



The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XVI -- The Adventure of the Cardboard Box

This may not qualify as a great detective story in the classic sense of clever clues that result in a surprise solution. It may not be considered one of the greatest of the Sherlock Holmes stories, where we seem to prize most those stories with suspenseful vigils and legendary villains. But consider how deftly this week's story leads us from the fantastic contents of the cardboard box into a lesson in how inevitable human passions and failings can lead to tragedy. Then take time to marvel at how subtly the mood changes from Holmes's initial eagerness and flippancy to his heartfelt summation of the case — and our lives generally.

The story begins with the famous mind-reading episode that we have already seen in "The Resident Patient," but here we find it in its original and proper home. It is a clever scene, to be sure, but why did Watson choose to report it rather than to commence the story of "The Cardboard Box" immediately after the apology/teaser of the opening paragraph? As an additional, or perhaps an alternative question, why did Holmes choose to spend so much time on the mind-reading episode before he got around to asking Watson if he wanted to go to Croydon?

In his crazed jealousy, Jim Browner cut and mailed his victims' ears under the power of his own suggestion — the threat he had made to Sarah Cushing. (Though his original threat had only mentioned Fairbairn's ear, in fact.) Why the ears? I seem to recall an ear-cropping incident in the Brigadier Gerard stories, too. Was this a common extra-legal punishment at one time? Did ear-slicing enjoy a "European vogue?"



The story also begins with a reference to Watson's "depleted bank account," and with a newspaper article located "under the financial column." Are these money references an oblique hint to the reader

concerning another possible money matter? That is, was Sarah Cushing a sometime prostitute? When she “let lodgings to sailors,” was this a euphemism for running a house of ill repute? Was it her intention to recruit her pretty sister Mary into the profession? Was there a plan in the works for Fairbairn to compromise Mary in an effort to make her more willing to go along with Sarah’s business plans?

And speaking of mind over matter: Do you think that Mary Browner and Alec Fairbairn ever actually consummated their relationship? Mary was obviously not overly perceptive, or she would have seen her sister’s attraction to Jim, and been more aware of Sarah’s subsequent efforts to cause trouble between husband and wife. Is it possible that Mary was such an innocent that she truly saw no harm in a friendship with a man other than her husband, especially if that friendship was endorsed by her big sister?

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