



## Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

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

#### SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

On a hot day in August, Holmes gets a letter from Lestrade asking for help in a case. Susan Cushing, a quiet maiden lady of 50 received a cardboard box in the mail containing two human ears. She had no idea where they came from. She rented rooms to medical students in the past and thought she might be the butt of a joke.

Holmes examined the string which had been around the box, the paper in which the box was wrapped, the box (a ½ lb. "Honey Dew" tobacco box), the salt which filled it and the ears. He then interviewed Susan and told Lestrade that he did not want his name associated with the case because he only wanted to be associated with difficult cases. After



sending a telegram and receiving a reply, he gave Lestrade the name of the murderer and where he could be found. Naturally, Lestrade took full credit for solving the case.

Susan and Sara had lived together until very recently. Sara was very mean and vindictive. Mary was married to Jim. Sara went to stay with them. Sara propositioned Jim but was spurned. Her love for him turned to hate. She moved a couple blocks away and had a boyfriend, Alec. Sara planted seeds of doubt in Mary's mind about Jim's fidelity. Sara then threw Alec and Mary together and they had an affair. Jim caught them and killed them. He meant the ears for Sara. He addressed the box to "Miss S. Cushing," but since Sara had recently moved out, Susan received them.

We are not told of Browner's fate but execution is inferred. Sara was suffering from brain fever when we last heard of her.

## **SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)**

Holmes, Watson and Lestrade visit Susan Cushing, who has just received by mail two human ears in a cardboard box. Susan says that James Browner, a steward who married his younger sister, Mary, while drinking, had a fight with Mary and Sarah, Susan's second sister.

The three men tried in vain to meet Sarah at her home but she was supposedly sick. Then Holmes asked Lestrade to arrest Browner as soon as he arrived in London. Browner confessed that Sarah had made advances to him, but when she was rejected, she managed to convince Mary that her husband was cheating on her, Mary fell in love with another sailor, Alec Fairbain.

Browner followed his wife and Fairbain to New Brighton where he murdered them. He cut off one ear to each and sent the macabre package to the address where he thought Sarah Cushing was living. However, only Susan Cushing lived there.

## **SUMMARY (Wikipedia)**

Miss Susan Cushing of Croydon receives a parcel in the post that contains two severed human ears packed in coarse salt. Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard suspects a prank by three medical students whom Miss Cushing was forced to evict because of their unruly behaviour. The parcel was sent from Belfast, the city of origin of one of the former boarders. Upon examining the parcel himself, Holmes is convinced that it is evidence of a serious crime. He reasons that a medical student with access to a dissection laboratory would likely use something other than plain salt to preserve human remains, and would be able to make a more precise cut than the roughly hacked ears suggest. The address on the package, roughly written and with a spelling correction, suggests to Holmes that the sender lacks education and is unfamiliar with Croydon. The knot in the string suggests to Holmes that they are looking for someone with sailing experience.

Holmes considers the solution so simple that he asks Lestrade not to mention his name in connection with it. A few simple questions to Miss Cushing, a few observations, a cable to Liverpool, and a visit to Miss Cushing's sister Sarah (Holmes was denied admittance by the doctor because she was having a "brain fever") convince Holmes that the ears belong to Miss Cushing's other sister, Mary, and her extramarital lover, and that they have been murdered. He is convinced that Mary's estranged husband, Jim Browner, is the murderer, and that Browner had sent the cardboard box containing the ears to the Cushings' house in Croydon (addressing it merely to "S. Cushing"), not realizing that Sarah was no longer resident there. Browner, who is an unpleasant man when drunk, had meant to horrify Sarah (rather than Susan) because he ultimately blamed Sarah for causing the trouble that culminated in his murder of his wife and her lover.

Browner is indeed a sailor, and Belfast was the first port where he had the chance to post the parcel. Lestrade, acting on Holmes's information, is waiting to arrest him when his ship reaches London. He confesses everything. He is presented with considerable sympathy, a simple man so tormented by guilt at his act that he would welcome being hanged. The real villain of the story—morally if not legally—is Sarah Cushing, who fell in love with and tried to seduce Browner herself; then, when he rejected her advances, set out to wreck his marriage with her sister Mary, by poisoning her mind to her own husband and by introducing and pushing her onto a new lover, which she easily took to, especially given her husband's propensity for getting drunk (and being rather rough when so intoxicated). In the end, her husband's inability to accept her betrayal, and sheer jealousy at discovering the affair, causes him to commit what Holmes considers a "crime of passion".