

THE SPECKLED BAND

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An Early Morning Visitor for Holmes

For many years, I was a good friend of Sherlock Holmes, the famous private detective¹.

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 client² 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 case³, 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 veil⁴.

‘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!'

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Miss Stoner Begins Her Story

'I'm listening carefully,' said Holmes. So the lady began her 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 I continued to live in India. My sister Julia and I were twins⁵. 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 income⁶. 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 inherit⁷ 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 neighbours 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 quarrelled with somebody. He is a very bad-tempered man and gets angry quickly. Soon, all our neighbours were afraid of him.'

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

'His only friends were gypsies⁸,' said Miss Stoner. 'These gypsies move round the country in bands⁹. 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 baboon¹⁰ – 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.’

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The Death of Julia

Holmes leant 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?”

“Because, during the past few nights,” replied Julia, “I have heard a strange whistle. It’s very low and clear. But I don’t 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 fainted¹¹. 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.’



'She was swaying from side to side, like a drunk person.'

‘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 handkerchiefs¹² 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!’

A Dangerous Enemy

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 examine¹³ 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’