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TME RETURN OF SMERLOCK MOLMES ...

BY A. CONAN DOYLE

The Adventure of the Six Napoleons

No. 8 of the Series

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branch surgery and dispensary at Lower
Brixton road, two miles away. This
Dr. Barnicot is an enthusiastic admirer
of Napoleon, and his house is full of
books, pictures and relics of the
French emperor. Some little time ago
he purchased from Morse Hudson two
duplicate plaster casts of the famous
head of Napoleon by the French sculptor
Levine. One of these he placed in his
hall in the house at Kennington
road and the other on the mantelpiece
of the surgery at Lower Brixton.
Well, when Dr. Barnicot came down
this morning he was astounded to find
that his house had been burgled during
the night, but that nothing had been
taken save the plaster head from the
hall. He had been carried out and
had been dashed savagely against the
garden wall, under which his splintered
fragments were discovered.

Holmes rubbed his hands.

"This is certainly very novel," said he.

"I thought it would please you. But I have not got to the end yet. Dr. Barnicot was due at his surgery at 12 o'clock, and you can imagine his amazement when on arriving there he found that the window had been opened in the night and that the broken pieces of his second bust were strewn all over the room. It had been smashed to atoms where it stood. In neither case were there any signs which could give a clue as to the criminal or lunatic who had done the mischief. Now, Mr. Holmes, you have got the facts."

"They are singular, not to say grotesque," said Holmes. "May I ask whether the two busts smashed in Dr. Barnicot's rooms were the exact duplicates of the one which was destroyed in Morse Hudson's shop?"

"They were taken from the same mold."

"Such a fact must tell against the theory that the man who breaks them is influenced by any general hatred of Napoleon. Considering how many hundreds of statues of the great emperor must exist in London, it is too much to suppose such a coincidence as that a pronounced iconoclast should chance to begin upon three specimens of the same bust."

"Well, I thought as you do," said Holmes. "On the other hand, this Morse Hudson is the purveyor of busts in that part of London, and these were the only ones which had been in his shop for years. So, although, as you say, there are many hundreds of statues in London, it is very probable that these busts were the only ones in that district. Therefore a local fanatic would begin with them. What do you think, Dr. Watson?"

"There are no limits to the possibilities of monomania," I answered.

"There is the condition which the modern French psychologists have called the 'idée fixe'—the idea which is a character and accompanied by complete sanity in every other way. A man who had read deeply about Napoleon or who had possibly received some hereditary family injury through the great war might conceivably form such an 'idée fixe' and under its influence be capable of any fantastic outrage."

"That won't do, my dear Watson," said Holmes, shaking his head. "For no amount of 'idée fixe' would enable your interesting monomaniac to find out where these busts were situated."

"Well, how do you explain it?"

"I don't attempt to do so. I would only observe that there is a certain method in the gentleman's eccentric proceedings. For example, in Dr. Barnicot's hall, where a sound might arouse the family, the bust was taken outside before being broken, whereas in the surgery, where there was less danger of alarm, it was smashed where it stood. The affair seems absurdly trifling, and yet I dare call nothing trivial when I reflect that some of my most classic cases have had the least promising commencement. You will remember, Watson, how the dreadful business of the Abernethy family was first brought to my notice by the depth which the parsley had sunk into the butter upon a hot day. I can't afford, therefore, to smile at your three broken busts. Lestrade and I shall be very much obliged to you if you will let me hear of any fresh development of so singular a chain of events."

"The development for which my friend had asked came in a quicker and an infinitely more tragic form than he could have imagined. I was still dressing in my bedroom next morning when there was a tap at the door, and Holmes entered, a telegram in his hand. He read it aloud:

"Come instantly, 131 Pitt Street, Kensington."

"What is it, then?" I asked.

"Don't know—may be anything. But I suspect it is the sequel of the story of the statues. In that case our friend, the image breaker, has begun operations in another quarter of London. These coffee on the table, Watson, and I have a cab at the door."

In half an hour we had reached Pitt Street, a quiet little backwater just beside one of the briskest currents of London life. No. 131 was one of a row, all dark chequered, respectable and most unromantic dwellings. As we drove up we found the railings in front

of the house lined by a curious crowd. Holmes whistled.

"By George, 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. What's this, Watson? The top steps swarmed down and the other ones dry. Footsteps enough, anyhow! Well, well, there's Lestrade at the front window, and we shall soon know all about it."

The official received us with a very grave face and showed us into a sitting room, where an exceedingly unkempt and agitated elderly man clad in a flannel dressing gown was pacing up and down. He was introduced to us as the owner of the house—Mr. Horace Harker of the Central Press syndicate.

"It's the Napoleon bust business again," said Lestrade. "You seemed interested last night, Mr. Holmes, so I thought perhaps you would be glad to be present now that the affair has taken a very much graver turn."

"What has it turned to, then?"

"To murder. Mr. Harker, will you tell these gentlemen exactly what has occurred?"

The man in the dressing gown turned upon us with a most melancholy face.

"It's an extraordinary thing," said he, "that all my life I have been collecting other people's news, and now that a real piece of news has come my own way I am so confused and bothered that I can't put two words together. 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. However, I've heard your name, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, and if you'll only explain this queer business I shall be glad for my trouble in telling you the story."

Holmes sat down and listened.

"It all seems to center round that bust of Napoleon which I bought for this very room about four months ago. I picked it up cheap from Harding Bros., two doors from the High Street station. A great deal of my journalistic work is done at night, and I often write until the early morning. So it was today. I was sitting in my den, which is at the back of the top of the house, about 8 o'clock when I was convinced that I heard some sounds downstairs. I listened, but they were not repeated, and I concluded that they came from outside. Then suddenly, about five minutes later, there came a most horrible yell—the most dreadful sound, Mr. Holmes, that ever I heard. It will ring in my ears as long as I live. I sprang with horror for a minute or two; then I seized the poker and went downstairs. When I entered this room I found the window wide open, and I at once observed that the bust was gone from the mantelpiece. Why any burglar should take such a thing passes my understanding, for it was only a plaster cast and of no real value whatever."

"You can see for yourself that any one going out through that open window could reach the front doorstep by taking a long stride. This was clearly what the burglar did, so I went downstairs and opened the door. Stepping out into the dark, I nearly fell over a dead man who was lying there. I ran back for a light, and there was the poor fellow as a great cash in his throat and the whole place swimming in blood. He lay on his back, his knees drawn up and his mouth horribly open. I shall see him in my dreams. I had just time to blow on my police whistle, and then I must have fainted, for I knew nothing more until I found the policeman standing over me in the hall."

"Well, who was the murdered man?" asked Holmes.

"There's nothing to show who he was," said Lestrade. "You shall see the body at the mortuary, but we haven't made nothing of it up to now. He is a tall man, sunburned, very powerful, not more than thirty. He is poorly dressed, but you don't see any marks on his body. Whether it was the weapon which did the deed or whether it beamed to the dead man I do not know. There was no name on his clothing and nothing in his pockets save an apple, some string, a shilling map of London and a photograph. Here it is!"

It was evidently taken by a snapshot from a small camera. It represented an alert, sharp featured simian man, with thick eyebrows and a very peculiar projection of the lower part of the face, like the muzzle of a baboon.

"And what became of the bust?" asked Holmes after a careful study of this picture.

"We had news of it just before you came. It has been found in the front garden of an empty house in Campden House road. It was broken into fragments. I am going round now to see it. Will you come?"

"Certainly. I must just take one look round the window. The fellow had either been standing or sitting on a most active man," said he. "With an area beneath, it was no mean feat to reach that window ledge and open that window. Getting back was comparatively simple. Ah, you coming with us to see the remains of your bust, Mr. Harker?"

The disconsolate journalist had seated himself at a writing table.

"I must try and make something of it," said he, "though I have no doubt that the first editions of the evening papers are out already with full details. It's my luck! You remember when the stand fell at Doncaster? Well, I was the only journalist in the stand and my journal the only one that had no account of it, for I was too shaken to write it. And now I'll be too late with a murder done on my own doorstep."

As we left the room we heard his pen traveling shrilly over the foolscap.

The spot where the fragments of the bust had been found was only a few hundred yards away. For the first time our eyes rested upon this precinct of the great emperor, which seemed to raise such frantic and destructive hatred in the mind of the unknown. It lay scattered in splintered shards upon the grass. Holmes picked up several of them and examined them carefully. I was convinced from his intent face and his purposeful manner that at last he was upon a clue.

"Well?" asked Lestrade.

Holmes shrugged his shoulders.

"We have a long way to go yet," said he. "And yet—and yet—well, we have some suggestive facts to act upon. The possession of this trifling bust was worth more in the eyes of this strange criminal than a human life. That is one point. Then there is the singular fact that he did not break it in the house or immediately outside the house, if to break it was his sole object."

"He was rattled and hustled by meeting this other fellow. He hardly knew what he was doing."

"Well, that's likely enough, but I wish to call your attention very particularly to the position of this house in the garden of which the bust was destroyed."

Lestrade looked at him.

"It was an empty house, and so he knew that he would not be disturbed in the garden."

"Yes, but there is another empty house further up the street, which he must have passed before he came to this one. Why did he not break it there, since it is evident that every yard that he carried it increased the risk of some one meeting him?"

"I give it up," said Lestrade.

Holmes pointed to the street lamp above our heads.

"He could see what he was doing here, and he could not there. That was his reason."

"By Jove, that's true," said the detective. "Now that I come to think of it, Dr. Barnicot's bust was broken not far from his red lamp. Well, Mr. Holmes, what are we to do with that fact?"

"To remember it—to docket it. We may come on something later which will bear upon it. What steps do you propose to take now, Lestrade?"

"The most practical way of getting it in my opinion, is to identify the dead man. There should be no difficulty about that. When we have found who he is and who his associates are we should have a good start in learning what he was doing in Pitt Street last night and who it was who met him and killed him on the doorstep of Mr. Horace Harker. Don't you think so?"

"No doubt, and yet it is not quite the way in which I should approach the case."

"What would you do, then?"

"Oh, you must not let me influence you in any way. I suggest that you go for a great cash in his throat and compare notes