



Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

The Return of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XXXV -- The Adventure of the Six Napoleons

SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

Lestrade consults Holmes about a series of petty burglaries in which someone is stealing and breaking cheap busts of Napoleon. Watson observes, "There are no limits to the possibilities of monomania." Then, one of the thefts is accompanied by a murder.

Through a complex series of inquiries, Holmes deduces the chain of events: Beppo learned of the pearl from Pietro who in turn had learned of it from his sister. Beppo stole it and still had it in his possession two days later when he stabbed a fellow worker just outside Gelder & Co. The police were hot on his heels for the stabbing, so he hid the pearl in a newly poured plaster bust of Napoleon which had not yet solidified.

Beppo was sentenced to a year in jail (his victim lived) and when he got out, the busts had been sold. He began tracking them down and cracking them open, looking for the pearl. Pietro caught him in the act of committing one of the burglaries (of Horace Harker) and was murdered by Beppo. Holmes and Lestrade lay in wait for him at Brown's house and capture him.

Since the other five busts had been opened and found empty, the sixth, owned by Mr. Sandeford, must contain the pearl. Holmes paid him 10 pounds for it and recovered the pearl, which he kept – he had Watson put it in the safe.



SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)

Lestrade stops by to ask Holmes's opinion about a strange case: Someone is breaking into houses in London only to smash inexpensive plaster busts of Napoleon. Those casts all come from the same shop.

The next day, a telegram from the inspector invites Holmes and Watson to head to the home of a reporter, Horace Harker. Another bust has been smashed, this one purchased from a different merchant, named Harding. This time, however, they also found the corpse of a murdered man. The victim, of unknown identity, had a photograph of a man in his pocket.

At the first shop, owned by a Mr. Hudson, Holmes and Watson learn that the three busts he sold came from Gelder's factory, and the merchant recognizes the man in the photograph: His name is Beppo, a former employee of his who had left only days before. Gelder tells them that the busts he sold to Hudson and Harding — six in all — were from the same batch. He, too, recognizes Beppo, who had worked at his factory months earlier, before being sent to jail for stabbing a man in a fight. Finally, Harding gives the detective the names of the buyers of the three last busts: Harker, Brown and Sandford.

In the meantime, Lestrade has established the identity of the murdered man, Pietro Venucci, a Mafia killer. Holmes convinces the inspector to lie in ambush before Brown's house. There, they catch Beppo who had come to steal and smash another bust.

Holmes, who considers the case is not over, goes to Sandford and buys the last bust. He smashes it and finds, in the plaster fragments, the black pearl of the Borgias which had been stolen months ago by Lucrecia Venucci, Pietro's sister. Somehow, Beppo got this pearl, and just before he was jailed, hid it in a bust from a drying batch. Once released, he tracked those busts in order to find the pearl. He was tailed by Venucci, who was also after the pearl, and when the two men met at Harker's house they fought, resulting in Venucci's death.

SUMMARY (Wikipedia)

Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard brings Holmes a mysterious problem about a man who shatters plaster busts of Napoleon.

One was shattered in Morse Hudson's shop, and two others, sold by Hudson to a Dr. Barnicot, were smashed after the doctor's house and branch office had been burgled. Nothing else was taken. In the former case, the bust was taken outside before being broken.

Holmes knows that Lestrade's theory about a Napoleon-hating lunatic must be wrong. The busts in question all came from the same mould, when there are thousands of images of Napoleon all over London.

The next day, Lestrade calls Holmes to a house where there has been yet another bust-shattering, but there has also been a murder. Mr. Horace Harker found the dead man on his doorstep after investigating a noise. His Napoleon bust was also taken by a burglar entering through a window. It, too, was from the same mould. Also, a photograph of a rather ape-ish-looking man is found in the dead man's pocket.

The fragments of Harker's bust are in the front garden of an empty house up the street. Holmes concludes that the burglar wanted to see what he was doing, for there is a streetlamp here, whereas the bust could have been broken at another empty house nearer Harker's, but it had been dark there.

Holmes tells Lestrade to tell Harker, a journalist for the Central Press Syndicate, that he is convinced that the culprit is a lunatic. Holmes knows that this is not true, but it is expedient to use the press to convince the culprit that this is what the investigators believe.

Holmes interviews the two shopkeepers who sold the busts and finds out whom they were sold to, and where they were made, Gelder & Co. A couple of his informants also recognize the ape-ish man in the picture. They know him as Beppo, an Italian immigrant. He even worked in the shop where the first bust was broken, having left his job there only two days earlier.

Holmes goes to Gelder & Co. and finds out that the busts were part of a batch of six, but other than that, the manager can think of no reason why they should be special, or why anyone would want to destroy them. He recognizes Beppo's picture, and describes him as a rascal. He was imprisoned for a street-fight stabbing a year earlier, but has likely been released now. He once worked at Gelder & Co., but has not been back. His cousin still works there. Holmes begs the manager not to talk to the cousin about Beppo.

That evening, Lestrade brings news that the dead man has been identified as Pietro Venucci, a Mafioso. Lestrade believes that Venucci was sent to kill the culprit, but wound up dead himself.

After sending an express message, Holmes invites Dr. Watson and Lestrade to join him outside a house in Chiswick where apparently Holmes is expecting another bust-breaking. Lestrade by now is exasperated with Holmes's preoccupation with the busts, but comes. They are not disappointed. Beppo shows up, enters the house, and comes back out of the window minutes later with a Napoleon bust, which he proceeds to shatter. He then examines the pieces, quite unaware that Holmes and Lestrade are sneaking up behind him. They pounce, and Beppo is arrested. He will not talk, however.

The mystery is at last laid bare after Holmes offers £10 (£1,150 in 2021[2]) to the owner of the last existing bust, making him sign a document transferring all rights and ownership of the bust to Holmes. After the seller has left, Holmes smashes the bust with a hunting crop. Among the plaster shards is a gem, the black pearl of the Borgias. Holmes was aware of the case of its disappearance from the beginning. Suspicion had fallen on the owner's maid, whose name was Lucretia Venucci – the dead man's sister. Beppo somehow got

the pearl from Pietro Venucci, and hid it inside a still-soft plaster bust at the factory where he worked, moments before his arrest for the street-fight stabbing.

After serving his one-year sentence, he sought to retrieve the hidden pearl. He found out from his cousin who bought the busts, and through his own efforts and his confederates', even found out who the end buyers were. He then proceeded to seek the busts out, smashing them one by one to find the pearl.