

An Observance Of Trifles

You know my method. It is founded upon the observance of trifles.

(Arthur Conan Doyle)

snell's interminable ramblings about the canon

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

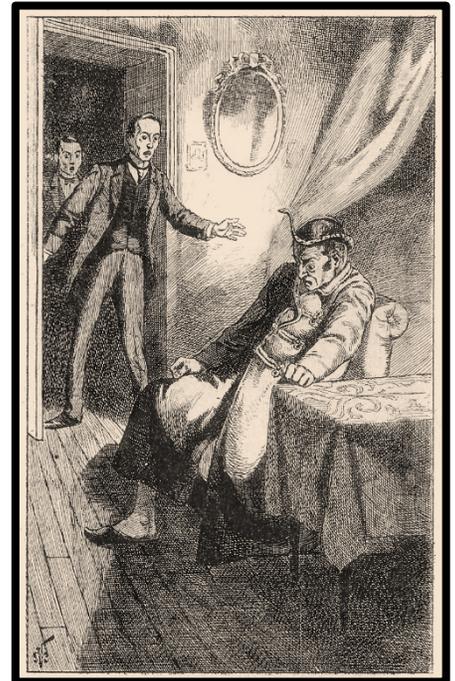
Adventure X -- The Adventure of the Speckled Band

Holmes' First Bond Villain!

There is something that I like to call the **Twilight Zone Phenomenon**.

There reaches a point when, through overexposure, an audience begins to lose touch with what a story actually does or says, and seems content to distill it down to a one or two sentence summary, letting all the subtleties and meanings of the work vanish into a jaded, post-ironic ether.

Take the **Twilight Zone**, for example. We've seen all of those episodes, especially the "classic" ones, dozens of times. We've seen parodies and pastiches (and out-and-out stealing) of their ideas by television and movies and comics (not that **Serling** and company were above **ahem** borrowing an idea from other sources). At times, it seems as if we've become jaded to the original stories, and are unable to engage with them on any level except the *tagline* and the *twist*. "Oh, that's the one where **William Shatner** sees the monster on the plane wing!" or "The one where **Burgess Meredith** breaks his glasses!" or "The planet where everyone is ugly!" To heck with any of the themes of the cautionary tales, the nuances, the details--what they're *really* about. The modern audience just wants it boiled down to "*It's a cookbook!*"



Which brings me to **The Adventure Of The Speckled Band**, or as many people--who look puzzled initially when I begin to describe the story--exclaim, "*oh, the one with the snake!!*"

Yes, the one with the snake. *Sigh*.

Speckled Band, along with **The Red-Headed League** and **Silver Blaze**, is one of the most reprinted of the **Holmes** short stories. It even appears quite often in English textbooks. It has been adapted to stage and screen more often than any of the other short stories (by my unofficial, doubtless incomplete count).

Arthur Conan Doyle himself declared it his favorite story, and produced a very successful and long-running play based on the story.

And there is a *tremendous* amount of stuff going on in this story. Start with the fact that it is Sherlock Holmes' first locked room murder mystery. Add in the fact that you have a marvelous villain--who'd make a great Bond Villain--who comes up with a overwrought scheme worthy of a **Columbo** killer.

Beautiful twin sisters threatened by "gipsies" and exotic foreign animals make this a wonderful bit of Gothic melodrama.

Add in some interesting thematic nuggets--musings about the plight of a declining aristocracy, thoughts about the financial (and physical) plight of women in Victorian England, and a symbolic acknowledgement of the fear many felt about the cultural influences from Britain's empire that were beginning to seep back to the home country.

And all anyone wants to talk about is the ****ed snake. *Sigh*.

Don't get me wrong--the snake is cool and all--but come on, people, there's much, much more to this story than "the twist."

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVANCES:

**** Doctor Grimesby Roylott of Stoke Moran** is a tremendously wonderful name for a villain, isn't it? And it's not just the name--Doyle gives him a creepy physical presence.

So tall was he that his hat actually brushed the cross bar of the doorway, and his breadth seemed to span it across from side to side. 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.

He also dresses distinctively: "*His costume was a peculiar mixture of the professional and of the agricultural, having a black top-hat, a long frock-coat, and a pair of high gaiters, with a hunting-crop swinging in his hand.*" He has immense physical strength, and a violent temper. Yet he is also cunning and devious. Throw in a menagerie of exotic creatures--a cheetah! A baboon! Poisonous snakes!--and Grimesby Roylott is only one symbolic physical infirmity or affected foreign accent from being a James Bond villain!

Yet, for all his fiendish cleverness, his murder plan is a little *much*, isn't it? For it to work, he has to bolt **Julia's** bed to the floor, install a fake bell-pull rope in her room, and install an unnecessary ventilator

between his room and hers--all very soon prior to the murder! And don't forget the long weeks (months?) it would have taken to train the snake. That's an investment of time a Columbo villain might hesitate to make.

That's an awful lot of work, and it still requires us to believe that the local coroner was not particularly curious about odd coincidences.

And then he contrives to move **Helen** into Julia's old room, and have her die *in exactly the same way*? How can he expect to get away with that? Even the most Barney Fifish of local constabulary would have to declare that to be too much coincidence, and lead to a much more intense investigation.

This indicates, to me, that cunning has slid into madness (if he wasn't already there, having beaten a "*native butler*" to death in a fit of rage).

And given that local doctors couldn't identify the poison, or even find the fang marks on Julia's body, I'm not sure he needed to go to all that trouble. Just milk some poison from the adder, and surreptitiously jab her with a hypodermic (he *was* a doctor, after all). Or ****, just let the snake bite her right out in the open; if the "slow process of official inquiry came to the conclusion that the doctor met his fate while indiscreetly playing with a dangerous pet" for Roylott's death, it's unlikely they would call a similar accident murder if it happened to Helen instead.

** Holmes opines. "*When a doctor does go wrong he is the first of criminals. He has nerve and he has knowledge.*" Hence, **Doctor Doom, Dr. Phibes, Doctor Polaris, Doctor Demonius, Dr. Shrinker, Dr. Evil**, etc.

** Roylott and Holmes have one of the most glorious exchanges, all in favor of Holmes, as the detective is able to goad the evil doctor by smiling and ignoring him.

My stepdaughter has been here. I have traced her. What has she been saying to you?"

"It is a little cold for the time of the year," said Holmes.

"What has she been saying to you?" screamed the old man furiously.

"But I have heard that the crocuses promise well," continued my companion imperturbably.

"Ha! You put me off, do you?" said our new visitor, taking a step forward and shaking his hunting-crop. "I know you, you scoundrel! I have heard of you before. You are Holmes, the meddler."

My friend smiled.

"Holmes, the busybody!"

His smile broadened. "Holmes, the Scotland Yard Jack-in-office!"

Holmes chuckled heartily. "Your conversation is most entertaining," said he. "When you go out close the door, for there is a decided draught."

** This is the *second* Holmes story in which a young woman's evil step-father is willing to go to extreme lengths to keep her from marrying, so he may maintain control of her money. And unlike **A Case Of Identity**, this time it's murder, not just pretend-incest.

I'm no economic/sociology scholar, but surely Doyle intended this as something of a statement about the plight of single women in Victorian times. He was famously anti-women's suffrage, but we shouldn't allow that one political stand to paint him as *totally* misogynist; he also campaigned hard for reform of England's draconian divorce laws, which was viewed as being pro-women's rights, and for other social reforms supported by feminists of the era.

Certainly the recurrence of this story in his work--the young woman forced to choose between living at home and effectively surrendering her inheritance to uncaring "family," with the only exit a marriage that would be challenged by humiliation or death--shows he had some awareness and concern over the difficulties faced by single women in society, their access to family money and their ability to support themselves.

Perhaps the best lesson we can draw is, if you're leaving a young female relative a sizable bequest, don't attach conditions about marriage or the such on it. Just give her the **** money.

The other lesson: Step-fathers are *evil b*****ds*..

** When Helen Stoner describes the history and slow decline of the Roylott clan, I'm sure many a reader gave an unsympathetic chuckle at "[t]he last squire dragged out his existence there, living the horrible life of an aristocratic pauper." Aww, poor rich people!

But of course, England was undergoing massive economic and social changes, and the decline of the landed gentry was a serious issue--perhaps not because they would turn to murder, as this story suggests, but because the economic support systems of whole regions was vanishing, without anything to replace them. Yeah, the Roylott's problems might not induce a tear, but the many servants and tradesmen and shopkeepers who depended on their money were no out of luck, too. Take **Watson's** description of the manor, "In one of these wings the windows were broken and blocked with wooden boards, while the roof was partly caved in, a picture of ruin." No one benefited from something like that, and the collapse of the Roylott's doubtless meant a lot of other people had to leave for the not-really-great conditions in the cities or mine to earn a living.

At least give Grimesby Roylott credit, for he tried to break out of the cycle. He took a loan from a relative, got an education, and took up an important (and lucrative) trade. Unfortunately, his (hereditary, perhaps, reading his family history) madness caught up with him. But at in the beginning, he *tried* to save his family.

** A cheetah and a baboon? Oh, you eccentric Britishers and your wacky pets.

Surprisingly enough, the **1964 BBC** version actually had a *real* cheetah and baboon, proving that not every show of the era suffered from **Doctor Who**-like production budgets.

The **Grenada** adaptation apparently couldn't get their hands on a cheetah, so they *changed* it to a leopard. *Growwwllll!*

If you're of a particularly literary bent, you *might* interpret these exotic, foreign animals and the fear they cause as symbolic for the unease caused by the growing cultural influence of Britain's holdings on the homelands. And the fact that they weren't truly the evil at work here a symbolic rejection of those fears.

Or perhaps, sometime a cheetah (*or leopard*) and a baboon are just a cheetah (*or leopard*) and a baboon...

** In the BBC '64 version, there is *definitely* some attraction/flirtation going on between Watson and Helen Stoner.

No problem there on Watson's part; in the original writings, this takes place while he's still a bachelor, and in the TV series he was never married. But Miss Stoner is engaged at this point!!

Yet she is not *too* enchanted with her fiancé, **Percy Armitage**. She complains that he's not too supportive of her worries: "even he to whom of all others I have a right to look for help and advice looks upon all that I tell him about it as the fancies of a nervous woman. He does not say so, but I can read it from his soothing answers and averted eyes."

We have to wonder if, now that she no longer had to marry to get away from Roylott, she followed through on marrying **Mr. "You're Just A Scared Female."**

** Given Roylott's violence and cunning, many commentators have been suspicious of the death of the Stoners' mother: "*Shortly after our return to England my mother died--she was killed eight years ago in a railway accident near Crewe.*" Could her death have been staged, as well? Could she have been murdered by Grimesby, so he could access her money?

There's no real evidence either way. But perhaps the greater question is why people aren't more suspicious about the untimely death of Helen Stoner. At the beginning of the tale, Watson tells us that he is released from his pledge not to tell the story because of "*the untimely death of the lady to whom the pledge was given.*" Given the troubling family history here, perhaps we should be questioning the surprising death of the sole survivor a mere nine years after the events of Speckled Band. I can't help but suspect foul play might be involved...

** Watson also says the he has decided to tell the tale because "*there are widespread rumours as to the death of Dr. Grimesby Roylott which tend to make the matter even more terrible than the truth.*" Really, Doctor? Rumours that are *worse* than "Roylott murdered one step-daughter with a snake and tried to kill the

other one the same way"? Unless the locals are starting rumours about Satanic ceremonies and unholy relations between Roylott and the baboon, I have trouble conceiving of rumours which *could* more terrible than the truth.

**Doyle once again skimps a bit at the ending, depriving us a bit of the closure we desire.

It is not necessary that I should prolong a narrative which has already run to too great a length by telling how we broke the sad news to the terrified girl, how we conveyed her by the morning train to the care of her good aunt at Harrow, of how the slow process of official inquiry came to the conclusion that the doctor met his fate while indiscreetly playing with a dangerous pet.

No, Sir Arthur, that is exactly the kind of thing we *do* want to hear.

** If I were in a particularly *conspiratorial* state of mind, I would note that with Julia dying unmarried, and Grimesby declared dead 'by accident,' Helen now controls the *entire* £750 annual income. Perhaps a reread looking at the story from this angle might reveal that Holmes and Watson were duped by a clever and cunning murderess...?

Naaahhhh...

** Watson writes that Holmes "work[ed] as he did rather for the love of his art than for the acquirement of wealth..." Holmes himself tells Miss Stoner that, "As to reward, my profession is its own reward; but you are at liberty to defray whatever expenses I may be put to, at the time which suits you best." This seems to once again belie the notion of Holmes being greedy. It certainly makes Granada's conceit that Holmes kept the **Blue Carbuncle** seem baseless.

** The Granada version decided for some reason that the Stoners were *not* twins--Julia was 5 years older than Helen. Go figure...?

** Only 1 prior case specifically mentioned this time, and it comes from Miss Stoner and Holmes, not Watson--the case of **Mrs. Farintosh**, which "*concerned an opal tiara. I think it was before your time, Watson.*"

** The "*gipsies*" were a pretty effective red herring, and Doyle went so far as to have Holmes latch onto them as suspects at the outset. Given Doyle's prior proclivities for making foreign groups and outsiders responsible for many crimes, the reader begins to make that leap as well. Well played, Sir.

** Maybe it's just me, but could *anyone* possibly go 2 plus without realizing the bell-pull was a dummy? Even if you "*never*" used it, wouldn't you at some point test it, just to see if it worked? Just because it was there? How could you resist? I know I couldn't. Is it a guy thing? Or just a *me* thing?

** There have probably been more pages written debating what kind of snake appears in this story then there have been debating the Kennedy assassination.

A slight exaggeration, but only slight. **The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes** has a 3-page *chart* examining all the snake species that have been suggested as possibilities, explaining how they fit Watson's description and how they don't, with references to no fewer than **12** articles by Holmesian scholars on the subject. One gentleman goes so far as to suggest a hybrid between a Mexican Gila monster and an Indian cobra as the likely culprit.

Just stop. It's a piece of fiction. It's a snake. Suspend disbelief, move on, and enjoy the story, please.

** Final lesson: If you have time for dying words, please *avoid fancy metaphors*. "Oh, my God! Helen! It was the band! The speckled band!" is nice and all, but in that *same* amount of time you could have said, "I was bitten by a darn snake! Here's the wound!" And Roylott would have been in jail long ago.

So don't get cute with your dying words, is what I'm saying.

Brian Keith Snell

August 10, 2014