

Sherlock Holmes Essay Contest

2011 Clarkson Prize Winning Essay

This year, Watson's Tin Box is celebrating its Seventh Annual Sherlock Holmes Essay Contest for seventh graders in Howard County, Maryland. Once again, the Tin Box partnered with Howard County Library and Howard County Public Schools. Participating students read the *Adventure of the Speckled Band* and wrote essays. English teachers in the Public Schools voluntarily participated, and Howard County Library made the participation possible for home schooled, private school, and public school students (whose teachers do not participate). Watson's Tin Box is very grateful to its partners for making this contest such a success. We survey the teachers to find out how many of them used the *Speckled Band* as part of their curriculum as a result of the contest. This year, we reached approximately 260 children. Over the last seven years, the contest has introduced more than 2,200 students to the *Speckled Band*.

Each year, the Tin Box has awarded First, Second, and Third Place Prizes to the top three essays. The First Prize in the contest is *The Clarkson Prize*, an award named after Tin Box founder Steve Clarkson, BSI, who was a mentor to so many young Sherlockians. Steve started a Sherlock Holmes literary society for young people in the late 1960s. It included members from across the country. Before the advent of email, the young Sherlockians would distribute their analyses of the Sherlock Holmes stories to each other in real envelopes. Steve continued his mentoring of young Sherlockians until he passed away in 2004.

The 2011 winner was Emily, a 13 year old student. Hearty congratulations for a job well done! With her (and her parents') approval, Emily's essay was published in *Irene's Cabinet*, the annual journal of Watson's Tin Box, and posted on the Tin Box and Beacon Society web sites. It is with great pride that we publish this year's Clarkson Prize winning essay on the *Speckled Band*. Emily can be proud to be a young published author.

"The Adventure of the Speckled Band"

By Emily

It is fantastic. It is unusual. What could it be? It is one of Sherlock Holmes's cases. Most of his cases include odd elements or events that are seemingly impossible. "The Adventure of The Speckled Band" fits this context in very many ways. A few oddities include the awkward behavior of Dr. Roylott, the mysterious death of Julia, and the location where the deaths occurred.

The behavior of Dr. Roylott around the time of Julia's death is just one of the many quirks contained in this story. An example of this odd behavior is that Dr. Roylott chose to keep exotic animals on the premises of Stoke-Moran. These animals included a baboon, a cheetah, and unbeknownst to the Stoner twins, an Indian swamp adder. Dr. Roylott keeps the snake in his possession and uses the snake to dispatch his young step-daughters so he would not have to bequeath them a dowry. The cheetah and the baboon do not appear to serve a specific purpose in the story, but were probably used for security or to browbeat others that were on Stoke-Moran. A second example is the queer behavior that Dr. Roylott exhibited after moving to Stoke-Moran. On page nine, Helen Stoner says, "Instead of making friends and exchanging visits with our neighbors ... , he shut himself up in the house and seldom came out save to indulge in vicious quarrels A series of disgraceful brawls took place ... he is a man of immense strength, and absolutely uncontrollable in anger." From the way that Helen Stoner was talking, the reader can infer that this is not how the doctor usually conducts himself. These events occurred after, and only after, Dr. Roylott's move into Stoke-Moran. Since Dr. Roylott has no reason to exhibit this strange behavior that the reader knows of at the beginning of the story, this is highly unusual.

A second oddity is the freakishness and the undoubtedly preposterous death of the engaged Julia. There was no evidence of a struggle or poisoning when Julia was examined after death. There was also no way that anyone could gain access to her bedchambers. The symptoms that Julia had were described by Helen Stoner on page 12, " her figure swaying to and fro like that of a drunkard ... She writhed as one who is in terrible pain, and her limbs were dreadfully convulsed ... she was unconscious ..." None of these are all symptoms of the same disease, and there was no poison in Julia's system at the time of the toxicology testing. This only leaves the reader and the characters in the story, with the exception of Dr. Roylott, few precious clues as to how the engaged Julie could have been eradicated. It is highly unusual to find absolutely no evidence for the cause of death.

A third example of the oddities contained within "The Adventure of The Speckled Band" is the room in which Dr. Roylott tried to exterminate both of his step-daughters. The furniture arrangement within the room was extremely peculiar. On page 11, Helen Stoner states that the doors were locked from the outside, so there was no way in to anyone from the outside and

one would definitely not be able to get out of the room and into another's without being noticed or heard by someone. Later, on page 23, Holmes finds the phony bell pull that has been inserted into the vent. The bell pull was not attached to anything, so when pulled, would have unquestionably no result. Later, on page 27, Holmes tells Watson that the bed was bolted to the floor so it could not be moved and so a portion of the bell pull was always touching the bed. There was no way of opening the shutters on the outside of the room once they had been bolted, either. This creates a bit of a locked room murder. No way in, no way out, one dead body with no cause of death. The only way that anything could have gotten in or out once Julia had bolted everything was the vent, which led into Dr. Roylott's room. The reader can then infer that whatever killed Julia and frightened her so much must have entered the premises of her room by utilizing the gaps in the vent. What could have fit through the vent?

As stated previously, there were many odd and puzzling anomalies that took place during the plot of "The Adventure of The Speckled Band." These include the queer behaviors exhibited by Dr. Roylott, the dispatching of Julia, and the arrangement of the furniture within Julia's bedroom. All of these factors lead to the death of a young woman in a seemingly impossible situation. As it has been explained in this paper, the fantastic and the unusual are usually the deadliest.