



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXV – The Adventure of the Six Napoleons

It appeared to be a commonplace instance of petty vandalism. Someone had come into Morse Hudson's shop and smashed a plaster bust of Napoleon Bonaparte right where it stood on the countertop. Nothing else was damaged or stolen. A police report was filed, of course, but hooliganism wasn't a high priority on Scotland Yard's list of things to investigate.

Then the police were notified by Dr. Barnicot that his clinic had been burgled, and a plaster bust of Napoleon Bonaparte had been smashed. When the good doctor returned home, he found that his house had been entered, and an identical bust had also been smashed. In both cases, nothing else was damaged or stolen. The case was handed to Inspector Lestrade, who thought it to be the work of a lunatic with an obsessive hatred of the great Emperor Napoleon...but he thought he'd consult Sherlock Holmes about it anyhow.

It wasn't long before the madman struck again, at the home of a syndicated journalist named Horace Harker. But this time the crime had turned deadly. The body of an unidentified man was found on Harker's doorstep. The victim's throat had been slashed. A plaster bust of Napoleon was missing from Harker's house and was found a couple of blocks away, shattered to pieces in the yard of an unoccupied house.

It's apparent that Beppo was a luckless soul. He had five chances in six of finding the purloined pearl and drew a blank on every one. But I've wondered why he smashed the first bust right on the corner of my... er, Morse Hudson's shop, instead of shoplifting it and taking it somewhere more private to break it open?



Was it customary in those times for retail shopkeepers to retain a record of the names and addresses of their customers, even for small purchases like a twelve shilling plaster bust? What use would they have made of such information?

Horace Harker says that anyone could reach his front step from the window where the entry was made “in a long stride.” I’m trying to picture Beppo stepping from the window to the top step while carrying the bust in one hand, using the other hand to hold a knife, all the while successfully defending himself against the hostile advances of Pietro Venucci. He may have been unlucky, but he surely was well-coordinated. What I can’t figure out is how, with the place “swimming in blood,” it happened that Venucci’s blood spilled only onto the top step? Not only had the next step not been swilled down, it was dry, which means that neither blood nor water had gotten on it. Am I alone in thinking that this is unlikely?

Watson tells us that “Holmes spent the evening in rummaging among the files of the old daily papers with which one of our lumber-rooms was packed.” How many lumber-rooms conveyed with the rental of one flat? And how would Holmes have filed the newspapers? By date? By subject matter? Would he have retained only those which contained items of possible future interest?

For our gem experts: would plaster adhere to the surface of a pearl once it had dried thoroughly? Would it have had any chemical effect on the surface of the pearl? And is there really such a thing as a natural black pearl? How rare is a black pearl, and how does it come to be black?

At the end of this Adventure, Holmes told Watson to put the pearl in the safe. Was Holmes entitled to retain possession of stolen property? If not, why did Lestrade allow him to do so?

Steve Clarkson

December 18, 1998