

smallest sound could ruin all our plans. We must sit without a light. He would see it through the ventilator. Do not go to sleep. Your life may be in danger. Have your revolver ready, I will sit on the side of the bed, and you in that chair.'

I took out my revolver and put it on the corner of the table. Holmes had brought a long thin stick, and he placed this on the bed beside him. Near it he put a box of matches and the end of a candle. Then he turned down the lamp and we were left in the dark.

How shall I ever forget the terrible hours that followed? Sometimes, from outside, we heard the cry of a night bird, and the church clock struck every quarter of an hour. Twelve o'clock passed, and one, and two, and three. We still sat silently, waiting for something to happen.

Suddenly, a light shone for a moment in the direction of the ventilator. It disappeared immediately, but it was followed by a strong smell of burning oil and heated metal. Someone in the next room had lit a small lamp. I heard a gentle sound of movement, and then everything was silent again, though the smell grew stronger.

For half an hour I sat listening. Then I heard something else – a very gentle sound like steam escaping from a pot. Holmes jumped from the bed and lit the candle. Then he struck wildly with his stick at the bell rope.

'Can you see it, Watson?' he shouted. 'Can you see it?'

But I saw nothing. When Holmes struck the match, I heard a low clear whistle. But the sudden light made it impossible to see what my friend was striking. I could, however, see that his face was pale and filled with horror.

Holmes had now put down his stick, and he was looking up at the ventilator. Then came the most horrible cry I have ever heard. It was a scream of pain and anger, and it grew louder and louder. They say that, down in the village, sleepers jumped from



*Then he struck wildly with his stick at the bell rope.*

their beds. I stood staring at Holmes, and he at me, until it stopped.

'What does that mean?' I said.

'It means that it is finished,' Holmes answered. 'And perhaps it is the best thing that could happen. Take your revolver, and we will enter Dr Roylott's room.'

Holmes lit the lamp, and led the way down the passage. Twice he knocked on the door of the room, but there was no reply. Then he turned the handle and entered. I was just behind him, with the revolver in my hand.

On the table stood a small lamp. The iron box was open and near it, on the wooden chair, sat Dr Grimesby Roylott. On his knees lay the dog lead which we had noticed earlier. Dr Roylott's eyes were fixed in a terrible stare. Round his head there was a strange yellow band with brown spots.

'The band! The speckled band!' whispered Holmes.

I took a step forward. The band moved, and I saw it was a snake.

'That is the most dangerous type of snake in India!' Holmes cried. 'He died seconds after it bit him.'

As he spoke, he took the dog lead quickly from the dead man's knees, put the circle round the snake's head, and threw it into the iron box.

These are the true facts of the death of Dr Grimeby Roylott of Stoke Moran. We told the news to the sad girl, then took her by the morning train to her aunt in Harrow. We then called the police. They decided that the doctor had died while playing with a dangerous pet.

On the train the next day, Sherlock Holmes told me the facts that I still had to learn about the case.

'At first,' he said, 'I had completely the wrong idea. I thought the dead girl meant a "band" of travelling people. However, when I saw that nobody could get into that room through the window or the door, I had to think again.'

'There were three strange things in the room – the ventilator the bell rope and the bed. I decided that the rope might be a bridge for something that passed through the ventilator to the bed.'

'The idea of a snake came to me because I knew that the doctor had a number of animals from India. He is also a doctor, and has worked in India, so he would know about poison that is not discovered by any test. Another advantage of a snake is the speed with which the poison works. No policeman would notice the two little holes where it went in.'

'Then I thought of the whistle. Of course, he had to get the snake back before daylight. He had taught it, possibly using the bowl of milk, to return to him when he whistled. So every night, very late, he put it through the ventilator. It climbed down the rope and landed on the bed. It might or might not bite the

sleeping girl. Perhaps she might escape every night for a week, but sooner or later it would kill her.

'I decided all this before I even entered his room. I examined his chair and saw that he had often stood on it. He used it, of course, to reach the ventilator. When I saw the iron box, the bowl of milk and the dog lead, I was sure that I had the right idea. Miss Stoner had spoken about the sound of falling metal. That was when the doctor quickly shut the iron box after he had put the snake inside.'

'So then we had to see if I was right. When I heard a hissing sound, I knew that the snake was coming through. I quickly lit the candle and attacked it.'

'And it went back through the ventilator.'

'Yes, and then it bit Dr Roylott. I am responsible for his death, but I do not feel very guilty about that.'