



Adventure II -- The Sign of Four

Note:

In addition to the 56 short stories about Sherlock Holmes, Doyle wrote 4 Holmes novels. This is one of them. It is the second Holmes story published, following A Study in Scarlet (STUD).

First published in:

Lippincott's Magazine, February 1890 Note: Some more modern editions call it "The Sign of Four", some don't.

Time frame of story (known/surmised):

September 1888 (generally accepted, but the month is somewhat arguable)

Holmes & Watson living arrangements:

Sharing bachelor quarters at 221B.



Opening scene:

Holmes was shooting up cocaine. Watson criticized Holmes' use of the drug. Holmes explained his business as a consulting detective to Watson, told of his monographs on the art of detection, criticized Watson's small brochure that he had given the somewhat fantastic title of A Study in Scarlet, and waxed on with eloquence about the Science of Deduction. Then, a client. A crisp knock, and the landlady entered, bearing a card upon the brass salver.

Client:

Miss Mary Morstan, a blonde young lady, small, dainty, well gloved, and dressed in the most perfect taste. She looked sweet and amiable, and her large blue eyes were singularly spiritual and sympathetic. Watson was smitten. In his experience of women which extended over three continents, never had he seen such a clear promise of a refined and sensitive nature. Not only that, but her lip trembled and she quivered.

Crime or concern:

Client found herself in a strange and utterly inexplicable situation. She was 27 years of age, and had been raised in a comfortable boarding establishment at Edinburgh, her mother being deceased and her father an army officer stationed in India. He came to England on extended leave and wired his daughter to meet him in London. At his hotel, she found he had gone out the night before and did not return. That was 10 years previous, and he was not seen again.

Then, four years later, she received in the mail a box containing a very large and lustrous pearl, a rare variety of considerable value. Then every year since, upon the same date, another pearl. No explanation or anything ever enclosed except the pearl itself. Then, a letter, requesting her to meet an "unknown friend", and she could bring with her two friends, but no police. The letter said she was a wronged woman and would have justice.

Villain:

There was villainy on several levels; theft of a treasure, murder, intrigue, bribery, betrayal, etc. It began during The Indian Mutiny, or India's First War of Independence, the term dependent upon your point of view. Achmet, a rich merchant, had been entrusted with the Rajah's treasure, but was playing both sides of the game, and he in turn was watched. The Four (Jonathon Small, Mahomet Singh, Abdullah Khan, Dost Akbar.), killed him and stole the treasure and swore a solemn pact. After the rebellion was put down, the Four were jailed for the murder. The Rajah had been deposed so only the Four knew of the treasure. Then they bribed Major Sholto and Captain Morstan, British officers, to help them escape, for a share of the treasure. Sholto crossed them all and took the whole treasure to England, and Small became obsessed with killing him.

Motive for it all:

The Great Agra Treasure, said to be worth £500,000. Unimaginable wealth. And for Small, even the treasure had come to be a smaller thing in his mind than the slaying of Sholto.

Logic/clues used to solve:

Holmes determined Maj. Sholto had died shortly before the pearls started to come. Holmes asked why the presents begin immediately after Sholto's death unless it was that Sholto's heir desired to make some compensation.

The treasure map had the names of the Four, and only one white man's name was among them. The others were Hindoos or Mohammedans, which allowed Holmes to identify Small. He knew that Maj. Sholto had a dreadful fear of a white man with a wooden leg.

Observation that one of the intruders had stepped in creosote allowed Holmes, helped by Toby the dog, track them to the Aurora's dock, the boat Small intended to escape on, with his companion Tonga and the treasure. Their plan was to board the Esmeralda, bound for Brazil.

Policemen:

Mr. Altheny Jones and an inspector in uniform.

Holmes' fees:

At the end, Watson remarked: "You have done all the work in this business. I get a wife out of it, Jones gets the credit, pray what remains for you?" Reply: "For me," said Sherlock Holmes, "there still remains the cocaine-bottle." And he stretched his long white hand up for it.

Note:

In later cases Holmes was often called in by Scotland Yard (the police). In this case, Miss Morstan was the client so she and her new husband would have owed Holmes a fee. This case followed very closely another, *A Study in Scarlet* (STUD), and quite likely led to some sort of retainer arrangement with the Yard. Readers are never told of Holmes being paid for services by the Yard.

Transport:

Holmes & Watson and Miss Morstan took a cab to their appointment with the unknown man, who then took them on a long ride in a four-wheeler to the apartment of Thaddeus Sholto, the Major's son. After explanations, the four of them took the cab on to brother Bartholomew's, home, Pondicherry Lodge.

After finding the brother dead, Thaddeus drove down to the station to report the matter to the police, presumably in a cab. He returned with the police.

Watson escorted Miss Morstan home in the cab the police had brought, and stopped to pick up Toby

the dog, and took him back to Pondicherry lodge.

Then, with Toby on the scent, Holmes & Watson went for a six-mile trudge to a small wooden wharf at the end of Broad Street. From there they found a boatman with a wherry and crossed the river, and then took a hansom to 221B.

The BSI's scrambled off on foot to find the Aurora.

Watson went back to Camberwell to "check on" Miss Morstan, by unspecified means, and then returned.

Food:

After returning from the overnight quest, Watson found Holmes had the breakfast laid (ham & eggs) and was pouring out the coffee.

Drink:

Watson decided to confront Holmes about his use of drugs, and was not sure if it was Holmes' deliberate manner, which Watson found offensive, or the Beaune (red wine from Burgundy) which Watson had taken with his lunch, that set him off.

Holmes determined that the older brother of Watson was a drunkard, by examination of his watch.

Sholto offered Miss Morstan a glass of wine, Chianti or Tokay. (He kept no other wines.)

Toby the dog put his nose to the creosote like a connoisseur sniffing the bouquet of a famous vintage, but of course he did not drink any creosote.

While Holmes was out looking for the Aurora, Altheny Jones called. He and Watson had a whisky and soda (Jones, only a half-glass).

Before setting out for the boat-chase, Holmes invited Altheny Jones to dine with them. The menu was oysters and a brace of grouse, with something a little choice in white wines. After the table was cleared Holmes glanced at his watch and filled up three glasses with port. "One bumper," said he, "to the success of our little expedition."

Holmes found the Aurora in a repair yard, along with Mordecai Smith, who was very flush of money and rather the worse for liquor.

Following the capture of Johnathon Small, Holmes advised him to take a pull out of the flask, for he was very wet. Altheny Jones then entered the cabin and announced he too would have a pull at the flask.

Later, while Small was telling his story, he stopped and held out his manacled hands for the whisky and water which Holmes had brewed for him.

Vices:

While telling Watson about his consultation by the French Detective Francois le Villard, Holmes filled up his old brier-root pipe.

While a trustee in the military prison, Small took his cheroot from his lips, and asked Maj. Sholto a question about the treasure.

After the initial visit by his client Mary Morstan, Holmes had lit his pipe again.

Sholto applied a taper to the great bowl of his hookah, and explained he found the balsamic odour of the Eastern tobacco to be an invaluable sedative. The smoke bubbled merrily through the rose-water, and he puffed uneasily.

Later, back at Pondicherry Lodge, Holmes was standing on the doorstep with his hands in his pockets, smoking his pipe.

After sending the BSI's to find the steam-launch Aurora, Holmes told Watson he planned to to smoke and to think over the queer business.

Holmes & Watson and Jones had a cigar after Holmes found the Aurora.

After capturing Small, Holmes offered him a cigar.

At end of the little drama, Holmes and Watson had sat some time smoking in silence at 221B.

While holed up in the fort at Agra, Johathan Small took out his pipe and laid down his musket to strike a match (not a wise move).

Other cases mentioned:

STUD. That of Mrs. Cecil Forrester, in which Holmes unraveled a little domestic complication. The Bishopgate Jewel case.

Notable Quotables:

"I am the last and highest court of appeal in detection." – Holmes "

I never guess. It is a shocking habit — destructive to the logical faculty." – Holmes

"Women are never to be entirely trusted — not the best of them." – Holmes

"There is something devilish in this, Watson, what do you make of it?" – Holmes

Other interesting:

Holmes recommended Watson read a book, Winwood Reade's *Martyrdom of Man*, which he called one of the most remarkable ever penned.

When all was said and done:

Small finally made it to England with a native companion, Tonga. Capt. Morstan later arrived, but died of a heart attack arguing with Maj. Sholto. Sholto hid the treasure and disposed of Morstan's body on the sly, but then died. His sons found the treasure and sent some of the pearls to Miss Morstan, believing she had been wronged.

Small tracked down the Sholtos, and he and his companion Tonga took the treasure. Tonga killed Maj. Sholto's son, Bartholomew, who had found the treasure. Based on Miss Morstan's story and evidence at the crime scene Holmes traced Jonathan Small and Tonga, who planned to escape to Brazil, and chased them down the Thames by steam-launch. Tonga was shot and killed and Small was captured, but not before he dumped the treasure into the Thames, spread out and unrecoverable. With the treasure no longer between them, Watson became engaged to Mary Morstan. Small was taken into custody but the story does not tell us what happened to him.

McMurdo's Camp