

THE CASE OF THE SANTA CROCE SYNDICATE`

It had been raining heavily for over an hour while I waited for my friend Sherlock Holmes in his rooms at 221B Baker Street, those pleasant rooms I had shared with him until my marriage two years earlier. April had been an especially dreary month, and my umbrella had seldom left my side as I did my rounds, visiting patients and occasionally attending at St. Barts.

Mrs. Hudson commiserated when she brought me a most welcome pot of her strong Scottish tea and raisin scones. “Why anybody goes out in this weather if they don’t need to, I’m sure I don’t know,” she said.

“Well, rain does have its advantages for a family physician like myself,” I replied. “My patients hesitate to come out with a minor complaint, so I find that my days are more leisurely. It seemed a good idea to brave the elements and see how my old friend is getting along.”

“You see for yourself, he doesn’t change,” answered Mrs. Hudson. “This room is more cluttered and untidy every time I come up here. And you know he only allows me to dust around the edges, and never to move any of his precious papers, or go near his terrible table of chemicals. Not that I would want to go near that table,” shuddered Mrs. Hudson.

The rain hit the bow window with increased intensity, and at that the main door below opened to admit a blast of wind and Holmes, identifiable by his usual impatient slam of the closing door and the muttered “bloody weather.” We could hear the rain sluicing off his overcoat, and a strange squelch-flap-squelch as his footsteps quickly

covered the seventeen steps to the sitting room. The door flew open and Holmes, overcoat dripping and boots squelch-flap-squelching, strode across the room to take my hand.

“Happy to see you, old boy,” he greeted me. “Really, this weather demands the full time use of a hansom cab.”

“Oh Holmes, my rugs,” sighed Mrs. Hudson, shaking her head at the wet footprints that marred the Persian carpet.

“Holmes, you know those Italian boots don’t stand up to rain like this,” I said, starting at the chill of his hand.

Holmes fell into his favourite rattan chair and removed his boots; the sole of his right boot was almost wholly detached from its upper. He threw the boots into the corner with only a slight glance and removed his stockings, wringing the sopping cloth into the coal scuttle near the fire.

“Oh, I ‘ll just go to see Eames and get a quick repair,” Holmes remarked carelessly. “Good thing you introduced me to that assiduous tradesman, Watson, and lucky that we have such a good relationship with him, since I find myself temporarily a little short of funds.”

He turned. “Ah, do I see tea, Mrs. Hudson? Just the thing on this kind of day. Won’t you join me, Watson?” Mrs. Hudson and I smiled at each other. Same old Holmes!

Despite the mess Mrs. Hudson referred to, it was exhilarating to be once again in the old lodgings. Mary and I led a quiet life, and I was always happy to hear Holmes’s summons: “Come, Watson, come. The game’s afoot.” As I grew older, I wondered how long I could stand the pace he set, but the thrill of accompanying him never waned.

While we drank our tea, Holmes told me of the case he had just successfully completed, which had occasioned his journey on such a stormy day. “Sorry you weren’t with me on this one, Watson. It would have made a capital addition to your sagas. You could have called it ‘The Adventure of the Pugnacious Traveller.’” With the details Holmes provided during our conversation, I could almost have recreated the story to add to the annals. It seemed that he too missed our previous close relationship and possibly the small fame he claimed to dislike. Certainly he was less dismissive of my literary efforts than he had once been.

Shaking the crumbs from the last scone onto the carpet below his chair, he abruptly returned to our earlier discussion. “Perhaps you should accompany me to see Mr. Eames, Watson. Your wound has caused your left and right soles to wear differently, possibly leading to that bad back that clearly causes you difficulty in sleeping.” As usual, Holmes astonished me with his diagnosis of a problem I had not really identified myself. I replied that I would be glad to accompany him to the shop of our favourite bootmaker, although my boots did not get quite the wear of his own.

“Capital, Watson. Let’s be off,” he replied.

Seizing a needle from among the test tubes and vials on the chemical table, Holmes plunged it straight into his damaged boot so that it held the sole and upper together in a temporary truce. “This will do until Eames can make a proper repair,” he told me cheerfully, putting on his still-damp overcoat and boots.

The establishment of Eames and Son, Bootmakers, was not far from Baker Street, and we had patronized it together when Holmes and I shared rooms. We found Mr. Eames the elder in attendance. His somber face managed a slight smile when he saw us. “Mr. Holmes, Dr. Watson, I am pleased to see you.” Predictably for a man in his occupation, his gaze went immediately to our feet, spotting the unusual repair Holmes had made to his footwear.

“I hope you will be able to give me a few days for your obviously needed repair, Mr. Holmes. I find myself rather distracted at the moment.”

Holmes was distracted himself as he looked around the small shop. “What are these boots on the shelves, Eames? They’re not your usual style. Bit rough and ready, aren’t they?”

“Yes, rough and ready boots that will be my downfall,” said Eames sadly. “A friend from my old schooldays who emigrated to Canada persuaded me to try a line of Canadian boots from his neighbour, Josiah Meyers. I thought that they might be welcomed by some of my clients, particularly those who must spend time out of doors. You can see how sturdy they are, with very heavy soles. And tough, strong leather on the vamp, from Jesse Ketchum’s own tannery.”

“Not your usual type of thing, though,” said Holmes. “I think most of us are used to the soft leather boots you make for us. Though I can certainly see the advantages of these foreign ones on a rainy day like today.”

“Foreign?” replied Mr. Eames. “Foreign? Well, at least Canada is part of the Empire. The leather you like so much on boots like you are wearing comes from Santa Croce, Italy. And from Italy, Mr. Holmes, comes my current problem.”

“I’m sorry to hear you have a problem, Mr. Eames. Perhaps I can help,” said Holmes.

Mr. Eames went to his desk and retrieved an envelope, which he handed to Holmes. Even from three feet away I could read the threatening first line of the enclosure: “*AVVERTIMO/WARNING.*” I peered over Holmes’s shoulder to read the rest of the handwritten note: *Remove those second-rate boots from Canada from your shelves immediately, or you will receive no further supplies of leather from the Santa Croce Syndicate.* The signature read “Giacomo Morietti.” Underneath the name: “The Godfather.”

“You see, Mr. Holmes,” said Mr. Eames in despair. “I cannot afford to just take these boots off my shelves; I have already paid for them, plus the shipping costs from overseas. I don’t know how long it will take to sell them. My regular clientele rely on me for the fine Italian leather boots I make myself, but my stock of Italian leather is perilously low.”

Holmes took his glass from his pocket to examine the missive, musing to himself: “The notepaper is European, quite fine. The handwriting is Italian in style, ornate, indicative of a Jesuit education. Written with a dip pen, iron gall ink of a type with the same tannin used by tanneries. But the envelope is a cheap English one, so the European stationery does not quite fit.” Neither Eames nor I questioned Holmes’s rapid evaluation of the letter.

He raised the paper to his nose: “The writer is obviously a heavy smoker. Tuscany tobacco. In fact, a Tuscany cigar, from the Grand Duke of Tuscany’s own tobacco factory. I have not had the pleasure of assessing this particular brand before. Capital, Watson, a piece of tobacco has been caught in the fold of the letter.” He carefully wrapped the shred of tobacco in his handkerchief and placed it in his pocket, to be added to the collection on the chemical table at 221B.

Holmes’s deductions were swift, leaving Eames open-mouthed. “The writer is Italian, well-educated, wealthy, a heavy smoker of an unusual and costly brand of cigars. Since the envelope and stamp are English, this gentleman is probably in England at the moment.”

Still amazed, Eames confirmed that such a gentleman had visited his shop quite recently; he had purchased nothing and spoke not a word to either him or his son.

“Scotland Yard will be very interested to learn of the threats you have received, Mr. Eames. Despite its long history, Italy has only recently become a united nation, and perhaps they do things differently there. But here, we call such threats blackmail or extortion, and we have laws against them. Watson, we might just linger here at Mr. Eames’s shop in case this so-called ‘Godfather’ comes in.”

I agreed, and we retreated to the back of the shop where boots were repaired and created; it was redolent of the fine leather Eames used. We managed to find a vantage point where we could see the door to the street.

We did not have long to wait. The bell on the shop door rang, and Eames reacted nervously, admitting a swarthy gentleman in an expensive overcoat, smoking a cigar and carrying a heavy walking stick.

The newcomer snarled. “Still have those boots on the shelves, I see, Mr. Eames. You will soon find that the Italian tanneries will leave you to your Canadian supplier. I wonder how your fine clients will like those rough work boots from Canada.” He brandished his stick, sweeping the boots from the shelves where they had been neatly arrayed, as was usual in the tidy shop.

Holmes and I sprang into action, wrested the walking stick from him and wrestled the intruder into a chair, pinning him down with his own weapon. Eames brought a strong piece of rope from the back room and tied the Italian to the chair. “I thought that rope on the packing case from Canada would come in handy,” he told Holmes.

“Threats, blackmail, extortion, is it sir? Trying to undermine an entrepreneur from the Empire? Scotland Yard will be most interested to hear of this Italian threat to a steady British tradesman.” He turned to me. “Watson, quick, send a message to Lestrade at Scotland Yard. And you might also let my brother Mycroft and the Foreign Office know of this threat from the country of tomatoes and olive oil.”

As I raced out into the street to hail a hansom cab, I heard Holmes speak to the bootmaker: “While we wait for Lestrade, Mr. Eames, perhaps you will have a moment to repair my boot?”