

This article was originally written five years ago for an academic journal specializing in Victorian studies. Later developments are included in a postscript.

Had Conan Doyle Read Henry Cauvain's Maximilien Heller?

Susumu Kobayashi

Introduction

Sherlock Holmes first appeared in **A Study in Scarlet** (Beeton's Christmas Annual, November 1887). However, French author and critic Michel Lebrun has pointed out that Holmes had a predecessor.^[1] His name was Maximilien Heller, and he appeared in a book named for him that was published in 1871.^[2] This fact seems to be widely known among French readers and they must be proud of it, because Lebrun has written articles and referred to Heller more than once.^[3] Furthermore, the French encyclopedia on crime fiction **Dictionnaire des Littératures Policières**^[4] contains an item on author Henry Cauvain (born 1847 in Paris; died 1899 in Lausanne) which states that "in fact, Maximilien Heller has already some traces of the future Sherlock Holmes by Conan Doyle."

In contrast, Maximilien Heller and his author Henry Cauvain are not known among non-French readers. No history of detective fiction has referred to them, mainly because the novel was not translated into English.

However, a new edition of the novel was published in France in 1930 by Librairie Hachette under the title **L'Aiguille qui tue**. The novel was also abridged for French learners and published in New York under the same title.^[5]

In recent years, an English translation seems to have been published as a CD-ROM. I do not have a copy and I suspect that only a few copies were actually published.^[6]

In this article, I first present a synopsis of part of the novel and direct non-French readers' attention to this detective who preceded Sherlock Holmes. By comparing **Maximilien Heller** and certain Sherlock Holmes stories, I then examine the possibility that Conan Doyle had read **Maximilien Heller** and that it had some influence on him.

Synopsis (a partial outline of Part 1 of the book)

In **Maximilien Heller**, the story is told in the first person by a doctor whose name is never specified. The novel consists of two parts. In the first part, the

doctor comes to know the protagonist Maximilien Heller, and they encounter a crime in which an innocent man is arrested. At this point, Heller is almost an invalid and is living like a recluse, yet he becomes active in solving the crime. In the second part, being employed as a servant of a man whom he believes to be the murderer, Heller finally obtains proof of the crime and succeeds in getting the innocent man released.

It starts when the doctor was asked by his friend, the lawyer Jules H., to consult his former comrade Maximilien Heller. The next week, the doctor visited this young man, who lived in a room in an attic. He entered the room to find a young man of about thirty lying stretched out in an armchair in front of a fireplace. He was a "bag of bones" and was evidently ill, with his whole body wrapped in a long overcoat. On a table in the centre of the room were piles of documents and books.

A kettle was boiling in the fireplace. A large cat stood up and arched her back, while her master remained still.

The doctor explained his business and examined his patient. He had dark circles under his eyes and his fingers were trembling. His hands were hot as flame and his pulse was irregular. The doctor thought, "He is hopeless!" While he was writing a prescription for medicine, the patient came up beside him and said, "Doctors are all the same. They believe medicine is almighty." Then he began to tell the story of his life.

His father had died just after his birth, and he was raised by his mother. Ironically, he had received a fortune from an unknown uncle just eight days after his mother's death in poverty. He had studied to become qualified as a lawyer. He was solitary in nature and had few friends. He had worked as a lawyer and had stood in court for some time, but now he confined himself to his room and lived as a philosopher, writing papers concerning a variety of subjects. After speaking for a long time, he seemed to become exhausted and fell asleep.

The doctor felt sympathy for him and became determined to cure him of his disease. Just as he was leaving the room, someone knocked on the

door and a harsh voice called, "In the name of the law, open this door!" Maximilien sat up, but was still half asleep. The knocking on the door went on. The doctor opened the door to find an inspector and some policemen. The inspector, whose name was Bienassis, ordered Maximilien Heller to follow him. The doctor asked the inspector to let him accompany the patient, and this was permitted.

Inspector Bienassis led them to another room in the attic. Here there were a table, two chairs and a bed. In the corner was a black trunk with a padlock. The inspector said, "Fetch me the suspect!"

Immediately, a pale frightened young man appeared in the doorway assisted by constables on both sides; the inspector then began his interrogations.

"Is your name Jean-Louis Guérin?"

The poor man looked at him absent-mindedly and didn't reply.

"Have you been in service at M. Bréhat-Lenoir's since eight days ago?"

The man remained silent, but the inspector went on interrogating him.

In the course of his interrogation, it was revealed that the young man was accused of the murder of Bréhat-Lenoir, a retired financier. The accused insisted on his innocence. He had promised to marry a young girl and had come from the country to secure some money for his poor mother and his future bride. He was suspected of poisoning his master and stealing his money. In fact, he had bought arsenic from a pharmacy for the purpose of killing rats. A large amount of money was stolen from his master's house. However, no money was found in the black trunk in Guérin's room.

Inspector Bienassis asked Heller, "He has been staying here for eight days. Have you noticed anything suspicious about him?"

Heller didn't reply to the inspector, but said, "Take good care of him. He will be released in less than two months." He then left the room.

The inspector was embarrassed by his behaviour but didn't try to stop him. The suspect was carried to the police station.

The doctor followed Heller and asked him what he thought about the case. He replied, "I believe in Guérin's innocence." He then laid on his back in the armchair and closed his eyes. He was evidently excited, sliding his trembling hands up and down along the arm of the chair. It was obvious that his mind was hard at working.

At the chime of midnight, the doctor said good-night, seeing that his patient was tired. Heller urged him to come again the next day, saying "I have something of vital importance to discuss with you."

The doctor read the newspaper to learn about the case.

The famous retired banker M. Bréhat-Lenoir was found dead in his bed the day before yesterday.

At first, he was considered to have died of apoplexy. His nephew, M. Castille, found that his uncle's secretary had been forced open and that documents had been disturbed. On the table beside the secretary was a glass containing a few drops of liqueur. In a chemical analysis, the liqueur was found to contain arsenic. Thus the case turned out to be a crime. Since the deceased did not leave a will, all of his fortune was to go to his brother, Bréhat-Kerguen. The police arrested a man named Guérin, who had been employed as a servant just eight days earlier. The police believe that he killed his master to steal his money. Neither the money nor a testament have yet been found.

At about ten the next morning, the doctor's old professor Dr. B. called on him and told him that he had investigated the corpse of M. Bréhat-Lenoir and had found no trace of arsenic. The police were not satisfied with his report and asked a Dr. Wickson for a second opinion. Dr. Wickson was a questionable person who had come from India and who had sold dubious medicine in Paris ten years ago. Dr. B. as well as the Academy had regarded him as a fraud. Dr. B. himself was very reluctant to attend the autopsy and asked him to be present as a witness. The doctor promised Dr. B. that he would do his best.

An hour later, the doctor came to Heller's room, with his belief in Guérin's innocence further strengthened. The doctor suggested that he go to the house where the crime was committed and attend the autopsy. Heller at once jumped on his suggestion. The doctor explained that he happened to be attending the autopsy on behalf of Dr. B.

His motivation to solve the crime and expose the murderer was singular. He wanted to solve the mystery in order to demonstrate the defects of the present social system. He considered the possibility of false accusation to be one of these social defects. If he succeeded in demonstrating Guérin's innocence and identifying the murderer, it would be equivalent to demonstrating a defect of the social system. He became passionate as he spoke of this idea.

Heller opened a wardrobe and extracted a long brown frock coat and an old-fashioned hat. He seemed indifferent to how he looked.

Heller and the doctor rode in a cab. It was the first time in two years that Heller had ventured out of the building. In half an hour, they arrived at a mansion at 102 Casette Street. They were received by a little lean old butler, M. Prosper. The doctor explained that he had come on behalf of Dr. B., and the butler led them to a room. Soon the door to the garden opened and a tall white-haired man walked past the window. Heller seemed curiously shocked at the sight.

The butler reappeared and told them that the arrival of the police seemed delayed. While waiting for the police, the doctor asked him about the will

of the deceased. According to the butler, for forty years his master had been on bad terms with his brother Bréhat-Kerguen, who lived in Bretagne. Circumstances were such that the butler believed that his master had made a will by which a vast sum of fortune would be bequeathed to his nephew M. Castille. However, the will was not found, and thus the whole fortune was to be inherited by Bréhat-Kerguen.

The police then arrived, led by a *juge d'instruction*. Heller and the doctor hurried to the room where the autopsy was to be performed. Bréhat-Lenoir's corpse was lying on a white wooden table, covered with a sheet. Maximilien Heller hid himself behind a curtain by the window. There he could observe whatever happened in the room without being noticed. At that instant, the little butler entered the room followed by the *juge d'instruction*, a chief prosecutor and a secretary.

The butler, surprised to find the doctor alone, was ordered by the chief prosecutor to leave the room. The doctor greeted everyone, explaining that he had come there on behalf of Dr. B. Upon hearing the doctor's words, the *juge d'instruction* remembered that Dr. B. and Dr. Wickson were on bad terms and allowed him to serve as an observer.

The corpse was submitted for the autopsy, and after a while M. Prosper announced the arrival of Dr. Wickson. He was a fiftyish well-built man with a ruddy face and reddish blond hair. He smiled when he was told the reason that Dr. B. could not attend. Dr. Wickson said that he had studied poisons, especially arsenic, and he could not help raising objections to Dr. B.'s report.

Dr. Wickson carried out an experiment called the Marsh test, a method used to detect a small fraction of arsenic. The experiment apparatus was provided by Dr. B. Curiously, during the experiment, Dr. Wickson did not take off his white gloves. Based on the result of the experiment, the existence of arsenic in the corpse's vital organs was demonstrated. As Dr. B.'s apprentice, the doctor could not find any defect in Dr. Wickson's experiment. He himself repeated Dr. Wickson's experiment and obtained the same result.

After the visitors had left Bréhat-Lenoir's house, the doctor returned to the room and found Heller examining the experiment apparatus. Seeing the doctor, Heller beckoned him to direct his attention to the edge of the table. There was a small fraction of white powder. It was arsenic. Then Heller told him what he had observed from behind the curtain. Dr. Wickson had ingeniously hidden arsenic in his glove, which had a small hole, and had sprinkled the arsenic on the vital organs. Heller was excited about his findings. He was further excited when he was offered a piece of wastepaper to light a cigarette. It had been found in Bréhat-Kerguen's room by M. Prosper. He suddenly left the doctor without saying goodbye.

For the next couple of weeks, the doctor did not hear from Heller. One fine day, at eight in the morning, he was called on by a tall young man with blond hair. The young man spoke like a countryman and asked him for employment as a servant. The doctor asked him, "Who told you that I need a servant?" but then cried out in surprise, because the young man had taken off his wig, and he turned out to be Maximilien Heller. He told the doctor that he had been employed as Bréhat-Kerguen's servant. He was to leave for Bretagne with his master.

Comparison

It will be evident to the reader that there are certain points connecting **Maximilien Heller** with Sherlock Holmes stories.

There is considerable circumstantial evidence. The protagonist Maximilien Heller is a misanthrope and lives like a recluse. His eccentric behaviour is described in the novel. In these ways his character resembles that of Sherlock Holmes. The teller of the tale is his "Watson" and is also a doctor. The villain's name Wickson even sounds like Watson. The poison used in the crime turned out to be curare, which is also mentioned in "The Sussex Vampire". Admittedly, though, curare was often used as a mysterious poison in nineteenth-century crime fiction.

The episode that most strongly evokes Holmes is found in Chapter 9 of Part 1. Heller appeared as a countryman in front of the doctor, and while the doctor was speaking he took off his disguise. There can be no denying that similar episodes can be found in Sherlock Holmes stories, e.g. "The Empty House".

According to Hubin's bibliography this novel had not been translated into English in the nineteenth century. However, as Doyle was fluent in French as well as German,^[7] there is a possibility that he read this novel in the original French while he was staying at Feldkirch, Switzerland, from 1875 to 1876. His uncle Michael Conan was staying in Paris and young Conan Doyle sent him a poem written at Stonyhurst. The second edition of the novel had just been published in 1875, and his uncle might have sent him a copy as a present. Or, when young Doyle called on his uncle in Paris bearing a book by Edgar Allan Poe in 1876,^[8] he might have recommended to his nephew that he read **Maximilien Heller**.

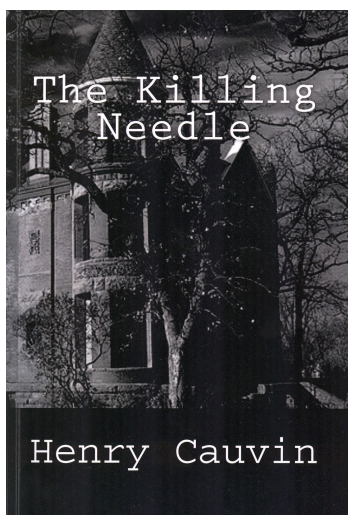
Postscript

This article was originally prepared for a Conan Doyle special issue of a journal on Victorian era studies about five years ago. Since then the circumstances have changed and I would like to make some additions.

The most important change is that an English translation by John Pugmire, **The Killing Needle**, was published in 2014 (Locked Room International). I hope those who are interested in this novel would read it.^{[9][10]}

Another novel by Cauvain, **La Main sanglante** (1885) has been republished in 2004 by Editions Paleo (once again, Henry is misspelled as Henri), and I read it four years ago after the present article had been written. In this novel, a man is murdered and a bloody handprint is left on a door. This reminds us easily of the scene in **A Study in Scarlet**.

Recently, I have obtained Cauvain's **La Mort d'Eva** (1881), which is a very scarce book. A plantation farmer and Englishman living in Benares (Varanasi) comes back to his home and found his wife and baby were cruelly killed. The tragedy develops in India and this reminds me of Doyle's preference for India.



Henry Cauvin (*sic*): **The Killing Needle**
(US: Locked Room International, 2014. pb., 152pp.)

Notes

1. Michel Lebrun: "Les Alchimistes du Roman Policier" in *Europe*, No. 542 (June 1974).
2. Henry Cauvain: **Maximilien Heller, ou le philanthrope sans le saviour** (Paris: Lecoffre, 1871).
3. See also Michel Lebrun: "Un Grand Classique du Roman Policier: **Maximilien Heller** d'Henry Cauvain" in *L'Almanach du Crime 1980* (France: Guénaud, 1980), p.185.
4. Claude Mesplède (ed.): **Dictionnaire des Littératures Policières**, two vols. (Joseph K., 2003).
5. P.W. Packer (ed.): **L'Aiguille qui tue** (New York: Oxford UP, 1933). Curiously the author's name is misspelled as Henri Cauvain.
6. **Maximilien Heller: The Misanthrope Detective**, translated by Peter D. O'Neill (Glen Segell, 2006)
7. John Dickson Carr: **The Life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** (Harper, 1949)
8. Carr: *ibid*.
9. John Pugmire's translation is from the 1930 publication of the novel by Librairie Hachette under the title **L'Aiguille qui tue**. He says that the only differences between the 1930 edition and the original publication is in the chapter structure. In this new edition the author's name is given as Henry Cauvin.
10. In CADS 59 (December 2010), in his article "A Room with a Clue", John Pugmire attempts to give the first example of each of the types of locked-room murders given in Dr. Fell's Locked Room Lecture in John Dickson Carr's **The Hollow Room** (1935). In CADS 68 (August 2014) John Pugmire extends the coverage to Clayton Rawson's own locked room lecture from *The Great Merlini* in **Death from a Top Hat** (1938) and uses **L'Aiguille qui tue (Maximilien Heller)** as the first book to use one of the categories. □

Review Extra: Older Book

Geoff Bradley

Andrew Garve: **A Press of Suspects** (1951)

I happened upon this early Garve by chance and as he is a writer I have always wanted to read more of, I picked it up and got straight to it. Set in a Fleet Street newspaper office — a setting familiar to Garve who was, in real life a journalist — it concerns the Assistant Foreign Editor who, annoyed at being overlooked for promotion yet again, decides to wreak revenge on all those he considers to be looking down on him, by the indiscriminate use of cyanide.

Don't worry, this is a procedural not a

whodunnit and we are made aware of the villain's actions right from the start. We share the thoughts and actions of many of the main protagonists including Inspector Haines, the man who Scotland Yard called in to investigate after the first death.

At one stage Haines describes his methods as "humdrum" and in a way that's what the book is as the story unfolds in a very matter-of-fact way but it retains the attention and I found myself engrossed until, with a sigh of satisfaction, the final page was read. □