The Sign of the Four

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

Arthur Conan Doyle was born to Irish Catholic parents in Scotland during the middle of the Queen Victoria's reign over the United Kingdom. Despite his later reputation as a frequenter of the London gentlemen's clubs, Doyle's upbringing was tough—his father, Charles Doyle, suffered from alcoholism and psychiatric illness. Doyle's wealthy uncles paid for their nephew to board at the Hodder Place school in Lancashire from 1868 to 1870, though Doyle found its methods harsh and outdated. He also spent time a school in Austria. He later went to medical school in Edinburgh, training as a doctor under the tutelage of Dr. Joseph Bell, whose astute methods of observation and diagnosis were to have a great effect on Doyle's writing. During this period, Doyle started composing stories but didn't publish any until a few years later. In 1885, Doyle married his first wife, Louisa Hawkins, and had two children with her. His first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*, was published when Doyle was 27 and was well received. *The Sign of the Four* followed in 1890, though Doyle felt that his publishers had taken advantage of him and coerced him into unfavorable terms. Doyle went on to write a total of 60 Sherlock Holmes stories (four of them novel-length), though he was famously ambivalent about his most successful creation. At one point, his own mother talked him out of killing off the famous detective. Doyle's first wife, Louisa, died in 1893, and he subsequently remarried with Jean Leckie and had three children with her. Outside of his writing, Doyle was a keen sportsman and an active participant in the political scene. He also became an avid supporter of the Spiritualist movement, peaking in a memorable episode in which Doyle advocated for the authenticity of a photograph seemingly showing a young girl enjoying the company of fairies in her garden. Towards the end of his life, Doyle was diagnosed with Angina Pectoris. Ignoring his doctor's advice to rest up, Doyle embarked on a Spiritualism tour of the Netherlands in 1929 and was bedridden on his return home. He died in his garden in the summer of 1930.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Sign of the Four is a quintessentially Victorian work of literature, both in the setting and context of the story *and* in the attitudes that the novella—consciously or not—inhabits. Queen Victoria's reign was a period of wide-reaching and rapid societal change, with important advances made in the fields of medicine, science and technology. This expansion of ideas was mirrored by the growth of the British Empire, which was well on its way to encompassing a quarter of the world's population (in 1922). With regard to the prominent ideas of the time, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution can be detected in the atmosphere of Doyle's novella. The character of Tonga, a native cannibal of the Andaman Islands, is portrayed as inherently inferior, evil, and inhuman—this can be read as an expansion of the overlap between Darwin's ideas of evolution and the prevalent notion of progress. That is, the British Empire and many of its proponents saw Western Society as demonstrably further along the line of progress than more so-called "primitive" cultures, who were frequently the indigenous populations of those countries that the Empire came to colonize. Doyle's novella is particularly linked to India, which was considered the "jewel in the crown" of the British Empire. India took on this nickname for two key reasons: firstly, the country was an extremely profitable venture for the British Empire, with the state-endorsed East India Company helping Britain to reap the rewards of Indian resources. Secondly, India was strategically important; Britain's ability to control a country of India's size—a control was largely psychological—gave the Empire its air of prowess and power. When Jonathan Small relates his story about the Agra treasure in *The Sign of the Four*, it involves the Indian Mutiny of 1857, which saw a large number of British-trained Indian troops (sepoys) rebel against their colonial oppressors. The whole premise of *The Sign of the Four*—a Western man seeking to retrieve the Eastern treasure that he feels is rightfully his—can be read as an unintentional echo on Doyle's part of the Empire project itself.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Though there are a few earlier examples of works that share common elements with detective fiction, the burgeoning of the genre picks up pace with the establishment of police forces across Western Europe. Edgar Allan Poe's stories are of significant influence, with "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" widely considered to mark the beginning of the detective fiction genre in the English language. Poe's stories provided the basic ingredients of the genre: a central detective with a brilliant mind, an emphasis on the importance of logical thinking, and a mysterious crime. Such was the appetite for the genre that real-life detectives, such as the Frenchman, Eugène Vidocq, were quick to capitalize on the public demand. Another Frenchman, this time a fiction writer (though Vidocq's stories were certainly not free from "embellishment"), Emile Gaboriau also made a key contribution to the genre. Among British writers, Charles Dickens' novel, *Bleak House*, is the first to prominently feature a detective. Dickens' protégé, Wilkie Collins, wrote the influential mystery novel, *The Moonstone*,

which also developed of the key touchstones of the genre (the "bumbling" local police). Arthur Conan Doyle's character, Sherlock Holmes, is unquestionably the most enduring of the literary detectives. Recent television adaptations of the stories have been remarkably popular and the detective's famous London address, 221b Baker Street, remains one of the U.K. capital's most visited tourist attractions.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Sign of the Four* (also known as *The Sign of Four*)
- **When Written:** 1889-1890
- **Where Written:** London, United Kingdom
- **When Published:** 1890
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Detective Fiction
- **Setting:** London
- **Climax:** Holmes and his crew take part in a boat chase to catch the criminals and secure the treasure.
- **Antagonist:** Jonathan Small
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Big Mistake. Arthur Conan Doyle mistakenly gave Jonathan Small's three Sikh accomplices Muslim names: Mahomet Singh, Abdullah Khan and Dost Akbar.

Dangerous Drugs. Though Sherlock Holmes' use of cocaine in *The Sign of the Four* is shocking to modern readers, it should be remembered that at the time of the story's setting the drug was widely and legally obtainable.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Sign of the Four begins at the Baker Street home of the infamous detective, Sherlock Holmes, and his assistant, Dr. John Watson. Holmes is a little bored, having no case to work on, and is injecting himself with cocaine—Watson disapproves of this bad habit.

Soon enough, the beautiful Miss Mary Morstan arrives at the flat asking for Holmes' help. She outlines her case. Her father, Captain Morstan, had been an officer in the British Army and was stationed in India; she was at boarding school in Scotland. Ten years ago, he came back on leave, but as soon as he arrived in London he disappeared without a trace. A few years ago, she started receiving pearls in the mail once a year after answering an advert in the paper calling for her address. The pearl she has recently received came with a note, instructing her to go to the Lyceum Theater in London's West End that evening, where somebody will come to meet her. Holmes and Watson agree to accompany her. Throughout Miss Morstan's story, Watson can't help but admire her.

Later that evening, Holmes, Watson and Miss Morstan head to the meeting point. On their way, Miss Morstan shows Holmes a paper she found in her father's desk. It appears to be a map, with a red cross drawn on it. Beside the cross, the paper reads: "the sign of the four – Jonathan Small, Mahomet Singh, Abdullah Khan, Dost Akbar." At the Lyceum Theater a carriage is waiting for them and takes them to the house of the anxious Thaddeus Sholto, the son of Major Sholto, who was Captain Morstan's friend and colleague in India. Thaddeus explains that Captain Morstan is dead; he died from a heart attack when arguing with Major Sholto about the **Agra treasure**. Thaddeus explains that this treasure, part of which he says is rightfully is Miss Morstan's, is an immense collection of jewels. His father fell ill a few years previously after receiving a letter from India that caused him a great shock. Thaddeus notes that his father had a fear of men with wooden legs. On his deathbed, Major Sholto was about to reveal the location of the Agra treasure when a bearded man appeared at the window; the shock killed Major Sholto. The next day, Thaddeus and his brother, Bartholomew, discovered that Sholto's belongings had been searched and a note reading "the sign of the four" was left on the body. Just before he died, Major Sholto instructed his sons to share some of the treasure with Miss Morstan and gave them pearls to send to her. Thaddeus then informs his visitors that Bartholomew has located the treasure at the family home, Pondicherry Lodge; all they need to do now is head over there and divide it up.

When the group arrives at Pondicherry Lodge, they find the housekeeper, Mrs. Bernstone, in an agitated state. She says that Bartholomew has not left his attic laboratory all day. Holmes and Watson look through the keyhole and see Bartholomew's face grinning back at them, unnaturally still. They break in and confirm that Bartholomew is dead; he seems to have been killed by a poisonous **blow dart**. Holmes investigates the scene, concluding that the assailants are a wooden-legged man and a short accomplice. The treasure, too, is nowhere to be seen. Holmes suspects the main culprit to be Jonathan Small, one of the "sign of the four" signatories. As Athelney Jones, the hapless Scotland Yard detective, arrives, Holmes sends Watson to fetch Toby the hound so that they can track a scent from the scene—it appears that the wooden-legged man stepped in creosote in his rush to escape. Watson drops Miss Morstan at home on his way, feeling his affections towards her increasing.

Holmes and Watson trek around London, following Toby the hound. At one point, the dog leads them to a pub's creosote store, much to their amusement. Toby then picks up the original scent again and leads them to the Thames. Holmes talks to a local woman and gleans that the criminals must have hired a boat from Mordecai Smith called the *Aurora*—a speedy steam

launcher. He tricks her into giving a description of the boat.

In order to trace the vessel, Holmes hires a group of street urchins to search London. They have no luck, so Holmes, increasingly agitated at the lack of progress, disguises himself as a sailor and makes his own inquiries around London. When he has a breakthrough, he instructs Athelney Jones to meet him at his flat. Jones waits for Holmes in Watson's company, before the two are interrupted by an old man who claims to know the solution to the case. The old man is only willing to speak to Holmes and makes to leave when he learns that Holmes is elsewhere; Jones and Watson entrap him in the flat. Suddenly, the old man reveals himself to be the delighted Holmes in disguise. Holmes explains that he has tracked the *Aurora* down to a shipyard, where it awaits Jonathan Small and his accomplice, who will attempt to escape that evening with the help of Mordecai Smith.

Later that night, Holmes, Watson, Jones and some police officers board a police boat in order to give chase to the *Aurora*. Holmes has stationed a boy at the shipyard who will give a signal when the *Aurora* is leaving. Soon enough, Small and his accomplice, Tonga, attempt to escape with Mordecai Smith at the helm. Holmes and the others begin the chase; when Tonga, a small "black cannibal," prepares to shoot at them with a blow dart, Holmes and Watson fire the guns at him. Tonga, dead, falls into the river. The *Aurora* runs aground and Jonathan Small is captured. The Agra treasure appears to have been recovered, so Watson delivers the treasure chest to Miss Morstan, only for them to discover that it is empty. Watson is relieved because he feels that Miss Morstan's riches would have made her inaccessible to him. Miss Morstan is not upset about the treasure, and they embrace.

Jonathan Small is taken back to Baker Street and asked to tell his story at Holmes' request. Before he does so, he explains that he has scattered the treasure in the Thames; if he can't have it, he doesn't want anyone else to. Small then tells his story. He was stationed in India with the British Army. Soon after arriving there, his leg was bitten off by a crocodile. When the Indian Mutiny began (the locals rose up against their British authorities), Small worked as a guard at the ancient fortress of Agra. He was in charge of two men, Mahomet Singh and Abdullah Khan, who convinced him to join with them in seizing treasure from a merchant acting on behalf of an Indian prince. Along with Abdullah's cousin, these men made up the "sign of the four" and pledged allegiance to each other. They killed the merchant and acquired the treasure, a rich bounty of various jewels. It was then hidden in the Agra fortress to be retrieved when the country had calmed down a little. Though the tensions did die down soon enough, Small and the others were arrested for killing the merchant and subsequently sent to a prison camp on the Andaman Islands. At the prison camp, Small made the acquaintance of the overseers Major Sholto and Captain Morstan, and hatched a plan to share the treasure with them in exchange for his escape. Sholto double-crossed everyone and took the treasure for himself back to England. During this time, Small befriended Tonga, a native of the island, nursing him when he was sick. Tonga became extremely loyal to Small and helped him to escape.

The two men eventually made it back to England, where for a time they survived by displaying Tonga in freak shows. Small tracked down Sholto just before he died and left the note on the Major's body. He had an inside contact at Pondicherry Lodge who informed him that the treasure had been discovered. With this knowledge, he and Tonga went to the house to get the treasure; Tonga entered the house first, killing Bartholomew without checking with Small first.

Holmes is satisfied he has learned all there is to know about the case. Athelney Jones thanks him for his help and leads Jonathan Small away. Watson informs Holmes that Miss Morstan has agreed to marry him. Rather than offer congratulations, Holmes explains that he believes "love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true cold reason which I place above all things." Holmes reaches for his own comfort: the cocaine bottle.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sherlock Holmes – Sherlock Holmes, the story's protagonist, is the infamous detective and occupant of 221b Baker Street. He has a supreme, almost superhuman intelligence that allows him to solve difficult cases. This intelligence is based on his deeply held belief in the power of rationalism—essentially, any problem is solvable if looked at clearly and logically enough. Holmes' mindset is distinctively Victorian, showing an affiliation with the ideas of Charles Darwin and encompassing certain elements of outdated pseudoscience that results in a discomforting belief in the superiority of white people over other races. Because of Holmes' intellectual and deductive abilities, Miss Morstanasks him to help her solve the case of her missing father, Captain Morstan, which subsequently draws in the mystery of the Agra treasure too. Likewise, Athelney Jones, the Scotland Yard detective, is fully aware of Holmes' abilities and relies upon him for help in his own work (though doesn't always give Holmes the credit he deserves). Holmes, for his part, takes on cases for the thrill of it—not because he wants fame or fortune. This thrill-seeking also contributes to the darker side of Holmes' character: his drug-taking. Holmes' mind needs stimulation and, when he doesn't have a case to work, he turns to cocaine, which greatly concerns his assistant, Dr. Watson. Ultimately, the entire novella functions at the pace of Holmes' thoughts. When Holmes is stuck on an aspect of the case, the action slows to a halt; when he has a breakthrough, the action picks up again.

Dr. John Watson – Dr. Watson is the narrator of the story and Sherlock Holmes' loyal assistant. He is a doctor by profession and has a background as a surgeon in the British Army. Over the course of the novella, Watson falls in love with Miss Morstan, finally asking her to marry him. Watson aids Holmes throughout the story, though the major breakthroughs in the case are always the result of Holmes' brilliant mind. Watson functions as a kind of counterpart to Holmes; the detective frequently uses him as a sounding board for his ideas, and in his inability to see problems as clearly as Holmes, Watson is representative of the general reader. That is, Watson is a kind of everyman figure of decent—but not Holmes' level—intelligence. Watson is more emotional than Holmes and is frequently concerned for the latter's wellbeing, especially when it comes to Holmes' drug use. But Watson is in awe of Holmes' abilities, which is why he decides to preserve them for posterity by writing them down. In his powers of observation about the more emotional side of life, Watson actually possesses something that Holmes lacks—an ability to understand people and the way that they feel.

Miss Mary Morstan – Miss Morstan comes to Sherlock Holmes to see if he can help her find out what happened to her father, Captain Morstan, who disappeared a few years previously. She has also been receiving a pearl once a year in the post and been told to go to London's Lyceum Theater in the evening of the day she comes to see Holmes. She therefore acts as the catalyst for the entire story, providing Holmes with a much-needed problem to solve. She is generally portrayed as quite passive, but is also virtuous, especially in her apparent lack of concern about her share of the Agra treasure (she is more interested in knowing what has happened to her father). Over the course of the novella, Miss Morstan falls in love with Dr. John Watson; at the end, she agrees to marry him. She lives with Mrs. Forrester, serving as her governess. She is described as beautiful and is around twenty-seven years old.

Athelney Jones – Athelney Jones is the hapless detective from Scotland Yard, the official police agency. He is described as a fat and bumbling man and is in a position of high authority. He functions as a counter-example to Sherlock Holmes' genius, frequently coming up with the wrong theories about the case and even arresting the wrong man (Thaddeus Sholto). Ultimately, Jones knows Holmes is superior to him in intellect and resorts to asking for help from the great detective. Jones is happy to take credit for Holmes' work, though does also express his gratitude for the assistance.

Jonathan Small (The Wooden-Legged Man) – Jonathan Small is the wooden-legged man who seeks vengeance on Major Sholto for the theft of the **Agra treasure**. He is one of "the four" original men who acquired the treasure. He has lived a tough life, having lost his leg to a crocodile while serving as a soldier in India for the British Army. While guarding the Agra fortress during the Indian Mutiny, Small was brought in on a plan to acquire the treasure with Abdullah Khan and Mahomet Singh, who were guards under his command (the fourth man, Dost Akbar, was the foster brother of Abdullah Khan). Small was sent to a penal colony on the Andaman Islands for his role in the killing of the merchant who had possession of the Agra treasure. On the islands, Small met Captain Morstan and Major Sholto, letting them in on the secret about the treasure in exchange for help with his escape. Sholto, however, double-crossed the others and fled to England with the treasure. Small managed to escape the Andaman Islands with his companion, Tonga, and searched for Sholto, eventually managing to recover the treasure from Pondicherry Lodge, the Sholto family home. His victory doesn't last long, however, as Holmes soon catches up with him and brings about his imprisonment. Small scatters the jewels of the Agra treasure into the Thames to prevent anyone else from enjoying their riches.

Tonga – Tonga is a native of the Andaman Islands who was aided by Jonathan Small when suffering from ill health. This made him feel a sense of loyalty towards Small, which explains why he accompanies him in attempting to recover the **Agra treasure**. Tonga's portrayal in the book is extremely problematic: he is described as a savage "black cannibal," painted more as an animal than a human being. He thus represents the deep racial prejudices of the Victorian era. Tonga uses poisonous **blow darts** as a weapon, killing Bartholomew Sholto with one and almost hitting Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson too. Tonga dies when Holmes and Watson shoot him during the boat chase. Notably, Tonga is given no dialogue at all throughout the entire novella, again reflecting the racial prejudice that his character embodies.

Thaddeus Sholto – Thaddeus Sholto is one of Major Sholto's sons, brother to Bartholomew Sholto. He is an eccentric character with an anxious manner. Thaddeus is the one who decides to contact Miss Morstan, feeling that she has been treated unfairly and deserves her share of the **Agra treasure** (a view also expressed by Major Sholto on his deathbed). Thaddeus has been sending pearls each year to Miss Morstan and it is him who contacts her to try and reunite her with her share of the riches. According to Thaddeus, his brother would have preferred to cut out Miss Morstan altogether.

Bartholomew Sholto – Bartholomew Sholto is one of Major Sholto's sons and lives at the family home, Pondicherry Lodge. Thaddeus Sholto, Bartholomew's brother, takes Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Watson and Miss Morstan to Bartholomew with the intention of dividing up the **Agra treasure**. It transpires, however, that Bartholomew has been killed by a poisonous **blow dart**. His face is locked in a frozen grimace when he is discovered. Bartholomew differs from Thaddeus in that he disagreed with his brother's intentions to honor Miss Morstan's share of the treasure—he would have preferred them to greedily keep it for themselves.

Captain Morstan – Captain Morstan was an officer in the

British army who served in India. He is Mary Morstan's father, and his unexplained disappearance is the catalyst for the novella's plot. He was friends with Major Sholto and had agreed with him to facilitate Jonathan Small's escape from the Andaman Islands penal colony—where he and Sholto were working—in exchange for a share of the **Agra treasure**. Sholto deceives him and takes the treasure for himself. According to Thaddeus Sholto—which in turn is according to Major Sholto—Captain Morstan died from a heart attack during an argument with Sholto. Sholto then hid his body to avoid suspicion and the detection of the treasure.

Major Sholto – Major Sholto is the father of Bartholomew and Thaddeus Sholto and was a friend to Captain Morstan, with whom he served in India. Jonathan Small relates how he brought Sholto into the **Agra treasure** scheme, hoping to secure his release from the Andaman Islands penal colony where Sholto was an authority figure. Sholto, suffering from gambling debts, double-crossed Small and Captain Morstan and took the treasure for himself. On his deathbed, he had a slight change of heart and instructed his sons to share the treasure with Miss Morstan—but he died before revealing the treasure's location after seeing the face of Jonathan Small at the window.

McMurdo – McMurdo is the doorman at Pondicherry Lodge, the Sholto family home. When Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Watson, Miss Morstan and Thaddeus Sholto arrive, he is unwilling to let anyone but Thaddeus into the house (under orders from Bartholomew Sholto). However, his attitude soon softens when Holmes realizes that the two have met before in an amateur boxing match.

Abdullah Khan – Abdullah Khan is an Indian man and one of the signatories of "the sign of the four" and the man who told Jonathan Small about the **Agra treasure**. The plan to kill the merchant carrying the treasure was mostly Abdullah's idea, but he was imprisoned for the murder before he could enjoy his riches.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Forrester – Mrs. Forrester employs Miss Morstan as a governess, but the relationship between the two women is more like that of close friends than employer and employee. Dr. Watson visits her home to give the two women information about the case and remarks upon its sanctuary-like qualities.

Mordecai Smith – Mordecai Smith is the proprietor of the *Aurora* boat and is portrayed as a common, working-class man. He agrees to help Jonathan Small and Tonga escape but is apprehended when Sherlock Holmes and his entourage run the boat aground.

Mrs. Hudson – Mrs. Hudson is the landlady and housekeeper at 221b Baker Street, the famous London address of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. She shows concern for Holmes when he grows increasingly agitated at the irresolution of the case.

Mrs. Bernstone – Mrs. Bernstone is the housekeeper and Pondicherry Lodge, the family of the Sholtos. When Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Watson, Miss Morstan and Thaddeus Sholto go to Pondicherry Lodge, they encounter a distressed Mrs. Bernstone who is worried that Bartholomew Sholto has not been out of his room all day.

Mahomet Singh – Mahomet Singh is an Indian man and one of the signatories of "the sign of the four." He colluded with Jonathan Small, Abdullah Khan and Dost Akbar to seize the **Agra treasure**.

Dost Akbar – Dost Akbar is an Indian man and one of the signatories of "the sign of the four." He lures the merchant—the man who is carrying the **Agra treasure**—into the trap set by the other men.

THEMES

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EMPIRE AND IMPERIALISM

The Sign of the Four is the second story in the world-famous Sherlock Holmes detective fiction series. The novella is set in the late nineteenth century, a time when the British Empire was immensely powerful and wide reaching under the reign of Queen Victoria. The Empire is a significant presence in the book, both informing the particular details of the mysterious story, which are centered around the **Agra treasure** hidden in British-controlled India, and in the attitudes of its central characters, who portray a racist attitude towards "the East," considering it a place of intrigue and suspicion. While setting the story within the Imperialist context is a deliberate move on Arthur Conan Doyle's part, the racist attitudes are more likely a reflection of the times rather than an attempt on the author's part to offer any implicit critique.

The first key way in which *The Sign of the Four* reflects the Imperialist mindset is in the plot itself. The story revolves around the Agra treasure, a bedazzling array of jewels that originates in India. This association of "the East" with luxury and riches ripe for the picking is typically Imperial; for the British Empire and its subjects, "the East" was a place of mystery and luxury. The treasure at the heart of the story originally belongs to an Indian rajah (a prince-like figure), and neither the thieves nor Sherlock Holmes ever consider whether the treasure should be returned to its original owner. Instead, Holmes and his assistant, Dr. Watson, try to track it down in order to give it to Miss Morstan. Her father, Captain

Morstan, was involved in the second stage of the original theft (the first was Jonathan Small and three Sikh soldiers). If Holmes and Watson can find the treasure, Miss Morstan will be rich for life. In this way, then, the story itself mimics the power dynamic at play during the British Empire. That is, foreign lands like India were plundered for their riches, considered fair game because they were populated by inferior peoples. Of course, this is a simplified account of a complicated state of affairs, but the general operation of infrastructures like the British East India Company saw the exploitation of resources from "the East" for the Empire's gain.

The novella also embodies problematic imperialist ideas about race and superiority. In essence, those from "the East" are seen as inferior to those from the West, and are frequently presented as morally treacherous, intellectually defective, and savage. This is not limited solely to "the East," but extends to black people throughout the book. Imperialist attitudes toward race are best exemplified through the character of Tonga. He is a native of the Andaman Islands and described as a "black cannibal." Of Tonga, Watson says, "never have I seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty," and describes him as "half-animal." There is a clear link here between Tonga's blackness and his "otherness"— he is typecast as an evil, inferior human. This reflects the dominant Eurocentric attitude of the British Empire, which views the "other" as distrustful and morally compromised in comparison to the Western man. Though frequent mention is made of Tonga, at no point in the novella does he speak. In that sense, the way in which he is disenfranchised reflects the attitude of the British colonizers to the peoples they colonized. Tonga is further dehumanized when, in the last chapter, the imprisoned Jonathan Small tells his life story. He explains his relationship to Tonga: "He was staunch and true, was little Tonga. No man ever had a more faithful mate." The relationship between Tonga and Small is portrayed as more like that between man and dog than two human beings. The central role of "Tonga" as the novella's main source of evil, then, is highly troublesome for a contemporary reader. It's important to remember the context in which the book was written, in which the problematic attitudes above were much more entrenched and expected.

But it isn't just Tonga who typifies the racist attitudes within the novella. Practically any mention of non-white people appears in a negative and demeaning light. Jonathan Small discusses the existence of the treasure with Captain Morstan and Major Sholto, as told during the last chapter's recollection. Jonathan Small was originally part of a group with three Indian men—whom Doyle mistakenly gives Arabic names—that hatched a plan to seize the treasure. He wants to remain loyal to his other partners, but Major Sholto can't see why. He asks, "What have three black fellows to do with our agreement?" Being black, then, is seen as inherently inferior to being white. Though these words come from a particular character's mouth—and the novella as a whole is told by Watson—they are fundamentally uncomfortable for a modern reader. Though problems relating to Empire and Imperialism are rife through the book, they serve as an accurate reflection of the times and give the reader a sense of the Victorian mentality.

WEALTH

Central to *The Sign of Four* is the idea of wealth and opulence—the **Agra treasure** at the heart of this Sherlock Holmes story represents a life-changing amount of riches. The book asks whether this kind of wealth equates to happiness, and whether it is right to pursue wealth at all costs. Different perspectives are presented by the life stories of different characters, ultimately culminating in a sense that being rich does not mean being happy.

Miss Morstan's main motivation for contacting Holmes is to try and find out what happened to her father, Captain Morstan. But a knock-on effect looks likely to be that, if Holmes is successful in cracking the case, Miss Morstan will inherit a large share of the treasure and be catapulted into the upper class by virtue of her newfound wealth. Through Dr. Watson and Miss Morstan's developing relationship, Doyle examines what effect this wealth might have. In the fourth chapter, "The Story of the Bald-headed Man," Holmes, Watson and Miss Morstan go to visit Thaddeus Sholto. He is the son of Major Sholto, who was a friend of Miss Morstan's father. He reveals the story of the treasure, and that his brother, Bartholomew, had discovered it hidden in the family home after their father died. Thaddeus reveals the immense worth of the treasure, which sets up the plot point that, if the treasure is found, Miss Morstan's life will be changed beyond recognition by her new riches.

This makes Watson uneasy. As the novella progresses and his feelings towards Miss Morstan intensify, he is afraid to mention them because he feels that she will assume he is hoping for a part of the fortune. Watson assesses that Miss Morstan's impending wealth will make her part of the upper classes and, essentially, put her out of his league. Wealth, then, is intimately linked to social status, and social status defines who can fall in love with whom. When Watson takes the box of treasure to Miss Morstan towards the novella's end, they are both relieved to learn that it is empty—the life-changing treasure is nowhere to be seen. This gives Watson the confidence to confess his love, which Miss Morstan reciprocates. Wealth, then, was a kind of threat hanging over their heads rather than an indicator of happiness; with that threat removed, they are allowed to give an honest account of how they feel. In the case of Miss Morstan, then, wealth is linked to upper-class superiority and exclusivity. The slightly glib point suggested by Doyle is that love is the "true" treasure of the novella. It's up to the reader to decide if the novella's love affair is convincing or not, given that it is relatively undeveloped (though keen Sherlock Holmes fans will note that Miss Morstan appears as Watson's wife in later

stories).

Alongside the question of whether wealth can lead to happiness is whether or not it is a good idea to actively pursue wealth. In truth, all of the characters associated with the treasure—those that want to possess it—meet a bad end one way or another. Doyle thus suggests that the pursuit of wealth itself can become a kind of sickness, corrupting the very lives of those who wish to benefit from its potential riches. The treasure seems to act as a kind of curse throughout, both in the main narrative and in Jonathan Small's retelling of his life story. Because it holds such promise of wealth, it possesses a deadliness of equal intensity. For example, the merchant tasked with looking after the treasure is killed by Small and his accomplices. Captain Morstan dies from a heart attack in an argument about the treasure. Likewise, the deaths of Major Sholto and his son, Bartholomew, are a direct result of the treasure. Bartholomew's face is stuck with a rictus grin, suggesting something of the paradox of the supposed happiness of wealth versus the deadliness of its pursuit. Jonathan Small's life has been ruined by pursuit of the treasure, and all of his efforts have been in vain. The best he has managed is to cast the treasure into the Thames river, thereby denying anybody else the wealth that he feels was his due. Tonga, his accomplice, dies too.

Not a single character in the novella, then, ever actually benefits from the treasure; in fact, most of them die or have their lives ruined. The happiest ending is reserved for Watson and Miss Morstan, who never once seems truly concerned about the finding the treasure—she only wants to know what happened to her father. Doyle, then, seems to equate the pursuit of wealth with unhappiness and ill fortune—the exact opposite of what the treasure promises to others.

RATIONALITY VS. EMOTION

Doyle presents Sherlock Holmes as the epitome of a particular kind of intelligence, which is razor-sharp, individual, and untainted by emotion. Holmes himself makes this divide clear, frequently expressing the view that emotions merely get in the way of his kind of work. This division plays out throughout the book, making the novella in part a kind of tussle between cold, unflinching rationality on the one hand and emotional life on the other. This spoke strongly to the novella's Victorian readership, who were living at a time of immense scientific progress through figures like Charles Darwin. In terms of literature, Victorian tastes were moving away from the emphasis on emotions and the imagination touted by Romantic writers like William Wordsworth and Percy Shelley. Holmes thus represents a kind of superhero of rationality—superior to all other modes of thought—which in part explains his great popularity at the time and ever since.

Throughout the novella, Sherlock Holmes is presented as a kind of singular intelligence. Athelney Jones, who is Scotland Yard's detective and thus a figure of the establishment, can't get close to Holmes in terms of his detective abilities. Whenever Holmes figures out a part of the case, he frequently delights in revealing the logic behind his thinking, demonstrating how he operates on a different level from everyone else in the book. He is cast as a kind of detective superhero with heightened powers of rationality. Furthermore, he actively feeds on exercising these powers—other pursuits don't interest him. Holmes describes his own mind as thus: "[It] rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work." This mirrors the relationship between the novella and its readers, whose minds are excited—like Dr. Watson's—by witnessing Holmes's powers of logic at work.

Holmes therefore operates less out of a sense of moral duty than as a kind of addict of problem-solving. As he says, "I cannot live without brain-work." Sherlock Holmes can be considered as an embodiment of Victorian ideals of rationality and logic, taking them to their furthest extreme. This both enables him to perform the incredible mind work and deduction that amaze the other characters, and sets him apart as an isolated figure. This isolation is entrenched by Holmes' attitude towards other people. He lacks empathy and emotion, with Doyle offering his readers the opportunity to examine Holmes' extreme rationality. Holmes abhors "the dull routine of existence." While he mostly combats this with his work, the novella opens and closes with Holmes injecting cocaine. Though this wasn't illegal at the time, it does horrify Watson, who sees the habit as self-destructive and dangerous. Holmes' drug use further paints him as an outside figure, showing that normal existence is simply not enough for him. Holmes actually sees his drug use as helping him to be more perceptive and mentally alert, in the same way that artists at the time thought it would enhance their creativity. Holmes' detective work and his drug use are therefore explicitly connected, two parts of the same solution to what he sees as the problem of modern life.

The character of Watson presents the counter-argument to Holmes' extreme rationality. He is more in tune with emotional life and looks on his boss with a mixture of concern and awe. Watson is a more sensitive soul that Holmes. In fact, as the novella progresses, his main concern shifts from solving the case to proposing to Miss Morstan. His emotionality creates a tension with Holmes' rationality. This tension is put starkly when Watson exclaims to Holmes, "You really are an automaton—a calculating machine." Watson, as the narrator, gives voice to the readers' own attitude towards Holmes. Like them, he is fascinated by Holmes' coldly rational abilities but also unable to understand his complete denial of the world of emotion. This tension reaches its peak at the novella's close. Here, Watson tells Holmes that he and Miss Morstan have agreed to marry. Instead of offering his congratulations, Holmes gives a "dismal groan," lamenting that "love 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." Holmes therefore sees rationality and emotions as completely incompatible. This incompatibility is tied in with the Victorian ideals of progress. Holmes sees rationality as superior to emotionality—a kind of evolutionary advancement.

Rationality and emotion are thus set against each other in *The Sign of the Four*. Holmes represents the extreme of the former, while Watson and Miss Morstan represent a more emotional (and human) way of life. The reader is asked to question the price that Holmes has to pay in being so devoted to rationality and logic at the expense of emotions. Holmes embodies a particularly Victorian thesis—that an increase in rationality represents a superior way of being—and the reader has to weigh up whether that idea rings true.

THE VICTORIAN GOTHIC

Doyle makes use of conventions from the Victorian gothic genre to lend his detective novella a heightened atmosphere of mystery and fearfulness. Though the novella is undoubtedly in the detective genre, ideas from the Victorian gothic imagination function as a theme throughout, informing the gloomy London setting and the function of the plot itself. Doyle uses elements from the gothic genre for two principal—and overlapping—reasons. Firstly, the story's gothic elements inform and enhance the sense of mystery in the novella, giving an atmospheric rendering of the case's own strangeness and lack of resolution. Secondly, with a Victorian readership that would have been familiar with many of the tropes of gothic literature, Doyle plays with the reader's expectations, transposing elements of the gothic into the detective genre, unsettling the readership and thus conjuring a sense of the uncanny—which only serves to reinforce the sense of mystery at the heart of the story.

The Sign of The Four takes place in London and its suburbs, only giving the reader a sense of another location when Jonathan Small tells his story in the final chapter. London is conjured in an expressly gothic atmosphere, intensifying the story's sense of mystery and danger. The city is painted as an obscure, foreboding place, shrouded in "dense drizzly fog," with the lamps casting "splotches of diffused light." The setting in this instance mirrors the set-up of the story itself. The low visibility on the London streets represents the mystery of the case at the heart of the novella—Sherlock Holmes is literally trying to bring light to the unknown through his detective work. The city is further characterized as having "monster tentacles." This speaks to the Victorian gothic idea of the monstrous and uncanny, in turn characterizing the story of **the treasure** and those who wish to attain it as outside of the norms of society.

With Pondicherry Lodge, the home of the deceased Major Sholto, Doyle ramps up the sense of gothic horror. This draws the reader deeper into the story, suggesting that there is much more going on than meets the eye. As with the gothic genre, the darker elements of the story build a sense of foreboding and danger. Pondicherry Lodge follows conventions of Gothic horror. Holmes, Dr. Watson, Miss Morstan and Thaddeus Sholto arrive there at night, with only the moon to provide illumination. The house is situated inside a "very high stone wall" and is accessed by an "iron clamped door." This feeling of inaccessibility, like the London setting discussed above, can be read as a direct representation of the story more generally. Holmes and Watson, at this point in the story, are "outside" of the knowledge required to solve the mystery of the sign of the four, trying to figure out a way in. Once inside, Holmes leads his fearful entourage through the cavernous building using a lamp. As they go deeper into the house, the sense of foreboding increases—in keeping with the gothic technique of building tension through the traversing of passageways. At the end of this journey into this house, Holmes discovers the body of Bartholomew Sholto, which is stuck grotesquely in a grinning pose. They find him in a laboratory setting which seems to gesture towards that of Frankenstein's lab in the novel of the same name. Doyle deliberately introduce elements from the Victorian gothic imagination into the setting of *The Sign of the Four*, developing the irresolution which requires Holmes' expertise and introducing a sense of the uncanny—a common element in gothic literature—into the detective fiction genre.

Finally, perhaps Doyle's use of Victorian gothic ideas can go some way to explaining the character of Tonga. Gothic convention dictates that the story needs some kind of supernatural embodiment of evil. Though Tonga *is* human, Doyle's descriptions of him make him only *just* human and imbue him with a strong sense of the uncanny. Tonga's strange appearance—he is grotesque and extremely short—sets him out as different from the other characters. Furthermore, his mysterious origin story and his use of **blow darts** as a lethal weapon mark him out as even more alien to the culture of Victorian England. This plays on Victorian fears of "the other," which essentially expresses suspicion of the unknown. It's worth pointing out the association in the Victorian imagination between "savagery" and the practice of witchcraft; that is, there is a link between the Victorian fear of "the other" with the gothic trope of the supernatural. Elements of the gothic genre, then, are blended with Doyle's detective fiction to intensify the atmosphere of mystery and intrigue. This played to a particularly Victorian psychology, but also explains why readers are still enticed and intrigued by *The Sign of the Four* today.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TONGA'S BLOW DARTS

In *The Sign of the Four*, Tonga's blow darts—small poisoned spears that kill their target—represent his position in the novella as the most simplistically evil figure, demonstrating his otherness through the darts' strange foreign quality. Tonga, a native of the Andaman Islands, is portrayed as the most directly and unambiguously evil character, a problematic portrayal with a clearly racist bias against Tonga's blackness and foreignness. The darts are displayed as a primitive weapon, contrasted with Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson's guns, which adds to the sense of Tonga as being intellectually and physically inferior to the other more Westernized characters. Bartholomew Sholto is the only character to get struck by one of the darts. The rictus grin that the poison leaves on his face is deliberately grotesque, intended to build a sense of fear and foreignness through the unusual manner of the death.

THE AGRA TREASURE

The Agra treasure at the heart of *The Sign of the Four* symbolizes both a cushioned escape from society and imprisonment. It is a bountiful collection of luxurious jewels, originally owned by an Indian prince and stolen by Jonathan Small and his accomplices (the titular "four"). It is later stolen in turn by Major Sholto, causing Small to come looking for him. Thaddeus Sholto, Major Sholto's son, judges Miss Morstan's share to be around five hundred thousand pounds worth of jewels—an amount that would mean never having to work again. The treasure thus represents an escape from the norms and restrictions of society, an idea that especially appeals to Jonathan Small who has lived a hard life. But the treasure, paradoxically, also represents imprisonment. Captain Morstan, Major Sholto, Bartholomew Sholto, Jonathan Small—practically anyone who has a link to the treasure—are all visited before long by bad luck rather than the freedom and comfort that they think the jewels will bring. The treasure also has symbolic overtones in relation to the British Empire. India was seen as "jewel in the crown" of the Empire, and its theft subconsciously echoes the way that Britain saw India's resources as fair game for exploitation and profiteering.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Spencer Blackett edition of *The Sign of the Four* published in 1890.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"My mind," he said, "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. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession,—or rather created it, for I am the only one in the world."

Related Characters: Sherlock Holmes (speaker), Dr. John Watson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes in the first chapter, which largely functions to set out Holmes' mental state of mind and his approach to the work that he does. It comes as Holmes justifies his use of cocaine to his concerned accomplice, Watson. The quote neatly summaries how Holmes views the functioning of his own mind—essentially, he readily admits that he depends upon stimulation. Ideally, that comes from problem-solving in case work; he gets a kick from applying his incomparable powers of logical rigor. In fact, this is practically the *only* reason he has created his own profession as "the only unofficial consulting detective"—to feel the thrill that mental stimulation provides. He doesn't seem to get paid for his work, and Athelney Jones, the incompetent Scotland Yard detective, tends to get the public credit. This quote explicitly compares Holmes' work to drug use, drawing parallels between the two: both are addictive and all-consuming. Like a drug addict, Holmes sees "normal" existence as dull—this ties in with his rejection of the world of emotions in favor of his dedication to rationality and logic.

> "But you have yourself had some experience of my methods of work in the Jefferson Hope case."

"Yes, indeed," said I, cordially. "I was never so struck by anything in my life. I even embodied it in a small brochure with the somewhat fantastic title of 'A Study in Scarlet.'"

He shook his head sadly. "I glanced over it," said he. "Honestly, I cannot congratulate you upon it. Detection is, or ought to be, an 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 same effect as if you worked a love story or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid."

"But the romance was there," I remonstrated. "I could not tamper with the
facts."

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson, Sherlock Holmes (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

This quote refers to the first Sherlock Holmes book, *A Study in Scarlet*. Essentially, Watson functions as Holmes' assistant and chronicler, keeping a record of the man's amazing achievements; likewise, Watson narrates the entirety of *The Sign of the Four*. Watson functions as a kind of everyman, representative of the average reader—certainly not stupid, but not in possession of the kind of intellectual superpowers that Holmes is portrayed as having. This quote in particular fleshes out Holmes' steadfast belief that rationalism and the emotions are fundamentally incompatible—there is no rationale to emotion and nothing emotional about being rational. Watson, for his part, sees a certain romance in what Holmes represents: a singular genius, helping on cases because there is nobody better *and* it gives him a thrill like no other. The tension between rationality and the emotions runs throughout the book, generally correlating to Holmes and Watson on either side, particularly when the latter comes to develop romantic feelings for Miss Mary Morstan.

> "May I ask whether you have any professional inquiry on foot at present?"

"None. Hence the cocaine. I cannot live without brain-work. What else is there to live for? Stand at the window here. Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world? See how the yellow fog swirls down the street and drifts across the dun-colored houses. What could be more hopelessly prosaic and material? What is the use of having powers, doctor, when one has no field upon which to exert them? Crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace have any function upon earth."

I had opened my mouth to reply to this tirade, when with a crisp knock our landlady entered, bearing a card upon the brass salver.

Related Characters: Sherlock Holmes , Dr. John Watson (speaker), Miss Mary Morstan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes at the end of the first chapter, and elucidates further the way Holmes perceives his own drug use. Drugs, to him, are a kind of mind work—just like the problem solving he does in his cases. Meanwhile, the mention of dreariness and "yellow fog" hint at a gothic atmosphere that runs throughout the novella and serves to heighten the sense of mystery and intrigue brought on by Miss Morstan's request for help. Most of the first chapter has worked to establish Holmes as being in a kind of mental stupor brought about by the lack of work and held at bay only by the use of cocaine and morphine. Miss Morstan, then, arrives exactly on cue, bringing with her exactly the kind of mystery with which Holmes can employ his intellectual powers. She functions as a kind of damsel distress for Holmes and Watson to collectively rescue—making it all the more fitting that Watson asks for her hand in marriage at the end of the story.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"What a very attractive woman!" I exclaimed, turning to my companion.

He had lit his pipe again, and was leaning back with drooping eyelids. "Is she?" he said, languidly. "I did not observe."

"You really are an automaton,—a calculating-machine!" I cried. "There is something positively inhuman in you at times."

He smiled gently. "It is of the first importance," he said, "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."

Related Characters: Sherlock Holmes , Dr. John Watson (speaker), Miss Mary Morstan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes just after Miss Morstan has left Holmes' flat, having explained the parameters of her case. Watson represents emotionality and feels an immediate connection with Miss Morstan that Holmes professes not to have acknowledged. This riles Watson, who paints Holmes as being machine-like—that is, brilliant at problem solving but lacking the emotion that is perhaps what makes people human. For Holmes' part, he views reasoning as inherently superior to emotion—a formula that later finds representation in the alleged superiority of white male civilization over foreign "savagery"—and in fact suggests that emotions are directly harmful to the work of rationality. The reverse claim can be made against Holmes: his deep-rooted belief in rationalism actively harms his capacity to be emotional (not that this bothers him in the slightest). Doyle does move away from this to a degree in the later books, bringing in a potential love interest for Sherlock Holmes. *The Sign of the Four* is only the second story out of sixty, though, so Holmes is still deeply skeptical of emotions.

Chapter 3 Quotes

It was a September evening, and not yet seven o'clock, but the day had been a dreary one, and a dense drizzly fog lay low upon the great city. Mud-coloured clouds drooped sadly over the muddy streets. Down the Strand the lamps were but misty splotches of diffused light which threw a feeble circular glimmer upon the slimy pavement. The yellow glare from the shop-windows streamed out into the steamy, vaporous air, and threw a murky, shifting radiance across the crowded thoroughfare. There was, to my mind, something eerie and ghost-like in the endless procession of faces which flitted across these narrow bars of light,—sad faces and glad, haggard and merry. Like all human kind, they flitted from the gloom into the light, and so back into the gloom once more. I am not subject to impressions, but the dull, heavy evening, with the strange business upon which we were engaged, combined to make me nervous and depressed. I could see from Miss Morstan's manner that she was suffering from the same feeling. Holmes alone could rise superior to petty influences. He held his open note-book upon his knee, and from time to time he jotted down figures and memoranda in the light of his pocket-lantern.

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson (speaker), Sherlock Holmes , Miss Mary Morstan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes as Holmes, Watson, and Miss Morstan travel to London's West End, where they will meet someone as instructed in the anonymous letter that Miss Morstan has recently received. This passage is a kind of interior monologue that allows Watson to give a sense of his own mental state, that of the others, and of the fog-rimmed London atmosphere. At this early stage, the case is shrouded in mystery; this is evoked by the murky, obscure setting. The low lighting and the uncanny display of human faces contributes to a sense of the gothic, which Holmes uses to develop mystery within the novella. Watson sees his own murky mind reflected in Miss Morstan's, thereby subconsciously bringing them closer together and differentiating them from the cold, unemotional Sherlock Holmes, who is wholly unbothered by the scene. That said, the pathetic fallacy employed here equally comes to symbolize Holmes' own state of mind, but specifically in relation to the case—his "visibility" of what's taken place is, at this stage, obscured.

Chapter 4 Quotes

"Your servant, Miss Morstan," he kept repeating, in a thin, high voice. "Your servant, gentlemen. Pray step into my little sanctum. A small place, miss, but furnished to my own liking. An oasis of art in the howling desert of South London."

We were all astonished by the appearance of the apartment into which he invited us. In that sorry house it looked as out of place as a diamond of the first water in a setting of brass. The richest and glossiest of curtains and tapestries draped the walls, looped back here and there to expose some richly-mounted painting or Oriental vase. The carpet was of amber-and-black, so soft and so thick that the foot sank pleasantly into it, as into a bed of moss. Two great tiger-skins thrown athwart it increased the suggestion of Eastern luxury, as did a huge hookah which stood upon a mat in the corner. A lamp in the fashion of a silver dove was hung from an almost invisible golden wire in the centre of the room. As it burned it filled the air with a subtle and aromatic odor.

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson, Thaddeus Sholto (speaker), Sherlock Holmes , Miss Mary Morstan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes when Holmes, Watson, and Miss Morstan arrive at the home of Thaddeus Sholto—the anonymous person who has been sending Miss Morstan a pearl every year. This passage is important because it is the first point in the story where the mysterious of disappearance of Captain Morstan starts to be drawn together with the Orientalism (and imperialism) throughout. That is, the novella presents the "East"—which the reader can take to mean countries like India and China—as a world that is alluringly exotic and at the same time dangerously foreign. Thaddeus has a clear affinity with "Eastern luxury," and has created an oasis of the East within the "desert" of the West—that is, within the mundanity that the Western world seems to represent. More widely, this reflects the Imperialist attitude of the British Empire, which plundered countries like India and vastly increased its own store of wealth in the process. The tiger-skins carry with them a subtle threat of danger which sets the scene for the quiet murder of Thaddeus' brother, Bartholomew.

"'I have only one thing," he said, "which weighs upon my mind at this supreme moment. It is my treatment of poor Morstan's orphan. The cursed greed which has been my besetting sin through life has withheld from her the treasure, half at least of which should have been hers. And yet I have made no use of it myself, so blind and foolish a thing is avarice. The mere feeling of possession has been so dear to me that I could not bear to share it with another. See that chaplet dipped with pearls beside the quinine-bottle. Even that I could not bear to part with, although I had got it out with the design of sending it to her. You, my sons, will give her a fair share of the Agra treasure. But send her nothing—not even the chaplet—until I am gone. After all, men have been as bad as this and have recovered."

Related Characters: Major Sholto (speaker), Captain Morstan, Miss Mary Morstan, Bartholomew Sholto, Thaddeus Sholto

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from Thaddeus Sholto as he tells the story of his father's and his family's involvement in the Agra treasure. He is in turn quoting his father, Major Sholto, who was the one most recently in possession of the Agra treasure which he had in fact stolen. It represents a relative change of heart on Major Sholto's part, as he stares death in the face. In an earlier chapter, Miss Morstan relates how Major Sholto had no knowledge of Captain Morstan's return to London and had made no mention of the treasure—it transpires that Captain Morstan allegedly died in a heated conversation with Sholto about the treasure. Sholto subsequently hid his body to avoid detection. The quote, then, shows the lengths that Sholto has gone to in order to keep possession of the treasure. He readily admits that he's never used the treasure—that is, never exploited it as wealth more generally—and held on to it for its own sake. This begs the question of whether it was worth it—Sholto's life has been ended abruptly, as has Captain Morstan's. The reader thus starts to build a picture of the Agra treasure as a kind of curse, bringing misfortune on those that possess it or strive to acquire it. More widely, Sholto's actions echo those of the British Empire; the treasure can be read as a metaphor for India, the lucrative "jewel in the crown" of the empire, which Britain was reluctant to let go.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Inside, a gravel path wound through desolate grounds to a huge clump of a house, square and prosaic, all plunged in shadow save where a moonbeam struck one corner and glimmered in a garret window. The vast size of the building, with its gloom and its deathly silence, struck a chill to the heart. Even Thaddeus Sholto seemed ill at ease, and the lantern quivered and rattled in his hand.

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson (speaker), Bartholomew Sholto, Major Sholto, Thaddeus Sholto

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes as Holmes, Watson, Miss Morstan, and Thaddeus Sholto arrive at Pondicherry Lodge, the Sholto family home where the Agra treasure has just been discovered. This passage is illustrative of Doyle's use of gothic literature elements within the detective story. The overall effect of the descriptors—the long path, the low light, the chilly gloom—is reminiscent of a haunted castle. Even Thaddeus, for whom the house is familiar, is afraid. This builds a sense of mystery and threat that intensifies the story and draws its readers in. This atmosphere of foreboding is appropriate given that, as this is where the treasure has been found/hidden, it's also the site of the bad fortune that comes with the treasure—Bartholomew Sholto's body is about to be discovered.

I stooped to the hole, and recoiled in horror. Moonlight was streaming into the room, and it was bright with a vague and shifty radiance. Looking straight at me, and suspended, as it were, in the air, for all beneath was in shadow, there hung a face,—the very face of our companion Thaddeus. There was the same high, shining head, the same circular bristle of red hair, the same bloodless countenance. The features were set, however, in a horrible smile, a fixed and unnatural grin, which in that still and moonlit room was more jarring to the nerves than any scowl or contortion. So like was the face to that of our little friend that I looked round at him to make sure that he was indeed with us. Then I recalled to mind that he had mentioned to us that his brother and he were twins.

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson (speaker), Thaddeus Sholto, Bartholomew Sholto

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

This is the moment when Watson looks inside the locked laboratory of Bartholomew Sholto, which he hasn't left all day. Bartholomew's face is fixed in a rictus grin, a grotesque mask of death. This speaks to the idea of the Agra treasure, rather than being a source of happiness, actually bringing misfortune to those it touches. Bartholomew's smile is thus deeply ironic, mimicking the happiness that those who sought the treasure felt that it would represent. The uncanny image is also deeply gothic, firstly through its unsettling nature but also in its use of twin imagery—twins and doubling are a common element in gothic literature, designed to unsettle the reader and destabilize reality.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible whatever remains, HOWEVER IMPROBABLE, must be the truth? We know that he did not come through the door, the window, or the chimney. We also know that he could not have been concealed in the room, as there is no concealment possible. Whence, then, did he come?"

"He came through the hole in the roof," I cried.

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson, Sherlock Holmes (speaker), Tonga, Jonathan Small (The Wooden-Legged Man)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes as Holmes examines the room in which they discovered Bartholomew's body. Holmes has been taking a close look at the scene, barely able to contain his glee at the mystery placed before him. His exchange with Watson is illustrative of their relationship more generally. Watson functions as a kind of sounding board for Holmes' ideas, and often serves to highlight, through his inability to arrive at the same conclusions, Holmes' immense powers of perception and logic. Holmes essentially walks Watson through his thinking step by step, albeit a little condescendingly, just as the reader has the case revealed to them throughout the novella. This is Holmes' "deduction" at work—in essence, he is saying that only one possibility

remains, and that this must therefore be the answer.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ The police had brought a cab with them, and in this I escorted Miss Morstan back to her home. After the angelic fashion of women, she had borne trouble with a calm face as long as there was some one weaker than herself to support, and I had found her bright and placid by the side of the frightened housekeeper. In the cab, however, she first turned faint, and then burst into a passion of weeping,—so sorely had she been tried by the adventures of the night. She has told me since that she thought me cold and distant upon that journey. She little guessed the struggle within my breast, or the effort of self-restraint which held me back. My sympathies and my love went out to her, even as my hand had in the garden. I felt that years of the conventionalities of life could not teach me to know her sweet, brave nature as had this one day of strange experiences. Yet there were two thoughts which sealed the words of affection upon my lips. She was weak and helpless, shaken in mind and nerve. It was to take her at a disadvantage to obtrude love upon her at such a time. Worse still, she was rich. If Holmes's researches were successful, she would be an heiress. Was it fair, was it honorable, that a half-pay surgeon should take such advantage of an intimacy which chance had brought about? Might she not look upon me as a mere vulgar fortune-seeker? I could not bear to risk that such a thought should cross her mind. This Agra treasure intervened like an impassable barrier between us.

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson (speaker), Miss Mary Morstan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes as Watson escorts Miss Morstan home from Pondicherry Lodge on Holmes' instruction. The passage demonstrates Watson's innermost thoughts about her—his increased affection coupled with his worry that, once she acquires her life-changing share of the Agra treasure, she will be propelled out of his social and economic league. Miss Morstan is presented in the Victorian cliché as a meek and mild woman in need of protection and prone to emotional outbursts (exactly the kind of behavior that Holmes frowns upon). The growing love between Watson and Miss Morstan is intended to act as a counterpoint to Holmes' intensely logical mindset, to allow the story some emotional breathing space. It's not the most convincing love story ever written though, given that it takes place entirely from Watson's perspective. Miss Morstan is a passive character who, luckily for Watson, just so happens to reciprocate his feelings.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ "Now, then, listen to this. 'They are naturally hideous, having large, misshapen heads, small, fierce eyes, and distorted features. Their feet and hands, however, are remarkably small. So intractable and fierce are they that all the efforts of the British official have failed to win them over in any degree. They have always been a terror to shipwrecked crews, braining the survivors with their stone headed clubs, or shooting them with their poisoned arrows. These massacres are invariably concluded by a cannibal feast.' Nice, amiable people, Watson!"

Related Characters: Sherlock Holmes (speaker), Tonga, Dr. John Watson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes at the end of Chapter 8, as Holmes reads from a book about "indigenous" peoples around the world. He is looking for an explanation of the small footprints of one of the culprits at Pondicherry Lodge, and settles upon the answer that the prints must belong to someone from the Andaman Islands. The tone and content of the passage is undeniably racist, portraying Victorian attitudes of the West as superior to "the East." While the description of the listed actions of the Andaman peoples might have some accuracy—in that there are documented conflicts between them and Westerners attempting to land on the islands—there is no hard proof of cannibalism. The physical descriptions are also clearly prejudiced, implying inferiority and sub-human status. In essence, the entry paints the Andamanese as the precise opposite of the Victorians, setting them up as the "other" to be feared. Tonga is thus positioned to be the purest "evil" in the novella, his blow darts representing his deadly foreignness.

Chapter 9 Quotes

"It is a romance!" cried Mrs. Forrester. "An injured lady, half a million in treasure, a black cannibal, and a wooden-legged ruffian. They take the place of the conventional dragon or wicked earl."

"And two knight-errants to the rescue," added Miss Morstan, with a bright glance at me.

"Why, Mary, your fortune depends upon the issue of this search. I don't think that you are nearly excited enough. Just imagine what it must be to be so rich, and to have the world at your feet!"

It sent a little thrill of joy to my heart to notice that she showed no sign of elation at the prospect. On the contrary, she gave a toss of her proud head, as though the matter were one in which she took small interest.

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson, Miss Mary Morstan, Mrs. Forrester (speaker), Sherlock Holmes

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes as Watson visits the home of Miss Mary Morstan, where she is employed as a live-in governess by Mrs. Forrester. He tells them about what's happened so far in the case, and they are allowed to enjoy the "romanticism" from afar. That is, the sense of danger engendered by the case gives them a kind of thrill, protected as they are in their warm, comfortable home. Mrs. Forrester's comment also shows how the story overlaps with gothic literature, bringing with it the idea of a supernatural evil—here played by Tonga—and the heroic figure saving the damsel in distress. Watson is gladdened to see that Miss Morstan does not seem particularly bothered by the recovery of the treasure because he fears that her newfound wealth will make it impossible for him to win her heart.

Chapter 10 Quotes

At the sound of his strident, angry cries there was movement in the huddled bundle upon the deck. It straightened itself into a little black man—the smallest I have ever seen—with a great, misshapen head and a shock of tangled, dishevelled hair. Holmes had already drawn his revolver, and I whipped out mine at the sight of this savage, distorted creature. He was wrapped in some sort of dark ulster or blanket, which left only his face exposed; but that face was enough to give a man a sleepless night. Never have I seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty. His small eyes glowed and burned with a sombre light, and his thick lips were writhed back from his teeth, which grinned and chattered at us with a half animal fury.

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson (speaker), Tonga, Sherlock Holmes

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes during the climax of the novella—the boat chase. Holmes, Watson, Jones and some policeman follow the *Aurora* ship down the Thames. Onboard the latter are Jonathan Small (the wooden-legged man) and Tonga, the "savage." This telling passage encapsulates the racism at the heart of the novella, mapping Tonga's blackness onto the idea of him as more animal than human. His physical appearance was intended to frighten Doyle's Victorian audience, playing into their Eurocentrism and fear of the foreign "other." Throughout the novella, Tonga, who never even gets a chance to speak, is portrayed as more animal than human. Apparently, he is only acting as Small's accomplice out of a dog-like loyalty based on Small's kindness to him during a period of sickness. Passages like this make for extremely uncomfortable reading for a contemporary reader, though to a degree reflect dominant, Eurocentric attitudes of the time.

Chapter 11 Quotes

"But it does seem a queer thing," he added, with a bitter smile, "that I who have a fair claim to nigh upon half a million of money should spend the first half of my life building a breakwater in the Andamans, and am like to spend the other half digging drains at Dartmoor. It was an evil day for me when first I clapped eyes upon the merchant Achmet and had to do with the Agra treasure, which never brought anything but a curse yet upon the man who owned it. To him it brought murder, to Major Sholto it brought fear and guilt, to me it has meant slavery for life."

Related Characters: Jonathan Small (The Wooden-Legged Man) (speaker), Sherlock Holmes , Major Sholto

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes as Jonathan Small tells his life story and fills in the gaps that Sherlock Holmes was unable to figure out. He has led a hard life, though there is no suggestion really that he deserved anything less. The "half a million" would have been a life-changing sum, equivalent to over 53 million pounds in modern money. This quote demonstrates the misfortune that has visited all those who have been involved in the Agra treasure; it has acted more as a curse than a liberation. Small himself has actually never been in possession of the treasure, making the wider point that not only is the treasure itself cursed but its pursuit is too. Small has dedicated his life to the treasure, and has been left with nothing. His entitled claim on the treasure glosses over the question of the original ownership—the jewels actually belong to an Indian prince. In this way, Small's sense of entitlement mimics that of the British colonizers towards India more generally (though this is not a deliberate criticism on Doyle's part).

"The treasure is lost," said Miss Morstan, calmly.

As I listened to the words and realized what they meant, a great shadow seemed to pass from my soul. I did not know how this Agra treasure had weighed me down, until now that it was finally removed. It was selfish, no doubt, disloyal, wrong, but I could realize nothing save that the golden barrier was gone from between us. "Thank God!" I ejaculated from my very heart.

She looked at me with a quick, questioning smile. "Why do you say that?" she asked.

"Because you are within my reach again," I said, taking her hand. She did not withdraw it. "Because I love you, Mary, as truly as ever a man loved a woman. Because this treasure, these riches, sealed my lips. Now that they are gone I can tell you how I love you. That is why I said, 'Thank God.'"

"Then I say, 'Thank God,' too," she whispered, as I drew her to my side. Whoever had lost a treasure, I knew that night that I had gained one.

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson, Miss Mary Morstan (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 71-72

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes when Watson visits Miss Morstan and Mrs. Forrester again. This time, with the culprits captured and the treasure seemingly retrieved, there is a sense of resolution. Watson forces open the treasure box, only for them to discover that it is completely empty—Small has scattered the jewels into the Thames in order to prevent anyone else from laying claim to them. Instead of being bad news, this acts as a liberation for Watson which he can't help but enunciate—Miss Morstan will not suddenly be joining the ranks of the upper classes, but will remain who she is now. This allows Watson the space to confess his love for her; she will no longer suspect him of wanting a share of her wealth. Miss Morstan reciprocates Watson's affections, allowing Doyle and Watson to draw the clichéd conclusion that she represents the "real" treasure—ultimately suggesting that she, too, is a possession.

Chapter 12 Quotes

Major Sholto was the hardest hit. He used to pay in notes and gold at first, but soon it came to notes of hand and for big sums. He sometimes would win for a few deals, just to give him heart, and then the luck would set in against him worse than ever. All day he would wander about as black as thunder, and he took to drinking a deal more than was good for him.

One night he lost even more heavily than usual. I was sitting in my hut when he and Captain Morstan came stumbling along on the way to their quarters. They were bosom friends, those two, and never far apart. The major was raving about his losses.

"It's all up, Morstan," he was saying, as they passed my hut. "I shall have to send in my papers. I am a ruined man."

Related Characters: Major Sholto, Jonathan Small (The Wooden-Legged Man) (speaker), Captain Morstan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of Jonathan Small's story about the Agra treasure, which makes up the bulk of the last chapter. The passage sheds light on the motivations of Major Sholto, who double crossed both Jonathan Small and his friend, Captain Morstan, to acquire the Agra treasure for himself. Evidently, he thought it would help him address his gambling debts and prevent him from ruin. This deepens the sense of the Agra treasure as being cursed—Sholto lost his closest friend as part of his pursuit of wealth. Small senses an opportunity when he hears about Sholto's problems, proposing the Agra treasure as a way out in exchange for help with his own escape from the Andaman Islands (where he is serving time for the murder of the merchant who originally possessed the treasure).

"Well, Small," said the major, "we must, I suppose, try and meet you. We must first, of course, test the truth of your story. Tell me where the box is hid, and I shall get leave of absence and go back to India in the monthly relief-boat to inquire into the affair."

"Not so fast," said I, growing colder as he got hot. "I must have the consent of my three comrades. I tell you that it is four or none with us."

"Nonsense!" he broke in. "What have three black fellows to do with our agreement?"

"Black or blue," said I, "they are in with me, and we all go together."

Related Characters: Major Sholto, Jonathan Small (The Wooden-Legged Man) (speaker), Captain Morstan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes as Small recounts how he brought Major Sholto and Captain Morstan into a scheme to retrieve the Agra treasure. This passage shows Sholto's maneuvers to acquire the treasure for himself—by innocently going to "check" on it—and also provides further evidence of the endemic racism found throughout the novella and its characters. Small, who demeans the Indian people elsewhere in his story, feels a loyalty towards his fellow signatories of the titular sign of the four (and thus is allowed some element of questionable moral redemption). Sholto reflects the common Westernized belief at the time that black people were inherently inferior to white, unable to understand why Small needs to consult with those involved in the original theft.

"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?"

"For me," said Sherlock Holmes, "there still remains the cocaine-bottle." And he stretched his long white hand up for it.

Related Characters: Sherlock Holmes , Dr. John Watson (speaker), Athelney Jones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

This quote ends the novella. By this stage, the case is wrapped up and the mystery is solved; Watson has become engaged to Miss Morstan; and Athelney Jones is set to take credit for the case's resolution, as often happens. Watson thus asks Holmes the question of his own reward. But as has been established throughout *The Sign of the Four*, the mental stimulation that comes with the problem-solving in a case like the Agra treasure *is* the reward for Sherlock Holmes. He thrives on his intellectual gifts, and needs cases to be able to use them to their full extent. He isn't bothered about getting credit, and certainly isn't about to make any foray into the world of emotion that he so disdains. So, the novella ends just as it has begun—with Sherlock Holmes reaching for his cocaine. The reader, then, is reminded that for Holmes, drugs and problem solving share a very similar role in his life, affecting his brain in a way that he has come to crave endlessly. Ending the novella like this also leaves the door open for further stories.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1 — THE SCIENCE OF DEDUCTION

Sherlock Holmes is sitting on his armchair in his Baker Street apartment, injecting himself with cocaine. Dr. Watson, Holmes' assistant, remarks that Holmes has been using drugs for three times a day over the last few months. Watson feels he should try and get Holmes to stop.

Holmes' drug use was not illegal at the time, though not without controversy (as embodied in Watson's reaction). Holmes has clearly been using cocaine to fill a void left by the lack of a case to work on.

Watson asks Holmes why he takes drugs and risks damaging the "great powers" of his intellect. Holmes replies that his mind "rebels at stagnation." When he doesn't have problems to solve, he says, he longs for other means of "mental exaltation." Holmes explains that he created a role for himself as "the only unofficial consulting detective" because it brings him great pleasure to solve problems.

Holmes himself explicitly links his drug use with his taste for problem solving—both seem to give him a similar thrill, and each precludes the requirement for the other. That is, if he has a case, he doesn't need the drugs to fill the void. For Holmes, employing his gift for rational thinking is his very reason for being. Notably, he lacks any emotional aspect to his life.

The two men briefly discuss Watson's write-up of one of Holmes' recent cases; Holmes criticizes Watson for treating the subject with too much emotion and "romanticism." Holmes then explains that a French detective has been seeking advice from him. The Frenchman is also in the process of translating Holmes' monographs into French, on subjects like "the Distinction between the Ashes of Various Tobaccos."

Holmes sees emotions and logic as two distinct entities—for him, there is no logic to emotions, and no emotion to logic. His mention of going beyond "romanticism" gestures towards the Victorian period's move away from the preceding Romantic literature. Holmes' mention of a French detective is probably a nod from Doyle to Edgar Allan Poe's French detective, C. Auguste Dupin, and the French detective fiction writer Émile Gaboriau. Watson is established as the chronicler of Holmes' cases, meaning everything the reader learns is filtered through him; in fact, he is in a way meant to represent the average reader.

Watson asks Holmes if there is a distinction between "observation" and "deduction," to which he replies that there certainly is. Holmes demonstrates by explaining that he can tell Watson has visited the post office that day because he has some red earth on his shoe, which Holmes knows is from the pavement outside the post office—this is observation.

This exchange is an early taste for the reader of Holmes' gifts. Deduction is a bit of a slippery concept in the Sherlock Holmes stories, but it is essentially a catch-all term for Holmes' ability to go beyond observations and arrive at a given thesis or explanation for how events have unfolded.

Holmes says that, as he has been with Watson all day and not seen him write a letter, he knows that the purpose of the visit was to send a telegram—this is deduction. Holmes explains that his method is to "eliminate all other factors, and the one which remains must be the truth."

For Holmes, then, deduction is partly about eliminating all falsehood around the truth. But he also makes use of inference—taking a set of observations and combining them to form the likeliest account of their overall cause. The main difference between him and others is that he is almost always right.

Watson proposes a further test of Holmes' powers of deduction. He offers the other man his watch to examine. Just from looking at the watch, Holmes can tell that it used to belong to Watson's brother, who Holmes deduces was a man who had a drinking problem.

This passage is intended to whet the reader's appetite for the problem-solving that is to follow in the rest of the story. To the average reader, Holmes' skillful deduction seems practically superhuman.

Watson is momentarily angered, thinking Holmes must have found out about his brother beforehand. When Holmes explains his process—which rests on observing tiny scratches on the watch, the marks of a "careless" man—Watson is in awe and apologizes. Holmes laments the fact that he has no case to work on currently: "I cannot live without brainwork." Just then, Miss Mary Morstan arrives at the apartment.

This passage displays a frequent pattern in the Holmes stories—the detective makes a seemingly impossible conclusion, much to everyone's disbelief, only for his explanation to demonstrate his thinking's sheer logic.

CHAPTER 2 — THE STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Miss Morstan is a young blonde woman whom Watson describes as "dressed in the most perfect taste" while also appearing to be of "limited means." She explains that she has come to Holmes on a recommendation from her employer, Mrs. Cecil Forrester.

Miss Morstan is set up as a kind of damsel-in-distress. Her modest yet beautiful appearance is intended to set up the contrast between her current economic state and the potential reward of the Agra treasure.

Miss Morstan outlines the facts of her case, as Holmes watches her gleefully with "hawk-like" features. Her father, Captain Morstan, who was an officer in the Indian regiment of the British forces, had been due to come home on leave when she was 17 years old in 1878 (she was at boarding school in Scotland at the time).

Holmes is often compared to animals with a reputation for high intelligence. Miss Morstan's story sets the Imperial backdrop for the story—the case not only takes place in the time of the British Empire, but actively involves its geography too.

Miss Morstan continues that, though her father made it to London, he subsequently disappeared, and she never saw him again. Among his belongings were "a considerable number of curiosities from the Andaman Islands," where he had been in charge of the convict-guard. His only friend in London, she tells Holmes, was the retired Major Sholto, who said he didn't even know Captain Morstan was in town.

The curiosities specifically tie Captain Morstan's fate to his time on the Andaman Islands, though it is of course not yet clear how. Major Sholto's line about not knowing his friend has returned later turns out to be untrue.

Miss Morstan goes on, explaining that six years ago an advert appeared in the newspaper asking for her address. When she responded with her address, she was soon a sent a "large lustrous pearl" in a box. Each year on the same date she has received another pearl; this time, for the first time, she has also received a note.

The pearls, sent from an anonymous source, are suggestive of some kind of store of wealth, somehow linked to Miss Morstan.

Holmes reads the note, which instructs Miss Morstan to "be at the third pillar from the left outside the Lyceum Theatre tonight at seven o'clock." It says that she can bring friends, that she is a "wronged woman and shall have justice." Holmes and Watson agree to accompany Miss Morstan later that evening.

The specifics of the instruction—a particular pillar of a particular theater—adds to the intrigue of the case. The meeting point, in London's West End, also builds a sense of grandeur that hints at the treasure.

Holmes compares the handwriting on the letter is the same to that on the pearl box addresses and deduces that it is the same. Miss Morstan takes back the box, thanks Holmes, and leaves the flat.

Holmes starts building a sense of the case, employing one of his many extremely specific skills (like the ability to distinguish between different tobacco ash seen in chapter 1).

Watson exclaims how attractive he found Miss Morstan. When Holmes says he hadn't noticed, Watson says, "you really are an automaton – a calculating machine [...] there is something positively inhuman in you at times." Holmes insists on separating emotional qualities from clear reasoning, saying that "a client to me is a mere unit, a factor in a problem."

This is an important exchange that reveals the fault lines between Watson and Sherlock Holmes. Watson represents the way that people "normally" are—he responds emotionally to the world and can't fully understand Holmes' extreme devotion to his rationality. Holmes, for his part, reveals that he gets involved with cases for their own sake—because he enjoys the mental stimulation—rather than expressly to help other people.

Holmes goes out for an hour, leaving Watson to daydream about Miss Morstan. He figures out that she must be twenty-seven—"a sweet age, when youth has lost its self-consciousness and become a little sobered by experience." He chastises himself for thinking such "dangerous thoughts."

Doyle intends the growing attraction between Miss Morstan and Watson as a counter-example to Holmes' way of seeing the world. However, Miss Morstan is quite a meek and mild character, and the attraction tends to be viewed almost entirely as Watson's. Miss Morstan, though she is certainly a morally virtuous character, is also for the most part objectified.

CHAPTER 3 — IN QUEST OF A SOLUTION

Holmes comes back to the flat in good spirits. He tells Watson that he has figured out that the pearls must have something to do with Major Sholto, who, he has discovered, died the same week that Miss Morstan started receiving the mysterious pearls. He figures that "Sholto's heir" knows something about "the mystery and desires to make compensation." Miss Morstan arrives outside the flat and the two men go down to meet her. Watson packs his heaviest walking stick and Holmes takes his revolver.

Holmes starts drawing the connection between Miss Morstan and the Sholtos. Though Holmes is expressly unemotional, he does have his moods—in general, if the case is going well, he is full of energy and vigor. The reverse is true too.

In the cab toward the Lyceum theatre, Miss Morstan explains that Major Sholto was a "very particular friend" to her father. Her father's letters were full of allusions to the major and their time together commanding troops on the Andaman Islands. Miss Morstan presents Holmes with a "curious paper" she has found in her father's desk.

This passage contains another mention of the Andaman Islands, which serves to conjure the sense of "otherness" and foreignness that helps to build the novella's mystery.

Holmes examines the paper, which he says is the diagram of a building and has a small red cross drawn on it. Beside the cross, the paper reads, "the sign of the four – Jonathan Small, Mahomet Singh, Abdullah Khan, Dost Akbar." Though he isn't sure of the significance of the paper, Holmes tells Miss Morstan to guard it safely.

Like the mention of the Andaman Islands, the combination of the four names—one western, three eastern—is meant to unsettle the readership based on their fear of the foreign. While Doyle intended the three eastern names to be Indian, they are Arabic in origin. This is the moment that the titular "sign of the four" is introduced to the story.

Watson describes the gloom of London as they head for the theatre: "dense drizzly fog," "mud-coloured clouds" and "misty splotches of diffused light" from lamps. He sees something "eerie and ghostlike" about all of the people that they pass. He can tell that Miss Morstan feels similarly to him; Holmes is deep in thought.

The gothic descriptors of London mimic the problem of the case; at this point in time, Holmes stands on the outside of understanding what's happened. The images conjure a sense of obscurity. Holmes is "computing" the facts of the case so far.

Arriving at the Lyceum theatre, the group is greeted by "a small, dark, brisk man" who instructs them to follow him. They get into another cab and head through the "foggy streets." Watson tells Miss Morstan anecdotes about his time serving in Afghanistan.

The "foggy streets" function as a kind of metaphor for the neural processes of Holmes' brain. His synapses are firing, attempting to apply his logical rigor to the evidence.

Eventually, the cab pulls up in a south London suburb, which Watson describes as part of the "monster tentacles which the giant city was throwing out into the country." The group is led to a modest-looking house, and they are surprised to find the door answered by a "Hindoo" servant. He shows them in.

The monster imagery is expressly gothic, working a sense of the uncanny into the detective genre. The Hindu servant, too, is intended to surprise the reader—another link to "the East."

CHAPTER 4 — THE STORY OF THE BALD-HEADED MAN

The servant leads Holmes, Watson and Miss Morstan to Thaddeus Sholto. He is an odd-looking 30-year-old man with a jerky manner. The house is decked out in oriental paintings and tapestries, with two tiger-skins spread upon the floor. Thaddeus crudely lets slip that Captain Morstan died from a heart attack; his lack of awareness angers Watson.

The interior of the house, brimming with rich tapestries and interesting paintings, conjures a sense of the East's "exoticism." The tiger-skins gesture towards deadly threat, but also indicate wealth.

Thaddeus smokes a hookah pipe as he explains that he has had a disagreement with his brother, Bartholomew. They will need to visit him later, he says. Thaddeus talks about his father, Major Sholto, who came back to England from India with a small fortune, enough to take care of his sons. According to Thaddeus, Major Sholto had a marked fear of men with wooden legs, and once shot at a man who had one.

Thaddeus' hookah pipe strengthens the tie between the mystery and the East. Later in the novella, Holmes will cite this conversation as part of the proof of why Jonathan Small—who has a wooden leg—is the man they are looking for.

In early 1882, Thaddeus explains, Major Sholto received a letter from India that caused a great shock from which he never recovered. By the end of April, he was on his deathbed. At this point, Major Sholto told his sons that he felt guilty about how Miss Morstan had been treated. He asked them to give Miss Morstan her fair share of the **Agra treasure**, and to send her some pearls that he had kept with him.

Whatever was contained in the letter was clearly of grave importance. Interestingly, the letter came from India, just like the treasure itself, suggesting that Major Sholto perhaps made enemies there.

This treasure, continued Major Sholto at the time, had come into his and Captain Morstan's possession in India. When Morstan had come back to London, he went to Sholto to claim his share. They had an argument, causing Morstan to have a heart attack and hit his head on the corner of the **treasure chest**. Sholto had concealed the body, afraid of the possible repercussions.

Given the reader later learns that Sholto had double-crossed Morstan and Jonathan Small in order to acquire the treasure for himself, it's possible that his deathbed story is not entirely true. The reader gets a sense that those involved in the treasure have been visited by misfortune.

Just at that moment, Sholto had been about to reveal the location of the **Agra treasure**. But looking up from his bed, he saw a bearded face at the window; this face terrified him, and moments later he was dead from shock.

This apparition at the window borrows from the gothic genre, bringing with it an air of the supernatural.

Thaddeus and Bartholomew searched for the strange man; looking in the flower-bed, they could see only a single footprint. The next morning, the brothers discovered that Major Sholto's room had been searched, a piece of paper reading "the sign of the four" left upon the dead man's chest.

The "sign of the four" paper acts as a kind of prophetic signature that also links with the gothic genre and contributes to the deepening sense of mystery. For attentive readers, the single footprint in the flowerbed chimes with the earlier reveal that Major Sholto was afraid of men with wooden legs—that is, men with one leg and therefore one footprint.

Thaddeus recounts how he and his brother searched high and low for **the treasure**. Bartholomew didn't want to send the pearls to Miss Morstan, but Thaddeus insisted, seeing himself as her "trustee." Thaddeus explains that he learned yesterday that the treasure has been found at the Major's old home, and that they must go there now to divide it up.

This raises the question of what benefit the treasure really served for Major Sholto, if it was hidden at his home along. The mention of his fortune upon returning from India wasn't specifically linked to the treasure, so it seems that possessing the jewels only caused him misfortune.

The group gets into a cab outside. Thaddeus explains that the value of **the treasure** is around "half a million sterling." Watson thinks to himself how this will make Miss Morstan the richest heiress in England; he offers congratulations but inwardly feels disheartened. They arrive at Pondicherry Lodge.

The amount of money that is proposed as Miss Morstan's share is truly life-changing, representing approximately 53 million pounds in today's money. Watson feels that her newfound wealth will make her socially beyond his reach, catapulting her into the upper class of society.

CHAPTER 5 — THE TRAGEDY OF PONDICHERRY LODGE

Pondicherry Lodge looks imposing in the moonlight; it is protected by a high stone wall topped with broken glass, with only a heavy iron door for entry. The doorman, McMurdo, is reluctant to let in anyone but Thaddeus. Holmes realizes that he knows McMurdo, whom he has previously fought against in an amateur boxing match. McMurdo now happily lets them inside. The doorman explains that Bartholomew has not left his room all day.

Pondicherry Lodge is palatial and castle-like, aligning with the conventions of the gothic genre to build suspense. The grumpy doorkeeper fits with these conventions, too. Holmes often has a way of turning a situation quickly around in his favor, often slightly implausibly, as is the case here.

They walk up a dimly lit path to the house. Thaddeus goes in meets the house keeper, Mrs. Bernstone, who has been crying. Miss Morstan and Watson instinctively hold hands in the dark as they look at the grounds with Holmes. The earth has been dug up all over the place in search of **the treasure**.

The strange, distinctively gothic surroundings and Mrs. Bernstone's distress add to the growing sense of unease.

Thaddeus comes rushing out, shouting that something is wrong with Bartholomew. Mrs. Bernstone expresses relief at seeing them, explaining that she saw a terrifying sight when she peeped through Bartholomew's keyhole to check if he was okay.

This suggestion of a "terrifying sight" increases the tension, setting up a horror story-esque reveal. The locked room is also a classic convention of the gothic genre.

They go upstairs. Holmes tries to open the door to Bartholomew's room, but it is locked. He and Watson look through the keyhole, surprised to see Bartholomew's face staring straight at them, fixed in a rictus grin. They break the door open and go inside.

Bartholomew's grotesque appearance hints at the paradoxically dangerous power of the treasure. The wealth it represents is supposed to make its owner happy, but Bartholomew's chilling, fixed smile is actually a mere mask for his death.

Bartholomew's room looks like a "chemical laboratory." They notice a set of steps leading up to a hole in the ceiling, and a long coil of rope at the foot of the steps. Bartholomew is stiff and cold; he's been dead for hours. Holmes picks up a note by the body, which once again reads "the sign of the four." He also notices a "**long dark thorn** stuck" in the side of Bartholomew's head.

Doyle doesn't explain why the room is set up as a laboratory, but it would have likely reminded readers of Frankenstein's laboratory in Mary Shelley's gothic story of the same name. The long dark thorn, one of Tonga's blow darts, suggests an evil, foreign influence—literally, with the "foreign" poison entering the "homeland" of Bartholomew's body.

Surveying the scene, Watson is baffled, but Holmes says he only needs "a few missing links to have an entirely connected case." Thaddeus remarks anxiously that **the treasure** has gone. Holmes instructs him to go the police and report what's happened.

Watson represents the reader, who is unlikely to have garnered much of an understand of the case, and contrasts with Holmes' intellectual ability.

CHAPTER 6 — SHERLOCK HOLMES GIVES A DEMONSTRATION

Holmes gleefully examines the crime scene. He observes two distinctive marks on the floor: a footprint and a circular print of a wooden stump. He and Watson agree that the wooden-legged man must have had help; the outer walls of the house are too high for him to have scaled. Someone else must have got inside and lowered him the rope to climb up, hypothesizes Holmes.

Holmes gets a thrill from case work, particularly when he's actually on the scene of the crime. The wooden stump footprint ties in with Major Sholto's deathbed story, in which the two brothers found only one footprint in the flowerbed outside of the Major's window.

Watson wonders how the wooden-legged man's ally could have got into the room. Holmes is mildly annoyed by Watson, saying, "how often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible whatever remains, HOWEVER IMPROBABLE, must be the truth?" Watson realizes that the accomplice must have come through the hole in the roof.

Holmes' quote neatly sums up his intellectual approach of deduction. Of course, in reality it is difficult to delineate the entire range of impossibilities and so the remark comes across as somewhat patronizing to Watson—who, as a doctor, is not an unintelligent man.

Holmes and Watson investigate the roof cavity and find a trapdoor leading out on to the roof. Here, they notice another set of footprints—but these are much smaller than those from an average man. Watson thinks a child must have been involved; Holmes clearly disagrees but doesn't yet explain why. Holmes is satisfied he has gleaned everything there is to learn from the scene.

The second set of footprints sets the stage for Tonga's entry later in the novella. The disagreement between Watson and Holmes serves to further distinguish their two different intellects.

Holmes notices that the wooden-legged man appears to have stepped in creosote. They hear the police arrive and quickly examine the body. Bartholomew's muscles are in a state of extreme contraction, suggesting poisoning by "some strychnine-like substance." Holmes explains that the poison must have been administered by **the thorn**.

As is often the case in Sherlock Holmes stories, there are convenient and improbable details. Here, the culprit has stepped in pungent creosote and thereby created an opportunity for Holmes to track him. The thorn is confirmed as a foreign object, intensifying the sense of strange outside influence.

Just then, the bumbling and red-faced Scotland Yard detective, Athelney Jones, arrives on the scene. He addresses Holmes patronizingly, calling him "the theorist." Jones has already made up his mind that Thaddeus is guilty of Bartholomew's murder. Despite Holmes' attempt to get Jones to see the holes in his theory, Jones arrests Thaddeus right then and there.

The official police act, and Jones in particular, as Holmes' foil, creating a low standard against which Holmes' immense powers can be contrasted.

Holmes tells Thaddeus he will be freed soon enough. He also names the real suspect, Jonathan Small; he adds that he is aware of an accomplice, though does not know his identity yet. Holmes takes Watson aside and asks him to escort Miss Morstan home, before fetching Toby the hound from an associate of Holmes' to help them track the wooden-legged man.

Holmes' perception of the case is completely different from Jones' or Watson's, once again elevating his powers of deduction as superhuman and uncommon. Toby is going to be used to follow the conveniently pungent creosote scent.

CHAPTER 7 — THE EPISODE OF THE BARREL

Watson takes Miss Morstan back to her home, feeling that the **Agra treasure** is "like an impassable barrier" between them. By now, it is nearly 2 A.M. Watson meets Mrs. Forrester, who employs Miss Morstan as a governess; he is pleased to see the warmth between the two women, and the tranquility of their home "in the midst of the wild, dark business which had absorbed us."

The "impassable barrier" is the wealth represented by the Agra treasure. At the moment, Watson and Miss Morstan are fairly well matched economically and socially, but the lavishness of the impending treasure will certainly change all of that.

Watson heads for Pinchin Lane to pick up Toby the hound. He finds the house of Mr. Sherman, one of Holmes' associates, who is glad to lend Toby for service to Sherlock Holmes. Watson returns to Pondicherry Lodge with Toby.

Toby represents a kind of extension of Holmes' powers, as do the Baker Street Irregulars later on. Holmes has a network of people he can call upon for favors.

Holmes reexamines the small "child-like" footprints of the accomplice, noticing that the toes are "distinctly divided." He then instructs Watson to go downstairs and let Toby the dog loose.

Doyle builds the sense of the second culprit as an "other," fitting in with the gothic overlap (like Dracula or Frankenstein's monster)).

Watson, now outside, observes Holmes clambering on the roof, looking for the accomplice's method of entrance. Holmes notices a barrel on the ground, and clambers down a drain pipe before lowering himself on to the barrel. He figures that this must have been the means of entry. Holmes shows Watson a small case containing more of the sharp **poisoned thorns** that he found on the roof.

Holmes thinks that, having found the case of blow darts, the owner of them will no longer be able to employ he deadly weapon.


Holmes then gives Toby a sniff of a handkerchief coated in the creosote from upstairs, hoping this will help them find the criminals. Watson and Holmes follow the hound on a lengthy walk into and around London.

The walk around London gives the story a moment of pause and also allows Holmes to do some thinking.

As they follow Toby, Holmes expands on his views about the case, calling it "simplicity itself." He identifies the wooden-legged man as Jonathan Small, one of the signatories on "the sign of the four" map in Captain Morstan's possession. He assumes that Small must have been a convict under the guard of Captain Morstan and Major Sholto, which would explain why he is now seeking his share of **the treasure**—it was him who told them of the treasure's whereabouts, presumably on the agreement that they would let him have his fair cut.

Of course, Watson, like the reader, has not come to any of the same conclusions that Holmes' intellect has brought him to. Interestingly, at this stage there is no discussion of the origin of the treasure or who it first belonged to.


Holmes gets Watson to realize that the letter that so frightened Major Sholto was most likely from the man he had wronged, now free to come for his **treasure**. Holmes reminds Watson that, according to Thaddeus, Sholto once shot at a white man with a wooden leg; and as there was only one "white man's name" on the "sign of the four" chart, it follows that the man they are looking for is Jonathan Small.

This moment represents something of an error or oversight in the text—Thaddeus never actually said in the earlier exchange that the wooden-legged man his father shot at was white. The mention of race is characteristic of the text generally, in which the color of skin represents a dividing line, almost exclusively painting non-white people in a demeaning and offensive manner.

Holmes continues that Small must have returned to England now to find **his treasure**. He probably made contact with the staff of the Sholto household, trying to find an insider that might help him. On hearing that Major Sholto was about to die, he went to the dying man's window, deterred by the presence of the two sons. Since then, reasons Holmes, Small must have kept "a secret watch" on the efforts to find the treasure.

Holmes' reasoning often depends upon inference, rather than deduction. His explanation is possible and of course turns out to be true, but it's conceivable that there could be other explanations. His particular explanation builds a sense of the pain and malice that surrounds the ownership and pursuit of the Agra treasure.

Holmes reasons that Small probably didn't want Bartholomew dead, but that this was the result of his accomplice's actions. Holmes thinks he has figured out the identity of the accomplice, whom he describes as having acted on "savage instincts." He promises to tell Watson "soon enough."

The word "savage" is particularly key here, as Tonga will later be presented as exactly that—an inferior foreigner. It also creates a distinction between Small and Tonga, painting the former as a more honorable figure despite the entire episode originating from his lust for the treasure.

With London rising to meet the next working day, Holmes and Watson are still walking around London, following Toby. Eventually the hound gets confused, before leading them off again with purpose. However, he has merely led them to a nearby store of creosote. Holmes and Watson laugh at the mishap.

This passage provides a moment of light relief to the darkness and mystery of the story and keeps Holmes from reaching a conclusion too quickly.

CHAPTER 8 — THE BAKER STREET IRREGULARS

Holmes and Watson take Toby back to the point where he had got confused, attempting to regain the trail. This leads them to a small boatyard by the river. A sign advertises "boats to hire by the hour or day" by someone named Mordecai Smith. Holmes feels that "these fellows are sharper than I expected."

This sets up the dramatic boat chase of the penultimate chapter. It also provides a further challenge to Holmes' intellect.

Holmes speaks with a woman in the doorway of a nearby house, who is trying to get her young son inside for a wash. By pretending that he wants to hire a boat, Holmes gleans from her that Mordecai Smith has gone off somewhere in his steam launch, hired by a man with a wooden leg. He tricks her into revealing the name and appearance of the steam launch: the black, red-streaked *Aurora*.

The woman is Mordecai's wife, and is presented as working-class and distinctly unsavvy, as Holmes tricks her with ease. This is in keeping with general narrative of Holmes as a superior mind.

Holmes thanks the woman and goes off with Watson, explaining that "the main thing with people of that sort is never to let them think their information can be of the slightest importance to you." Holmes decides that the best course of action is to employ a gang of street urchins known as the Baker Street Irregulars and sends a telegram to their "lieutenant" on the way home.

Holmes' pithy statements to Watson are quite often the kind of thing that contemporary readers would find uncomfortable and inaccurate. Here, he essentially pegs the entire working class as distrustful, suggesting that they are little more than accessories.

Back at the flat, Watson takes some much-needed respite by having a bath. When he gets out, Holmes shows him an article in the paper talking about the case and praising Athelney Jones' detective work—much to Holmes' amusement.

Jones' misguided attempts to solve the case amuse Holmes, rather than hinder him, because he knows eventually it will be him that reveals the truth. This is part of the thrill he gets from the cases.

The Baker Street Irregulars arrive. Holmes explains that he wants them to track down the whereabouts of the *Aurora* by spreading out among London's various docks. In exchange, he will pay them a shilling each per day. They hurry off to work.

The Baker Street Irregulars are another part of Holmes' extended network, essentially helping him to have eyes and ears in more than one place at a time.

Watson asks Holmes if he intends to sleep. Holmes says that he is not tired; only "idleness" tires him. Instead, he will spend some time thinking about the identity of the accomplice with the small footprints. Watson exclaims that the small footprints and **the blow darts** point towards a "savage," perhaps from South America.

Holmes functions differently from ordinary people and, with the case functioning like a stimulating drug, he doesn't need sleep while he is under its influence. The link between the accomplice and the "savage" foreigner becomes clear, setting Tonga up as the true embodiment of evil and fear in the novel (whereas Small's actions will be characterized as misguided but understandable).


Holmes consults a book and finds an entry on "the aborigines of the Andaman Islands." This says that they are perhaps the "smallest race upon this earth," and are "fierce, morose, and intractable people." It describes their appearance as "naturally hideous, having large, misshapen heads, small fierce eyes and distorted features." Holmes reasons that this is the likely identity of the accomplice. He instructs Watson to get some rest, playing him to sleep with his violin.

The Andamanese are a real tribe or, more accurately, a combination of tribes that still exist on the islands today. Doyle completely buys into the Victorian fear of the foreign "other," implying the tribespeople to be irrational, inferior, and evil. British colonial exploits in nearby India had a destabilizing effect on the Andaman Islands, introducing Eurasian diseases that were new to the area. Holmes' sudden switch to playing the violin is an unsubtle move from undeveloped savagery to the high culture of Western society.


CHAPTER 9 — A BREAK IN THE CHAIN

Watson wakes up late in the afternoon. Holmes appears agitated, frustrated that he has not yet solved the case. Watson decides to go to see Miss Morstan and Mrs. Cecil Forrester to update them; Holmes tells him "women are never to be entirely trusted – not the best of them."

Holmes' mental state becomes increasingly agitated with the stalling of the case, as though he is needing his next fix. The degrading comment about women is totally in keeping with the novel's disparaging attitudes to race and the implication that Western man represents the world's evolutionary peak.


Watson heads to Miss Morstan's house, dropping off Toby the hound on the way. He tells them about the case. Mrs. Forrester calls it "a romance"—"an injured lady, half a million in treasure, a black cannibal, and wooden-legged ruffian." Watson takes comfort in how unconcerned Miss Morstan seems with her potential fortune; she says her only concern is for Thaddeus's freedom.

Miss Morstan and Mrs. Forrester generally function as passive receivers of information. The idea of the case "a romance" fits in with a certain idealized version of the East's exoticism.

In the evening, Watson returns home. Holmes' housekeeper, Mrs. Hudson, expresses concern for his health—he has been walking up and down in his room all day. Watson goes to sleep, hearing Holmes' footsteps throughout the night.

Holmes' condition is deteriorating with the stalling of the case. The reader might question if this is a rational response to the events that are taking place, or whether Holmes' obsession with the thrill of problem solving actually represents its own kind of irrationality.

At breakfast, Watson talks with the haggard-looking Holmes. The latter says that "this infernal problem is consuming me." He is frustrated to have figured out the particulars of the case but not yet apprehended the subjects. The day goes by without any news. That night, Watson can hear Holmes conducting a chemical experiment.

The chemical experiment appears to serve no purpose to the case other than to occupy Holmes' mind and reduce his agitation.

The next morning, Holmes decides to go off down the river in search of the *Aurora*. He instructs Watson to stay behind to receive any notes and telegrams. At breakfast, Watson reads in the paper that Thaddeus has been set free, exonerated from any involvement in the crime. He also notices an advert asking after the whereabouts of Mordecai Smith, which he figures is Holmes' doing (it has their Baker street address for correspondence).

Holmes already knew that Thaddeus was not the perpetrator of the crime; Doyle uses the newspaper device to confirm this.

In the afternoon, the despondent Athelney Jones comes to the apartment, looking for Holmes. Watson offers him a cigar and a whisky and soda while they wait for Holmes to return. Jones laments his inability to solve the case and praises Holmes' detective skills. He shows Watson a telegram from Holmes that instructed him to come to the Baker street apartment; Holmes claims to be closing in on the culprits.

Jones has run out of luck because Holmes himself has stalled. Jones' own abilities can't actually get him anywhere near to solving the case, and so all he can do is wait for Holmes to have a breakthrough. Jones is concerned for his public reputation, whereas Holmes is happy to remain anonymous.

Just then, a wheezy old man in "seafaring garb" comes to the apartment looking for Holmes. He says that he knows the whereabouts of the *Aurora*, the criminals, and the **Agra treasure**. He makes to leave, saying he only wants to speak to Holmes, and as Holmes isn't there, he can figure it out for himself.

Eagle-eyed readers might notice something suspicious about an old man arriving who seems to all of the answers that are needed to solve the case.

Jones blocks the door so that the old man cannot leave. Suddenly, they hear the voice of Holmes asking for a cigar—the old man was him in disguise all along. Holmes tells Jones that he will lead him to the suspects as long as he is allowed total control over the case, to which Jones agrees. He instructs Jones to meet him with a police-boat and some men at 7 P.M. that evening, by the Westminster Stairs of the Thames.

The old sailor figure was Holmes all along. Now that he has had a breakthrough in the case, he is in high spirits and having fun—his mental state is intimately linked with the progression of the case. Jones defers to his superior intellect, relieved that he will at least be able to take credit for the case's resolution at the end of it all.

Holmes also insists that, when the capture is complete, he would like to question Jonathan Small on his own; he also wants Watson to be entrusted with taking the treasure to Miss Morstan. Jones agrees to these demands, despite them being so "irregular." Holmes then invites Jones to join him and Watson for dinner.

Jones has to agree to Holmes' demands because if he doesn't the case won't be solved. Holmes' insistence that Watson deliver the treasure—thus allowing Watson to spend time with his love—is perhaps his only emotionally generous action.

CHAPTER 10 — THE END OF THE ISLANDER

Holmes, Watson and Jones enjoy dinner together, talking about a wide range of subjects other than the case. They drink a toast before leaving for the river; Holmes tells Watson to bring his revolver.

There is a celebratory atmosphere based on the presumed resolution of the case—all thanks to Holmes' work. The dinner table discussion displays Holmes' intellect, painting him as the quintessential Victorian gentleman.

The three men board the police boat and head out in search of the *Aurora*. Holmes explains that, while conducting his chemical experiment during the night, it had occurred to him that Jonathan Small would want to leave England under the cover of darkness. He reasons that Small would have wanted to lay low until he knew it was safe to leave, meaning that the ship is probably still nearby—possibly with a boat-builder or repairer, thereby being hidden from view but readily accessible when the moment came.

Holmes displays his genius powers of logic. Essentially, he creates a causal chain of the likeliest events and, of course, for the purpose of the stories, is almost always right.

Holmes had then made inquiries at various shipyards along the river before chancing on one where the foreman had recently taken a ship from a wooden-legged man. At that very moment, Mordecai Smith had come to instruct the foreman that he would need the boat at 8 P.M. that evening. Holmes has stationed one of the Baker Street Irregulars at the yard to wave to them when the *Aurora* takes off.

The wooden leg acted as confirmation that Holmes had found the right place. The name of the ship, which roughly means "dawn," might be read as a gesture to the "dawning" of the solution in Holmes' mind.

The boat goes along the river and stops near Jacobson's Yard, where Holmes tracked the *Aurora* to. They notice the signal—the waving handkerchief. The *Aurora* leaves the shipyard; Holmes and the others give pursuit. Holmes shouts at the men operating their boat to "pile it on!"

Jacobson's Yard is a fictitious shipyard positioned near Tower Bridge. The handkerchief is subtly comic detail by Doyle, given that people would often wave ships away in a similar manner. The boat chase set up is intended to excite the reader and build the story towards its climax.

They pursue the *Aurora* down the river, dodging past other boats. Watson notices the figures on the deck, including "a dark mass, which looked like a Newfoundland dog." They yell at the other boat to stop; a wooden-legged man shakes his fists at them, cursing.

The "dark mass" is Tonga, who is consistently characterized as being sub-human, directly compared here to a dog. The sighting of the wooden leg confirms Holmes' hypothesis about the case and therefore also validates his ingenious command of logical thinking.

The "dark mass" turns out to be "a little black man [...] with a great, misshapen head and a shock of tangled, disheveled hair." Watson says that "never have I seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty [...] his thick lips were writhed back from his teeth, which grinned and chattered at us with half-animal fury." When Holmes and Watson notice the man (later revealed as Tonga) pulling a **short piece of wood** to his lips, they fire their pistols at him, causing him to fall into the water.

The descriptions of Tonga are clearly racist and link with the idea that black people are inferior to white people. Tonga is once again characterized as "animal" rather than human. Tonga dies here, having been a prominent part of the novel without once having any of his own input. This means he represents the ultimate "other," never brought into the close circle of the plot's development and embodying the fear of the other. His weapon is no match for the more advanced Western pistols, subconsciously echoing the means by which the British Empire was able to extend such a vast network of power across the world (which was also highly dependent on the psychology of Imperialism).

The *Aurora* runs aground on the shore in "wild and desolate" marsh-land. Holmes and his company ensnare Jonathan Small, and recover **the treasure chest** from the boat. Holmes and Watson notice a **poison dart** stuck in the wood on their boat; they are relieved to have escaped death.

The main drama of the novella is thus brought to a close, with Tonga, the accomplice but primary evil character, vanquished, and the treasure recovered. With that, Holmes' rational powers prove to be triumphant.

CHAPTER 11 — THE GREAT AGRA TREASURE

As the police boat heads back, Holmes talks with Jonathan Small, who denies having anything to do with killing Bartholomew—that was all Tonga, "that little hell-hound," he says. Holmes says that, if Small gives him an honest account of everything, he can probably prove that the poisoning of Bartholomew took place before Small arrived in the room.

This passage contains further characterization of Tonga as being more of a dog than a human. Small is a given a shot at relative redemption, whereas Tonga's evilness is set in stone.

Small reflects on his unfortunate life, saying it seems unfair that "I, who have a fair claim to half a million of money, should spend the first half of my life building a breakwater in the Andamans, and am like to spend the other half digging drains in Dartmoor." He curses the **Agra treasure** and all those involved.

Like the others who have come into contact with the Agra treasure, Small has come to a misfortunate end. The wider implication here is that the pursuit of wealth does not bring happiness to the pursuer. Also noteworthy is Small's claim on the treasure, which, as is revealed in his story, is based on murder and subterfuge—nobody ever thinks that it should be returned to the original Indian owner.

Jones comes in to say that Mordecai Smith is professing his innocence; Small confirms that he knew nothing of their criminality and he was just doing his job. Small tells the men that the key for **the treasure** is at the bottom of the river.

Mordecai Smith is portrayed as a simple working-class man, ignorant to the goings-on that the other characters were privy to. The key at the bottom of the reader returns the treasure back to a state of unresolved mystery.

Watson is dropped off at Vauxhall bridge with the **treasure box** and takes it to Miss Morstan's house. She is dressed in "white diaphanous material," looking angelic. She doesn't seem excited to be in receipt of the treasure, despite Watson's slightly insincere attempts to talk up the occasion. He tells her about the boat chase.

The "angel in the house"—represented here by Miss Morstan—is a popular Victorian image that characterizes woman as submissive, meek, passive and essentially in wait for her male superior. The concept stems from a popular 1854 poem by Coventry Patmore and ties in with the idea that women are emotional and irrational compared with men's intellectual superiority.

Without a key to open the **treasure box**, Watson wedges it open using a poker. To their amazement, the box is entirely empty. Miss Morstan calmly says, "the treasure is lost." Watson, without being able to stop himself, exclaims, "thank god!" Miss Morstan smilingly asks him why he is so relieved; he explains that she is now within his "reach" again and that he loves her. The treasure would have stopped them being together, he says. They embrace.

Watson is relieved that the treasure is lost because it prevents the ascension of Miss Morstan into the wealthy classes, thereby keeping his love for her within the realm of possibility. Glibly speaking, Miss Morstan is characterized as the "real treasure."

CHAPTER 12 — THE STRANGE STORY OF JONATHAN SMALL

Watson heads to Baker Street and reconvenes with Holmes, Jones and Jonathan Small. Watson shows them the empty treasure box. Small admits that this was his doing—he scattered the jewels in the Thames during the boat chase. He says that the only men who have any right to **the treasure** are him and the three others that make up "the sign of the four"; as none of them can have it, neither can anyone else.

Small's sense of entitlement to the treasure glosses over the fact that they stole it from an Indian prince in the first place. Paradoxically, now that the treasure has gone, it can longer bring harm to those involved.

Jones accuses Small of thwarting justice. Small snarls back, "Where is the justice that I should give it up to those who have never earned it? [...] Twenty long years in that fever-ridden swamp, all day at work under the mangrove-tree, all night chained up in the filthy convict-huts, bitten by mosquitoes, racked with ague, bullied by every cursed black-faced policeman who loved to take it out of a white man. That was how I earned the **Agra treasure**."

Small embodies the racist attitudes that are on display elsewhere in the novella. Black people are once again characterized as fundamentally bad and evil. Small's story makes him a kind of returning figure, an explorer who has a tale to tell of "the East."

Holmes reminds Small that they are yet to hear his side of the story, and so can't judge whether he has been treated unjustly or not. Small agrees to tell his story, and for it to be "god's truth"; he has nothing left to lose.

Small is restored a certain degree of moral virtue by now speaking his truth and having distanced himself from the "authentic" evil of Tonga.

Small launches into his story. He was born into a humble country life in Worcestershire. He joined the British army after getting "into a mess over a girl" and was sent out to India. Early on in his time there, a crocodile bit off one of his legs.

The "mess over a girl" is a euphemistic statement, but given that Small felt he had to leave the country, the implications are that it was a serious incident. The mention of the crocodile ties in with the idea of the East as exotic and foreign.

After recovering from his injury, Small was employed as an overseer on a plantation, tasked with making sure the men worked hard. Around this time, the Indian mutiny began: "there were two hundred thousand black devils let loose, and the country was a perfect hell." Small's boss and his boss' wife were killed by mutineers. Small escaped on a horse and found safety within the ancient fort city of Agra.

Black people are once again presented as sub-human, deserving of colonial subjugation. The Indian mutiny of 1857 saw sepoys—British-hired Indian soldiers—turning on the British authorities (embodied by the East India Company).

In Agra, Small joined a volunteer corps that set up base in the old fort. Here, he served as a guard in one of the many outer guardhouses. He had two Punjabi men under his command, Mahomet Singh and Abdullah Khan. One night, one of these men held a knife to Small's throat. They told him either to be with them or against them, giving him three minutes to decide. They promised that their plan was nothing to do with the safety of the fort, and that Small would have the opportunity to be rich.

Doyle mistakenly gives the guards under Small's watch Arabic names instead of Punjabi ones. They are also presented as the originators of the plot, meaning that Small can imply that the ultimate responsibility of what's happened lies with them, rather than him. Small's extraction of the promise that those at the fort will be safe is also another attempt to present him as morally relatable.

Small swore to be on their side, as long as no one at the fort was endangered. The two men then explained about the **Agra treasure**, which they proposed would be divided by four (the fourth man, Dost Akbar, wasn't there yet). They explained that a rajah from the northern provinces intended to split his fortune into separate parts and hide them so that, whichever side was victorious in the conflict, he would be able to retrieve at least half of his luxurious belongings.

The Agra treasure, then, belonged to an Indian man. At no point in the story does any question whether the treasure should have been taken in the first place, or if it ought to be have been returned to its rightful owner.

The rajah's merchant, continued Abdullah Khan, would be travelling to Agra to hide part of **the treasure** there. He would be with Dost Akbar, Abdullah's foster brother; the men therefore had the opportunity to intercept the treasure and divide it among themselves. Small agreed to the plan.

The treasure can be read as a metaphor for the British presence in India itself. British colonial and trade activities were an attempt to procure wealth by taking advantage of an imbalance in military and technological power.

That night, the men executed their plan, killing the merchant and snatching **the treasure**. Small pauses for a drink of whiskey and water and then continues his story. After burying the merchant in the fort, the men looked at the treasure; it was an incredible collection of gleaming jewels—emeralds, rubies, sapphires, and so on. They counted the treasure and "renewed our oath to stand by each other and be true to our secret." They concealed the loot in the fort wall, intending to retrieve it when the country had calmed down. Small drew up plans for them all to keep for later.

Small is treated with relative respect by his captors, echoing the idea that as a white man he is more legitimate. This is the first real description of the Agra treasure, which is a cornucopia of jewels and gems. It's worth noting here that India was considered the "jewel in the crown" of the British Empire—that is, it was considered the foremost treasure under the rule of British power.

Though the situation in the country calmed down soon enough, Small and the others were arrested for murdering the merchant. It turned out that a second man had been following the merchant to check on his safety and had reported back that he never emerged from the fort. All four men were given penal servitude for life.

India represented a fluid situation, which is why Small and the others get caught before they can return to the treasure.

Small was eventually sent to the Andaman Islands, where he got along well with his guards. During his incarceration, he learned about medication and healthcare, helping the camp surgeon. Major Sholto and Captain Morstan were stationed at the same camp, often playing cards with the prison-officials.

Here the reader starts to understand how Small came to have a link with the Andaman Islands and, by extension, Tonga. The medical learning adds another detail to Small's moral picture.

Major Sholto eventually lost quite a lot of money playing cards. Small decided to tell him and Captain Morstan about **the treasure**, offering to share it with them if they aided his escape. The men agreed and allowed Small to get the others from "the sign of the four" to consent to the plan too. Sholto didn't see why that was necessary: "what have three black fellows to do with our agreement?"

Sholto is one of the most morally bankrupt characters of the story. Here, he sees the Agra treasure as a solution to solve his gambling debts. Sholto gives clear voice to the racist idea that black people are inferior to white, which is heavily implied throughout the novella.

As part of the plan, Major Sholto was supposed to first verify that **the treasure** was where Small said it was, before reporting back. Sholto double-crossed them and stole the treasure, never returning to the Andaman Islands. Tracking Sholto down became Small's life passion.

Sholto's theft of the treasure can also be read as a metaphor for the British reason for being in India.

Around this time, Small met Tonga, a native of the islands. Tonga was sick, but Small nursed him back to health, instilling in Tonga a fierce loyalty to the other man. Small says of Tonga that "no man ever had a more faithful mate."

Small is presented has having a caring side, while Tonga is characterized as a faithful and obedient creature—again, like a dog more than a human.

Tonga helped Small escape by bringing a boat. Small got past the guard by hitting him with his wooden leg, before sailing off with Tonga. He and Tonga had numerous adventures, all the while intending to track Sholto down in London. Three or four years ago, they finally made it to England.

Tonga becomes a kind of sidekick to Small. There is little sense of Tonga having had a life of his own on the Andaman Islands. The reader doesn't learn much anything about the years between the Andaman Islands and the arrival in England.

Hearing that Sholto was dying, Small tracked him down to his deathbed, searching the room for a clue as to where the treasure was now hidden. He left the "sign of the four" on a piece of paper on Sholto's body as a "token from the men whom [Sholto] had robbed and befooled."

The sign of the four thus functions as a kind of calling card signaling Small's presence and lending a sense of fated eeriness to proceedings.

During this time, Small and Tonga earned a living by exhibiting Tonga at fairs as "the black cannibal," at which he would eat raw meat and perform a "war-dance." Finally, Small heard from an insider at Pondicherry Lodge that **the treasure** had been found and was told about the trapdoor in the roof.

This kind of display of "exotic" human figures was a real phenomenon, with human zoos exhibiting different peoples from around the world in cruel and inhumane conditions. This tapped into the fear and fascination with the "other."

At Pondicherry Lodge, Tonga climbed up the roof with a rope tied round his waist so that Small could climb up. Unbeknownst to Small, Tonga instinctively killed Bartholomew with **a blow-dart** when he reached the attic room. Tonga was surprised that Small was angry about the murder. They gathered up the jewels and made their escape, heading to Mordecai Smith in order to hire the *Aurora*.

Tonga is painted as being intellectually inferior, dog-like in his attempt to do right by his master, Small. His diminutive size explains the small footprints.

Holmes remarks that he was surprised to have nearly been hit by one of Tonga's **darts**, given that he had found the casing with all the darts inside. Small reminds him that Tonga would have had one already loaded in the blowpipe. With this, Small's story is concluded.

The mistake over the darts is a small chink in Holmes' otherwise impenetrable intellectual powers.

Athelney Jones thanks Holmes for his assistance and bids him goodbye. As Holmes and Watson leave, Watson indicates that this may be the last case on which he is able to help, as Miss Morstan has accepted his marriage proposal. At this news, Holmes groans, "I really cannot congratulate you [...] love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true cold reason which I place above all things."

Jones knows he owes the success of the case to Holmes' brilliance. Holmes here reinforces his stark separation of the rational from the emotional, as if the two could—or should—never overlap. The betrothal of Watson, for the reader, is a kind of heroic happy ending in keeping with gothic literature.

Watson remarks that it seems unfair that Holmes gets nothing out of the case's resolution—Jones has his suspect, and Watson has Miss Morstan. Holmes replies that "there still remains the cocaine-bottle," before reaching out to grab it.

Holmes receives no ostensible reward from the case—solving the case is its own reward. With the void now returned, Holmes immediately reaches to fill it with cocaine, thus ending the story as it began—but also leaving the door open for other stories to come.

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