



The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure X -- The Adventure of the Speckled Band

This is Sherlock Holmes at his best! He is kind and considerate to his client, poised and cool in the presence of the villain, and absolutely courageous in the face of danger. And what a danger! The awareness of it slithers in upon our minds: “A ventilator is made, a cord is hung, and a lady who sleeps in the bed dies. Does not that strike you?” Yes, it certainly does strike us! Even those who cannot remember the story’s title always remember “the one with the snake.” Is there any wonder that this story consistently ranks at the top of every list of Sherlockian favorites? In a moment: The scent of cigar smoke leads the Hounds to solve the mysteries of “The Speckled Band!”

A very amiable person: That Grimesby Roylott is quite a character, isn’t he? He killed a man and served hard time for it. He abused his stepdaughters physically, and possibly sexually as well. We never doubt that he killed Julia Stoner, even if at first we don’t know how he managed it. His neighbors hated and feared him. And he seems to have been on the Canonical Worst Dressed List too!

What do you make of Roylott’s association with the gypsies? Did he let them camp on his land just because it annoyed the neighbors? Did he plan to blame his second murder upon them? (Not a bad idea: Even Sherlock Holmes had the gypsies on his mind until he saw the details of the murder room.) Or did Roylott long for the gypsy life, a life without land to manage and a household to maintain?

We cannot deny that the murder of Julia Stoner was cleverly done. Even had the local coroner noticed the marks of the serpent’s fangs on the victim, Roylott could have simply blamed the snake and destroyed it with many a crocodile tear about how it got away from him and just happened to bite his stepdaughter.



The murder method worked so well that Roylott tried it again, but it baffles me that he should have done so immediately after Helen Stoner had been to see a detective. Did Roylott not realize how much his stepdaughter had seen and heard on the night of her sister's death? Did he underestimate Sherlock Holmes?

And why did Roylott come into town that day? Did he lie to Helen about his important business, just so that he could see what she did in his absence? Why did he decide to barge in upon Holmes and threaten him? Did he really think that intimidation was the best way to prevent interference? Was he past thinking? Was his visit a subconscious wish to be caught and prevented from committing another crime?

A thousand details: The swamp adder's bite killed Roylott in ten seconds, but Julia Stoner lingered on long enough to stagger out of her room and talk to her sister for a moment. How do you explain the time difference? Different reaction times on different victims? Different snakes?

Would Helen Stoner really have been happy in her marriage to Percy Armitage, a man too thick-headed to recognize that she was in danger from her stepfather? Do you think she ever did marry Percy, once she didn't need him as her means of escape from her intolerable life at Stoke Moran?

Why does Holmes call Helen Stoner "Miss Roylott?" (See Doubleday, page 263: I believe that the name switch does not occur in all editions of the story.) Was it an accidental slip, or an intentional goad? If the latter, what did Holmes hope to learn from it?

Most modern readers cannot help but take note of the many sexual symbols in this story. And yet many of you who have been Sherlockians since childhood undoubtedly read the story for the first time without thinking of anything but literal snakes and pokers. Do you think that we enjoy the story more or less when we have some knowledge of its Freudian undertones?

Rosemary Michaud