

## The Speckled Band

During the past eight years I have watched my friend Sherlock Holmes at work on more than seventy cases. The most unusual is the case connected with the well-known Surrey family, the Roylotts of Stoke Moran. The events there happened not long after I first met Holmes, before my marriage, when we were sharing rooms in Baker Street.

Early in April 1883 I woke one morning and found Sherlock Holmes standing, fully dressed, by the side of my bed. He normally got up quite late, but the clock showed that it was only a quarter past seven, so I looked up at him in some surprise.

'What is it?' I asked. 'A fire?'

'No. A young lady has arrived in a great state of excitement, and wants to see me. When young ladies visit people at this early hour, I imagine that they want to talk about something very important. If this becomes an interesting case, you may want to follow it from the beginning. So I thought that I should call you.'

'My dear Holmes, I would not miss it for anything.'

My greatest pleasure was to help Holmes in his detective work, and so I quickly put on my clothes and followed him down to the sitting-room.

A lady dressed in black, wearing a thick veil, was sitting by the window. She stood up as we came into the room.

'Good morning, madam,' said Holmes cheerfully. 'My name is Sherlock Holmes. This is my friend Dr Watson. Ah, I am glad that Mrs Hudson has had the good sense to light the fire. Please come and sit beside it and I shall order you a cup of coffee. I can see that you are shaking.'

'It is not the cold that makes me shake,' said the woman quietly, changing her seat as Holmes suggested.

'What, then?'

'It is fear, Mr Holmes. It is terror!' She lifted her veil as she spoke. Her face was pale and her eyes were frightened, like the eyes of a hunted animal. She looked about thirty years old, but her hair was quite grey.

'You must not be afraid!' Sherlock Holmes said gently, bending forward to touch her arm. 'We shall soon be able to help, I have no doubt. You have come in by train this morning, I see.'

'You know me?'

'No, but I can see the second half of a return ticket just inside your left glove.'

'Yes, I left home before six and came in by the first train to Waterloo. Sir, I shall go mad if it continues. Only one person cares about me, and he, poor man, cannot help.'

'I have heard of you, Mr Holmes, from Mrs Farintosh. You gave her help when she needed it. Oh sir, do you think that you could help me too? At the moment I cannot pay you for your services, but in a month or two I shall be married, and I shall have my own money.'

Holmes turned to his desk and, unlocking it, took out a small notebook. He studied this for a moment.

'Farintosh,' he said, 'Ah, yes, I remember the case. It was about some jewellery. I think it was before your time, Watson. I can only say, madam, that I shall be happy to give you my attention. My profession brings its own rewards. You may, though, pay my costs when you are able to. And now please tell us what your problem is.'

'Oh dear!' our visitor replied. 'The most terrible thing about my situation is that the facts seem so small and so unimportant. I have talked about this to the one man that I can call a friend. Even he thinks that it is all just in the imagination of a nervous woman. He does not say so, but I know this from the way he

speaks and looks at me. But I have heard, Mr Holmes, that you can see into the human heart. You can advise me how to walk among the dangers that surround me.

'My name is Helen Stoner, and I am living with my stepfather. He is the last of one of the oldest Saxon families in England, the Roylotts of Stoke Moran, on the western border of Surrey.'

'Yes,' Holmes said, 'I have heard the name.'

'The family was once the richest in England, with very large amounts of land. In the last century, however, four oldest sons, one after another, wasted the fortunes of the family. Now there is nothing left except a small piece of land and the 200-year-old house, and a lot of money is still owed.'

'The present oldest son, my stepfather, borrowed money from a relative, which allowed him to study medicine. When he became a doctor he went out to Calcutta, where he was very successful.'

'However, one day some money was stolen from his house. He blamed one of his servants, and in an angry temper beat him hard until he died. He was sent to prison for many years, and afterwards returned to England, a very sad and angry man.'

'When Dr Roylott was in India, he married my mother, Mrs Stoner. Her first husband, an army officer, had died. My sister Julia and I were twins, and we were only two years old at the time of my mother's remarriage. She had quite a lot of money, not less than a thousand pounds a year, and this became Dr Roylott's while we lived with him. However, she also ordered that quite a large amount of money should be ours if we got married.'

'A short time after our return to England, my mother died in a railway accident near Crewe. Dr Roylott then stopped working as a doctor in London and took us to live with him in the family home at Stoke Moran. My mother's money was enough for all

our needs, and there seemed no reason for us not to live happily.

'But our stepfather changed at about this time. Our neighbours were at first very happy to see a Roylott of Stoke Moran back in the old house, but he shut himself away. When he did appear, he argued with everyone.

'The men of the family have always had a violent temper. In my stepfather's case, this was made worse by his time in prison. Two terrible fights ended in the police court, and at last he became the terror of the village. He is a man of great strength, and cannot be controlled when he is angry.

'Last week he threw a local man off a bridge into a stream. This was not reported to the police only because I paid all the money that I could find. He has no friends except for some travelling people. He allows them to camp in the woods on the small piece of land we still own. They invite him into their tents, and sometimes he goes away with them for several weeks.

'He also likes Indian animals, which are sent over to him by a friend. These are feared by the villagers almost as much as their owner is.

'You can imagine that my poor sister Julia and I did not have much pleasure in our lives after our mother died. No servant stayed with us for long, and we had to do all the housework. Julia was only thirty at the time of her death, but her hair was already turning white, like mine now.'

'So your sister is dead?'

'She died two years ago, and her death is the reason that I am here. You can understand that we were very unlikely to see anyone of our own age and position. We had, however, an aunt, my mother's sister, who lives near Harrow, and we were occasionally allowed to visit her.

'Julia went there at Christmas two years ago, and she met a man who asked her to marry him. My stepfather learned of this when she returned, and seemed quite happy about the marriage.

But two weeks before the wedding day, a terrible thing happened.'

Holmes was sitting back in his chair with his eyes closed. He half opened them now, and looked across at his visitor.

'Please tell me all the details,' he said.

'It is easy for me to do that, because every event of that time is burned into my memory. The family house is, as I have already said, very old, and we now live in only one part of it. The bedrooms in this part are on the ground floor. The first room is Dr Roylott's, the second my sister's, and the third my own. There are no doors between them, but they all open into the same passage.

'The windows of these rooms open out on the garden. On the night of my sister's death, Dr Roylott had gone to his room early. However, we knew that he had not gone to bed. My sister could smell his strong Indian cigarettes.

'Because of this smell, she left her room and came into mine. She sat there for some time, talking about her wedding. At eleven o'clock she got up to leave, but she paused at the door and looked back.

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

“Never,” I said.

““You do not whistle in your sleep?”

““Certainly not. But why?”

““Because during the last few nights I have heard a low clear whistle, always at about three in the morning. I am a light sleeper, and it has woken me. I cannot tell where it came from — perhaps from the next room, perhaps from the garden. Have you heard it?”

““No. It must be those travelling people in the woods.”

““Very likely. But if it was from the garden, I am surprised that you did not hear it too.”

“Ah, but I sleep more heavily than you do.”

“Well, it does not matter very much,” she said, and she smiled at me and left the room. A few moments later I heard her key turn in the lock.

‘Really?’ said Holmes. ‘Did you always lock your doors at night?’

‘Always.’

‘And why?’

‘I think I told you that the doctor kept some wild animals. They ran about at night. We did not feel safe unless our doors were locked.’

‘I understand. Please continue.’

‘I could not sleep that night. I had a feeling that something very bad was going to happen. My sister and I, you remember, were twins, and twins can be very close. It was a wild night. The wind was blowing hard outside and the rain was beating against the windows.’

‘Suddenly, through all the noise of the storm, I heard a wild scream. I knew that it was my sister’s voice. I jumped from my bed and rushed into the passage. As I opened my door, I seemed to hear a low whistle, like the one my sister had described. A few moments later, I heard a noise like a heavy piece of metal falling.’

‘As I ran down the passage, my sister’s door opened. By the light of the passage lamp, I saw my sister appear in the opening. Her face was white with terror.’

‘I ran to her and threw my arms round her, but at that moment she fell to the ground. She moved on the floor like someone in terrible pain. At first I thought she had not recognized me, but as I bent over her she suddenly screamed, “Oh, my God! Helen! It was the band! The speckled band!”’

‘She wanted to say something else, and she pointed in the direction of the doctor’s room, but the words did not come.’

‘I called loudly for my stepfather, and both of us tried hard to



*‘I heard a wild scream. I knew that it was my sister’s voice.’*

save her life. We sent for medical help from the village, but there was nothing we could do. She never opened her eyes again.’

‘Was your sister dressed?’ asked Holmes.

‘No. She was in her nightclothes. In her right hand we found the burnt end of a match, and in her left there was a matchbox.’

‘So she struck a light and looked around her when she first woke up. That is important. What did the police decide?’

‘They were very careful, as Dr Roylott’s bad behaviour had been well known for a long time, but they were unable to find the cause of her death. I was able to say that the door had been locked on the inside, and the windows were closed every night.’

‘The walls were carefully checked, and had no hidden doors. The police also checked the floor, with the same result. The chimney is wide, but there are iron bars across it. It is certain, therefore, that my sister was alone. Also, there were no marks of violence on her.’