

The Adventure of the Speckled Band

by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

"I'm sorry to wake you, Watson," whispered Holmes as he stood over me, "but we have a visitor. There is a young woman in the sitting room who wants to see us. I'm sure it's important if she's come at this hour. Would you care to join me?"

"My dear Holmes," I replied sleepily, "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

With my wife out of town, I was staying with Holmes for the evening. I always enjoyed helping my colleague in his investigations. It was fascinating to watch him gather his clues and use them to solve crimes. So I dressed quickly and joined him in the sitting room. We beheld a woman dressed in black, wearing a veil over her face.

"Good morning, madam," began my companion. "My name is Sherlock Holmes. This is my friend and partner, Dr. Watson. How can we be of service to you?"

The woman lifted the veil from her face. We could see that she was pale and upset. "I am very frightened, Mr Holmes," she began.



"We will try our best to help you," Holmes said, trying to calm her, "I see that you travelled to London by train this morning. And that you rode to the train station in a horse-drawn wagon."

"How do you know that?" she asked with a look of surprise on her face.

"The return ticket is tucked into your glove," Holmes explained. "And the left arm of your jacket is splashed with fresh mud. You could only have gotten splashed that way by sitting on the left-hand side of an open wagon."

"You're correct," she replied, "I have travelled all this way because I am going mad, Mr Holmes. I have no one to turn to. You must help me."

"Please madam. Tell us your problem." Holmes sat back in his chair, closed his eyes, and listened.

"My name is Helen Stoner. I live with my step-father, Dr. Grimseby Roylott. He is the last member of a family. They were wealthy once. But over the years, The Roylotts lost their fortune. All that remains is the family home, Stoke Moran.

"Years ago, my stepfather lived in India and had a successful medical practice. That is where he met and married my mother. My twin sister Julia and I were only two at the time.

"It was in India that my stepfather's troubles began," she said. "In a fit of anger, he got into a fight, killed someone, and spent many years in prison. When my stepfather was released, we moved back to England, where he returned to being a doctor. But he was a changed man by then.

"Shortly after our return, my mother passed away, leaving all her money to my stepfather. My sister and I would receive some money of our own, but only when we got married. With my mother gone, we left London and went to live in Stoke Moran."



Miss Stoner grew more upset as she continued her story. "My stepfather became even more troubled after that. His temper grew, and later he was arrested by the police for fighting. People became afraid of him. His only friends were a group of poor travellers who roamed the countryside and sometimes visited Stoke Moran. He would often let them camp in the woods near the house.

"His behaviour grew stranger with every passing day," she continued. "He loves wild animals. So he brought a wild cheetah and a baboon from India, letting them run wild in the woods around our home.

"My sister Julia and I became very unhappy. No servants would stay with us. So my sister and I took care of that big house by ourselves. It was very hard for us. Julia was thirty when she died, but she looked much older."

"Your sister is dead?" asked Holmes.

"Yes," our visitor replied. "She died two years ago. And it is her death that I wish to speak to you about. Just before that sad event, Julia became engaged. My stepfather did not object. But just before the wedding, a terrible thing happened."

When Holmes heard this, he opened his eyes and looked at our visitor. "Do not leave out any details," he said.

Miss Stoner continued. "My stepfather, sister, and I lived in only one part of the old house. Julia's bedroom was between mine and my stepfather's, on the main floor. There are no doors connecting the rooms. But they all share the same hallway. The windows of the rooms look out onto the yard.

"That night two years ago, all three of us were in our rooms. While I was still awake, my sister came to me. She said she could smell my step-father's cigar smoke and that it bothered her. So we sat and talked about her wedding until about eleven o'clock. That's when she got up to return to her room.

"As she was leaving, Julia asked me if I had heard a whistling sound at night. She told me she had heard such a sound for the last few nights, but she did not know where the noise had come from.

"I told her it might have been the travellers who were camped nearby. I sleep more soundly than she, which may explain why I heard nothing. After that, we said good night. My sister returned to her room and I heard her lock her door."

"Did you always lock your doors?" asked Holmes.

"Yes," answered Miss Stoner. "We were afraid of my father's wild animals."

"Continue," said Holmes.

"Well, that night," she went on. "I could not sleep, and lay awake for hours. Suddenly, I heard Julia scream. I jumped from my bed and ran into the hallway. At that moment, I heard a quiet whistle, followed by a loud clanging sound.

"In the hallway, I watched as Julia's bedroom door opened. My dear sister slowly stepped from her room. I saw terror in her eyes. She could barely stand, and she moved about as if she was in pain. I ran to her just as she fell to the floor. As I held her in my arms, she cried out "Oh, Helen! It was the band. The speckled band!" She reached out with one hand and pointed to my stepfather's room. I called out to him and he quickly appeared. But there was nothing we could do. That night, Julia died."

"And you are sure," asked Holmes, "that you heard the whistle and clanging sound of metal?"

"I think I did," Miss Stoner replied.

"I am sure a doctor examined your sister's body. What did he find?" asked Holmes.

"He knew of our stepfather's temper, Mr Holmes, and was very careful, but he did not find what killed Julia. It is still a mystery. We know that Julia had locked both the windows and the bedroom door. We searched the room carefully, but couldn't find any

hidden entrances. My sister must have been alone when she met her end. Besides, she didn't have any marks on her."

"What about the poison?" asked Holmes.

"The doctor found no trace of it," replied the young woman. "Mr Holmes, I believe she died of fright. And I think that when my sister said the word 'band', she meant a 'band' of people. Like the band of travellers."

"Well that was two years ago. I have come to see you, Mr Holmes, because a month ago I became engaged also. Again, my stepfather did not object. My fiancé and I are to be married in the spring.

"But two days ago," she said with a fearful look on her face, "work began on some walls of our house. And because of the repairs, had to move into my sister's bedroom. As you can imagine, I did not feel comfortable. Then, last night, as I lay in bed, I suddenly heard a noise. It was the sound of a quiet whistle! I jumped out of bed and lighted a lamp. I didn't see anything, but I was so scared that I dressed and dared not go back to bed. In the morning, I left the house and came to London to beg for your help."

"It was the right thing to do," said my friend. "But, Miss Stoner, you haven't told me everything about your stepfather."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Holmes took the young woman's hand in his and held up her wrist. There were marks on her skin as if she had been grabbed by a very strong hand. Our visitor lowered her head and said, "He is a troubled man, Mr Holmes."

My friend became silent. He stared into the fire that warmed our room. "We don't have a moment to lose," he said finally, "Miss Stoner, if we come to your house today, can we see the rooms without your stepfather knowing?"

"Yes. He is visiting London today and won't be home," she replied.

"Good. Then Watson and I will take the train and meet you there this afternoon."

"Thank you, Mr Holmes," she said. "I feel better already. Now, if that is all, I will see you this afternoon." Our visitor lowered the veil over her face and left.

"This is a strange and dangerous case, Holmes," I said. "From everything we have heard, Miss Stoner's sister must have been alone when she was killed. But what was the whistling sound? And what did the dead woman's last words mean?"

"It seems to me," my companion began, "that it must have something to do with the band of travellers. Also, it is clear that Dr. Roylott would have lost money if his daughters married. Clearly, he would prefer his daughters not to be wed. And the metal clang? Perhaps it was the shutter of the window opening."

"But if that is the case," I said, "how then did the travellers kill Miss Stoner? It doesn't quite make sense to me."

"I agree, Watson. And that is why we must visit Stoke Moran today."

Just then, the door flew open and a huge man burst into our room. He looked at Holmes and me with a wild, angry expression on his face.

"Which of you is Holmes?" he roared.

"I am," Holmes answered calmly. "And who are you?"

"I am Dr. Grimesby Roylott," he cried. "I know my stepdaughter has been here. And I know you as Mr. Sherlock Holmes, the troublemaker. What did she say to you?"

Holmes laughed, "Please close the door on your way out, Dr. Roylott. It is cold outside."



"I'll go when I'm finished with you. I am a powerful man, Mr. Holmes. You had better stay out of my business. Or else!" Roylott grabbed the metal poker from the fireplace.

He held the piece of metal in his hands and bent it as if it were rubber. He threw the twisted metal into the fireplace, took one last look at us, and stormed out."

"Well, Watson," Holmes began, "our investigation has become much more interesting. I only hope the doctor's visit doesn't mean Miss Stoner is in even more danger. I think we must take ourselves to Stoke Moran right away. Let us go to the train station. And Watson, I think it would be a good idea if you brought your gun. I wouldn't want Dr. Roylott to treat us the way he treated that metal poker."

Holmes and I took the train from London to the town of Leatherhead. From there, we took a horse-drawn carriage. But before we reached Stoke Moran, we saw Miss Stoner walking through a field toward the road. She had come from her troubled home to meet us.

"I'm very happy you are here," she said to us after the carriage had gone. "Dr. Roylott is still in town and won't be back for a while."

"We have had the mixed pleasure of meeting your stepfather," explained Holmes. "He paid us a visit after you had left."

"You mean he followed me?" she cried in fear.

"Yes," answered Holmes. "So we must be very careful. And we must take a closer look at the rooms while we have a chance."

Stoke Moran was an old, grey, stone mansion. One side of the house looked empty. The windows on that side were broken and covered with boards. The other side looked well kept. Smoke from the chimney told us that the family lived in this part of the house.

"I see that these are the bedroom windows," said Holmes, pointed to a set of three windows. "The doctor's, then your sister's, and then yours?"

"Yes," answered Miss Stoner. "And you can see where the workmen have been busy. But Mr. Holmes, I don't think the work was necessary. I think it was a way to get me to sleep in my sister's bedroom."

"Most interesting," said my companion. "Miss Stoner, please go into your sister's room while Watson and I stay out here. Make sure the window is locked."

The young woman went inside. Holmes pulled a knife from his pocket and tried to open the window from the outside. When he failed, he used his magnifying glass and looked at the window frame and the hinges. "No," he said finally, "no-one could get in through these windows. Watson, let us continue our search for clues inside."

We joined Miss Stoner in her sister's room. Holmes sat down in a chair and silently studied everything around him. A rope hung from the ceiling down to the bed. It was a rope you would pull to ring a bell. The bell was a signal for servants. The rope was so long that the end rested on the pillows.

"Where is the bell that is rung by this bell-rope?" he asked.

"In the housekeeper's room," replied Miss Stoner.

"It looks new," observed Holmes. "Did your sister ask for it?"

"It is only a couple of years old. But no, my sister did not ask for it."

"Why would you need such a nice bell-rope here, I wonder?" said Holmes. He got up from the chair, pulled out his magnifying glass again, and got down on his hands and knees. He crawled back and forth over the floor, searching for clues. He then examined the walls in the same way.

Holmes walked over to the bed and studied the bell-rope. Finally, he grabbed it and pulled. "Why, it doesn't work," he said. "It is attached to a hook on the ceiling and doesn't ring a bell at all. This is most interesting. Also, the air vent on the ceiling is unusual." Holmes pointed to a small opening next to where the bell rope reached the ceiling. "Has the air vent always been there, Miss Stoner?"

"No," she answered. "It was put in around the same time that the bell-rope was put in."

Next, we visited Dr. Roylott's bedroom. Holmes carefully examined the bed, a wooden chair, a table, and a large metal safe. He noticed a small dish of milk sitting on the safe.

"Does Dr. Roylott keep a cat?" he asked.

"No," Miss Stoner replied.

My friend then bent down and studied the wooden chair. "Yes that's it then," he said as he stood up. "But wait, what's this?" Holmes pointed at a rope, looped over one post of the bed. "Ah, Watson. It is a wicked world. Especially when a smart man turns to crime. I have seen enough, Miss Stoner. Let us leave these rooms."

Once outside, Holmes turned to the young woman. "It is very important that you do everything I tell you. Your life may depend on it. When Dr. Roylott returns, you must stay in your sister's room. Then, tonight, when you hear your stepfather in his bedroom, you must open your window. Put a lamp where it can be seen from outside. Then quietly leave and return to your own room. Be sure to lock the door.

"Watson and I will be watching. When we see the lamp, we will enter your sister's bedroom through the window. We will spend the night there."

"Mr. Holmes," said Miss Stoner, "I think you know what killed my sister. You must tell me! Did she die of fright?"

"No, I don't believe so," answered Holmes. "But until I know for sure, that is all I can tell you. I'm sorry. And now, Watson and I must leave before your stepfather returns. Do as I have instructed and all will be well."

My companion and I left Miss Stoner at Stoke Moran. There was an inn not far from the house where we were able to take a room. From there, we could look across a field and see the bedroom windows. We waited for night to fall.

"Watson," said Holmes as we sat looking out at the house, "I must warn you that we could be in danger tonight."

"Danger? But how?" I asked. "I didn't see anything this afternoon that suggested danger. You have clearly seen more than I have in these rooms."

"No, we have seen the same things," replied Holmes. "But I have reasoned out what those things mean. First, there is the air vent, which I expected to find. Miss Stoner said that her sister could smell her stepfather's cigar smoke the night she died. That told me that there would be a vent connecting the two rooms. There is also the bell-rope that doesn't ring a bell. Plus the interesting fact that the air vent and the bell-rope were put in the room at the same time.

"What you may not have seen was an odd feature about the bed. It was clamped to the floor. That means you could not move the bed away from the bell-rope and air vent. Yes, Watson. We are dealing with a dreadful criminal. We may have a night of horrors ahead of us."

As the hours passed, the two of us watched the distant, dark house. Finally, a light appeared in a window. It was our signal. We left the inn and made our way through the fields. Suddenly, as we were crossing the lawn, a dark figure darted from the bushes. The creature's arms and legs flew wildly as it ran off into the shadows.

"My word!" I gasped. "What was *that*?"

Holmes laughed quietly. "This is a strange case indeed. Watson. That was the doctor's baboon. Now quickly. Let us climb in the bedroom window before we see the cheetah as well."



We crawled in through the window and closed it behind us. Once inside, Holmes whispered to me. "Do not make a sound, Watson. I will sit on the bed. You sit in that chair. Have your gun ready." Holmes had brought a cane with him, and he placed it on the bed. "We must sit in the dark. We do not want Dr. Roylott to see anything." He turned out the lamp, and we were in total darkness.

The hours passed as we waited silently. A church bell echoed in the distance. A bird called in the night. Then we heard a sound that could only come from a large, wild cat. It was the cheetah walking by the bedroom window.

After a long wait, my eyes caught a dim flicker of light from the air vent above the bed. The light quickly disappeared and was followed by the odour of burning oil. Someone had lighted a lamp in the next room. Next came the sound of movement, followed by silence.

A half hour passed before I heard something else. It was a quiet hissing sound, like steam from a boiling kettle. Suddenly, Holmes jumped from the bed. He struck a match, grabbed his cane, and swung it at the bell-rope. At the same time, I heard a low, whistling sound.

"Did you see it, Watson?" yelled Holmes. "Did you see it?"

My companion was looking up at the air vent. Just then, a loud cry filled Stoke Moran. It was a cry of pain and fear that turned into an angry shriek. As Holmes and I stared at each other, the cry faded away into silence.

We ran into the hallway, to the door of Dr. Roylott's room. Holmes knocked loudly. No one answered, so we opened the door and entered. The room was lit by the light of a lamp. We could see that the safe was open. Dr. Grimesby Roylott sat on a wooden chair that Holmes had studied earlier in the day. The doctor was in his dressing gown and slippers. The coiled rope lay across his lap.

The doctor did not move. His head was turned toward the ceiling, and his eyes started upward. Wrapped tightly around his head was a strange yellow band. It was covered with brown speckles.

"The band! The speckled band!" Whispered Holmes.

As I took a step forward, the band began to move. Then the head and puffed-up collar of a snake rose up out of the doctor's hair.



"It is a swamp adder!" cried Holmes. "The deadliest snake in India. The doctor's murder weapon has turned on him. He has been bitten." Holmes took the rope and put it across the snake's collar. He tightened it and carefully conveyed the snake into the safe. "It is too late for us to do anything for him. But we must take Miss Stoner from this place, and call the police."

The next day, as Holmes and I returned to London by train, he explained the facts of the case to me. "At first, Watson, I was on the wrong track, I knew that Miss Stoner's sister had used the word 'band'. I also knew of the travellers who were camping nearby. So I thought the solution to the mystery lay with the band of travellers.

"But when we inspected the rooms. I realised that no-one could have entered the locked bedroom. I also took note of the bell-rope, the air became clear to me that the rope was a bridge between the bed and the air vent. Right away, I thought of a

snake. If Dr. Roylott had a cheetah and a baboon, he might easily have a snake. As a doctor who practiced in India, he would also know that this snake's poison could not be detected. And he would know that its bite would be invisible.

"When his stepdaughter Julia became engaged," Holmes explained, "he did not want her to get the money. So he put the bell-rope in her room and had the air vent installed. Once they were in place, he waited until his stepdaughter was asleep. I could tell from looking at the chair in his room that he stood on it to reach the air vent. He would place the snake in the air vent. The deadly creature would crawl through the vent, down the rope and onto the victim's bed.

"At first, the snake did not attack Julia Stoner. But the doctor had trained it to return at the sound of a whistle. That is what she heard. The milk also helped lure the snake back to Roylott's room. He would then catch it with the rope and put it in the safe. The clanging sound that the sisters heard was that of the safe being closed.

"And so, last night, I listened for the faintest sound that a snake could make. When I heard the hissing, I lit a match and attacked it. The creature quickly slithered back to Dr. Roylott's room. But I had hit it with my cane, making it angry. So when it returned to the doctor's bedroom, it attacked."

Sherlock Holmes looked out the window at the English countryside. It was hard to imagine that last night's events had taken place in such a peaceful setting. "The murderer is dead," he said, "killed by his own strange murder weapon."