



Adventure II -- The Sign of Four

“I’d like two shillin’ better,” said little Jack Smith, and there are plenty of characters in *The Sign of Four* who followed his philosophy. But there are also the knights errant: Holmes, working for the love of his art, and Watson, working for love. The story could serve as a study in Victorian ambivalence toward the desirability of wealth versus the acceptable means of AGRA-ndizement. Luckily for us readers, however, this is a study that comes complete with a missing treasure, a chilling murder, some classic deductions by Sherlock Holmes, a fascinating pursuit on land, an exciting chase on the river, some sweet romantic moments, a boatload of characters worthy of Dickens — and, as they say, much, much more! Whoever lost a treasure, this is one that we Sherlockians get to keep! (And by the time Jonathan Small finished his boat ride, all of the gems in the Agra treasure were “of the first water.”)

Money Changes Everything: “Whose was it? His who is gone. Who shall have it?” No, we haven’t started to discuss “The Musgrave Ritual” by mistake: I mean the Agra treasure, of course.

Who has a right to it, morally or legally or any way under the sun? And if Mary Morstan had gotten it, would Watson really have had to give up all hopes of marrying her, even if it were partly through his efforts that she came into her wealth? Why was it acceptable for Lord Robert St. Simon, “The Noble Bachelor,” to court Hatty Doran, but not for Watson to propose to Mary? Was there some social double standard at work when it came to marrying for money?

The apportionment of virtue in *The Sign of Four* is as haphazard as the scattering of the Agra treasure. Murderous little Tonga was “staunch and true” to his friend, while an officer of the British Army broke his most solemn oath in order to satisfy his greed. Jonathan Small and his companions killed Achmet for the treasure, but they remained loyal to each other. His loyalty and candor give a certain appeal to the character of Small, and it surprised me to read of Watson’s disgust and contempt for the unfortunate convict. Are we



supposed to share Watson's sense of outrage, or are we meant to feel sympathetic to Small? Was there a social prejudice in operation at the time the story was written, so that Small was automatically supposed to be cast as the villain in the reader's eyes, or are we in our times a bit more inclined to excuse crimes if the transgressor himself has suffered some prior injustice?

Sherlock Holmes Demonstrates: Why is Holmes so sure that Lal Rao is the accomplice who gave Small the inside information on the workings of the Sholto household? Isn't it possible that Mrs. Bernstone was the person with whom Small "made friends?" Is that why she was so upset at the murder of Bartholomew Sholto: because she had helped with the theft, but had been assured there would be no violence?

An aspect of the story that has always puzzled me is Holmes's apparent certainty that Small would take the Aurora into hiding for a day or two, rather than head straight down the river to rendezvous with an outward-bound ship. Wasn't it really much more likely that if Small had planned his escape via the steam launch to begin with, he would have timed the theft of the treasure according to the Esmeralda's scheduled date of departure for "the Brazils?" Can any of the Hounds give a more satisfactory explanation for the delay than the one Holmes gave, an explanation which did not sound completely sea-worthy even to Watson?

Holmes quoted "one of our greatest statesmen" as saying, "A change of work is the best rest." Is this a genuine quotation, and does anyone know its source?

Details: When Jonathan Small and his friends hid a body and a treasure in the old fort at Agra, the body was found but not the treasure. Ironically, when Major Sholto hid both a body and a treasure, the treasure was found, but not the body. What do you make of the fact that Mary Morstan never asked if anyone could tell her how to locate her father's remains?

On the night Bartholomew Sholto's body was discovered, Athelney Jones arrived on the scene with an inspector in uniform. He called his companion "Sergeant" in one instance and "Inspector" in another. Can anyone explain Jones's interchange of the two terms?

Tonga entered Pondicherry Lodge through the roof and tossed down a rope so that Jonathan Small could climb up more easily. The rope was secured to a great hook in the wall. Assuming that the Sholtos didn't have the hook installed expressly for the convenience of treasure-grabbing intruders, what WAS the hook doing there? Were "great hooks" a popular feature in Victorian decor?

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