

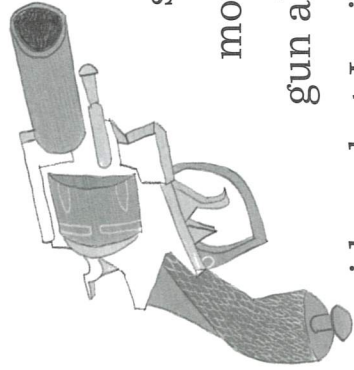
Next to it
he put a box
of matches and
the stump of a candle. Then he
turned down the lamp and we sat
in darkness.

How could I ever forget that
awful night? I could not hear
a sound, not even Holmes
breathing, and yet I knew that
he sat alert a few feet in front
of me, probably in the same
state of nervous tension as me. I
wished that whatever event was
to come would happen soon.

With the shutters closed
there was absolute darkness.
From outside there came the
occasional call of a bird and
once, right outside the window,
a long drawn-out whine of a cat,
revealing that the cheetah was on
the prowl.

Far away, every quarter of an
hour, the parish clock chimed.
Twelve midnight struck, then one,
then two, then three o'clock. How
long those hours were. And still
we sat waiting for whatever was
going to happen.

All at once there was a gleam of light from the ventilator. It flickered like candlelight.



I gasped and heard Holmes stiffen. My hand moved towards my gun although I had no idea what I might be shooting at.

There was a strong smell of burning oil and the light steadied and dimmed a little. Someone in the next room had lit a lantern with a shutter across it to dim the light. I heard a tiny sound

of movement that then stopped. I was aware that I was holding my breath and released it slowly, trying my best not to make a sound. I wanted to change position on the chair but was afraid to move in case I made my presence known.

For half an hour I stayed motionless, straining my ears, my nerves alert. Then I heard a sound. A very gentle, soothing sound, like the hiss of a boiling kettle.

At that sound, Holmes sprang from the bed, struck a match, and

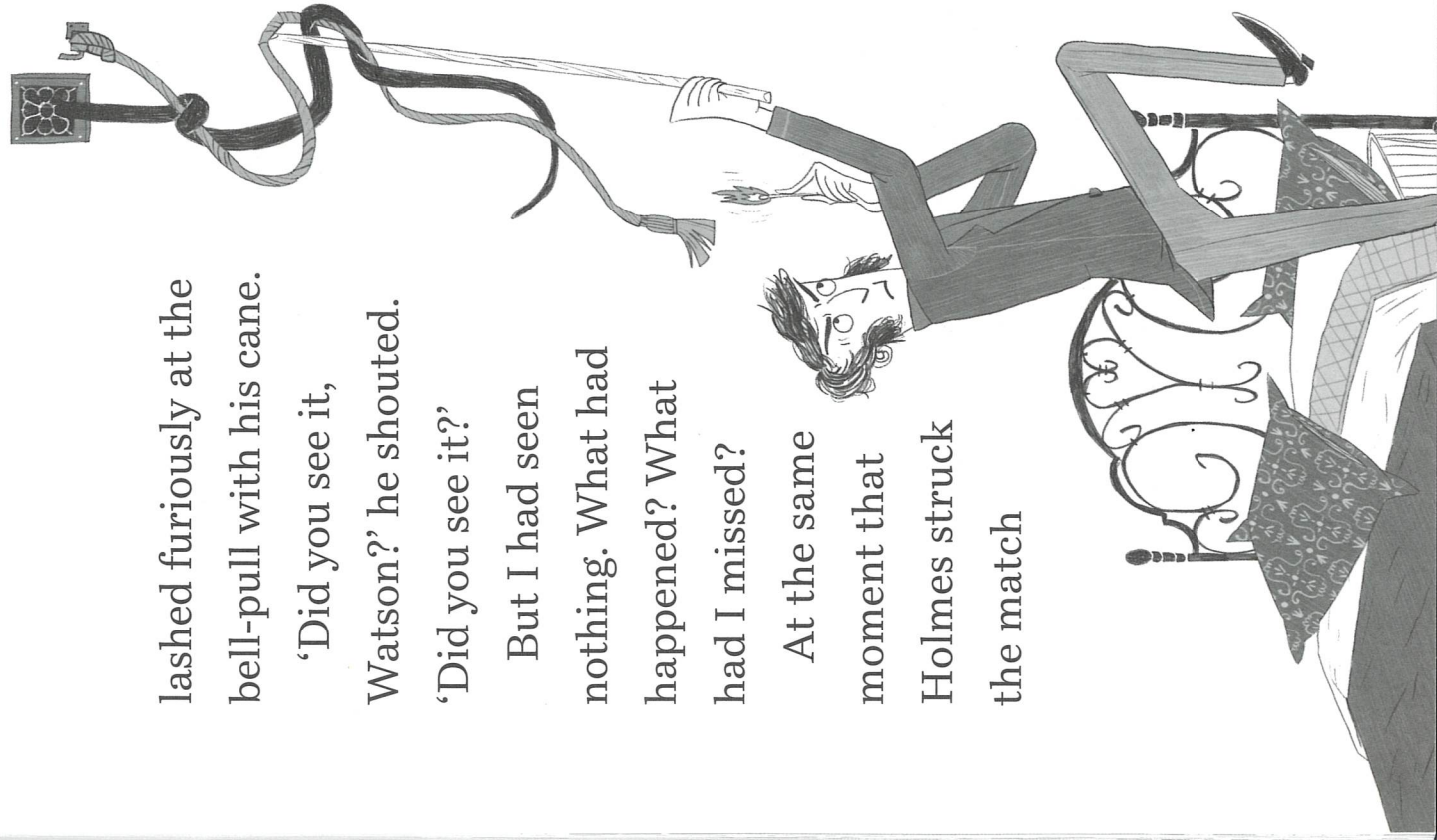
lashed furiously at the bell-pull with his cane.

‘Did you see it, Watson?’ he shouted.

‘Did you see it?’

But I had seen nothing. What had happened? What had I missed?

At the same moment that Holmes struck the match



I heard a whistle, long and low, just as Miss Stoner had described, but the light had temporarily blinded me. All I could see was my friend's face, deathly pale and filled with horror and loathing.

He had stopped thrashing at whatever it was and was gazing up at the ventilator when there was a sound that made my heart almost leap from my chest. It was a horrible cry – a cry of fear and pain and anger that got louder and louder until I was almost forced to put my hands over my ears.

The cry was so loud and long that I was sure people in the village would have been roused from their sleep. It struck such cold in my heart that I know it will stay with me forever.

I stood looking at Holmes and he at me until the last echoes of that terrible shriek had died away.

‘What can it mean?’ I asked when at last I could speak.

‘It means that it is all over,’ Holmes answered. ‘And perhaps, after all, it is for the best. Bring your gun, Watson, and we will

enter Doctor Roylott’s room.’

He lit the lamp and I followed him out into the corridor. Twice he hammered on Doctor Roylott’s door but there was no reply from within. Then he turned the handle and went in with me close behind, my gun at the ready, not knowing what I was going to see.

On the table stood the lantern with one of the shutters half open so that the beam shone on the iron safe, the door of which hung partly open.

Beside the table, seated on

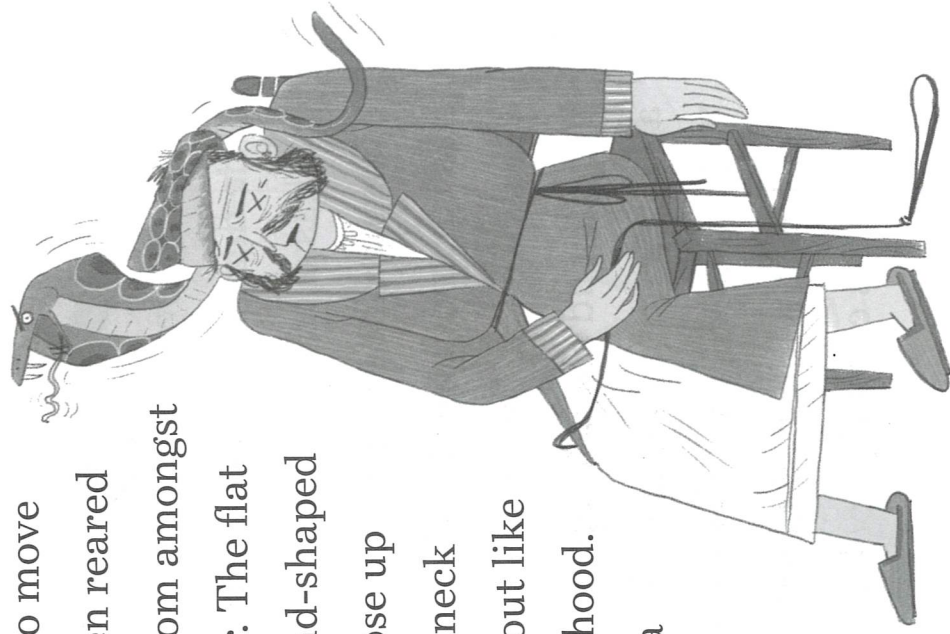
a wooden chair, was Doctor Roylott. He was dressed in a grey dressing gown and he had red slippers on his feet. Across his lap lay the dog leash that we had seen earlier in the day. His face was tilted upward towards the ventilator, fixing it with the most dreadful stare. Round his forehead was a strange brownish-yellow speckled band, tightly wound. He made no movement or sound as we entered.

‘The band! The speckled band!’ whispered Holmes.

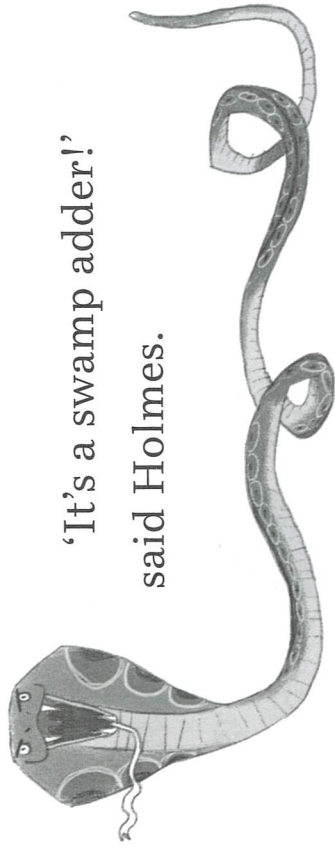
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I took a step forward. In an instant the strange head-piece began to move and then reared itself from amongst his hair. The flat diamond-shaped head rose up and its neck puffed out like a huge hood.

It was a snake!



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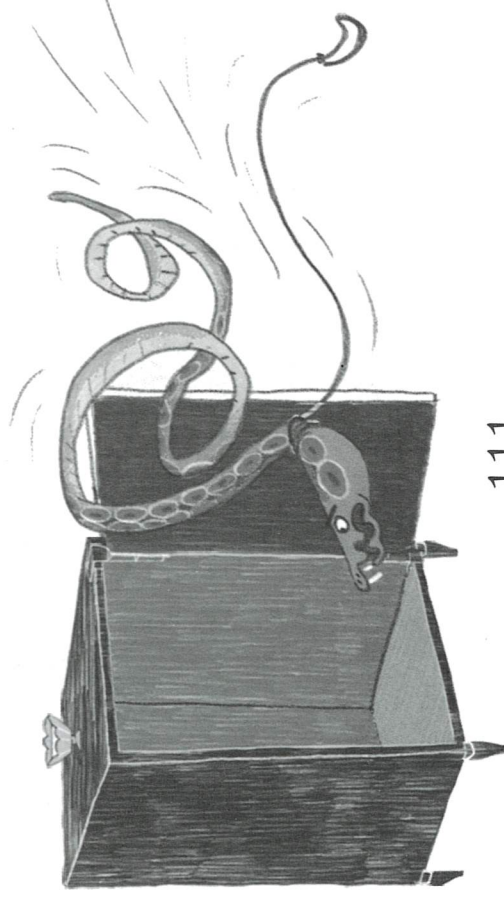
'It's a swamp adder!'
said Holmes.

'The deadliest snake in India.
He has died within ten seconds
of being bitten. His own weapon
has turned upon him.'

I looked at the creature in
horror and shuddered. It was
all beginning to make sense now.
What an evil and loathsome man
Doctor Roylott had been!
Holmes carefully took the leash

from Roylott's lap. 'Let us get this
creature back into its den and then
we can take Miss Stoner to a place
of safety and inform the police.'

He deftly threw the noose
around the reptile's neck, pulled
it tight and, carrying it at arm's
length, threw it into the iron safe
and slammed the door shut.



Miss Stoner had been awoken by the noise and stood, shaking, in the corridor outside her room.

‘You are safe now, Miss Stoner,’ said Holmes, taking her hand in a rare moment of compassion.

‘But I’m afraid that your step-father is dead.’

Her eyes widened in surprise rather than grief but she said nothing.

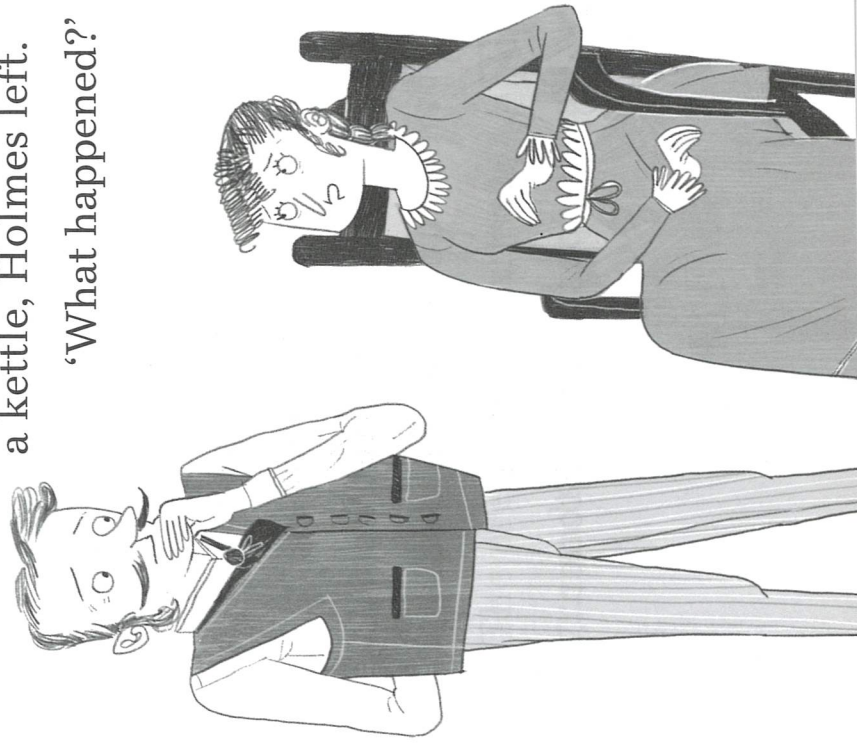
‘We must inform the police,’ said Holmes. ‘If Watson will stay with you and make a cup of tea, I shall rouse someone at the inn and ask

them to take a message.’

I nodded and we led her into the kitchen where the wood range still gave off some warmth.

When she was seated and I had stoked up the fire to boil a kettle, Holmes left.

‘What happened?’



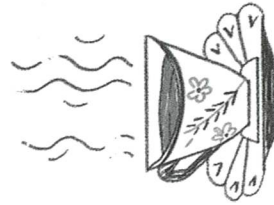
the young lady asked after a long period of silence.

I shook my head. 'I'll let Holmes explain the details to you. All I can say is that you were right that your step-father meant you harm, but he is dead and you have nothing else to fear. Your nightmare is over.'

She seemed to relax and sipped her tea until Holmes

returned. I offered him a cup but he refused,

seating himself opposite Miss Stoner.



'It seems that the baboon and the cheetah were not the only wild animals that Doctor Roylott kept here,' he began. 'He had also brought a snake from India: a swamp adder.'

Miss Stoner stared at him in horror. 'The most deadly snake ...' she said.

Holmes continued. 'I admit that after our meeting at Baker Street I had developed a theory that turned out to be incorrect. The presence of the gangs in the grounds and your sister's use of

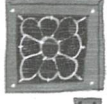


the word 'band' to describe what she saw that night were enough to send me down the wrong path. Once we had seen the rooms, however, it became clear that nothing could enter through the window or the door.

When I first saw the ventilator and the dummy bell-pull I knew that they were significant. I also noticed that the bed was clamped to the floor so that it could not be moved from beneath the

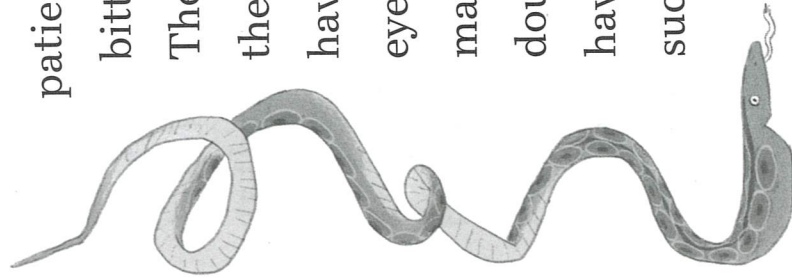
ventilator. The bell-rope therefore, must be a bridge for something to pass through the hole and make its way to the bed. What else but a snake? Of course, we know that

he brought several animals back from India. The snake was part of that collection, although he kept it hidden. Its poison



is quick-acting yet impossible to trace by the police laboratories. Being a doctor in India, Roylott would have known that. I imagine that he must have treated patients who had been bitten by such a creature.

The coroner carrying out the investigation would have had to be sharp-eyed to see the puncture marks of the bite. It is doubtful that he would have even considered such a possibility.



Miss Stoner had a strange expression on her face, something between sadness and disbelief, as if, even though she had not liked her step-father, she couldn't believe that he could do such a thing to get his hands on her and her sister's money. 'He could not allow the snake to remain in the room, as it would have been discovered the following morning. He must have trained it to return at



the sound of the whistle, with the lure of the milk,' Holmes continued. 'And an inspection of the chair showed that he often stood on it, which he would have to do to reach the ventilator.'

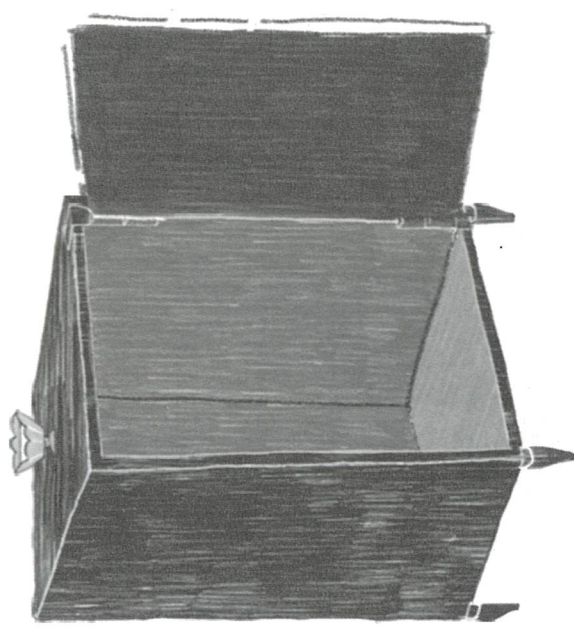
'I was lucky that first night,' said Miss Stoner. 'He must have sent it through. I wonder that it didn't bite me.'

'He was in no great hurry,' said Holmes. 'the snake may not bite the bed's occupant every time, but he knew that sooner or later it would happen. As long as it

happened before your wedding.'

'And you remember the metallic clang you heard?' I put in. 'He kept the snake in the safe.'

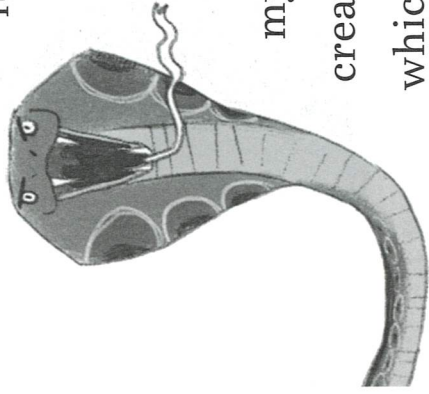
She looked from one to the other of us. 'I cannot thank you



enough, Mr Holmes and Doctor Watson. You risked your lives tonight. I assume you waited for the snake to come through the ventilator?’

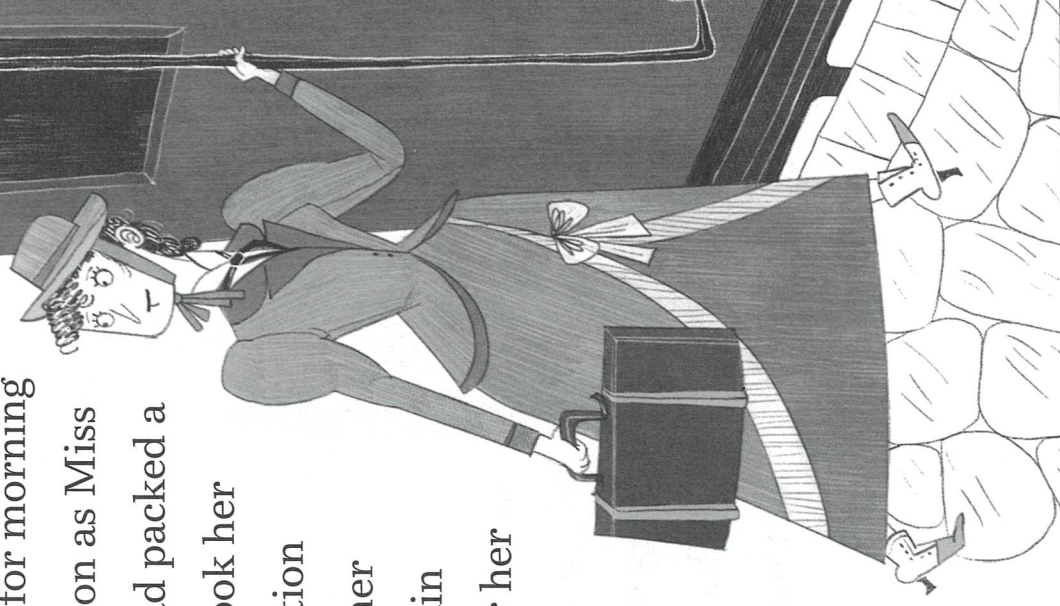
‘Indeed,’ said Holmes, ‘and then I beat it with my stick until it was driven back through

its hole. We had the advantage of knowing what to expect. Some of my strikes hit the creature and angered it, which is why it flew at



the first person it saw - its master.’

We did not have to wait long for morning and, as soon as Miss Stoner had packed a bag, we took her to the station and saw her onto a train bound for her aunt’s in Harrow.



After putting the whole affair into the hands of the police, we then made our way back to

Baker Street. The mystery was over. This time the

coroner gave the cause of death

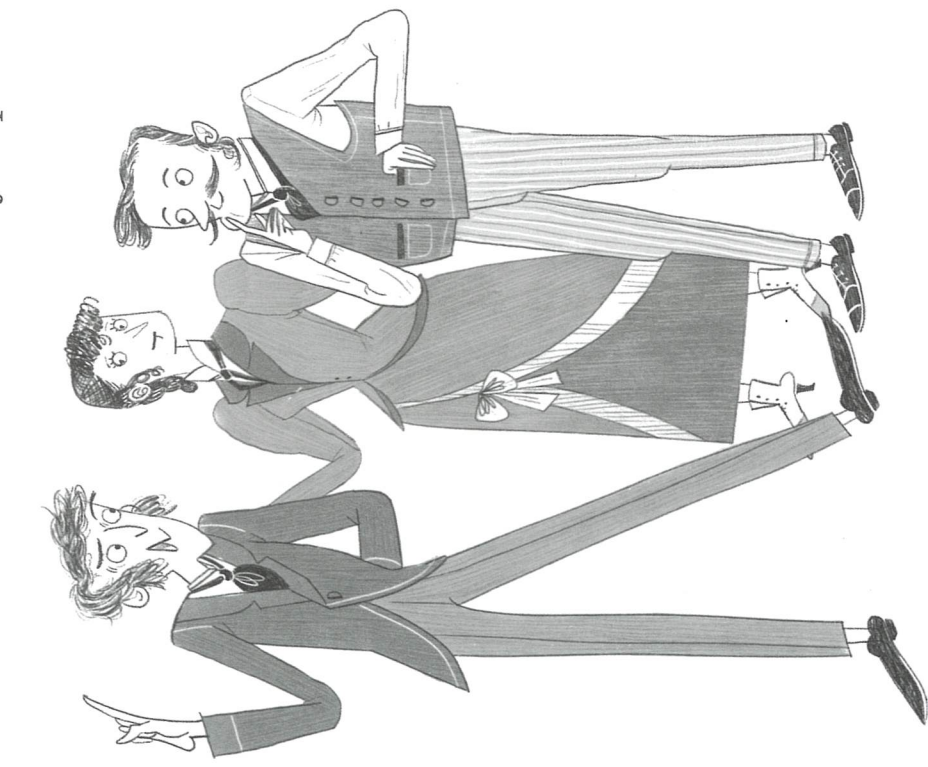
as: Doctor Roylott, of

Stoke Moran, died while

playing with a dangerous pet.

The true details of the

case were to be known only to the three of us - Holmes and I, and Miss Stoner. I sincerely hope



that the details would fade from
her mind once she was married
and enveloped in the loving care of
her new husband.

