

The First Two Pages: “The Cardboard Box”

By Terence Faherty

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My Sherlock Holmes parodies have a silly but straightforward premise: a cache of Dr. John H. Watson's notebooks has been discovered containing first drafts of his immortal stories (officially credited to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle). These manuscripts revealed that the versions Watson published in *The Strand* had been greatly reworked by the doctor, in part to gentrify Holmes, who had actually been more of a workingman's detective, fond of a fat fee and a well-drawn pint.

The idea was suggested to me by the title of the first Holmes short story, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” in which Holmes is hired by a king to recover a compromising photo. The word “Bohemia” can refer to a region of Europe, the meaning it has in the *Strand* version of the story, but it can also refer to an avant-garde artistic community. I decided to reimagine the story using the second definition and came up with a “first draft” in which Holmes and Watson rescue a debauched painter from the clutches of a blackmailing model (and prostitute).

I then wondered whether I could come up with “first drafts” of the other stories from Conan Doyle's first collection, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. The answer turned out to be yes. I knew I couldn't just reinterpret every story's title (though I've been able to do that once more so far), so I read each story over

carefully looking for some other “back door” I could use to get in. For some stories, it was a different solution to the same basic mystery. For other stories, my back door was more offbeat. For example, when I reread “The Man with the Twisted Lip,” I was struck by the number of married couples the story contains. I decided to turn it into a bedroom farce, a type of comedy in which couples pair up, break up, and pair up again in a confined setting. When I reconsidered “The Blue Carbuncle,” I found I had the same dramatic personae as another famous mystery, Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. (I even had a fabulously valuable bird!) So my “Carbuncle” became a mash-up of the short story and the novel.

My latest parody, which is currently available in the January/February 2019 *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, is “The Cardboard Box.” The *Strand* version may be the darkest of the Holmes stories, with a double homicide and human ears being sent by post. I had ears in mind when I reread the story (naturally), so when I came across a reference to “drop earrings,” I decided to make a pair of those and not a pair of ears the key to the mystery.

The story begins, as all of my parodies do, with an editor's note that explains—with a straight face—the rediscovery of Watson's first drafts. In this case, since I was moving from the first Holmes short story collection, *The Adventures*, to the second, *The Memoirs*, I announce that a second cache of

Watson's early drafts has been discovered. (As a result of subway tunneling, no less. I like to keep things believable.)

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."

I try for an academic tone with these notes. And it's fun to suggest that there's a staff of editors off someplace pouring over these "manuscripts" as though they were the Dead Sea Scrolls.

After a brief reference to the *Strand* version's darkness, I move on to the story itself. I usually paraphrase Sir Arthur's opening paragraphs fairly closely, even when I intend to go completely off the rails, so readers familiar with the original story can feel at home, however briefly. Here's my opening paragraph.

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.

I made a special point to echo the original opening of “The Cardboard Box,” because it contains one of Conan Doyle’s more famous passages, in which Holmes appears to read the Dr. Watson's mind, inferring from his actions and expressions a long and complex chain of unspoken thoughts. It ends with Holmes blurting out Watson’s conclusion before the doctor can give voice to it himself. I greatly shortened this episode. Conan Doyle takes almost four hundred words to get to Holmes's reverie interruption. I reach it in a little over one hundred. My readers (and editors) expect their mystery to be served up a little faster than his did. And for me, the sequence is merely a long lead-in to a punch line, which is that Holmes’s deductions regarding Watson’s train of thought turn out to be completely wrong.

But never fear. Holmes does solve the mystery that's presented after page two. He even finds time to stop for a beer. I hope you'll enjoy the complete story, if you come across it in *Ellery Queen*. If you do, you might check out my first collection of the parodies, published by the Wessex Press: *The True Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Thanks!

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Terence Faherty is the author of the Edgar-nominated Owen Keane series, which follows the adventures of a failed seminarian turned amateur sleuth, and the Shamus-winning Scott Elliott private-eye series, set in the golden age of Hollywood. He is a frequent contributor to *Alfred Hitchcock* and *Ellery Queen* magazines.