

Toast to Dr. Watson
The Three Garridebs – September 22, 2018
Hastings-on-Hudson Public Library, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY

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I have been asked to lead our toast this afternoon to Dr. John H. Watson, the great companion of Sherlock Holmes and beloved chronicler of his adventures. The case we are discussing today – “The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax” – reflects Watson as both friend and writer. The banter between Holmes and Watson at the beginning of the story demonstrates their friendship, and Watson’s recounting of the events is well-written and satisfying.

A more puzzling aspect of the affair is Holmes’s choice of Watson to travel to the Continent and conduct an investigation of Lady Frances’s whereabouts. Holmes asks Watson to assist with his investigatory work several times during the Canon, but rarely if ever does Watson provide the information Holmes is looking for. For example, Holmes sends Watson to Surrey in “The Solitary Cyclist” to do some scouting when Holmes is unable to leave London for himself, but upon hearing Watson’s report, he denounces Watson’s work: “Your hiding place, my dear Watson, was very faulty. As it is, . . . you can tell me even less than Miss Smith.” The tone of Holmes’s comments upsets Watson: ““What should I have done?” I cried with some heat.” Holmes, of course, then proceeds to tell Watson what he should have done. It might, perhaps, have been more useful if Holmes had told Watson that before sending him to Surrey.

In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Holmes again employs Watson as an investigator, this time at Baskerville Hall – but Holmes also conceals himself on the Tor as he places more trust in his own eyes and ears than on Watson’s. In “The Retired Colourman,” Holmes has Watson accompany the client on a visit to the vicar of a remote village. The visit is mere misdirection, but Watson never realizes the fact. After all, in Holmes’s own words, Watson is not himself luminous, though he is a conductor of light.

In “The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax,” Holmes yet again entrusts vital investigative work to Dr. Watson. “I have no doubt that your researches will soon clear the matter up,” Holmes tells Watson, though one suspects that Holmes did seriously doubt it. And indeed, when Holmes follows Watson to Lausanne, his assessment of Watson’s efforts is a predictable one. “Well, Watson, a very pretty hash you have made of it. . . . 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.” Watson responds bitterly that “[p]erhaps you would have done no better,” but Holmes ripostes that he already has done better. He might have done better still by not having entrusted this type of assignment to Watson in the first place. The doctor’s talents lie in other directions.

*So raise a glass to Dr. Watson
He never lost his special touch
As a friend, and as an author –
As a detective, not so much.*