

THE SPECKLED BAND

By Arthur Conan Doyle

For many years, I was a good friend of Sherlock Holmes, the famous private detective. During this time, Holmes solved many unusual mysteries. But perhaps one of the most unusual was the mystery of the Speckled Band.

The story began in April, 1883. At that time, Holmes and I were sharing an apartment in Baker Street, in London. One morning, I woke up very early. To my surprise, Holmes was standing beside my bed. He was already dressed.

'What's happened, Holmes?' I asked. 'Is there a fire?'

'No, Watson,' replied Holmes. 'A client has just arrived. A young lady is waiting downstairs. She seems very worried and upset. I think she has something important to tell me. This could be an interesting case, Watson. That's why I woke you up.'

'I'll come at once,' I said.

I was very interested in Holmes' cases. My friend was a very clever detective. I very much admired his work. So I dressed quickly and went downstairs with Holmes. The lady was waiting in our sitting-room. She was dressed all in black. Over her face she wore a veil.

'Good morning, madam,' said Holmes. 'I'm Sherlock Holmes and this is Dr. Watson, my friend and helper.' Holmes shut the door and turned to the lady. 'You're shivering, madam,' he said. 'You must be cold. Sit near the fire and I'll get you some hot coffee.'

The lady moved nearer the fire. Then she said, 'It isn't the cold which makes me shiver.'

'What is it, then?' 'It's fear, Mr Holmes. It's terror.' As she spoke, the lady raised her veil. We saw at once that she was very frightened. Her eyes were like the eyes of a terrified animal. She was a young woman, about thirty years old, but her hair was already turning grey with worry.

Holmes looked at the lady carefully. Then he leant forward and touched her arm. 'Don't be afraid,' he said kindly. 'I'm sure we can help you. But first, please tell us your story.'

'Mr Holmes,' said our visitor, 'I know I'm in terrible danger. Please tell me what to do!'

'I'm listening carefully,' said Holmes.

So the lady began her L story. 'My name,' she said, 'is Helen Stoner. My father was an officer in the Indian army. But he died when I was a baby. After his death, my mother, my sister Julia, and myself continued to live in India. My sister Julia and I were twins. When Julia and I were only two years old, my mother married again. She married a man called Dr Grimesby Roylott. So Dr. Roylott became our stepfather.'

'Tell me about Dr Roylott,' said Holmes.

'In the past, Dr Roylott's family were very rich,' said Miss Stoner. 'But, as the years went by, they lost all their money. Now Dr Roylott has only a large, old house and a small piece of land. The house is called Stoke Moran. I'm living at Stoke Moran with Dr Roylott now.'

'When my stepfather was young, he studied medicine. After he became a doctor, he went to India. That's where he met my mother and later married her. 'My mother was a rich woman,' went on Miss Stoner. 'She had a private income. Every year, she received a sum of about one thousand pounds from her bank. When she married Dr Roylott, an agreement was made about this money.'

'What was this agreement?' asked Holmes.

'If my mother died,' replied Miss Stoner, 'Dr Roylott would inherit her income. After her death, he would receive one thousand pounds every year. 'But if my sister or I married, some of the one thousand pounds would go to us instead. We would receive part of the money.'

'I see,' said Holmes.'

After some years, we returned to England from India, ' " continued Miss Stoner. 'But soon after we got back, my mother was killed in an accident. At first, all our neighbors at Stoke Moran were friendly with my stepfather. They were very happy that someone from the Roylott family was living at Stoke Moran again. 'But my stepfather didn't want to make friends with anyone. Whenever he went out, he quarreled with somebody. He is a very bad-tempered man and gets angry quickly. Soon, all our neighbors were afraid of him.'

'Didn't he have any friends at all?' asked Holmes.

'His only friends were gypsies ,' said Miss Stoner. 'These gypsies move round the country in bands. Dr Roylott allows these gypsies to camp on his land. 'Dr Roylott is also very fond of Indian animals. Two of these - a cheetah and a baboon - were sent to him from India. They run around freely over his land. Everyone is terrified of these dangerous animals. So Julia and I became more and more unhappy,' went on Miss Stoner. 'No servants wanted to live at Stoke Moran so we had to do all the work. When Julia died . . . '

'Your sister is dead, then?' asked Holmes. At once, he became very interested.

'Yes,' said Miss Stoner. 'She was to be married. The date had been fixed for the wedding. But two weeks before her wedding day, Julia died.'

Holmes leaned forward excitedly. "Tell me exactly what happened,' he said.

'On the night of Julia's death,' said Miss Stoner, my step-father went to his room early. Julia and I were sitting together in my bedroom. We talked until about eleven o'clock. Then Julia went to bed. All the bedrooms at Stoke Moran are in the same part of the house. They're all next to each other, on the ground floor. 'The door of each bedroom opens into the same corridor. The windows look out onto the garden. But there are no doors or windows from one bedroom to the next.'

'I understand,' said Holmes.

'As Julia was leaving my room that evening, she asked a strange question. "Tell me, Helen," she said, "have you ever heard anyone whistle in the middle of the night?"

"No," I said, in surprise.

"Why?" went to his room early. Julia and I were sitting together in my bedroom. We talked until about eleven o'clock. Then she told me: Helen each night, I've heard a quiet whistle followed by a metallic clank. It's a strange whistle. It's very low and clear. But I don't know where it comes from." Do you know where it comes from?

"Remember," I said, some gypsies are camping near the house. Perhaps it was one of them whistling at night."

"You're probably right," Julia replied. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. Goodnight." She smiled at me and closed my door.'

'Did you and Julia always lock your doors at night?' asked Holmes.

'Yes,' replied Miss Stoner. 'We were afraid of the cheetah and the baboon. They're dangerous animals. We didn't feel safe unless our doors and windows were locked.'

'Of course,' said Holmes. 'Please go on.'

'That night, there was a terrible storm,' continued Miss Stoner. 'The wind was howling and the rain was beating on the window. I couldn't sleep. Suddenly I heard a dreadful scream. I knew it was Julia. I jumped out of bed and ran into the corridor. As I opened my door, I thought I heard a noise. It was a low, clear whistle. Then I heard another sound. The second sound was like

metal clanging against metal. I saw that my sister's door was open. I stared at it in horror. Suddenly Julia appeared. She was standing in the doorway. Her face was white with terror. Her eyes were staring wildly. She was swaying from side to side, like a drunk person. Then she fell on the floor. Her body moved like someone in terrible pain. Suddenly she screamed these words: "Oh, my God! Helen! It was the band! The speckled band!"

Then she fainted. At that moment, my stepfather came out of his room. He ran down the corridor to help Julia. But there was nothing he could do. 'My stepfather went to the village to bring another doctor. But before he returned, poor Julia was dead.'

'How was your sister dressed?' asked Holmes.

'She was wearing her nightdress. In one hand, she was holding a box of matches and, in the other, a burnt match.'

'So she had lit a match to see around her,' said Holmes. 'That could be important. Was the cause of her death ever discovered?'

'No,' replied Miss Stoner. 'Nobody could find out how she died. Her body was not marked in any way. The doors and windows of Julia's room were locked. The chimney was built so that no one could climb down into the fireplace from the roof. Nobody could get in or out of her room. So Julia must have been alone in her bedroom.'

'But what about her strange words: "The speckled band?" ' asked Holmes. 'What do you think she meant?'

'I don't know,' said Miss Stoner. 'But perhaps she meant a band of people. Gypsies were camping near the house. Many of these gypsies wear handkerchiefs on their heads. These

handkerchiefs have a design of spots or speckles. So perhaps Julia was trying to describe the band of gypsies.'

Holmes looked doubtful. 'Please go on,' he said.

'Julia died two years ago,' said Miss Stoner. 'Since her death, I've been very lonely. But recently, a dear friend of mine asked me to marry him. We're getting married very soon. 'But two days ago, some builders arrived at Stoke Moran. The builders started to knock a hole through my bedroom wall. So I had to move out of my room and into Julia's room. I've been sleeping in her bed.'

Miss Stoner stopped for a few moments. Then she said, 'Mr Holmes, last night, I heard a terrible sound.'

'What was that?' I asked.

'It was a whistle, Dr Watson. A low, clear whistle. The same sound Julia heard for several nights before she died!'

Holmes and I looked at each other in astonishment.

'What did you do?' asked Holmes.

'I jumped out of bed and looked around me,' replied Miss Stoner. 'But it was dark and I couldn't see anything. At daylight, I went to the station and caught a train to London. I knew I had to see you, Mr Holmes. You are the only man who can help me.'

'But I can only help you if you tell me everything,' said Holmes. 'You have not told me everything, Miss Stoner.'

'What do you mean?' asked Miss Stoner, in surprise.

Holmes did not answer. He took hold of Miss Stoner's arm and pushed back her sleeve. I saw five red marks on her arm. They

were the marks of four fingers and a thumb. Somebody had held Miss Stoner's arm tightly.

'Your stepfather has hurt you badly,' said Holmes.

Miss Stoner's face became red. 'Dr Roylott is a very strong man,' she said. 'He doesn't know how strong he is.'

Holmes stared into the fire without speaking. I knew he was thinking hard. 'I need some more information,' he said at last. 'But we must move quickly. I want to go to Stoke Moran today and examine the bedrooms there. But your stepfather must not know about my visit.'

'Dr Roylott has important business in London today,' said Miss Stoner. 'He'll be away from home all day.'

'Excellent!' cried Holmes. 'Will you come with me, Watson?'

'Of course,' I replied.

'Then, Miss Stoner, we'll arrive at Stoke Moran early this afternoon''

'I must go now,' said Miss Stoner. 'But I feel much happier, now that I have told you about my troubles. Goodbye.' She pulled her veil over her face and left the room.

Holmes leant back in his chair. 'Well, Watson,' he said, 'this matter is very strange.'

'I don't understand it,' I said. 'Helen Stoner's sister, Julia, was alone in her bedroom. Nobody could get in or out. So how did she die?'

'And what about the whistle in the night?' said Holmes. 'And the dying woman's words about the "speckled band"?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Perhaps the band of gypsies . . .'

Suddenly the door of our room was thrown open and a man appeared. He was so large that his body almost filled the doorway. His face was red and his eyes were cruel. The man stared at Holmes. Then he looked at me. 'Which of you is Holmes?' he asked rudely.

'That's my name,' answered my friend quietly.

'Well, I'm Dr Grimesby Roylott of Stoke Moran,' said the man. 'I know my stepdaughter's been here. I followed her. What has she been saying to you?'

Holmes was not afraid of the large man. He was not going to tell Dr Roylott anything about Helen Stoner's visit. So he said politely, 'The weather is a little cold just now, isn't it?'

'Answer my question!' shouted Dr Roylott angrily. 'What has my stepdaughter been saying to you? I've heard about you, Holmes. You're a busybody. You interfere in other people's lives. Well, keep out of my life. I'm a dangerous man. Look!'

A poker was lying beside the fire. It was made of iron and was very heavy. Dr Roylott stepped forward and picked it up. He bent the poker with his huge hands. Then he threw it back into the fireplace.

'I'm warning you, Holmes. Keep out of my life!' he said again. Then he left the room.

Holmes began to laugh. 'Well,' he said, 'perhaps I'm not as large as Dr Roylott. But I'm just as strong.' As he spoke, Holmes picked up the poker and pulled it straight again. 'Now,' said Holmes, 'let's have some breakfast, Watson. Then I have some business to do. I need more information.'

It was nearly one o'clock before Holmes returned. He looked excited. 'I've been to Mrs Roylott's lawyer,' he said. 'I've seen her will. This is what she wanted to happen to her money after her death. After her death, Dr Roylott inherited all of his wife's income. But if Julia and Helen Stoner married, they would receive a large part of the income instead.'

'So Dr Roylott would lose a lot of money,' I said.

'Exactly,' said Holmes. 'But now, Watson, we must hurry. And, please, bring your gun with you.'

We caught a train to Leatherhead, the nearest town to Stoke Moran. Then we drove along the country lanes to Dr Roylott's house. It was a beautiful spring day. Soon we saw a large house through the trees.

'That's Stoke Moran,' said our driver, pointing at the house. 'The quickest way to get there is through the fields. See, where that lady is.'

We saw a lady walking towards us. It was Helen Stoner. We paid the driver and he set off back to Leatherhead. Miss Stoner hurried forward to meet us. 'We have plenty of time,' she said. 'Dr Roylott won't return from London until this evening.'

'We've already met your stepfather,' said Holmes. He told Miss Stoner about Dr Roylott's visit.

Miss Stoner's face went white. 'So he followed me,' she said. 'I'll never be safe from him.'

'Come,' said Holmes. 'Let's examine the bedrooms.'

We walked across the fields to the house. We saw that work was being done on one wall of the house. This was the wall of Miss Stoner's bedroom. 'This is strange,' said Holmes. 'I can't see why this work is necessary.'

'No,' said Miss Stoner. 'I am sure that the work is *not* necessary. It is an excuse to get me to move from my room.'

'Well,' said Holmes, 'I want to examine the room you're sleeping in now — your sister Julia's room.'

The room was small, with a low ceiling and a wide fireplace. There was some old furniture in the room — a bed, a table and two chairs. Holmes, examined everything carefully. Suddenly he pointed to a long rope which hung down by the bed. The end of this rope touched the pillow. The rope looked like a bell-rope for calling a servant. If the person in bed wanted something, they could pull the rope. The rope would be attached to a bell in another part of the house. The bell would ring and a servant would come.

'That bell-rope looks very new,' Holmes remarked.

'Yes,' replied Miss Stoner. 'It was put in only two years ago.'

Holmes pulled the bell-rope. We waited. But nothing happened. We could not hear a bell ringing anywhere in the house. 'Look,' said Holmes suddenly. 'This isn't a real bell-rope. It doesn't go anywhere. It's attached to a hook on the ceiling.' We all stared up at the ceiling. Holmes was right. Then I noticed something else.

Near the top of the bell-rope was a tiny opening in the wall. It looked like a small ventilator.

Holmes saw the ventilator too. 'That's strange,' he said. 'Air usually comes into a room from outside, through a ventilator. But this ventilator connects two rooms inside. I wonder why?'

'I don't know,' said Miss Stoner. 'But the bell-rope and the ventilator were put in at the same time.'

'That's very interesting,' said Holmes. 'A bell-rope which doesn't ring a bell and a ventilator which doesn't ventilate. They are both false. And now, Miss Stoner, I'd like to examine your stepfather's room.' We went into Dr Roylott's room next door. There were a few pieces of furniture in the room and some books. In the middle of the floor stood a large iron safe. The safe was locked. Holmes knocked on the walls of the safe. 'What's in here?' he asked.

'My stepfather's business papers,' replied Miss Stoner.

'There isn't a cat inside?'

'A cat!' said Miss Stoner, in surprise. 'No. What a strange idea.'

'Well, look,' said Holmes. He pointed to a small saucer of milk on top of the safe.

'We don't have a cat,' said Miss Stoner. 'But there is the cheetah. A cheetah is just a big cat.'

'Yes, of course,' said Holmes. 'But here's something else.' A short stick was lying on top of the bed. A thin rope was attached to this stick. One end of the rope had been tied into a noose. I looked

at the noose. I wondered what it was for. 'Well,' said Holmes. 'I think I've seen enough.' We walked out into the garden. Holmes looked very serious 'Miss Stoner,' he said at last, 'Dr Watson and I must wait in your room tonight.'

Miss Stoner and I looked at each other in astonishment.

'Yes,' said Holmes. 'Your life is in great danger. This is my plan, Miss Stoner,' said Holmes. 'Listen carefully. When Dr Roylott returns, go into Julia's room, but don't go to bed. Wait until you hear Dr Roylott go to bed. Then put a lamp in the window. Then go to your own room. You must stay there all night. 'Dr Watson and I will be watching the house. The lamp in the window will be a signal for us. When we see the lamp, we'll come.'

'But where will you be?' asked Miss Stoner. Holmes pointed to a building through the trees. 'Is that the village inn?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Miss Stoner.

'Then Dr Watson and I will wait at the village inn,' said Holmes. 'We can watch your bedroom window from there. Goodbye, Miss Stoner, and don't be afraid.'

Holmes and I went to the inn. We paid for a room on the first floor. From our room, we could see Stoke Moran. As it was getting dark, a horse and carriage came along the road. I saw Dr Roylott sitting in the carriage. The carriage went through the big iron gates at Stoke Moran. Then it drove on, up to the house.

'Watson,' said Holmes, 'we may be in great danger tonight.'

'Why do you think we may be in great danger?' I asked.
'What did you see in those rooms?'

'You remember the bell-rope and the ventilator?'

'Yes,' I said. 'But I don't understand why they are important.'

'Both the bell-rope and the ventilator were put into the room two years ago,' said Holmes. 'But they are false. They don't work. And something else happened two years ago. Julia Stoner died.'

'Yes,' I said. 'But I still don't see . . . "

'Did you notice anything unusual about the bed, Watson?' asked Holmes.

'No.'

'The bed was fixed to the floor. It cannot be moved. It must always stay in the same position — next to the bell-rope and under the ventilator.'

'Holmes!' I cried. 'I'm beginning to understand. The person in the bed cannot escape some terrible danger.'

'Dr Roylott is a very clever man,' said Holmes. 'We're just in time to prevent a horrible crime.'

About eleven o'clock, we saw a light. It was the lamp shining from the bedroom window. Holmes jumped up excitedly. 'That's our signal, Watson,' he said. 'Come on!' We hurried along the road. The yellow light was still shining from the bedroom window. We went into the garden of Stoke Moran and walked towards the house. Suddenly a dark shape ran in front of us. It was like a child with very long arms. But it was not a child. I felt very afraid.

'What was that, Holmes?' I asked.

Holmes laughed quietly. 'It was one of Dr Roylott's animals,' he said. 'That was the baboon.'

We reached the house and climbed through the window, into Julia's bedroom. Holmes closed the window. Then he whispered in my ear. 'We must put out the light, Watson. Dr Roylott might see the light through the ventilator.'

I took my gun out of my pocket and put it on the table. Holmes had brought a long, thin stick with him. He put this stick on the bed. He put a box of matches beside the stick. I put out the lamp, and we waited. I shall never forget that terrible night. We were in complete darkness and we knew we mustn't make a sound. We heard the bell in the village clock. It struck midnight, then one o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock . . . Still we waited. Suddenly I saw a light shining through the ventilator. Somebody in Dr Roylott's room had lit a lamp. I heard someone moving about quietly. Then everything was silent again.

Another half hour passed. Then I heard a strange noise — a very soft, hissing noise. The noise was near us in the room. Holmes jumped up and lit a match. Immediately, I heard a low, clear whistle. Suddenly Holmes began hitting the bell-rope with his stick. By the light of the match, I saw his face. It was full of horror.

'Do you see it, Watson?' he shouted.

But I saw nothing. Holmes stopped hitting the bell-rope and gazed up at the ventilator. Suddenly we heard a dreadful cry — a cry of pain and terror. I felt cold and sick with fear.

'What was that cry?' I whispered.

'It means that everything is over,' said Holmes. 'Bring your gun and let's go into Dr Roylott's room.' Holmes lit the lamp. Then I followed him down the corridor to Dr Roylott's room. We knocked twice on the door, but there was no reply. We pushed the door open and entered the room. A terrible sight met our eyes. Dr Roylott was sitting beside his safe. The door of the safe was open. The short stick with the noose lay across Dr Roylott's knees. Dr Roylott was dead. His eyes were staring upwards in terror. There was something strange round his head. It was bright yellow, with brown speckles. 'The band,' whispered Holmes. 'The speckled band!'

I stepped forward. Immediately the strange band began to move. 'It's a snake,' I cried in horror. Quickly Holmes grabbed the stick with the noose on the end. He caught the snake's head in the noose. Then he threw the snake into the iron safe and closed the door. The metal door clanged shut.

Next morning, we took Helen Stoner away from Stoke Moran. The poor girl was very upset by what had happened. We took her to an aunt's house in London. She would stay there until her wedding. We also told the police about Dr Roylott's death. Then we returned to our apartment in Baker Street.

'Tell me something, Holmes,' I said. 'How did you know the "speckled band" was a snake?'

'Well,' said Holmes, 'when I examined Julia Stoner's bedroom, I saw the bell-rope and the ventilator. I saw they were both false. Then I noticed the bed was fixed to the floor. 'And I realized that something could pass through the ventilator; it could travel down the bell-rope and land on the bed. Immediately, I

thought of a snake. 'Dr Roylott had other strange animals from India. It would be easy for him to have a snake as well. 'So he kept it in his safe and fed it with milk. And every night he put the snake through the ventilator. It went into his stepdaughter's room and came down the rope. He knew that one night it would bite the girl in the bed.'

'How did he make the snake come back to him?' I asked.

'Dr Roylott's signal to the snake was a whistle,' replied Holmes. 'When the snake heard the whistle, it returned to its master. Julia and Helen Stoner also heard this whistle.'

'On the night her sister died,' I said, 'Helen Stoner heard the sound of metal clanging against metal.'

'That was the safe door clanging shut,' said Holmes.

'So when you heard the hissing noise in the room last night,' I said, 'you knew it was the snake.'

'Yes. So, I hit it with my stick and it went back through the ventilator. But the blows from my stick also made it angry. That's why it bit Dr Roylott.'

'Dr Roylott wanted his stepdaughters' money,' I said. 'He killed Julia Stoner and he tried to kill her sister, Helen, too. But his plans went wrong. The snake finally killed its master.'

'Exactly,' said Holmes. 'And I don't feel very sorry for him.'