

SCIENCE FICTION NEWS

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SIXTY YEARS OF AMAZING STORIES

1927 (contd.)

"In this department we shall discuss, every month, topics of interest to all of our readers. The editors invite correspondence on all subjects directly or indirectly related to the stories appearing in this magazine." With these words commenced the first appearance of Discussions in the January 1927 issue. The community involvement that has been such a notable feature of science fiction had begun.

E.H. of Indianapolis remarked on the October issue: "Mr. Jules verne's story was one of the best I have ever read. He is a very promising writer." Gernsback judged this letter to be "safely ensconced in the domain of classic hilarity." Following it came a message from one better informed, Prof. Jack E. Edwards of San Francisco: "You seek prestige through the names of such Old Masters as Jules Verne, who, in his day, was supreme as a describer of the bizarre; but whose wildest flights of imagination present things and conditions that are today merely commonplace, if not slightly antique and ridiculous. He can no longer amaze us."

In February Clifton Amsbury of Berkeley (who was to be heard from again and at last report is still an active supporter of SF) commented on the ending of The War of the Worlds: "If our germs attack the Martians the ones they bring would attack us as the white man's germs have attacked the original populations of lands he has conquered."

"As a young man," wrote H. W. Widner of New Haven, "I spent considerable time in writing impossible stories of this character myself, but there was no market for such manuscripts in those days..." Not entirely correct for as we know many such did get into print and Amazing was largely based on reprinting some of them. "There are however a few points of criticism I would like to make...First that the reasoning back of the alleged scientific discovery that makes the marvel possible be a possible extension of our present scientific knowledge. Any theory or hypothesis is acceptable, but it should commence with known scientific data...(with some exceptions) all the marvellous fairy tales of scientific fiction brutally and needlessly transgress against known facts. Second, where the plot of the story depends on the contraversion of some Gibraltar of scientific truth the real fact should be fully explained in a footnote."

Earl W. Brown of Amesbury thought it worth emphasizing: "Science is good for everyone. If everyone knows a little science the world will be better off, and will advance more quickly. But, if everyone delves a little into science, something else will happen. They will begin to think." Gernsback replied: "We are glad to publish the letter of our correspondent because it fits in excellently with our most cherished ambition -- that is, to uplift humanity through the means of Science. It is strange, but a fact nevertheless, that although we are all immersed in the ocean of science abounding all about us, it seems to be too deep for the average man, and he pays scant attention to it. Whereas, if he should become really interested in science, his horizon would immediately enlarge and he would become a more valuable individual, not only to himself but to the community as a whole. If Amazing Stories is accomplishing this, to ever so little an extent, we feel that its mission is being fulfilled."

Ernest Bishop of Miami found fault with A Columbus of Space: "It didn't end right. You know yourself

that the hero and heroine should not get killed. Do you think there is any chance of getting Mr. Serviss to write a sequel..." Gernsback differed: "Why must all stories end 'right'? Does everything in life end right? Does the hero always get the heroine, and do they always live happily ever after? We believe that since the reverse is the case most of the time in life, there is no reason why it shouldn't be in fiction. The modern school of fiction tries to approximate life as it is, not the romantic life which we would like to have...We feel that Professor Serviss ended his story very well, although most of our readers will probably not agree with us here."

Another plea for a sequel came from Sam Fishman of Tarrytown. Writing of *The Diamond Lens* by Fitz-James O'Brien he argued: "Linley had committed what seems a perfect crime when he murdered Simon the dealer in order to get possession of the coveted diamond. His new microscope did not render any aid to science, and in this his case parallels that of Dr. Moreau, who met his death through the product of his brain, and of Frankenstein, who also met death at the hands of his product, the grotesque creature he had formed. Why then should Linley fare better than they? Let a science-fiction story be written around the murder incident and let Linley get his just punishment." Gernsback commented: "It is perhaps a tribute to the merit of a story, when a reader desires a sequel, but the author of the beautiful fiction *The Diamond Lens* died many years ago, and it would be an adventurous author who would undertake to write a sequel to this classic. But as we read the story, Linley seems to us rather a subject for the insane asylum than for the prison or the death sentence."

Speaking of murder, among the advertisers in the back pages of this issue were no less than eight mail order dealers offering handguns.

In *The Man who could Vanish* in the January issue, A. Hyatt Verrill in an aside to the public excuses the

exposition of how invisibility would work: "...unless such matters were included my story would be considered as purely fictitious. And at any rate the reader is at liberty to skip such portions of my narrative as the appreciative reader may find to be lacking in real and genuine interest." More things needed full explanation in the 20's and techniques of working it into the action were not well known. Incidentally, in this story the inventor of the invisibility device naively decides to "present it to our government on the understanding that it shall remain a secret until needed to avert some national calamity." Few readers probably found this funny, another indication of how much ideas have changed.

Another piece of unintentional humor is in *On the Martian Way* by Capt. H. G. Bishop in February, about a future interplanetary traffic similar to 19th Century shipping lines. Business is based on shipping meat to Mars, "returning either in ballast or fruit-laden." Propulsion is by antigravity but that's no excuse.

In contrast, Gernsback's editorial on *Interplanetary Travel* discusses Goddard's experiments and notes that rocket propulsion is the only possibility in sight.

March featured *The Green Splotches* by T. S. Stripling, from 1920 *Adventure*, about some visiting person-shaped vegetables from Jupiter. An interesting piece revived more than once since then. *Advanced Chemistry* by Jack G. Huekels proposed reviving the dead by recharging the brain cells, the brain seen as a battery.

Revival of the dead was a recurring theme of the time. Verrill's *Plague of the Living Dead* in April was one of the more extravagant treatments of it, beginning with a rejuvenation method and ending with a horde of irrational and indestructable revenants regenerating like starfish from parts, a decidedly gruesome tale. *The Man who Was* by Walter Burch in May raised legal questions about the position of an electrocuted felon restored to activity.

And then there was the great Cover Contest. For the first of several times, Cernsback had Paul paint a startling cover scene full of baffling details and invited readers to write a story around it for a cash prize, hoping to turn up some new talent. So the December 1926 issue displayed a spherical levitating vessel lifting a large passenger ship of the time out of the water, while ~~hamoids~~ looked on from the foreground. Three prize winning entries ran in the June 1927 issue, four near-misses in July.

"You might think that seven stories inspired by the same picture would of necessity be alike. We were very much astonished to find that such was not the case, and you will be delighted...to find the wide divergence of interest in the seven stories." Thus the June Editorial.

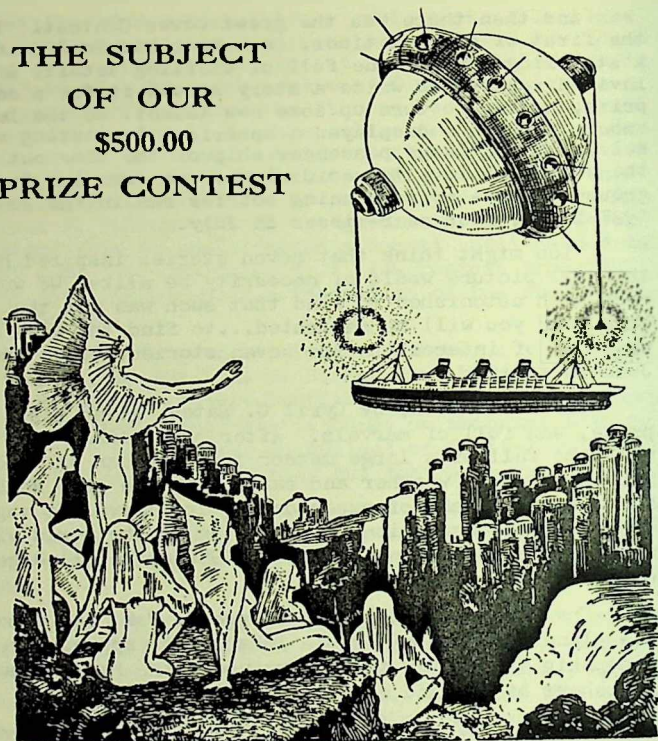
The Visitation, by Cyril G. Wates, given first prize, was full of marvels. After preliminary events with the fall of a large meteor in the ocean and subsequent violent weather and earthquake the ship reaches an unrecorded land of superhumans, locality left vague. Their utopian condition is passed on to the world with a new power source and so on, in 1950 as recalled generations later.

The Electronic Wall, by George R. Fox, had a mobile planetoid with minuscule inhabitants appropriate a troopship and convey it to Mars where the Martian humans are short of men and need to import some.

The Fate of the Poseidonia, by Clare Winger Harris, also introduced ~~Martians~~. In this case making off with the ship as a trophy is incidental, the main undertaking being to take a large amount of water to replenish the canals. There is no serious threat to Earth though sea level does drop.

The Ether Ship of Oltor, by S. Maxwell Coder, went to the greatest lengths to account for the scene. The near passage of a star with the capture of a new planet for the Solar system brings another culture within reach in the future. The object of the sphere taking

THE SUBJECT
OF OUR
\$500.00
PRIZE CONTEST



the ship is to collect a shipment of gold -- which the aliens use as fuel and eventually agree to pay for with a load of platinum.

The Voice from the Inner World, by A. Hyatt Verrill, was the least extravagant of the lot, with a mere raid by 30-foot amazons from a cave-world under South America.

The Lost Continent, by Cecil B. White, involved time travel as well as Atlantis, perhaps a little top-heavy. Finally The Gravitomobile, by D. B. McRae, had a trip to Mars (once again) by antigravity device, towing the ship in the hope of finding enough water to float it. The dream ending detracts little from it.

Verrill had been writing for a few years, and appeared four times in Amazing already. He was to write many more stories up to 1940. Mrs Harris had had A Runaway World in Weird Tales July 1926, and wrote another eight stories by 1930, plus one with Miles J. Breuer. All are collected in the book Away from the Here and Now (Dorrance, 1947). Wates and White, both Canadians, wrote a further three and two stories respectively. So that wasn't a bad talent quest even though the others proved to be oncers.

"Readers...have frequently commented upon the fact that there is more actual knowledge to be gained through reading its (Amazing's) pages than from many a textbook." Thus Gernsback, introducing What do you Know? a quiz on points in stories in the issue that began as a regular feature in September. Sample questions: "How could you determine the position of a radio broadcasting station by surveying or triangulating with radio?" "What dominant feature of almost all human devices is neglected by nature?" (The wheel,) "Where do we find Widmanstattan figures in nature?" (In meteorites)

Francis Flagg (Henry George Weiss) first appeared in November with The Machine Man of Ardathia. A time-traveller visits the present, from the world of some 30,000 years on, when the race is physically atrophied and permanently installed in mobile life-support systems. This was a concept that was in the air, and attitudes to such a way of life varied. Flagg was here rather in favor of it.

Gernsback's editorial on Space Flying in this issue considered such points as that since ET's haven't visited us there probably aren't any. True, inhabitants of a much older world like Mars or Luna might have been here ages ago and since become extinct. Or it might prove that space flight is going to be much tougher than we suppose due to various hazards, and so there might be Martians after all but they just can't reach us.

The War of the Worlds, in August and September, brought many comments in Discussions. R. L. Morris of Toronto wrote in November: "Why do they always give poor little Mars such a bad time? Simply because the planet is reddish in tint doesn't necessarily mean it is of a sanguinary disposition, which all fiction in regard to it seems to suggest. The presumption is that being a much older planet than the Earth it is by thousands of years more civilised, if life exists at all.

"Take Edgar Rice Burroughs' latest brain wave, The Master Mind of Mars, and all his other yarns about Mars. It is nothing but battle, murder and sudden death, besides having the most grotesque forms of life imaginable. There are men of purple, green, yellow and every color of the spectrum, dressed like Roman warriors with short swords and, Ye Gods! radium guns. Can you beat it?

"Again, consider The Man who Saved the Earth. Once again poor little Mars. She tried to drain the Atlantic Ocean. Then we have H. G. Wells' story The War of the Worlds. This is an old story, but it is good fiction but at the same time highly improbable. I think Mars is a very much maligned planet. If there is a form of intelligence on Mars I don't suppose for one moment it bears the slightest resemblance to man. Mars, being many millions of years in advance of the Earth, has presumably passed beyond the man stage of existence, just as certainly as man will pass from the Earth and give place to an infinitely higher form of life, and a beautiful form at that and not a monstrosity like H. G. Wells would have us believe..."

1928

Edmond Hamilton, another recruit from *Weird Tales*, led off the year with *The Comet Doom*. Like many of his stories, this one had Earth saved from disaster: in this case, comet-dwellers evolved into brains in robot bodies proposed hauling away the whole planet for its mineral resources. It is curious that he had not previously clicked with *Amazing*, since beginning in August 1926 he had sold to *Weird Tales* his first effort, *The Monster-God of Mamurth* (about an invisible giant spider) followed by *Across Space*, *The Metal Giants*, *The Atomic Conquerors*, *Evolution Island*, *The Moon Menace* and *The Time-Raider*. But he soon made up for lost time and was a mainstay of *Amazing* for years and years.

The December issue featured the arrival of another stalwart, Jack Williamson, with *The Metal Man*. He too was prominent among the group who made the magazine -- and indeed science fiction -- what it was through the 1930's. These two were the first to make a living by writing science fiction and little else.

Other names of note appearing this year were David H. Keller, mentioned earlier, with his lateral thinking on society; George McLoiard, an original thinker too, with *Smoke Rings* in February; Harl Vincent with *The Golden Girl of Munan* in June, first of 72 stories that kept his name familiar up to 1942; Charles Cloukey with *Sub-Satellite* in March, ingenious and original; Fletcher Pratt in collaboration with Irvin Lester -- he collaborated with numerous others -- with *The Octopus Cycle* in May, with an ecological theme of a plague of giant amphibious cephalopods.

But two newcomers of far-reaching influence made the August issue the most significant, after the first -- E. E. Smith (his one-time collaborator Lee Hawkins Garby even then mentioned in passing) with *The Skylark of Space*: and Philip Francis Nowlan with *Armageddon 2419 AD*.

There had been a few stories before then looking beyond the solar system: yet there is no doubt that Dr.

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Smith created the interstellar adventure story. This was something quite different in tone and scope from science fiction as it was then. The Skylark had been in manuscript since 1920, unable to find a buyer. It is not obvious why this was so, for Argosy or Blue Book should have taken it: it would have appealed to the readers who already appreciated the strange worlds of Burroughs, Farley, England and others, and would not seem any more incredible than Stilson's interstellar astral projection or Cummings' subatomic venturings. One would think Gernsback would have welcomed it years before for Science and Invention -- or to launch Amazing instead of good old Verne and Wells and Poe.

Well, never mind, here it was, and science fiction would never be the same again.

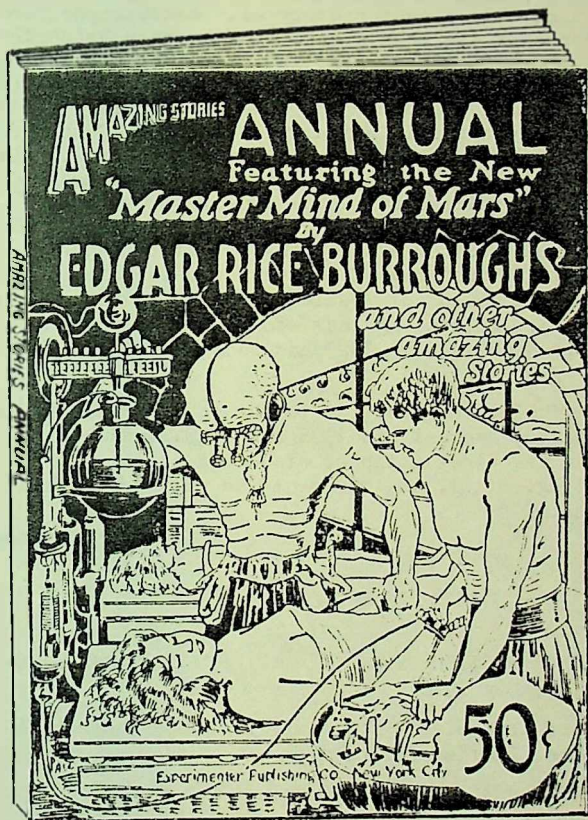
Nowlan's story and its sequel The Airlords of Han told of a future America long reduced by the Mongols, with freedom fighters working against all odds to bring down the vastly superior Mongol civilisation. The technical interest was in ideas for weapons, applications for large and small rockets, radar and the like which were to be achieved not too much later, as well as more speculative energy weapons and antigravity. Nowlan's influence in science fiction proper was not extensive, but the Buck Rogers comic series based on these stories had profound effects on popular concepts of the future.

Scientifiction -- not yet Science Fiction -- was still a lucky dip, with a wild disparity of quality. Side by side with original forecasts of future devices and possibilities with some thought on their implications, were weak and ridiculous concoctions rooted in conventions of past generations. Professional writers, even of ordinary commercial standard, were not yet on the scene: amateurs dominated it and their work left much to be desired. But it cannot have seemed to matter. Amazing had the field to itself, so much so that the logical development was to start another magazine to meet the demand. Competition did not exist -- oh, Weird Tales and other magazines ran a few scientifiction

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stories, but these only created a demand for more and brought in more readers for Amazing.

The experimental Annual of 1927 sold well at a hefty 50 cents, so the next move was clear: a Quarterly on the same scale and in the same price bracket.



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The Quarterly provided only 50% more wordage in its 144 pages for double the price, but complaints are not recorded. Its main virtue and strength was its use of the space to present complete booklength novels. The first was a classic, Wells' *When the Sleeper Wakes*, but most of the content was new and carefully chosen. The *Moon of Doom* by Earl L. Bell, also in the first issue, was a notable disaster story with catastrophe from disturbance of the Moon's orbit. The oncer Frederick Arthur Hodge in *A Modern Atlantis* told of a floating mid-Atlantic airport, a project with supporters at the time. J. Schlossel, another who had been writing ambitious interplanetaries in *Weird Tales*, had *The Second Swarm* in the second issue: a curious tale of war with Sirius in a distant future of a united Earth along racially compartmentalised but equal lines. (Doubt it.) Keller's episodic novel *The Menace* in which the naughty Black Americans plotted against their betters ranks as one of the most thoroughly offensive works in science fiction. Gernsback could not resist reprinting his own *Ralph 124C41+*, written against monthly deadlines throughout 1911, which even by 1929 had become as it is regarded today, so bad it's good.

The monthly issues did not come up to the same standard, overall, in 1928 and 1929. Trailblazing Smith and a few other notables stood out against much mediocre writing. Still, the movement was alive and making progress.

(To be continued)

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