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The Adventure of the Cardboard Box

By

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

In choosing a few typical cases which illustrate the remarkable mental

qualities of my friend, Sherlock Holmes, I have endeavoured, as far as

possible, to select those which presented the minimum of

sensationalism, while offering a fair field for his talents. It is,

however, unfortunately impossible entirely to separate the sensational

from the criminal, and a chronicler is left in the dilemma that he must

either sacrifice details which are essential to his statement and so

give a false impression of the problem, or he must use matter which

chance, and not choice, has provided him with. With this short preface

I shall turn to my notes of what proved to be a strange, though a

peculiarly terrible, chain of events.

It was a blazing hot day in August. Baker Street was like an oven, and

the glare of the sunlight upon the yellow brickwork of the house across

the road was painful to the eye. It was hard to believe that these

were the same walls which loomed so gloomily through the fogs of

winter. Our blinds were half-drawn, and Holmes lay curled upon the

sofa, reading and re-reading a letter which he had received by the

morning post. For myself, my term of service in India had trained me

to stand heat better than cold, and a thermometer at ninety was no

hardship. But the morning paper was uninteresting. Parliament had

risen. Everybody was out of town, and I yearned for the glades of the

New Forest or the shingle of Southsea. A depleted bank account had

caused me to postpone my holiday, and as to my companion, neither the

country nor the sea presented the slightest attraction to him. 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. Appreciation of nature

found no place among his many gifts, and his only change was when he

turned his mind from the evil-doer of the town to track down his

brother of the country.

Finding that Holmes was too absorbed for conversation I had tossed aside

the barren paper, and leaning back in my chair I fell into a brown

study. Suddenly my companion's voice broke in upon my thoughts:

"You are right, Watson," said he. "It does seem a most preposterous

way of settling a dispute."

"Most preposterous!" I exclaimed, and then suddenly realizing how he

had echoed the inmost thought of my soul, I sat up in my chair and

stared at him in blank amazement.

"What is this, Holmes?" I cried. "This is beyond anything which I

could have imagined."

He laughed heartily at my perplexity.

"You remember," said he, "that some little time ago when I read you the

passage in one of Poe's sketches in which a close reasoner follows the

unspoken thoughts of his companion, you were inclined to treat the

matter as a mere tour-de-force of the author. On my remarking that I

was constantly in the habit of doing the same thing you expressed

incredulity."

"Oh, no!"

"Perhaps not with your tongue, my dear Watson, but certainly with your

eyebrows. So when I saw you throw down your paper and enter upon a

train of thought, I was very happy to have the opportunity of reading

it off, and eventually of breaking into it, as a proof that I had been

in rapport with you."

But I was still far from satisfied. "In the example which you read to

me," said I, "the reasoner drew his conclusions from the actions of the

man whom he observed. If I remember right, he stumbled over a heap of

stones, looked up at the stars, and so on. But I have been seated

quietly in my chair, and what clues can I have given you?"

"You do yourself an injustice. The features are given to man as the

means by which he shall express his emotions, and yours are faithful

servants."

"Do you mean to say that you read my train of thoughts from my

features?"

"Your features and especially your eyes. Perhaps you cannot yourself

recall how your reverie commenced?"

"No, I cannot."

"Then I will tell you. After throwing down your paper, which was the

action which drew my attention to you, you sat for half a minute with a

vacant expression. Then your eyes fixed themselves upon your newly

framed picture of General Gordon, and I saw by the alteration in your

face that a train of thought had been started. But it did not lead

very far. Your eyes flashed across to the unframed portrait of Henry

Ward Beecher which stands upon the top of your books. Then you glanced

up at the wall, and of course your meaning was obvious. You were

thinking that if the portrait were framed it would just cover that bare

space and correspond with Gordon's picture there."

"You have followed me wonderfully!" I exclaimed.

"So far I could hardly have gone astray. But now your thoughts went

back to Beecher, and you looked hard across as if you were studying the

character in his features. Then your eyes ceased to pucker, but you

continued to look across, and your face was thoughtful. You were

recalling the incidents of Beecher's career. I was well aware that you

could not do this without thinking of the mission which he undertook on

behalf of the North at the time of the Civil War, for I remember your

expressing your passionate indignation at the way in which he was

received by the more turbulent of our people. You felt so strongly

about it that I knew you could not think of Beecher without thinking of

that also. When a moment later I saw your eyes wander away from the

picture, I suspected that your mind had now turned to the Civil War,

and when I observed that your lips set, your eyes sparkled, and your

hands clenched I was positive that you were indeed thinking of the

gallantry which was shown by both sides in that desperate struggle. But

then, again, your face grew sadder, you shook your head. You were

dwelling upon the sadness and horror and useless waste of life. Your

hand stole towards your own old wound and a smile quivered on your

lips, which showed me that the ridiculous side of this method of

settling international questions had forced itself upon your mind. At

this point I agreed with you that it was preposterous and was glad to

find that all my deductions had been correct."

"Absolutely!" said I. "And now that you have explained it, I confess

that I am as amazed as before."

"It was very superficial, my dear Watson, I assure you. I should not

have intruded it upon your attention had you not shown some incredulity

the other day. But I have in my hands here a little problem which may

prove to be more difficult of solution than my small essay in thought

reading. Have you observed in the paper a short paragraph referring to

the remarkable contents of a packet sent through the post to Miss

Cushing, of Cross Street, Croydon?"

"No, I saw nothing."

"Ah! then you must have overlooked it. Just toss it over to me. Here

it is, under the financial column. Perhaps you would be good enough to

read it aloud."

I picked up the paper which he had thrown back to me and read the

paragraph indicated. It was headed, "A Gruesome Packet."

"Miss Susan Cushing, living at Cross Street, Croydon, has been made the

victim of what must be regarded as a peculiarly revolting practical

joke unless some more sinister meaning should prove to be attached to

the incident. At two o'clock yesterday afternoon a small packet,

wrapped in brown paper, was handed in by the postman. A cardboard box

was inside, which was filled with coarse salt. On emptying this, Miss

Cushing was horrified to find two human ears, apparently quite freshly

severed. The box had been sent by parcel post from Belfast upon the

morning before. There is no indication as to the sender, and the

matter is the more mysterious as Miss Cushing, who is a maiden lady of

fifty, has led a most retired life, and has so few acquaintances or

correspondents that it is a rare event for her to receive anything

through the post. Some years ago, however, when she resided at Penge,

she let apartments in her house to three young medical students, whom

she was obliged to get rid of on account of their noisy and irregular

habits. The police are of opinion that this outrage may have been

perpetrated upon Miss Cushing by these youths, who owed her a grudge

and who hoped to frighten her by sending her these relics of the

dissecting-rooms. Some probability is lent to the theory by the fact

that one of these students came from the north of Ireland, and, to the

best of Miss Cushing's belief, from Belfast. In the meantime, the

matter is being actively investigated, Mr. Lestrade, one of the very

smartest of our detective officers, being in charge of the case."

"So much for the Daily Chronicle," said Holmes as I finished reading.

"Now for our friend Lestrade. I had a note from him this morning, in

which he says:

"I think that this case is very much in your line. We have every hope

of clearing the matter up, but we find a little difficulty in getting

anything to work upon. We have, of course, wired to the Belfast

post-office, but a large number of parcels were handed in upon that

day, and they have no means of identifying this particular one, or of

remembering the sender. The box is a half-pound box of honeydew

tobacco and does not help us in any way. The medical student theory

still appears to me to be the most feasible, but if you should have a

few hours to spare I should be very happy to see you out here. I shall

be either at the house or in the police-station all day.

"What say you, Watson? Can you rise superior to the heat and run down

to Croydon with me on the off chance of a case for your annals?"

"I was longing for something to do."

"You shall have it then. Ring for our boots and tell them to order a

cab. I'll be back in a moment when I have changed my dressing-gown and

filled my cigar-case."

A shower of rain fell while we were in the train, and the heat was far

less oppressive in Croydon than in town. Holmes had sent on a wire, so

that Lestrade, as wiry, as dapper, and as ferret-like as ever, was

waiting for us at the station. A walk of five minutes took us to Cross

Street, where Miss Cushing resided.

It was a very long street of two-story brick houses, neat and prim,

with whitened stone steps and little groups of aproned women gossiping

at the doors. Halfway down, Lestrade stopped and tapped at a door,

which was opened by a small servant girl. Miss Cushing was sitting in

the front room, into which we were ushered. She was a placid-faced

woman, with large, gentle eyes, and grizzled hair curving down over her

temples on each side. A worked antimacassar lay upon her lap and a

basket of coloured silks stood upon a stool beside her.

"They are in the outhouse, those dreadful things," said she as Lestrade

entered. "I wish that you would take them away altogether."

"So I shall, Miss Cushing. I only kept them here until my friend, Mr.

Holmes, should have seen them in your presence."

"Why in my presence, sir?"

"In case he wished to ask any questions."

"What is the use of asking me questions when I tell you I know nothing

whatever about it?"

"Quite so, madam," said Holmes in his soothing way. "I have no doubt

that you have been annoyed more than enough already over this business."

"Indeed I have, sir. I am a quiet woman and live a retired life. It is

something new for me to see my name in the papers and to find the

police in my house. I won't have those things in here, Mr. Lestrade.

If you wish to see them you must go to the outhouse."

It was a small shed in the narrow garden which ran behind the house.

Lestrade went in and brought out a yellow cardboard box, with a piece

of brown paper and some string. There was a bench at the end of the

path, and we all sat down while Homes examined one by one, the articles

which Lestrade had handed to him.

"The string is exceedingly interesting," he remarked, holding it up to

the light and sniffing at it. "What do you make of this string,

Lestrade?"

"It has been tarred."

"Precisely. It is a piece of tarred twine. You have also, no doubt,

remarked that Miss Cushing has cut the cord with a scissors, as can be

seen by the double fray on each side. This is of importance."

"I cannot see the importance," said Lestrade.

"The importance lies in the fact that the knot is left intact, and that

this knot is of a peculiar character."

"It is very neatly tied. I had already made a note of that effect,"

said Lestrade complacently.

"So much for the string, then," said Holmes, smiling, "now for the box

wrapper. Brown paper, with a distinct smell of coffee. What, did you

not observe it? I think there can be no doubt of it. Address printed

in rather straggling characters: 'Miss S. Cushing, Cross Street,

Croydon.' Done with a broad-pointed pen, probably a J, and with very

inferior ink. The word 'Croydon' has been originally spelled with an

'i', which has been changed to 'y'. The parcel was directed, then, by

a man--the printing is distinctly masculine--of limited education and

unacquainted with the town of Croydon. So far, so good! The box is a

yellow, half-pound honeydew box, with nothing distinctive save two

thumb marks at the left bottom corner. It is filled with rough salt of

the quality used for preserving hides and other of the coarser

commercial purposes. And embedded in it are these very singular

enclosures."

He took out the two ears as he spoke, and laying a board across his

knee he examined them minutely, while Lestrade and I, bending forward

on each side of him, glanced alternately at these dreadful relics and

at the thoughtful, eager face of our companion. Finally he returned

them to the box once more and sat for a while in deep meditation.

"You have observed, of course," said he at last, "that the ears are not

a pair."

"Yes, I have noticed that. But if this were the practical joke of some

students from the dissecting-rooms, it would be as easy for them to

send two odd ears as a pair."

"Precisely. But this is not a practical joke."

"You are sure of it?"

"The presumption is strongly against it. Bodies in the

dissecting-rooms are injected with preservative fluid. These ears bear

no signs of this. They are fresh, too. They have been cut off with a

blunt instrument, which would hardly happen if a student had done it.

Again, carbolic or rectified spirits would be the preservatives which

would suggest themselves to the medical mind, certainly not rough salt.

I repeat that there is no practical joke here, but that we are

investigating a serious crime."

A vague thrill ran through me as I listened to my companion's words and

saw the stern gravity which had hardened his features. This brutal

preliminary seemed to shadow forth some strange and inexplicable horror

in the background. Lestrade, however, shook his head like a man who is

only half convinced.

"There are objections to the joke theory, no doubt," said he, "but

there are much stronger reasons against the other. We know that this

woman has led a most quiet and respectable life at Penge and here for

the last twenty years. She has hardly been away from her home for a

day during that time. Why on earth, then, should any criminal send her

the proofs of his guilt, especially as, unless she is a most consummate

actress, she understands quite as little of the matter as we do?"

"That is the problem which we have to solve," Holmes answered, "and for

my part I shall set about it by presuming that my reasoning is correct,

and that a double murder has been committed. One of these ears is a

woman's, small, finely formed, and pierced for an earring. The other

is a man's, sun-burned, discoloured, and also pierced for an earring.

These two people are presumably dead, or we should have heard their

story before now. To-day is Friday. The packet was posted on Thursday

morning. The tragedy, then, occurred on Wednesday or Tuesday, or

earlier. If the two people were murdered, who but their murderer would

have sent this sign of his work to Miss Cushing? We may take it that

the sender of the packet is the man whom we want. But he must have some

strong reason for sending Miss Cushing this packet. What reason then?

It must have been to tell her that the deed was done! or to pain her,

perhaps. But in that case she knows who it is. Does she know? I

doubt it. If she knew, why should she call the police in? She might

have buried the ears, and no one would have been the wiser. That is

what she would have done if she had wished to shield the criminal. But

if she does not wish to shield him she would give his name. There is a

tangle here which needs straightening out." He had been talking in a

high, quick voice, staring blankly up over the garden fence, but now he

sprang briskly to his feet and walked towards the house.

"I have a few questions to ask Miss Cushing," said he.

"In that case I may leave you here," said Lestrade, "for I have another

small business on hand. I think that I have nothing further to learn

from Miss Cushing. You will find me at the police-station."

"We shall look in on our way to the train," answered Holmes. A moment

later he and I were back in the front room, where the impassive lady

was still quietly working away at her antimacassar. She put it down on

her lap as we entered and looked at us with her frank, searching blue

eyes.

"I am convinced, sir," she said, "that this matter is a mistake, and

that the parcel was never meant for me at all. I have said this

several times to the gentlemen from Scotland Yard, but he simply laughs

at me. I have not an enemy in the world, as far as I know, so why

should anyone play me such a trick?"

"I am coming to be of the same opinion, Miss Cushing," said Holmes,

taking a seat beside her. "I think that it is more than probable--" He

paused, and I was surprised, on glancing round to see that he was

staring with singular intentness at the lady's profile. Surprise and

satisfaction were both for an instant to be read upon his eager face,

though when she glanced round to find out the cause of his silence he

had become as demure as ever. I stared hard myself at her flat,

grizzled hair, her trim cap, her little gilt earrings, her placid

features; but I could see nothing which could account for my

companion's evident excitement.

"There were one or two questions--"

"Oh, I am weary of questions!" cried Miss Cushing impatiently.

"You have two sisters, I believe."

"How could you know that?"

"I observed the very instant that I entered the room that you have a

portrait group of three ladies upon the mantelpiece, one of whom is

undoubtedly yourself, while the others are so exceedingly like you that

there could be no doubt of the relationship."

"Yes, you are quite right. Those are my sisters, Sarah and Mary."

"And here at my elbow is another portrait, taken at Liverpool, of your

younger sister, in the company of a man who appears to be a steward by

his uniform. I observe that she was unmarried at the time."

"You are very quick at observing."

"That is my trade."

"Well, you are quite right. But she was married to Mr. Browner a few

days afterwards. He was on the South American line when that was

taken, but he was so fond of her that he couldn't abide to leave her

for so long, and he got into the Liverpool and London boats."

"Ah, the Conqueror, perhaps?"

"No, the May Day, when last I heard. Jim came down here to see me

once. That was before he broke the pledge; but afterwards he would

always take drink when he was ashore, and a little drink would send him

stark, staring mad. Ah! it was a bad day that ever he took a glass in

his hand again. First he dropped me, then he quarrelled with Sarah,

and now that Mary has stopped writing we don't know how things are

going with them."

It was evident that Miss Cushing had come upon a subject on which she

felt very deeply. Like most people who lead a lonely life, she was shy

at first, but ended by becoming extremely communicative. She told us

many details about her brother-in-law the steward, and then wandering

off on the subject of her former lodgers, the medical students, she

gave us a long account of their delinquencies, with their names and

those of their hospitals. Holmes listened attentively to everything,

throwing in a question from time to time.

"About your second sister, Sarah," said he. "I wonder, since you are

both maiden ladies, that you do not keep house together."

"Ah! you don't know Sarah's temper or you would wonder no more. I tried

it when I came to Croydon, and we kept on until about two months ago,

when we had to part. I don't want to say a word against my own sister,

but she was always meddlesome and hard to please, was Sarah."

"You say that she quarrelled with your Liverpool relations."

"Yes, and they were the best of friends at one time. Why, she went up

there to live in order to be near them. And now she has no word hard

enough for Jim Browner. The last six months that she was here she

would speak of nothing but his drinking and his ways. He had caught

her meddling, I suspect, and given her a bit of his mind, and that was

the start of it."

"Thank you, Miss Cushing," said Holmes, rising and bowing. "Your

sister Sarah lives, I think you said, at New Street, Wallington?

Good-bye, and I am very sorry that you should have been troubled over a

case with which, as you say, you have nothing whatever to do."

There was a cab passing as we came out, and Holmes hailed it.

"How far to Wallington?" he asked.

"Only about a mile, sir."

"Very good. Jump in, Watson. We must strike while the iron is hot.

Simple as the case is, there have been one or two very instructive

details in connection with it. Just pull up at a telegraph office as

you pass, cabby."

Holmes sent off a short wire and for the rest of the drive lay back in

the cab, with his hat tilted over his nose to keep the sun from his

face. Our drive pulled up at a house which was not unlike the one which

we had just quitted. My companion ordered him to wait, and had his

hand upon the knocker, when the door opened and a grave young gentleman

in black, with a very shiny hat, appeared on the step.

"Is Miss Cushing at home?" asked Holmes.

"Miss Sarah Cushing is extremely ill," said he. "She has been

suffering since yesterday from brain symptoms of great severity. As her

medical adviser, I cannot possibly take the responsibility of allowing

anyone to see her. I should recommend you to call again in ten days."

He drew on his gloves, closed the door, and marched off down the street.

"Well, if we can't we can't," said Holmes, cheerfully.

"Perhaps she could not or would not have told you much."

"I did not wish her to tell me anything. I only wanted to look at her.

However, I think that I have got all that I want. Drive us to some

decent hotel, cabby, where we may have some lunch, and afterwards we

shall drop down upon friend Lestrade at the police-station."

We had a pleasant little meal together, during which Holmes would talk

about nothing but violins, narrating with great exultation how he had

purchased his own Stradivarius, which was worth at least five hundred

guineas, at a Jew broker's in Tottenham Court Road for fifty-five

shillings. This led him to Paganini, and we sat for an hour over a

bottle of claret while he told me anecdote after anecdote of that

extraordinary man. The afternoon was far advanced and the hot glare

had softened into a mellow glow before we found ourselves at the

police-station. Lestrade was waiting for us at the door.

"A telegram for you, Mr. Holmes," said he.

"Ha! It is the answer!" He tore it open, glanced his eyes over it,

and crumpled it into his pocket. "That's all right," said he.

"Have you found out anything?"

"I have found out everything!"

"What!" Lestrade stared at him in amazement. "You are joking."

"I was never more serious in my life. A shocking crime has been

committed, and I think I have now laid bare every detail of it."

"And the criminal?"

Holmes scribbled a few words upon the back of one of his visiting cards

and threw it over to Lestrade.

"That is the name," he said. "You cannot effect an arrest until

to-morrow night at the earliest. I should prefer that you do not

mention my name at all in connection with the case, as I choose to be

only associated with those crimes which present some difficulty in

their solution. Come on, Watson." We strode off together to the

station, leaving Lestrade still staring with a delighted face at the

card which Holmes had thrown him.

"The case," said Sherlock Holmes as we chatted over our cigars that

night in our rooms at Baker Street, "is one where, as in the

investigations which you have chronicled under the names of 'A Study in

Scarlet' and of 'The Sign of Four,' we have been compelled to reason

backward from effects to causes. I have written to Lestrade asking him

to supply us with the details which are now wanting, and which he will

only get after he had secured his man. That he may be safely trusted

to do, for although he is absolutely devoid of reason, he is as

tenacious as a bulldog when he once understands what he has to do, and

indeed, it is just this tenacity which has brought him to the top at

Scotland Yard."

"Your case is not complete, then?" I asked.

"It is fairly complete in essentials. We know who the author of the

revolting business is, although one of the victims still escapes us.

Of course, you have formed your own conclusions."

"I presume that this Jim Browner, the steward of a Liverpool boat, is

the man whom you suspect?"

"Oh! it is more than a suspicion."

"And yet I cannot see anything save very vague indications."

"On the contrary, to my mind nothing could be more clear. Let me run

over the principal steps. We approached the case, you remember, with

an absolutely blank mind, which is always an advantage. We had formed

no theories. We were simply there to observe and to draw inferences

from our observations. What did we see first? A very placid and

respectable lady, who seemed quite innocent of any secret, and a

portrait which showed me that she had two younger sisters. It

instantly flashed across my mind that the box might have been meant for

one of these. I set the idea aside as one which could be disproved or

confirmed at our leisure. Then we went to the garden, as you remember,

and we saw the very singular contents of the little yellow box.

"The string was of the quality which is used by sail-makers aboard

ship, and at once a whiff of the sea was perceptible in our

investigation. When I observed that the knot was one which is popular

with sailors, that the parcel had been posted at a port, and that the

male ear was pierced for an earring which is so much more common among

sailors than landsmen, I was quite certain that all the actors in the

tragedy were to be found among our seafaring classes.

"When I came to examine the address of the packet I observed that it

was to Miss S. Cushing. Now, the oldest sister would, of course, be

Miss Cushing, and although her initial was 'S' it might belong to one

of the others as well. In that case we should have to commence our

investigation from a fresh basis altogether. I therefore went into the

house with the intention of clearing up this point. I was about to

assure Miss Cushing that I was convinced that a mistake had been made

when you may remember that I came suddenly to a stop. The fact was

that I had just seen something which filled me with surprise and at the

same time narrowed the field of our inquiry immensely.

"As a medical man, you are aware, Watson, that there is no part of the

body which varies so much as the human ear. Each ear is as a rule

quite distinctive and differs from all other ones. In last year's

Anthropological Journal you will find two short monographs from my pen

upon the subject. I had, therefore, examined the ears in the box with

the eyes of an expert and had carefully noted their anatomical

peculiarities. Imagine my surprise, then, when on looking at Miss

Cushing I perceived that her ear corresponded exactly with the female

ear which I had just inspected. The matter was entirely beyond

coincidence. There was the same shortening of the pinna, the same

broad curve of the upper lobe, the same convolution of the inner

cartilage. In all essentials it was the same ear.

"In the first place, her sister's name was Sarah, and her address had

until recently been the same, so that it was quite obvious how the

mistake had occurred and for whom the packet was meant. Then we heard

of this steward, married to the third sister, and learned that he had

at one time been so intimate with Miss Sarah that she had actually gone

up to Liverpool to be near the Browners, but a quarrel had afterwards

divided them. This quarrel had put a stop to all communications for

some months, so that if Browner had occasion to address a packet to

Miss Sarah, he would undoubtedly have done so to her old address.

"And now the matter had begun to straighten itself out wonderfully. We

had learned of the existence of this steward, an impulsive man, of

strong passions--you remember that he threw up what must have been a

very superior berth in order to be nearer to his wife--subject, too, to

occasional fits of hard drinking. We had reason to believe that his

wife had been murdered, and that a man--presumably a seafaring man--had

been murdered at the same time. Jealousy, of course, at once suggests

itself as the motive for the crime. And why should these proofs of the

deed be sent to Miss Sarah Cushing? Probably because during her

residence in Liverpool she had some hand in bringing about the events

which led to the tragedy. You will observe that this line of boats

call at Belfast, Dublin, and Waterford; so that, presuming that Browner

had committed the deed and had embarked at once upon his steamer, the

May Day, Belfast would be the first place at which he could post his

terrible packet.

"A second solution was at this stage obviously possible, and although I

thought it exceedingly unlikely, I was determined to elucidate it

before going further. An unsuccessful lover might have killed Mr. and

Mrs. Browner, and the male ear might have belonged to the husband.

There were many grave objections to this theory, but it was

conceivable. I therefore sent off a telegram to my friend Algar, of

the Liverpool force, and asked him to find out if Mrs. Browner were at

home, and if Browner had departed in the May Day. Then we went on to

Wallington to visit Miss Sarah.

"I was curious, in the first place, to see how far the family ear had

been reproduced in her. Then, of course, she might give us very

important information, but I was not sanguine that she would. She must

have heard of the business the day before, since all Croydon was

ringing with it, and she alone could have understood for whom the

packet was meant. If she had been willing to help justice she would

probably have communicated with the police already. However, it was

clearly our duty to see her, so we went. We found that the news of the

arrival of the packet--for her illness dated from that time--had such

an effect upon her as to bring on brain fever. It was clearer than

ever that she understood its full significance, but equally clear that

we should have to wait some time for any assistance from her.

"However, we were really independent of her help. Our answers were

waiting for us at the police-station, where I had directed Algar to

send them. Nothing could be more conclusive. Mrs. Browner's house had

been closed for more than three days, and the neighbours were of

opinion that she had gone south to see her relatives. It had been

ascertained at the shipping offices that Browner had left aboard of the

May Day, and I calculate that she is due in the Thames tomorrow night.

When he arrives he will be met by the obtuse but resolute Lestrade, and

I have no doubt that we shall have all our details filled in."

Sherlock Holmes was not disappointed in his expectations. Two days

later he received a bulky envelope, which contained a short note from

the detective, and a typewritten document, which covered several pages

of foolscap.

"Lestrade has got him all right," said Holmes, glancing up at me.

"Perhaps it would interest you to hear what he says.

"My dear Mr. Holmes:

In accordance with the scheme which we had formed in order to test our

theories" ["the 'we' is rather fine, Watson, is it not?"] "I went down

to the Albert Dock yesterday at 6 p.m., and boarded the S.S. May Day,

belonging to the Liverpool, Dublin, and London Steam Packet Company.

On inquiry, I found that there was a steward on board of the name of

James Browner and that he had acted during the voyage in such an

extraordinary manner that the captain had been compelled to relieve him

of his duties. On descending to his berth, I found him seated upon a

chest with his head sunk upon his hands, rocking himself to and fro.

He is a big, powerful chap, clean-shaven, and very swarthy--something

like Aldrige, who helped us in the bogus laundry affair. He jumped up

when he heard my business, and I had my whistle to my lips to call a

couple of river police, who were round the corner, but he seemed to

have no heart in him, and he held out his hands quietly enough for the

darbies. We brought him along to the cells, and his box as well, for

we thought there might be something incriminating; but, bar a big sharp

knife such as most sailors have, we got nothing for our trouble.

However, we find that we shall want no more evidence, for on being

brought before the inspector at the station he asked leave to make a

statement, which was, of course, taken down, just as he made it, by our

shorthand man. We had three copies typewritten, one of which I

enclose. The affair proves, as I always thought it would, to be an

extremely simple one, but I am obliged to you for assisting me in my

investigation. With kind regards,

"Yours very truly,

"G. Lestrade.

"Hum! The investigation really was a very simple one," remarked

Holmes, "but I don't think it struck him in that light when he first

called us in. However, let us see what Jim Browner has to say for

himself. This is his statement as made before Inspector Montgomery at

the Shadwell Police Station, and it has the advantage of being

verbatim."

"'Have I anything to say? Yes, I have a deal to say. I have to make a

clean breast of it all. You can hang me, or you can leave me alone. I

don't care a plug which you do. I tell you I've not shut an eye in

sleep since I did it, and I don't believe I ever will again until I get

past all waking. Sometimes it's his face, but most generally it's

hers. I'm never without one or the other before me. He looks frowning

and black-like, but she has a kind o' surprise upon her face. Ay, the

white lamb, she might well be surprised when she read death on a face

that had seldom looked anything but love upon her before.

"'But it was Sarah's fault, and may the curse of a broken man put a

blight on her and set the blood rotting in her veins! It's not that I

want to clear myself. I know that I went back to drink, like the beast

that I was. But she would have forgiven me; she would have stuck as

close to me as a rope to a block if that woman had never darkened our

door. For Sarah Cushing loved me--that's the root of the business--she

loved me until all her love turned to poisonous hate when she knew that

I thought more of my wife's footmark in the mud than I did of her whole

body and soul.

"'There were three sisters altogether. The old one was just a good

woman, the second was a devil, and the third was an angel. Sarah was

thirty-three, and Mary was twenty-nine when I married. We were just as

happy as the day was long when we set up house together, and in all

Liverpool there was no better woman than my Mary. And then we asked

Sarah up for a week, and the week grew into a month, and one thing led

to another, until she was just one of ourselves.

"'I was blue ribbon at that time, and we were putting a little money

by, and all was as bright as a new dollar. My God, whoever would have

thought that it could have come to this? Whoever would have dreamed it?

"'I used to be home for the week-ends very often, and sometimes if the

ship were held back for cargo I would have a whole week at a time, and

in this way I saw a deal of my sister-in-law, Sarah. She was a fine

tall woman, black and quick and fierce, with a proud way of carrying

her head, and a glint from her eye like a spark from a flint. But when

little Mary was there I had never a thought of her, and that I swear as

I hope for God's mercy.

"'It had seemed to me sometimes that she liked to be alone with me, or

to coax me out for a walk with her, but I had never thought anything of

that. But one evening my eyes were opened. I had come up from the ship

and found my wife out, but Sarah at home. "Where's Mary?" I asked.

"Oh, she has gone to pay some accounts." I was impatient and paced up

and down the room. "Can't you be happy for five minutes without Mary,

Jim?" says she. "It's a bad compliment to me that you can't be

contented with my society for so short a time." "That's all right, my

lass," said I, putting out my hand towards her in a kindly way, but she

had it in both hers in an instant, and they burned as if they were in a

fever. I looked into her eyes and I read it all there. There was no

need for her to speak, nor for me either. I frowned and drew my hand

away. Then she stood by my side in silence for a bit, and then put up

her hand and patted me on the shoulder. "Steady old Jim!" said she,

and with a kind o' mocking laugh, she ran out of the room.

"'Well, from that time Sarah hated me with her whole heart and soul,

and she is a woman who can hate, too. I was a fool to let her go on

biding with us--a besotted fool--but I never said a word to Mary, for I

knew it would grieve her. Things went on much as before, but after a

time I began to find that there was a bit of a change in Mary herself.

She had always been so trusting and so innocent, but now she became

queer and suspicious, wanting to know where I had been and what I had

been doing, and whom my letters were from, and what I had in my

pockets, and a thousand such follies. Day by day she grew queerer and

more irritable, and we had ceaseless rows about nothing. I was fairly

puzzled by it all. Sarah avoided me now, but she and Mary were just

inseparable. I can see now how she was plotting and scheming and

poisoning my wife's mind against me, but I was such a blind beetle that

I could not understand it at the time. Then I broke my blue ribbon and

began to drink again, but I think I should not have done it if Mary had

been the same as ever. She had some reason to be disgusted with me now,

and the gap between us began to be wider and wider. And then this Alec

Fairbairn chipped in, and things became a thousand times blacker.

"'It was to see Sarah that he came to my house first, but soon it was

to see us, for he was a man with winning ways, and he made friends

wherever he went. He was a dashing, swaggering chap, smart and curled,

who had seen half the world and could talk of what he had seen. He was

good company, I won't deny it, and he had wonderful polite ways with

him for a sailor man, so that I think there must have been a time when

he knew more of the poop than the forecastle. For a month he was in

and out of my house, and never once did it cross my mind that harm

might come of his soft, tricky ways. And then at last something made

me suspect, and from that day my peace was gone forever.

"'It was only a little thing, too. I had come into the parlour

unexpected, and as I walked in at the door I saw a light of welcome on

my wife's face. But as she saw who it was it faded again, and she

turned away with a look of disappointment. That was enough for me.

There was no one but Alec Fairbairn whose step she could have mistaken

for mine. If I could have seen him then I should have killed him, for

I have always been like a madman when my temper gets loose. Mary saw

the devil's light in my eyes, and she ran forward with her hands on my

sleeve. "Don't, Jim, don't!" says she. "Where's Sarah?" I asked. "In

the kitchen," says she. "Sarah," says I as I went in, "this man

Fairbairn is never to darken my door again." "Why not?" says she.

"Because I order it." "Oh!" says she, "if my friends are not good

enough for this house, then I am not good enough for it either." "You

can do what you like," says I, "but if Fairbairn shows his face here

again I'll send you one of his ears for a keepsake." She was

frightened by my face, I think, for she never answered a word, and the

same evening she left my house.

"'Well, I don't know now whether it was pure devilry on the part of

this woman, or whether she thought that she could turn me against my

wife by encouraging her to misbehave. Anyway, she took a house just

two streets off and let lodgings to sailors. Fairbairn used to stay

there, and Mary would go round to have tea with her sister and him.

How often she went I don't know, but I followed her one day, and as I

broke in at the door Fairbairn got away over the back garden wall, like

the cowardly skunk that he was. I swore to my wife that I would kill

her if I found her in his company again, and I led her back with me,

sobbing and trembling, and as white as a piece of paper. There was no

trace of love between us any longer. I could see that she hated me and

feared me, and when the thought of it drove me to drink, then she

despised me as well.

"'Well, Sarah found that she could not make a living in Liverpool, so

she went back, as I understand, to live with her sister in Croydon, and

things jogged on much the same as ever at home. And then came this

week and all the misery and ruin.

"'It was in this way. We had gone on the May Day for a round voyage of

seven days, but a hogshead got loose and started one of our plates, so

that we had to put back into port for twelve hours. I left the ship

and came home, thinking what a surprise it would be for my wife, and

hoping that maybe she would be glad to see me so soon. The thought was

in my head as I turned into my own street, and at that moment a cab

passed me, and there she was, sitting by the side of Fairbairn, the two

chatting and laughing, with never a thought for me as I stood watching

them from the footpath.

"'I tell you, and I give you my word for it, that from that moment I

was not my own master, and it is all like a dim dream when I look back

on it. I had been drinking hard of late, and the two things together

fairly turned my brain. There's something throbbing in my head now,

like a docker's hammer, but that morning I seemed to have all Niagara

whizzing and buzzing in my ears.

"'Well, I took to my heels, and I ran after the cab. I had a heavy oak

stick in my hand, and I tell you I saw red from the first; but as I ran

I got cunning, too, and hung back a little to see them without being

seen. They pulled up soon at the railway station. There was a good

crowd round the booking-office, so I got quite close to them without

being seen. They took tickets for New Brighton. So did I, but I got

in three carriages behind them. When we reached it they walked along

the Parade, and I was never more than a hundred yards from them. At

last I saw them hire a boat and start for a row, for it was a very hot

day, and they thought, no doubt, that it would be cooler on the water.

"'It was just as if they had been given into my hands. There was a bit

of a haze, and you could not see more than a few hundred yards. I

hired a boat for myself, and I pulled after them. I could see the blur

of their craft, but they were going nearly as fast as I, and they must

have been a long mile from the shore before I caught them up. The haze

was like a curtain all round us, and there were we three in the middle

of it. My God, shall I ever forget their faces when they saw who was

in the boat that was closing in upon them? She screamed out. He swore

like a madman and jabbed at me with an oar, for he must have seen death

in my eyes. I got past it and got one in with my stick that crushed

his head like an egg. I would have spared her, perhaps, for all my

madness, but she threw her arms round him, crying out to him, and

calling him "Alec." I struck again, and she lay stretched beside him.

I was like a wild beast then that had tasted blood. If Sarah had been

there, by the Lord, she should have joined them. I pulled out my

knife, and--well, there! I've said enough. It gave me a kind of savage

joy when I thought how Sarah would feel when she had such signs as

these of what her meddling had brought about. Then I tied the bodies

into the boat, stove a plank, and stood by until they had sunk. I knew

very well that the owner would think that they had lost their bearings

in the haze, and had drifted off out to sea. I cleaned myself up, got

back to land, and joined my ship without a soul having a suspicion of

what had passed. That night I made up the packet for Sarah Cushing,

and next day I sent it from Belfast.

"'There you have the whole truth of it. You can hang me, or do what

you like with me, but you cannot punish me as I have been punished

already. I cannot shut my eyes but I see those two faces staring at

me--staring at me as they stared when my boat broke through the haze.

I killed them quick, but they are killing me slow; and if I have

another night of it I shall be either mad or dead before morning. You

won't put me alone into a cell, sir? For pity's sake don't, and may

you be treated in your day of agony as you treat me now.'

"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."

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throughout numerous locations. Its business office is located at

809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887, email

business@pglaf.org. Email contact links and up to date contact

information can be found at the Foundation's web site and official

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For additional contact information:

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Chief Executive and Director

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