

THE Sign of the Four.

BY CONAN DOYLE.

"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 parchment, 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 creosote, 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, lowered the 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 oven as the Andamans. His height is readily calculated from the length of his stride, and we know that he was bearded. His hairiness was the one point which impressed itself upon Thaddeus Sholto when he saw him at the window. I don't know that there is anything else."

"The associate?" "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 red rim of the sun pushes itself over the London cloudbank. 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 the feel with our petty ambitions and strivings in the presence of the great elemental forces of nature! Are you well up in your Jean Paul?" "Fairly so. I worked back to him through Carlyle."

"That was like following the brook to the parent lake. He makes but one obvious but profound remark. It is that the chief proof of man's real greatness lies in his perception of his own smallness. It argues, you see, a power of comparison and of appreciation which is 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 line of 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 dogstays. At the square-topped corner public houses business was just beginning, and rough-looking men were emerging, rubbing their sleepy eyes, and strange dogs sauntered up and stared wonderingly 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 detour to the zig-zag 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 rushed round in circles, looking up to some point in 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.

"It's all right. He's off again."

"I want 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's a n't more coals in her than would take her to about Woolwich and back. If he'd been away in the barge I'd ha' thought nothin' for many a time a job has taken him as far as Gravesend, and then if there was much doin' there he might ha' 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 odd bags. Besides, I don't like that wooden-legged man, w' his ugly face and outlandish talk. What did he

want always knockin' 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 old man. It was him that roused him up yesternight, and, what's more, my man knew he was comin', for he had steam up in the launch. I tell you straight, 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 knew his voice, which is kind o' 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?" "Couldn't say, I am sure, sir. I didn't hear no one else."

"I am sorry, Mrs. Smith, for I wanted a steam launch, and I have heard good reports of the— Let me see, what is her name?" "The Aurora, sir."

"Ah! She's not that old green launch with a yellow line, very broad in the beam?" "No, indeed. She's as trim as little thing as any on the river. She's been fresh painted, black with two red streaks."

"Thanks. I hope that you will hear soon from Mr. Smith. I am going down the river; and if I should see anything of the Aurora I shall let him know that you are uneasy. A black funnel, you say?" "No, sir. Black with a white band."

"Ah, of course. It was the sides which were black. Good morning, Mrs. Smith. There is a boatman here with a wherry, Watson. We shall take it and cross the river."

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