

An Observance Of Trifles

You know my method. It is founded upon the observance of trifles.

(Arthur Conan Doyle)

snell's interminable ramblings about the canon

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XVI -- The Adventure of Cardboard Box

The Adventure Of The Cardboard Box--Too Scandalous To Reprint?!?

All right, so now we move on to **The Adventure of The Cardboard Box**.

Wait...*what*? You think that **The Yellow Face** is supposed to be next?

Well, there's a reason this is so confusing, even though we ultimately don't know what that reason is.

I'm tackling the stories in publication order, which in most cases is the same order the stories appear in the various collections.

But not in *this* case. Although Cardboard Box was published in **The Strand** *after Silver Blaze* and *before* Yellow Face, the story was completely omitted in the first British publication of **The Memoirs Of Sherlock Holmes**.

Odder still, the story *was* included in the first *American* edition of Memoirs. But that edition was almost immediately replaced with a "new" and "revised" edition that *removed* Cardboard Box.

The Cardboard Box was eventually published again in America, reprinted in the **His Last Bow** collection, two decades later.

Eventually sense prevailed, and British publishers eventually restored Cardboard Box to future editions of Memoirs. But to this day, most American-published version keep Cardboard Box with His Last Bow.

What's the deal? Amazingly enough, no one seems to know for sure. Various theories abound, without any actual proof or documentation. Some suggest that **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** himself had the story removed because it involved adultery, and thus was *not appropriate* for younger readers. The story goes that the American publisher missed that memo, and quickly issued a new edition in line with Doyle's wishes so they wouldn't miss out on publishing his future works.



Others have suggested it was the somewhat *graphic, violent subject matter*--a brutal double murder, body parts severed--that Doyle and/or publishers thought rendered it too controversial and scandalous for readers.

Doyle, who was rarely shy about discussing the stories and their shortcomings, *never* mentioned the issue in his memoirs or letters. As far as I'm aware, we've never had the actual explanation from any party that might actually know--just speculation at the odd publishing behavior.

So, is Cardboard Box "*too scandalous*"? Does the adultery, or the violence, make it unsuitable for young readers, or American audiences of the era?

Obviously I'm not a Victorian, but it's difficult to see how. So far into the **Canon**, we've had *several* stories dealing with bigamy--just the prior story, *Silver Blaze*, in fact--and bigamy is just adultery that someone tried to illegally cover with an extra marriage. **Straker/Derbyshire** obviously did commit adultery...is his having two wives somehow less salacious than a married person having an affair without the "cover" of a second wedlock? Yet that story was reprinted in *Memoirs* with no problem.

Of course, Cardboard Box does show a married *woman* having an affair, and single *woman* trying to start an affair with a married man. Not to put too fine a point on it, but perhaps it was the portrayal of *female lust and adultery*, as discreet and restrained as these depictions may seem by modern standards, that made Cardboard Box too unsavory for Doyle and/or publishers. Victorian double standards and all that.

As to the violence? We've seen plenty of murders in the Canon up to now, including people *dying horribly by poisoned blow dart and writhing in agony from snake venom*. And we've seen people *have body parts severed* in attempted murders. Perhaps it was the postmortem removal of the ears, the desecration of corpses, that made Cardboard Box so controversial to someone. And perhaps it was the mode of these killings--a red-hot crime of passion, with a drunken, jealous man bashing two peoples heads in with a club--that made the murders too "real" for Doyle's tastes. Rather than fantastical locked room killing with exotic tools, **Jim Browner's** actions were just nasty and brutish and all too real-world.

Yes, it's a tawdry, sad story...but is it really any worse than many other in the Canon?

I'm not aware of any protests or poor reaction to Cardboard Box's initial publication in *The Strand*--nothing that would justify burying the story. But in the months between then and the collection of the stories for *Memoirs*, Doyle (or his publishers?) had second thoughts for some reason. Did they receive complaints? Was their pressure from somewhere? Or did they somehow decide that the story just went too far (even though, by our lights, it certainly doesn't seem as though it did). We'll probably never know exactly why.

[*Completely wild-***-guess theory: Sherlock* would surely chide me for theorizing with facts. But it strikes me as possible that Doyle perhaps based this story on a real life tragedy--it wouldn't be the only time he had done so.

And perhaps some of the parties involved were less than pleased, and legal action was threatened. And perhaps not reprinting the story for 20+ years was part of the settlement. Just a thought.]

Thankfully, someone *finally* thought better of the self-censorship, or else one of Sherlock Holmes' best mysteries might have become lost to time. Now the biggest problem Cardboard Box presents is figuring out *which* collection the story is in--which depends on which side of the ocean your edition was published.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVANCES:

***Another* substantial piece of confusion caused by this story? The opening bit, where Sherlock performs like **Poe's Dupin** and predicts **Watson's** thoughts after a long silence? Well, Doyle or the editors must have decided that the bit was *too good to lose* when they decided not to reprint Cardboard Box. So they basically *cut and paste the entire sequence* onto the beginning of The Resident Patient! And even more confusingly, when Cardboard Box was restored to His Last Bow, they *left* the opening sequence there, without returning Resident Patient to its original status!! To this day, many collections have not restored Resident Patient to its original form!

So, depending upon your edition of the collected works, you very well might have the exact opening sequence in two different Holmes stories!!

***This* is also an era when there is some *confusion* over the exact titles of stories. Most sources have no "*prefix*" appended to most of the story titles: **The Resident Patient**, The Cardboard Box, etc. Other editions append "**The Adventure Of**" to the beginning of every title *except* Silver Blaze. And some can't even be consistent about it, with the title listed in the table of contents not matching the title version they use in the actual story. Quite annoying, really.

***Possibly* more than any story, Cardboard Box makes **Lestrade** look like a *pathetic little worm*. It's bad enough to be a poor thinker, but to try and steal Holmes' reasoning as his own?

It starts with his not asking Holmes to come out to Croyden: "*We have every hope of clearing the matter up, but we find a little difficulty in getting anything to work upon.*" So, a particularly unhumane way of saying, "*the case is easy, but we have no idea where to start.*" Lestrade is too arrogant to actually admit he needs help.

He goes on to brush aside every suggestion Holmes gives him: about the knot, the string, the paper, the state of the ears, etc. He rejects Holmes' ideas out of hand.

Yet when Holmes hands him the solution, his face *lights up*--and if you read it the way I do, part of that delight is that Holmes has asked not to get any credit in the press for the case! More glory for Lestrade!

And when the "*obtuse but resolute*" Lestrade sends Holmes a letter outlining the results of the investigation, well...

In accordance with the scheme which we had formed in order to test our theories ["the 'we' is rather fine, Watson, is it not?"]...The affair proves, as I always thought it would, to be an extremely simple one...

What a weasel. He rejects Holmes' advice at every turn, but then claims the credit--even to Holmes himself!!

The **Granada adaptation is noteworthy because it is **Jeremy Brett's** last performance as Holmes. We miss you, Jeremy.

Unfortunately, the TV version is also notable because, for reasons unknown, they decided to *completely take the mystery out of it*. In the Cardboard Box story, Holmes notes that it is another case where they were "compelled to reason backwards from effects to causes." None of that for Granada, as they start off with the wedding of Jim Browner and **Mary Cushing**, and immediately follow that with a scene of Browner stalking Mary and **Alec Fairbairn**. We also see **Susan Cushing** finding out that Mary is missing, and trying to hire Holmes to find her! In other words, all of the mystery is taken out for the viewers; Holmes is just trying to find out what we've already been shown, and there's really no mystery left about who's ears are in the box! In the meantime, the production focuses on the melodrama. Boo!

Also, the story has been changed from August to December, so Susan Cushing opens the box of ears *at a Christmas party*!! Yay!

**We haven't had many untold tales teased to us lately, but finally we have one--not from Watson, but Lestrade, as he mentions "Aldrige, who helped us in *the bogus laundry affair*."

**Watson, seeming to respond to prior criticism from Holmes on his choice of story and manner of presentation: "*It is, however, unfortunately impossible entirely to separate the sensational from the criminal.*" It would be difficult, for example, to present the facts of this case without sensationalism.

**Watson was *so broke* that he had to postpone a holiday. Patients not paying their bills, or is the practice not yet fully established? Or, perhaps, too much gambling on the ponies...

**Watson describes Holmes' preference for the city:

He loved to lie in the very center of five millions of people, with his filaments stretching out and running through them, responsive to every little rumour or suspicion of unsolved crime.

Careful, Doctor--that sounds very like how Holmes will describe **Moriarty** in just a few months. Are they really just two sides of the same coin?

**One flaw in Doyle's plot is this: if Browner believed that both Susan and Sarah still resided at the same address, why didn't he *specifically* address the package to Sarah, as opposed to just "*Miss S. Cushing*"? Did Browner not realize that *both* Susan and Sarah start with an S?!? We still might very well have had the wrong party open the package, even if Sarah did still live there!

**One flaw in Doyle's melodrama, at least to me, is that we never actually *meet* Sarah Cushing, and see her reaction to these events, as she is the instigator of much of what happens. Her falling into "*brain fever*" is a bit of a dramatic cop-out; it's shorthand for "*she feels guilty and awful*" without actually having to show any such thing. It ends up letting her character off the hook much too easily.

Additionally, while we do the whole story from Browner, a murderous, drunken animal might not be the most reliable narrator of events.

**Speaking of "brain fever," this is the second time we've encountered it in the Canon, and it won't be the last. Debate continues amongst commentators whether it was a real malady, or some creation of Victorian literature. As a physician, one would think that Doyle would be describing an actual medical condition--albeit one not properly diagnosed by the medicine of the day (perhaps even a psychosomatic/mental reaction to great stress--no one ever seems to come down with brain fever unless they're experiencing some type of crisis in their life...?)

**Susan Cushing is...well, she's a pretty *brittle, mean-spirited spinster*. Granted, *nobody* would be thrilled with finding two severed ears in the post, especially if they were completely in the dark about their origin.

But every single word she speaks is a complaint about how *inconvenient* and *annoying* the whole experience has been for her, and why can't everyone just go away and leave her alone!! "Oh, I am weary of questions!"? Lady, it's a double homicide!!

We sadly never see her informed that one of the ears belongs to murdered sister...somehow I expect Susan would be grouching about how Mary had gotten herself killed just to annoy her and cause her inconvenience.

Holmes is quite excited that "*he had purchased his own Stradivarius, which was worth at least five hundred guineas...for fifty-five shillings.*" Assuming it was indeed a real Stradivarius, and not one of many authorized copies that were around at the time, it's a pretty great deal--akin to finding a copy of **Action Comics #1 at a garage sale. "Strad" violins have sold for as much as *\$16 million* at auctions in the past few years...

****Holmes' speech at end is a great bit of existential despair:**

What is the meaning of it, Watson?" said Holmes solemnly as he laid down the paper. "What object is served by this circle of misery and violence and fear? It must tend to some end, or else our universe is ruled by chance, which is unthinkable. But what end? There is the great standing perennial problem to which human reason is as far from an answer as ever.

Good question, Sherlock. Good question.

Brian Keith Snell

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