

## An Observance Of Trifles

You know my method. It is founded upon the observance of trifles.

(Arthur Conan Doyle)

*snell's interminable ramblings about the canon*

## Adventure II -- The Sign of Four

### The Sign Of The Four--The Adventure Of The Wandering "The"!

Today we shall be discussing four important things about **The Sign Of The Four**:

No, not *\*that\** Four...although that does give me an idea for one heck of a story (which is why they don't let me write comics books or **Sherlock Holmes** stories).

No, I meant this: Let's begin, shall we?

**Sign The First:** You know, we don't even know the *actual title* of this novel, which is weird, if you think about it.

As you can see from the above picture, in the novel's first publication, it was clearly entitled **The Sign Of The Four**. *Five* words. *Two* "the's."

But upon subsequent publications, that second "the" would sometimes be there, sometimes not:

The text itself is no help, as while the majority of the novel's references are to the 5-word version, on at least two occasions the 4-word version is used.

Careless writing? Poor proofreading? Typesetting errors? No one can say--I read (somewhere--source long forgotten, I'm afraid) that the original manuscript is in the possession of a private collector who refuses to let anyone see it. So I guess we'll have to live with the mystery, and everyone will have to decide for themselves whether the correct title has 4 or 5 words.

It's funny, because we're used to that kind of thing from older sources. What we know as **Shakespeare's** work was put together from various unauthorized sources, unsupervised by the author. The works of Homer? Translations of transcriptions from oral traditions. When you read the Bible, you're reading a translation of a translation.



But despite the canon being over a century old, somehow we think of Sherlock Holmes as being more *modern*, as not subject to such historical uncertainty or whims.

This is the very definition of a trifle--it makes absolutely no difference, really, in the story, our enjoyment of it, our understanding of it. I just find it noteworthy that *no one truly knows what the actual title of the second Sherlock Holmes novel is...*

**Sign The Second:** This is very much a story of **John Watson**.

Of course, we already know that. He proposes at the end!!

But many of the adaptations skim over that or ignore it (more on that below). And this same story gives us the first discussion of Holmes' drug use, the first time we see him in one of his disguises, the first time we meet Toby, the first mention of Holmes' boxing, his opinions on women, it's very easy to get oneself swamped by the deluge of Holmes information and forget everything we learn about Watson.

Early on, we hear Holmes dismiss Watson's written version of events in **A Study In Scarlet**. But we must remember, in **A Study in Scarlet**, Holmes criticized the detective works of **Poe** and **Gaboriau** in much the same fashion. One can almost imagine that this is Holmes' version of a *back-handed compliment*, comparing his companion's work to his predecessors. (And it hardly surprising that Watson "*attempted to tinge*" his early story with romanticism--in this case, **Mrs. Cecil Forrester** declares "It is a romance!" Surely **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** made this juxtaposition on purpose, to highlight Watson's abilities as an author.)

Although many adaptations wish to portray Watson as a dolt, that certainly *not* what Doyle intended. True, in many of the short stories, the limited storytelling space often left Watson filling the "*gaze in awe as an appreciative audience for Holmes' brilliance*" role. But not following Holmes' reasoning immediately (or having the breadth of experience and knowledge as Sherlock) is not the same as being ignorant, or a fool--see, for example, many of the fine police inspectors in the canon for an example of what Doyle considers an example of someone truly foolish.

And in this case, Watson often follows fairly closely with Holmes. When Holmes gives his famous "*eliminate the impossible*" bon mot, **Watson** *immediately* follows his reasoning and sees exactly what Sherlock was thinking. At several other points in the story, Watson keeps up with Holmes' train of thought; at others, he asks exactly the right questions. **Doyle** hardly presents **Watson** as a dunce, or a dunsel--he is intelligent, and a vital part of the team. Not having knowledge of Andaman aborigines is hardly a sign of dolthood.

We also learn much personally about **John Watson**--his father, the tale of his brother's sad life the not-just-medical concern for his flat mate's drug habit. Perhaps most endearing is the insecurity he shows around a lovely woman. Despite his claim of "*an experience of women which extends over many nations and three separate continents*," he shows no such expertise with **Miss Mary Morstan**. His confession to (*twice*) bumbling

a conversation because he finds her presence distracting is terribly charming. Add his finding of every excuse possible not to woo her--(It would be taking advantage of a women in distress!! She'll be too wealthy!!) and we see a shy, self-effacing humility. That may explain why Watson the author tends downplay the Watson in his written work in favor of Holmes.

And of course, he does get the woman in the end!

**Sign The Third:** Adaptation is a tricky business.

What you leave in, what you take out, what you massage or expand or compress or elide are all judgement calls, especially with a franchise as popular as Sherlock Holmes. If you leave out something, you might upset the Holmes fans, presumably your core audience; but too much unnecessary detail (and, frankly, fan service), and you risk losing the casual viewer.

All of which is a way of saying that the **BBC Cushing** version of **The Sign Of The Four** kind of sucks rocks, while the **Granada** edition pretty much gets it right. Part of the problem is time, of course. The **1968** edition only had *50 minutes*, which would have made it difficult to fit the whole novel even with the best of choices. **Granada**, by contrast, made a "*feature film*" of their TSOTF, giving it *103 minutes*.

But a lot of the problems came down not just to time, but to disastrous choices. You'll recall in the 1968 version of **A Study In Scarlet**, they dropped the entire "**Country of Saints**" digression, trying to recap **Jefferson Hope's** entire story in two sentences. Here, again they try the same tactic, to a particularly awful result.

They do take one wise step to compress--**Sholto** and **Morstan** were *original* members of The Four, not interlopers who came in later. This saves some steps, but still theoretically keeping **Jonathan Small's** need for revenge intact. However, once Small is captured, that is it. We don't get any deep confession from him; we never learn how he and his comrades came to have the treasure; we never learn why **Small** was in prison; we never learn how or why **Major Sholto** came to take the treasure; never learn how **Small** came to have **Tonga** as an ally, or how he escaped--the entire backstory is *virtually eliminated!* As a result, as with **A Study In Scarlet**, we again have a criminal with precious little motivation presented, whose actions seem largely random, and the entire story concludes with a thud.

Granada, having the luxury of time (and a better sense of storytelling, methinks), manages to lay out the whole story, largely intact. It manages to make **Small** an actual character, not just "*this week's prop villain,*" which in turn makes Holmes look all the brighter for having outwitted him.

Each version chooses to ignore the initial "*Sherlock shoots up*" scene. You don't want to show your hero as a drug addict, I guess...and quite possibly the television censors of the time wouldn't allow it, either.

Both versions also *omit* **Watson's** proposal to **Mary Morstan**! In the context of a TV series, it makes sense; you can't have one of your co-stars up and leave **Baker Street** in the middle of a season.

Plus, the difficulty of keeping **Morstan** around and finding a way to incorporate her each week (or explain her absence) would have proved to be a pain in the butt for the writers.

BBC **1968** takes a *silly* way out of the dilemma. In something straight from a bad romantic comedy, **Watson** observes what he thinks is **Thaddeus Sholto** proposing to **Morstan**, so like a true gentleman, he just forgets all about his attraction to her:

Really, they cut **Small's** back story for this?

**Granada** doesn't even try to provide an explanation. While there was some *obvious attraction* twixt **Watson** and **Morstan**, they don't do anything with it, and the end the good doctor just gazes out the window as she leaves, muttering to himself what a lovely woman she was. *Oh, John...*

Perhaps I am too harsh on the **BBC** version. But then again, perhaps they should have thought better than to bite off such a large story to adapt into a single 50 minute episode.

**Sign The Fourth**. The Tonga Problem.

Look, I'll admit that I'm ill-positioned to be critical of the portrayal of aboriginal pygmy cannibals as vicious murdering maniacs.

And, as with **A Study In Scarlet** and the Mormons, what was an acceptable portrayal in **1890** might not be acceptable by current social standards. But unlike the Country Of Saints digression, you would lose too much of the story/mystery if you eliminated Tonga from the storyline.

The question, then, becomes how to deal with Tonga in modern times?

Well, in **1968**, the solution was to get a child actress and put her in blackface:

Or, as **Granada** did, you can hire the Guinness record holder of "*world's shortest stuntman*" and, well, **Klingon** him up a bit:

And there are many other attempts, some more successful than others, each potentially problematic: Sorry about that last one, but it's out there.

I don't pretend to have any answer, let alone the right one, for how to deal with The Tonga Issue. But any future producers of adaptations of **The Sign Of The Four** should think long and hard about it before they proceed.

## OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVANCES:

\*\* I know this is crazy fanboy genre-mixing, but in this book we have a killer who uses a poison that leaves a "*ghastly, inscrutable smile upon [the victims' face] face.*" Further, he "*leave[s] some such record upon the body as a sign that it was not a common murder...bizarre conceits of this kind are common enough in the annals of crime, and usually afford valuable indications as to the criminal.*"

A terribly smile in death? A calling card left with the body?? C'mon, that's the **Joker**, right? It's the **Joker!!**

You have to wonder if **Jerry Robinson** and/or **Bill Finger** and/or **Bob Kane** had this story in mind when they created the **Clown Prince Of Crime...**

\*\* More nerd-cred: I can't hear the name **Jonathon Small** without mentally yelling out "**John Smallberries!**" Yes, I am a pathetic loser.

\*\* As in **A Study in Scarlet**, once again England is personal **Thunderdome** for grievances started in a far-away land. It shan't be the last time, though...

\*\* As I predicted in my **A Study in Scarlet** post, Doyle obviously learned from that story and became *much* better at structuring his stories. There's still a considerable amount of off-stage flashback in this story, but this time it's much better integrated into the contemporary story, with revelations coming at a regular pace. Well before the end, we know the killer's identity, and are at least partially-clued in as to his motives. So when we get to the capture/confession of **Small**, we still have a flashback digression, but it is a much more manageable *20ish* pages; and as we've already gotten some detail on **Small**, it doesn't seem as much as a non-sequitur. The mystery itself may not be as good, but it's put together much more seamlessly than the first book.

\*\* Given the early information about Holmes' drug use, perhaps we should have been worried when they encountered "*a great pile of coke upon the jetty.*"

\*\* How old is **Holmes**? In **A Study in Scarlet**, **Watson** mistakes him for a student when they meet. Here, Inspector **Athelney Jones** refers to **Holmes** as a "*young man.*"

Too often the movie and television adaptations opt for an older actor to portray Holmes, but I'm not sure why, as most indications (albeit inconsistent ones) suggest that, at least early in the partnership, Holmes and Watson were much younger than the *stodgy middle-aged* men hired to portray them...

\*\* **Athelney Jones**...*heh heh*...too bad we never saw more of him. Pompous, but entertaining.

\*\* As per usual, **Sherlock Holmes** was *far* ahead of his time, prefiguring psychohistorian **Hari Seldon**:  
"*...while the individual man is an insoluble puzzle, in the aggregate he becomes a mathematical certainty. You can, for example, never foretell what any one man will do, but you can say with precision what an average number will be up to. Individuals vary, but percentages remain constant. So says the statistician.*"

**Obviously Isaac Asimov read the canon.** So again, conscious influence on the Foundation novels, or just a coincidence?

\*\* Holmes is very certain of his marksmanship: "*He took out his revolver as he spoke, and, having loaded two of the chambers, he put it back into the right-hand pocket of his jacket.*" Only two rounds, Sherlock?!?

As for Tonga's marksmanship, the novel has his last dart went between Holmes and Watson, hitting one of the launch's hatches. In the **BBC** version, it hit **Watson's** bowler. In **Granada** it hit **Holmes** in the throat-  
-but the heavy scarf he was wearing kept it from doing him damage. Adaptations, man, adaptations...

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