

The Sign of Four

by Arthur Conan Doyle · Language: EN

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Overview

The Sign of Four is the second novel featuring Sherlock Holmes, published in 1890. The story opens with Holmes and Dr. Watson in their Baker Street lodgings, where they are visited by Miss Mary Morstan, a young governess who has received a series of anonymous pearls and a letter inviting her to a meeting. She asks for their help, and they accompany her to the meeting, where they meet Thaddeus Sholto, who reveals that her father, Captain Arthur Morstan, disappeared ten years ago, and that his own father, Major Sholto, died under mysterious circumstances, leaving behind a treasure that may be connected to her father's fate.

The investigation leads Holmes and Watson through a labyrinth of clues involving a secret pact, a stolen treasure, and a murder. They uncover the story of Jonathan Small, a former soldier who, along with two Sikhs and a treasure, was involved in a mutiny in India. The treasure, a vast hoard of jewels, is the center of the mystery, and the murder of Bartholomew Sholto (Thaddeus's twin brother) is linked to its recovery. Holmes uses his deductive skills to track down the culprits, including a mysterious boat called the Aurora and a small, deformed man named Tonga, who uses a blowpipe and poisoned darts.

The novel is significant not only as a classic detective story but also for its introduction of Dr. Watson's romance with Mary Morstan, which adds a personal dimension to the narrative. It also explores themes of justice, revenge, and the consequences of colonial greed. The story's resolution, where Jonathan Small is captured but the treasure is lost, raises moral questions about the nature of crime and punishment. The Sign of Four is a foundational work in the detective genre, showcasing Conan Doyle's skill in crafting intricate plots and memorable characters.

Key Takeaways

- Sherlock Holmes's deductive method relies on close observation of small details, such as footprints, handwriting, and physical marks, to draw large conclusions.
- The novel highlights the importance of patience and methodical investigation over impulsive action, as Holmes systematically eliminates possibilities.
- The story warns against the corrupting influence of greed, as the treasure brings misery and death to almost everyone who seeks it.
- Watson's engagement to Mary Morstan shows that even a detective's companion can find personal happiness, but it also introduces a new responsibility that affects his partnership.

with Holmes.

- The use of a boat chase on the Thames demonstrates that detective work can involve physical pursuit and action, not just intellectual deduction.
- The character of Tonga illustrates the dangers of prejudice and the exoticization of the 'other' in Victorian literature, as his actions are driven by a primitive loyalty.
- The novel's ending, where the treasure is lost, suggests that justice is not always about recovering stolen goods but about preventing further harm.
- The Sign of Four is a prime example of the 'locked-room' mystery, where the solution lies in understanding the method of entry and exit, which here involves a hidden trapdoor and a poisoned dart.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: The Science of Deduction

Holmes demonstrates his deductive abilities to Watson by deducing that Watson has been getting very wet lately and that his servant girl is clumsy. He explains his method of observation and inference, and they discuss his latest case. Watson reflects on Holmes's eccentricities and his own growing interest in his friend's work. The chapter sets the stage for the arrival of a new client, as Holmes is expecting a case involving a 'Miss Mary Morstan'.

Chapter 2: The Statement of the Case

Mary Morstan arrives and tells her story: her father, Captain Arthur Morstan, disappeared ten years ago after returning from India. She has received a pearl in the mail each year for the past six years, and now a letter invites her to meet an unknown person. Holmes and Watson agree to help her, and they accompany her to the meeting, where they are taken to a house in a carriage with drawn blinds.

Chapter 3: In Quest of a Solution

They arrive at the house of Thaddeus Sholto, who explains that his father, Major Sholto, had a treasure that he brought from India, and that he and his twin brother Bartholomew have been guarding it. Major Sholto died suddenly, and on his deathbed he confessed to having kept the treasure from Captain Morstan, who had been his partner. Thaddeus reveals that the treasure is now missing, and that his brother Bartholomew has been murdered.

Chapter 4: The Story of the Bald-Headed Man

Thaddeus Sholto tells the full story of his father's connection to Captain Morstan and the treasure. Major Sholto and Captain Morstan were in India and came into possession of a vast treasure, but they had a falling out. Major Sholto returned to England with the treasure, leaving Morstan behind. Morstan followed him, but Major Sholto refused to share, and Morstan

disappeared. Major Sholto, haunted by guilt, died after revealing the location of the treasure to his sons.

Chapter 5: The Tragedy of Pondicherry Lodge

Holmes, Watson, and Miss Morstan travel to Pondicherry Lodge, the Sholto estate, where they find Bartholomew Sholto dead in his locked room. The room is in disarray, and there is a strange smell. Holmes examines the scene and finds a footprint and a thorn, but no obvious weapon. He concludes that the murder was committed by a small person who entered through a trapdoor in the ceiling, and that a poisonous dart was used.

Chapter 6: Sherlock Holmes Gives a Demonstration

Holmes demonstrates his deductions to the police, showing that the murderer is a small, agile man who used a blowpipe. He also deduces that the murderer had an accomplice who was a large man with a wooden leg. Holmes sets off to track down the boat that the murderers used, the Aurora, and he uses a dog to follow a scent. He also sends a telegram to his network of street urchins, the Baker Street Irregulars, to help find the boat.

Chapter 7: The Episode of the Barrel

Holmes and Watson follow a clue to a wharf, where they find a barrel that contains a strange substance. Holmes deduces that it is a form of creosote, which is used to preserve wood, and that the murderers used it to mask their scent. They also find a note that leads them to a boatyard, where they learn that the Aurora was recently repaired. Holmes continues his investigation, while Watson returns to Miss Morstan to report progress.

Chapter 8: The Baker Street Irregulars

Holmes employs his network of street boys to search for the Aurora along the Thames. They receive a tip that the boat is moored at a particular location, but when they arrive, they find it has been moved. Holmes, however, discovers a clue that leads him to believe the murderers are hiding in a nearby house. He and Watson stake out the house, and they see a small, deformed man who is later identified as Tonga.

Chapter 9: A Break in the Chain

Holmes and Watson continue their surveillance, but they lose track of the Aurora. Holmes is frustrated, but he receives a message from a contact who has seen the boat. They pursue it along the river, and they engage in a chase, finally catching up to the Aurora. During the chase, Tonga fires a poisoned dart at them, but it misses. They board the boat and capture Jonathan Small, but Tonga escapes and is later found dead, having drowned.

Chapter 10: The End of the Islander

Jonathan Small is captured and tells his story. He explains that he was a soldier in India, and he and two Sikhs, along with a treasure, were imprisoned. They escaped and made a pact to share

the treasure, but they were pursued. Small eventually came to England with the treasure, and he was involved in the murder of Bartholomew Sholto. He reveals that the treasure was lost when the Aurora sank, and he is taken into custody.

Chapter 11: The Great Agra Treasure

Jonathan Small tells the full story of his life, including his time in India, his involvement in the mutiny, and his escape with the treasure. He explains that he and his companions hid the treasure in a secure place, but they were betrayed by Major Sholto, who stole it. Small swore revenge, and he finally tracked down the Sholto family, leading to the murder of Bartholomew. He also reveals that the treasure was thrown into the river during the chase, and it is now lost forever.

Chapter 12: The Strange Story of Jonathan Small

The novel concludes with Holmes and Watson reflecting on the case. Watson is engaged to Mary Morstan, and he is happy, but he also feels a sense of loss as his partnership with Holmes may change. Holmes, however, is more interested in the intellectual challenge of the case than in the outcome. The story ends with Holmes and Watson discussing the nature of justice and the futility of revenge, as the treasure is gone and the murderers are dead or captured.

Themes

- Deduction and logic
- Justice and revenge
- Colonial greed
- The exotic 'other'
- Friendship and partnership
- The nature of evil

Notable Quotes

- "How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?" — Holmes says this to Watson while discussing the case, explaining his method of deduction.
- "My mind is like a racing engine, tearing itself to pieces because it is not connected up with the work for which it was built." — Holmes complains to Watson about his boredom and need for mental stimulation.
- "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts." — Holmes advises Watson on the importance of gathering evidence before forming conclusions.

- "I am the last and highest court of appeal in detection." — Holmes boasts about his reputation as a detective, though he is being modest in context.
- "There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact." — Holmes remarks on the misleading nature of apparent evidence.
- "I never guess. It is a shocking habit — destructive to the logical faculty." — Holmes rebukes Watson for suggesting he might guess at a solution.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is *The Sign of Four* about?

The Sign of Four is a Sherlock Holmes novel about a treasure stolen in India, a mysterious murder, and a secret pact. Holmes and Watson help Mary Morstan solve the disappearance of her father and a series of anonymous pearls, leading to a chase for the culprits and a lost treasure.

Is *The Sign of Four* worth reading?

Yes, it is a classic detective story that showcases Holmes's deductive genius and introduces a compelling plot with twists. It is shorter than many novels and offers a satisfying mystery, though some modern readers may find the colonial attitudes dated.

How does *The Sign of Four* end?

Spoiler: Jonathan Small is captured, but the treasure is lost forever when it is thrown into the Thames. Tonga drowns, and Watson proposes to Mary Morstan. Holmes reflects on the case, noting that the treasure's loss is perhaps for the best, as it would have brought only misery.

Who should read *The Sign of Four*?

Fans of classic detective fiction, Sherlock Holmes enthusiasts, and readers who enjoy Victorian-era mysteries with intricate plots. It is also a good choice for those new to Holmes, as it is a short, engaging novel.

How long does it take to read *The Sign of Four*?

At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes about 3 to 4 hours to read the entire book, which is roughly 40,000 words. Most readers finish it in a few sittings.