

# The Adventure of the Speckled Band



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

Born in Edinburgh to an Irish Catholic family, Arthur Conan Doyle's early life was marked by instability. After his father Charles's growing alcoholism caused the family to split apart in 1864, the children lived across the city in different forms of low-income housing. The family reunited in 1867 and then lived together in a run-down tenement flat in the Sciennes neighborhood, where young Arthur was the leader of a Catholic street gang. When Charles died in 1893, a nine-year-old Doyle was sent to study at a Jesuit prep school in England, with the support of wealthy uncles. He went on to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh Medical School from 1876 until 1881. During this time, Doyle began to write short fiction and, in 1879, published both his first story, "The Mystery of Sasassa Valley," and his first academic article, "Gelsemium as a Poison." After working briefly as a doctor on two ships and trying to establish his own medical practice, Doyle received his Doctor of Medicine degree in 1885. That same year, he married his first wife, Louisa, with whom he would have two children. In 1886, Doyle published his first novel [A Study in Scarlet](#), which was also his first work featuring the famous detective Sherlock Holmes. He went on to publish two historical novels in succession and then abandoned his career as a doctor to focus exclusively on writing. Doyle remained dedicated to a number of judicial and political causes, even moving briefly to South Africa in 1900 to work as a chief surgeon in a field hospital during the Boer War. Louisa died of tuberculosis in 1906 and Doyle was married again the following year, to his long term platonic love interest Jean, with whom he would have three more children. The author had an enduring fascination from with mysticism, Freemasonry, and Spiritualism, writing and lecturing frequently about these topics for decades. Up until his death at the age of 71, Doyle wrote a total of fifty-six stories and four novels featuring Sherlock Holmes and his assistant Watson, as well as dozens of books across non-fiction, drama and poetry.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Sherlock Holmes stories were written at the height of Victorian England, the cultural period between 1837 and 1901 when Queen Victoria reigned over the country. These years are considered a major turning point in England's history, when it transitioned fully into the age of modernity. Without a major international war happening at the time, there was a relative increase in national prosperity, a push in industrialization and a

massive population boom in the country's cities. An expanded railway system, the use of gas lighting, and improved medicine were all important developments of the time. Under Queen Victoria's rule, the British Empire continued its rapid colonial expansion throughout the world, especially around the Indian subcontinent. The era was also known for its widespread moral refinement, which can be seen in Sherlock Holmes's infatuation with the balance between good and evil. The term "Victorian morality" usually refers to a general set of ethical beliefs promoting refined social codes, sexual restraint, and a low tolerance of crime.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As Arthur Conan Doyle's favorite of the twelve short stories collected in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" is one of the preeminent examples of modern detective storytelling. Though Holmes is so well-known as a fictional detective that he is nearly synonymous with the genre, Doyle had a few notable predecessors. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," featuring the clever detective C. Auguste Dupin, is often considered the first example of a short story in the genre, while Wilkie Collins, the supposed "grandfather of English detective fiction," is credited with writing the first of novel of the genre, *The Woman in White*. After Doyle's long and productive career, the period between the First and Second World Wars generated what is thought to be the Golden Age of detective fiction. Agatha Christie is the most celebrated writer from that era, especially her novels featuring the detective Hercule Poirot, the most famous of which is [Murder on the Orient Express](#).

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Adventure of the Speckled Band
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1892
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Mystery
- **Setting:** London and Surrey, England
- **Climax:** Sherlock discovers that Dr. Roylott used a poisonous snake to kill Julia Stoner
- **Antagonist:** Dr. Grimesby Roylott
- **Point of View:** Third-person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Stage Adaptation.** Doyle wrote and produced a play based on "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," which premiered at the

London's Adelphi Theatre on June 4th, 1910. The author changed the title to "The Stonor Case" and also made several other changes to the story, including some character names.

**Amateur Athletics.** Throughout his life, Doyle was an avid and respected sportsman, playing football, golf, and cricket. In the latter sport, he played on an amateur team for several years, beginning in his late thirties, and in one of his infrequent attempts as a bowler once took a wicket against W.G. Grace, who is considered one of the sport's all-time best players.



## PLOT SUMMARY

"The Adventure of the Speckled Band" begins with Watson recounting how, of the nearly seventy cases that he and Sherlock Holmes have embarked upon together as a detective duo, the one that he is about to narrate is among the most unusual of them. Watson's telling of the narrative starts when a young woman, Helen Stoner, pays them a visit one morning, in desperate need of their help.

Helen's stepfather, Dr. Grimesby Roylott, is the sole remaining descendent of an old family whose fortune has been slowly reduced to nearly nothing after generations of waste and gambling. When he was younger, Roylott embarked on a medical career in India, where he married the widowed Mrs. Stoner. Helen's mother died and Roylott moved back into his family's decaying **Stoke Moran Manor**, along with Helen and her twin sister Julia, all of them living in adjacent bedrooms in the building's one inhabitable wing. Mrs. Stoner had left an inheritance to Roylott, with a stipulation that should her daughters get married, they would receive an annual income from this fund.

Two years ago, Helen tells Holmes and Watson, her sister got engaged. Shortly thereafter, Julia told Helen that she began to hear a low whistling sound in the middle of the night. This went on for some time, until, shortly before Julia's wedding date, Helen heard a scream coming from her sister's bedroom. Helen ran over to see what happened and Julia, in a state of shock, fell to the ground in convulsions. Julia said, "It was the band! The speckled band!" and died. The sisters were in the habit of locking their doors and shuttering their windows—Roylott keeps a wild cheetah and baboon around the property as pets—so Julia's death fully baffles Helen.

By the time she comes to visit Holmes and Watson, Helen herself has become engaged. Soon after she makes the announcement, renovations begin on the exterior wall next to her bedroom, so Helen is forced to move into her sister's former room, next door to Roylott. Not long after this, Helen begins to hear the same low whistling sound that Julia had described to her. Holmes and Watson then make plans to meet her at the Stoke Moran Manor later that day so they can begin

investigating the mysterious incidents.

Not long after Helen leaves their apartment, a large man with a threatening demeanor enters the room. He announces himself as Dr. Roylott, Helen's stepfather. He tells Holmes and Watson that he's been tracing Helen's movements, so he knows that she has just paid them a visit and he demands to know what she told them. When Holmes refuses to say anything, Roylott tells them not to meddle in his affairs. He then grabs a fire poker, bends it as show of his strength, and leaves them. Holmes remarks that he himself is stronger than he looks and he bends the poker back into shape.

Holmes and Watson journey out to Surrey later that afternoon. Meeting up with Helen, the detectives first inspect the rooms from the outside, determining that the shutters are essentially impenetrable, and then the inside, where there are a number of telling clues. Holmes examines every surface of Julia's former room and notices that the bed is bolted to the floor, that a ventilator hole leads into Roylott's bedroom next door, and that the bell-pull is fake (it's merely a rope hanging onto a hook in the ceiling). They then inspect Roylott's room, where Holmes notices a safe with a saucer of milk sitting on top of it and a leash tied and looped like a whipcord hanging from the bed.

The three hatch a plan for the evening. Holmes and Watson will take a room on the second floor of the inn across the lane from the manor. Helen will tell her stepfather that she will be confining herself to her room due a headache. When she hears that Roylott has gone to bed, she will undo the shutters in Julia's former room, put a lamp in the window indicating that all is quiet in the house, and then retreat into her former room for the night. Holmes and Watson then go back to the inn and wait for Helen's signal. At eleven, they see the light and head to the manor.

In Julia's former room, Holmes instructs Watson to sit silently in the dark and to not fall asleep. They quietly wait until, hours later, they see a light coming from the ventilator hole and smell burning oil, telling them that Roylott is stirring about next door. A few moments later, they hear a long hissing sound come into their room. Suddenly, Holmes gets up and begins to furiously beat at the hanging bell-pull rope with his cane. Right when they light a lantern in their room, the glare makes it so that Watson can't tell what Holmes had seen, only that the detective's face had paled and a taken on a look of terror. They then hear the expected low whistling and, shortly after, a horribly loud scream coming from Roylott's room.

Once the shrieking fades, they investigate Roylott's room and see the doctor sitting on a chair with a snake curled tightly around his head. Holmes immediately remarks on the speckled bands around the snake's skin and identifies it as a **swamp adder**, "the deadliest snake in India." Roylott has died quickly from the snake's lethal bite.

The story closes with Holmes telling Watson what he took

away from the investigation, namely how important it is to have sufficient data, noting the confusing double meaning of the word “band,” which initially threw him off. Only by examining the physical clues directly in front of him—the bell-pull, the bolted bed and the ventilator hole—could he accurately deduce the method of the crime. Though he knows he is at least partly responsible for Roylott’s death, Holmes tells Watson, the guilt of this evil man dying will not weigh on him very heavily.



## CHARACTERS

**Sherlock Holmes** – The eccentric hero of the story, Sherlock Holmes is a detective with hypersensitive abilities of observation and deduction. As this story comes after the publication of dozens of other popular stories starring Holmes, Doyle is assuming that the reader already has some familiarity with the biographical details of Holmes’ life. In this story, Doyle gives only passing hints about Holmes’s life: he shares an apartment with Watson, he tends to be a late riser in the mornings, he has a sharp sense of humor, and is rather strong despite his slim build. He is also prone to reverie, as he frequently stares off into space or takes quick naps throughout his investigation. Most importantly, though, he is an excellent detective. In his chosen profession, he works more “for the love of his art than for acquirement of wealth” and he only takes cases that “tend towards the unusual, and even the fantastic.” His dedication to the job goes above and beyond what a typical detective might be willing to do in order to solve a murder.

**Dr. Watson** – The longtime sidekick on Sherlock Holmes’s crime-solving adventures, Dr. John Watson is the narrator of these detective stories. Like with Holmes, Doyle gives very few biographical details about Watson, since Doyle assumes the reader is familiar with the previous stories in the series. In “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” the reader learns that Watson and Holmes are “sharing rooms as bachelors in Baker Street” and that they have solved over seventy cases together as a working duo.

**Helen Stoner** – Helen Stoner is the twin sister of Julia Stoner, who died under mysterious circumstances two years prior. Helen enters into the story when she comes to London to seek Holmes’s help in solving this case. The Stoner twins lived in adjacent bedrooms in the crumbling **Stoke Moran Manor** in rural Surrey, both of them in the care of their villainous stepfather, Dr. Roylott. Helen, still living there, is engaged to be married to a longtime acquaintance and is eager to leave the confines of the strange mansion. However, since her sister died just before her own wedding under mysterious circumstances, and since her physically abusive stepfather is so sinister and unhinged, Helen has begun to fear for her life. The night before she decides to visit Holmes and Watson, she hears the same low whistling sound that her sister claimed to have heard in the room shortly before she died, which is the catalyst for Helen

deciding to seek the detectives’ help.

**Dr. Grimesby Roylott** – Dr. Grimesby Roylott is the last descendent of the Roylotts of **Stoke Moran**, one of the oldest and (formerly) wealthiest Saxon families in England. However, previous generations squandered their immense family riches through wasteful lifestyles and gambling habits, leaving Roylott’s father to live “the horrible life of an aristocratic pauper.” Seeing that he had to make his own money, Roylott obtained a medical degree and moved to India, where he set up a large practice and eventually married the widowed mother of the young Stoner twins, Helen and Julia. After his home in Calcutta was robbed, Roylott beat his butler to death in a fit of anger, but somehow wasn’t charged for the crime and returned to his native England in disgrace. He tried to set up a medical practice in London, but when Mrs. Stoner died in a train accident, he moved with his stepdaughters to his ancestral manor in Stoke Moran, living off of inheritance from his deceased wife. While there, Roylott’s fits of anger worsen and much of the surrounding town fears him. He also develops a number of eccentric habits, like smoking Indian cigars, spending weeks at a time with the gypsies who live on his property and collecting an array of exotic animals. One such animal, the deadly **swamp adder** snake, is what Roylott uses to murder Julia Stoner, in order to prevent her from getting married and thereby obtaining a portion of his slim inheritance.

**Julia Stoner** – The murder victim in this story, Julia Stoner was the twin sister of Helen Stoner. She was killed in the middle of the night in her bedroom at the **Stoke Moran Manor** by a poisonous **swamp adder** snake. The snake was trained by her stepfather, Dr. Roylott, who lived in the neighboring bedroom. At the time of her death, Julia was engaged to be married to a major of the marines, and her marriage would have meant that she would receive a portion of the recurring annual inheritance that was set up to go to Roylott before her mother’s death. Her final words—“It was the band! The speckled band!”—are what give the story both its title and its central mystery.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### EXOTICISM

In “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” Sherlock Holmes solves a case in which the villain and the murder weapon have ties to India. The story is set in Victorian England, a period when the British empire was expanding its colonial reach around the world, and Doyle’s

conflation of India with the sinister shows the anxiety of white Britons about the foreignness and otherness that came into their lives as a result of living in a more interconnected world.

Many of the story's sinister elements have ties to India. For example, after living and working in India for a long stint, Dr. Roylott develops a violent temper. Although he was an angry figure before living in India, Helen Stoner believes that his temper was "intensified by his long residence in the tropics." Dr. Roylott also has a fondness for many Indian exports. He smokes Indian cigars and, most importantly, collects exotic animals. Roylott's wandering baboon and cheetah are an ambient threat that can be felt throughout the manor, and the **swamp adder**, "the deadliest snake in India," is proven to be the murder weapon in the case. At the end of the story, Holmes claims that he deduced that the snake was used in the killing because the idea of using such a venomous animal would obviously "occur to a clever and ruthless man who had had an Eastern training," thus giving non-Western medicine and science a tinge of danger or evil.

The "wandering gypsies" that are living in encampments on the forested land around the **Stoke Moran Manor** are another element of the sinister exotic. While the gypsies are European, Roma people are ancestrally from the Indian subcontinent, and their nomadic lifestyle has always made them outsiders in Europe. Just like the dangerous foreign animals, then, the reader is led to believe that the exotic gypsies could easily be responsible for the death of Julia Stoner. The story's titular "speckled band," a phrase which Julia utters as she dies in Helen's arms, is first presumed to refer to the band of gypsies. This confusion of the word "band," and the general unspoken racial prejudice among the characters in the story, causes Sherlock Holmes to mistakenly follow it as a lead early in the case. The sinister gypsies are also meant to reflect poorly on Roylott, as the reader learns early on that Dr. Roylott "had no friends at all save the wandering gypsies, and he would accept in return the hospitality of their tents, wandering away with them sometimes for weeks on end." With no friends of his former social class and stature, it is implied, Roylott can only associate with this marginal community, which is meant to enhance the reader's suspicion that Roylott might be sinister and unhinged.

By populating the story with a variety of exotic elements—people, animals, and objects—Doyle is trying to create a setting that is both strange and sinister. In doing this, he is largely playing off of the racial and cultural anxieties that the average white British reader of the time would likely have been feeling in relation to the country's expanding reach around the world and the potential consequences that this new globalization might have at home.



## GREED, DESPERATION, AND DECLINE

The murder in "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" takes place in a crumbling and isolated **manor** belonging to the once-noble Roylott family whose wealth is now gone. Although he is destitute, Dr. Roylott—the last remaining member of the Roylott family—still feels entitled to the life of an aristocrat in which he lives well without working. His greed leads him to murder one of his stepdaughters, Julia, and attempt to murder the other stepdaughter, Helen, in order to protect his claim to monthly payments from his late wife's wealth. Therefore, the Roylott family's decline in wealth and status leads directly to Dr. Roylott's moral decline into greed and murder. This shows that desperation in the face of decline—especially in the absence of meaningful social and familial ties—can lead to depraved and immoral behavior.

Early in the story, when Helen Stoner first appears at the apartment of Holmes and Watson, she notes that she is living with her stepfather, who is "the last survivor of one of the oldest Saxon families in England, the Roylotts of Stoke Moran." The Roylott family was once one of the richest families in all of England, with a series of vast estates and a massive fortune. Over the course of a century, though, a few different heirs slowly drained the family wealth with their wasteful lifestyles and gambling habits. Due to this decline in family wealth, Dr. Roylott's father was reduced to living as "an aristocratic pauper," as there was no family fortune left for him.

In addition to the Roylott family's financial decline, Helen also depicts Dr. Roylott as someone who has undergone a psychological decline from the days in which his family was respectable. When Roylott and his two stepdaughters return from India to live at his family's decrepit country manor, the neighbors are excited "to see a Roylott of Stoke Moran back in the old family seat." But rather than make himself a prominent figure in the community, as his family once did, Dr. Roylott shuts himself inside of the house and gets angry with the townspeople who cross his path. By telling Holmes and Watson all of this, Helen is trying to emphasize that the precipitous decline in this family's wealth and status could lead its last surviving member to desperation. Indeed, a combination of his financial strain (and his greed in the face of it) and his psychological disturbance leads him to commit murder so that he can keep the last of his ex-wife's funds.

A physical embodiment of the Roylott family's decline in fortune and respectability, the Stoke Moran Manor itself is visibly crumbling after many years without upkeep. Only one wing of the mansion is inhabitable by the time that Helen Stoner comes to see Holmes and Watson; the other wing and central portion of the manor are in a state of near-ruin, with a caved-in roof and boarded windows. The diminishing size of the manor parallels the diminishing size of the family, while its state of ruin reflects the family's decline in wealth. The exterior of

the home, too, is slowly reverting back into wilderness from its presumably once well-manicured state. Not only have the grounds been drastically reduced to only a few acres, they have also been left to grow into a shrubby expanse that conceals wandering exotic animals and a group of traveling gypsies who live in tents on the property. In a way, the mysterious and sinister grounds can be seen as a reflection of Roylott's psychological state. While it's clear for most of the story that he is a dangerous and mysterious man, it's not clear for much of the story whether he—or whether the ambient dangers of the property—are responsible for the murder.

Through depicting the last descendant of a once-noble family driven to murder by greed and desperation, Doyle is showing that decline and loss can provoke violent emotions and behavior. However, Doyle offers a glimpse of hope: Helen Stoner is an orphan whose sister is dead and whose life and money are tightly controlled by her evil stepfather. Like the Roylotts, Helen's family has declined in wealth, size, and status, but Helen—unlike Dr. Roylott—does not become violent or immoral in the face of this grim reality. Instead, she hires Holmes and Watson to protect her. Doyle isn't clear about what saves Helen from moral decline, but it's noteworthy that she has meaningful social ties: a fiancé and an aunt whom she loves. Perhaps, then, family could be a redemptive force for Dr. Roylott, if only he knew how to love his stepdaughters rather than take advantage of them.



### ISOLATION AND POWERLESSNESS

“The Adventure of the Speckled Band” is one of only four Sherlock Holmes stories that can be classified as a “locked-room mystery,” where a crime is committed in a closed-off and seemingly impenetrable room. The apparent isolation of the crime scene mirrors the setting and the lives of the story's characters, who live together in a crumbling mansion without much contact with one another or with the outside world. However, the story distinguishes between true isolation and the *belief* that one is isolated. By making the Stoner sisters *feel* isolated, their stepfather Roylott psychologically manipulates them into feeling powerless. Their vulnerability, however, does not come from true isolation (either physical or emotional), since Julia is murdered because the locked room is not as sealed off as she believed, and Helen only saves herself from the same fate by seeking help from Holmes, which proves that she is not truly cut off from others. Therefore, Doyle emphasizes that a person who believes herself isolated becomes vulnerable, while those who are able to seek out connections between people (and recognize connections between clues) have the power to control their own destiny.

Doyle goes to great pains to establish that the circumstances of the characters' lives make them feel isolated, and the story's setting—the secluded **Stoke Moran Manor**—is the most

isolating aspect of all, the ideal location for the elaborate murder at the story's center. For one, to leave the manor and visit Holmes and Watson in London, Helen must take a long ride on a dog-cart and then a train from Leatherhead to Waterloo Station, which shows how difficult it is to escape the manor's rural isolation and find sympathetic people who might be able to protect her from the dangers in the house. Furthermore, the mansion's slight remove from the surrounding community in the town—whose residents fear Dr. Roylott's unpredictably cruel behavior and stay out of his way whenever possible—makes it so there is no broad oversight of what develops there. In this sense, Doyle suggests that the remote setting is part of what enables Roylott to set up an elaborate murder involving a rare and poisonous **swamp adder**, a snake that would never be allowed in a more populated area.

The architectural layout of the crumbling Stoke Moran Manor is another part of the story's general sense of isolation. As the formerly expansive mansion is in such bad decay, the inhabitable areas of the house have been reduced to only a portion of one wing, leaving all common areas and exterior space (which has both dangerous animals and supposedly fearsome gypsies wandering about) off limits. Therefore, the Stoner sisters are kept in relative seclusion from their immediate surroundings and have no interior spaces to encourage communal activities, as only bedrooms are left. Doyle also emphasizes that the bedrooms are particularly isolating: Helen tells Holmes and Watson that “[t]here is no communication between [the bedrooms],” and the sisters must keep their bedrooms shut like prison cells at night, as they are forced to shutter their windows and lock their doors to keep the wandering baboon and cheetah from entering as they sleep.

The sisters are cut off from one another and from the surrounding community by the location, layout, and dangers of the mansion, but they are also kept in a deeper form of isolation within their own home: psychological isolation. Roylott limits their lives to two rooms in the manor and tries to prevent them from seeing anyone besides their aunt (he is furious, for instance, that Helen goes to see Holmes without his permission). As a result, the twins are certain that they are alone and powerless, which is key to their vulnerability: neither one of them is able to consider that Julia's bedroom might not be as isolated from the other rooms as it seems, despite abundant evidence otherwise (the smell of cigar smoke and the sound of a low whistle coming through the wall she shared with Roylott). Though they were free to come and go, Doyle shows the reader that the Stoner sisters had become mentally isolated in such a way that they became extra vulnerable to Roylott's scheming.

Doyle, like his detective, is somewhat suspicious of country life and makes the inherent isolation of Surrey's rural landscape

mirror the psychological isolation of the inhabitants at Stoke Moran. Separated from its surrounding community, the author seems to be saying, the crumbling mansion is the kind of place that would inevitably foster the devious behavior of a character like Roylott. Just as the isolated environment fostered Roylott's behavior, it left the Stoner twins vulnerable to his machinations, but in reaching out to Holmes and Watson to help her solve the murder, Helen breaks her physical and psychological isolation and makes her first step to regaining some sense of agency over her life.



## FATE AND JUSTICE

One of the overarching ideas of most Sherlock Holmes stories, including “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” is that justice and goodness must

triumph over evil and injustice. Doyle's stories depict a straightforward division between good and evil, in which characters are generally not nuanced blends of both characteristics, but rather embodiments of either extreme. Through the triumph of the eminently good Holmes and Watson over the evil Dr. Roylott, Doyle suggests that justice is a natural condition of human life and that goodness or fairness will always prevail in the end.

More than a mere detective solving crimes, Holmes see himself as a conduit for justice. In this particular case, his ambition is less to make sure that whoever murdered Julia Stoner is caught and taken to court than it is to personally stop an inherently evil person from doing harm again. This is clear in his constant ruminations about the nature of justice and his personal concern for Helen's safety. When Helen visits Holmes and Watson, for instance, she asks whether she can pay him at a later point for his detective services. “As to reward, my profession is its own reward,” he claims. This shows that Holmes is less concerned about any financial incentives than doing good in the world. Furthermore, during Helen's explanation of her sister's mysterious death, Holmes notices five small bruises on her wrist, left by the grip of Roylott's fingers. When he tells her that she has been “cruelly used” by her stepfather, Helen tries to defend him by saying he just doesn't understand his own strength. Holmes then stares pensively into the fire and the reader can see that he feels it is imperative for him to take up this case to ensure that Roylott does no further harm.

As much as Holmes' intellect and ambition to do good propel him to solve crimes, Doyle seems to suggest that evildoers being brought to justice is a matter of fate. In Doyle's cosmology, bad people are obviously bad, which contributes to the sense that they are fated for a downfall. When Dr. Roylott enters into Holmes and Watson's apartment, for instance, he is made to appear inherently foreboding. His first name, Grimesby, is almost laughably dark and his appearance—so tall and broad that he fills the door frame, his face “seared with a

thousand wrinkles, burned yellow with the sun, and marked with every evil passion”—makes it clear that he is the story's villain. As a threat, Roylott takes the poker from the fireplace and bends it into a curve. Once he leaves, Holmes straightens the poker back out, as if to demonstrate that he will correct whatever wrong has been committed in the case.

Near the end of the story, when Roylott is killed by his own **swamp adder** (the murder weapon used against Julia, which he also attempted to use against Helen), Holmes is hardly surprised. “Violence does, in truth, recoil upon the violent,” he says, “and the schemer falls into the pit which he digs for another.” Therefore, despite Holmes' dedication, intellect, and conviction that Helen was in grave danger without his services, Holmes also seems to believe that it is inevitable that Roylott would be brought down in the course of executing his nefarious scheme. In this light, Holmes' detective work seems as though it is as much a matter of managing fate as it is an exercise in deductive reasoning

Doyle's sense that evildoers are inevitably brought to justice is also reflected in Holmes' easy conscience. In the final sentence of the story, Holmes tells Watson that he isn't too concerned about his own role in the murderer's death, despite that he is generally quite concerned by those who do bad things. “I am no doubt indirectly responsible for Dr. Grimesby Roylott's death,” he says, “and I cannot say that it is likely to weigh very heavily upon my conscience.” In other words, Holmes believes that Roylott deserved this final punishment, since he brought it upon himself by hatching such an evil scheme.

Unlike many detectives, who are trying to use their deductive skills in an objective way so that they can catch a criminal, Holmes is clearly concerned with the moral balance in the universe and what he can do to preserve it. Although he is known for his scientific observational skills, Holmes frequently infuses his detective work with emotional and moral weight, as when he is clearly pained by the dark bruises that Roylott left on Helen's wrist. In Doyle's telling, there is almost a cautionary element to how the story ends, as though the moral of the story is that those who do wrong will inevitably have wrong done to them.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## SWAMP ADDER

As Julia Stoner was mysteriously dying in her sister's arms, she said that what killed her was the “speckled band.” At the time, Helen Stoner did not understand what she meant, but later readers learn that the speckled band is the deadly swamp adder snake, with its “peculiar yellow band,

with brownish speckles, which seemed to be bound tightly round his head." Dr. Roylott used this trained snake to murder Julia, and the snake represents, in part, the exotic form of evil that Doyle is emphasizing throughout the story. Doyle peppers the story with orientalist elements—animals from India, exotic household objects, a band of gypsies—meant to evoke a sinister ambiance through their association with cultural otherness. Of all of these elements, the swamp adder, "the deadliest snake in India," is the most potent, as it's the one that actually proves deadly. The snake also represents Roylott's own descent into evil—he goes from being the last living member of a noble Saxon family to a desperate eccentric willing to commit murder in order to save himself from an inevitable financial downfall. The fact that swamp adder, which Roylott trained and kept in a safe in his bedroom, ultimately ends up killing his master literalizes how extreme desperation can take over a person's life.



### STOKE MORAN MANOR

The decaying Stoke Moran Manor is Dr. Roylott's ancestral home and the scene of the story's central crime. While the manor—the property of one of the wealthiest and oldest families in England—was once grand and imposing, by the time Julia and Helen Stoner move to the manor with Dr. Roylott, the house is in near ruin. The manor once had three wings and a central portion, but only one wing remains—the rest of the house has a caved-in roof and boarded-up windows. As such, Roylott and the Stoner twins occupy adjacent rooms in the only inhabitable wing, an arrangement that leaves them simultaneously cut off from one another due to the lack of common space and uncomfortably close to one another because of the adjacent rooms. This slowly crumbling house represents the decline of the once prosperous and respectable Roylott family, which is now left with a sole descendant who is both destitute and unhinged. The house's decay also parallels Roylott's loss of Victorian morals, as Roylott becomes evil and deranged in tandem with the house falling apart.



### QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Trade Editions edition of *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories, Vol. 1* published in 1986.

#### The Adventure of the Speckled Band Quotes

...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.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Watson (speaker), Sherlock Holmes

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 396-397


#### Explanation and Analysis

As Watson opens the narrative, he is quick to tell the reader that Sherlock Holmes is no ordinary detective. Unlike others in his field, Holmes is attracted to the most bizarre kinds of cases and refuses to do the kind of traditional procedural work that many other detectives might routinely perform. In addition to his inclination to take on rather unusual cases, he also works purely for the love of the deductive process, not to simply make a living. For Holmes, detective work is both a means to practice heightened intellectual engagement and to balance the moral scale in the universe.

The family was at one time among the richest in England, and the estates extended over the borders into Berkshire in the north, and Hampshire in the west. In the last century, however, four successive heirs were of a dissolute and wasteful disposition, and the family ruin was eventually completed by a gambler in the days of the Regency. Nothing was left save a few acres of ground, and the two-hundred-year-old house, which is itself crushed under a heavy mortgage.

**Related Characters:** Helen Stoner (speaker), Dr. Grimesby Roylott

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 400



#### Explanation and Analysis


As Helen describes Roylott's family history, she paints a picture of a once-noble lineage that has declined to only a single person and of a physical home that went from a being vast estate to a decaying mansion over the period of only a few generations. The people in the family and their property both suffered from waste and neglect, which resulted in Roylott's predicament of being the sole descendent hanging on to the remains of a disappearing fortune. In this way, the Stoke Moran Manor itself represents the financial, moral and genetic decline of the Roylott family line. This passage

also points to the desperation that suffuses the story. Presumably, being the heir to a decaying house and vanished fortune would embitter Roylott and make him desperate to reverse the processes that have ruined his standing. Since he seems to have no viable assets in the manor or in the fortune, Roylott may have to look elsewhere for his income.

Instead of making friends and exchanging visits with our neighbours, who had at first been overjoyed to see a Roylott of Stoke Moran back in the old family seat, he shut himself up in his house and seldom came out save to indulge in ferocious quarrels with whoever might cross his path. 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.

**Related Characters:** Helen Stoner (speaker), Dr. Grimesby Roylott

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 


**Page Number:** 401


### Explanation and Analysis

Once he returned to Stoke Moran after living in India for many years, Roylott began to devolve into a state of bitterness and dejection. During his time overseas, he murdered his butler after a robbery in his home and was eventually let go without a trial. Yet, the residue of this crime still lingers around Roylott during his life in Surrey, where he erupts into anger for the slightest reasons. Though he is an innately violent person, Helen tries to deflect this by saying that living in India for such a long time made him go a bit mad, placing the blame on a country that is exotic to the Anglo British perspective. This underscores that readers are supposed to intuit a connection between the “exotic” (here generally represented by things associated with India) and the sinister (Roylott's temper escalating in response to his life in India). This trades on racist stereotypes that the British mainland held about its colonies, but British readers at the time would have widely accepted the connection Doyle makes between the sinister and exotic.

“Tell me, Helen,” said she, “have you ever heard anyone whistle in the dead of the night?”

**Related Characters:** Julia Stoner (speaker), Helen Stoner

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 402


### Explanation and Analysis

The mysterious low whistling sound that Julia hears in the nights leading up to her death is one of a few different, disconnected clues that neither sister is quite able to understand. As the manor is populated with a variety of strange and exotic entities, like the wandering group of gypsies and Roylott's tropical animals, the sisters look for causes beyond the confines of the house itself. This assumption that the whistle must be coming from elsewhere—“It must be those wretched gypsies in the plantation,” Helen tells Julia—makes the sisters' false pairing of exoticness with maliciousness part of the cause of Julia's death.

At first I thought that she had not recognised me, but as I bent over her she suddenly shrieked out in a voice which I shall never forget, “Oh, my God! Helen! It was the band! The speckled band!”

**Related Characters:** Helen Stoner (speaker), Julia Stoner

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 404

### Explanation and Analysis



The story's titular phrase is another important clue that confuses Helen and initially eludes both Holmes and Watson. The “speckled band” is open to many interpretations, so when Julia says these words to Helen as she dies in her sister's arms, it is assumed that she must have been referring to the band of gypsies, some of whom wear spotted handkerchiefs over their heads. As with the whistling sound, the fact that Helen assumes the cause of the death to be the gypsies, rather than a more familiar source, only emphasizes her inability to look critically at her




own immediate environment. Clearly, the sisters have been so thoroughly isolated in the manor that they cannot fathom that the threat would come from the inside. In other words, they see themselves as being so thoroughly alone in their bedrooms that they turn to the exotic outdoor elements of the manor, rather than paying closer attention to their sinister stepfather next door.

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.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Watson (speaker), Dr. Grimesby Roylott

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 408

### Explanation and Analysis

Everything describing Roylott in this passage—his size, demeanor, dress and facial features—all depict him as a threatening presence in the most exaggerated way. Even his name, Grimesby Roylott, seems like a comical take on a typical villain's name. The way that Doyle intricately conveys the features of Roylott's face, with its deeply wrinkled skin and bird of prey nose, all underline the fact that this is a character who can't be trusted and is able to carry out all manner of sinister plans to get what he wants.

The fact that Roylott is so clearly evil from his name and physical features contributes to the story's overall commitment to clear distinctions between good and evil. These characters do not have ambiguous morality or complex personalities: Holmes embodies goodness and justice with his righteous quest to save Helen Stoner free of charge, and Roylott has no nice characteristics to mitigate his evil. This focuses the reader on the mystery to be solved, since there is no ambiguity of morality to make people question whether Holmes catching Roylott would really be a good outcome.

He must guard himself, for he may find that there is someone more cunning than himself upon his track.

**Related Characters:** Sherlock Holmes (speaker), Dr. Grimesby Roylott

**Related Themes:** 



**Page Number:** 411


### Explanation and Analysis

As a detective whose passion for the job exceeds his desire to make money from it, Holmes loves the process of solving a crime through his heightened skills of reasoning and deduction. For him, a sense of cunning is superior to any kind of physical violence. (This is demonstrated earlier, too, when Roylott bends a fire poker with his hands in front of Holmes, but the detective refuses to be intimidated by this show of brute force.) Holmes is confident that his sharp detective skills will defeat Roylott in the end, no matter how threatening the doctor might be. Furthermore, this quote suggests a fatedness or even karmic justice at work in Holmes' world. Since Roylott is using his cunning to sow evil for the Stoner twins, it seems that his cunning will only attract a greater cunning—Holmes—which is devoted to setting right what Roylott has done wrong. Since Holmes is unambiguously good and Roylott is unambiguously bad, Doyle is suggesting here that good will inevitably win over evil.

The building was of grey, lichen-blotched stone, with a high central portion and two curving wings, like the claws of a crab, thrown out on each side. 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.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Watson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 411

### Explanation and Analysis


The description of Stoke Moran Manor conveys with great detail how this was once an elegant and stately mansion but is now an ignored home that has been left to decay. Just as the Roylott family had been a noble lineage that was admired by all, but is reduced to the eccentric and

desperate Dr. Roylott, the manor itself is merely an echo of its former self. Only one of the curving wings is inhabitable by the time Holmes and Watson arrive, making it a somewhat constrained crime scene.

- There are one or two very singular points about this room. For example, what a fool a builder must be to open a ventilator into another room, when, with the same trouble, he might have communicated with the outside air!

**Related Characters:** Sherlock Holmes (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 



**Page Number:** 413

### Explanation and Analysis

There are two telling clues that Holmes is able to notice in Julia's former room: a fake bell-pull above the bed and a ventilator hole that leads into Roylott's room. Though Julia and Helen should have been able to see that these were strange additions to a room, their general isolation from their surroundings, imposed upon them by Roylott, made it so that they were unable to piece together the sinister ambitions behind these architectural tricks. Only by reaching out to Holmes, with his superior observational skills, was Helen able to see the strangeness of her sister's room.

- When a doctor does go wrong he is the first of criminals. He has nerve and he has knowledge.

**Related Characters:** Sherlock Holmes (speaker), Dr. Grimesby Roylott

**Related Themes:**  


**Page Number:** 417


### Explanation and Analysis

Holmes is making the case that doctors, with their heightened intellect and ability to handle extreme stress, are perhaps the most skilled variety of criminal. As he himself possesses the traits of nerve and knowledge in his detective work, crime-inclined doctors are the perfect match for Holmes's own skill set. After examining Julia's room, he begins to piece together the crime and no longer sees Roylott as simply a thuggish brute, but rather as an exceedingly clever murderer and a kind of intellectual match for himself, thus a greater threat than he initially imagined.

- "It is a swamp adder!" cried Holmes; "the deadliest snake in India. He has died within ten seconds of being bitten. Violence does, in truth, recoil upon the violent, and the schemer falls into the pit which he digs for another."

**Related Characters:** Sherlock Holmes (speaker), Dr. Grimesby Roylott

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 421

### Explanation and Analysis

Holmes, whose intellectual breadth covers many disciplines and fields of study, immediately sees upon entering Roylott's room that the so-called "speckled band" refers not to the gypsies but to the spotted skin of the swamp adder snake coiled upon the doctor's head. As he sees himself as an arbiter of morality in the eternal battle between good and evil, Holmes posits that violent people will inevitably bring violence upon themselves. In saying this, he is claiming that justice always overpowers injustice in the world and that criminals will always be taken down, whether by him or by themselves.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## THE ADVENTURE OF THE SPECKLED BAND

“The Adventure of the Speckled Band” begins with Watson, the story’s narrator, noting that, of the nearly seventy cases that he and Sherlock Holmes have embarked on together as a detective duo, the one that he is about to narrate is among the most unusual. Watson also notes that Holmes only takes cases that are out of the ordinary, as he is a detective “for the love of his art” not as a means to get rich.

Watson says that he would have told these events sooner, but he was sworn to secrecy by a lady, whose untimely death has allowed him to tell the tale. As the cause of Dr. Grimesby Roylott’s death has long been gossiped about, Watson seeks to set the record straight in his narrative.

The events that Watson recounts start early one morning in April of 1883, when he and Holmes were living as roommates in an apartment on Baker Street in London. Watson wakes up to find Holmes, normally a late riser, standing over him to let him know that they have a distressed young lady waiting for them in their sitting room.

Holmes notes that young women would only be wandering the streets of London at such an hour if there were a pressing need, so her case must be important. As Watson loves nothing more than watching Holmes use his exceptional deductive skills, he is excited to embark on a new adventure.

A few moments later, they head down to the sitting-room, where a young woman, clad in black and wearing a veil, is sitting near the window. Holmes notes that the woman is shivering, and he says she should sit next to the fire and drink a cup of hot coffee. The woman says that a sense of terror, not cold, is causing her to shiver. She lifts her veil to reveal a pale face and a frightened look in her eyes. The woman looks to be around thirty and has prematurely grey hair.

*From the opening lines of the story, the reader notices that Holmes seems to think of detective work as a higher calling—a life passion more than a mere job. He revels in these strange and supposedly unsolvable cases, which paints him as something of an eccentric, and also points to his honor, since he doesn’t care about money.*



*By telling the reader that he was long sworn to secrecy, Watson is making the case that the strange circumstances of this crime would have brought shame to their client’s family. As manners and decorum were integral to the Victorian ethos of the era, keeping public gossip to a minimum was important to Watson and Holmes.*



*The fact that Holmes and Watson live together as roommates gives readers a sense of their deep working relationship, in which Watson is able to closely understand Holmes’s unique skill set as a solver of crimes and narrate their developments for the reader.*



*By having a client arrive early in the morning, when the two are normally sleeping, readers are led to believe that her case must be extremely urgent. Though Holmes partly embarks on his cases for the pure love of solving the logical puzzles of a given crime, he also seeks to help victims. Reducing the general evil he sees in the world is one of his prime moral objectives as a detective.*



*The physical descriptions of Holmes and Watson’s future client help the reader see how heavily the case has been weighing on her conscience. By stating that her hair is prematurely grey, it illustrates in physical form that she has witnessed something shockingly horrible and is desperate to escape her particular situation.*



Holmes makes the quick observation that she must have started her travels early that morning (he notices half of a train ticket in her hand and sees splatters of mud, indicating that she traveled partially by dog-cart), and the woman introduces herself as Helen Stoner.

Helen tells Holmes that he was recommended by an acquaintance who had used the detective's services for an earlier case. Helen also says that she is unable to afford a payment at the moment, but will be married in a month and can pay Holmes then. The detective says that his "profession is its own reward," and money isn't an issue for him.

Helen then recounts the incidents that led her to seek Holmes's help. She lives with her stepfather, Dr. Grimesby Roylott, the sole remaining descendent of the Roylotts of **Stoke Moran**, one of the oldest Saxon families in England. The Roylotts were once among the richest families in the country, but their fortunes have slowly been reduced to nearly nothing after generations of wasteful habits.

Realizing that he needed a career, a young Roylott earned a medical degree and moved to India to set up a medical practice. While there, he married Mrs. Stoner, the widow of a major in the Bengal Army with two twin daughters. Roylott, provoked by a robbery in his house, beat his butler to death and somehow managed to escape a capital sentence. With his new family, he returned to England in disgrace.

Not long after, Helen's mother died in a train accident, leaving a sizable inheritance to Roylott, with a stipulation that should Helen or her twin sister Julia get married, they would receive an annual income from it.

Roylott attempted to start a medical practice in London but gave up after some time and moved back, along with Helen and Julia, to the decaying **Stoke Moran Manor**.

*Sherlock Holmes is renowned for his uncanny observational skills. He is able to notice minute details that others might be unable to see, like mud splatters and a torn train ticket, which is part of the reason that he so successful in his pursuit of solving crimes.*



*Just as Watson tells the reader earlier that Holmes is a detective who does it "for the love of his art," this sentiment is echoed again here. The process of solving crimes and the pleasure he obtains from using his sharp deductive skills is the real reason he does his work, not to merely collect a paycheck.*



*By telling Holmes and Watson right away that Dr. Roylott belongs to a once-noble family, Helen is conveying to the detectives how far he has fallen since. Not only has the entire family lineage been reduced to a single man, but its former wealth has also shrunk to nearly nothing by the time Roylott becomes an adult.*



*Unlike the earlier generations of his family, Roylott actually has to find a career that can generate an income. The theme of the exotic, which is threaded throughout this story, has its source in India, where Roylott practiced medicine, married Mrs. Stoner and got so angry at a butler that he murdered him. This is meant to flag for readers that Roylott has dalliances with the strange and bizarre (India, in Doyle's orientalist portrayal), and that Roylott is dangerous and prone to rage.*



*The rule governing the inheritance that Mrs. Stoner leaves to both Roylott and to the twins will become a clue in the murder. By making marriage the way that Julia and Helen can escape the confines of Stoke Moran, it is immediately clear that Roylott would want to retain his portion of his ex-wife's funds by any means necessary.*



*Stoke Moran, once a well-kept estate but now a crumbling mansion, symbolizes the Roylott family's financial and moral decline.*



Rather than integrating into the surrounding rural community of Surrey, who were excited to have someone from the distinguished family living in the **manor** again, Roylott became reclusive and got furiously angry with anyone who crossed his path. This temper, Helen believes, was aggravated by living for years in India.

Helen tells Holmes and Watson that Roylott has no friends aside from the group of wandering gypsies who have set up a camp on the **Stoke Moran** property. In exchange for letting them have tents on the manor's grounds, they let Roylott stay with them for weeks at a time. She also says that her stepfather has a passion for Indian animals, keeping a cheetah and a baboon as pets that he allows to wander around the property.

Two years ago, Helen tells Holmes and Watson, her sister got engaged. Roylott had no objection to the marriage, but Julia died under mysterious circumstances shortly before her set wedding date.

Helen then tells the detectives about the incidents leading up to Julia's strange death. She describes the layout of the building: Roylott, Julia, and Helen all lived in adjacent bedrooms in the only inhabited portion of the **manor**. "There is no communication between [the rooms]," Helen says, "but they all open into the same corridor." In this arrangement, Julia and Roylott shared a wall.

One night, disturbed by the smell of Roylott's Indian cigar smoke in her room, Julia went to Helen's room to chat about her approaching wedding. As she left, Julia asked if Helen had ever heard a low whistling sound in the middle of the night. Helen had not, and she wondered if it came from the gypsy camp.

Helen and Julia always locked themselves in at night, and the sisters' bedroom windows, which open to the lawn outside, were always shuttered to keep out the wandering animals.

*After returning to Surrey after his years abroad in India, Roylott begins his own descent into eccentricity and bitterness. Much of Roylott's violent temperament can be traced to his time in India, where his deep anger was nurtured by forces that the Stoner twins, and the reader, never fully understand.*



*Both the gypsies and the wild animals who wander around the overgrown property surrounding Stoke Moran are aspects of the exoticism within this story. They are depicted as vague threats, thus giving the place a strange sinister ambience that can be traced to forces that aren't traditionally related to Anglo British culture.*



*As the reader learned earlier about the importance of marriage for the Stoner twins (through marriage, they can access their inheritance and the independence that comes with it), a great weight is placed on the occurrence of Julia's mysterious death shortly before her wedding date.*



*The strange layout of Stoke Moran, where the three residents all live close together in a single wing of the decrepit mansion, demonstrates the sense of isolation that Roylott has impressed upon the sisters for many years.*



*The smell of Roylott's cigar and the sound of a low whistle are the telling clues of Julia's mysterious death. That neither of the sisters were able to connect these two elements as signs of suspicious activity in the Manor is one sign of their general isolation from their surroundings and a clue that Julia's room might not be as cut off from the other bedrooms as she imagined.*



*Though Helen and Julia are free to come and go as they please, the fact that they've had to lock themselves in their rooms at night is yet another indication of how they are, in effect, imprisoned in their home.*



One night shortly before Julia's wedding, Helen heard a scream coming from her sister's bedroom. As she entered the corridor, Helen seemed to hear the low whistling sound and a clanging of metal. She ran over to see what happened and Julia, in a state of shock, fell to the ground and started shaking in her sister's arm. During her final convulsions, Julia said, "It was the band! The speckled band!" and then died. Helen tells Holmes and Watson that she saw a charred match and a match box in her sister's hand, indicating that she had looked around right before she collapsed.

With no markings on her body, and the fact that the windows and door were locked up, Julia's death is a mystery to Helen. She tells Holmes that she assumed the "speckled band" had something to do with the band of gypsies on the property, who sometimes wear spotted handkerchiefs over their heads.

By the time she comes to visit Holmes and Watson, Helen herself has become engaged. Soon after she made the announcement to Roylott, renovations began on the exterior wall next to her bedroom, so she was made to move into her sister's former room.

Not long after switching rooms, Helen began to hear the same low whistling sound that Julia had described. Thoroughly disturbed, she decided to make the long trek to London to see how Holmes could help her.

Holmes notices that Helen has five bruised marks on her wrist, which she says came from Roylott. She brushes this off, suggesting that her stepfather is merely unaware of his strength, but Holmes stares pensively into the fire. Holmes and Watson make plans to meet Helen at the [Stoke Moran Manor](#) later that day so they can begin investigating the death.

*The repeated phrase of "the speckled band" is yet another clue that throws Helen, and thus Holmes and Watson, off the track in quickly solving the case. Though Julia is trying to communicate to Helen what killed her, the three words are just opaque enough to be open to multiple interpretations.*



*As all entryways and exits to Julia's room are firmly closed when she dies, her death belongs to a detective story trope known as a "locked room mystery," a difficult one to solve. The assumption that the "speckled band" refers to the groups of gypsies, another exotic and vaguely-sinister presence at the manor, presents another kind of "lock" that must be opened to solve the case.*



*As she herself is soon to be married, Helen is understandably on edge about the circumstances of Julia's death preceding her own wedding. By moving into her sister's former room, Helen knows that she is being led into a similar setup, but she cannot figure out the specific plan.*



*Only by hearing the telltale sounds does Helen force herself to seek outside help in Holmes and Watson. This can be seen as her first step towards agency and away from her stepfather's grip.*



*The bruises on Helen's wrist, which a less observant detective may not have noticed, indicate to Holmes that Roylott's abuse was not limited to verbal tirades against the neighboring townspeople—it also included some physical violence against the Stoner twins. Always eager to fight against injustice, Holmes decides to take on the case,*



Not long after Helen leaves their apartment, a large man with a threatening demeanor enters the room. He announces himself as Dr. Roylott, Helen's stepfather. He tells Holmes and Watson that he's been tracing Helen's movements, knows that she has just paid them a visit, and demands to know what she told them. When Holmes refuses to say anything, Roylott tells them not to meddle in his affairs. He then grabs a fire poker, bends it as show of his strength, and leaves the room. Holmes then remarks that he himself is stronger than he looks and he bends the poker back into shape.

Before leaving, Holmes runs errands and makes some calculations about the state of the inheritance that Mrs. Stoner left to Roylott. Taking into account falling agricultural prices, the remaining funds were rather low and the marriage of either daughter would likely cripple Roylott's finances.

Holmes and Watson begin their journey from London to Surrey, first by train and then by dog-cart. They cross paths with Helen and tell her that Roylott had been following her, which causes her some alarm.

Holmes and Watson then begin to inspect the manor with Helen's help. Watson notes how the building is in a state of great decline, yet the scaffolding for the repairs outside of Helen's room seems inessential.

The detectives inspect the bedrooms from the outside and determine that the shutters are essentially impenetrable. Inside the manor, they go to Julia's former room, where Holmes examines every surface and notices that the bed is bolted to the floor and that a ventilator hole goes from that room into Roylott's bedroom next door.

Holmes also remarks on the strangeness of the bell-pull, supposedly installed to call the housekeeper upstairs, though the sisters never used the bell-pull because they never had a need for a housekeeper's help. Holmes tests it and determines that it's a fake, merely hanging onto a hook in the ceiling. Both the bell-pull and the ventilator were recently installed, Helen tells them. They then go into Roylott's room, where Holmes notices a safe with a saucer of milk sitting on top of it and a leash tied and looped like a whipcord.

*Roylott's size, demeanor, dress and full name all immediately paint him as a somewhat threatening presence. Though Holmes makes light of Roylott's intimidation tactics, when the doctor takes the fire poker and bends it in front of the detectives, it is meant to be a final sign of his physical control over the situation. However, after Roylott leaves and Holmes straightens the poker, the reader is able to see that Roylott's brute strength is no match for Holmes' own intellectual crime solving skills.*



*The calculations that Holmes makes about the steep decline in the remaining inheritance point to his early understanding that Roylott was increasingly desperate about his own financial security and thus willing to do anything to prevent his own downfall.*



*By taking the same long travel route that Helen took to reach Holmes and Watson, the reader is able to see how eager she must have been to seek outside help in order to make such a trek to London. This emphasizes the sense of threat.*



*The makeshift scaffolding and the few chips in the wall indicate that Roylott's supposedly-necessary repairs to the outside of Helen's room were in fact a ploy to get her to stay in her sister's former room.*



*After confirming that the room can't be entered from the outside, Holmes begins his search for signs of how a murder could happen within a locked room. With his superior observational skills, he finds several unusual features that will later help solve the case.*



*More unusual to Holmes than the vent and the bolted bed, though, is the fake bell-pull hanging directly above Julia's former bed. As it doesn't serve its purpose of communicating with a housekeeper, Holmes immediately knows that it had an important role in Julia's murder. The various strange clues in Roylott's room are less immediately telling for Holmes. He knows they mean something, he just isn't quite sure what yet.*



Back outside, the three hatch a plan for the evening. Holmes and Watson will take a room on the second floor of the inn across the lane from the manor. Helen will tell her stepfather that she will be confining herself to her room due a headache. Then, when she hears that Roylett has gone to bed, she will undo the shutters, put a lamp in the window indicating that all is quiet in the house, and retreat into her former room. Holmes and Watson then go back to the inn and wait.

At the inn, the detectives wait for night to fall. From their window, they see Roylett pull up to the **manor** and yell at the boy driving him, who is unable to open the heavy gates. Holmes and Watson discuss the clues they saw that day, as well as how to proceed when they enter the mansion later.

At eleven, Holmes and Watson see from their room at the inn that Helen has lit the lamp in her room, their signal to enter the **manor**. They set out into the night and, when they nearly reach the rooms, they see the outline of the baboon scurrying in front of them. Once the animal passes by, they slip off their shoes, secretly enter Julia's former bedroom and close the windows.

Holmes instructs Watson to sit silently in the dark and not fall asleep. With a cane in his hands, Holmes sits on one side of the bed and Watson, with his pistol on a table, sits nearby. Through the window, they hear the whine of the cheetah outside.

After waiting for hours, the detectives suddenly see a light coming from the ventilator and they smell oil, telling them that Roylett is stirring about next door. Holmes and Watson continue to sit in silence until they hear a hiss come into their room. Suddenly, Holmes gets up and begins to furiously beat at the bell-pull.

Right when Watson lights a lantern in the room, he hears the low whistling sound. The glare of the light makes it so he can't see what Holmes had been beating at with his cane, but the detective's face has paled and a taken on a look of terror. Moments later they hear a long and horribly loud scream come from Roylett's room.

*The complex plan that Holmes and Watson create allows the detectives to be waiting in the bedroom for some unexpected, malicious event to occur. As the home is fairly disconnected from every part of the surrounding town except for the inn across the lane, they choose to use it as their communication point between the two buildings.*



*Roylett's quick fit of anger at his young driver, which Holmes and Watson see from a distance, only confirms their growing suspicion that the doctor is hatching some kind of sinister plan in the mansion.*



*The journey that Holmes and Watson make from the inn to the manor emphasizes the strangeness of this dilapidated environment, especially after night falls. This bizarre ambience is emphasized by the silhouette of the wandering baboon that passes in front of their path.*



*As with the baboon they spotted on their way over to the manor, the sound of the whining cheetah outside the window gives a sense of danger.*



*As Watson and Holmes are waiting in the dark and in silence, they are disconnected from each other's thought processes. Though Watson is unsure of what to expect, once Holmes hears a hissing sound enter the room, it is clear that he was prepared for what would happen.*



*In the new glare of the lantern, Watson is further disoriented about what was happening as Holmes was beating the bell-pull with his cane. All he can make out is the distressed look on Holmes's face and, shortly after, the terrible screams from the room next door. Clearly, Holmes is in the driver's seat of the detective work and Watson is truly just an assistant.*





Once the screams fade down, they investigate Roylott's room and see the doctor sitting on a chair wearing a long dressing gown and slippers with the looped leash in his lap and a snake curled tightly around his head. Holmes immediately remarks on the speckled bands around the snake's skin and identifies it as a **swamp adder**, "the deadliest snake in India." He notes that Roylott had likely died instantly from the snake's bite. Holmes takes the leash from Roylott's lap and places the snake back into the safe.

Thus ends the investigation. Watson quickly summarizes for the reader how they conveyed the news to Helen, who then moves in with her aunt. A slow official inquiry gets underway. The story closes with Holmes telling Watson what he took away from the investigation, namely how important it is to have sufficient data. Julia mentioning the "speckled band" to Helen made her confuse the word "band" meaning "stripe" with "band" meaning "group," thus putting Holmes onto the wrong scent and thinking the groups of gypsies had something to do with Julia's death. Only by examining the physical clues directly in front of him—the bell-pull, the bolted bed and the ventilator hole—could he deduce the method of the crime.

At the conclusion of the story, Holmes tells Watson that he knows he is at least partly responsible for Roylott's death, but that the guilt of this evil man dying will not weigh on him very heavily.

*As expected by the horrible sounds, Roylott has died in his room. The "speckled band" is then understood to refer to the swamp adder snake which lethally bit Roylott and is coiled upon his head when Holmes and Watson enter the room, thus clearing up any lingering misunderstanding over the words on the reader's part.*



*As a way to unpack the events of the story, and to walk the reader through Holmes' series of deductive leaps to solve the case, he tells Watson how the easy misunderstanding of the word "band" initially led him astray. Holmes's overall lesson in the end is that hard facts are necessary to efficiently solve a crime and that depending on words alone can hinder as much as help.*



*Holmes has a serious moral compass. Even though his beating the snake likely angered it enough to kill Roylott, he is satisfied knowing that this death reduces the amount of potential evil flowing through the world.*





## HOW TO CITE

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