

Neverland - Peter Blau reports in *Scuttlebutt* that *Neverland*, a film based on Allan Knee's play *The Man Who Was Peter Pan* is scheduled for release by Miramax on 22nd Oct. It stars Johnny Depp as *Peter Pan* author J.M. Barrie, Ian Hart as Conan Doyle, Dustin Hoffman as Charles Frohman (who produced William Gillette's *Sherlock Holmes*), Julie Christie, and Kate Winslett. Ian Hart, of course, was Watson in Richard Roxburgh's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (BBC, 2002), making him one of the few actors to have played both Watson and Conan Doyle.

A gay old time - According to <<http://uk.gay.com>> (15 June 2004), "Two of the country's most famous gay actors [Stephen Fry and Rupert Everett] will fight it out later this year, with both appearing as Sherlock Holmes on different channels. Stephen Fry...and long-time comedy partner Hugh Laurie were hired to join forces again as early as March this year...But Everett's version of the show, co-starring Ian Hart as Dr Watson,¹ will be shown first.

"If successful, the shows could lead to lucrative future programmes for both actors; ITV has already discussed extending the one off into a full series for Fry and Laurie, should they attract enough viewers." The Everett pic, to be screened on BBC-1, will be produced by Tiger Aspect from an original story by Allan Cubitt (who wrote the Roxburgh *Hound* screened on BBC-1 in 2002).

Stephen Fry recently laughed off any suggestion of rivalry with Everett: "Two camp Sherlocks - it's too much to imagine, isn't it? I'm going to be the fatter one. I'm going to have to go on a very fast diet in order to lean down to Holmes. There's no mention in all of Conan Doyle of Holmes being a great wobbly lard arse, so I'm going to have to get tuned-up in some awful way!"



Watson & Holmes to be:
Hugh Laurie & Stephen Fry

¹ Ian Hart played Watson to Richard Roxburgh's Holmes in the BBC's 2002 *Hound of the Baskervilles*



THE MYSTERY of THE EMPTY HOUSE

by Philip Cornell

With the possible exception of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *The Empty House* was probably the most eagerly awaited Sherlock Holmes story ever. The *Hound* had been the first new Holmes tale in the eight years since Conan Doyle had sent Professor Moriarty and (so far as the world knew) Sherlock Holmes himself to a watery grave at the Reichenbach Falls. But *The Hound* had been a posthumous account, dating from the period before *The Final Problem*, and Holmes had experienced no true resurrection. However, the appearance, in the September 26th 1903 *Collier's Weekly* and the *Strand Magazine* of October 1903 of *The Adventure of the Empty House* marked the Return of Sherlock Holmes, living and breathing, from the dead - and the confidence of Conan Doyle's publishers in paying him US\$4000 per story was fully justified by the frenzy at the bookstalls of readers desperate to learn how Holmes had survived.

In his excellent anthology of *Locked-Room Mysteries and Impossible Crimes*¹, Mike Ashley, writing of the development of this particular genre, rightly notes that, after Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Conan Doyle was one of the very first writers to attempt a "locked room" murder mystery with *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*. He writes that perhaps it is surprising there are not more impossible crimes amongst the Holmes Canon. Strictly there are only two - the other being *The Problem of Thor Bridge*².

Yet there is, of course, another although Mr Ashley may be forgiven for overlooking it for it is hardly ever remarked upon because Conan Doyle has, understandably, emphasized in *The Adventure of the Empty House* the dramatic return of Sherlock Holmes, his exciting, if improbable, account of his survival and subsequent travels, and the thrilling climactic capture of the last of Moriarty's gang.³ But there is in the background a quite ingeniously devised "locked room" murder mystery - that of the Honourable Ronald Adair - which, Watson tells us, had all of London interested and the fashionable world dismayed.

Let us examine the evidence. The Honourable Ronald was found dead in a locked bedroom, his brains blown out by a soft-nosed revolver bullet. No gun was found in the room. Although the window was open, it was high on the second³ storey. It was, so Watson assures us after examining the scene himself, impossible for even the most active man to have climbed up to it. The flowerbed below was undisturbed, showing that no ladder had been used, and nobody had escaped by making the perilous leap from the window. No shot had been heard, either from within the house or from the still busy street. The wide expanse of Park Lane would require that, if the

¹ Ashley, Mike (ed.) *The Mammoth Book of Locked-Room Mysteries and Impossible Crimes*, Constable and Robinson, London 2000 p. 521.

² Well... excepting Parker the garotter, but perhaps he'd served his time.

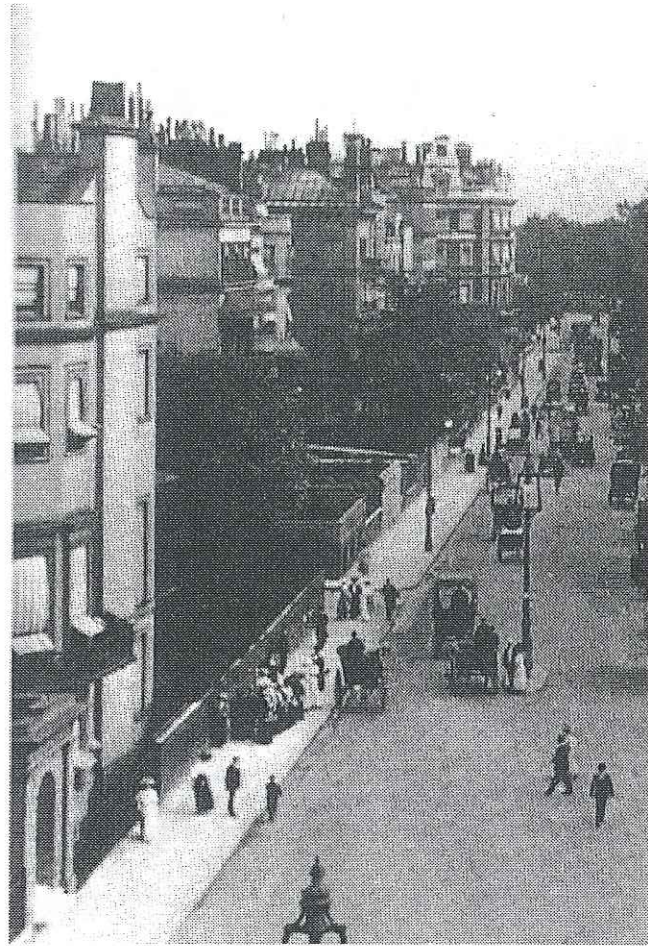
³ Or the *third* by American calculation.

shot had been made from outside, the gun must have been fired from a considerable distance. That would make a successful shot with a revolver a matter of luck rather than marksmanship, particularly when the angle needed for the bullet to pass through the window and strike the victim while seated at his desk (rather than imbedding itself in the ceiling) is added to the calculation.

We have here a classic “locked room” scenario of the best sort, for it is at once baffling yet, once explained, plausible - not relying on any impractical contrivance or improbable coincidence. Had he so chosen, Conan Doyle might have milked the mystery for all it was worth. Ever-mindful, however, of what his public wanted, and perhaps for other reasons besides, he concentrated instead on Watson’s reaction to Holmes’s unexpected return, cleverly and tantalizingly delaying Holmes’s explanation, then bamboozling both Watson and the reader with Holmes and Watson’s mysterious nocturnal meanderings through the back lanes and mews gardens behind Baker Street, performing the conjuror’s trick with the shadow of the bust, and finishing up with a rousing burst of action as Colonel Sebastian Moran is laid to heel.

The murder of Ronald Adair, with all its attendant mystery, is all but forgotten until Holmes belatedly reveals Colonel Moran to be the culprit, whereupon he is bundled off in handcuffs by Lestrade and we have to be content with a perfunctory paragraph back in Baker Street to fill in the details of motive and method. Thus, one of the cleverest killings in the Canon is, in a sense, wasted. Had Conan Doyle not been almost exclusively concerned with narrating how Sherlock Holmes came back from the dead, think what he might have made of this material...

Firstly, we might expect much more to have been made of Lestrade’s bewilderment by the seemingly inexplicable circumstances. We might have had Holmes offering some of those pointed, yet rarely comprehended and never acted upon, hints: “It is a mistake, Lestrade, to assume that the existence of a revolver bullet presupposes the existence of a revolver.” Perhaps Watson would have proposed his own theory: “Holmes, might not the killer have shot through the window from the upper deck of a passing omnibus?”. Some further testimony might have been gleaned from the Maynooth menage and from Adair’s fellow whist players at the Bagatelle Club (perhaps in passing settling the vexed question of just *which* of the Australian colonies the Earl governed).



The wide expanse of Park Lane at the time of *The Adventure of the Empty House*

Thus we might have learned more of the character of young Adair and his fellow players and perhaps have got a scent of anything untoward about Adair and Moran’s successes at the tables. If indeed Lord Balmoral is Watsonese for the future Edward VII⁴, would pressure have been brought to bear on Holmes to keep his Lordship’s name out of it? The unrealised possibilities are considerable.

To be fair to Conan Doyle, though, he does play fair with the reader. Although he was writing before what might be termed “the golden age of the whodunnit”, when the fair presentation (amidst a myriad of red herrings) of all the clues necessary for the reader to solve the puzzle was mandatory, virtually all the evidence is available to the astute armchair sleuth, particularly if *The Empty House* is taken in conjunction with *The Final Problem* to which, intervening years notwithstanding, it is a direct sequel. For, in that earlier adventure Holmes, on the run from Moriarty’s minions, makes a point of closing all the windows, thereby alerting Watson to his fear of airguns and thus giving the reader of *The Empty House* the essential clue to the method of the murder - a long barrelled accurate weapon capable of silently propelling a revolver bullet from the high vantage point of one of the trees in Hyde Park across the width of Park Lane and through the open window of no. 427 and into the cranium of its unfortunate occupant. The motive is also implied. We are told that in partnership with Colonel Moran, young Adair had won a considerable sum of £420 some weeks before; that he had played again with Moran the night of the murder; that Adair himself was a cautious gambler rather than a plunger and had no need of the money; that he had a pile of his winnings before him on the desk (incidentally eliminating any hint of robbery as a motive) and that he had been making calculations of his gains and losses.

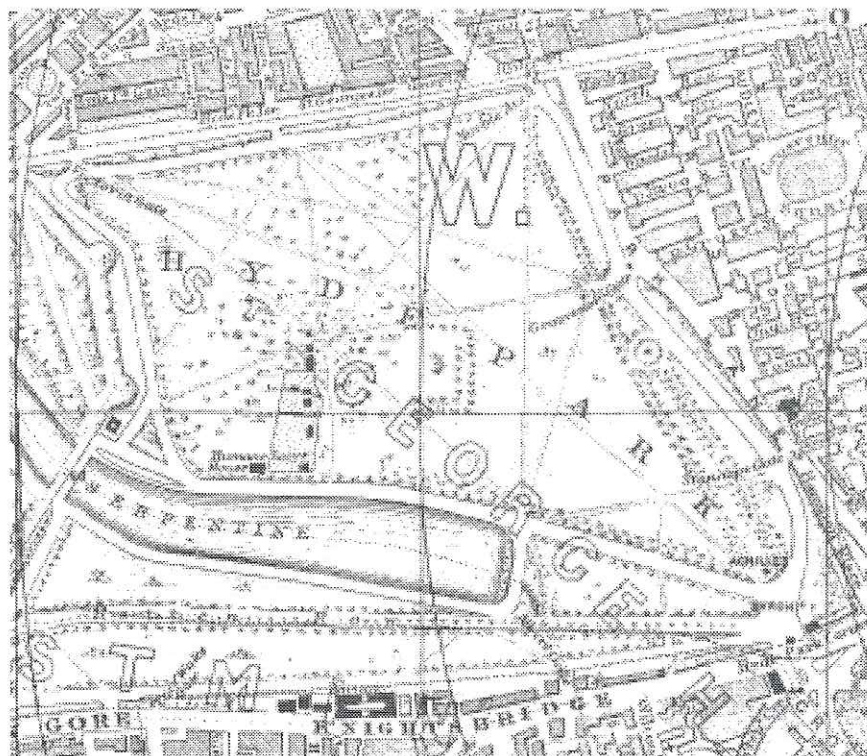
The only crucial piece of information that is withheld from the reader until after the solution is revealed is that Colonel Moran was both a big game hunter and Professor Moriarty’s right hand man. Had this intelligence been imparted earlier in the story, the reader might have made the all-important link between airguns, Moriarty and Moran and have had a decent chance of matching wits with Holmes. But we must remember that Conan Doyle was writing two decades before the Detection Club devised their famous rules of fair play for mystery writers and was not therefore bound to complete candour about his suspects, and it must also be admitted that to reveal that one of the participants was Moriarty’s closest associate might just in itself have pointed the finger of suspicion ever so slightly in his direction.

Why, I wonder, did Conan Doyle not make more of this splendid plot, instead of almost throwing it away? He had a realistic and professionally detached view of his own work, as well as an awareness of how difficult it was to come up with novel ideas for the Holmes stories, so it is unlikely that he simply did not realise what he had. No, I think other factors may have influenced the way he fashioned and emphasized the various elements in *The Empty House*.

At the time he was writing the story, Arthur Conan Doyle wrote to his mother, “The plot, by the way, was given to me by Jean, and is a rare good one. You will find that Holmes was never dead and that he is very much alive”⁵. The “Jean” alluded to is Miss Jean Leckie, the young woman with whom Conan Doyle fell in love whilst nursing his dying first wife Louise, and whom he married the year following Louise’s death in 1906 from tuberculosis. I would suggest that the

⁴ The astute Holmesian might recall that his Lordship ran one of his horses in the Wessex Plate against Silver Blaze.

⁵ Quoted by Richard Lancelyn Green in his introduction to *The Uncollected Sherlock Holmes*, Penguin Books, 1983, p. 91



Hyde Park and Park Lane at the time of *The Empty House*

Empty House, Conan Doyle gave so much prominence to that aspect of the story which Jean had suggested to him, at the expense of the “impossible crime” element.

There is, as well, another mystery inherent in *The Empty House*. I have mentioned how the existence of the crucial airgun of Colonel Moran is “set up”, as it were, in *The Final Problem* when Holmes mentions the danger that airguns pose, after which no more is heard of them.

This begs the question of whether Conan Doyle, even as he was devising Holmes’s demise, had in mind a future use for those airguns. Writing in 1923 in his autobiography, Conan Doyle states unequivocally that he was fed up with Holmes, and how, on a visit to the Reichenbach Falls (he had taken Louise to Davos, in Switzerland, in the hope that the climate would relieve her tuberculosis) it had struck him that this “terrible place ...would make a worthy tomb for poor Sherlock”⁶.

Many Sherlockians find it significant that when Conan Doyle “killed off” Sherlock Holmes he did so in a fashion that left the way clear for him to return. There was no body, there were no witnesses, and we only have Watson’s reconstruction of events to tell us what happened at the Reichenbach Falls. Had Doyle *really* wished to dispose of Holmes once and for all, he could easily have had Holmes die before Watson’s very eyes, expiring dramatically in his friend’s arms having sacrificed himself to rid the world of Moriarty. Yet he did not, choosing instead, whether quite unconsciously or with a deliberate and canny eye to possible future resurrection should his bank balance require it, to surround Holmes’s death with ambiguity and almost mythic

⁶ Doyle, Arthur Conan *Memories and Adventures*, [1924] Oxford University Press, 1989, p.99.

“plot” provided by Jean Leckie was the explanation of how Holmes “was never dead, but very much alive” (for that seems the clear implication of Conan Doyle’s wording of the letter) rather than the clever airgun murder plot. If this was the case, Doyle’s growing fondness for Miss Leckie, and his natural delight that she took an interest in his writing, might furnish a further explanation, beyond the wish to gratify his readers’ intense curiosity about Holmes’s miraculous return, of why, when constructing *The Adventure of the*

mystery. Like King Arthur, Sherlock Holmes disappeared into the mists, waiting until his country should call him forth in time of peril.

The common belief, fostered by Conan Doyle’s own accounts in his memoirs and elsewhere, is that Conan Doyle killed Holmes off with great satisfaction - “Thank God I’ve killed the brute!” he wrote to his mother - and only relented eight years later when the developing plot of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* seemed to require a Holmes-like protagonist, though being careful to explain that the Baskerville case dated from before Holmes’s death. Encouraged by the rapturous welcome from his readers to a new Holmes adventure, impressed by the success on the London and New York stage of William Gillette’s *Sherlock Holmes*, no longer feeling exhausted trying to conjure up new Holmes plots, and lured by the princely sums offered for new stories, Doyle succumbed at last to the demand to revive Sherlock Holmes.

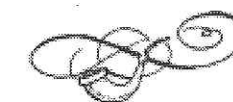
But there is evidence that Conan Doyle was deliberately keeping his options open from the beginning. He was careful in England to maintain the impression that Holmes’s death was certain and irrevocable (he told the Author’s Club in 1896 that “it was not murder, but justifiable homicide in self defence...If I had not killed him, he would certainly have killed me”⁷) and wrote in the same year to his friend David Christie Murray, “Poor Holmes is dead and damned. I could not revive him if I would”⁸. But when he was in the United States in 1894 (shortly after *The Final Problem* was published) he let slip to the *New York Tribune* that “Holmes was *probably* dead” and that “he *might* escape and be revived”⁹ [my emphasis].

And so, to the relief and delight of Sherlockians, it ultimately proved. And the seeds sown in *The Final Problem*, of Moriarty’s men making diabolically murderous use of airguns, reached fruition with the baffling murder, alone in a locked room, of the unfortunate Ronald Adair. Whether that was always Conan Doyle’s contingency plan, we cannot ever know, but I’d suggest that it is a pity that, when he came to write *The Adventure of the Empty House*, Conan Doyle did not give equal prominence (perhaps in a two-part story like *The Naval Treaty* or *Wisteria Lodge*) to Sherlock Holmes’s dramatic return from the dead *and* to one of the earliest and cleverest locked-room mysteries in literature.

⁷ Quoted in Green, Richard Lancelyn (ed.) op. cit. p.69.

⁸ Green *ibid.* p. 70.

⁹ Green *ibid.* p.71



All answers are contained in articles in this issue of *The Passengers’ Log*

1. Which places does Sherlock Holmes say he visited during the ‘Great Hiatus’?
2. Why does NASA use whale oil as a lubricant in its rockets?
3. What article of 19th century female attire used to be made in part from whale baleen?
4. What is the name of the art of carving designs into whalebone?
5. How many kilometers of rope is used in the rigging of the 3-masted barque ‘James Craig’ in Sydney’s Darling Harbour?
6. In what year did Sir Arthur Conan Doyle visit Australia?

Answers on page 32