



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXV -- The Adventure of The Six Napoleons

"I've seen you handle a good many cases, Mr. Holmes, but I don't know that I ever knew a more workmanlike one than that." Thus spoke Inspector Lestrade in admiration of Holmes's efforts, and I think we can all agree that this is a remarkably fine combination of imagination, logic, and legwork. In fact, Holmes's investigations are so thorough and irreproachable that, judging from the "Best of Hounds" printouts, previous discussions have all but passed this story by. I can only conclude that it's more fun to pick holes in a shaky case than it is to analyze a near-perfect one. (I recommend the Hounds Best of "The Six Napoleons," however, for some entertaining discussions about the depth to which parsley sinks into butter, and the lengths to which some Sherlockians will go to emulate the Master's methods.) But see here: this story contains The Amazing Beppo AND the illustrious Morse Hudson – what more do the Hounds need to inspire them?! So let's see if we can't chase down some good conversation even if all we do is praise Holmes for a successful case. As Doctor Watson probably said many times, "I hope my story about the black pearl hasn't Borgia."

The spirit of cooperation: This story shows Holmes and Lestrade working in perfect and amicable cooperation. Holmes left the identification of the body to the official police while he pursued the busts. Nowadays, the police would hardly leave any aspect of the case to an amateur, no matter how gifted and helpful he was, would they? And as for letting Holmes walk away with Beppo's picture – well, that does seem highly unprofessional even for its time, doesn't it? Was it Lestrade's idea of a joke to let Holmes take on what might have seemed to him like the tedious aspects of the case, while he, Lestrade, covered the sensational murder aspect? But the joke was on Lestrade: Shouldn't he have made the connection between the name of the dead man to the theft of the Borgia pearl only one year earlier?



Cooperation also existed between Holmes and the press. Holmes bragged to Watson about his ability to use the press for his own purposes (a good purpose in this case), but it's also true that his suggestions to Horace Harker seem to have broken through the newspaperman's shock and allowed him to write up his news account after all. This makes me wonder if Holmes ever had any kind of reciprocal relationships with other reporters. Certainly Holmes was always consulting the newspapers for information; is it possible that he returned the favor now and then?

His second name I never knew: In my introduction to "The Six Napoleons," I referred to The Amazing Beppo, and really, he is quite a versatile guy. By day he was "one of the best" workmen at Gelder and Co. He could carve and gild and frame. On the darker side, he could break into houses (and surgeries) with ease, and he seemed to win all his knife fights. He was quick-witted enough to hide the black pearl in a place where he might easily have gotten away with his crime, had chance been more on his side when he went to find his stash later on.

Beppo hid the pearl because he was about to be arrested for knifing "another Italian." Was this crime related to the theft of the pearl, or was the knifing a mere coincidence? Why was Beppo carrying the pearl around with him? Had he only just stolen it? Was Pietro Venucci also the victim of this first knifing? When Beppo was released from prison, was Venucci on his trail from the start, or did the breaking of the busts give Beppo's game away to his criminal rival as well as to Sherlock Holmes?

Why do you suppose Holmes was unable to make anything of the original theft of the pearl from the Dacre Hotel? It's interesting that even after Holmes found the pearl, he still was not entirely sure how Beppo came into possession of it. If Beppo was such a clever criminal, was he responsible for any other unsolved thefts and burglaries? How was it that Holmes had never heard of him before?

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