

A FRESH BITE AT The SPECKLED BAND an antipodean identification

by Philip Cornell

With the possible exception of the location of Dr Watson's war wound or the true address of 221 Baker St, no case of identity has so occupied Holmesian commentators as the true species of the loathsome serpent responsible for the dreadful deaths of Julia Stoner and Dr Grimesby Roylott, and the near demise of Helen Stoner and Mr Sherlock Holmes.

"It is a swamp adder, the deadliest snake in India" declared Sherlock Holmes, according to Dr Watson's account of the Stoner case in *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, and herein lies the problem, for no such serpent is known to herpetology. Whilst Dr Watson has admitted to changing the names and places in the Canon in the interests of preserving anonymity, surely even a man of his gentlemanly discretion would not go to such lengths as applying pseudonyms to protect a reptilian reputation.

Clearly either, in the drama of the moment, Dr Watson misheard and misquoted Holmes' actual words (and several ingenious, if contrived, reconstructions of Holmes' words have been attempted by scholars¹) or, having failed to catch Holmes' words or forgotten them - or Holmes never having made them, being unable to correctly identify the creature - Watson invented a plausible sounding name never suspecting the flurry of speculation it would cause.

Many candidates for the identity of the eponymous snake have been proposed. Russell's Viper has many adherents², the Indian Krait³ has much to recommend it as has the Indian Cobra, whose distinctive hood might have suggested Watson's curious reference to "the puffed neck of a loathsome serpent". Yet I would suggest that all of these identifications, none of which fully satisfies the criteria of Watson's description, may well be founded upon an unreliable premise.

Dr Grimesby Roylott had a "passion...for Indian animals, which are sent over to him by a correspondent, and he has this moment a cheetah and a baboon", explained Helen Stoner to Sherlock Holmes. It has therefore been presumed that the third foreign inhabitant of Stoke Moran - the 'Speckled Band' itself - also originated in India. Yet the baboon is not native to India at all and the cheetah is more numerous in Africa. The likelihood is that Roylott, bitten (so to speak) by the exotic animal enthusiasm while in India, had begun gathering his menagerie

¹ e.g. Klaiber, L.M., "The Truth About the Speckled Band", Baker Street Journal, January 1954

² Lawson, D., "The Speckled Band - What Is It?", Baker Street Journal, January 1954;

Nevers, K., "Considering the Speckled Band", Notes from a Notorious Card Club 1976

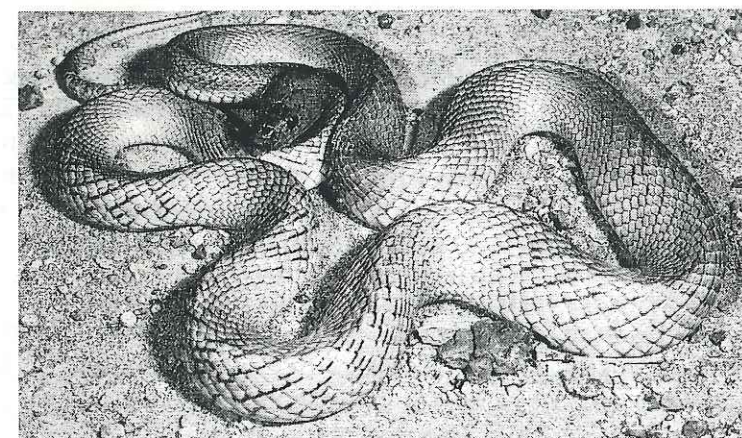
³ Waggoner, L., "The Final Solution", Devon County Chronicle, October 1978

from wider afield, whether from overseas correspondents or from such London suppliers as Jamrach's or Old Sherman of Lambeth. If Roylott's lethal pet need not have been Indian, and the basis for the assumption seems shaky, then we may look elsewhere for a reptile which fits the description.

The Australian TAIPAN belongs to the same family, the elapidae (front fanged snakes) as the better known cobras, kraits, mambas and coral snakes, but is deadlier than all of them. Possibly it was Holmes' observation "it is *elapida*" that Watson misheard as "it is a swamp adder". The Western Taipan, *Oxyuranus Microlepitodus* (also known as 'the Fierce Snake'), secretes a venom which is seven or eight times more lethal than the cobra and is considered the most toxic of all terrestrial snakes.⁴ Only the sea-snake, a species unlikely to negotiate bell-ropes, is more poisonous. The Eastern Taipan, *Oxyuranus Scutellatus*, is only marginally less lethal than its western relative.

The average Taipan bite is toxic enough to kill 300 men and, "before a Taipan antivenom was developed in the 1950's, any full bite meant certain death".⁵ Before this development, only two victims of a Taipan's bite had ever been known to have survived. Well might Dr Grimesby Roylott have been confident that its victim would sooner or later succumb. The Taipan fully and frighteningly warrants Holmes' assessment that it is "the deadliest snake" - in India or elsewhere.

The objection has been made⁶ that Holmes' remark "he has died within ten seconds of being bitten" represents a gross exaggeration of any snake-bite's effect, the suggestion being that a matter of hours is more accurate. In their survey of Taipan attacks from the first half of the century, Masci and Kendall remark "...the victims received massive doses of venom, causing convulsive seizures and the onset of unconsciousness within 2 to 90 minutes of being bitten".⁷



The Fierce Snake or Western Taipan

In 1943, a young woman from Cairns "collapsed within 90 seconds of being bitten" and died soon after and, in 1979, a four year old boy was dead within ten minutes of being bitten. Certainly Holmes' estimate of 10 seconds seems an exaggeration (not a habit to which Holmes is prone), but not of the order usually claimed. Probably Holmes meant that Dr Roylott, who could well have been unconscious and paralyzed for Taipan venom produces a "curare-like paralysis"⁸, was "as good as dead" within 10 seconds.⁹

⁴ Masci, P. and Kendall, P., "The Taipan -The World's Most Dangerous Snake", Kangaroo Press 1995

⁵ Underhill et al. op.cit. p.128

⁶ e.g. Roden, C., "More Singular Features Than I Can recall", *The Case Files of Sherlock Holmes - The Speckled Band*, Calabash Press 1997

⁷ Masci and Kendall, op. cit., pp.12-13

⁸ ibid, p.8

⁹ It is also possible that the shock of being bitten could have caused cardiac arrest. In any event, more than 10 seconds must have elapsed to allow Holmes and Watson to react to the cry, unlock the door, run down the corridor and enter Dr Roylott's room.

Indeed, Taipan toxin is a veritable cocktail of lethal ingredients, attacking the body's vital processes upon a number of fronts. "This...venom contains components which are strongly neurotoxic (destroys the function of nerves), coagulant (clots human blood), haemolytic (causes red blood cells to break down), cytotoxic (kills human cells), myotoxic (destroys function of muscles) and cardiotoxic (destroys heart muscles causing heart failure). The coagulant property of this venom causes the total loss of clotting factors, resulting in the defibrination of patients' blood...The presynaptic neurotoxin, taipoxin, is a potent nerve-blocking agent preventing muscle-nerve function. This venom has a combination of components which can destroy all the major functions of the human body, resulting in a fatal outcome."¹⁰

Moreover, Taipan venom contains 34 components which can only be analyzed by using electrophoresis.¹¹ As Holmes remarked, "The idea of using a form of poison which could not possibly be discovered by any chemical test was just such a one as would occur to a clever and ruthless man who had had an Eastern training. The rapidity with which such a poison would take effect would also, from his point of view, be an advantage. It would be a sharp-eyed coroner who could distinguish the two dark little punctures which would show where the poison fangs had done their work." Compare Masci and Kendall's comment; "The fine sharp fangs...combined with the fact that there is often little or no local reaction to the venom, can make the bite site difficult to find."¹²

The effects of Taipan bite seem then to correspond singularly well to the report of the effects of "the speckled band". In appearance too the Taipan (particularly the western variety) conforms more closely than any other candidate to "the peculiar yellow band with brownish speckles". Consider the description of the mature Taipan: "uniformly light or dark brown...with a creamy yellow belly which is usually spotted anteriorly with reddish-pink freckles" and "the belly is creamish, freely speckled".¹³

As Dr Watson continues his account of the horrific climax of the adventure, he writes "In an instant his strange headgear began to move, and there reared itself...the squat diamond-shaped head and puffed neck of a loathsome serpent." Masci and Kendall observe of the Taipan, "it may arch parts of its body off the ground, usually one or two coils, displaying the yellowish underside of the belly. The rear part of its head distends..."¹⁴ The effect of the brown scales on the creamy yellow base colour would accurately meet Dr Watson's vivid description and evoke Julia Stoner's dying cry, "It was the band. The speckled band".

The Taipan's head, unlike other venomous Australian snakes, is long and rectangular and may well be categorized as "diamond shaped". Moreover, its unusually large eyes and the supra-ocular brow-like scale gives it a uniquely sinister appearance. Underhill and Sutherland confirm the description above when they describe the Western Taipan or Fierce Snake thus: "Narrow head, slim body, no distinguishable neck. Back brown with dark edged scales giving SPECKLED look, sometimes faintly BANDED towards tail. Head dark; eye black. Belly cream or yellow with darker edges."¹⁵ (my emphasis). More so than Russell's Viper or the Banded Krait or the Cobra, the Taipan conforms to the physical appearance of Dr Roylott's serpentine pet.

¹¹ A sophisticated process by which the various components are identified by the size and electric charge of the molecules

¹² Masci and Kendall, op. cit., pp.46

¹³ Masci and Kendall, op. cit., pp.64 and 85

¹⁴ *ibid*, p.79

¹⁵ Underhill, D. and Sutherland, S. et al. "Australia's Dangerous Creatures", *Readers' Digest* 1987, p.131

But what of its behaviour? Can the Taipan, or any known snake, perform as required to play the title role in our drama? Well, not entirely. All snakes are deaf so a whistle is not the best way to attract their attention. Nevertheless, the Taipan has a peculiarly keen ability to sense vibrations through its body.¹⁶ A "low whistle" just might resonate through the floorboards well enough to be picked up. No snake is partial to milk though, if deprived of water, snakes have been observed to drink milk. Anecdotal accounts of snakes in Australia helping themselves from the bucket after the morning milking have been reported.¹⁷

The use of a dog lash to pick up the snake was a wise precaution for, as veteran snake handler Eric Worrall reported, "if grasped by the tail, which is the common practice in the capture of Australian snakes, the Taipan has the ability to lift its whole body back on itself and to strike its tormentor".¹⁸

More notably, Taipans are known to familiarize themselves with their environment, and are disturbed by any new or misplaced item in their territory. "A Taipan's knowledge of its home ground becomes dramatically evident when it is being pursued and it appears to know exactly where to go in order to escape."¹⁹ Such a snake would lend itself particularly well to Dr Roylott's diabolical purposes being capable of memorizing the entry and exit points of the room. If, following Julia's death, the snake had been allowed regular access to the bedroom, the sudden appearance of Helen and her belongings in its territory might have aroused its "snakish temper".²⁰ Taipans "...are easily angered and will attack ferociously"²¹ although Holmes is mistaken in imagining that it "fastened upon Roylott". "They hurl themselves at a tormentor and deliver a quick succession of snapping bites, not attempting to hold on."²²

It has been objected that a venomous snake (as opposed to a boa or python), while it might be able to slide down a bell rope, could not climb back up it. Although I personally suspect that Holmes was wrong on this point and that the band's true egress point was perhaps an innocent (and overlooked) mouse hole communicating back to Roylott's room, the ability of the Taipan (which can easily be seven, eight or even up to ten feet in length and is agile and muscular) to both climb trees and, according to many accounts, to launch itself high enough to reach a victim's head²³, does lend credibility to the idea that it might, if the bell rope were sufficiently stiff to provide purchase, successfully negotiate it. Certainly on the occasion of the attack on it

¹⁶ Masci and Kendall, op. cit., pp.71

¹⁷ A possibly tall tale recounted by my dairy farmer grandfather in Maclean, N.S.W.

¹⁸ Masci and Kendall, op. cit., pp.79

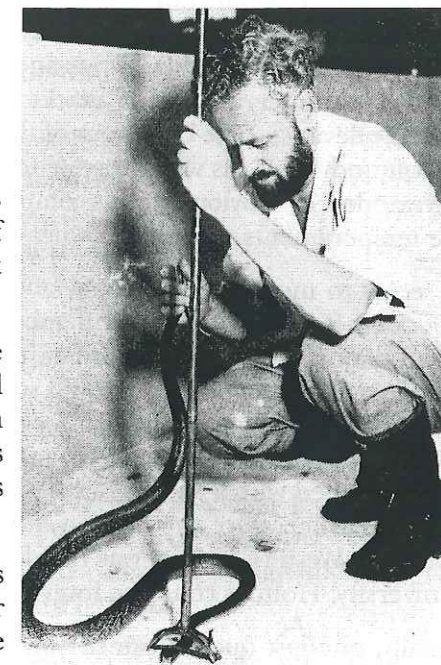
¹⁹ Masci and Kendall, op. cit., pp.73

²⁰ "As Taipan's possess a highly nervous disposition...an unexpected encounter with man may lead to an immediate attack." Masci and Kendall, op. cit., pp.74

²¹ Underhill et.al. *ibid*.

²² Underhill et.al. *ibid*.

²³ Masci and Kendall, op. cit., pp.79



Eric Worrall pins a Taipan

by Sherlock Holmes' cane - and, in view of the ferocity and lightening swiftness of the Taipan, Holmes was fortunate not to fall victim himself - the agile Taipan would have no trouble doubling back to return through the ventilator to its master's room. A Taipan in captivity will thrive, happy to subsist on a diet of rats and mice, for up to 20 years so the point sometimes made that the two year interval between attacks on Julia and Helen would be beyond a single snake's lifespan has no relevance. The behaviour of the Taipan is cryptozoic (i.e. it displays secretive behaviour), it is swift and ferocious when threatened and ruthless in attack. Just like its master! Holmes might have added Dr Roylott and his companion to his observations upon the correspondence between the temperaments of pet and owner.²⁴

It seems to me that the Taipan, of all venomous snakes, uniquely fits the criteria of the "The Speckled Band". In colour and appearance, potency of venom, behaviour and habit it accords in all major, and not a few minor, respects with the evidence we have from Watson's account. The sole factor against it, I would suggest, is Sherlock Holmes' declared belief that the Roylott snake was a denizen of India. Yet even he implies that an element of assumption was involved: "The idea of a snake occurred to me, and when I coupled it with my knowledge that the doctor was furnished with a supply of creatures from India, I felt I was probably on the right track." As argued earlier, since the baboon did not come from India, nor need the snake. What is more, since the Western Taipan was not documented until 1879,²⁵ by Professor McCoy of Melbourne University, Holmes could be forgiven for being unfamiliar with it in 1883.

Finally, one last quote from the invaluable Messrs. Masci and Kendall might cast light on the peculiar garb worn by Dr Grimesby Roylott on his memorable visit to Baker Street, "a peculiar mixture of the professional and of the agricultural, having a black top hat, a long frock-coat and a pair of high gaiters". Masci and Kendall make the recommendation for those venturing into Taipan territory that "the wearing of puttees or gaiters is especially useful as they give complete protection as far as the knee."²⁶ If Holmes had been the ideal reasoner that Dr Watson was fond of portraying, this one fact alone might have given him the solution.

Afterword:

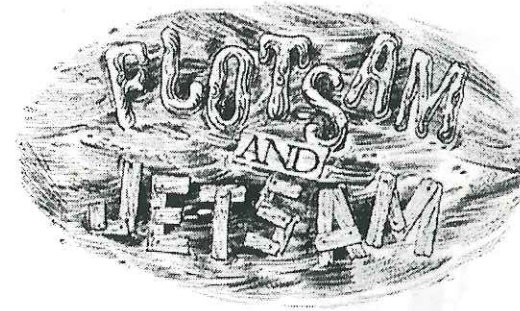
On 10th October, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported what must be one of the most bizarre incidents involving a Taipan: a six-year-old boy, travelling with his mother on a plane from Melbourne to Perth complained of a sore leg half way through the four-hour flight and subsequently became ill. On arrival in Perth his mother noticed two small puncture marks on the back of his ankle and took him to hospital where tests revealed that he had been bitten by a Taipan, presumably in-flight! While most people would not expect to be bitten by the world's deadliest snake 30,000 feet in the air, it probably doesn't surprise in-flight staff who are used to seeing just about everything brought on board in hand luggage.



²⁴ *The Adventure of the Copper Beeches*

²⁵ The only other, incomplete, descriptions in the scientific press were in a German publication of 1867 and Kreff's 1869 "The Snakes of Australia" - both obscure works that might have escaped even "an omnivorous reader"

²⁶ Masci and Kendall, op. cit., pp.79



Best Canonical Illustrators - The Hounds of the Internet have had another poll, this time to determine who is regarded as the best Sherlockian illustrator. The results were as follows:

1st	Sidney Paget	48%
2nd	Frank Wiles	17%
3rd	Howard Elcock	13%
4th	Frederic Dorr Steele	10%
5th eq	Robert Storm Petersen	4%
	Frederic Townsend	4%
	Nis Jessen	4%

Comrade, we make the rules! - The 'Echo of Moscow' radio station, one of the most popular in Moscow, ran a quiz called 'The Big Conan Doyle Game' from 1st Sept. to 1st Dec. There are three questions every week which were asked live on radio and also published in a newspaper and participants had to phone the station at fixed hours to give their answers. The first prize was a one-week trip to London for two. Unfortunately, it seems that not all the questions had a canonical background. It appears

that some have been taken from a story called *The Death of a Russian Landowner* inserted in a collection of Conan Doyle stories put out by a St. Petersburg publishing house which claims the story was written by Doyle. When asked

about this inadequacy the game organizers said that they do not recognize the Sherlockian canon, "What's the canon? Others have their canon, and we have our canon." True Russian Sherlockians have mounted a campaign to correct this anomaly.



Alice Turns 100 - Passengers familiar with late night American television weather reports (the type becoming all too common, in which the weather person can't simply report the weather but has to something approximating a vaudeville 'turn') will have heard recently from Willard Scott (via *The Late Show With David Letterman*) that Alice Turner is alive and well and living in Florida and has just turned 100 - which fact will cast even more doubt on the dating of *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*.

Down Under Dogs - Not to be outdone by their British counterparts, two Australian Labradors with the uncanonical names of Fay and Floyd are successfully helping customs officers in their battle against the importing of drugs. They are the first to graduate from the 'Super Sniffer Program' developed by Australian Customs and Melbourne University which breeds dogs to have particularly sensitive noses and long attention spans.



Rat bites Dog! - A correspondent to *The Fortean Times*, the eclectic journal of the bizarre and inexplicable, reports from Leeds, Yorkshire, that a mastiff (from Ross and Mangles?) has been attacked by a giant rat (whether or not from Sumatra was not specified).