



## Spain and Sherlock Holmes

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### **Spanish Silver and Spanish Eyes?: A Speculation on Lady Frances Carfax's Family**

by Antonio J. Iriarte

If Holmes's vivid description of her situation is to be relied on, Lady Frances Carfax certainly led an aimless and lonely life. And we know that Holmes was, albeit a little theatrical at times, not prone to exaggeration. The unfortunate love affair between Lady Frances and the Honourable Philip Green explains her isolated and wandering life only up to a point: having chosen to remain single for the love of Philip Green, she would understandably refrain from leading a very active life, but why would she stay apart from her own family? At no point in his narrative of the case does Watson say why, nor does he imply that this situation arose from Lady Frances's personal choice.

A first, although rather unlikely, explanation may easily be proposed. Perhaps the courting of that "wild youngster" in "The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax" (LADY) by Philip Green was not the innocent affair that he would have had Holmes believe. If there had been some scandal at the time, it would most certainly account for the unfortunate woman's ostracism by her family. However, Lady Frances Carfax's spotless character is well attested to by several witnesses, not the least of whom is Holmes himself, in that he based his conclusions on personal investigations rather than on hearsay. There must, therefore, have been some other reasons for the "drifting and friendless" life of Lady Frances.

We are told that she is "the sole survivor of the direct family of the late Earl of Rufton," who may well have been her father. There was no direct heir to the estate, which descended through "the male line," and Lady Frances was therefore "left with limited means." We may reasonably assume that the title and properties were inherited by a more-or-less distant cousin. Holmes's services had probably been retained by the present Earl of Rufton. Watson is told that Lady Frances's families "are anxious" on her account, and that, being "exceedingly wealthy," they are ready to spare no sum to have her disappearance cleared up. And yet they will not act personally, but rather prefer to have a

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third party take the necessary steps. This is an additional indication of the existence of an estrangement between Lady Frances and her relatives.<sup>1</sup>

Everything that we learn about the missing lady points to her being a person of strong pride and determination. After her father's death, it is unlikely that she would have accepted her cousin's hospitality, even if it were tendered, and so live as a guest in what used to be her home. On the other hand, it is possible that the new Earl of Rufton did not care greatly for a middle-aged spinster with, as he might think, a dubious past. It may be held that the lady's independent character points rather to her voluntary estrangement from her family, although it is also quite clear from the text that she was not much loved by them, and it can be suggested that the anxiety which the family felt was dictated more by social considerations than by ties of affection. After all, it was to her old governess, Miss Dobney, that Lady Frances wrote regularly, not to her cousins, and it was Miss Dobney herself who consulted Holmes, although his fees were to be paid by the family.

Is there anything else which we may deduce from the text about the history of the family of Lady Frances? Several scholars have noted that the title Earl of Rufton is "a disguised, non-existent title,"<sup>2</sup> so there is little or no hope of tracing any information on the family and its properties in the usual archives or reference sources on the peerage, at least until further research results in the identification of the real title of the Earl of Rufton. Nevertheless, Watson's account of the case provides us with a most revealing detail on the family background: Lady Frances had inherited "some very remarkable old Spanish jewelry of silver and curiously cut diamonds." This jewelry was almost certainly the main cause of Lady Frances's abduction, and it may have consisted of extremely valuable family heirlooms. It is customary for such jewelry to be passed down through matrilineal succession. This seems to have been the case here, for we know that Lady Frances was "fondly attached" to her jewelry, and that she "always carried [it] about with her." We may, then, safely assume that the jewels had belonged to her mother, and possibly to her grandmother before her.

The most remarkable fact about this jewelry, however, is that it was Spanish in origin — something which tends to indicate that there must have been a particularly strong connection between the forebears of Lady Frances and Spain. A marriage link suggests itself, but other explanations can be advanced. The jewels might, for instance, have come into the family as a result of war, as booty. There is no need to go back to the time of Drake or to the buccaneers on the Spanish Main to find a suitable occasion for such an acquisition; it could have taken place just as easily during the more recent Peninsular War (1808-14), which saw many English officers fighting against Napoleon in Spain.

There is, apparently, textual evidence which might be used in support of the proposal that Lady Frances was of Spanish descent. Although the manuscript of LADY is in the hands of a private collector and not readily available for scholarly examination,<sup>3</sup> Donald Redmond seems to have had access to details of its contents, for he mentions, in his *Sherlock Holmes: A Study in Sources*, that

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<sup>1</sup> In his editorial annotations to this case, Owen Dudley Edwards suggests that this was "a commonplace situation in wealthy households at the time," but this is only a statement of fact, and hardly an explanation. Conan Doyle, A. [Edwards, O.D.]. *His Last Bow*, Oxford University Press, 1993, 209.

<sup>2</sup> CC-LADY: Conan Doyle, A. [Weller, P.L.-Ed] *The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax*, Sherlock Publications, 1995, 36.

<sup>3</sup> According to Peter Blau's updates to his *A Brief Census of the Manuscripts of the Canon*, Spermaceti Press, 1971, as communicated to the author of this article in 1994. The manuscript of LADY was not consulted by Owen Dudley Edwards for *His Last Bow*, from Oxford University Press, or by Philip Weller for CC-LADY from Sherlock Publications.

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Lady Frances was originally called Maria in the manuscript.<sup>4</sup> Maria is a traditional Spanish name if ever there was one, and an infrequent one, on the other hand, in England. Taking these facts into consideration, additional research in the peerage records, looking specifically for families with Spanish blood ties, or for members having taken part in military actions against Spain or on Spanish territory, might perhaps shed some light on the real title disguised behind the Watsonian Earl of Rufton. Until this happens, other possible sources of information should not be disregarded.

It is usually assumed that Watson was responsible for the occasional alterations of personal and place names included in his narratives, normally with a view to protecting Holmes's clients. However, one should never lose sight of the possibility that Watson's literary agent might also have amended the text on his own account; he was, after all the appointed editor. A careful study of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's other literary works is always rewarding in its own right, and it can also often offer valuable material for Canonical research. This is actually the case so far as LADY is concerned, for the other celebrated series of memoirs edited by ACD, those of Etienne Gerard of Hussars of Conflans, offers an unexpected insight into what may be the family of Lady Frances.

Brigadier Gerard took part in the Spanish campaigns of the Napoleonic Wars and, as many readers will know, he was taken prisoner in July 1810 and sent to England. ...

(Continued)

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<sup>4</sup> Redmond, D.A. *Sherlock Holmes: A Study in Sources*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1982, 189. However, it must be said that Redmond does not affirm that he has actually studied the manuscript itself, and a later allusion to Peter Blau would indicate that his evidence is second-hand. I am grateful to Juan A. Requena for bringing this detail to my notice.