

# Some Observations on the Adventure of the Empty House: A Study in Preparedness

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The Adventure of the Empty House (EMPT) is one of the four fixed points in the structure of the Canon. Along with A Study in Scarlet, The Final Problem, and His Last Bow, they are the marked points of our universe. Quite naturally, many Sherlockian scholars have written at length on most subjects from this adventure. EMPT contains many tantalizing hints that these scholars have explored to develop some of the most interesting and inventive writings upon the writings. Those amazingly few words that describe the Great Hiatus (only 112!) have certainly generated more than 112 scholarly papers and several books.<sup>1</sup> In the new *Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, Les Klinger devotes three pages of footnotes to those 112 words.

William S. Baring-Gould has an article eight pages long about the Great Hiatus

However, the actual adventure of EMPT has gotten little attention. The murder of the Hon. Ronald Adair and the attempted murder of Sherlock Holmes sometimes seem like mere plot devices to introduce Sherlock Holmes' return. Some of the best Sherlockian scholars have pointed out major holes in the plot. They asked questions about where Col. Moran was when he fired the shot that killed Adair – Climbing trees, standing on the tops of buses, or using a yet to be invented helicopter have been jokingly proposed as explanations.

And so I thought, until I reread the adventure again as part of my regular mental health program. In doing so I came across a striking piece of evidence that revealed the back story and the preparations made by Col. Moran and Mr. Sherlock Holmes that came to fruition in a few days around March 30, 1894. That small observation was provided in an offhand way, *"The servant deposed that she heard him enter the front room on the second floor, generally used as his sitting-room. She had lit a fire there and as it smoked she had opened the window."* An open window would also mean that the drapes had to be open after dark a shocking breach of the duties of the household staff. Now, either we accept that the window being open and the drapes being pulled back was some incredible coincidence or it shows preplanning on the part of Moran. Even Inspector Lestrade, seeing broken glass inside the room by a window and Adair dead from a bullet wound, would have deduced that he had been shot from the outside. Hence, this trivial piece of preparation was vital to the mystery around how the crime occurred and keeping Moran off the suspect list. Beginning with this key observation I placed myself in the mind of both Moran and Sherlock Holmes before March 30, 1894.

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar W. Smith and A. Carson Simpson both penned books on The Great Hiatus.

### The planning:

**Col. Sebastian Moran** was well aware that Sherlock Holmes had not died at the Reichenbach Falls. While he had lost track of Holmes, he had been paying people for three years to watch Baker Street. He was clearly preparing to deal with Holmes at his first opportunity. The obvious motive would be revenge for the Professor, but Moran had many sins from his past that Sherlock Holmes could reveal. One plan for dealing with Holmes could involve an "accident" along the lines of the attempts on Sherlock Holmes' life in FINA, *i.e.* an errant van, a brick falling from a roof, or a fire. However, revenge for murder of so close an associate as Prof. Moriarity would call for direct personal action by the Col. himself-- the air rifle.

Perhaps Moriarty first ensured that the empty house be empty as a place where Holmes' could be observed or as part of the professor's plans for his "inevitable destruction." Moran kept the empty house empty, so as to provide a suitable base for his plans. Consider that Moran entered the empty house and knowingly went directly to a certain window, where the best shot was to be had. In a house empty and unmaintained for at least three years where the wallpaper was hanging down in shreds and the windows were covered in dust, the key in the back door was silent and smooth, as was the raising of the window to take aim.

Moran was no longer Prof. Moriarity's Chief of Staff and no longer received the very substantial salary he had been paid to plan and execute some of the greatest crimes of London. Sherlock Holmes tells us his source of income was now cheating at cards. It appears he was very good at cheating, as winning 420 pounds at a single sitting is an excellent income for one day's work in any time, let alone 1894.

However, being a professional cheat at cards carries with it a great risk. Someone, sometime, could notice that one was cheating. Moran made preparations for this eventuality. He would not know for sure who might notice his cheating but a good first bet would be his partner. He played the most with Adair, clearly made some big kills with him, and would be most observed by him. Adair was described as a "cautious" player and must have been shocked at the risks, and then the too frequent amazing coups, of his partner. Others, such as the club's secretary, another frequent player, or a sore loser, might also see something amiss. But Moran was wily enough to play at different clubs presumably fleecing different marks. As Holmes points out, to be identified as a cheat would end his source of income and destroy him. The scandal would be terrible. Consider the consequences when the Prince of Wales was merely called as a witness in the Tranby Croft<sup>2</sup> affair in 1890. There is also a modern parallel in the James Bond novel *Moonraker*,

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<sup>2</sup> In September 1890, the Prince was among the guests at a house party at Tranby Croft, the country house of shipbuilder Sir Arthur Wilson. During the evening, several players observed Sir William apparently cheating. The next morning they confronted Sir William. Sir William denied any wrong-doing but finally agreed to sign a pledge that he would never play cards again in exchange for an agreement that the matter would be kept secret.

where the villain cheats at cards, faces ruin, scandal, and the loss to Great Britain of the most advanced rocket in the world.

Moran's plan would have to be ready to be executed quickly. In the Victorian age the proper thing to do, and what Adair did, was to give Moran a chance to "Save His Honor." If Moran immediately resigned from his clubs and agreed to no longer gamble, honor might be satisfied. Even so, his sudden and abrupt departure from his clubs and from his favorite form of entertainment would be noticed. Rumors would spread behind his back and accusations would be made.

Advanced preparations for the demise of Adair, or anyone who might expose Moran, were required. Moran probably had several plans for dealing with Adair, but they all would require knowledge of Adair's daily routines and lodging. Moran needed someone inside Adair's house on Park Lane and at the clubs he frequented on his "payroll." It was Adair who found that Moran was cheating. Adair had to be eliminated, which meant that Moran had to know where Adair's rooms were, how he used those rooms, when and where he went, and what Adair's routine was so that a certain window with a view of the table could be opened at a certain time. The maid who set the fire in the fireplace and opened the window would be my first choice for the insider. But it could have been someone else who partially blocked the chimney causing the fireplace to smoke. So, with inside knowledge from inside the Adair household, just the right window could be opened at just the right time. All of these plans had danger as at least one person (the maid, I would suggest) would understand after the murder what had happened. No doubt the maid would soon suffer an "accident."

### **The Murder of the Hon. Robert Adair:**

Now that the stage is set, I must address a significant question about the method used to murder Adair, where was Moran when he fired the shot? The question can be answered by understanding the geography of Park Lane. I've been unable to determine which of the properties towards the Oxford Street end of Park Lane was numbered 427 in 1903, but the general layout of the properties can be established. An important observation is that Park Lane intersects with no less than six (seven in the "Stanford's Map of Central London," 1897) streets<sup>3</sup> or lanes at the Oxford Street end. At each of these intersections, the houses on both sides of the cross streets would have windows both on Park Lane frontage and on the frontage on the side streets.

Further, maps (Figure 1) and photographs (Figure 2) of Park Lane in that era show that the properties were not row-houses. This area was a neighborhood of the very well-to-do and

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The matter quickly became common knowledge. Sir William found himself ostracized by society and he decided to defend his Honor by suing his accusers in a case where the Prince was called as a witness. Source: Diamond, Michael (2003), *Victorian Sensation*, Anthem Press, pp. 33-37, ISBN 1-84331-150-X via Wiki.

<sup>3</sup> The first six intersecting streets from the Oxford Street end are: (Hereford C. in 1897) North Row, Green Street, Wood's Mews, Upper Brook Street, Cul Ross Street, and Upper Grosvenor Street.

these were the homes of the well-to-do, and thus were generally freestanding.<sup>4</sup> Sidney Paget's drawing shows a bay window of sorts on one property, perhaps 427. Further, based on other maps, the front faces of the house did not align in a flat row same distance from Park Lane. Different properties had different set-backs due to gardens, fences, etc. The room where Adair was murdered was described as a sitting room on the second (USA third floor). Sitting rooms and Victorian homes were usually provided with good lighting as they were the place where an individual would spend the private part of his day. A corner room with windows on Park Lane and on a cross street or offset from the adjacent property would be ideal. A desk would be provided and comfortable places to relax, smoke, read, or work. Hence, Adair's room had both windows facing on Park Lane and a window or windows facing one of the cross streets or offset from those of the next house.

Moran no longer needs helicopter, a triple-decker omnibus, or a tree, but only advance arrangements to place him on the roof or in one of the facing windows of a property across one of the side streets or a property next to 427 if that property was offset along Park Lane differently than its neighbor. This view is consistent with Holmes own statement after the arrest of Moran, that the man, "*... who shot the Honourable Ronald Adair with an expanding bullet from an air-gun through the open window of the second-floor front of No. 427 Park Lane.*" That the crime occurred in a second floor, front room does not mean the shot was fired through a second floor, front window!

With this observation the crime and its method seem very logical, very well-planned, and occurring as described by Watson.

## The Great Hiatus

Sherlock Holmes was not idle during The Great Hiatus. He kept up to date on the criminal world and London and knew when one of his enemies had died. In those last few months practicing organic chemistry in Montpellier [*Sic*]<sup>5</sup>, he had been preparing for his return. Holmes mentions that the preparation of the bust took several days and, when the Adair crime was committed, he was getting ready to return to London. A look at contemporary train schedules shows that if Sherlock Holmes had read of the crime in a paper, perhaps on April 1<sup>st</sup> or after the inquest on April 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> the quickest he could've gotten to London in 1903 would be a little less than 24 hours. He would have taken a train to Paris, Gare de Lyon, changed to a train for Calais or another French port from the Gare du Nord. An overnight ferry to one of the English Channel ports and thence a train to London completes the trip.<sup>6</sup> He no longer needed the circuitous route through Belgium

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4 The Park Lane of today is very different and less residential. It now contains deluxe hotels, the flagship sales offices of luxury car companies, and office blocks for organizations such as the Guild of Professional Estate Agents.

5 In this adventure Watson seems to have particular trouble with his "L's" mistaking a beast for a priest and Vermont (or a city in one of 14 other US states) for the South of France.

6 Today, thanks to the TGV and the Channel Tunnel, this trip could be done in as little as eight hours. If you leave Montpellier at a very early 0528 you would be at London St. Pancras at 1230. The routing via Paris would be the same unless you choose one of the less frequent modern connections via Lille Europe.

that he took in FINA. In any case, on arrival in London the bust was ready and, after a brief emotional visit with Mrs. Hudson, 221b was ready -- with the bust, the window, and the lamp. Homes had notified Moran that he was back by visiting 221b and then waited for Moran to react. He anticipated that Moran would react and use the air gun and Holmes made his plans accordingly. Sherlock Holmes may have had other plans depending on the circumstances that caused him to return to London.

### **The Attempted Murder of Sherlock Holmes:**

Moran was ready to use the same plan to deal with Sherlock Holmes that he used when dealing with Adair. Once again, his planning would get him into a good firing position where he would be unobserved to assemble the air gun and then use it. Having made arrangements for an empty house to remain empty his plan seemed foolproof.

So, what went wrong? Moran's plans for dealing with Adair or anyone else that found him cheating at cards and his plan for dealing with the return of Sherlock Holmes were independent plans. Moran did not foresee that execution of the first plan would lead to the immediate return of Sherlock Holmes and demand the instant implementation of the second. With Sherlock Holmes back in town and looking at the evidence, the method of the first crime, its purpose, and the perpetrator were rapidly deduced by Sherlock Holmes. Holmes, expecting an attack, laid his own counter plan, which in the end was more effective.

So, by careful observation and a review of the facts, I conclude that the Adventure of The Empty House was a real adventure (a study in preparedness) and no made-up mere vehicle to resurrect Holmes. I agree with Watson, *"The crime was of interest in itself..."* We can now enjoy the adventure itself as well as the wonderful opportunities for Canonical research related to The Great Hiatus, Prof. Moriarity, the second most dangerous man in London, the question of multiple Holmes, and many others.

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Figure 1

From England, Scotland and Wales, Ordnance Survey, Five feet to the mile, London, Edition of 1894-6, Sheet VII.72 - Sheet VII.72, <http://maps.nls.uk/view/101201613>

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Figure 2

London, Park Lane Towards Marble Arch, 1900

On Books and Streets - An approach to Cultural History, Jaap Harskamp and Paul Dijstelberge,  
<https://abeautifulbook.wordpress.com/>