

Foreword, *The Reminiscences of Solar Pons*

Anthony Boucher, April 28, 1961

Small puzzle for Baker Street Irregulars: why should the fourth volume of Solar Pons stories, after the Adventures, Memoirs and Return, be logically and inevitably titled The Reminiscences?

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One of the most appealing qualities of Solar Pons is the clear fact that he is *not* Sherlock Holmes.

Offhand, this statement may seem at least a paradox, if not a heresy, since his greatest following is among those readers who find a Pons story the best possible substitute for a new adventure of Holmes himself.

But a mere effort to make a facsimile of the Master is not enough to give life and readability to a story – as the Agent himself demonstrated in *The Crown Diamond* and its offspring, *The Mazarin Stone*, and as the Agent’s son proved even more clearly in *The Exploits*.

Of all the 48 variants on the Holmes name and character listed by Ellery Queen in *The Memoirs of Solar Pons*, hardly any other has the independent vitality of Pons. (The two major exceptions might be Maurice Leblanc’s Herlock Sholmes and H.F. Heard’s Mr. Mycroft – both intended to be direct portraits of the Master, but each viewed so differently through un-Watsonian eyes as to become a separate and living character.)

As Vincent Starrett wrote in introducing the first Pontian collection, Pons is “a clever impersonator, with a twinkle in his eye, which tells us that he knows he is not Sherlock Holmes, and knows that *we* know it, but that he hopes we will like him anyway for what he symbolizes” – and, I might add, for what he *is* as well.

In a delicate and all but indefinable way, he is not, like Holmes, a man of the Nineteenth Century foreshadowing the Twentieth, but rather a man of the Twentieth Century recalling the Nineteenth. The “twinkle” (which is also perceptible in the eye of Dr. Parker and perhaps even in that of the Sauk City Agent) is faintly self-mocking; the note of gaiety and a sort of ironic playfulness, which marks Holmes upon rare occasions (as in the opening section of *The Valley of Fear*), is more common with Pons, especially when he contemplates his relationship to his “illustrious predecessor.”

Pons is even independent enough to have interests of his own, nowhere abumbrated in the Canon of Watson. Although Dr. Parker lists among Pons’ “varied interests” his “addiction to good music of all kinds” (obviously the comment of an unmusical man), he is apparently simply an auditor, and unlike Holmes, neither performer nor musicologist. But Pons is (Parker tells us) absorbed equally by “occult lore and scientific treatises on the nature of evidence”; and the official Pons bibliography lists, along with such works as

The Varieties of the Criminal Method (1911), a monograph dealing with *An Examination of the Cthulhu Cult and Others* (1931). (The reference for those unfamiliar with other publications handled by Pons' Agent, is to a singularly terrible Mythos of eldritch and arcane horror, created – or revealed – by the late Howard Phillips Lovecraft, which once dominated American fiction of the supernatural in *Weird Tales* and other magazines.)

It is doubtless because of this interest that Solar Pons has on rare occasions found himself involved, as Holmes never was,¹ in cases which contain a definite and undeniable element of “fantasy” – occurrences which pass the bounds of what is (at this moment) believed possible by science. One such adventure you will find in this volume (*The Blind Clauraudient*). Two others (jointly agented by Derleth and Mack Reynolds) appear in *The Science Fictional Sherlock Holmes* (Denver, 1960).

Few of the detectives whose exploits have been chronicled for us are competent to handle a case which does not have a “rational explanation.” Holmes and such later masters as Dr. Fell and the Great Merlini – yes, and even Father Brown, with his devout faith in the supernatural – approach a seemingly paranormal situation with a firm attitude of “Stuff and nonsense! How was this gimmicked?” - an attitude that may invite disaster if no human gimmickry is involved.

A very few detectives, notably Algernon Blackwood's John Silence, Manly Wade Wellman's John Thunston, and Seabury Quinn's Jules de Grandin, have specialized exclusively in the supernatural; but this too has the limitations of inflexibility, and one can imagine de Grandin brandishing a clove of garlic or an apergillum as protection against Jack the Ripper.

With more suitable ambivalence, the cases of Richard Sale's too-little-known Captain McGrail, like those of my own Dr. Verner (all save one of which, I regret to say, still repose in their box at the Wells Fargo Bank), end inconclusively, or rather with two conclusions, evenly balanced between the rational and the fantastic.

A certain few detectives have on occasion adopted themselves to a case outside the normal pattern. Lord Peter Wimsey once (in *The Bone of Contention*) employed a good occult reasoning to dispel the supernatural. The career of C. Daly King's Tarrant (another of the Great Neglected Detectives – *there's* a title for an anthology!) seemed to draw him more and more into occult involvement. My own Fergus O'Brien, who has coped only with murderers in novels, has met (and I hope competently) with werewolves and time machines in shorter adventures. F Tenneyson Jesse's Solange Fonataine (yet another candidate demanding rescue from oblivion) employs something very like ESP in her deductions, and has occasionally found herself in an unarguably supernatural episode.²

¹ At least, not to our knowledge. There is some reason to believe that the extraordinary “unfathomed cases” listed in *Thor Bridge – Phillimore, Persano* and the *Cutter Alicia* – may have been supernatural or at least science-fictional in essence.

² I have vivid recollection of a short story by H.C. Bailey, in the 1920's or early 1930's, in which Reggie Fortune confronted genuine witchcraft, but I have never been able to rediscover it. I shall be grateful if any reader can help me.

In addition, to the somewhat specialized *Dream Detective*, Morris Klaw, Sax Rhomer has chronicled the fortunes and misfortunes of Assistant Commissioner (of Scotland Yard) Sir Denis Nayland Smith and of private detective (ex-FBI) Drake Roscoe, each of whom has often faced an adversary whose catholic and unscrupulous arsenal of weapons includes the supernatural and the parascientific – Smith’s enemy being, of course, the (apparently literally) immortal Dr. Fu Manchu and Drake’s the less well known but no less insidious Astar, by first marriage the Marquise Sumuru.

(It is regrettable that the infamous Doctor has no more worthy antagonist than the often startlingly inept Nayland Smith; he should have been matched with Holmes, or at the very least with Cleek of the Forty Faces – as a subsidiary matter, the prose style of his exploits and those of Cleek would have jibed admirably. Aficionados, however, will recall that a certain unnamed Oriental doctor crossed the path of Solar Pons in *The Camberwell Beauty*, and will be happy to learn that he reappears in this current volume.)

The detective of ideal flexibility is William Hope Hodgson’s “ghostfinder,” Carnacki (of whom Dennis Wheatley’s Niels Orsen is a pallid and regrettable imitation). Carnacki is a specialist, called in only for seemingly supernatural problems; but unlike either Gideon Fell or Jules de Grandin, he aims his efforts at determining whether the specific problem is or is not supernatural in origin. Once having determined its nature, he treats it on its own terms, by “realistic” or by occult methods.

You will discover many individual, non-Holmesian virtues of Solar Pons in this volume, as well as many more felicitous echoes of 221B Baker Street in 7B Praed Street. But high among the independent qualities of Pons must rank the fact that his name can be inscribed on the all-too-short list of the Flexible Detectives.

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His Last Bow, the *Fourth collection of Sherlock Holmes’ shorter adventures (and I trust you have observed that each volume of the Pontian Canon contains precisely as many stories as its Holmesian parallel?)*, bears in its original English edition (John Murray, 1917), the subtitle: *Some Reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes*. (The U.S. edition, mysteriously, as always, is subtitled: *A Reminiscence...*)