

THE LADY VANISHES

Directed by Alfred Hitchcock
Distributed by Gaumont British Picture Corporation
Released in 1938

Part cautionary tale against appeasement, part mystery, with a little romance thrown in for good measure, *The Lady Vanishes* impresses in spite of itself. Some distracting model work, a dearth of score, a chief villain left unpunished, and a very flaccid climax can be forgiven. The project nearly collapses under the weight of its own whimsy, but an arresting performance by Dame May Whitty as the absconded spy, two delightfully-obtuse Englishmen willing to sacrifice anything for cricket, and an innovative method to smuggling state secrets (through a coded folk song!) save the day. The real fun is trying to determine how an old lady can disappear when her new friend falls asleep. Every passenger claims ignorance—never saw her, they say. It's conspiracy or madness because this is a moving train—she can't just dash off. But since we're not sure if everything that we have seen up to this point, a third of the way through the film, has been objective truth or the subjective impressions of the heroine, we enjoy the double conundrum of wondering if Iris ever met Miss Froy, and if they did meet, marveling at what could have become of the kindly governess. Particularly pernicious is the introduction of a lady that superficially resembles Miss Froy, and it is this lady whom everybody insists Iris has mistaken for a missing person: Oh, yeah—*that* must have been the lady you were talking about. But nothing can stand in Iris's way, and the audience can readily identify with her relentless pursuit of the truth, as she's motivated to prove her sanity and to save her new friend. Finally, she does prove it's all a conspiracy, but at that point the fun's just started.

The film has a touch of the supernatural. Iris, for a time doubting her convictions and resolved to forget the whole ugly business, sees tangible proof of her sanity—F-R-O-Y—scrawled on a greasy window. Sharing her find with doubting compatriot Gilbert, the writing is suddenly gone. But minutes later a wrapper, from the tea Miss Froy insisted on being served, is momentarily pinned against another window as trash is pitched off the train. Gilbert sees it, and from that moment on the pair are inseparable. Finally convinced of the truth of her story, they not only have to be careful of who they will trust in this mass-conspiracy, but they also have to hide the fun they are having. Unraveling a cracking-good mystery while falling in love proves an unbeatable combination.

But the biggest mystery is still the flower pot that falls onto Iris's head. Was it intended for Miss Froy? Or did Miss Froy somehow provide for its fall so she would have a compatriot on her risky journey? After all, Miss Froy does drop her glasses (purposely?), glasses which Iris immediately return, only to be hit on the head for her efforts. If the pot was intended to kill Miss Froy, why bandage her up later—why hide her instead of just throwing her off the train while Iris sleeps? And if the pot was merely intended to knock her out then the question becomes either: Why not wait to knock her out on the train, in private? (if they have to get her on to it anyway); or, why wait until right before the train is to leave, rather than nabbing the old lady when she's still at the inn? It's very peculiar, and given the tight control Hitchcock

maintains over his stories, he's probably not cutting corners with this development. The director may be suggesting that this perplexity hints at something deeper.