

An Observance Of Trifles

You know my method. It is founded upon the
observance of trifles.

(Arthur Conan Doyle)

snell's interminable ramblings about the canon

The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXV -- The Adventure of the Six Napoleons

The Adventure Of The Six Napoleons--The South Shall Rise Again?!

I've gone off on some *odd* tangents in some of my essays on various stories in the **Canon**.

But this may be the oddest, having relatively little to do with the story itself (which is quite a nice tale, by the way). But whenever I read **The Adventure of The Six Napoleons**, I always find myself fixating on one question:

Why are there so many statues and busts of Napoleon in Victorian (or Edwardian) England?

Let me begin by saying that I'm not looking for a debate on the historical record of Napoleon. He has as many defenders as detractors, as many admirers as harsh critics. Suffice it to say, his legacy is still to this day a fairly controversial one. As Max Hastings wrote recently in the Wall Street Journal, there is still great argument over whether Bonaparte was "*an enlightened despot who laid the foundations of modern Europe or, instead, a megalomaniac who wrought greater misery than any man before the coming of Hitler.*" There's no way I grok enough history to make any intelligent commentary on either side of the issue.



But to England? Napoleon was a hated, mortal enemy. They fought in several wars; Britain still treats anniversaries of major military victories over Napoleon as major national celebrations; Napoleon actually planned to *invade* England at one point!!

You would think, therefore, that a nation as quick and proud to celebrate their superiority as Great Britain wouldn't have a lot of truck with statues and busts of a hated, vanquished enemy. Yet, Sherlock Holmes opines while pondering the case, "*Considering how many hundreds of statues of the great Emperor must exist*

*in London..." The manager of **Gelder & Co.** confirms this, saying that from his company alone "hundreds of casts had been taken from a marble copy of Devine's head of Napoleon."*

Assuming that this isn't just something that **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** has pulled out of thin air as the basis for the story, why were there (at least) *hundreds* of statues and busts of England's hated rival about the country? Who was so interested in celebrating a conquered enemy?

Surely, some museums would want some, and perhaps schools? The story establishes that **Dr. Barnicot**, who had purchased two of the busts, was "*an enthusiastic admirer of Napoleon, and his house is full of books, pictures, and relics of the French Emperor.*" (The **1965 BBC** adaptation has **Holmes** and company go and interview Barnicot, and makes clear that he is a bit of an *obsessive nutter*)

Journalist **Horace Harker** just purchased one for his room, without any explanation of why he chose Napoleon. And no reason is given for why **Josiah Brown** of Chiswick or **Mr. Sandeford** of Reading made their choices in decorating their abodes. (Again interestingly, the BBC 1965 version had it that **Mrs. Brown** had purchased the bust, not knowing that it was Napoleon---she just thought it resembled her husband, so she bought it as a present for him!)

These can't be atypical cases, if Gelder & Co thought it worthwhile to churn out hundreds of these things. And if they did, no doubt other companies followed suit. Was there really *that* large a market for busts and statues of defeated enemies of the realm?

Maybe it's because it's now the 21st century, or because I'm a dopey American, but that just seems odd to me. Not to go all **Godwin's Law** here, but you wouldn't expect to see, say, hundreds of busts of **Hitler** adorning homes and offices throughout London, would you (or, to be less provocative, **Mussolini**?). And if so, people possessing them would *not* be well thought of by most, right?

Of course, plenty of places in, say, the U.S. southern areas have art celebrating various heroes of their side in the Civil War. But then again, that's why it's not analogous--**Robert E. Lee** and **Jefferson Davis** were defeated, but they were on the South's side. You're not going to see a lot of those busts in the northern states.

So is this just some English habit of celebrating the underdog? Did the intervening 80 or 90 years since the wars making it *safe* to admire Napoleon and his legacy again? Perhaps--just maybe--there was a certain longing amongst the English population for a *radical, revolutionary reformer* to upturn the applecart and restructure society--the admiration for a defeated foe actually being a (perhaps subconscious) critique of current leadership?

Again, I'm ill-qualified to render any serious verdict here. But every time I read this story, that's the first thought that pops into my head--"*Why the hell are there so many busts of Napoleon floating around England?*"

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

My trivial obsessions aside, Six Napoleons is still a *corking* good story. A good gimmick, lots of interesting characters, Sherlock Holmes at his sharpest, a touching payoff between Holmes and **Lestrade...good stuff.

Between this story and the **Blue Carbuncle, I'm forced to ask--just *how many* famous stolen jewels were there stashed in emergency hiding places in London? Is, say, the Hope Diamond stashed inside a potted plant? Are the Graff Diamonds cooked inside a very special doughnut waiting to be claimed?

**Speaking of the Blue Carbuncle, Six Napoleons is often compared to that story. And it's a fair cop, as far as the "famous stolen jewel stuffed in unlikely hiding spot" gimmick is used in both.

But it's not really the same story. In Blue Carbuncle, Holmes was working *backwards*--he found the jewel, and then he traced it back to the thief. In Six Napoleons, it was the opposite--he started by trying to track the party responsible for odd crimes, and ended up finding the pearl at the end.

And of course, whereas in Carbuncle Holmes displayed some holiday mercy and allowed the thief to flee, this case involved a murder--and Sherlock was not about to allow **Beppo** to go free.

**This story tests how you may feel about *play fair* mysteries.

The revelation at the end--"*let me introduce you to the famous black pearl of the Borgias!*" comes completely out of nowhere. There's not a clue or a hint that anything like that is in the offing, and the reader is completely in the dark. The murder victim had the same last name as the maid at a famous robbery? Well, that would have been nice to know before the big reveal. Instead, the reader doesn't even know that there was a robbery, let alone that a maid may have been involved.

Now, I *don't* think this hurts the story--it's still a smashing success, not a bust. But since in modern mysteries, where the reader has become accustomed to having the author/lead detective share clues with us so we can at least pretend to have a chance to solve the mystery, I can see where this *out of left field resolution* could be a bit unsatisfying to some.

We should contrast this, however, with the BBC 1965 version, which begins with Holmes returning a check to the **Prince of Colonna**, as he was unable to find the pearl after it was stolen. Well, this does introduce the **MacGuffin** ahead of time, so the ending is no longer a complete surprise.

However, it also sets off the "*too big a coincidence*" alarms: right after announcing a failure in a case, Lestrade brings to Holmes' attention a complete independent case--*which magically provides the resolution to the first case!!* So perhaps that version is more nearly play fair--although no clue is given that the two cases are related until near the end--but also more clunky and coincidental and unconvincing.

I'm fine with the prose version--*every* mystery doesn't have to be "play fair." Sometimes, the journey to the solution is as (or more) important than the solution.

Doyle adopts a *new technique* of presenting long interviews here--Watson** merely summarizes these conversations, seemingly only presenting the interviewees answers. But look more closely--the ways Watson writes it up, we can tell what the questions are, and the interviewees' personalities come through quite clearly.

It's really quite a *clever* conceit, and manages to condense what would be a multi-page interrogation to a (*longish*) single paragraph without our losing any information. Here, for example, is the conversation with the first shop owner, **Morse Hudson**:

"Yes, sir. On my very counter, sir," said he. "What we pay rates and taxes for I don't know, when any ruffian can come in and break one's goods. Yes, sir, it was I who sold Dr. Barnicot his two statues. Disgraceful, sir! A Nihilist plot--that's what I make it. No one but an anarchist would go about breaking statues. Red republicans--that's what I call 'em. Who did I get the statues from? I don't see what that has to do with it. Well, if you really want to know, I got them from Gelder & Co., in Church Street, Stepney. They are a well-known house in the trade, and have been this twenty years. How many had I? Three--two and one are three--two of Dr. Barnicot's, and one smashed in broad daylight on my own counter. Do I know that photograph? No, I don't. Yes, I do, though. Why, it's Beppo. He was a kind of Italian piece-work man, who made himself useful in the shop. He could carve a bit, and gild and frame, and do odd jobs. The fellow left me last week, and I've heard nothing of him since. No, I don't know where he came from nor where he went to. I had nothing against him while he was here. He was gone two days before the bust was smashed."

A Nihilist plot! Red republicans!! What we pay taxes for? *Wonderful* stuff--Doyle manages to convey lots of information in a more compact way without sacrificing character moments.

Doyle uses this technique three times in the story, and really, it works very well. You wouldn't want to use it *every* time--especially when you want to see Holmes using some of his cleverness to wheedle information form people--but here it works quite well.

Some commentators have opined that Morse Hudson *must* actually be the Hudson from **The Gloria Scott, AND the (ex?)husband of **Mrs. Hudson**, as well.

C'mon, guys, this is reasoning *unworthy* of the **Great Detective**. Seriously, are we to believe that everyone with the common surname of Hudson is *actually the same person*, or related to the same person?!?

**There are lots of great character moments here, but my favorite is probably Harker, the journalist, who is far more worried about getting shut out on a big story than he is about a dead body on his doorstep: *"If I had come in here as a journalist, I should have interviewed myself and had two columns in every evening*

paper. As it is, I am giving away valuable copy by telling my story over and over to a string of different people, and I can make no use of it myself."

Fun stuff, and not the only jibes Doyle takes at journalists in this story...

**As mentioned above, whereas Doyle doesn't do too much with Dr. Barnicot, BBC 1965 has us meet him, and plays him up as a full-on obsessive eccentric. He has some remarkably obscure Napoleonia in his collection, and is quite certain the bust smashing is a plot by those who wish to hurt the emperor's reputation. Funny stuff.

So wait--this story has both *Kennington*** and ***Kensington*** as locations?? Please, Sir Arthur, are you trying to confuse your dim American readers?

This might be a dumb question--why didn't Beppo just *buy* the last of Hudson's busts (or have one of his friends do it for him)? It only cost a few shillings. By buying it, and breaking it home, he would avoided the risks of smashing there in shop: being recognized, and perhaps being caught. He might have also avoided the case becoming interesting enough to interest *Scotland Yard*** (and Sherlock Holmes).

**Doyle's use of language is wonderful throughout this story. When Sherlock describes our mysterious bust-smasher as a "*promiscuous iconoclast*," well, that may be the best thing ever written in the English language.

(Not really, but it is a *wonderful* turn of phrase)

**I believe this story brigs us the first real discussion of *psychology* in the Canon. Usually Holmes and Watson will go on about corrupt bloodlines and inherited tendencies for evil and atavism and the like. But here Watson refers to "*modern French psychologists*" and the "*idee fixe*."

Holmes seems to be dismissive, but please note that it's only for *this particular case*--even if deranged, the mystery villain had access to a lot of information, and on closer examination seemed to be a canny planner (not that that would necessarily rule out mental disease). But Holmes doesn't challenge the work of psychologists in general...

**More untold tales. Holmes himself alerts us how "*the dreadful business of the Abernety family was first brought to my notice by the depth which the parsley had sunk into the butter upon a hot day*," one of the more famous apocryphal references in the Canon. And later he has Watson fetch the materials on the "*Conk-Singleton forgery case*."

**More canny social commentary from Doyle, as Holmes notes the crowds surrounding Harker's home: "*It's attempted murder at the least. Nothing less will hold the London message-boy. There's a deed of violence indicated in that fellow's round shoulders and outstretched neck.*"

**Harker, upon discovering a corpse on his stoop: "*I had just time to blow on my police-whistle, and then I must have fainted.*"

See, Victorian men fainted, too. Watson's spell in **The Empty House** had far greater provocation, as well...

**More great language: "*this presentment of the great emperor, which seemed to raise such frantic and destructive hatred in the mind of the unknown.*"

**Holmes using the press to mislead a suspect:

Tell him for me that I have quite made up my mind, and that it is certain that a dangerous homicidal lunatic, with Napoleonic delusions, was in his house last night. It will be useful for his article."

Lestrade stared.

"*You don't seriously believe that?*"

Holmes smiled. "*Don't I? Well, perhaps I don't. But I am sure that it will interest Mr. Horace Harker and the subscribers of the Central Press Syndicate..*

And of course, Sherlock later tells his partner, "*The Press, Watson, is a most valuable institution, if you only know how to use it.*"

Someone once wrote that they thought this was the *first* literary example of a hero planting false information in the media to entrap a suspect (sorry, I simply can't remember where I read that? Any clues, peeps?) Certainly, Sherlock had place *false classified advertisements* before, but getting a newspaper to run a false story is quite another matter entirely, one that has almost become a cliche in crime fiction. To think that it, like so much else, started with Holmes over a century ago!

Both the BBC 1965 and the **Granada adaptations eliminated the **Harding Brothers** shop from the story--all six bust were purchased and resold by Morse Hudson in their versions. A sensible move for economy in storytelling.

**On the drive to Stepney: "*In rapid succession we passed through the fringe of fashionable London, hotel London, theatrical London, literary London, commercial London, and, finally, maritime London, till we came to a riverside city of a hundred thousand souls, where the tenement houses swelter and reek with the outcasts of Europe.*"

Some have objected that seeing all of these areas on this journey was impossible, while others have explanations and workarounds to make it work.

Pish posh, people--you're missing the forest for the trees!! Just sit back and enjoy the prose!

**The mafia "*red herring*" may not have been entirely incorrect. It is certainly possible that the theft of the black pearl was a job done by or for the mafia, after all. We'll see more of these criminals later...

****Holmes:** "...well, it all depends upon a factor which is completely outside our control. But I have great hopes--in fact, the betting is exactly two to one--that if you will come with us to-night I shall be able to help you to lay him by the heels."

Sherlock Holmes admitting that something is beyond his control!!

****More grist for those who, like me, insist that Watson is not a dunderhead:**

...and, though I could not yet perceive the goal which we would reach, I understood clearly that Holmes expected this grotesque criminal to make an attempt upon the two remaining busts, one of which, I remembered, was at Chiswick. No doubt the object of our journey was to catch him in the very act, and I could not but admire the cunning with which my friend had inserted a wrong clue in the evening paper, so as to give the fellow the idea that he could continue his scheme with impunity.

Watson was certainly able to follow Holmes' reasoning and methods more closely than Lestrade, even if the ultimate answer remained beyond him (mainly because Sherlock was keeping all of the good information to himself).****The story works only if the pearl happens to not be in the first 4 busts Beppo smashes. Otherwise, he gets away with the pearl and the murder.**

That is akin to playing Russian Roulette and having the first four chambers come up empty. Dramatically satisfying, perhaps. But the odds are against it happening that way, and thinking about it too closely leads you to realize that even though Sherlock comes up with all the right answers, he catches his man *by sheer luck*.

****Mr. Sandeford** of Reading: "Well, I am an honest man, though not a very rich one. I only gave fifteen shillings for the bust, and I think you ought to know that before I take ten pounds from you."

That does do his scruples credit.

Still, the fact the Holmes was willing to pay such an *outrageous* amount, and that he required Sandeford to sign away any rights he might have had, should have set off *alarm bells*, right?

Sandeford should have realized that something was up. His greed for the £10 blinded him to the possibility of a larger payday (in the form of a reward from the prince, of course).

****A wonderful glimpse into Sherlock's psyche, via Watson:**

It was at such moments that for an instant he ceased to be a reasoning machine, and betrayed his human love for admiration and applause. The same singularly proud and reserved nature which turned away with disdain from popular notoriety was capable of being moved to its depths by spontaneous wonder and praise from a friend.

**We shouldn't be *too* hard on Lestrade in this case. After all, he identified the body quickly; and he found a mafia connection, which might *actually* have been part of the case (pending Beppo's gallows confession).

It's not unlikely that, with the information he had and the photograph, Lestrade might actually have caught Beppo before he went out to Reading the next day in search of the sixth Napoleon, even without Holmes help!

He may not have had the ultimate motive, but again, that's because Sherlock was withholding information about the black pearl. And they might very well have convicted Beppo without motive, if they found the murder weapon on him.

**Something a good many adaptations with Lestrade would do well to reread before they present him in an adversarial relation with Holmes:

"Well," said Lestrade, "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. We're not jealous of you at Scotland Yard. No, sir, we are very proud of you, and if you come down to-morrow, there's not a man, from the oldest inspector to the youngest constable, who wouldn't be glad to shake you by the hand." "Thank you!" said Holmes. "Thank you!" and as he turned away, it seemed to me that he was more nearly moved by the softer human emotions than I had ever seen him.

I'm just sayin.'

Brian Keith Snell

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