

THE SIGN OF THE FOUR.

BY CONAN DOYLE.

"It was easy to follow him," he said, drawing on his stockings and boots. "Toby was in the way of the whole way along, and in his hurry he had dropped this. It confirms my diagnosis, as you doctors express it."

The object which he held up to me was a small pocket or pouch woven out of colored grasses and with a few tawdry beads strung round it. In shape and size it was not unlike a cigarette case. Inside were half a dozen spines of dark wood, sharp at one end and rounded at the other, like that which had struck Bartholomew Sholto.

"They are hellish things," said he. "Look out that you don't prick yourself. I'm delighted to have them for the chances are that they are all he has. There is the less fear of you or me finding one in our skin before long. I would sooner face a Martini bullet, myself. Are you game for a six-mile trudge, Watson?"

"Certainly," I answered. "Your leg will stand it?"

"Oh, yes." "Here you are, doggy! Good old Toby! Smell it, Toby, smell it!" He pushed the crescent handkerchief under the dog's nose, while the creature stood with its comical legs separated, and with most comical cock to its head, like a famous snuffing the bouquet of a famous vintage. Holmes then threw the handkerchief to a distance, fastened a stout cord to the mongrel's collar, and led him to the foot of the water barrel. The creature instantly broke into a succession of high, tremulous yelps, and, with his nose on the ground, and his tail in the air, pattered off upon the trail at a pace which strained his leash and kept us at the top of our speed.

The east had been gradually whitening, and we could now see some distance in the cold gray light. The square, massive house, with its black, empty windows and high, bare walls, towered up, sad and forlorn, behind



WITH A LIGHT SPRING HE CAME ON THE BARREL.

us. Our course led right across the grounds, in and out among the trenches and pits with which they were scarred and intersected. The whole place, with its scattered dirt heaps and ill-grown shrubs, had a blighted, ill-omened look which harmonized with the black tragedy which hung over it.

On reaching the boundary wall, Toby ran along, whining eagerly, underneath its shadow, and stopped finally in a corner screened by a young beech. Where the two walls joined, several bricks had been loosened, and the crevices left were worn down and rounded upon the lower side, as though they had frequently been used as a ladder. Holmes clambered up, and, taking the dog from me, he dropped it over upon the other side.

"There's the print of wooden-leg's hand," he remarked, as I mounted up beside him. "You see the slight smudge of blood upon the white plaster. What a lucky thing it is that we have had no very heavy rain since yesterday! The scent will lie upon the road in spite of their eight-and-twenty hours' start."

I confess that I had my doubts myself when I reflected upon the great traffic which had passed along the London road in the interval. My fears were soon appeased, however. Toby never hesitated or swerved, but waddled on in his peculiar rolling fashion. Clearly the pungent smell of the crescent rose high above all other contending scents.

"Do not imagine," said Holmes, "that I depend for my success in this case upon the mere chance of one of these fellows having put his foot in the chemical. I have knowledge now which would enable me to trace them in many different ways. This, however, is the readiest, and, since fortune has put it into our hands, I should be culpable if I neglected it. It has, however, prevented the case from becoming the pretty little intellectual problem which it at one time promised to be. There might have been some credit to be gained out of it, but for this too palpable clue."

"There is credit, and to spare," said I. "I assure you, Holmes, that I marvel at the means by which you obtain your results in this case, even more than I did in the Jefferson Hope murder. The thing seems to me to be deeper and more inexplicable. How, for example, could you describe with such confidence the wooden-legged man?"

"Pshaw, my dear boy! It was sim-

plying itself. I don't wish to be theatrical. It is all patent and above-board. Two officers who are incompetent to do anything but hunt an important secret in a charted treasure. A map, then, for them, by an Englishman named Jonathan Small. You remember that we saw the name upon the chart in Capt. Morstan's possession. He had found it in behalf of himself and his associates, the sign of the four, as he somewhat dramatically called it. Aided by this chart the



HOLMES CLAMBERED UP AND TOOK THE DOG FROM ME.

officers—or one of them—gets the treasure and brings it to England, leaving we will suppose, some condition under which he received it unfilled. Now, then, why did not Jonathan Small get the treasure himself? The answer is obvious. The chart is dated at a time when Morstan was brought into close association with convicts. Jonathan Small did not get the treasure because he and his associates were themselves convicts and could not get away."

"But this is mere speculation," said I. "It is more than that. It is the only hypothesis which covers the facts. Let us see how it fits in with the sequel. Maj. Sholto remains at peace for some years, happy in the possession of his treasure. Then he receives a letter from India which gives him a great fright. What was that?"

"A letter to say that the men whom he had wronged had been set free." "Or had escaped. That is known more likely, for he would have known what their term of imprisonment was. It would not have been a surprise to him. What does he do then? He guards himself against a wooden-legged man—a white man, mark you, for he mistakes a white tradesman for him, and actually fires a pistol at him. Now, only one white man's name is on the chart. The others are Hindoos or Mohammedans. There is no other white man. Therefore we may say with confidence that the wooden-legged man is identical with Jonathan Small. Does the reasoning strike you as being faulty?"

"Not it is clear and concise." "Well, now, let us put ourselves in the place of Jonathan Small. Let us look at it from his point of view. He comes to England with the double idea of regaining what he would consider to be his rights and of having his revenge upon the man who had wronged him. He found out where Sholto lived, and very possibly he established communications with some one inside the house. There is this butler, Lal Rao, whom we have not seen. Mrs. Fernet gives him a far from a good character. Small could not find out, however, where the treasure was hid, for no one ever knew, save the major and one faithful servant who had died. Suddenly Small learns that the major is on his deathbed. In a frenzy lest the secret of the treasure die with him, he runs the gauntlet of the guards, makes his way to the dying man's window, and is only deterred from entering by the presence of his two sons. Mad with hate, however, against the dead man, he enters the room that night, searches his private papers in the hope of discovering some memorandum relating to the treasure, and finally leaves a memento of his visit in the short inscription upon the ead. He had doubtless planned beforehand that should he slay the major he would leave some such record upon the body as a sign that it was not a common murder, but from the point of view of the four associates, something in the nature of an act of justice. Whimsical and bizarre conceits of this kind are common enough in the annals of crime, and usually afford valuable indications as to the criminal. Do you follow all this?"

"Very clearly." "Now, what could Jonathan Small do? He could only continue to keep a secret watch upon the efforts made to find the treasure. Possibly he leaves England and only comes back at intervals. Then comes the discovery of the garret, and he is instantly informed of it. We again trace the presence of some confederate in the household. Jonathan, with his wooden leg, is utterly unable to reach the lofty room of Bartholomew Sholto. He takes with him, however, a rather curious associate, who gets over this difficulty, but dips his naked foot into crescent, whence come Toby, and a six-mile limp for a half-pay officer with a damaged Achilles tendon."

"But it was the associate, and not Jonathan, who committed the crime."

"Quite so. And rather to Jonathan's disgust, to judge by the way he

stamped about when he got into the room. He bore no grudge against Bartholomew Sholto, and would have preferred if he could have been simply bound and gagged. He did not wish to put his head in a halter. There was no help for it, however, the savage instincts of his companion had broken out, and the poison had done its work: so Jonathan Small left his record, however a treasure-box to the ground, and followed it himself. That was the train of events as far as I can decipher them. Of course as to his personal appearance he must be middle-aged, and must be sunburned after serving his time in such an even as the Indians. His height is readily calculated from the length of his stride, and we know that he was bearded. His hairness was the one point which impressed itself upon Bartholomew Sholto when he saw him at the window. I don't know that there is anything else."

"The associate?" "Ah, well, there is no great mystery in that. But you will know all about it soon enough. How sweet the morning air is! See how that one little cloud floats like a pink feather from some gigantic flamingo. Now the roll of the sun pushes itself over the London dome. It shines on a good many folk, but on none, I dare bet, who are on a stranger errand than you and I. How small we feel with our petty ambitions and strivings in the presence of the great elemental forces of nature. Are you well up in your Dean Paul?"

"Fairly so. I worked back to him through the..." "That was like following the brook to the parent lake. He makes but one curious but profound remark. It is that the proof of man's real greatness lies in his perception of his own smallness. Harrowes you see, a powerful comparison and of appreciation which is in itself a proof of nobility. There is much food for thought in Richter. You have not a pistol, have you?"

"I have my stick." "It is just possible that we may need something of the sort if we get into their lair. Jonathan I shall leave to you, but if the other turns nasty I shall shoot him dead." He took out his revolver as he spoke, and, having loaded two of the chambers, he put it back into the right hand pocket of his jacket.

We had during this time been following the guidance of Toby down the half rural, villa-lined roads which lead to the metropolis. Now, however, we were beginning to come among continuous streets, where laborers and dockmen were already astir, and slatternly women were taking down shutters and brushing doorsteps. At the square-topped corner public houses business was just beginning, and rough-looking men were emerging, rubbing their sleeves across their beards after their morning wet. Strange doors, sauntered up and started wondering at us as we passed, but our immitable Toby looked neither to the right nor to the left, but trotted onwards with his nose to the ground and an occasional eager whine, which spoke of a hot scent.

We had traversed Streatham, Brixton, Camberwell, and now found ourselves in Kennington lane, having borne away through the side streets to the east of the Oval. The men whom we pursued seemed to have taken a curiously zigzag road, with the idea probably of escaping observation. They had never kept to the main road if a parallel side street would serve their turn. At the foot of Kennington lane they had edged away to the left through Bond street and Miles street. Where the latter turns into Knight's place Toby ceased to advance, but began to run backwards and forwards with one ear cocked and the other drooping the very picture of canine indecision. Then he waddled round in circles, looking up to us from time to time, as if to ask for sympathy in his embarrassment.

"What the deuce is the matter with the dog?" growled Holmes. "They surely would not take a cab or go off in a balloon."

"Perhaps they stood here for some time," I suggested. "Ah! it's all right. He's off again," said my companion in a tone of relief. He was, indeed, off, for, after sniffing round again, he suddenly made up



TOBY STOOD UPON THE CASE.

his mind, and darted away with an energy and determination such as he had not yet shown. The scent appeared to be much hotter than before, for he had not even to put his nose on the ground, but tugged at his leash, and tried to break into a run. I could see by the gleam in Holmes' eyes that he thought we were nearing the end of our journey.

Our course now ran down Nine Elms until we came to Broderick & Nelson's large timber yard, just past the White Eagle tavern. Here the dog, frantic with excitement, turned down through the side gate into the enclosure, where the sawyers were already at work. On the dog raced through sawdust and shavings, down an alley, round a passage, between two wood-piles, and finally, with a triumphant yelp, sprang upon a large barrel, which still stood upon the hand-trrolley on which it had been brought. With lolling tongue and blinking eyes, Toby stood upon the easel, looking from one to the other of us for some sign of appreciation. The staves of the barrel and the wheels of the trolley were smeared with dark

liquid, and the whole air was heavy with the smell of creosote.

Sherlock Holmes and I looked blankly at each other, and then burst simultaneously into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BAKER STREET DRUGGISTS. "What now?" I asked. "Toby has lost his character for infallibility." "He acted according to his lights," said Holmes, lifting him from the barrel and walking him off to the timber yard. "If you consider how much creosote is scattered about London in one day, it is no great wonder that our Toby should have been deceived. It is much more now, especially for the reasons of wood. Poor Toby is not to blame."

"We must get on the main scent again, I suppose."

"Yes. And, fortunately, we have no distance to go. Evidently what puzzled the dog at the corner of Knight's place was that there were two different trails running in opposite directions. We took the wrong one. It only remains to follow the other."

There was no difficulty about this. On leading Toby to the place where he had committed his fault, he cast about in a wide circle, and finally dashed off in a fresh direction.

"We must take care that he does not now bring us to the place where the creosote barrel came from," I observed. "I had thought of that. But you notice that he keeps on the pavement, whereas the barrel passed down the roadway. No, we are on the true scent now."

I tended down towards the river-side, running through Belmont place and Prince's street. At the end of Bond street it ran right down to the water's edge, where there was a small wooden wharf. Toby led us to the very edge of this, and there stood whining, looking out on the dark current beyond.

"We are out of luck," said Holmes. "They have taken to a boat here." Several small punts and skiffs were lying about in the water and on the edge of the wharf. We took Toby round to each in turn, but though he sniffed earnestly, he made no sign.

Close to the rude landing stage was a small brick house, with a wooden playard swung out through the second window. "Mordecai Smith" was printed across it in large letters, and underneath, "Boats to hire by the hour or day." A second inscription above the door informed us that a steam launch was kept—a statement which was confirmed by a great pile of coke upon the jetty. Sherlock Holmes looked slowly at me, and his face assumed an ominous expression.

"This looks bad," said he. "Those fellows are sharper than I expected. They seem to have covered their tracks. There has, I fear, been preconcerted management here."

He was approaching the door of the house, when it opened, and a little curly-headed lad of six came running out, followed by a stoutish, red-haired woman with a spongy, red-handled Jack. "You come back and be washed, Jack," she shouted. "Come back, you young imp. For if your father comes home and finds you like that, he'll let us hear of it!"

"Dear little chap," said Holmes, strategically. "What a rosy-cheeked young rascal! Now, Jack, is there anything you would like?"

The youth pondered for a moment. "I'd like a shilling," said he. "Nothing you would like better?"

"I'd like two shillings better," the prodigy answered, after some thought.

"Here you are, then! Catch—A fine child, Mrs. Smith!"

"For bless you, sir, he is that, and forward. He gets a most too much for me to manage. Specially when my man is away days at a time."

"Away, is he?" said Holmes, in a disappointed voice. "I am sorry for that, for I wanted to speak to Mr. Smith."

"He's been away since yesterday morning, sir, and, truth to tell, I am beginning to feel frightened about him. But if it is about a boat, sir, maybe I could serve as well."

"I wanted to hire his steam launch."

"Why, bless you, sir, it is in the steam launch that he has gone. That's what puzzles me, for I know there a n't more boats in there than would take her to about Woolwich and back. If he'd thought nothing for many a time a job has taken him as far as Gravesend, and then if there was much about there he might be stayed over. But what good is a steam launch without coals?"

"He might have bought some at a wharf down the river."

"He might, sir, but it weren't his way. Many a time I've heard him call out at the prices they charge for a few old bags. Besides, I don't like that wooden-legged man, with his ugly face and outlandish talk. What did he want always knocking about here for?"

"A wooden-legged man?" said Holmes, with bland surprise.

"Yes, sir, a brown, monkey-faced chap that called more'n once for my chimney. It was him that roosed him up yesterday, and, what's more, my man knew he was coming, for he had been up in the launch. I tell you, sir, I don't feel easy in my mind about it."

"But, my dear Mrs. Smith," said Holmes, shrugging his shoulders, "you are frightening yourself about nothing. How could you possibly tell that it was the wooden-legged man who came in the night? I don't quite understand how you can be so sure."

"His voice, sir. I know his voice, which is kind of thick and foggy. He tapped at the window about three it would be. 'Show a leg, matey,' says he; 'time to turn out guard.' My old man woke up Jim that's my eldest, and away they went, without so much as a word to me. I could hear the wooden leg clackin' on the stones."

"And was this wooden-legged man alone?"

(CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.)

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