



## The Hounds of the Internet

"A singular set of people, Watson."

In 1883, Sherlock Holmes was 29 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 31.

### Main Characters:

Dr. Grimesby Roylott, widowed disgraced former medical doctor, residing on his decaying family estate in Surrey. Helen Stoner, Dr. Roylott's stepdaughter, now living with him in Surrey. Julia Stoner, Helen's late twin sister, who died under mysterious circumstances two years before. A swamp adder, the deadliest snake in India.

### Notable Quotes:

On glancing over my notes of the seventy odd cases in which I have during the last eight years studied the methods of my friend Sherlock Holmes, I find many tragic, some comic, a large number merely strange, but none commonplace; for, 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.

"This is my intimate friend and associate, Dr. Watson, before whom you can speak as freely as before myself."

"As to reward, my profession is its reward."

"I have heard, Mr. Holmes, that you can see deeply into the manifold wickedness of the human heart."

"These are very deep waters."

## An Inquiry into: "The Adventure of the Speckled Band"

Vol. XIV No. 9 • November 22, 2023

"The Adventure of the Speckled Band" was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in February 1892. It is part of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

Uncharacteristically, as the table shows, all our scholarly Canon chronologists agree as to the date of the case.

### The Adventure of the Speckled Band

Chronologist	Date of the Adventure
Canon	Early April 1883
Baring-Gould	Friday, April 6, 1883
Bell	Early April 1883
Blakeney	April 1883
Brend	April 1883
Christ	Wednesday, April 4, 1883
Dakin	Wednesday, April 4, 1883
Folsom	Early April 1883
Hall	Early April 1883
Keefauver	Sunday, April 1883
Klinger	1883
Zeisler	Wednesday, April 4, 1883

Please note that Canon chronologists may differ on pivotal dates and comparative periods between cases, thus a simple majority is not necessarily correct. Most Canon scholars settle on a single chronologist's results for their research framework.

“Fancy his having the insolence to confound me with the official detective force!”

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



### *A Sad Beginning*

We learn from Doctor Watson that after everything that poor Helen Stoner had to endure and suffer at the hands of her vicious stepfather, Dr. Grimesby Roylott—including the murder of her beloved sister—her (hopefully happy) marriage to Percy Armitage lasted less than a decade.

It is not farfetched to assume that once Armitage found himself a widower he gave his permission to publish the case that Watson mentioned came from Armitage himself, who now found himself a widower.

### *The Bad Doctor*

The not-so-good-doctor in this case qualifies as one of the Canon’s more interesting villains. Watson’s description of him is quite remarkable, if not just a little over the top: *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.* Even our Biographer’s literary exaggeration—

“marked with every evil passion”—makes the man even more interesting, although one might observe, “*Every evil passion*”? Really, Doctor Watson! Such a face would have put Dorian Gray at his worst come in a poor second!



Although what Roylott did was in every way unconscionable and in the end poetic justice provided him with his just reward, it is worthwhile to examine the man himself.

While it might be argued that Roylott lacked in any redeeming virtue it must be recognized

that there is a deep pathos to his life. According to what Helen Stoner told Holmes, he was the last member of an ancient and honored family, possibly minor aristocracy. Through no fault of his own, due to improvident ancestors he found himself facing his father’s tragic fate, who ended his days “living the horrible life of an aristocratic pauper.” Instead, he displayed a great deal of gumption by his effort to escape from this sad destiny by bettering himself. He borrowed money to attain a medical

education which he able to pursue successfully; he acquired a gentleman's profession, and went to Calcutta where through his efforts established a lucrative practice.

According to Helen, "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." We know, in our age of DNA and gene splicing that there is no such thing as a hereditary "violence of temper."

However, it may indeed be that his violent temper, so far kept in check, was intensified by his life in India.

While life in the Raj was like heaven to many, for others it came close to hell. This might have been the case with Roylott when he killed the house butler whom he suspected of theft and was condemned to prison for this crime.

After having being imprisoned for years in an Indian jail, by the time he had served his sentence and returned to the mother country it is not surprising that, although unbroken, he became a deeply embittered man. His behavior is proof of this—whatever inclination towards violence that he may originally have had was exacerbated with his mind having become increasingly unbalanced by his incarceration experience.

Jails, whether English or American tend to create similar graduates, even though they bear absolutely no comparison to what prisons were like in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the aim of locking up miscreants was punishment, not redemption. Even with today's far better accommodations and different retribution philosophy, many who have been sentenced and served their time come out changed—often for the worse. In Roylott's case, this seems quite obvious, as shown by the various violent incidents that took place between him and the villagers—the one with the blacksmith being the most telling one.

It is not too farfetched to conjecture that Roylott's return to England to bury himself in the old family estate was a way of escaping from the world. He now found himself either barred from the profession he struggled hard to acquire because of his felony, or perhaps by that time he simply was too full of anger to adequately practice it as successfully as he once did. How far this profound alienation from society extended is reflected by the only company he tolerated and kept—gypsies whom society almost unanimously viewed as pariahs. Helen Stoner's description makes clear the sad morass of his life, "He had no friends at all save the wandering gypsies, and he would give these vagabonds leave to encamp upon the few acres of bramble-covered land which represent the family estate, and would accept in return the hospitality of their tents, wandering away with them sometimes for weeks on end." It may have been only there that he received the acceptance that he either no longer sought or was unlikely to get from his own kind.

Although clearly an intelligent and educated man, Roylott's fate had unhinged him; he was increasingly driven by emotions over which he was daily losing control. He cleverly disposed of Julia Stoner, but this was negated by his foolish decision to use the same means (i.e., the swamp adder) to attempt to murder Helen. Another proof of how fractured his personality had become was the evident blun-





der of clambering up those 17 steps to furiously threaten Holmes after Helen had left. Besides revealing himself as a violent and dangerous man, his disclosure that he followed his stepdaughter to 221B



inevitably raised him to the level of prime suspect. Then he proceeded to try to kill Helen in the same way he had her sister. There can be no question that he obviously knew who Holmes was (“I know you, you scoundrel! I have heard of you before. You are Holmes, the meddler. Holmes, the busybody! Holmes, the Scotland Yard Jack-in-office!”) and should have realized that his visit would only exacerbate the situation by giving our sleuth an even stronger reason for investigating his private affairs. The explanation is probably that by that time Roylott became completely psychotic, unable to think clearly

Holmes found out that in her last will Mrs. Stoner bequeathed some £1,100 (>\$400,000) per year to Dr. Roylott with the proviso that her daughters each received an unrevealed pin-money sum, and £250 (>\$90,000) upon marrying.

The decline in agricultural prices, reduced the initial sum to £750 (≈\$300,000). Thus, upon Helen Stoner’s marriage, this would have forced Roylott to live on the interest of the smaller amount (£500), which would not have provided him with enough to maintain his decaying establishment.

Without casting even a scintilla of approval, it is possible to understand his angry desperation when it became obvious that he was going to lose the income he derived from his stepdaughters. It was, after all the only thing that would have enabled him to sustain the fragile barriers he had built up for himself, against the outside world. He now found himself in a position where his meager livelihood on his moldering, reduced, family estate was based on his dead wife’s shrinking inheritance and to the fact that her two daughters were yet unmarried and living with him.

The yearly £750 (≈\$280,000 today) must have been barely enough for the three of them to keep body and soul together. With his two stepdaughters gone and left with only £250 (≈\$94,000) a year, he would not have been able to live in the kind of isolation he obviously sought and needed. By then, in his unbalanced mind, murder seemed as the most logical path to avoid this.

Considering his mental state, it is puzzling that he waited for the sisters to become engaged to be married before working to permanently put them out of the way. It is quite implausible that there was any love lost between him and them. He had to have been aware that if he had disposed of the sisters *before* they became engaged he would have diverted away any possible suspicion, because he would have had no apparent reason or gain for doing so; especially considering that he had an ideal, undetectable means of accomplishing his goal.



None of this, of course, in any way justifies his plan and execution of a premeditated cold-blooded murder, and it might be argued that the world was better off by his exiting it. Holmes, put it best: “I

am no doubt indirectly responsible for Dr. Grimesby Roylott's death, and I cannot say that it is likely to weigh very heavily upon my conscience."

### *The Facts behind Dr. Roylott's Death*

Watson tells us that he made public the true facts of Dr. Grimesby Roylott's death when he did, years afterwards, because, it would seem, Helen Stoner was dead. He also tells us that he did it because the "widespread rumours as to the death of Dr. Grimesby Roylott which tend to make the matter even more terrible than the truth."

A natural question to ask is what were the rumors that the Good Doctor considered so necessary to dispel? And why would they have arisen? After all, an official inquiry concluded that Roylott met his death while playing with one of his dangerous pets—an accident. Surely Helen Stoner would not have had any inclination to revisit and reveal the terrible and painful circumstances surrounding the deaths of her sister and stepfather. Above all this is the fact that although Dr. Roylott's family had been important to the region, he personally was not. Thus, it is very unlikely that there would have been any further inquiries (official or otherwise) about his death years after the fact.

Deep waters.

### *The Mysterious Ophidian Weapon*

Generations of Sherlockians and Holmesians have merrily spent endless delightful hours arguing over the true identity of Dr. Grimesby Roylott's snake.

The fact that Holmes himself identified it as "a swamp adder—the deadliest snake in India," worsened the situation.



The reason is, to begin with, there is no such reptile as the "swamp adder," and this led to the lethal, short-tempered spotted critter central to this case to be variously identified as a puff adder, a banded krait of India, and a cobra, among others. Torrents of ink have been spread writing about the nature of the different poisons that some of these delightful slithering creatures can freely dispense, and the varied effects that they have upon the human organism.

And, lest we forget, the scaly killer had to be able to enter into a state of self-induced suspended animation whenever locked up in Roylott's safe, to avoid dying of asphyxiation.

Some have even gone so far as to argue that it was not a snake at all,

but some sort of unknown possibly supernatural, horrible creature (possibly a cousin of the giant rat?). This has mostly been based upon the inconvenient fact that, regardless of all their remarkable sensory capabilities (mostly in the infrared region of the spectrum), snakes are as deaf as a doorpost.

“Dr. Roylott,” it is argued, “could have whistled himself dry from now to eternity, and his slinky weapon would not have known any better!” All the whistling did was to awaken the intended victims. The last blow (and yes, pun intended) is the fact that, according to herpetologists, snakes avoid milk because they are unable to digest it.

My bewilderment, however, lies in an entirely different direction. Even if one were to grant that Roylott’s village was small and backwards—what we today might describe as “the boonies”—and that the area’s coroner was not exactly a guiding light in the field of forensics—a snake bite, particularly that of a poisonous one, is very difficult to miss. Aside from the fang’s twin marks themselves, tissue reaction to the poison injected is very marked, often colorful.

What truly defied credibility is how such a verdict was arrived at.



### *What else happened in 1883:*

#### *Empire*

Britain evacuates The Sudan.

#### *Britain*

The Fabian Society is founded in London.

Small electric power station built at 57 Holborn Viaduct.

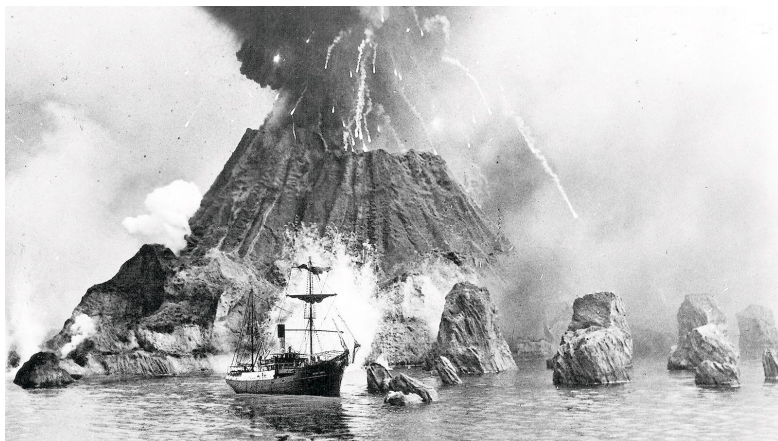
Royal College of Music established.

#### *World*

Germans take Southwest Africa.

England's offer to mediate between France and Madagascar is denied. French navy attacks Antananarivo forts and soon after the territory around Tamatave is put under French military rule.

Brooklyn Bridge opens with attendance of U.S. President Arthur and other dignitaries from the



State of New York. When the bridge is open to the public, crowds attempt to cross it and a number of people are killed in the crush. As a result, radical changes are made to the bridge's approaches.

◀ The volcano on Krakatoa kills 40,000 and spews ashes around the world, giving red sunsets for decades, causing shorter summers and longer winters.

Colossal, 80-foot bronze figure of Germania, erected at the site of Arminius' early victory over the Romans, near Rudesheim, is unveiled by Emperor William. After the ceremony it is revealed that the police barely prevented a dynamite plot to blow up the Emperor and his retinue as they were about to unveil the statue.



Buffalo Bill organizes his *Wild West Show*.

French troops from Hanoi are annihilated and three French ironclads are dispatched from Quiberon, Brest, and Corfu. Anti-French reinforcements sent to Tonquin by the Governor of Cochinchina, and troops are dispatched from New Caledonia.



*Ladies Home Journal* is founded.

◀ Alexander III of Russia is crowned. On the day after the coronation riots break out at St. Petersburg

Revolution breaks out in Haiti. Rebels attacked by government troops which they defeat. The area outside Miragoane is bombarded, but regular troops are again repulsed with the loss of many men and two vessels. Rebels are left holding nearly the whole of the western coast.

Labor strikes of American telegraph operators and glass blowers. Nearly 100,000 strikers were out of work.

Anarchy in Armenia. Turkey loses all control over the province.

Trade caravans are consistently pillaged and foreign diplomats insulted. The tribe of Malissoon, numbering 60,000, raids Scutary but it repulsed by Turkish troops.

*Life Magazine* publishes first issue

Karl Marx dies.

Parliament Houses of Belgium burn down. The Parliamentary library with all the archives is destroyed.

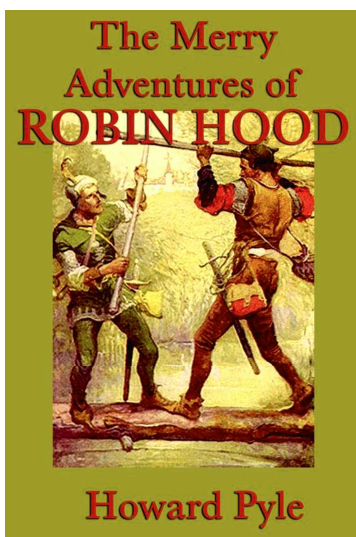
Orient Express makes its first run from Paris to Istanbul.

Construction of Panama Canal proceeding. De Lesseps and others of its promoters predict completion within five years. Now more than 15,000 laborers are engaged.

Paul Kruger becomes President of South Africa.

War of Chile against Peru and Bolivia is brought to a close. Chile receives province of Tara Paca and the Department of Tacna.

## *Art*



Robert Louis Stevenson publishes *Treasure Island*.

Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* published.

◀ Howard Pyle writes/draws *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*.

New York's Metropolitan Opera House opens.

Richard Wagner dies in Venice.

Edouard Manet, famous painter, dies.

Richard Wagner, composer, dies.

Gustave Dore, famous illustrator, dies.

Nietzsche publishes *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

## *Science and Technology*

Sir Victor Horsley discovers role of thyroid gland.

Edison discovers electricity can travel through space.

Klebs and Loeffler discover the dyptheria bacillus.

First skyscraper built in Chicago. Ten stories.

*Next week's case: ENGR.*

Respectfully submitted,

*Murray, the Courageous Orderly*

(a.k.a. Alexander E. Braun)

"I should have fallen into the hands  
of the murderous Ghazis had it not  
been for the devotion and courage  
shown by Murray, my orderly..."

*All Sherlock Holmes photos have been published by courtesy of ITV Granada.*

**If you would like to join the Hounds of the Internet, email us at [CourageousMurray@aol.com](mailto:CourageousMurray@aol.com).**

**Copyright © 2023 Alexander E. Braun**