

The Sign of Four

This Adventure has something for everyone: exotic locales; fierce Sikh warriors; a cannibal shooting poison darts; a bearded, one-legged villain; a fabulous treasure; secret hiding places; revenge; war; violent death; betrayal; and romance.

It even has the Victorian version of a wild chase scene.

Yet, at the end, Holmes seems to have been left out in terms of being given credit for his sleuthing, or a reward for running the malefactors to ground...er, mire.



The Sepoy Mutiny (February 1857 – July 1859) was thought to have been triggered by a seditious rumor. Opponents of the British rule circulated word that British rifle-cartridges had been dipped in pork tallow (the cartridges were paper and needed to be sealed in some way against dampness).

Since the procedure for loading a musket entailed biting off the end of the paper cartridge, this was a monstrous affront to the devoutly Muslim Sepoys who rose up in religious fervor.

This Adventure provides a vivid depiction of the carnage and chaos that ran rampant in India for more than two years.

Against this background stands Jonathan Small, implacable Seeker of the Great Agra Treasure.

In some ways, he has always reminded me of Long John Silver in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.

Small is a cunning, remorseless, peg-legged treasure hunter who will stick at nothing to recover Achmet's jewel-chest and take revenge on the one who betrayed The Four.

Some thoughts (painful, but not fatal) which may be worthy of discussion come to mind:

- Crocodiles have no way to chew their food. Consequently, they seize their prey with their jaws and then spin rapidly to literally tear off a piece that can be swallowed whole. Yet Jonathan Small says a crocodile "nipped off my right leg as clean as a surgeon could have done it, just above the knee." I believe that a large crocodile could have sheared through Small's leg, but the wound would not have resembled a surgical procedure. And trauma plus the loss of blood would have been fatal in a very short space of time. All of which makes me wonder: Was Small being truthful about how he lost his leg, and if he was lying, what would his purpose for doing so have been?
- Watson professed his reluctance to reveal his love for Mary Morstan, ostensibly because he did not want to be viewed as a gigolo who proposed marriage to her so that he could lay hands on a vast treasure. And when it was revealed that the treasure was gone (at this point he does not know that it is irretrievably gone), he proposed to Mary. Was it because the treasure no longer stood in his way, or because he wanted to make sure of getting access to the only remaining portion of the treasure: the pearls sent to Mary by Thaddeus Sholto?

- I have sometimes wondered what kind of thorn Tonga used for his poison darts. And why were their ends rounded? Wouldn't it have allowed greater pressure to build up behind them in the blow-gun if the ends were squared off, particularly in a blowgun the length of a school ruler?
 - What was old Mr. Sherman's purpose in keeping his remarkable menagerie? And how did he come to refer to Holmes familiarly as "Mr. Sherlock"?
 - Small said about his slaying of the Pathan prison guard: "With three long hops I was on him." How far might a man hop with one leg? Would it be far enough that three hops would have been a sufficient distance to prevent detection by the guard while Small unstrapped his leg?
 - Watson wrote of "...the great rubbish-heaps which cumbered the grounds..." of Pondicherry Lodge, and remarked to Miss Morstan that "It looks as though all the moles in England had been let loose in it." At that point, Holmes joined the conversation: "These are the traces of the treasure-seekers. You must remember that they were six years looking for it. No wonder that the grounds look like a gravel-pit." This causes me to wonder whether the brothers Sholto had performed all this mighty labor by themselves, or whether the "treasure-seekers" might have been rascals who scaled the wall to have a go at finding buried treasure? I have also wondered what clues or flights of imagination might have led whoever it was to dig about in the grounds?
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