so

clear, if only my own sight had not been dimmed. At eight the Lady

Frances would be buried. Our one chance was to stop the coffin before

it left the house.

"It was a desperate chance that we might find her alive, but it WAS a

chance, as the result showed. These people had never, to my knowledge,

done a murder. They might shrink from actual violence at the last.

The could bury her with no sign of how she met her end, and even if she

were exhumed there was a chance for them. I hoped that such

considerations might prevail with them. You can reconstruct the scene

well enough. You saw the horrible den upstairs, where the poor lady

had been kept so long. They rushed in and overpowered her with their

chloroform, carried her down, poured more into the coffin to insure

against her waking, and then screwed down the lid. A clever device,

Watson. It is new to me in the annals of crime. If our ex-missionary

friends escape the clutches of Lestrade, I shall expect to hear of some

brilliant incidents in their future career."

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