



## An Inquiry into: "The Adventure of the Speckled Band"

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"The Adventure of the Speckled Band" was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in February 1892. It is part of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

Uncharacteristically, as the table shows, all our scholarly Canon chronologists agree as to the date of the case.

In 1883, Sherlock Holmes was 29 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 31.

### Main Characters:

Dr. Grimesby Roylott, widowed disgraced former medical doctor, residing on his decaying family estate in Surrey. Helen Stoner, Dr. Roylott's stepdaughter, now living with him in Surrey. Julia Stoner, Helen's late twin sister, who died under mysterious circumstances two years before. A swamp adder, the deadliest snake in India.

### Notable Quotes:

On glancing over my notes of the seventy odd cases in which I have during the last eight years studied the methods of my friend Sherlock Holmes, I find many tragic, some comic, a large number merely strange, but none commonplace; for, working as he did rather for the love of his art than for the acquirement of wealth, he refused to associate himself with any investigation which did not tend towards the unusual, and even the fantastic.

"This is my intimate friend and associate, Dr. Watson, before whom you can speak as freely as before myself."

"As to reward, my profession is its reward."

"I have heard, Mr. Holmes, that you can see deeply into the manifold wickedness of the human heart."

"These are very deep waters."

### The Adventure of the Speckled Band

Chronologist	Date of the Adventure
Canon	Early April 1883
Baring-Gould	Friday, April 6, 1883
Bell	Early April 1883
Blakeney	April 1883
Brend	April 1883
Christ	Wednesday, April 4, 1883
Dakin	Wednesday, April 4, 1883
Folsom	Early April 1883
Hall	Early April 1883
Keefauver	Sunday, April 1883
Klinger	1883
Zeisler	Wednesday, April 4, 1883

Please note that Canon chronologists may differ on pivotal dates and comparative periods between cases, thus a simple majority is not necessarily correct. Most Canon scholars settle on a single chronologist's results for their research framework.

“Fancy his having the insolence to confound me with the official detective force!”

“When a doctor does go wrong he is the first of criminals. He has nerve and he has knowledge.”

### *Regarding Dr. Grimesby Roylott's Demise*

Watson tells us that he has publicized the true facts behind Dr. Grimesby Roylott's death now, years afterwards, apparently due to Helen Stoner's demise. According to him, there was a secondary reason for this revelation: “the widespread rumours as to the death of Dr. Grimesby Roylott which tend to make the matter even more terrible than the truth.”



This is perennially puzzling in some respects. What could have been these rumors that our biographer considered so necessary to be dispelled? And what caused them to arise years after the fact? After all an official inquiry concluded that Roylott's death was an accident that took place while he was playing with one of his dangerous pets.

It is extremely unlikely that Helen Stoner would have been willing to revisit and disclose the sordid circumstances of the deaths of her sister and stepfather, so the revelation of the facts after her death makes

sense. Additionally, although Dr. Roylott's family had been of importance to the region, he personally was not; in fact, he was detested by his neighbors; therefore it is quite unlikely that there would be someone who, after all those years, would begin questioning the conclusions of the official inquiry.

Unfortunately, Watson did not choose to clarify the matter.

### *Dr. Roylott, Villain or Unbalanced?*

Without a doubt, Grimesby Roylott is one of the Canon's more interesting criminals. Watson's rather remarkable description of the man is quite extraordinary: *A large face, seared with a thousand wrinkles, burned yellow with the sun, and marked with every evil passion, was turned from one to the other of us, while his deep-set, bile-shot eyes, and his high, thin, fleshless nose, gave him somewhat the resemblance to a fierce old bird of prey.* Although Watson's literary exaggeration—“marked with every evil passion”—makes the man even more interesting, for the sake of accuracy one is forced to remark, “every evil passion”? Really, Doctor Watson! One must assume that there has to be a modicum of embellishment in this—such an evil, tortured face would have made Dorian Gray's picture at its worst look attractive!



Being a thoroughly honorable man, perhaps Watson was blinded by the horror of Roylott's crime and unwittingly painted the man in the darkest possible colors—he shows us someone lacking in any redeeming virtue. However, if one considers what Helen

Stoner told Holmes, we see a different facet of the man. We learn that he was the last member of an ancient and honored family, possibly minor aristocracy. Because of improvident ancestors and through no fault of his own, he faced the same tragic fate of his father who ended his days “living the horrible life of an aristocratic pauper.” At this time, we see him courageously facing his situation by borrowing money to acquire a medical education that will not only provide him a gentleman’s profession, but also a means to earn a comfortable living. He then takes the adventuresome step to seek his fortune in the colonies by going to India where he establishes a lucrative practice in Calcutta.

According to Helen, a “Violence of temper approaching to mania has been hereditary in the men of the family, and in my stepfather’s case it had, I believe, been intensified by his long residence in the tropics.” Although I am far from being a biologist, I tend to doubt that “violence of temper” is “hereditary.” The rest of her observation, that his fits of temper were intensified by his life in India

seems closer to the truth.



Life in the Raj was heaven-like to many and hell on earth to others. The latter may have been the case with Roylott; unquestionably his time in prison would not have done much to sweeten his disposition. As bitter icing on his life’s cake as a convicted felon who served jail time, he would have been precluded from practicing his profession.

All this had to have added to his bitterness and resentment towards the world. His social decline alienated him further from the rest of humanity. The extent of this isolation is revealed by the only company he tolerated: gypsies whom the society of the time almost unanimously viewed as criminals and pariahs. Helen Stoner explained that, “He had no friends at all save the wandering gypsies, and he would give these vagabonds leave to encamp upon the few acres of bramble-covered land which represent the family estate, and would accept in return the hospitality of their tents, wandering away with them sometimes for weeks on end.” As an outsider himself, he received from these fellow outcasts the acceptance that he either did not seek or was unlikely to get from others.

After all his toil and effort to acquire his profession and a good practice, he found himself in the same position of his father, which he had so struggled to avoid. He became a pauper aristocrat living on a decaying family estate dependent for a decent livelihood on his dead wife’s shrinking inheritance and the fact that her two daughters were as yet unmarried.

The yearly £750 (≈\$280,000) was probably barely enough to keep body and soul together for the three of them while marginally coping with the necessity of maintaining an estate that was in dire straits, something which can be deduced from the physical state of the house itself. With both stepdaughters gone, and left with only £250 (≈\$94,000) a year, he would have been unable to sustain the kind of isolation he obviously sought and needed. In his by then twisted mind, the most logical path

to avoid this was murder; otherwise, the fragile fortress that he had managed to build for himself against an uncaring world would quickly crumble.

It might be assumed that, for all the evil attributed to him, the idea of disposing of his stepdaughters did not cross his mind until he found himself in danger of losing the use of their money. Although there obviously was no love lost, he did not see too prone to harm them until they became engaged. Had he been truly as murderous as depicted, the most practical thing to do would have been to kill the sisters *before* they became engaged to be married. This would have diverted any possible suspicion, because he would have had no apparent reason or gain if he disposed of them while they were still unattached; especially in view of the fact that he had an ideal, undetectable means of accomplishing his goal.



That Roylott was psychotic and unable to think clearly is shown by the fact that he went out of his way to defy and threaten Sherlock Holmes. He knew who Holmes was and had had he been thinking clearly he would have had to realize that this would only exacerbate the situation, giving the Great Detective a stronger reason for investigating the situation.

All of this is not to say that his murderous premeditated actions were in any way justified. The world was better for his exit. Holmes put it best: "I am no doubt indirectly responsible for Dr. Grimesby Roylott's death, and I cannot say that it is likely to weigh very heavily upon my conscience."

### *The Ophidian Weapon*



Generations of Sherlockians and Holmesians students and scholars have gleefully spent endless delightful hours arguing over Dr. Grimesby Roylott's snake's true identity; this has been exacerbated by the fact that Holmes himself identifies it as "a swamp adder—the deadliest snake in India."

The reason, of course is that no such snake as the "swamp adder, exists. This has led our canonical herpetologists to identify the lethal, short-tempered critter that is so central to this case as a puff adder, a banded Indian krait, and a cobra,

among several others. Enough ink to float an aircraft carrier has been spilt discussing the nature of the different poisons that some of these charming creatures freely dispense, and their varied effects upon the human organism.

On top of everything else the scaly weapon had to be capable of inducing a state of suspended animation to avoid dying of asphyxiation whenever it was locked up in Roylott's safe.

Some have even argued that this living weapon was not a snake, but some sort of unknown possibly supernatural, horrible creature (possibly a cousin of the giant rat?). All of this has been prompted by some inconvenient facts. For example, although snakes possess remarkable sensory capabilities (mostly in the infrared region of the spectrum), they are as deaf as a doorpost. According to this argument, "Dr. Roylott could have whistled himself dry from now to eternity, and his slinky weapon would not have known any better!" Proponents of this argument, think that all that the whistling did was awaken the intended victims. Another example against our slithering weapon is that, according to experts, snakes avoid milk because they are unable to digest it.

My problem lies in an entirely different direction. Granting that Roylott's village was not only small but backwards, and that the area's coroner was far from being a guiding light in the field of forensics, a snake bite, particularly that of a poisonous one, is nearly impossible to miss. Aside from the fangs' twin marks themselves, the tissue reaction to the poison these inject is very marked, often colorful.



It seems impossible that anyone could have arrived to such a verdict even if the examination of the body was extremely cursory.

### *What else happened in 1883:*

#### *Empire*

Britain evacuates The Sudan.

#### *Britain*

The Fabian Society is founded in London.

Small electric power station built at 57 Holborn Viaduct.

Royal College of Music established.

#### *World*

Germans take Southwest Africa.

England's offer to mediate between France and Madagascar is denied. French navy attacks Antananarivo forts and soon after the territory around Tamatave is put under French military rule.

Brooklyn Bridge opens with attendance of U.S. President Arthur and other dignitaries from the State of New York. When the bridge is open to the public, crowds attempt to cross it and a number of people are killed in the crush. As a result, radical changes are made to the bridge's approaches.

Colossal, 80-foot bronze figure of Germania, erected at the site of Arminius' early victory over the Romans, near Rudesheim, is unveiled by Emperor William. After the ceremony it is revealed that the police barely prevented a dynamite plot to blow up the Emperor and his retinue as they were about to unveil the statue.

Buffalo Bill organizes his *Wild West Show*.

French troops from Hanoi are annihilated and three French ironclads are dispatched from Quiberon, Brest, and Corfu. Anti-French reinforcements sent to Tonquin by the Governor of Cochinchina, and troops are dispatched from New Caledonia.



◀ The volcano on Krakatoa kills 40,000 and spews ashes around the world, giving red sunsets for decades, causing shorter summers and longer winters.

*Ladies Home Journal* is founded.

Alexander III of Russia is crowned. On the day after the coronation riots break out at St. Petersburg

Revolution breaks out in Haiti. Rebels attacked by government troops which they defeat. The area outside Miragoane is bombarded, but regular troops are again repulsed with the loss of many men and two vessels. Rebels are left holding nearly the whole of the western coast.

Labor strikes of American telegraph operators and glass blowers. Nearly 100,000 strikers were out of work.

Anarchy in Armenia. Turkey loses all control over the province. Trade caravans are consistently pillaged and foreign diplomats insulted. The tribe of Malisson, numbering 60,000, raids Scutary but it repulsed by Turkish troops.



*Life Magazine* publishes first issue

Karl Marx dies.

Parliament Houses of Belgium burn down. The Parliamentary library with all the archives is destroyed.

Orient Express makes its first run from Paris to Istanbul.

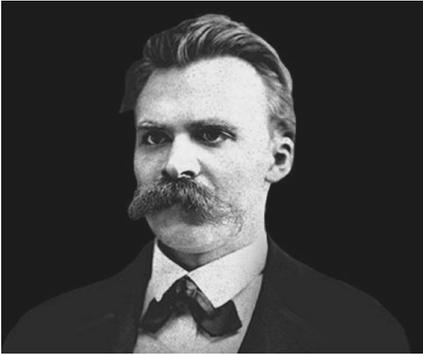
Construction of Panama Canal proceeding. De Lesseps and others of its promoters predict completion within five years. Now more than 15,000 laborers are engaged.

◀ Paul Kruger becomes President of South Africa.

War of Chile against Peru and Bolivia is brought to a close. Chile receives province of Tara Paca and the Department of Tacna.

## *Art*

Robert Louis Stevenson publishes *Treasure Island*.



Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* published.

Howard Pyle writes/draws *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*.

New York's Metropolitan Opera House opens.

Richard Wagner dies in Venice.

◀ Nietzsche publishes *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

Edouard Manet, famous painter, dies.

Richard Wagner, composer, dies.

Gustave Dore, famous illustrator, dies.

## *Science and Technology*

Sir Victor Horsley discovers role of thyroid gland.

Edison discovers electricity can travel through space.

Klebs and Loeffler discover the dyptheria bacillus.

First skyscraper built in Chicago. Ten stories.

Hollerith's punched-card system widely used in industry.

## *Next week's case: ENGR.*

Respectfully submitted,

## *Murray, the Courageous Orderly*

(a.k.a. Alexander E. Braun)

"I should have fallen into the hands of the murderous Ghazis had it not been for the devotion and courage shown by Murray, my orderly..."

*All Sherlock Holmes illustrations have been published by courtesy of ITV Granada.*

**If you would like to join the Hounds of the Internet, email us at [CourageousMurray@aol.com](mailto:CourageousMurray@aol.com).**

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