

SECRETS OF SIR HENRY MERRIVALE

by Rick Lai

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Sir Henry Merrivale (also known as H. M) was an eccentric detective with an outrageous sense of humor. The rotund baronet was featured in several novels by John Dickson Carr written under the pseudonym of Carter Dickson. H. M. bore a strong physical resemblance to Mycroft Holmes, the brilliant brother of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. In fact, both Mycroft and H. M. were members of the Diogenes Club. In his literary debut, H. M. claimed responsibility for throwing an Oriental doctor down four flights of stairs. The object of Merrivale's wrath called himself Fu Manchu, the name of a master criminal depicted by Sax Rohmer. Both the Diogenes Club and Fu Manchu play prominent roles in the Solar Pons stories penned by August Derleth. Some scandalous conclusions can be discerned from these connections.

The Plague Court Murders (1934), Merrivale's first known case, was set in September 1930. He was then fifty-nine years old. Since World War I, H. M. headed the same department in the British government. During the Great War, the department had been known as the Counter-Espionage Service. By 1930, it had been re-dubbed the Military Intelligence Department (M. I. D.). This government agency seems to correspond to the modern MI-5.

During World War I, H. M. earned a most curious nickname. The sobriquet resulted from a letter written by Johnny Ireton, a British agent in Constantinople. Ireton was reminded by H. M. of a character from the Sherlock Holmes saga:

"...The most interesting figure in the stories about the hawk-faced gentleman from Baker Street... isn't Sherlock at all; it's his brother Mycroft. Do you remember him? He's the one with a big or bigger a deductive hat than S. H., but he's too lazy to use it; he's big and sluggish and won't move out of his chair; he's a big pot in some mysterious department of the government, with a card-index memory, and moves only in the orbit of lodgings-club-Whitehall. I think he only appears in two stories, but there's a magnificent scene in which Sherlock and Mycroft stand in the window of the Diogenes Club rattling out an exchange of deductions about a man passing by the street—both of them very casual, and poor Watson dizzier than he's even been before...I tell you if our H. M. had a little more dignity, and would always remember to put on a necktie, and would refrain from humming words to questionable songs when he lumbers through rooms of lady typists, he wouldn't make a bad Mycroft. He's got the brain, my lad; he's got the brain...."

Soon Merrivale's subordinates began calling him Mycroft. H. M. detested the nickname. He argued that he as an original rather than a copy of anybody.

There may have been a totally different reason for Merrivale's anger. Apparently a bit of controversy surrounded his birth. *Seeing is Believing* (1941) had the sleuth dictating his explosive memoirs. H. M. told of his origin in these words:

"I was born ...on February 6, 1871, at Cranleigh Hall, near Yewborough, Sussex. My mother was formerly Agnes Honoria Gayle, daughter of the Rev. and Mrs. William Gayle, of Great Yewborough. My father—notwithstandin' the slanderous rumors circulated at the time—was Henry St. John Merrivale, eight baronet of the name."

H. M. identified the source of these rumors as “my father’s second brother, George Byron Merrivale, who may be described with moderation as a bounder and a louse.” Could there be more substance to these rumors than just a family feud? What if Merrivale’s resemblance to Mycroft Holmes was not just coincidence? Maybe Mycroft Holmes had an affair with Mrs. Agnes Merrivale that resulted in the birth of the ninth baronet.

The Diogenes Club is a purely fictional association from the Sherlock Holmes series, but it appears in the Sir Henry Merrivale novels. *The Plague Court Murders* mentioned that H. M. was a member of the Diogenes Club. The next novel in the series, *The White Priory Murders* (1934), noted that H. M. often played poker there. If the Diogenes Club exists in Merrivale’s fictional milieu, then Mycroft Holmes would also exist there.

The idea that H. M. was Mycroft’s illegitimate son was hinted at in Philip Jose Farmer’s *The Adventure of the Peerless Peer* (1974), a novel in which Sherlock Holmes and Tarzan joined forces. While visiting Mycroft at the Foreign Office in February 1916, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson encountered “young Merrivale, a young baronet’s son, the brilliant aide to the head of British Military Intelligence Service and soon to assume the chieftainship.” The character is clearly meant to be H. M. even though “young Merrivale” would have been forty-five in 1916, and the Military Intelligence Department was then known as the Counter-Intelligence Service. Of course the novel was narrated by Watson who was known to make all sort of minor errors in the original Conan Doyle tales.

Mycroft Holmes boasted that the deductive abilities of “young Merrivale” were superior to those of his brother. Such a compliment almost sounded like a father praising his offspring. Descent from Mycroft Holmes would explain Merrivale’s detective skills, his choice of a government career and his membership in the Diogenes Club.

There was no reason given for Merrivale’s presence in Mycroft’s office in February 1916. According to William S. Baring-Gould’s *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street* (1962), Mycroft Holmes was born on February 12, 1847. Mycroft and H. M. were born in the same month. Perhaps H. M. visited Mycroft in order to plan a joint birthday celebration.

In addition to Mycroft Holmes and H. M., there was another obese government official who belonged to the Diogenes Club. He was a supporting character in the Solar Pons stories written by August Derleth. Solar Pons was a criminal investigator who imitated Sherlock Holmes in the 1920’s and the 1930’s. Fortunately for Pons, he was a tall hawk-faced man like his role model. Pons managed to find Dr. Lyndon Parker, a Watson-like physician to accompany him on his adventures. Pons also discovered Mrs. Johnson (1), a landlady in the tradition of Mrs. Hudson.

Occasionally, Pons was visited in Praed Street by a man who looked and acted like Mycroft Holmes. This visitor not only belonged to the Diogenes Club, but also was allegedly an official in the Foreign Office. He was supposed to be Bancroft Pons, Solar’s brother.

Now I can accept that Solar Pons could physically resemble Sherlock Holmes, learn to mimic him, and even find people who corresponded to Dr. Watson and Mrs., Hudson. Nevertheless, I find it inconceivable that Pons would be blessed by Providence

with a brother who is identical to Mycroft Holmes. The only logical explanation is that Pons persuaded some government official to be his non-existent brother.

In the Sherlock Holmes stories, only Mycroft was a member of the Diogenes Club. Both Pons brothers belonged to the Club in Derleth's stories. Maybe this false Bancroft at the Diogenes Club was Sir Henry Merrivale. Besides the Diogenes Club, Solar Pons and H. M. can be linked by their activities during World War I. From a capsule biography of Pons (2) in Derleth's *A Praed Street Dossier* (1968), we know that the Sherlockian surrogate was in British Intelligence during World War I. He could have worked in the Counter-Espionage Service under Merrivale.

Considering Merrivale's revulsion at the nickname of Mycroft, it is highly unlikely that he would have voluntarily agreed to portray Bancroft Pons. The following scenario explains how H. M. could have become Bancroft. Solar Pons reported to H. M. at the Counter-Espionage Service. At the conclusion of the war, Pons tendered his resignation to pursue his Sherlockian fantasies. Hoping to keep the services of a talented subordinate, H. M. responded with a novel wager. He and Pons would play a game of poker at the Diogenes Club for unusual stakes. If H. M. won, Pons would abandon his Sherlockian pretensions and stay with the Counter-Espionage Service. If Pons triumphed, H. M. would pretend to be the Mycroft-like brother of the sleuth. In addition, H. M. would be obligated to visit Praed Street at regular intervals and seek the investigator's assistance in some vital matter plaguing the government. Since Pons won the poker game, H. M. posed as the mythical Bancroft for at least two decades. While pretending to be Bancroft, H. M. was forced to act in the more dignified manner that Johnny Ireton had envisioned in his famous letter.

With the establishment of a plausible relationship between the creations of Carr and Derleth, the issue raised by a reference to Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu in *The Plague Court Murders* can now be addressed. H. M. mentioned Rohmer's infamous villain while complaining about practical jokes performed by other government employees in Whitehall:

"...And what's more, their idea of sending me messages, and bribing Chinamen to call, and the cards that're sent up here...Why, only last week they phoned up from the downstairs office and said an Asiatic gentleman wanted to see me, and gave his name. I was so bloomin' mad I chewed the phone, and yelled down and told Carstairs to chuck the fellow down all four flights of stairs. And he did. And then it turned out that the poor feller's name really was Dr. Fu-Manchu after all, and he come from the Chinese Legation. Well, the Chink Ambassador went wild, and we hadda cable an apology to Peking."

Before continuing any further, Merrivale's use of a racial epithet for the Chinese Ambassador should be deplored.

Fu Manchu is an impossible name for a citizen of China. Both "Fu" and "Manchu" are surnames. In some of the early editions of Sax Rohmer's books, the name was hyphenated as in Merrivale's statement. In *The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1916), Sax Rohmer suggested the master criminal was using Fu Manchu as an alias. During the torture of a British missionary who had been in China during the Boxer Rebellion, Fu Manchu hid behind a screen. The impression was given that Fu Manchu did not want to risk the possibility that the missionary had seen him under his real name in China.

It is incomprehensible that a genuine Chinese diplomat could possess the name of Fu Manchu. Merrivale's visitor can only have been the actual article. What was Fu Manchu doing in Whitehall?

Since Merrivale's aborted meeting with Fu Manchu was a recent event, then the incident transpired shortly before September 1930. The chronology established for the Fu Manchu series in Cay Van Ash's "A Question of Time" from *The Rohmer Review* #17 (August 1977) had the malevolent genius in the Middle East during the autumn of 1930. Fu Manchu's activities there are described in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932). It is probable that Fu Manchu arrived in the Middle East after crossing the path of H. M. in Whitehall during the summer of 1930.

Fu Manchu can be placed in England during 1930 by a reference in the Solar Pons series. One of three stories by Derleth involving Fu Manchu was "The Adventure of the Camberwell Beauty" from *The Return of Solar Pons* (1958). Derleth originally wrote that the story was set in "193-." Years after Derleth's death, Basil Copper re-edited the story for inclusion in *The Solar Pons Omnibus* (1982). Copper changed the statement to "1933."

In "Camberwell Beauty," Fu Manchu extended this greeting to Pons: "Let me see, is it not three years since our last encounter?" If the remark was uttered in 1933, then Pons tangled with Fu Manchu in 1930. The 1930 meeting can not be either of the other recorded exploits involving Pons and Fu Manchu, "The Adventure of the Seven Sisters" from *The Chronicles of Solar Pons* (1973) or "The Adventure of the Praed Street Irregulars" from *The Reminiscences of Solar Polar* (1961). Their sequence in *The Solar Pons Omnibus* places both storied in the 1920's.

Assuming that the unrecorded 1930 case was related to the Whitehall incident, Pons was probably employed by the Chinese government of Chiang Kai-Shek. Ambitious to become master of Asia, Fu Manchu would have been opposed to the Chiang regime. It is likely that Fu Manchu was wanted in China for several crimes.

Fu Manchu was a ruthless megalomaniac, but he also viewed himself as a man of honor. He never broke his word. He was also loyal to his subordinates including his chief of staff, a man known by the aliases of John Ki and Sam Pak.

Suppose the Chinese government learned of Fu Manchu's presence in London during 1930. The Chinese Ambassador hired Solar Pons to apprehend Fu Manchu. Pons succeeded in apprehending a key agent of Fu Manchu who had penetrated the Chinese Legation under a false name. The prisoner was identified as John Ki. Arrangements were made to transport him back to China for trial. Rather than see a loyal follower suffer in his place, Fu Manchu sent a proposal to the Legation. If John Ki was set free, Fu Manchu would surrender himself to any British official chosen by Solar Pons. The Ambassador accepted the offer on condition that Fu Manchu come to the Legation in order to give his word to the agreement in person.

With his safety guaranteed, Fu Manchu arrived at the Legation. John Ki was freed. Fu Manchu justified his decision to surrender to the British on the grounds that he did not wish to suffer the indignity of being tried by his own countrymen. He viewed his criminal acts as legitimate protests against British Imperialism. Therefore, he would only stand trial before his true enemies.

Pons would have chosen Sir Denis Nayland Smith, Fu Manchu's persistent adversary, as the man to accept the criminal's surrender. Unfortunately, Sir Denis was

engaged in a secret mission in India alluded to in *The Mask of Fu Manchu*. Instead, Pons selected Sir Henry Merrivale.

At Fu Manchu's request, Pons declined to escort the defeated criminal to Whitehall. To be accompanied to Merrivale's offices would be considered dishonorable in Fu Manchu's eyes. It would be an indication that someone doubted his word. Hoping to surprise H. M., Pons neglected to telephone the baronet about Fu Manchu's mission.

Upon receiving word of Fu Manchu's arrival, H. M. wrongly concluded that the visitor was an impostor committing a practical joke. H. M. ordered Carstairs to eject Fu Manchu. Accepting his ignominious treatment by H. M. as a refusal to receive his capitulation, Fu Manchu departed London for the Middle East.

The Chinese Ambassador was livid. A diplomatic incident was narrowly avoided. Solar Pons never permitted this 1930 case to be chronicled because it would severely embarrass Merrivale.

H. M. later cited the incident in public conversation, but described the occurrence in such a way to give the impression that Dr. Fu Manchu was merely an inoffensive diplomat. Sometimes the truth can be hidden by altering it in a way that closely corresponds to the facts. H. M. often acted like a clown, but he was nobody's fool.

NOTES

1. Mrs. Johnson could be the widow of Shinwell Johnson, an underworld informant for Sherlock Holmes in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client." The only woman known to be friendly with Johnson was Kitty Winter. She served a brief stay in prison for throwing acid into the face of a cad. Perhaps Kitty married Shinwell after her release.
2. The biography originally appeared in Anthony Boucher's anthology, *Four-&-Twenty Bloodhounds* (1950).