



An Inquiry into: *The Sign of Four*

Vol. XII No. 42 • June 17, 2021

The Sign of Four was first published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* on February 1890. It never appeared in *The Strand Magazine*. It is the second of the four Canonical novels.

As the table shows, the majority of our Canon chronol-

ogists point to 1888 as the year in which this case took place. If that is so, then at the time Sherlock Holmes was 34 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 36.

Main Characters:

Mary Morstan, a young governess who appeals to Holmes for protection. Captain Morstan, Mary's dead father. Thaddeus Sholto, English gentleman who wants to right a wrongdoing done to Mary by his father. Bartholomew Sholto, Thaddeus' greedy brother. McMurdo, Pondicherry Lodge porter and gatekeeper. Lal Lao, butler at Pondicherry Lodge. Mrs. Bernstone, housekeeper at Pondicherry Lodge. Major Sholto, Thaddeus and Bartholomew's father. Jonathan Small, English escaped convict. Mahomet Singh, Abdullah Khan, and Dost Akbar,

associates of Jonathan Small. Tonga, native Andaman islander, devoted to Small. Athlney Jones, Scotland Yard Detective. Mordecai Smith, steam launch owner. Mrs. Cecil Forrester, Mary's employer.

Notable Quotes:

"My mind rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram, or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation."

"The work itself, the pleasure of finding a field for my peculiar powers, is my highest reward."

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

<i>The Sign of the Four</i>	
<i>Chronologist</i>	<i>Date of the Adventure</i>
<i>Canon</i>	<i>July or September 7, 1888</i>
<i>Baring-Gould</i>	<i>Tuesday, September 18, 1888</i>
<i>Bell</i>	<i>Wednesday, September 7, 1887</i>
<i>Blakeney</i>	<i>July 1888</i>
<i>Brend</i>	<i>July 1888</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>Tuesday, September 25, 1888</i>
<i>Dakin</i>	<i>Thursday, September 27, 1888</i>
<i>Folsom</i>	<i>Tuesday, July 17, 1888</i>
<i>Hall</i>	<i>July 7, 1887</i>
<i>Keefauver</i>	<i>Tuesday, September 4, 1888</i>
<i>Klinger</i>	<i>1888</i>
<i>Zeisler</i>	<i>Monday, April 16, 1888</i>

Please note that Canon chronologists may differ on pivotal dates and comparative periods between cases, thus a simple majority is not necessarily correct. Most Canon scholars settle on a single chronologist's results for their research framework.

“Detection is, or ought to be, and exact science, and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner. You have attempted to tinge it with romanticism, which produces much the effect as if you had worked a love-story or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid.”

More than once during the years that I had lived with him in Baker Street I had observed that a small vanity underlay my companion’s quiet and didactic manner.

“I never guess. It is a shocking habit—destructive to the logical faculty.”

“In an experience of women which extends over many nations and three separate continents, I have never looked upon a face which gave a clearer promise of a refined and sensitive nature.”

“It is of the first importance not to allow your judgment to be biased by personal qualities. A client is to me a mere unit,—a factor in a problem. The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning. I assure you that the most winning woman I ever knew was hanged for poisoning three little children for their insurance-money, and the most repellant man of my acquaintance is a philanthropist who has spent nearly a quarter of a million upon the London poor.”

“Women are not to be entirely trusted—not the best of them.”

“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

“[L]ove is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true cold reason which I place above all things. I should never marry myself, lest I bias my judgment.”

The Addicted Detective

Today, we can all understand Watson’s concern over Holmes’ use of opioids. At the very beginning of his account of this case, he admits to having feelings of irritation and guilt over his failure to say something to Holmes about his drug use. One can hardly blame the good Watson for this—although



given to exaggeration about something for effect, I doubt very much that he was doing it in this instance. Were that to have been the case, then Holmes was definitely close orbiting the black hole of addiction; injecting cocaine and morphine “three times a day for many months,” points to a considerable drug habit.

Whenever anyone doubts Watson’s ability as a physician, I point to this case. Back then, doctors viewed the use of drugs as an unhealthy practice, perhaps a little worse than smoking. The fact that our medico seriously warned Holmes about the drugs’ “pathological and morbid process, which involves increased tissue-change and may at last leave a permanent weakness,” speaks volumes of his medical talent and instincts. Back in 1888 cocaine was touted as wonder drug and sold over the counter. Being in fashion, it was haphazardly added to different products, including snuff, candy, and teething syrup for toddlers, to soft drinks—we all know what the “Coca” part in Coca-Cola

was. There was practically nothing in the medical literature of the time that indicated that it was capable of such deleterious effects. Doctor Watson was ahead of his time.

According to Watson, Holmes had told him that he only indulged in drugs whenever he had no cases to work on, otherwise his brain would tear itself to pieces. This state of affairs appears somewhat contradictory. Even this early in his career, one would have expected the Great Detective to have been active with a surfeit of cases. As he told Watson, “I am the last and highest court of appeal in detec-

tion. When Gregson or Lestrade or Athelney Jones are out of their depths—which, by the way, is their normal state—the matter is laid before me. I examine the data, as an expert, and pronounce a specialist’s opinion. I claim no credit in such cases. My name figures in no newspaper. The work itself, the pleasure of finding a field for my peculiar powers, is my highest reward.” As has been discussed in past issues of this newsletter, all his interventions at the request of the official police had to have been *pro bono*. Even if one were to even consider the possibility that the Scotland Yarders would



Courtesy of ITV Granada

have been willing to pay him a fee, or even defray his expenses, it is doubtful that our sleuth would have accepted this. Although Holmes was rarely arrogant, he did have his pride, and it is unlikely that he would have even considered accepting payment from those official investigators whom he considered so inferior.

However, “as an expert” one would imagine that he would have received an expert’s fee adequate to the magnitude of the client’s problem.

The fact that he was involved in publishing activities would also point to the development of a very promising a successful career. If he was

writing for publication and his output was being published, that means that he must have had an adequate reading audience. “I have been guilty of several monographs,” he admitted with a trace of conceit to his friend. “They are all upon technical subjects. Here, for example, is one ‘Upon the Distinction between the Ashes of the Various Tobaccos.’ In it I enumerate a hundred and forty forms of cigar, cigarette, and pipe tobacco, with coloured plates illustrating the difference in the ash.” As a lifelong non-smoker, I have always wondered if there *really* could be as many as 140 different kinds of distinctive tobaccos producing distinctive ashes!

Yet another indication of the progress of Holmes’ career was recognition by his colleagues that he was a premier authority on crime. The note from François le Villard, for example, in which he addresses Holmes as a pupil would a wise teacher is additional proof of this. On top of everything else our sleuth let his biographer know that his “. . . practice [had] recently extended to the Continent.”

In view of all this, and knowing that he lived in Imperial London, the largest city in the world, it is difficult to accept that he would not have had a single important consultation for three months.

So what kept him so attached to his hypodermic? It certainly could not have been boredom induced by a lack of brainwork. While it is true that Watson does not give us more than a hint of the strength of the solutions (seven percent solution of cocaine) that Holmes injected, it seems to be quite conclusive that he had become quite addicted to these opioids.

The one puzzling factor is that when pursuing a case he not only stopped using drugs, but was able to function extremely effectively without them. Someone as deeply addicted as Holmes *seems* to have been would not have been able to work so efficiently without drugs; in fact, as time went on, he would have required increasingly higher dosages to obtain the desired results.

That Holmes was able to operate at such high levels without maintaining his habit makes one question what the true nature of that habit might have been. Long-term opioid use results in physical

changes to the structure of the brain. Regardless of how powerful his will was, in the end the drug would win.

Deep waters, indeed...

Watson's Declining Infirmities

When Holmes offered Watson to share his seven-percent solution he immediately declined the offer: "My constitution has not got over the Afghan campaign yet. I cannot afford to throw any extra strain upon it." This is of great interest—"My constitution has not got over the Afghan campaign yet." There no longer is any talk of his health being "irretrievably ruined," meaning permanently ruined. Obviously, there has been some improvement since he first wrote that. Note, as well, that when Holmes asks him whether his leg will bother him if he joins him, Watson answers negatively.

Another sign of improvement is that he is making an effort to keep up with medical developments. When he tries to get the beautiful Miss Morstan out of his mind he resorts to reading some readily handy material on pathology. This would indicate that, at least in the back of his mind, Watson is considering the possibility of again practicing medicine.

Of Watches, Jewels, Deductions, and Reminiscences

I recall that the very first Sherlock Holmes story I read, as a boy, was CROO. I was enthused by the way the Great Detective solved that particular conundrum; it made me an immediate fan. However, I did not fall in love with the Canon until I first read the present adventure.



I must have reread Holmes' deductions about Watson's brother, just from looking at his watch, at least three times before continuing reading. To this day, when I read it again decades drop off, I become a kid again, and am as enchanted as I was that first time, long ago.

Not that I do not realize that there are other interpretations to the clues that Holmes derived from Watson's brother's watch. He explains to his friend that, "When you observe the lower part of that watch-case you notice that it is not only dented in two places, but it is cut and

marked all over from the habit of keeping other hard objects, such as coins or keys, in the same pocket. Surely it is no great feat to assume that a man who treats a fifty-guinea watch so cavalierly must be a careless man."

Here Holmes is assuming, with nothing to point to it, that it had been Watson's brother who had been so careless. Why? It was just as possible that the careless one had been the father, not the elder son. And while the deduction of the unsteady hand of the alcoholic, derived from the multiple scratches around the winding keyhole was solid, it did not point to which generation of Watsons had been responsible for them. In the case of the scratched pawnbroker marks, unless they were dated, it would not have been possible to determine who did the pawning.

One wishes that Watson would have been more specific in the matter of the murder weapon used on Bartholomew Sholto:



Courtesy of ITV Granada

*“Ah! I expected it. Look here!”
“It looks like a thorn,” said I.*

What, in heaven’s name, could have led Holmes to expect the use of such a murder weapon in London’s environs? Especially since the Great Detective had had no hint that anyone like Tonga even existed! And even if he had kept special information about the Andaman Islands in his brain-attic, poisoned darts were in use outside those islands.

Then, he bitterly complains that his “memory failed” him when they discovered the “child’s footprint,” and that he should have been able to foretell this. What could possibly have led him to anticipate that someone like Tonga was eliminating subjects of the Realm using a blowgun?

Another puzzling factor is Holmes’ atypical disinterest in Captain Morstan’s last possessions. Why would he not have jumped at the chance to go through Morstan’s things? If he could deduce so much from a single watch one would think that he would have been able to fill a sizeable volume with everything he was able to derive from the clothing, books, and “considerable number of curiosities from the Andaman Islands.” He dismisses the Captain’s last possessions but gets excited over the pearl boxes’ wrapping paper.

Converting 19th century pounds sterling to 21st century dollars is a byzantine undertaking that requires equal doses of Kentucky windage and the darkest of all black magic. Back then, the currency was not fiat money and was solidly anchored in golden reality, but there are few instances of solid equivalences that one can hang one’s hat on—the cost and price of things could be wildly different to what things are today. Income tax was practi-



Courtesy of ITV Granada

cally non-existent, but a pineapple might cost in the neighborhood of \$100. Lobster was so cheap that it was considered bad form to feed it to your servants more than three times a week. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert bought their thousands-of-acres-estate in Balmoral, Scotland—where to this day the Royal Family seeks refuge—for £30,000 (≈\$11.3 million). One would be hard-pressed to find such a bargain today!

So one ventures into the minefield of values very gingerly.

As Watson sets it down, the great Agra treasure consisted of:

143 diamonds
97 emeralds
170 rubies
40 carbuncles
210 sapphires
61 agates
Somewhat less than 300 pearls set on a gold coronet
Assorted beryls, onyxes, cats'-eyes, turquoises, and other unnamed jewels

It all added up to £500,000 or about \$190,000,000 in today's currency. Even if all that Mary Morstan had received had been the share due to her father, £250,000 (≈\$94 million) she would indeed have become a very wealthy young lady.

Small wonder Watson laments about his attraction to Mary, "What was I, an army surgeon with a weak leg and a weaker banking-account, that I should dare to think of such things?" In the end, of course, the lady is only left with the pearls sent to her by the surviving member of the Sholto family and, although the pearls may have had a value of some \$30,000, this did not amount to a fortune and the loss of the main treasure put the lady within the Good Doctor's romantic reach.



Courtesy of ITV Granada

A Kind Word for Jonathan Small



Among the many interesting and often fascinating characters that populate the Canon, Jonathan Small stands out in a somewhat unique way. Regardless of what the law might have to say about his actions, he was basically an honorable man. Bad luck wrecked his chosen destiny when the army he wished to serve in abandoned him when his leg was taken by a crocodile, making him a cripple in his early twenties. He manages to make an honest living and insurrection puts an end to it. When he gets a chance to acquire a fabulous fortune he is arrested and sentenced to a miserable penal colony. There, even though he gets a chance for freedom by trusting Sholto, he risks it to keep faith with the men with whom he originally obtained the treasure. Then he is double-crossed by Sholto.

Jonathan Small was a steadfast and brave man, true to his word. When, in the end, he realizes that everything is lost, he still displayed loyalty to his comrades and disposed of the treasure in the river—if they were not to enjoy it, then nobody else would.

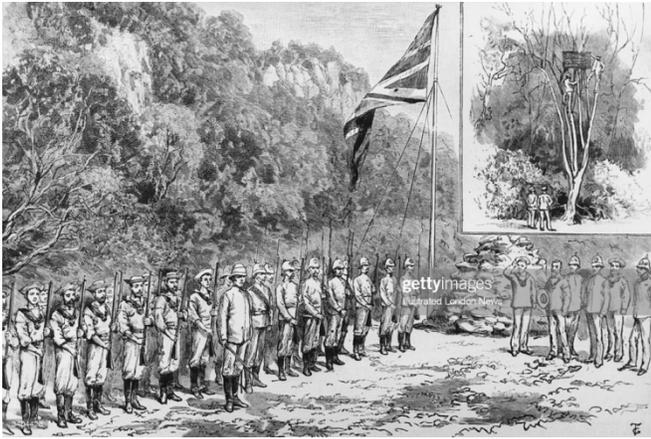
What else happened in 1888:

Empire

Mashonaland and Matabeleland declared British sphere of influence.

Suez Canal Convention signed: Suez Canal declared open to ships of all nations and free from blockade.

Sarawak and Brunei placed under British protection.



A 7.0-7.3-magnitude earthquake strikes North Canterbury, New Zealand.

◀ Great Britain annexes Christmas Island.

Queen Victoria grants a charter to the Imperial British East Africa Company, and it is incorporated in London, England.

Canadian Pacific Railway opens Hotel Vancouver, Vancouver, British Columbia.

Hailstones kill about 250 in Moradabad district of Delhi, India.

Britain

County Councils' Act establishes representative county-based authorities.

Annie Besant leads the London match factory girls on strike.

Commission to examine charges against Parnell.



General Buller founds RASC (Royal Army Service Corps).

◀ Jack the Ripper has murder spree in Whitechapel, kills his last victim.

County Councils Act: elects councils to take over administrative duties of JPs.

Foundation of London General Omnibus Company.

Miners Federation of Great Britain formed; demands minimum wage.

Foundation of Scottish Labour Party.

Final report on Commission on Elementary Education Acts in England.

English Priory of Knights Hospitalers authorized by Royal Charter.

World



French Indochina formed.

Princess Isabel of Brazil signs *Lei Auréa* abolishing slavery.

Emperor Wilhelm I of Germany dies; Frederick III becomes Emperor from March to June, dies, and is succeeded by Wilhelm II.

◀ Benjamin Harrison elected President of United States. Even though Cleveland received more popular votes, the Electoral College gives Harrison the election.

Unemployment demonstration in Rome suppressed by the military.

Louisville, Kentucky, becomes first government in U.S. to adopt Australian ballot.

Marshal Bazaine, officer in charge of the French Foreign Legion in Mexico during Emperor Maximilian's rule, dies.

Agricultural depression causes Sweden to abandon free trade.

British Honduras adopts decimal currency.

Great Blizzard of 1888 strikes northeast U.S., 400 die.

Phil Sheridan, who fought as a Union General against the South during the American Civil War dies.

Clashes in Paris between Radicals and Monarchists. Anarchists riot in favor of weavers of Lille and glass blowers of Lion. Paris stone masons and waiters strike for higher wages and shorter work schedules.

More liberal constitution granted to Serbia by Milan.

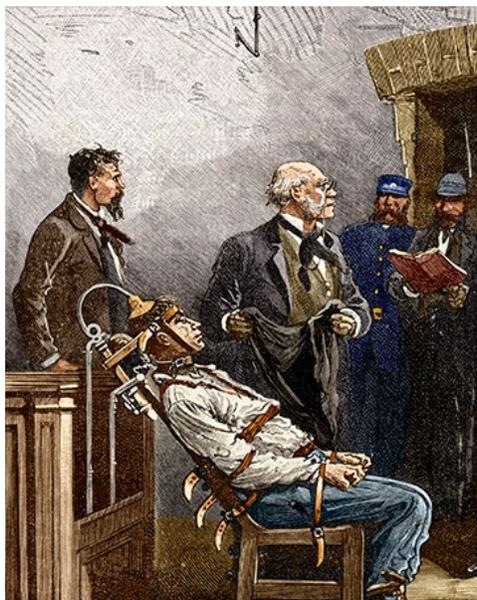
Pennsylvania's Monongehela River rises 32 feet after 24-hour rainfall.

Bandai volcano in Japan erupts for first time in 1,000 years.

Use of Danish language forbidden in schools in German N. Schleswig.

Founding of the Dutch shipping line Koninklijke Paketvaart-Maatschappij (KPM). It supports the unification and development of the colonial economy.

Reconstructed free port of Hamburg opens.



The Washington Monument officially opens to the general public.

Italy and Spain sign military treaty.

King Leopold II of Belgium introduces the Order of the African Star.

◀ New York State establishes electric chair for method of death penalty.

Revolution in Haiti culminates in the destruction of public buildings and the flight of President Salomon.

Ferdinand de Lesseps attempts to issue a fresh series of 1,000,000 bonds "to finish the Panama Canal." Proposal is withdrawn, de Lesseps resigns his directorship, and the project collapses.

Italians near Alite relieved by the withdrawal of the Abyssinians.

The first beauty contest is held, the Concours de Beauté, at Spa in Belgium. Winner is 18-year-old Bertha Soucaret of Guadeloupe.

First organized rodeo competition held, Prescott, Arizona.

Boulangier supported by Monarchists in France; his popularity threatens Third Republic.

Main portion of Bremen incorporated into German Customs Union; parts of Wesser estuary remain free port.

Art

Van Gogh in Arles, Holland, paints *Sunflowers*, *Portrait of Armand Roulin*, *La Mousme*, and *Drawbridge at Arles*. Cuts off his left earlobe and gives it to a prostitute in Arles.

Oscar Wilde publishes *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*.

Casey at the Bat is published in *The San Francisco Examiner*, and recited publicly for the first time.

John Phillip Sousa composes the military march *Semper Fidelis* for the U.S. Marine Corp.

Tchaikovsky performs *Symphony No. 5 in E Minor* at St. Petersburg.

George Moore publishes *Confessions of a Young Man*.

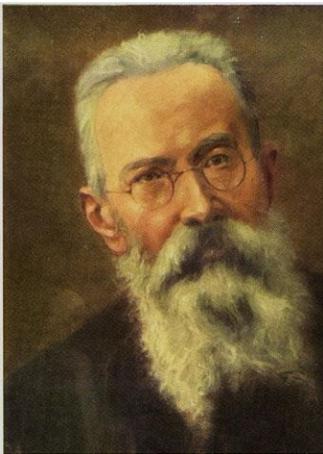
Cézanne paints *Peasant in a Blue Smock*.

Guilbert and Sullivan debut *The Yeomen of the Guard*.

Iannis Psichari, one of the creators of modern Greek literary language, publishes *My Journey* in demotic Greek.

Morris publishes *Dream of John Bull*, on a socialist commonwealth.

Matthew Arnold, critic, essayist, and poet dies.



Fontane publishes *Irrungen, Wirrungen*.

Monet paints *Cap d'Antibes*.

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch publishes *Troy Town*, a novel about Cornwall.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec paints *Trace Horse of the Bus Line, Place Clichy*.

Stevenson publishes *The Black Arrow*, a novel about the War of the Roses.

◀ Rimsky-Korsakov composes *Scheherazade*.

Charles Doughty publishes *Travels in Arabia Deserta*.

Seurat paints *Fishing Fleet at Port-en-Bessin*.

Thomas Hardy publishes *Wessex Tales*.

Kipling publishes *Soldiers Three*, and *Plain Tales from the Hills*; short stories of India.

Science and Technology

Dunlop's pneumatic tire developed, principle still unproven.

First wax drinking straw patented, by Marvin C Stone in Washington DC.

George Eastman registers the trademark "Kodak" and receives a patent for his box camera, which uses photographic paper roll-film.

Emile Berliner improves the gramophone.

Dr. Fitz, Boston surgeon, advocates the removal of the vermiform appendix in certain intestinal disorders, after several post-mortem operations. His advice is followed.

William Bundy patents the timecard clock.

First ballpoint pen patented.

The first known recording of classical music, Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, is made on wax cylinder.

Fridtjof Nansen, Norwegian explorer, crosses the Greenland icefield.

Clinton Merriam founds the National Geographical Society in Washington, D.C., for "the increase and diffusion of geographical knowledge," and the first issue of its magazine is published.

Thomas Edison files a patent for the Optical Phonograph (the first movie).

Bertha Benz, wife of inventor Karl Benz, drives from Mannheim to Pforzheim, Germany in the first long distance automobile trip.

Lick Observatory, Mount Hamilton, California, formally inaugurates the Ewing duplex-pendulum seismometer, Ewing horizontal-pendulum seismometers, and Gray-Ewing vertical seismometers.

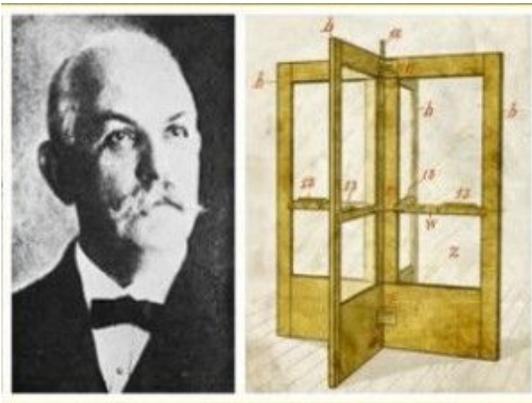
Hudson and Sclater publish *Argentine Ornithology*.

Mercerizing process introduced into cotton manufacture; facilitates later development of the artificial silk industry.

Spanish navy launches first submarine, designed by Isaac Peral. It features accumulator batteries, three dynamos, two 30-hp engines, electric propulsion, a torpedo tube, and periscope. Displacement is 80 tonnes, length 48 feet, and 6 feet beam.

Nikola Tesla makes first AC motor.

In the U.S., Leroy Buffington patents a system to build skyscrapers.



Incubators are first used for premature infants.

Pasteur Institute for the treatment of hydrophobia founded.

◀ Theophilus van Kannel of Philadelphia patents revolving door.

Sir J. Dewar and Sir F. Abel invent cordite.

William Seward Burroughs patents the first successful adding machine.

Louis Le Prince films the Roundhay Garden Scene, the earliest surviving film.

Heinrich Hertz produces electromagnetic waves, proves light and heat are both forms of electromagnetic radiation. Sir Oliver Lodge makes same discovery independently. Hertz used an induction coil; Lodge Leyden jars.

Next week's case: SCAN

Respectfully submitted,

Murray, the Courageous Orderly

(a.k.a. Alexander E. Braun)

"I should have fallen into the hands of the murderous Ghazis had it not been for the devotion and courage shown by Murray, my orderly..."

If you would like to join the Hounds of the Internet, email us at CourageousMurray@aol.com.

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