

THE SIGN

OF... THE FOUR

BY CONAN DOYLE...

(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

"Well, there's no use my telling you, gentlemen, what came of the Indian mutiny. After Wilson took Delhi and Sir Colvin relieved Lucknow the back of the business was broken. French troops came pouring in, and Nana Sahib made himself scarce over the frontier. A flying column under Col. Gardner came round to Agra and cleared the Pandies away from it. Peace seemed to be settling upon the country, and we four were beginning to hope that the time was at hand when we might safely go off with our shares of the plunder. In a moment, however, our hopes were shattered by our being arrested as the murderers of Achmet.

"It came about in this way: When the rajah put his jewels into the hands of Achmet he did it because he knew that he was a trusty man. They are suspicious folk in the east, however; so what does this rajah do but take a second even more trusty servant and set him to play the spy upon the first? This second man was ordered never to let Achmet out of his sight, and he followed him like his shadow. He went after him that night, and saw him pass through the doorway. Of course he thought he had taken refuge in the fort, and applied for admission there himself next day, but could find no trace of Achmet. This seemed to him so strange that he spoke about it to a sergeant of guides, who brought it to the ears of the commandant. A thorough search was quickly made, and the body was discovered. Thus at the very moment that we thought that all was safe we were all four seized and brought to trial on a charge of murder—three of us because we had held the gate that night, and the fourth because he was known to have been in company of the murdered man. Not a word about the jewels came out at the trial, for the rajah had no one had any particular interest in them. The murder, however, was clearly made out, and it was certain that we must all have been concerned in it. The three Sikhs got penal servitude for life, and I was condemned to death, though my sentence was afterward commuted into the same as the others.

"It was rather a queer position that we found ourselves in then. There were, all four tied by the leg and with precious little chance of ever getting out again, while we each held a secret which might have put each of us in a palace if we could only have made use of it. It was enough to make a man eat his heart out to have to stand the kick and the cuff of every petty jack in office, to have rice to eat and water to drink, when that gorgeous fortune was ready for him outside, just waiting to be picked up. It might have driven me mad; but I was always a pretty stubborn one, so I just held on and bided my time.

"At last it seemed to me to have come. I was charged from Agra to Madras, and from there to Blair Island in the Andamans. There are very few white convicts at this settlement, and, as I had behaved well from the first, I soon found myself a sort of privileged person. I was given a hut in Hope town, which is a small place on the slopes of Mount Harriet, and I was left pretty much to myself. It is a dreary, fever-stricken place, and all beyond our little clearings was infested with wild cannibal natives, who were ready enough to blow a poisoned dart at us if they saw a chance. There was digging, and ditching, and yam-planting, and a dozen other things to be done, so we were busy enough all day; though in the evening we had a little time to ourselves. Among other things, I learned to dispense drugs for the surgeon, and picked up a smattering of his knowledge. All the time I was on the lookout for a chance of escape; but it is hundreds of miles from any other land, and there is little or no wind in those seas; so it was a terribly difficult job to get away.

"The surgeon, Dr. Somerton, was a fast, sporting young chap, and the other young officers would meet in his rooms on an evening and play cards. The surgery, where I used to make up my drugs, was next to his sitting-room, with a small window between us. Often, if I felt lonesome, I used to turn out the lamp in the surgery, and then, standing there, I could hear their talk and watch their play. I am fond of a hand at cards myself, and it was almost as good as having one to watch the others. There was Maj. Sholto, Capt. Morstan and Lieut. Bartholomew Brown, who were in command of the native troops, and there was the surgeon himself, and two or three prison-officers, crafty old hands who played a nice sly sate game. A very snug little party they used to make.

"Well, there was one thing which very soon struck me, and that was that soldiers used always to lose and the civilians to win. Mind, I don't say that there was anything unfair, but so it was. These prison chaps had done little else than play cards ever since they had been at the Andamans, and they knew each other's game to a point, while the others just played to pass the time and threw their cards down anyhow. Night after night, the soldiers got up poorer men, and the sooner they got the more keen they were to play. Maj. Sholto was the hardest hit. He used to play in notes and gold at first, but soon it came to notes of hand and for big shills. He some-

times 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 Capt. 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."

"Nonsense, old chap," said the other, slapping him upon the shoulder. "I've had a nasty fever myself, but—that was all I could hear, but it was enough to set me thinking.

"A couple of days later Maj. Sholto was strolling on the beach; so I took the chance of speaking to him.

"I wish to have your advice, major," said I.

"Well, Small, what is it?" he said, taking his cheroot from his lips.

"I wanted to ask you, sir," said I, "who is the proper person to whom hidden treasure should be handed over. I know where half a million worth lies, and, as I cannot use it myself, I thought perhaps to be best thing that I could do would be to hand it over to the proper authorities, and then perhaps they would get my sentence shortened for me."

"Half a million, Small!" he gasped, looking hard at me to see if I was in earnest.

"Quite that, sir—in jewels and pearls. It lies there ready for anyone. And the queer thing about it is that the real owner is outlawed and cannot hold property, so that it belongs to the first comer."

"To government, Small," he stammered—"to government." But he said it in a halting fashion, and I knew in my heart that I had got him.

"You think then, sir, that I should give the information to the governor general?" said I, quietly.

"Well, well, you must not do anything rash, or that you might repent. Let me hear all about it, Small. Give me the facts."

"I told him the whole story, with small changes so that he could not identify the places. When I had finished he stood stock still and full of thought. I



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could see by the twitch of his lip that there was a struggle going on within him.

"This is a very important matter, Small," he said, at last. "You must not say a word to anyone about it, and I shall see you again soon."

"Two nights later he and his friend Capt. Morstan came to my hut in the dead of the night with a lantern.

"I want you just to let Capt. Morstan hear that story from your own lips, Small," said he.

"I repeated it as I had told it before.

"It rings true, eh?" said he. "It's good enough to act upon."

"Capt. Morstan nodded.

"Look here, Small," said the major. "We have been talking it over, my friend here and I, and we have come to the conclusion that this secret of yours is hardly a government matter, after all, but is a private concern of your own, which of course you have the power of disposing of as you think best. Now, the question is, what price would you ask for it? We might be inclined to take it up, and at least look into it, if we could agree as to terms."

"He tried to speak in a cool, careless way, but his eyes were shining with excitement and greed.

"Why, as to that, gentlemen," I answered, trying also to be cool, but feeling as excited as he did, "there is only one bargain which a man in my position can make. I shall want you to help me to my freedom, and to help my three companions to theirs. We shall then take you into partnership, and give you a fifth share to divide between you."

"Hum!" said he. "A fifth share! That is not very tempting."

"It would come to fifty thousand apiece," said I.

"But how can we gain your freedom? You know very well that you ask an impossibility."

"Nothing of the sort," I answered. "I have thought it all out to the last detail. The only bar to our escape is that we can get no boat fit for the voyage, and no provisions to last us for so long a time. There are plenty of little yachts and yawls at Calcutta or Madras which would serve our turn well. Do you bring one over. We shall engage to get aboard her by night, and if you will drop us on any part of the Indian coast you will have done your part of the bargain."

"If there were only one," he said.

"None or all," I answered. "We have sworn it. The four of us must always act together."

"You see, Morstan," said he, "Small is a man of his word. He does not flinch from his friends. I think we may very well trust him."

"It's a dirty business," the other answered. "Yet, as you say, the money would save our commissions handsomely."

"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."

"Well, the matter ended by a second meeting, at which Mahomet Singh, Abdallah Khan and Dost Akbar were all present. We talked the matter over again, and at last we came to an arrangement. We were to provide both the officers with charts of the part of the Agra fort and mark the place in the wall where the treasure was hid. Maj. Sholto was to go to India to test our story. If he found the box he was to leave it there, to send out a small yacht provisioned for a voyage, which was to lie off Rutland Island, and to which we were to make our way, and finally to return to his duties. Capt. Morstan was then to apply for leave of absence, to meet us at Agra, and there we were to have a final division of the treasure, he taking the major's share as well as his own. All this we sealed by the most solemn oaths that the mind could think of or the lips utter. I sat up all night with paper and ink, and by morning I had the two charts all ready, signed with the sign of four—that is, of Abdullah, Akbar, Mahomet and myself.

"Well, gentlemen, I weary you with my long story, and I know that my friend Mr. Jones is impatient to get me safely stowed in chokoy. I'll make it as short as I can. The villain, Sholto, went off to India, but he never came back again. Capt. Morstan showed me his name among a list of passengers in one of the mail boats very shortly afterwards. His uncle had died, leaving him a fortune and he had left the army, yet he could stop to treat five men as he had treated us. Morstan went over to Agra shortly afterwards, and found, as was expected, that the treasure was indeed gone. The second had stolen it all, without carrying out one of the conditions, on which we had sold him our secret. From that day I lived only for vengeance. I thought of it day and night, and nursed it by night. It took an overpowering, absorbing passion such as I cared nothing for the best of things for the galleons. To escape, I tracked down Sholto, to have my own hands on his throat. That was my one thought. Even the Agra treasure had come to be a smaller thing in my mind than the slaying of Sholto.

"Well, I have set my mind on many things in this life, and never one which I did not carry out. But it was weary years before my time came. I have told you that I had picked up something of medicine. One day when Dr. Somerton was down with fever a little Andaman islander was picked up by a convict gang in the woods. He was sick to death, and had gone to a lonely place to die. I took him in hand, though he was as venomous as a snake, and after a couple of months I got him all right and able to walk. He took a kind of fancy to me then, and would hardly go back to his woods, but was always hanging about my hut. I learned a little of his lingo from him, and this made him all the fonder of me.

"Tonga— that was his name— was a fine boatman, and owned a big, roomy canoe of his own. When I found that he was devoted to me and would do anything to serve me, I saw my chance of escape. I talked it over with him. He was to bring his boat on a certain night to an old wharf which was never guarded, and there he was to pick me up. I gave him directions to have several gallons of water and a lot of yams, coconuts and sweet potatoes.

"He was staunch and true, was little Tonga. No man ever had a more faithful mate. At the night named he had his boat at the wharf. As it chanced, however, there was one of the convict guard down there—a vile Pathan who had never missed a chance of insulting and injuring me. I had always vowed vengeance, and now I had my chance. I was as fate had placed him in my way that night. I paid my debt before I left the island. He stood on the bank with his back to me and his carbine on his shoulder. I looked about for a stone to beat out his brains with, but none could I see. Then a queer thought came into my head and showed me where I could lay my hand on a weapon. I sat down in the darkness and unstrapped my wooden leg. With three long hops I was on him. He put his carbine to his shoulder, but I struck him full and knocked the whole front of his skull in. You can see the split in the wood now where I hit him. We both went down together, for I could not keep my balance, but when I got up I found him still lying quiet enough. I made for the boat and in an hour we were well out at sea. Tonga had

four of us, as it had been on the chart, and I pinned it on his bosom. It was too much for him; he should be taken to the grave without some token from the man whom he had robbed and befoiled. "We earned a living at this time by my exhibiting poor Tonga at fairs and other places as the black cannibal. He would eat raw meat and dance his war dance; so we always had a handful of pennies after a day's work. I still heard all the news from Pondicherry Lodge, and for some years there was no news to hear, except that they were hunting for the treasure. At last, however, came what we had waited for so long. The treasure had been found. It was up at the top of the house, in Mr. Bartholomew Sholto's chemical laboratory. I came at once and had a look at the place, but I could not see how with my wooden leg I was to make my way up to it. I learned, however, about a trap-door in the roof, and also about Mr. Sholto's supper hour. It seemed to me that I could manage the thing easily through Tonga. I brought him out with me, with a long rope wound round his waist. He could climb like a cat, and he soon made his way through the roof, but, as ill luck would have it, Bartholomew Sholto was still in the room, to his cost. Tonga thought he had done something very clever in killing him, for when I came up by the rope I found him strutting about as proud as a peacock. Very much surprised was he when I made at him with the rope's end and cursed him for a little bloodthirsty imp. I took the treasure-box and let it down, and then slid down myself, having first left the sign of the four upon the table, to show that the jewels had come back at last to those who had most right to them. Tonga then pulled up the rope, closed the window, and made off the way that he had come.

"I don't know that I have anything else to tell you. I had heard a water-nymph speak of the speed of Smith's launch, the Aurora, so I thought she would be a handy craft for our escape. I engaged with old Smith, and was to give him a big sum if he got us safe to our ship. He knew, no doubt, that there was some screw loose, but he was not in our secrets. All this is the truth, and if I tell it to you, gentlemen, it is not to amuse you—for you have not done me a very good turn—but it is because I believe the best defense I can make is just to hold back nothing, but let all the world know how badly I have myself been served by Maj. Sholto, and how innocent I am of the death of his son."

"A very remarkable account," said Sherlock Holmes. "A fitting wind-up to an extremely interesting case. There is nothing at all new to me in the latter part of your narrative, except that you brought your own rope. That I did not know. By the way, I had hoped that Tonga had lost all his darts; yet he managed to shoot one at us in the boat."

"He had lost them all, sir, except the one which was in his blow pipe at the time."

"Ah, of course," said Holmes. "I had not thought of that."

"Is there any other point which you

would like to ask about?" asked the convict, affably.

"I think not, thank you," my companion answered.

"Well, Holmes," said Athelney Jones, "you are a man to be humored, and we all know that you are a connoisseur of crime, but duty is duty, and I have gone rather far in doing what you and your friend asked me. I shall feel more at ease when we have our story-teller here under lock and key. The cab still waits, and there are two inspectors downstairs. I am much obliged to you both for your assistance. Of course, you will be wanted at the trial. Good-night to you."

"Good-night, gentlemen, both," said Jonathan Small.

"You first, Small," remarked the wary Jones as they left the room. "I'll take particular care that you don't club me with your wooden leg, whatever you may have done to the gentleman at the Andaman Isles."

"Well, and there is the end of our drama," I remarked, after we had sat some time smoking in silence. "I fear it shall be the last investigation in which I shall have the chance of studying your methods. Miss Morstan has done me the honor to accept me as a husband in prospective."

"He gave a most dismal groan. "I feared as much," said he. "I really cannot congratulate you."

"I was a little hurt. "Have you any reason to be dissatisfied with my choice?" I asked.

"Not at all. I think she is one of the most charming young ladies I ever met, and might have been most useful in such work as we have been doing. She had a decided genius that way; witness the way in which she preserved that Agra plan from all the other papers of her father. But 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."

"I trust," said I, laughing, "that my

judgment may survive the ordeal. But you look weary."

"Yes, the reaction is already upon me. I shall be as limp as a rag for a week."

"Strange," said I, "how terms of what in another man I should call laziness alternate with fits of splendid energy and vigor."

"Yes," he answered, "there are in me the makings of a very fine lawler and also of a pretty spy sort of fellow. I often think of those lines of old Goethe: 'Schade dass die Natur nur einen Mensch aus dem zum würdigen Mann war und zum Scheitern der Stoff.'"

By the way, Apropos of this Norwood business, you see that they had, as I surmised, a confederate in the house, who could be none other than Lal Rao, the butler; so Jones actually has the undivided honor of having caught one fish in his great haul."

"The division seems rather unfair," I remarked. "You have done all the work in this business. I got a wife out of it. Jones got 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."

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