

THE CARDBOARD BOX

by Terence Faherty

Terence Faherty is primarily known for two series of mystery novels, one featuring former seminarian Owen Keane, the other WWII vet and private-security op Scott Elliott. The latest Scott Elliott novel, *Play a Cold Hand* (2017), received a nomination for the PWA Shamus Award. The author's last story for *EQMM*, "Infinite Uticas," was nominated for a Macavity.

EDITOR'S NOTE

A second cache of notebooks containing early drafts of stories written by Dr. John H. Watson and featuring the doctor's famous friend Sherlock Holmes has been discovered as a result of the Crossrail project, which has created miles of new rail tunnels beneath London. The trove was not recovered from one of these tunnels, as was erroneously reported in the press, but from a building whose basement was slightly damaged by the passage of tunneling equipment. To celebrate the discovery, we are here publishing the first manuscript from the new group to be edited, "The Cardboard Box."

The version of "The Cardboard Box" that Watson eventually published in The Strand Magazine was among the darkest of the Holmes tales. This early draft is markedly less so, demonstrating once again how the doctor melted down and recast his source material. This was done for dramatic effect, but also, in the words of one critic, "to present a version of Holmes that the Victorian Watson considered more suitable for publication."

(As has been our practice, the doctor's rewrite notes and corrections are inserted in the appropriate places in the text in parentheses. In an effort to make this series more useful in the classroom, modern American spelling has been used throughout. No cursive writing has been reproduced.)

* * *

The August morning had turned into a veritable blast furnace, the unrelenting sun making the pavement of Baker Street painful to the eye and even to the thinly shod foot. Holmes and I were passing the time indoors, he with his correspondence and I with the morning paper. Our blinds were only half drawn, the better to admit a fitful breeze, though this was small compensation for the resulting glare. To escape it, I put the paper aside and turned my gaze to a windowless wall, falling into drowsy thoughts that were near to a doze.

Suddenly, Holmes's voice broke into my reverie. "You are quite correct, Watson. It is a preposterous way to settle a dispute."

"Huh?"

"Forgive me for indulging in my little mind-reading act. I've been reading

yours like a large-print edition ever since you attracted my attention by discarding your newspaper. Do you recall what caused your train of thought to leave the station?"

"Huh?" I said again.

"You sat for a moment with a vacant expression. Yes, that's the one. Then you glanced across to your framed portrait of General Gordon. And then to the corresponding blank spot on the wall where your matching portrait of Henry Ward Beecher hung until my recent attempt to demonstrate W.G. Grace's roundarm bowling technique broke its frame. Your very expressive features then became thoughtful as you remembered Beecher's immortal stand against slavery. Then your eyes conveyed sadness as you considered the horror and waste of the American Civil War. At that point, I broke in to agree with you that war is a preposterous means of settling a domestic dispute. Was I correct?"

"No," I said. "I was thinking, prompted by the lighter square of wallpaper where Beecher had hung, that we're smoking way too much."

"Oh," Holmes said. "Well, it was worth a shot." (Make more of this. It could be a word-count bonanza!)

"By the way," he continued, "I've been offered a case that I hope will prove easier than following the thoughts of a sphinx like yourself. Before you gave up on the newspaper, did you read of the amazing vanishing lady of Croydon?"

"Not a word."

"The relevant sheet is there, next to your left boot."

I retrieved the page in question and held it out to Holmes, but he affected not to see it.

"Just read it aloud, there's a good fellow."

The story was headed "A Mysterious Package" and ran as follows:

* * *

Miss Abigail Crusher, living at Cross Road, Croydon, disappeared yesterday under baffling circumstances. At two o'clock yesterday afternoon, Miss Crusher was handed a small packet wrapped in brown paper by her postman. At five minutes past two, a neighbor, Margaret Howes, arrived at Miss Crusher's door to return a cup of sugar. Mrs. Howes had, from her own front step, witnessed the postman hand Miss Crusher the package. Receiving no answer to her knock but certain that her neighbor was at home, Mrs. Howes entered the Crusher residence through the unlocked front door.

She found the sitting room empty. On its central table was an open cardboard box, resting on the brown paper in which it had been wrapped. The box had been sent by parcel post from Belfast the morning before. It was lined with a scrap of muslin and contained a pair of gilt earrings, engraved with Miss Crusher's first initial.

Mrs. Howes called out for her neighbor and then searched the premises without success. She next contacted the local constable, and a wider search was initiated. It also proved fruitless.

According to Mrs. Howes, Miss Crusher sometimes spoke of a "lost love," but there is no evidence to suggest that the earrings were from him or to explain why such a gift should cause its recipient to flee, apparently in fear of her life.

Mr. Lestrade, one of our ablest officers, is in charge of the case.

* * *

“So much for the fifth estate,” my friend said when I’d finished.

“The press is the fourth estate, Holmes. The first is—”

“Here is Lestrade’s note to me.”

Holmes held it out, but I gazed up at the ceiling, my hands behind my head. “Just read it aloud,” I said, “there’s a good fellow.”

“Ahem,” Holmes said and began:

* * *

This Croydon vanishing is right in your bailiwick. I’m sure I will master it as soon as I can grasp its handle, but so far it appears not to have a handle. We have attempted to trace the package at the Belfast post office without success. Ditto tracing the lost admirer. Miss Crusher has no living family or close friends to question. Would be grateful for a leg up.

* * *

“What do you say, Watson? Feel equal to a short train trip on a hot day? There may be a story in it for you.”

“What’s in it for you?”

“I admit the business isn’t very promising financially. Even the mysterious earrings are gilt. But it wouldn’t hurt to scratch Lestrade’s back for once. Supplying his deficiencies has proven to be a nice sideline for me. I’d hate to see him demoted into a job at which he’s actually competent.”

* * *

It rained steadily during our trip south, forcing us to keep the windows of our compartment closed and endure the resulting steam bath. The air on the Croydon platform was delicious by comparison. Lestrade awaited us there, looking, as he usually did, like a rat (mongoose? ferret?) who’d picked a Derby winner and spent his windfall at his tailors. We paused at the station’s cabstand while he and Holmes each commented on the weather and waited for the other to sponsor the ride. Finally, in disgust, I set out on foot, and the two weather experts followed.

Cross Road turned out to be a very long one, with the Crusher residence very near its rural terminus. I knew we were getting close when the number of idle neighbors, gossiping in small groups, dramatically increased. The apparent focus of their attention was a small brick house, which Lestrade unlocked.

Once inside, the professional opened curtains and threw up windows, a task at which I willingly entered in. Holmes made directly for the central table mentioned in the newspaper reports. When Lestrade and I joined him, he was closely examining a bit of string with his glass.

“This secured the package?” he asked.

“Yes. As you can see, it’s waxed.”

“Greased, rather,” Holmes said. “Note that Miss Crusher cut the string, leaving the knot intact.”

“What of that?” Lestrade said.

“What of it, indeed,” Holmes replied breezily.

Next he picked up the brown paper and sniffed it. “Distinct aroma of coffee. Address written in a genteel hand, certainly a woman’s, in ink that was less than genteel. Now to the box itself. A patent-medicine box. ‘Steedman’s Soothing Powder, John Steedman, Chemist, Walworth, Surrey.’ Familiar with it, Watson?”

"It's a calming agent sold by chemists everywhere. Used to settle children who are teething."

"Steedman's Powder figured in a famous poisoning case in eighteen seventy-three, I believe," Holmes murmured.

"The Bailey-Berry poisonings," Lestrade said, snapping his fingers for emphasis. "The powder was replaced with strychnine. The lethal package arrived by mail in that case as well!"

"Certainly true, Inspector, and just as certainly a coincidence. If this were a poisoning, Miss Crusher would still be with us, corporeally, at least.

"Finally, the earrings. Wrapped in cheap muslin."

He held aloft one of a pair of "drop" earrings, both its base and the teardrop-shaped pendant a matching gold. The pendant was engraved with a tiny "A."

"Hmmm. Certainly plated. See how the gold is worn off the back of this one?"

He examined the back of the second earring and whistled. Then he went over each with his magnifier, minutely.

"Neither new, but one is far more worn than the other. What do you make of that, Watson?"

"That instead of gifting them to Miss Crusher, someone was returning them."

"Very good. So the theory about the 'lost love' begins to leak air. But what about the uneven wear?"

"Something to do with Miss Crusher's habits? Or the habits of the person who has had them? Or perhaps with that person's profession?"

Holmes chuckled. "Certainly, Doctor. Perhaps the borrower is a lady engine driver who habitually exposes one ear to the smoke and cinders as she scans the track ahead."

He and Lestrade enjoyed a hearty laugh at my expense, Holmes ending his with a glance around the room.

"Any family photos?"

"None. According to the neighbor, Mrs. Howes, all Miss Crusher's relatives are dead."

"That sad circumstance usually makes family portraits more precious," Holmes observed. "Has the lady's jewelry box been examined?"

"Nothing too small to hold the lady herself has been disturbed," Lestrade replied.

"I suggest you do it now."

"Are you hoping to find a matching necklace or broach?" I inquired.

"No, I'm expecting to find matching earrings. I predict the inspector will find another pair that matches this one in all respects save the initials."

"While your crystal ball's warmed up," Lestrade said with a wink at me, "why don't you tell us what the initial on the second pair will be?"

"I'll tell you this much. The initial engraved on the first earring of the pair will differ from that on the second."

With a muttered oath, the Scotland Yard man hurried away.

"I may have just set myself up for another Henry Ward Beecher moment," Holmes whispered. "Then again, if you never stick your neck out, you never see as far as you might."

This time, the sleuthhound had not overreached. We knew that a moment

later when a chastened Lestrade returned, carrying a pair of drop earrings before him, one dangling from each hand, like tiny golden lanterns. He laid them on the table. They matched the original pair in all respects, except that engraved on the right earring was a “B,” while the left bore a “C.”

“What can it mean, Holmes?” I asked.

“It means that Miss Crusher’s parents were very orderly people, a trait that was not, I fear, passed on to the current generation.

“I have a question or two for Mrs. Howes now, I think.”

“In that case, you’re on your own,” Lestrade said. “I’m still hoarse from the last time I spoke with that old post.”

“You’ll join us for lunch?” Holmes asked.

I sighed inwardly, anticipating the game of dodge-the-check that ended every meal Holmes and the little professional shared. Lestrade eased my mind.

“I’ve a previous engagement, I’m afraid. Knowing you gentlemen as I do, I’d recommend the Empire Hotel.”

“The food there is good?” I asked.

“Scarcely edible. But the barley wine is a poem. You’ll find me at the police station afterward, if you can find the police station.”

Lestrade directed us to a nearby house and then departed. Mrs. Howes turned out to be a widow of advanced years, whose white hair was covered by a lace cap of an ancient style. We soon learned why Lestrade had referred to her as a post, as she was very nearly as deaf as one.

After shouting some pleasantries, which only produced a confused blinking of the widow’s watery blue eyes, Holmes said, “Miss Crusher had two sisters, I believe.”

He repeated the sentence several times with rising volume but without eliciting a response.

“Grab an oar, Watson,” he finally said. “I suggest we try together and that we harmonize, which is to say vary our pitch. I’ll take the upper register, you provide the bass.”

Together we shouted Holmes’s original remark, the detective beating the air with his straw hat to keep us in unison.

“Two sisters? Yes, that’s right. Both as dead as last week’s Dover sole, the poor dears.” Then, after we’d taken up a new chant. “Their names? Beatrice and Cynthia, the poor dears.”

We thanked the monument and left. A cab happened to be passing, and I snagged it, gratefully. Holmes asked the driver to take us to a hospital, the nearest one that was outside of Croydon proper.

“That would be at Wallington, sir.”

He drove us there, after a stop at a telegraph office, where Holmes dispatched a wire.

“In olden days,” Holmes said as we jogged along, “sanctuary was provided by churches, but I somehow doubt that Miss Crusher belongs to a church, or a chapel either. That leaves us with the modern equivalent, a hospital.”

“Why not start with the ones in Croydon?”

“Lestrade will have visited those. He doesn’t lack for energy, whatever one might say about his imagination.”

On the steps of the Wallington Hospital, we met a serious young man.

His mien and his black coat identified him as a doctor, his very shiny silk hat as a newly christened one.

“No, we have no patient named Crusher,” he assured us as he pulled on his gloves.

“How about a woman of another name?” Holmes consulted his notebook for the description Lestrade had given him. “About forty with grizzled hair worn in ringlets? She would have been admitted yesterday for a nervous complaint or, possibly, brain fever.”

“That would be Miss Smith. Or so we’re calling her. She’s been unable to give us a name or to say anything at all except two words, ‘sister’ and ‘wives,’ whatever they may mean.”

I stole a quick glance at Holmes, who merely smiled.

“I cannot allow you or anyone else to see her,” the young man added. “She is extremely ill.”

“She is despaired of then?” I asked.

“No. I hope to effect a cure.” With that, he strode off.

“If that popinjay can cure what’s ailing Miss Crusher, she may have found her way to a church after all,” Holmes observed when we were once again in our cab. “However, that’s enough work for the moment. Let us sample the poetic brew Lestrade spoke of.”

We drank (ate, rather) a pleasant lunch, during which Holmes talked of the famous banjo players he’d heard, including James Bohee, banjo in-structor to the Prince of Wales himself. He went on to discuss the merits of open-backed and zither banjos and to describe how he’d found his own instrument—an early Boucher bearing on the interior of its drumhead the autograph of the legendary J.W. Sweeney—in a Battersea pawn shop. My attempts to turn the conversation to mismatched earrings were unavailing.

It was after four when we found our way to the police station. As we approached it, Holmes and I were harmonizing again, this time to “Down Among the Dead Men.” (Best omit. Not everyone is musical.)

“I thought you’d enjoy the barley wine,” Lestrade said from his post by the station’s front door. “This just came for you.”

“A telegram?” Holmes asked, affecting nonchalance. “Whoever could be wiring me here?” He opened it and immediately undercut his pose by shouting, “Jackpot!”

“What have you learned?” Lestrade demanded.

“Everything. Or as near to it as makes no never mind.”

Placing the telegram in his breast pocket, safe from Lestrade’s hovering hand, Holmes scribbled a line on the back of our bar (luncheon) bill from the Empire Hotel. Recognizing Holmes’s choice of writing paper, the professional accepted it very reluctantly.

“If you meet that boat and detain that gentleman, you’ll know everything yourself. And you’ll have solved serious crimes in Belfast and, I believe, Liverpool. You may even be moved to recompense us for lunch.”

“But will I know where Miss Crusher is?”

“No. For that, you must inquire at the Wallington Hospital. Ask for a Miss Smith. Good evening, Inspector!”

Holmes and I both slept on the train journey north. Luckily, London was the last stop, or we might have ended up in King’s Lynn. That evening, as we

restored ourselves with tankards of “the hair of the dog” (change to “relaxed over cigars”), I asked him to expand upon our visit to Croydon.

“To where? Oh, right. You’ve surely drawn your own conclusions.”

“Only that I will avoid barley wine in the future.”

“Amen to that. Let me step you through the business, beginning with the strange mailing itself. The string that secured it was cooking string, the type used to bind a roast or truss up a fowl. This example, from the smell of the grease it bore, had been used on a roast of beef. Cooking string is made of either linen or cotton. This was linen, which was consistent with the Irish origins of the package. It suggested to me a middle-class household at the low end of the range, one able to afford an occasional cut of beef but strained enough to retain and reuse string. Also boxes and brown paper. You’ll recall my observation that the paper had previously been used to wrap coffee beans.”

“Yes,” I said.

“The type of box—one that had carried medicine for soothing children—told me that the household contained one or more child. The knot in the string, though tiny, was a particular nautical type, suggesting that the sender was either a sailor or one who had been instructed in knot tying by a sailor, perhaps even—given the package’s other domestic touches and the feminine handwriting of the address—the wife of a sailor.”

“But what of the earrings themselves?”

“As a doctor, you’ve no doubt observed the vagaries of the human ear. Their individuality is such that ears could be the basis of a system of identification. I intend to dash off a monograph on the subject any day now. (Credit him with the monograph. Make it two—one for each ear.)

“You’ll remember my observing that the gilding was worn from the back of the first earring I examined. Imagine my surprise when I examined the second and found a similar, though less pronounced, pattern of wear on its pendant, but in a distinctly different place.”

“A single individual’s ear lobes may differ in shape and size,” I protested.

“Of course. But when I examined the baubles with my glass, I found that one was well-worn and the other less so, supporting the supposition that they had been used by separate individuals. How then to explain two different wearers each acquiring a single earring of Miss Crusher’s?”

“Suppose she had a sister and that she and her sister had both been given initialed earrings, perhaps by a doting parent. What would be more natural than that the sisters would have exchanged earrings when they parted so each would have a keepsake of the other?”

“It would be perfectly natural,” I agreed.

“But I had to account for the uneven wear of the two returned earrings, so I conjured up a third sister. When the three parted company, each divided her earrings between the other two and received two in return, unmatched as to initials. If this had actually happened, Miss Crusher would have such a mismatched pair. I sent Lestrade to find it, and damn me if he didn’t.”

“Why were her earrings returned?”

“Because Sister B and Sister C have broken with Sister A, Abigail Crusher, for some reason. And no trifling reason either, to judge by Abigail’s reaction, which indicates an extremely guilty conscience.”

“But Mrs. Howe told us that Miss Crusher’s sisters, Beatrice and Cynthia, are dead.”

“So she was told, which suggests that at some time in the recent past, the sisters incurred Abigail’s displeasure and so were ‘dead to her,’ to use a common turn of phrase. The return of the earrings tells us that the feeling is now mutual.

“To learn more, it was necessary to employ the telegraph. I sent off a query to my friend Agate of the Belfast force. I asked him for information concerning a recent crime or domestic disturbance involving a woman whose maiden name is Crusher and whose first is either Beatrice or Cynthia.

“My answer was handed to me by Lestrade himself. Agate reported that a certain Beatrice Brownstone, nee Crusher, was being held on suspicion of assaulting her husband, James Brownstone, a steward on a packet, the *Mary Dee*, operating between Belfast and Liverpool. The Brownstones’ neighbors reported a domestic disturbance, and the responding officers found a quantity of fresh blood but no husband.”

“Fresh blood!” I exclaimed. “That’s more like it.”

Holmes shook his head reprovingly. “Let’s not get sidetracked by your standing criticism of my cases. Namely that they don’t feature enough good, old-fashioned, Cain-and-Abel work.”

“It’s only a shortcoming from a storyteller’s point of view,” I assured him.

“Well, don’t get your bloodthirsty hopes up, is all I’m saying. They may be dashed when Lestrade meets the *Mary Dee*.”

* * *

Sherlock Holmes was once again proven right. Two days later, he received an envelope containing a covering note from Lestrade and a long typed document.

“I’ll toss you for who reads the note and who the tome,” he said.

Before I could supply a coin, Holmes tossed his own and, not surprisingly, won.

* * *

Dear Mr. Holmes (he read), in keeping with your advice, I journeyed to Liverpool and at 9 p.m. yesterday boarded the *Mary Dee*, belonging to the Isle of Man Steam Packet Company. I learned that James Brownstone, a steward, had spent the voyage confined to his cabin, initially due to loss of blood and later to mad ravings.

In the indicated berth, I found a sturdy young chap whose good looks were marred by a number of bruises and by a bandage covering one ear. Upon hearing my identification, he gave himself up without a fuss, though he continued to rant.

When we reached the local station, his ravings were taken down. A typed copy is enclosed, along with my thanks in the form of an official reimbursement for your, ah, expenses at the Empire Hotel. In light of the total, I’m surprised you and your accomplice survived. Very affectionately, G. Lestrade.

* * *

Holmes waved a check in the air triumphantly and then passed me several sheets of foolscap. “You’re on, Watson. From the diaphragm, please.”

I dutifully read the following verbatim account.

“Have I anything to say? No, I refuse to speak. Not a peep or even a grunt will I utter, except to say that if I ever hear the word “sister” again, I won’t be responsible for my actions.

“I was a happy man until I met the Crusher sisters while I was on leave from my ship. I was a deep-water sailor then, working the boats between England and South America. I sought a quiet boardinghouse far from the sea and fatally chose Croydon.

“Two of the Crusher girls, Beatrice and Cynthia, were angels. The third, Abigail, was a devil, though I didn’t see that until it was too late. All three took a fancy to me, so it was just a matter of taking my pick. I disposed of Abigail straightaway. I told her she was too barnacled an old barkentine for me, and she seemed to accept and even appreciate my frankness. That left the dilemma of choosing between Beatrice and Cynthia, and no man ever faced a harder choice. I would no sooner make up my mind for one than the sight of the other, wringing laundry, say, or plucking a chicken, would set me tingling.

“Then one day, Abigail took me aside. She’d guessed my problem and come up with a solution, a way to make me happy and to win as much happiness as she could for her “dear sisters.” I was to throw over my South American berth and find one on an Irish Sea packet. I was then to contact Cynthia on the sly and propose marriage, swearing her to absolute secrecy to spare her sister’s feelings. Then I was to repeat the procedure with Beatrice. One I was to dispatch to Belfast or Dublin, the other I’d set up in Cardiff or Liverpool. Then I could marry both at my leisure, and no one would be the wiser.”

I interrupted my reading to catch my companion’s eye. “The young medico was mistaken. Crusher hasn’t been saying ‘sister’ and ‘wives’ in her delirium. She’s been saying ‘sister-wives.’”

Holmes nodded. “Shades of *A Study in Scarlet*, eh? I assure you, Doctor, when a sailor goes wrong, he is the first of bigamists. He has the nerve and he has the steamship. Now, back to our story.”

“I did as Abigail suggested, and for two years my life was all that she had promised me. Then, after a stormy passage that might have been a warning from the elements themselves, I returned to my home in Liverpool and found Cynthia gone. The only clues were bits of paper scattered on the cold hearth. They turned out to be the remains of an envelope that had been torn and torn again, apparently in a frenzy. The assembled fragments bore Abigail’s return address.

“Fearing the worst, I hurried to Belfast as quickly as the *Mary Dee* could carry me. But I was too late. I found Beatrice and Cynthia together, looking like two Furies with the same toothache. They chased me around the house, Cynthia armed with a knobbed stick and Beatrice with a kitchen knife, with which she all but cut off my ear.

“I escaped with one thought only: to avenge myself against the woman who had laid the trap and then sprung it, who had ruined me and her two sisters, who had made outcasts of us, anywhere this side of Utah.

“I failed at my revenge, for which I bear you gentlemen no ill will. But there, I have resolved not to speak, so I shan’t. Not a word. Not a syllable. Not a diphthong . . .”

I scanned the last two pages. “It goes on in that vein for some time.”

Holmes had ceased to listen. "There's a pretty picture of family life for you, Watson. A circle of misery, violence, and fear."

"Some violence," I complained. "She didn't even manage to dispatch his ear."

"Take heart, old fellow. You can add a few corpses when you write it up. Though why the reading public demands them eludes and saddens me. It is a perennial problem to which this human's reason is as far from an answer as ever!"

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