



Adventure II – The Sign of Four

Publishing History

2 of the 60 stories written

First published in Lippincott's Magazine, February, 1890

Published in book form by Spencer Blackett, October, 1890

1890 Illustrations by Richard Gutschmidt.

Interesting Fact

The Sign of Four first appeared in the February 1890 edition of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. In America it was called *The Sign of the Four*, but in Britain the title was shortened to *The Sign of Four*. However you title it, it's a classic.

Chronology

William Baring Gould places it as Tuesday, September 18 to Friday, September 21, 1888 which makes it 19th in time. This means that Holmes is 34 and Watson 36.



Christopher Morley Says

“Sherlock Holmes is roused from boredom and cocaine by Miss Morstan's appeal. Shall she keep the blind date with the Unknown Friend? The thrilling story that follows extends to the great mutiny in India years before to a man hunt down the river Thames, a still leaves time for Dr. Watson's quiet love story.”

Dummies Short Summary

“In Doyle’s sophomore effort, readers discovered Holmes’s drug abuse (“What is it today?” Asks Watson in disgust. “Morphine or cocaine?”) meet the Baker Street Irregulars (the ragtag group of street urchins Holes uses as his eyes and ears around London), and head off a treasure hunt featuring bloodhounds, savage natives, blowguns., and a boat chase on the Thames. Great Stuff.”

How Many Words

At 43,372 words SIGN has the 57th most words (#1 is VEIL – 4,499, #56 if NAVL – 12,701)

Classifying This Case

This case is one of 23 classified as a MURDER and one of 14 where the perpetrator was either killed, arrested, or otherwise satisfactorily handled.

The Best Of Sherlock Holmes

Sherlockian societies usually only compare the 56 short stories. The few times the 4 long stories were included, this story was low on the totem pole.

What Else Happened That Year (1888)

- Convention of Constantinople: Suez Canal declared open to ships of all nations and free from blockade.
- British East Africa Company founded.
- Jack the Ripper has murder spree in Whitechapel.
- Foundation of London General Omnibus Company.
- French Indochina formed.
- Slavery ends in Brazil.
- New York State establishes electric chair for method of death penalty.
- Casey at the Bat is recited publicly for the first time.
- Tchaikovsky performs Symphony No. 5 in E Minor at St. Petersburg.
- Clinton Merriam establishes the National Geographical Society and they release their first magazine
- Drinking straws are invented.
- George Eastman perfects the "Kodak" box camera, which uses photographic paper roll-film.
- Nichola Tesla makes first AC motor.

- Incubators are first used for premature infants.
- William Burroughs patents the adding machine.

Holmes And Watson – Personal Information

Both are in residence at 221B Baker Street and Watson ends up getting married and moving out.

Dramatis Personae

We have a varied and interesting cast in this story.

The Four: Johnathan Small, Mahomet Singh, Abdullah Kahn, Dost Akbar

Colonel Arthur Morstan, officer of the British army.

Mary Morstan, daughter of the Colonel

Major John Sholto, late of the army.

Thaddeus Sholto, son of John

Brother Bartholomew, twin of Thaddeus.

Mcmurdo, servant to Bartholomew

Athelney Jones, of the Yard.

Old Sherman, owner of Toby.

Toby, an ugly, long-haired, lop-eared dog with an amazing sense of smell.

Mordecai Smith, renter of boats. Owner of the *Aurora*.

Tonga, a native of the Andaman Islands.

QUOTABLE SHERLOCK (We Have So Many To Choose From – Just A Few)

- "No, no: I never guess. It is a shocking habit --destructive to the logical faculty."
- "I cannot live without brain-work."
- "Crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace have any functions upon earth."
- "I never make exceptions. An exception disproves the rule."
- "How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?"

- “You know my methods. Apply them.”
- “It is the unofficial force – the Baker Street irregulars.”
- "Women are never to be entirely trusted --not the best of them."

Holmes' Fee

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.” 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, (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.

Disguises

The Master of disguise used the deception of being disguised 14 times in 11 of the 60 stories. In *The Sign of Four* Holmes disguises his self as a sailor and an asthmatic old master mariner. in *The Sign of Four*

Unrecorded Cases

Sherlockians just have to know about *The Domestic Affair of Mrs. Cecil Forrester* and *The Bishopgate Jewel Case*.

Sherlock Holmes On The Big And The Little Screen

This is very popular, if only for the boat chase on the river.

- 1923 - *The Sign of Four* with Eille Norwood
- 1932 – *The Sing of Four* with Arthur Wontner
- 1968 – *The Sign of Four* (TV) *Sherlock Holmes* series episode with Peter Cushing
- 1979 – Part of *The Blood Inscription* episode in the Russian *Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson* (TV) series with Vasily Livanov
- 1983 – The Treasure of Agra episode with also had SCAN content in The Russian *Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson* (TV) with Vasily Livanov.
- 1983 – *The Sign of Four* TV movie with Ian Richardson
- 1984 - *The Sign of Four* (Animated TV movie)with Peter O’Toole
- 1984 – *The Sign of Four* with Jeremy Brett

- 1991 – The Crucifer of Blood with Charlton Heston
- 1999 – *The Sign of Four* in *Sherlock Holmes in the 22nd Century* (Animated TV series)
- 2001 – *The Sign of Four* (TV movie) with Matt Frewer

Fainting In The Canon

In SIGN, Major Sholto almost fainted but Mary Morstan (the future Mrs. Dr. Watson) almost fainted three times. Jonathan Small actually did faint.

Newspapers

The Standard - One of the more popular papers. It was of a Conservative nature. Had a distinguished staff of writers in journalism and literature.

Annotated Sherlock

This is our longest list for any story due to the many Indian terms used.

- **“the Beaune”** a rather potent red wine from Burgundy, too strong to drink for lunch
- **“lunkah”** like the Trichinopoly, a thin cigar open at both ends
- **“bird’s eye”** a kind of pipe tobacco cut into small circular pieces
- **“khitmutgar”** Hindu for a butler or manservant
- **“Le mauvais goût mène au crime”** “bad taste leads to crime.”
- **“a valetudinarian”** a person of feeble or delicate health or constitution; an invalid; one subject to frequent illness
- **“Il n’y a pas des sots si incommodés que ceux qui ont de l’esprit.”** French which liberally translates as “There are no fools so troublesome as those who have some wit.”
- **“a wheery”** A long, light rowboat, sharp at both ends.
- **“the Downs”** The anchorage for ships inside of Goodwin Sands just south of the Thames estuary
- **“whisky-pegs”** Anglo-Indian slang for a high-ball; whisky or brandy with soda; usual explanation is that each drink is a peg in your coffin
- **“nullah”** Hindu word for a ravine or valley
- **“bhang”** Indian hemp, smoked and chewed as a narcotic
- **“pandies”** Nickname for the mutineers; from the name of one Pande, a ringleader at the beginning of the trouble

- **“chokey”** Anglo-Indian slang for a jail or prison. From the Hindu *chauki*, meaning a four-sided place or building
- **“Pathan”** Member of the principal race of Afghanistan.

Holmes The Author

- “I have been guilty of several monographs. They are all upon technical subjects. Here, for example, is one ‘Upon the distinction between the Ashes of Various Tobaccos.’ In it I enumerated a hundred and forty forms of cigar, cigarette, and pipe tobacco, with coloured plates illustrating the difference in the ash.”
- "Here is my monograph upon the tracing of footsteps, with some remarks upon the uses.”

Weapons

There are so many weapons in this story that it would fill an entire page. Just a few would be revolvers, muskets, bamboo spears, poison darts, knives, swords, a heavy stick, a wooden leg, fists, etc.

Frank Mentzel