



The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure X – The Adventure of the Speckled Band

The ancient Manor House of Stoke Moran, dark and crumbling from age, stands forbidding against the backdrop of huge trees and heath-covered moor. Outside, it is night. Gypsies roam the moor, and a cheetah and baboon prowl about the premises as a deterrent to unwelcome intruders. Inside, twin sisters sleep in their separate bedrooms in a household dominated by a violent stepfather.

A scream cuts the dark. One sister runs out into the hallway to find her twin staggering from her room, incoherently raving about a “speckled band.” Although the stepfather, a physician, is on the scene almost immediately, nothing can be done and the woman slowly sinks and dies. A coroner’s inquiry reaches a verdict of death from unknown causes. The surviving sister is moved into her dead twin’s room so that repairs to Stoke Moran can be made. It is not long before she begins hearing again the strange noises that played a prelude to the terrible fate of her sister. Frightened and brutalized by her stepfather, she seeks Holmes’ assistance.

A little while ago, there was some dispute over what a snake can and cannot do. I stated, for example, that a snake does not drink milk, but another Hound said that the snake-charmers in India keep a bowl of milk handy when entertaining tourists with their dangerous pets. But there are other herpetological characteristics mentioned in SPEC, one of which is a continual hissing sound like that made by a tea-kettle. Does a snake hiss continuously and is the sound as loud as that of a tea-kettle?



Holmes tells Watson, “that and a toothbrush are, I think, all that we shall need” when the two prepare to visit Stoke Moran. They checked into a local hostelry without any baggage; the good innkeeper must have looked askance at that. Holmes knew that they’d be all night, but made no provision for fresh linen, shaving...nothing but a toothbrush (which, hopefully, Watson didn’t have to share with him). Why was Holmes in such a rush to dash out of 221B unprepared for an overnight stay?

After Dr. Roylott has met his grisly fate, Holmes recounts the sequence of his impressions and deductions to Watson. In the course of this, Holmes says, “It would be a sharp-eyed coroner indeed who could distinguish the two little dark punctures which would show where the poison fangs had done their work.” This strikes me as a curious statement. In cases of snake bite, the puncture area invariably becomes reddish in colour and swells noticeably. For those who would say, “It was probably at the hairline or some other location where the wounds could not be easily discerned,” I ask, how did Dr. Roylott know where the snake would bite its victim? The marks of the bite might easily have occurred in a location easily seen by a coroner or anyone else.

In order to retrieve his dangerous pet, Roylott stood on a chair by the ventilator and used a dog whip with its end tied in a noose to handle the creature, presumably both when he sent it on its deadly mission and when it returned. How did he know the snake would always return through the ventilator? Snakes cannot hear a whistle, and in any case are incapable of being trained. What would have prevented the creature from wandering about the death chamber and being detected by those investigating Julia Stoner’s death? Further, Roylott knew that the snake needed to be handled with the utmost care. Why, then, did he have the chair positioned so close to the ventilator that the snake was able to bite him? Arm’s length with the dog whip would have been the order of the day, one would think.

And, for the physiologists among us, how much strength would Holmes have needed to straighten, with a single jerk, the **steel** fireplace poker bent by Roylott? A distant remembrance from a physics class recalls that such a feat would require far more vigour than that needed to bend the poker in the first place.

Steve Clarkson

July 10, 1998