



*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*.

As shown by the table below, this is one of those rare occasions in which all our scholarly Canon chronologists

are in agreement regarding 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 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.”

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

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.

“These are very deep waters.”

“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.”

Why Publish the Story?

Watson opens his telling of this case by informing us that he is making public the true facts of Dr. Grimesby Roylott’s death, years afterwards, seemingly because of Helen Stoner’s demise. He then adds that another important consideration for doing this were 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 puzzling. Certainly, the case is important to *us* because of Sherlock Holmes’ participation in it. However, aside from this, the whole matter amounted to no more than an inconsequential incident taking place at an unimportant corner of England. This is one of the many instances in which one wishes that the Good Doctor had been a lot more communicative. Why does he not tell us what were the rumors that he considered so important to dispel? And why did these arise? After all, an official inquiry concluded Roylott’s death was an accident caused by his negligent play with one of his notorious dangerous wild pets. Although Dr. Roylott’s family had been important to the region, he personally was not. This makes it very unlikely that, years later, there would have been any further inquiries (official or otherwise) about his death.



Courtesy of ITV Granada

A riddle indeed.

Dr. Grimesby Roylott, Villain



Courtesy of ITV Granada

I always get a kick out of Watson’s description of one who undoubtedly rates as one of the Canon’s more interesting villains: *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.* Even our biographer’s literary exaggeration—“marked with every evil passion”—makes the gentleman even more interesting. Of course, one must wonder, “*Every evil passion*”? Besides being dangerously unstable, he must have been a fascinating man.

This reminds me of other interesting character descriptions; for example, Rafael Sabatini’s portrayal of his hero in *Scaramouche*: “He was born

with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad.” That’s it, the rest we must imagine. Then there is Margaret Mitchell’s heroine, “Scarlett O’Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it

when caught by her charm as the Tarleton twins were.” It is interesting to note that in all of the 82 novels and short stories, Erle Stanley Gardner did not actually describe Perry Mason; he just gave readers the impression that he was a large man. Gardner was very enthusiastic about Raymond Burr being cast as Mason, stating that he looked just as he had pictured his legendary attorney.

Getting back to the Bad Doctor, I unhesitatingly confess a certain degree of grudging sympathy for him. While there is no way of getting around the fact that he was not only a cold-blooded murderer but an almost diabolical one as well, there can be little doubt that had fate treated him with even a modicum of kindness his life would have turned out to be radically different.

Helen Stoner tells us that he was the last member of what had been an ancient and honored family, possibly even possessing a few drops of blue blood. Unfortunately for him, his profligate ancestors did not take good care of the family resources, which left him—through no fault of his own—condemned to follow in the footsteps of a tragic father who lived “the horrible life of an aristocratic pauper.”

To his credit, the last of the Royslotts decided not to go gentle into that good night, instead borrowing funds to pursue a medical degree, which enabled him to establish himself in a gentleman’s profession, building a lucrative practice in Calcutta.

Helen’s claim that “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,” is easily dismissed in our age of DNA and gene tampering. However, it is entirely possible that his life in India may have done his general disposition a

disservice. Life in the Raj was far from heavenly for all. If one adds to this time spent in an Indian prison, it is small wonder that he returned to England with a more than slightly soured disposition. It is even likely that his prison record might have precluded him from practicing the profession he so struggled to attain, adding to his unhappiness.

Small wonder he developed such a solid core of bitterness and anger towards the world. By this time, his alienation from society was solidly cast. This is reflected by his chosen company—gypsies. These were also outsiders living in an intolerant society that detested them as vagabonds and thieves, most of the time without proof or reality. He felt at ease in their company because, recognizing a fellow pariah, they accepted him unquestioningly.

The Three Fates certainly showed no pity towards Royslott, considering that added to all his load of resentment, his situation was such, that even his basic livelihood on a crumbling, reduced, family estate wholly depended upon a dead wife’s dwindling inheritance and to the fact that her two daughters were yet unmarried.

The state of the house demonstrated that the yearly earnings from the inheritance were barely sufficient for their expenses and the maintenance of an estate that was, to say the least, in a state of decay. When the decline in agricultural prices reduced the yearly £1,000 to £750 (≈\$280,000) the economic situation must have increased in severity. Were his two stepdaughter to marry, Dr. Royslott would have been left with only £250 (≈\$94,000) a year, which would have prevented him from leading the



Courtesy of ITV Granada

isolated existence that he had chosen to follow. With the initial sum reduced to £750 (\approx \$300,000), had Helen married, Roylott would have been forced to live on the interest of the smaller amount (£500)—insufficient to maintain his establishment.

Faced with the very real possibility of losing everything, it is not surprising that his twisted mind would have turned to such fiendish plans of murder to avoid this result.

That Roylott's mind was unhinged bears no discussion. Were one to consider his situation dispassionately, with a view to murder, one must wonder why he waited for the sisters to become engaged



Courtesy of ITV Granada

before deciding to murder them. From what Helen Stoner described to Holmes, it is obvious that there was no love lost between him and them. An important aspect of this is that had he decided to kill the sisters before they became engaged; at that time he would have had no apparent reason to do it. He would have he would have diverted all possible suspicion; particularly as he used what he must have considered as an ideal, undetectable means of accomplishing his goal.

Another clue to his unbalanced mind was his decision to go out of his way to defy and threaten Sherlock Holmes.

From his words with the Great Detective ("Holmes, the Scotland Yard Jack-in-office!") it is obvious that he knew

who Holmes was. Did he think that he would not exacerbate the situation by giving the Great Detective a stronger reason for investigating his private affairs?

None of this should be taken as justification for such a sinister, premeditated cold-blooded murderer. 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."

What else happened in 1883:

Empire

Britain evacuates The Sudan.

Britain

The Fabian Society is founded in London.

Royal College of Music established.

Small electric power station built at 57 Holborn Viaduct.

World

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

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.

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

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.



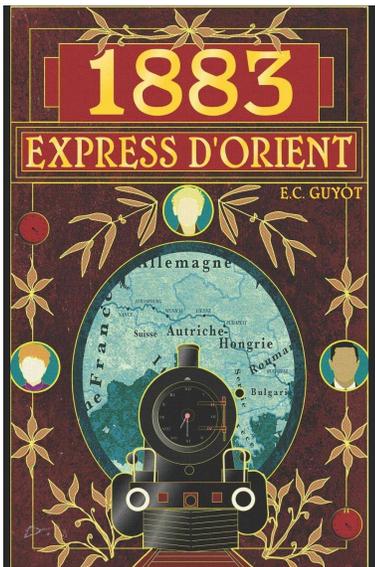
◀ Brooklyn Bridge opens with attendance of U.S. President Arthur and other dignitaries from the State of New York. When the bridge is open to the public, crowds attempt to cross it and a number of people are killed in the crush. As a result, radical changes are made to the bridge's approaches.

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.

Buffalo Bill organizes his *Wild West Show*.

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.



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.

Edouard Manet, famous painter, dies.

◀ Richard Wagner, composer, dies.

Gustave Dore, famous illustrator, dies.

Nietzsche publishes *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

Science and Technology

Sir Victor Horsley discovers role of thyroid gland.

Edison discovers electricity can travel through space.

Klebs and Loeffler discover the diphtheria bacillus.

First skyscraper built in Chicago. Ten stories.

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..."

If you would like to join the Hounds of the Internet, email us at CourageousMurray@aol.com.

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