



The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XVI – The Adventure of the Cardboard Box

Susan Cushing was an elderly maiden lady who had, by her own estimate, not an enemy in the world. She lived by herself in a neat, prim little house in Croyden, knitting antimacassars and tending to no one's business other than her own. It was quite a shock to her, therefore, when she opened a box which had been mailed to "S. Cushing" at her address and found inside a pair of freshly-severed human ears, packed in coarse salt.

It appeared to be a grisly prank at first, and Inspector Lestrade was inclined to consider it as only that, but just to make sure he called upon the services of Sherlock Holmes. After a careful examination of the box and its macabre contents, Holmes was inclined to believe that a brutal double murder had occurred. After questioning the irritable Miss Cushing at some length, he was positive that this was the true situation.

This is possibly one of the most melancholy of Holmes' cases; it is also one of the easier ones he had to solve. Indeed, it well may have been resolved by Jim Browner himself, given his mental state at the time of his arrest and his willingness to unburden himself of his load of guilt and self-loathing.



Watson mentions that a depleted bank account had forced him to defer his vacation ("holiday"). What might have brought his finances to that sorry state? Was summer the horse-racing season?

At the time of the American Civil War, Watson, believed to have been born in 1852, was little more than a stripling. Yet his memory of Henry Ward Beecher's mission to England in 1863 (on behalf of the North)

was so vivid that years later he would express “passionate indignation” over the negative way in which Beecher was received by many Britons. Was such a powerful sentiment, involving international politics as it did, likely to be raised in the breast of an 11-year-old boy?

Was 500 guineas a reasonable valuation for a Stradivarius violin in those times? Before you answer, consider that while there are numerous Stradivarii, only a comparative few are of the quality that makes them in high demand by virtuoso performers. Also consider that these few all have “pedigrees,” and their whereabouts was for the most part known and their numbers accounted for, so that it is unlikely that one would be found at the stall of a Tottenham Court Road pedlar.

Jim Browner’s narrative confession leaves the impression that Alec Fairbairn was the aggressor in pursuing Mary Cushing Browner. But couldn’t it have been Mary who first pursued Fairbairn? Wasn’t it possible that she had a roving eye even before Browner fell off the wagon? And why, if Mary loved her husband as deeply as he believed, would she allow her sister Sarah to poison her relationship with him? Indeed, did Mary Browner deserve the soubriquet of “innocent lamb?”

I wonder how the cab driver knew which house in New Street, Wallington to drive to?

Steve Clarkson

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