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Pulp Villains

By Gareth-Michael Skarka


Introduction

The pulps were a time of stalwart heroes, larger-than-life characters who would, in time, give birth to the archetype of the modern superhero. It was a time of stark contrasts: Good vs. Evil on a grand scale.

For every hero, there were dozens of villains. The villains were often a never-ending supply of run-of-the-mill gangsters and crooks, ready to be defeated on a monthly basis, sandwiched between lurid, brightly-colored covers, and sold for a dime. On occasion, however, other villains appeared. Villains as fantastic as the heroes they confounded. Villains that were nearly equal to the heroes in power and in their uniqueness.

These are the villains that we remember. The hordes of cookie-cutter crooks fade into obscurity, but the arch-fiends remain. Sherlock Holmes needs his Moriarty, after all. Doc Savage had his John Sunlight, and the Shadow had Shiwan Khan. Some villains became so popular that they were given their own magazines, where they were the central character: The Insidious Wu Fang...The Octopus...Doctor Death.

The player-characters in your own pulp-era campaigns should face such threats. Don't give



About THRILLING TALES

Thrilling Tales is Adamant Entertainment's line of pulp-genre gaming products for use with Modern D20. The line currently features Advanced Classes representing the major pulp hero archetypes, a Gamemaster's Guide (including a random pulp adventure generator), and adventures.

About the Author

Gareth-Michael Skarka has been working in the adventure games industry since 1988. He is the designer of several role-playing games, including *Hong Kong Action Theatre!*, *UnderWorld* and *Skull & Bones*. His design imprint, **Adamant Entertainment**, produces the pulp d20 line *Thrilling Tales*, and more.

them an enemy to fight....Give them a Nemesis. The villains that appear in these pages will give you a good start, and your players will curse you for it!

The Master of the World

Strong Villain 5/Smart Villain 4/ Charismatic Villain 4 CR 13; Medium-size humanoid; HD 5d8+10 plus 4d6+8 plus 4d6+8; HP 77; Mas 14; Init +1; Spd 30 ft; Defense 16, touch 16, flatfooted 15 (+0 size, +1 Dex, +5 class); BAB +9; Grap +12; Atk +12 melee (1d6+4/18-20, sword), or +10 ranged (2d4+0, Walther PPK); FS 5 ft by 5 ft; Reach 5 ft; SQ ; AL none; SV Fort +8, Ref +7, Will +6; AP 6; Rep +6; Str 17, Dex 12, Con 14, Int 16, Wis 11, Cha 16.

Occupation: Criminal (Disguise, Move Silently)

Skills: Bluff +8, Climb +6, Craft (electronic) +5, Craft (mechanical) +6, Decipher Script +8, Demolitions +5, Diplomacy +6, Disable Device +5, Disguise +16, Forgery +7, Gather Information +7, Handle Animal +6, Intimidate +7, Jump +7, Knowledge (Arcane Lore) +13, Knowledge (Behavioral Sciences) +6, Knowledge (Business) +6, Knowledge (Civics) +4, Knowledge (Current Events) +11, Knowledge (History) +5, Knowledge (Physical Sciences) +5, Knowledge (Streetwise) +12, Knowledge (Tactics) +11, Knowledge (Technology) +7, Knowledge (Theology and Philosophy) +7, Listen +2, Move Silently +11, Navigate +5, Pilot +3, Profession +4, Read/Write Language +3 (English, Tibetan, German), Repair +6, Search +7, Sense Motive +1, Speak Language +3 (English, Tibetan, German), Spot +2, Swim +11, Tumble +3

Feats: Acrobatic, Alertness, Archaic Weapons Proficiency, Athletic, Blind-Fight, Combat Expertise, Combat Martial Arts, Deceptive, Exotic Melee Weapon Proficiency, Iron Will, Lightning Reflexes, Personal Firearms Proficiency, Point Blank Shot

Talents: (Strong Hero): Melee Smash, Extreme Effort, Ignore Hardness; (Smart Hero): Savant (Knowledge [Arcane Lore]), Exploit Weakness; (Charismatic Hero): Charm, Coordinate

Possessions: sword, Walther PPK; Wealth +16

The villain known only as The Master of the World has his origins shrouded in mystery. He appears to be of European descent, but claims to be one of the Hidden Masters spoken of in Tibetan legend. He rules a vast criminal empire, centered in a hidden mountain fortress high in the Himalayas. From this impregnable headquarters, he runs most of the opium and white slavery trade in Asia. His operations stretch into every corner of the globe.

He will ally himself with others, if such an alliance suits his needs, but is quick to betray his allies the moment that he detects an advantage in such betrayal.



Characters who face The Master of the World will find him to be a charming sociopath, who will act the consummate host, wining and dining them as he asks for details about current goings-on in the modern world (given his self-imposed solitude in the Himalayas, he misses hearing about the minutiae of modern life:

men's fashion, popular music and film, stocks and bonds, etc. His mood can turn abruptly, however, and he is likely to order someone executed by slow torture, for example, if they displease him in any way.

Adventure Hooks:

- The local Chinese Tongs who run criminal operations in the Chinatown of the Player-Characters' home city are being attacked, which is sparking a violent gang war. The action is being taken by The Master of the World and his minions, in an effort to expand his influence into the city and use Chinatown as his center of operations. This is an excellent way to introduce the Master of the World into your campaign.
- The daughter of a wealthy socialite is kidnapped while mountain climbing in the Himalayas. Depending upon the whims of the gamemaster, this situation could result in a straightforward rescue operation, with the Player-Characters tracking her to the mountain fortress of the Master of the World, or perhaps something more complex: The daughter inexplicably returns to America, unable to recall what has happened to her. The Master of the World, however, has used a powder created from a rare Himalayan plant as a mind-control drug, and trained the unsuspecting socialite as a hidden assassin, to strike at any target the Master designates!

Doctor Sin

This character uses levels of the Mesmerist and Mastermind classes, available from Adamant Entertainment.

Smart Villain 6, Mastermind 2, Mesmerist 5 CR 13; Medium-size human; HD 6d6+12, 2d10+4, 5d6+10; HP 63; Mas 14; Init +1; Spd 30 ft; Defense 18, touch 13, flatfooted 12 (+0 size, +1 Dex, +5 class); BAB +7; Grap +9; Atk +9 melee (1d4+2, martial arts), or +8 ranged (varies by weapon); FS 5 ft by 5 ft; Reach 5 ft; SQ Minions, Crime network, Hypnotic ability, Hypnotic Trance, Trick, Command Word, Lengthy Trance, Winning Smile; AL none; SV Fort +5, Ref +10, Will +13; AP 13; Rep +8; Str 14, Dex 13, Con 14, Int 18, Wis 13, Cha 17.

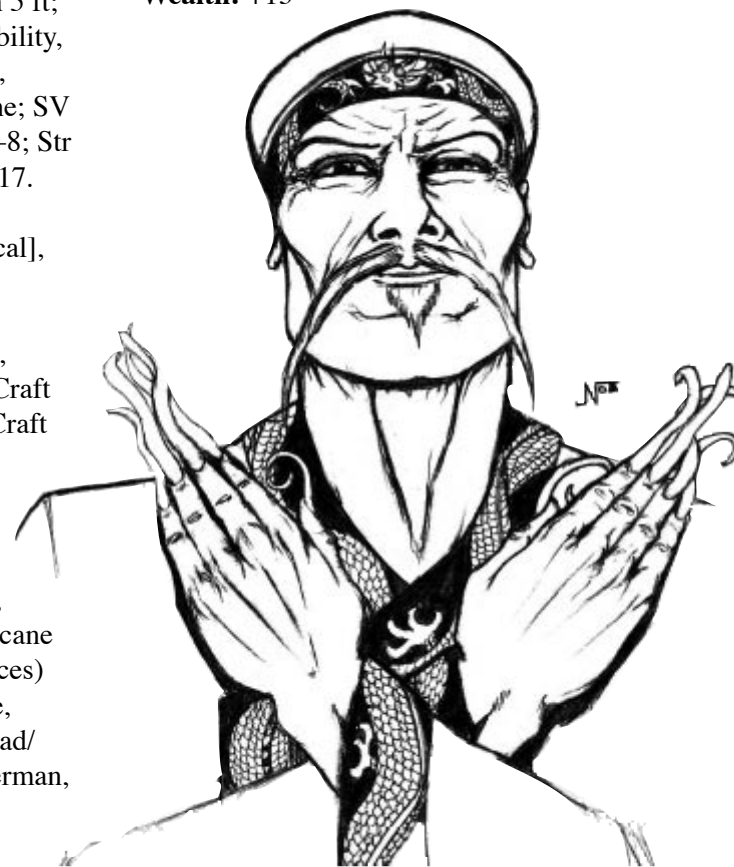
Occupation: Doctor (Craft [pharmaceutical], Knowledge [Behavioral Sciences])

Skills: Balance +7, Bluff +10, Climb +10, Concentration +4, Craft (chemical) +13, Craft (electronic) +13, Craft (mechanical) +9, Craft (pharmaceutical) +15, Decipher Script +8, Demolitions +9, Diplomacy +12, Disable Device +8, Disguise +12, Escape Artist +13, Forgery +10, Gather Information +8, Hide +9, Intimidate +12, Investigate +7, Jump +3, Knowledge (Arcane Lore) +12, Knowledge (Behavioral Sciences) +18, Knowledge (Tactics) +9, Knowledge, (Underworld) +10, Move Silently +5, Read/Write Language +4 (Chinese, English, German, Tibetan) Speak Language +4 (Chinese, English, German, Tibetan)

Feats: Combat Expertise, Combat Martial Arts, Defensive Martial Arts, Educated (Knowledge [Arcane Lore], Knowledge [Behavioral Sciences]), Frightful Presence, Iron Will, Lightning Reflexes, Personal Firearms Proficiency

Talents (Smart Hero): Savant (Knowledge [Behavioral Sciences]), Exploit Weakness, Trick

Wealth: +13



Doctor Tsung-Chi Sin is known as the Devil of Chinatown. He is notorious for his skill as a Mesmerist and as a poisoner and torturer. He runs a criminal empire centered in the Chinatown district of the player-characters home city, where his influence extends into nearly every criminal enterprise. If it's illegal, and happening in the city, it is said that Doctor Sin has his fingers in it.

Doctor Sin is a cold, ruthless killer, with a voice like a silken strangling cord. He can be charming when he has to be, and relies upon lies and subterfuge as a matter of course. If backed into a corner, he will not hesitate to endanger innocents to cover his escape.

As a Mastermind, Doctor Sin has a vast army of minions at his disposal. These range from rank-and-file servants who perform mundane duties such as messengers, to specialists who are secretly on the Doctor's payroll. Adventurers who are facing Doctor Sin should never be able to completely trust that the NPCs that they encounter are not part of the Devil of Chinatown's vast empire.

Most feared of all of Doctor Sin's minions are the cadre of fanatical assassins called the *Qing Ri* (pronounced "ching ree"). These are orphans from some of the worst slums on Earth, taken in by Sin as children and trained as the most efficient and remorseless killers the world has ever seen. A *Qing Ri* can be identified by heavy scarring where most of his right ear used to be: the final test of the assassin's dedication, which occurs during the "graduation ceremony"

when the *Qing Ri* is 18, involves the prospective member having their right ear nailed to a ceremonial post. The *Qing Ri* is then handed a knife, with which to free himself. Any one who cries out is killed instantly by his brothers. Those who pass the test become full members of the brotherhood.

Example stats for a *Qing Ri* assassin:

Fast Ordinary 2/ Strong Ordinary 2

CR 4; Medium-size humanoid; HD 2d8+2 plus 2d8+2; HP 22; Mas 13; Init +2; Spd 30 ft; Defense 18, touch 18, flatfooted 16 (+0 size, +2 Dex, +6 class); BAB +3; Grap +5; Atk +5 melee (2d6+2/19-20, *Qing Ri Paired Swords*), or +5 ranged (2d6+0, .357 Revolver); FS 5 ft by 5 ft; Reach 5 ft; SQ ; AL *Qing Ri Brotherhood*; SV Fort +3, Ref +4, Will +0; AP 2; Rep +0; Str 15, Dex 14, Con 13, Int 12, Wis 10, Cha 8.

Occupation: Criminal (Disable Device, Move Silently)



Skills: Balance +4, Climb +4, Disable Device +3, Drive +6, Escape Artist +5, Hide +7, Jump +4, Knowledge (Current Events) +2, Knowledge (Streetwise) +3, Knowledge (Tactics) +3, Move Silently +7, Profession +2, Read/Write Language +1 (English, Chinese), Sleight of Hand +4, Speak Language +1 (English, Chinese), Swim +3, Tumble +3

Feats: Combat Martial Arts, Exotic Melee Weapon Proficiency, Personal Firearms Proficiency, Two-Weapon Fighting

Possessions: *Qing Ri* Paired Swords, .357 Revolver

Note: The *Qing Ri* use a distinctive weapon: a pair of razor-sharp swords which they wield in both hands. They are similar in form and function to the Japanese katana.

Adventure Hooks:

- Doctor Sin has decided to expand his operations, allying himself with another force of evil: The Nazis. He has struck an arrangement: He will provide the Nazis with industrial secrets (which his operatives will steal), and in return, the Nazis will allow Sin to smuggle opium from New York to Los Angeles via their zeppelin, *Die Walkuriye*, which is making a promotional world-wide tour. The Nazis believe that helping the Devil of Chinatown spread his drugs throughout the United States will further weaken “a decadent and morally corrupt society”, leaving it ripe for Nazi takeover.

The Player-Characters will first enter the plot by investigating the theft of plans for a new aircraft. This will lead them to the thieves, and from there, to Doctor Sin and his Nazi accomplices.

- The Devil of Chinatown is using his powers of mesmerism to brainwash innocent people into committing crimes upon his behalf. A rash of crimes committed by normal, upstanding citizens alerts the Player-Characters to the problem.

In each case, the perpetrator of the crime has had some connection with one of Doctor Sin’s front businesses (a housewife who has her husband’s suits pressed at a Chinatown laundry, a banker who ate lunch at a nearby Chinese restaurant, etc.) The trail will lead back to Doctor Sin.

- This option is best used after the Player-Characters have encountered Doctor Sin on at least one other adventure: The insidious Doctor has decided to remove a thorn from his side...and that thorn is the Player-Characters themselves! Doctor Sin orders the *Qing Ri* to assassinate the heroes.

In finest pulp fashion, the assassins will not simply walk up to the heroes on the street and shoot them, but will, of course, use bizarre methods: releasing a venomous snake, scorpion or spider into the character’s bedroom; setting elaborate traps that shoot poisoned darts; etc.

If these methods fail, the *Qing Ri* will then make a personal appearance, infiltrating the character’s inner sanctum, and striking like shadows in the night!

A Note on Villain Survival

Villains like these are too good to waste on a single adventure. Taking a page from the pulps, Gamemasters should be prepared to bring a villain back, even when it seems impossible. If at all possible, make the villain’s end have a bit

of “wiggle-room”: the body is never recovered, for example.

...and when the heroes ask “how did you survive that?” The villain should dismiss the question with a wave of his hand. “You cannot begin to comprehend the power at my disposal....”



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