

An Observance Of Trifles

You know my method. It is founded upon the observance of trifles.

(Arthur Conan Doyle)

snell's interminable ramblings about the canon

The Return of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XXVIII -- The Adventure of the Empty House

The Adventure Of The Empty House--Is Watson History's Greatest Liar?

I'm trying to tread lightly here, as I don't want to poop on anyone else's parade.

But honestly, there comes a point when I have to speak up. And that point is **The Adventure Of The Empty House**.

I have no problem with those who play "**The Grand Game**," the "*gentle fiction*" that **Sherlock Holmes** was real, and the stories actually written by **John H. Watson** (and published through his "*literary agent*" **Arthur Conan Doyle**).

I really don't have time for such things at this point in my life. But I'm not disparaging attempts to put together chronologies and the like. Heavens, I once wasted an entire summer trying to put all of **Doctor Who's Dalek & Cyberman** stories in the correct chronological order--so I'm not one to question the desires of others to obsess and have that kind of fun.

The problem, of course, is that Doyle *himself* didn't take the time for any meaningful continuity. He didn't bother to look things up, or even go so far as to consult his own past stories. And so we get Watson's moving war wound(s), stories set on dates when they couldn't happen or in places that hadn't been built when the story was set, etc.

Of course, some of this can be glossed over, elided by, massaged, and interpreted away. **No-Prizes** for everyone!

But where we get into *tricky* territory is when some begin to suggest that Watson, either accidentally or in order to protect the identities of those involved, misinforms the reader. He changes the dates or location of the actual events in the stories. Or else they blame "*literary agent*" Doyle for changing things, or mistranscribing them.



The problem with this approach is obvious, upon reflection. Once you establish that Watson is willing to deceive us, or careless enough to misinform us, the question becomes this: if you insist that Watson was wrong (or lying) about A, than how you trust him to be accurate about B or C? If the good doctor was willing to fudge the dates in one story, then how do you know that he didn't fudge the dates in *every* story? If he was willing to lie to protect reputations in one case, how can you know that he didn't do it in *many* other cases?

By establishing that Watson is an unreliable narrator in some stories--in order to prove your point about chronology or whatever--you open the door to the possibility that he is *always* an unreliable narrator. It's illogical and self-serving to suggest that Watson was always honest except in the cases that you need him to be dishonest.

Eventually, this leads to people taking extreme positions, such as: all (or nearly all) of **The Final Problem** and The Empty House are "*made up*"--they never really "*happened*." They're just Watson efforts trying to cover something up--Holmes' mental breakdown, his secret mission for Her Majesty's government, the fact that Holmes actually did die and was replaced by a sibling/actor/whatever. Holmes was in Baker Street for the entirety of the Great Hiatus. It's a cover-up for Holmes' cold-blooded murder of **Professor Moriarty**, for Holmes actually being Moriarty, for whatever arcane theory you can come up with. All of these theories and more are posited by those who suggest that Watson was being completely disingenuous with readers, and he knew the truth all the time--he was part of the cover-up! He was **Verbal Kint!**

But if Watson "made up" those stories, how can we know that he didn't make up the **Hound Of The Baskervilles** as well? How can we know that he didn't make up *every single story*? That he didn't *invent* Holmes himself--the whole thing was the creation of the good doctor? If you argue that Watson invented stories out of whole cloth, how can you say that argument may not apply to every story?

And so The Grand Game becomes a bit of an *ouroboros*--attempting to prove the "gentle fiction," that the adventures of Holmes were real, requires painting Watson as a liar; yet doing so ends up opening the possibility the entire enterprise was completely a lie to begin with. Paradox.

Again, this is just my opinion. I don't want to harsh anyone's buzz. Please keep playing the Grand Game if it increases your enjoyment.

But for me, I'll take Holmes and Watson on a *literary* level. It doesn't matter if they were "real" or not. What is real is what is on the paper, in the stories.

That Sir Arthur made plenty of errors is simply evidence of sloppiness, not real-world conspiracies or incoherent contradictions that need to be explained in order to enjoy the **Canon**.

So, yes, I take the events as narrated by John Watson at face value. I'm there for the stories, not the game.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

**As I've mentioned before, the set-up of Holmes' "death" in Final Problem left it remarkably easy for him to be brought back to life. No witnesses, no body. It's hard to even call it a retcon, as the possibility of his having survived was pretty clearly established--at least to the eyes of a modern reader.

This leaves me 3/4-convinced that Doyle *always* intended to bring back Sherlock, no matter what his stated intentions. It would have been easy to give Holmes a "final" death, witnessed by others, that left no doubt (and no possibility of reversing course, short of supernatural intervention or cloning).

Yet Doyle chose a "death" that left itself open to easily reversing course, after a suitable period of time. If he didn't intend Holmes' demise to be temporary, Sir Arthur was at the very least *hedging his bets*.

**Holmes says that, after dispatching Moriarty, he realized that this was a perfect opportunity to fake his own death, as "*at least three*" of the professor's lieutenants would be looking to kill him.

This bothers some, as in the Final Problem, Holmes receives a telegram from the London police saying they captured "*the whole gang with the exception of [Moriarty]*." So how could Holmes know that some of the evil minions escaped?

Well, aside from common sense--if Moriarty knew the end was coming and fled, certainly some of his top people did as well, as the professor would have warned them--it's likely that the professor *himself* told Holmes.

When Moriarty confronted Holmes at Reichenbach, and before Sherlock left the note for Watson, Holmes tells us that he "*exchanged some remarks with [Moriarty]*." Surely they didn't talk about the weather.

Given what we saw of their previous dialogue, we can assume that Holmes gloated, "All of your men have been captured," and Moriarty retorted, "Not all of them. Before you die, know that you have failed to completely destroy my organization." Or something along those lines.

"*So cleverly was the colonel concealed that, even when the Moriarty gang was broken up, we could not incriminate him,*" Holmes tells us. Holmes knew about **Moran, and knew he would be coming after Holmes. Moran was "Moriarty's chief of staff." Why wasn't Holmes worried, then, that the evil Colonel would just take over from the evil professor, and maintain the large criminal organization (even if less efficient than before)?

Well, at the conclusion of this tale, we're told that "*the exclusion from his clubs would mean ruin to Moran, who lived by his ill-gotten card-gains.*"

Well, that's *hardly* a ringing endorsement of his criminal acumen, is it? Three years, without any interference from Sherlock Holmes, as the de facto head of a (ravaged) crime operation, and Moran had to earn his living *by cheating at card clubs*? That's rather low-rent villainy.

Of course, some evil people just like to cheat at cards--see **Hugo Drax** in the **Moonraker** novel, or **Auric Goldfinger**. But certainly neither of those two needed that money to live on, or finance their evil schemes. It seems that Moran was not up to Moriarty's standards as a criminal mastermind if he had to resort to card hustling to survive...

The **Honourable Ronald Adair usually played for low stakes, we are told, and was a "cautious player." Why did Moran hook up with him, then, as an (unwitting) partner in his cheating? Certainly he was using Adair's reputation to give himself some legitimacy, and thus conceal his dishonesty.

But how did a man who might lose £5 pounds in a night get involved in a game where he and his partner raked in **£420**? Did Moran talk him into it? Peer pressure him?

Perhaps the unusually large stakes (for him) caused Adair to scrutinize the game more carefully, and lead him to the revelation that Moran was cheating...

**Watson tells us that Adair "*had no particular vices*"--yet a paragraph later, he informs us that Adair "*was fond of cards--playing continually, but never for such stakes as would hurt him.*"

Apparently, Watson considers gambling a vice only if you lose or cheat...playing continually in and of itself isn't a vice.

**Adair discovered Moran was cheating, and demanded that he repay the victims. Adair himself seemed to be making a list of those whom he owed reparations to, as he felt "he could not profit from his partner's foul play."

The one actual case of cheating we know about was the winning of £420 from **Godfrey Milner** and **Lord Balmoral**. Which means that Adair would feel that he had to return his half, or £210 (assuming he split the winning evenly with his partner). But the amount he had on his desk--"*two banknotes for ten pounds each and seventeen pounds ten in silver and gold*"--was nowhere near enough. £37 would only cover a small portion of his perceived debt, to those two. And there may have been others.

Perhaps Adair thought that, since he hadn't cheated, he only owed a "*pro-rated*" portion of his winning back--he assumed he would have won some of that honestly?

Or if he didn't have that much cash on him at the moment, why take any out to make "piles" upon the desk? Why not just list names on a tally sheet?

**Watson tells us that, after Holmes' apparent death, he took a particular interest in following crime news, attempting to use Sherlock's methods to deduce a result for his own "*private satisfaction*," but with "*indifferent results*."

The **Granada** adaptation makes Watson a little more active in such cases, taking a part-time job as a "*police surgeon*," on call to help with medical emergencies or conduct autopsies. They actually have Watson consulting on the Adair murder, and testifying at the inquest. The coroner, it should be noted, is none too pleased with Watson's attempts to apply Holmes' "*fanciful*" methods, and chides the doctor to keep his testimony strictly to "the facts."

**Watson refers to his own "*sad bereavement*," which most commentators take to refer to the death of (one of his) wives. No other hints are given, so it's possible that doctor was referring to the loss of some other relative. Perhaps even a child? Holmes was gone for three years, after all...

**Some consider it an open question whether or not Colonel Moran was *actually convicted*. As Holmes refuses to press charges for the attempt upon his life, we're seemingly left with the murder of Adair. And the case seems pretty circumstantial, at best. We have a speculated motive--with no evidence to prove it. We know that Adair was killed with the same type of bullet Moran used to try and kill Holmes--but there here was no "ballistics" testing in 1894, so you weren't going to get any closer than "same type of bullet." No witnesses exist to the Adair murder.

So a conviction hardly seemed assured. And a couple of references in later stories could be taken to imply that Moran is not in prison at the time.

Yet Watson tells us that "*the case for the prosecution was so overwhelmingly strong*." And certainly, as he is telling the story ten years later, he would have mentioned if Moran were acquitted.

It seems likely that, once the police had Moran, they would have searched his lodgings. Perhaps there they found more evidence that we didn't know of: a journal, threatening letters, a floor plan of Adair's home, a record of his card cheating...or perhaps they found a confederate that he had boasted to.

Then again, given that he doubtless had information of what was left of Moriarty's crime organization, as well as the members who had escaped prosecution, perhaps he was able to *make a deal*...

**I was surprised that soft-nosed bullets were known back then. That just shows how much I know about such things.

**Some have questioned whether Watson would have *really* fainted when Holmes revealed himself. It's unlikely, they claim, that a "hardened war veteran" would have reacted that way to a severe shock.

Of course, in **The Crooked Man**, we saw a retired military man with far more war time experience than Watson drop dead from terror at the sight of a man he thought long dead. Sure, **Colonel Barclay** likely had an

underlying medical condition that contributed to his stroke (and no doubt his guilty conscience contributed)...but who is to say that Watson doesn't have a medical condition, as well?

And we shouldn't forget that fainting and the such is a *literary convention* of the time. People faint an awful lot in stories of the era, and emotional upset is likely to send anyone instantly into a weeks-long bout of "*brain fever*."

Physical reaction to emotional distress and surprise is taken as a given in Doyle's universe. Why Watson should be immune is never explained.

**Many have complained that Holmes *shouldn't* have had a flask of brandy on him with which to revive Watson, because an "*elderly bibliophile*" wouldn't have such a flask, and thus Holmes ruined his own disguise.

First of all, it's not likely that anyone would have physically searched Holmes in this disguise, so it seems unlikely that a concealed flask would blow the impersonation.

Secondly, and most importantly, why the heck *couldn't* an actual bibliophile carry a flask? Is there some union rule I'm not aware of? Were all bibliophiles *teetotalers*, or Puritans? Does obsessing on books mean you might never want a nip now and again?

Seriously, I just don't get the problem here...

**Whatever your opinion on *baritsu*, it sure didn't help Holmes any in his struggle with Moran, as the villain overpowered him. It took a good old-fashioned revolver butt to the head from Watson to subdue Moran...

**It took three years for Moran and company to make a slip-up great enough to capture Holmes attention and bring him back to England? Maybe he is a better criminal than I gave him credit for...

****The Great Hiatus**, as Holmes' three years "dead" is called, consisted of less than one paragraph:

I travelled for two years in Tibet, therefore, and amused myself by visiting Lhasa, and spending some days with the head lama. You may have read of the remarkable explorations of a Norwegian named Sigerson, but I am sure that it never occurred to you that you were receiving news of your friend. I then passed through Persia, looked in at Mecca, and paid a short but interesting visit to the Khalifa at Khartoum the results of which I have communicated to the Foreign Office. Returning to France, I spent some months in a research into the coal-tar derivatives, which I conducted in a laboratory at Montpellier, in the south of France.

Such a relatively short bit has likely inspired *more scribbling* than any other Holmes, including a four-volume treatise describing Holmes' journeys in detail. Because there are no obsessives likes Sherlock Holmes obsessives.

**Earlier in the conversation, Holmes had told Watson that Moriarty had "*at least three*" men desiring vengeance upon him who were still free. At the conclusion of his tale, he says "*only one of my enemies was now left in London*" Where did *other two* go? Did they leave London? England? Were they arrested? Did they die? Killed by other criminals in a turf war? Killed by Moran in order to consolidate his power and remove rivals? Tell us!!

**Holmes used *a key* to enter the empty house--but how did Moran get in? Did Holmes leave it unlocked? That might have been a dead giveaway. Did Moran pick the lock? Quietly break a pane of glass?

**Watson does spot the undercover policeman watching Baker Street, "*with unerring accuracy.*" Good on you, Doctor!

Sherlock describes the Moran confederate who spotted him: "*He is a harmless enough fellow, Parker by name, a garroter by trade.*" A garroter is *harmless***?! It's pretty hard to think of a non-harmful--****, *non-lethal*!--use of a garrote. **Parker**, almost by definition, must be a murderer!! I guess Holmes has too much respect for a fellow musician...

After praising **Lestrade in Hounds, Doyle is back to having Holmes being rude and disparaging to him:

I think you want a little unofficial help. Three undetected murders in one year won't do, Lestrade. But you handled the Molesey Mystery with less than your usual--that's to say, you handled it fairly well.

Geez, Sherlock, that's being rather a *dick*, even for you. So much for the "*he is the best of the professionals.*" I guess Lestrade's "throwing himself on the ground in terror" sufficiently soured Holmes' opinion on the inspector.

Holmes continues to show his recent dedication to the theory that evil is inherited. In Final Problem, he suggested that Moriarty's turn to crime was because of "*hereditary tendencies of the most diabolical kind. A criminal strain ran in his blood...*" In Hound, he opined that **Stapleton was a "*physical and spiritual throwback.*" And here, he tries to explain how an exemplary military man like Moran could go to the dark side:

I have a theory that the individual represents in his development the whole procession of his ancestors, and that such a sudden turn to good or evil stands for some strong influence which came into the line of his pedigree.

Of course, much of this was in keeping with the scientific tenor of the times, as psychology was not well known at the time (**The Seven Per-Cent Solution** aside!). Nature, not nurture, was often viewed as the culprit (the better to absolve society of guilt, no doubt).

Watson seems skeptical--he dismisses Holmes' tree/Moran example as "*surely rather fanciful.*" Yet the good doctor himself seems to possess his own beliefs in the physical influencing/reflecting the moral: "*With*

the brow of a philosopher above and the jaw of a sensualist below, [Moran] must have started with great capacities for good or for evil."

Sounds like he'd make a good **Dick Tracy** villain...

**Holmes seems to take far too much pleasure in goading Moran after his capture, going on for pages to hammer home his analogy that Moran was the ironic prey in his big game hunt. Such gloating is a bit uncharacteristic, perhaps.

Then again, Moran did try to kill him. And the fact that he managed to escape Holmes' net in *The Final Problem* surely rankled the Great Detective.

The **M volume of Holmes' index of biographies provides so entries of interest: "*Merridew of abominable memory, and Mathews, who knocked out my left canine in the waiting-room at Charing Cross...*" More apocryphal cases, or just curious people Holmes had met? And did **Merridew** have an abominable memory, or was the memory *of* him abominable?

**Throughout *The Final Problem*, Holmes talks about his career "*reaching its summit*," and his desire for "*a more placid line in life*," perhaps concentrating on "*chemical researches*."

Obviously, the Hiatus recharged his batteries (and showed him how boring a life of study could be...), as by the end of *Empty House*, Sherlock declares that "*once again Mr. Sherlock Holmes is free to devote his life to examining those interesting little problems which the complex life of London so plentifully presents*."

Welcome back, Sherlock. Just be careful about referring to yourself in the third person. *Very* annoying...

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