

# Excerpt terms and conditions



This excerpt is available to assist you in the play selection process.

You may view, print and download any of our excerpts for perusal purposes.

Excerpts are not intended for performance, classroom or other academic use. In any of these cases you will need to purchase playbooks via our website or by phone, fax or mail.

A short excerpt is not always indicative of the entire work, and we strongly suggest reading the whole play before planning a production or ordering a cast quantity.

*Dramatic Publishing*

*Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's*

# **THE SIGN OF THE FOUR**

Adapted for the Stage

By

**DR. SHANGHAI LOW**

Being a ripping dramatization in two parts of twelve scenes after the second of many reminiscences regarding the singular career of Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective, as recounted by Dr. John H. Watson, late of Her Majesty's Army Medical Department in service to the Afghan Campaign.



**Dramatic Publishing**

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

\*\*\* NOTICE \*\*\*

The amateur and stock acting rights to this work are controlled exclusively by THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY without whose permission in writing no performance of it may be given. Royalty must be paid every time a play is performed whether or not it is presented for profit and whether or not admission is charged. A play is performed any time it is acted before an audience. Current royalty rates, applications and restrictions may be found at our Web site: [www.dramaticpublishing.com](http://www.dramaticpublishing.com), or we may be contacted by mail at: DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, P.O. Box 129, Woodstock IL 60098.

COPYRIGHT LAW GIVES THE AUTHOR OR THE AUTHOR'S AGENT THE EXCLUSIVE RIGHT TO MAKE COPIES. This law provides authors with a fair return for their creative efforts. Authors earn their living from the royalties they receive from book sales and from the performance of their work. Conscientious observance of copyright law is not only ethical, it encourages authors to continue their creative work. This work is fully protected by copyright. No alterations, deletions or substitutions may be made in the work without the prior written consent of the publisher. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, videotape, film, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. It may not be performed either by professionals or amateurs without payment of royalty. All rights, including, but not limited to, the professional, motion picture, radio, television, videotape, foreign language, tabloid, recitation, lecturing, publication and reading, are reserved.

For performance of any songs, music and recordings mentioned in this play which are in copyright, the permission of the copyright owners must be obtained or other songs and recordings in the public domain substituted.

©MMV by  
SHANGHAILOW

Printed in the United States of America  
*All Rights Reserved*  
(THE SIGN OF THE FOUR)

ISBN: 1-58342-285-4

For Chicago veteran actor Mike Nussbaum—  
for whom Basil Rathbone will *always* be Sherlock Holmes.

## IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

All producers of the play *must* give credit to the author of the play in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and in all instances in which the title of the play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the play and/or a production. The name of the author *must* also appear on a separate line, on which no other name appears, immediately following the title, and *must* appear in size of type not less than fifty per cent the size of the title type. Biographical information on the author, if included in the playbook, may be used in all programs. *In all programs this notice must appear:*

Produced by special arrangement with  
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY of Woodstock, Illinois

## EDITORS' NOTES

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's most famous creation, the legendary detective Sherlock Holmes, was not, in the stories, an avid theatergoer. Yet in spite of Holmes' aversion to all things theatrical, he can hardly be described as a stranger to the stage. Sherlock Holmes has appeared in so many plays and films in the past hundred years, it sometimes seems that Holmes was a character created for the theatre and that the stories were merely a diverting appendage, a novelization of the movies.

This version of "The Sign of The Four" (the Doyle story most often adapted for the stage), benefits, we feel, from two years' careful study of the complete Canon, a painstaking return to the source of this iconic figure, assisted by the counsel of some of the 50 Sherlockian societies in and around Chicago—most especially, the city's oldest: Hugo's Companions.

A faithful eye was kept toward weeding out—both in text and staging—those elements that have been laid upon the character's mythos through more than a century's worth of interpretation. For example, in the original Apple Tree production, Holmes smoked the required *clay* pipes called for in the stories, as opposed to the larger varieties adopted by the great William Gillette in his stage productions. And, since the detective never travels to the countryside in this story, he did not wear his most recognizable accessory: the deer stalker cap.

But these were rules that seemed important to *us*, at the time, and need not be written in stone for *you*, should you want to invest in the good nostalgia of your particular audience—as we ourselves felt the need to break them in our original advertising art.

On the whole, our staging research focused on Victorian stagecraft as the primary tool used to wind through the many places and events required by the text but certainly need not be limited to that. All one needs is a love of all things theatrical, really. For example, Toby the Dog appears in the play and, not having a live dog handy, we simply used a puppet on wheels—to the delight of the audiences.

Exceptions: productions should make the greatest effort to obtain proper, accurate translations of the Indian dialects represented here, and it would be a great disappointment to us if South Asian actors were not engaged for the three parts requiring them.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We are so very grateful to Linda Habjan at Dramatic Publishing, Cecelie Keenan, Eileen Boevers and all the good folks at the Apple Tree Theatre in Highland Park, Ill., and the original cast, designers, crew and volunteers of our production. We also thank Tom Creamer and Steve Scott at the Goodman and all of the actors and designers who participated in readings and workshops of the text.

Chris Redmond of [www.sherlockian.net](http://www.sherlockian.net) was of great promotional help to us, Charley Sherman for moral support, and as stated before, the care and attention of Chicago's Hugo's Companions, specifically our point men: Tom Evans, Ely Liebow and David Humphrey, was invaluable.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of the Four*; adapted by Dr. Shanghai Low, premiered at the Apple Tree Theatre on June 18, 2003, with the following cast and crew:

Paramesh / Sergeant / Brahmvir Chada . . . . . JASON BALL  
Thaddeus Sholto / Major Edward Sholto / Wiggins . . . TOM  
BATEMAN

Ravishnu / Abinaash Ahuja . . . . . PARVESH CHEENA  
Dr. John Watson . . . . . JOE FORBRICH  
Sherlock Holmes . . . . . MICHAEL GRANT  
Mahendra / Toba Singh . . . . . ANISH JETHMALANI  
Indian Magician / Toby (puppeteer) / Bartholomew Sholto /  
Tonga / Achmet . . . . . RONALD JIU  
Mrs. Hudson / Mrs. Cecil Forrester / Mrs. Bernstone / Mrs.  
Smith . . . . . LINDA KIMBROUGH  
Miss Mary Morstan / Capt. Arthur Morstan. KATE MARTIN  
McMurdo / Athelney Jones / Mr. Wild . . . BILL MCGOUGH  
Billy / Dr. Mortimer / Jonathan Small . LARRY NEUMANN JR.

Director . . . . . STEVE PICKERING  
Assistant Directors . . . . . SCOTT CUMMINS & BIRGITTA  
VICTORSON

Scenic Design . . . . . JACQUELINE and RICHARD PENROD  
Lighting Design . . . . . PETER GOTTLIEB  
Costume Design . . . . . PATTI ROEDER  
Original Music and Sound Design . . . . . ROBERT STEEL  
Literary Czar . . . . . KEVIN THEIS  
Visual Czar . . . . . CHARLIE ATHANAS  
Props Design . . . . . MICHELLE CAPLAN  
Dialect Coach . . . . . JILL WALMSLEY-ZAGER  
A.E.A., Stage Manager . . . . . RITA VREELAND



Technical Director . . . . . SCOTT MILLER  
Master Electrician . . . . . GINA PATTERSON  
Dramaturg . . . . . RUBY THOMAS  
Indian Advisor. . . . . SHREEYASH PALSHIKAR  
Weapons/Military Advisor . . . . . IAN CHRISTOPHER  
Sherlockian Advisors . . . . . TOM EVANS, ELY LIEBOW,  
DAVID HUMPHREY of Hugo's Companions

**Special thanks:**

Dennis Director, Barbara Gaines, Gary Griffin, Anjalee Deshpande, Kristine Thatcher, Larry Yando, Kevin Gudhal, Scott Parkinson, John Lister, Lia Mortensen, Roderick Peeples.

# THE SIGN OF THE FOUR

A Play in Two Parts  
For 7-10 Men and 2-4 Women

## CHARACTERS

DR. JOHN WATSON  
SHERLOCK HOLMES  
MISS MARY MORSTAN  
MRS. HUDSON  
BILLY  
RAVISHNU  
MAHENDRA  
PARAMESH  
THADDEUS SHOLTO  
McMURDO  
MRS. BERNSTONE  
ATHELNEY JONES  
POLICESERGEANT  
MRS. CECIL FORRESTER  
MRS. SMITH  
DR. MORTIMER  
POSTMAN  
WIGGINS  
SMALL

(continued on following page)

TONGA  
CHADA  
SINGH  
AHUJA  
ACHMET/RAJA (non-speaking)  
CAPTAIN MORSTAN

NOTE: See page 7 for doubling suggestions as done by the  
Apple Tree Theatre.

# PART ONE

## SCENE ONE

*(Music. Lights up on Victorian street scene. A MAN addresses us as the scene shifts to an upstairs sitting room.)*

MAN *(aside)*. The date is September 18, 1888, three o'clock in the afternoon. The place is London, England; a second-floor sitting room at Baker Street, Marylebone. Number: 221 – *(Beat.)* – B.

*(He exits. The sitting room is an intensely cluttered combination library, laboratory and Museum of Crime. A formidable cloud of smoke conceals the ceiling. Reigning over the chaos is Victoria—a large portrait of the queen in an oval frame. Next to her the initials “V.R.” have been shot into the wall.*

*In the midst of this, two Victorian GENTLEMEN of modestly comfortable means are discovered. One sits in a chair facing us. An open newspaper conceals his identity. Behind, and to the right, sits a winged-back chair facing the opposite direction. A small table sits in between the two chairs. We perceive someone must be slouched in this second chair because thin tendrils of smoke rise from it, making their way to the cloud on the*

*ceiling. A few moments pass. The MAN behind the newspaper lowers it to check his pocket watch.*

*He is DR. JOHN WATSON, 36 years of age. As if the watch reminds him of something, he leans back to address the other MAN. Noticing what his associate is doing, WATSON folds his paper, and faces forward.)*

WATSON. Which is it today? Morphine or cocaine?  
*(Noises of the injection process from the upstage chair.)*

MAN. Hm?

WATSON. Yes. I see.

MAN. Was it something?

WATSON. I said, "Which is it today? Morphine or cocaine?"

MAN. It is cocaine.

WATSON. Ah. Variety.

MAN. A seven-percent solution.

WATSON. Three times a day, in as many months, Holmes.  
You surpass yourself.

HOLMES. Oh? I hadn't noticed.

WATSON. Frankly, I'm stricken with my own cowardice  
in not previously bringing up the matter.

HOLMES. But you had *two* glasses of claret with your luncheon today.

WATSON. How on earth did you—? *(He stops himself.)*

HOLMES *(a soft chuckle. Holding up a syringe)*. Would you care to try some of this?

WATSON. No, I would not.

HOLMES. I assure you, it will keep you much less disputatious than the claret obviously has.

WATSON. My constitution has not yet got over the Afghan campaign, all these years hence. I can ill afford to throw extra strain upon it.

HOLMES (*sighs deeply*). Oh, perhaps you are right, Watson. I've sensed your disapproval for some time.

WATSON. Indeed.

HOLMES. And I suppose that its influence is physically—a bad one.

WATSON. My dear fellow, with all the current advances in medical science at your grasp, can there be any doubt?

HOLMES. But, you see, I find it so transcendently stimulating and clarifying to the mind that its secondary action is a matter of small moment.

WATSON. Small *moment*. For God's sake, Holmes, count the cost. Your brain may be roused and excited, but it is a pathologically morbid process, which involves increased tissue-change and may leave permanent weakness. (*Beat.*) It might also be quite decent of you to remember that I speak as a medical man to one for whose constitution I am to some extent answerable.

HOLMES. "My reputation, Iago. O, my reputation!"

WATSON. And I'll thank you to turn the black reactions of your habit away from these barracks, sir.

HOLMES. But Watson, this—*suffocating inertia*.

*(He rises. He is, of course, SHERLOCK HOLMES at 34 years of age, looking very much the worse for wear.)*

My mind 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 proper atmo-

sphere. 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, indeed, the only one in the world.

WATSON. The only detective?

HOLMES. The only *Unofficial Consulting* Detective.

WATSON. Ah.

HOLMES. I am the last and highest court of appeal in detection. When the police regulars are out of their depths—which is their normal state—the matter is laid before me. I examine the data, and pronounce a specialist's opinion. (*Beat.*) Until *recently* I claimed no credit in such cases. Until *recently*, my name figured not in public. The work itself, the pleasure of finding a field for my peculiar powers, was, until *recently*, my highest reward. (*Holding up a book.*)

WATSON (*elated*). My dear Holmes, you've finally read it.

HOLMES. Well, I *glanced* over it. (*Reading.*) "A Study in Scarlet. Being a Reprint from the Reminiscences of John H. Watson, M.D., Late of the Army Medical Department."

WATSON. It's doing moderately well, they tell me.

HOLMES. I, for one, seem to encounter well-thumbed copies of it with startling frequency.

WATSON. Well, come now. Your opinion, at last.

HOLMES. I honestly don't see why you would deem my opinion of your work at any value, Watson, since I find on page twelve of *A Study in Scarlet* that my basic knowledge of literature stands at—(*Reading.*) "Nil."

WATSON. Holmes, I assure you, I had no desire to bruise your feelings in the matter.

HOLMES. Not at all. (*Reading.*) “Knowledge of Philosophy—*Nil.*”

WATSON. Quite the contrary, in point of fact.

HOLMES. “Knowledge of Astronomy—*Nil*, Knowledge of Anatomy—Accurate, but unsystematic.”

WATSON. High marks for chemistry, boxing, and British law.

HOLMES. “Knowledge of Geology—*practical, but limited.*”

WATSON. Oh, come now, Holmes. You’ve said so yourself on numerous occasions.

HOLMES. In the privacy of these rooms, yes. It’s another thing entirely to have one’s *supposed* deficiencies aired for the general consumption.

WATSON. I was under the impression you approved of this venture as a means to provide supplemental income.

HOLMES. Yes, but—

WATSON. Of which we are, on occasion, in need.

HOLMES. Well, of course, my dear, dear friend, and I gave you my oath as an English gentleman to support—

WATSON. I did not wish to raise the point, but—

HOLMES. But your *methods*, Watson, your *methods*. Oh, honestly, my dear boy. I cannot congratulate you on this—this *story*.

WATSON. I should have expected as much.

HOLMES. Detection is, or ought to be, an *exact* science, and should be treated in a cold and unemotional manner.

WATSON. Well, perhaps I am guilty of a certain embellishment of *tone*.

HOLMES. *Hah.*

WATSON. I did not, however, tamper with the basic *facts* of the case.



HOLMES. Watson, in 1881, during your admirable service with the Berkshires at Maiwand, your right leg was shot through with a Jezail bullet, to which event you owe an occasional, though permanent, stiffness.

WATSON. True.

HOLMES. On page one of this *whimsical* tome, however, the self-same bullet passes through your *shoulder*—there is no specification as to which—thereby shattering the bone, and grazing the subclavian artery. (*Beat.*) Mental lapse?

WATSON. Artistic license.

HOLMES. One day you really must enlighten me as to the difference between the two.

WATSON. Very well, how would you suggest I should have gone about telling the story of the Hope case?

HOLMES (*reaches into the bookcase, and pulling out a small pamphlet, throws it to WATSON*). For example, thus.

WATSON (*reading the title*). “Upon the Distinction Between the Ashes of the Various Tobaccos.” One of your monographs.

HOLMES. Quite so. In it I enumerate a hundred and forty forms of cigar, cigarette, and pipe tobacco, with colored plates illustrating the difference in the ash. (*He shows one.*) As I’ve said repeatedly, Watson, the ideal detective possesses three necessary qualities: he has the power of observation and that of deduction—

WATSON/HOLMES. “—knowledge being the third.”

HOLMES. Exactly. Hard, cold, indisputable *facts*. I appreciate their importance. (*The monographs.*) I have been guilty of a host of these, you know.

WATSON. Yes, I know.

HOLMES. Have you *read* them?

WATSON. Well, I've *glanced* over them. (*Beat.*)

HOLMES. In light of our present digression, you might steel your self for the full attempt.

WATSON. I shall.

HOLMES (*holding up a bound stack*). We have several copies of each, as you can see.

WATSON. But, Holmes, I'm led to believe the general public needs to be attracted by a dramatic embellishment of the events. A human *story*.

HOLMES. Oh yes, "*in the human interest.*"

WATSON. And, heavens, man, if they continue to sell like this—who knows? Criminologists all over the world could benefit from your methods.

HOLMES. Couched in torrid little *melodramas*? *My God, but it's singularly infuriating.* What is the use of having brains in our profession? No man lives or has ever lived who has brought the same amount of study and of natural talent to the detection of crime as I have done. And what is the result? *There is no crime to detect.* (*Suddenly, his hand reaches for the case again. WATSON stops him.*)

WATSON. I say, Holmes, would you think me impertinent if I were to put your theories to a more severe test? (*Beat.*)

HOLMES. I should be delighted to look into any little problem you might submit to me.

WATSON. I have here a watch, which has recently come into my possession. Would you have the kindness to let me have an opinion upon the character or habits of the previous owner? (*WATSON hands it over. A pause as HOLMES begins to study the watch.*) Well?

HOLMES. Subject to your correction, I should judge that the watch belonged to your elder brother, who inherited it from your father.

WATSON. That you, no doubt, guess from the "H.W." upon the back?

HOLMES. Guess? *Guess?*

WATSON. Oh, my dear fellow—

HOLMES. Watson, I never *guess*. It is a shocking habit—destructive to the logical faculty. You know this.

WATSON. Sorry, old boy.

HOLMES. No, the "W." suggests your own name. The date of the watch is 1840, nearly fifty years back, and the initials are as old as the watch—so it was made for the last generation. Jewelry usually descends to the eldest son, and he is most likely to have the same name as the father. Your father has, if I remember rightly, been dead many years. It has, therefore, been in the hands of your eldest brother.

WATSON. Correct, so far. Anything else?

HOLMES. Well—he was a man of untidy habits—very untidy, in fact, and careless. He was left with good prospects, but he threw away his chances, lived for some time in poverty with occasional short intervals of prosperity, and finally, taking to drink, he died. That is all I can gather. (*Tries to hand back the watch.*)

WATSON (*walks to the window, deeply stricken*). I could not have believed that you would have descended to this, Holmes. You have made inquiries into the history of my unhappy brother. It is unkind, and, to speak plainly, has in it the touch of the charlatan.

HOLMES. My dear doctor. I had forgotten how personal and painful a thing it might be to you. Pray accept my

apologies. (*Slow, with rising enthusiasm, despite himself.*) But if you will notice the lower half of the watch case; it is dented and marked from the habit of keeping other hard objects, such as coins or keys, in the same pocket. It is no great feat to assume that a man who treats a fifty-guinea watch so cavalierly must be pretty well provided for—yet a careless man. Next, it is customary for pawnbrokers, when they take a watch, to scratch the number of the ticket with a pinpoint upon the inside of the case. There are no less than four such numbers visible to my lens. Inference: that your brother was often at low water. Secondary inference: that he had occasional bursts of prosperity, or he could not have redeemed the pledge. Finally, there are thousands of scratches all round the keyhole—marks where the key has slipped. You will never see a drunkard's watch without them. He winds it at night, and he leaves these traces of his unsteady hand.

WATSON. And his death?

HOLMES. Elementary, my dear fellow. *You* possess the watch.

WATSON. Of course. I should have had more faith in your marvelous faculty.

HOLMES. It is my blessing and my curse. (*Handing the watch back.*) I cannot live without brainwork, Watson. What else is there to live for? (*He moves to the window and peers out. WATSON joins him. Tragic.*) Was there ever such a dreary, dismal, flat, and unprofitable world? What is the use of having powers, Doctor, when one has no field upon which to exert them?

WATSON. *Someone* is out there, Holmes.

HOLMES. Indeed, dear fellow, I had almost forgotten. Professor James Moriarty. He is the Napoleon of Crime, Watson. The organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city. He sits motionless, like a great spider in the center of his web—

WATSON. No, Holmes, I am not clear. I mean there is someone out there on our doorstep. A young lady, just descending from a carriage.

*(HOLMES looks. MISS MARY MORSTAN, a young woman of 29, enters and rings the downstairs bell.)*

HOLMES. *Salvation. (HOLMES exits into the bed room.)*

WATSON *(turning)*. Oh, my Lord. The state of this *room*.

*(WATSON frantically tries to put the room in order. MRS. HUDSON, their landlady, in her 50s, enters downstairs and opens the front door. She carries a small silver tray.)*

MRS. HUDSON. Good afternoon, Miss.

MARY. Good afternoon. Mr. Sherlock Holmes? *(She hands MRS. HUDSON a card.)*

MRS. HUDSON *(reading)*. Yes, Miss Morstan. Is Mr. Holmes expecting you?

MARY. No, I am afraid not. I don't mean to impose, but it is a matter of some urgency.

MRS. HUDSON. I see, miss. It should be no imposition this afternoon. If you will, follow me. *(MRS. HUDSON places the card on the tray.)*

MARY. Thank you.

*(They ascend the stairs. HOLMES returns to the sitting room, dressed smartly. He sits slowly, eyes beamed on the door. At the top of the stairs, MRS. HUDSON stops.)*

MRS. HUDSON. If you will wait here, miss.

MARY. Oh, yes. *(MRS. HUDSON knocks on the sitting-room door and enters.)*

HOLMES. Mrs. Hudson. A client, perhaps?

MRS. HUDSON. I believe so, Mr. Holmes. A young lady.  
*(He takes the card from her.)*

HOLMES. Show her up, then.

WATSON. "Please."

HOLMES. Please, yes, show her up.

MRS. HUDSON *(looks about the room, aghast)*. Mr. Holmes. Doctor Watson.

WATSON. I know, Mrs. Hudson.

MRS. HUDSON. *Gentlemen, the state of this room.*

HOLMES *(reading the card)*. Miss Mary Morstan. I don't believe I know the name.

MRS. HUDSON. *And just yesterday it was cleaned.*

WATSON. My *deepest* apologies.

HOLMES. Show her up, please, *now*, Mrs. Hudson.

MRS. HUDSON. *Completely* unfit to receive young ladies, Doctor.

WATSON. We were taken a bit aback, you see.

MRS. HUDSON. Taken aback? Taken aback. Well, gentlemen, I'm afraid there can be no possible recourse.  
*(Beat.)* You shall use the *downstairs* parlor.

HOLMES *(rising)*. *We shall do nothing of the kind, my good woman.*

WATSON. Oh, let's not do that, Mrs. Hudson, I shall make apologies—

HOLMES. *Mrs. Hudson. Show. Her. Up. This. Instant.*  
(*Beat. MRS. HUDSON stands her ground.*)

WATSON. We shall make all indulgences to the young lady, Mrs. Hudson. Eh, Holmes?

HOLMES. Why—of course we shall.

WATSON. "Please."

HOLMES (*seething. Fast*). Yes. Please. Please. *Please,* Mrs. Hudson.

MRS. HUDSON. And so you shall, gentlemen. (*Referring to the initials shot into the wall.*) *Discharging firearms in the house. (She exits.)*

HOLMES (*whispering*). Watson, how long must I endure this persecution for a temporary lapse in judgment?

WATSON. I fear she will never recover from the event, Holmes.

HOLMES. Seized with a fit of patriotism, old fellow, what could be done?

(*MRS. HUDSON returns.*)

MRS. HUDSON. Miss Mary Morstan.

(*MISS MORSTAN enters the room. MRS. HUDSON stands at the door.*)