The Adventure of the Speckled Band

Arthur Conan Doyle · 1892

A veiled woman at Baker Street before eight in the morning; a sister dead two years ago with the words ‘the speckled band’ on her lips; a stepfather who bends pokers. Doyle’s own favourite of the Holmes stories, complete — the trap through the Surrey lanes, the dummy bell-rope, and the longest night in the canon.

LISTEN FOR

— The wing in one sentence: Dr. Roylott’s room, Julia’s, Helen’s, all opening on the same corridor and the same lawn.

— The whistle: Julia hears it for several nights, Helen hears it once, and Watson hears it last, in the dark.

— What Holmes tells Watson and when: at the Crown he says he knew they would find a ventilator ‘before ever we came to Stoke Moran’.

— The vigil is told in what Watson can hear and smell: the parish clock, the cheetah at the window, hot oil, a hiss like a kettle.

THE PEOPLE, AS THE BOOK NAMES THEM

Dr. Watson	the narrator · still at Baker Street
Sherlock Holmes	a late riser, as a rule
Helen Stoner	of Stoke Moran · thirty, and grey before her time
Dr. Grimesby Roylott	her stepfather · the last of the Roylotts
A Driver	of the trap from Leatherhead

THE PLACES

Calcutta · Stoke Moran · Leatherhead · Waterloo · Baker Street

CHAPTERS, WITH THEIR TIMES IN THE VIDEO

0:00	On glancing over my notes
1:20	A quarter past seven, Baker Street
7:22	Helen Stoner’s story
12:27	The night Julia died
19:14	The whistle returns
24:59	Dr. Grimesby Roylott calls
29:02	To Stoke Moran
34:39	The three rooms
40:13	Holmes’s plan
42:29	The Crown Inn
46:03	The vigil
52:05	The speckled band
53:56	The true facts

WORDS AND THINGS, FROM THE MARGIN

A thousand pounds a year Roughly £100,000 today — and, under the will, the sisters' on marriage. The motive is on the table before the mystery.

A cheetah and a baboon 'Indian animals': the cheetah, yes — it was kept for hunting in India — but the baboon is African. Doyle's zoology is approximate throughout, and it does not matter.

The band Julia's last words. 'Band' meant a gang — the gipsies' band — before it meant a ribbon. The pun is the misdirection, and Holmes falls for it.

Five little livid spots The bruises of a hand. Doyle lets the wrist tell what the lady will not.

The poker Bent by Roylott, straightened by Holmes. The one physical boast Holmes ever makes.

A dummy bell-rope Fastened to a hook above the ventilator, attached to nothing. The ventilator opens not to the air but into the next room.

A saucer of milk On the safe. Doyle believed snakes drink milk; they do not. The clue is wrong and the deduction is right.

The parish clock Striking every quarter. Twelve, one, two, three: the longest night in the stories.

A swamp adder No such snake exists. 'The deadliest snake in India' has been argued over for a century — a cobra, a Russell's viper, a krait — and none of them climbs a rope, drinks milk, or comes to a whistle. The story does not mind.

The true facts Holmes's confession: he reasoned from the gipsies and the word 'band' to an entirely wrong conclusion, and corrected it only in the room itself.

PASSAGES TO HEAR AGAIN

"It is fear, Mr. Holmes. It is terror."
Helen Stoner's answer to 'What, then?', just before she raises her veil.

"Oh, my God! Helen! It was the band! The speckled band!"
Julia's last words, as Helen repeats them at Baker Street.

"It is a little cold for the time of the year"
Holmes's first reply when Dr. Roylott demands to know what his stepdaughter has said; the crocuses follow.

"They seem to have been of a most interesting character—dummy bell-ropes, and ventilators which do not ventilate."
Holmes in Julia's room, before he goes through to the inner apartment.

"When a doctor does go wrong he is the first of criminals. He has nerve and he has knowledge."
Holmes at the window of the Crown, in the gathering darkness.

"come to an entirely erroneous conclusion which shows, my dear Watson, how dangerous it always is to reason from insufficient data."
Holmes on the train back the next day, before he explains the rest.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Holmes tells Helen Stoner four things about her journey before she has said a word of it. What are they, and what does he point to for each?
2. Helen gives the history of the Roylotts before she gives the facts of the case. What does she say about the money her mother left, and what does Holmes find out about it at Doctors' Commons?
3. Julia asks Helen two questions at the door on her last night. What are they, and what does Helen answer? Compare that with what Helen says she heard herself the night before she came to Baker Street.
4. The coroner found the door, the windows, the walls, the floor and the chimney all secure. List what Helen says was checked and how. What does Watson conclude from this list, and what does Holmes ask him in reply?

5. Holmes sets out his first theory to Watson in one long sentence, with the gipsies in it. Which facts does he use? Which of them does he later say put him ‘upon an entirely wrong scent’?
6. Dr. Roylott calls Holmes three names and bends a poker. What does Holmes say to him each time, and what does he do with the poker after Roylott has gone?
7. In the three rooms Holmes looks at the end wall, the shutters, the bell-rope, the ventilator, the bed, the safe, the saucer, the chair and the lash. What does he say about each at the time, and what does he say about them afterwards, at the inn and on the train?
8. At the Crown, Holmes says ‘I knew that we should find a ventilator before ever we came to Stoke Moran.’ What in Helen’s statement told him? What else does he say he has deduced, and what does Watson admit he saw?
9. Go through the vigil by the senses: what Watson hears, what he smells, and what he sees. At what moment does he hear the whistle, and what does Holmes see that Watson does not?
10. Holmes says he is ‘indirectly responsible’ for Dr. Roylott’s death and that it will not ‘weigh very heavily’ on his conscience. What did he do with the cane, by his own account, and what does the official inquiry conclude?

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