

OPUNTIA 331

Auld Lang Syne 2016

Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. It is posted on www.efanzines.com and www.fanac.org. My e-mail address is: opuntia57@hotmail.com When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

SHOULD OLD ACQUAINTANCE ETCETERA
photos by Dale Speirs

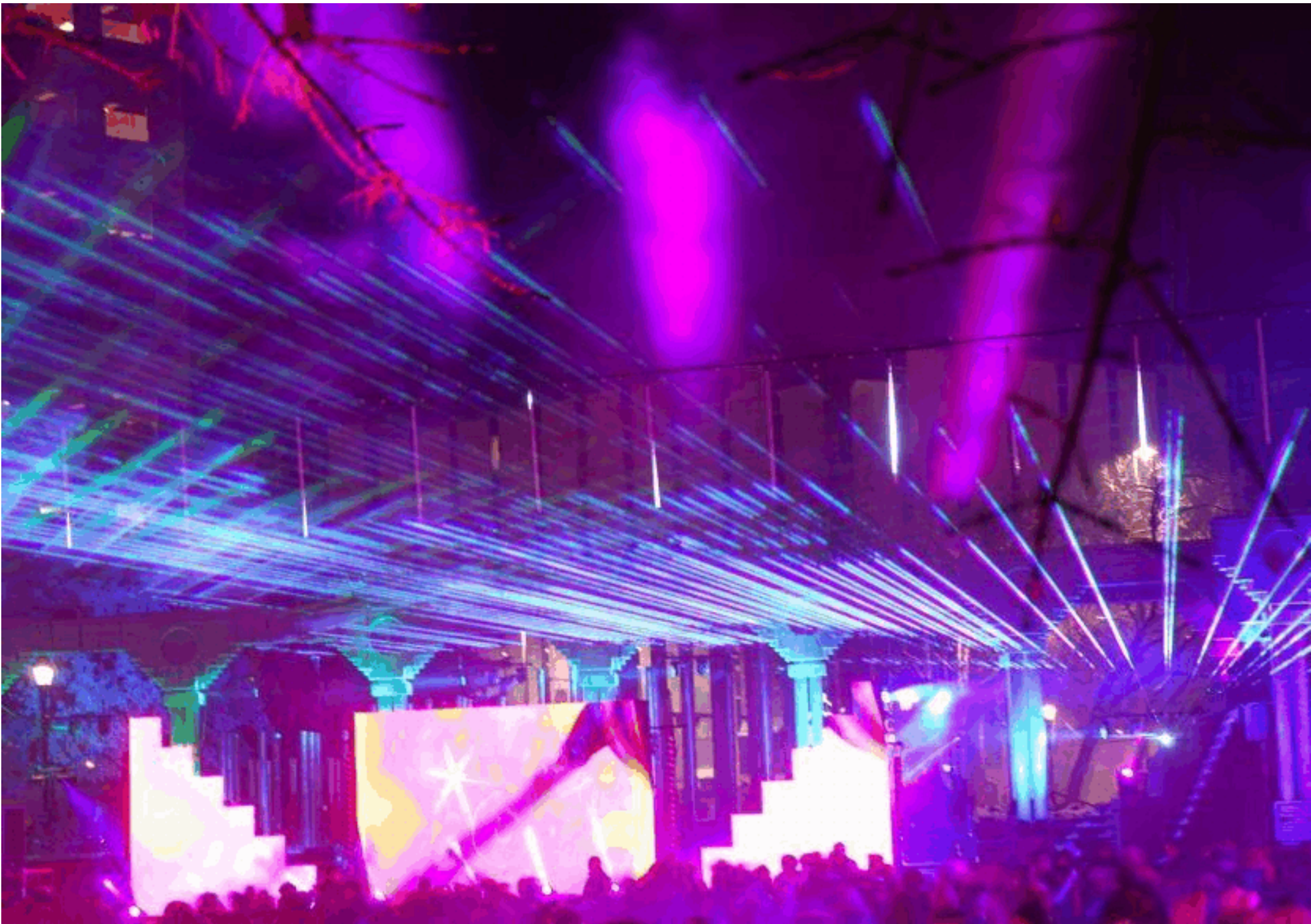
2015-12-31

I went down to the Olympic Plaza in downtown Cowtown where the biggest New Year's Eve celebration is held. About ten thousand people attending. I reported on last year's in OPUNTIA #295, with lots of fireworks photos. This year I was able to get into a better position for the stage show. The DJ put on some good techno music and the light show was excellent.

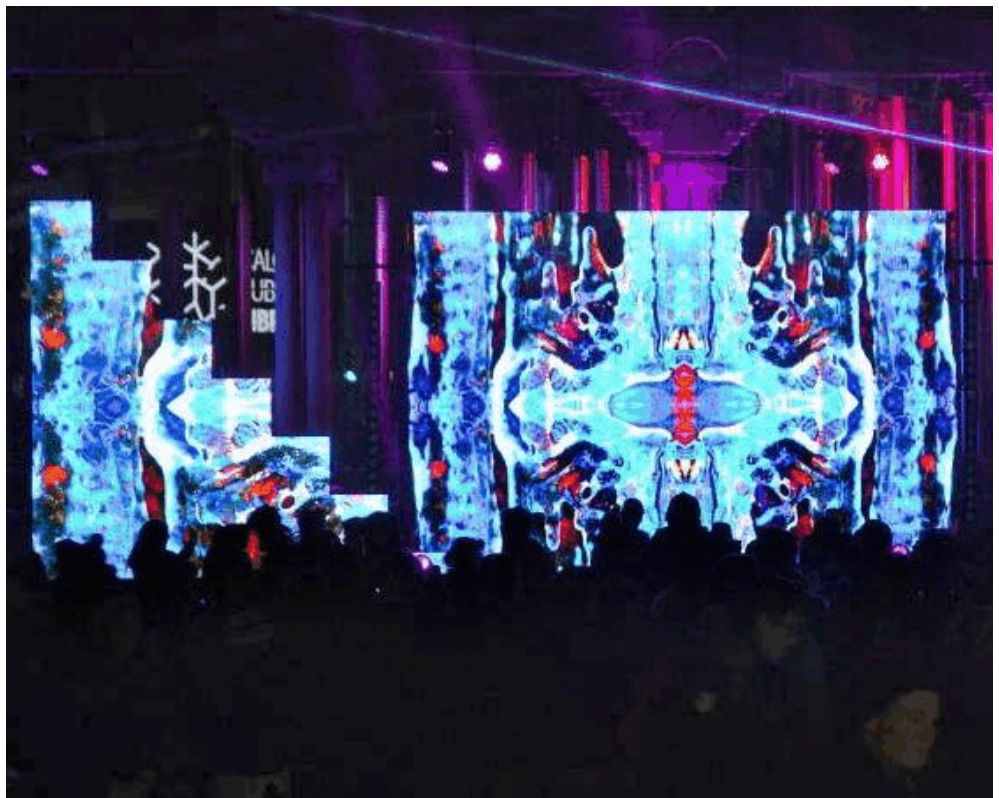


For perspective, a daytime view of the Plaza.

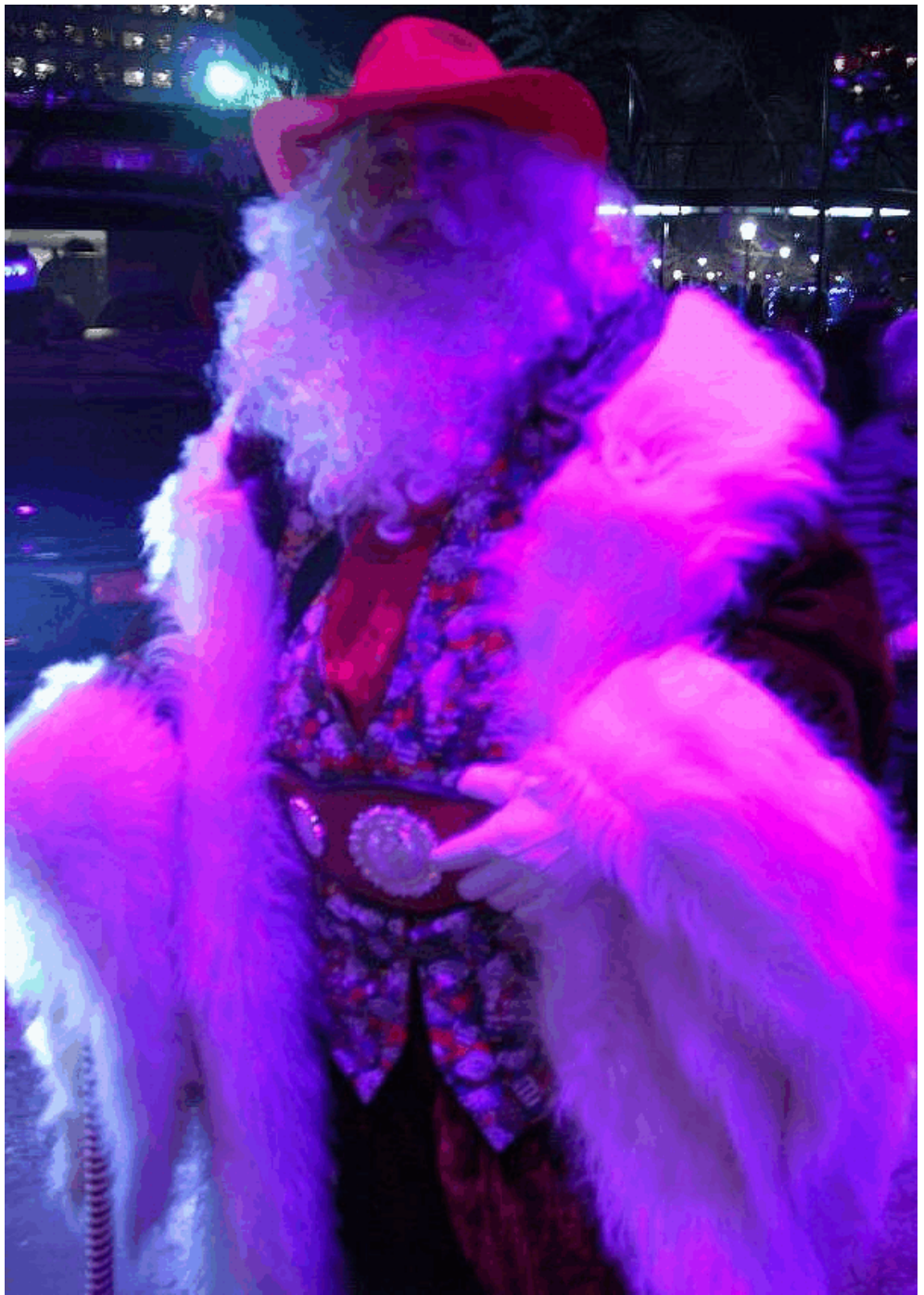




I was going to shout out something about his spelling, but I didn't think the DJ could hear me.



Cowboy Santa, having done his part last week, came down to party hearty.



For the selfie generation there were the traditional sign boards, as well as an ice sculpture.



And the main reason we all came down to the plaza.



NONE SO QUEER AS FOLK

by Dale Speirs

I don't read only Nero Wolfe stories and Sherlock Holmes pastiches in the mystery genre. Herewith are a few items that deserve renewed attention. These are two short-story collections whose titles would be impossible now. "Queer" once meant strange or unusual, but since the 1980s has been so widely used for male homosexuals as to be untenable now for its original meaning.

THE CLUB OF QUEER TRADES (1905) by G.K. Chesterton is a collection of short stories about a British club whose members are required to have invented an unusual trade. The organization is run by Basil Grant, a judge who snapped on the bench one day and retired for, as they politely say, medical reasons. His brother Rupert is a private investigator, and the stories are narrated by Charles Swinburne, a poor man's version of Dr. Watson or Archie Goodwin.

"The Tremendous Adventures Of Major Brown" is about a man beset by strange happenings. People he doesn't know talk to him in code, and in a house yard where he has never been before the phrase "Death to Major Brown" is spelled out in flowers. It all turns out to be one of the purveyors of queer trades, a man who specializes in putting people into real-life action and adventures, for a fee of course. The problem was that the Adventure and Romance Agency, hired by a man named Brown to make his life more exciting, inadvertently acted on the wrong Brown.

"The Painful Fall Of A Great Reputation" introduces the Organizer of Repartee. A young man in society wishes to be known as a great wit but couldn't ad-lib a belch after a Hungarian meal, so he hires the Organizer who will act as his foil. The Organizer supplies a script of witty remarks, and then goes along to the parties as a target for those remarks, disguised as a pompous old fool. When the Grant brothers find him out and intercept him from a dinner, the young man is suddenly stricken silent, unable to be witty without a script.

"The Awful Reason Of The Vicar's Visit" is a piece of misdirection that begins when Swinburne is dressing for a dinner out at a lady's house, at which he will also see Basil Grant and a mutual friend Capt. Fraser. The doorbell rings and a vicar is ushered in who has an urgent errand. He tells an extended story about his evening so far, and each time Swinburne becomes impatient to leave for the dinner party, the vicar's story becomes more and more fantastical, yet evolving in logical fashion. As the vicar reaches the point where he is kidnapped by a

gang of hoodlums who want him to dress as an old woman, Swinburne realizes he has missed his engagement, much like the Wedding Guest was detained by the Ancient Mariner's story. He takes the vicar over to Grant's place, where he finds Grant likewise missed the party. It turns out that Capt. Fraser had hired the two Professional Detainers, as he wanted an evening alone with the lady, towards whom he had romantic feelings. As Grant remarked, it would have been cheaper to just to drop a hint to the men. The Professional Detainers get five guineas each for performing as vicars, a promotion from doing colonels, who are only worth four guineas to impersonate.

"The Singular Speculation Of The House Agent" has the Grants following a peripatetic man who never seems to sleep in the same place twice. After a street brawl, he gives a police constable an address of "The Elms, Buxton Common, Purley, Surrey". In the follow-up investigation, there is no such house, but in the following follow-up investigation, the Brants determine that the man actually does live in the elms, not a house but the actual trees in the common. He enjoys the treehouse life, high up above maddening crowd. As for the queer trade, it is the agent who found the place for the man. The agent specializes only in treetop houses, which does limit his market considerably.

"The Noticeable Conduct Of Professor Chadd" develops from an argument between the Professor and Basil Grant about how children acquire language, whether instinctively or consciously learned from adults by observation. Chadd later disrupts his family life by dancing about the house and refusing to speak. When Basil is called back in, he guesses correctly that the dancing is actually a physically-expressed language thought up by Chadd. He studies Chadd and the two begin dancing as a duo, communicating with each other by leg and feet movements. Chadd refuses to change his behaviour until other people also learn his dancing language.

The final story is "The Eccentric Seclusion Of The Old Lady". Rupert and Swinburne are out for an evening stroll returning home from the pubs when they see an elderly woman looking out from a darkened basement window. They apprehend that she is being held captive, and drag in Basil in the attempt to free her. It turns out that she is in voluntary detention because she felt guilty about breaking off an engagement in a nasty way years ago. At this point, we learn what Basil's queer trade is; he runs a Voluntary Criminal Court for those ridden by their guilt.

This collection of stories is an interesting look at how fiction has changed over the century since it was first published. The writing, while not florid, does tend to take the scenic route before the plots are engaged. The stories reflect an era long before even our grandparents' time, and are a time capsule of the transition between the Victorian and Edwardian eras.

DEPARTMENT OF QUEER COMPLAINTS is a 1940 collection of stories by Carter Dickson, a pseudonym of John Dickson Carr. Most of the stories are about D-3, a department of New Scotland Yard which handles oddball complaints from the general public. Colonel Marsh is the commanding officer, assisted by Inspector Roberts.

The first story is "The New Invisible Man", which brings a citizen to D-3 about a murder he witnessed but which no one else believes happened. Horace Rodman is a stuffy accountant whose hobby is spying on his neighbours in an apartment building across the street. He observes a man shot in a bare room with no hiding place, the assailant being invisible but for the gloves worn and the handgun it held. A constable on patrol heard the shot, and arrives just as Rodman runs out on the street to find a policeman (this was back when few Brits had telephones in their homes). They proceed to the apartment, disturb the couple living there, and find nothing. Everyone winds up in Col. Marsh's office where the explanation is conveniently laid out with information previously withheld from the reader. It was all done with mirrors, you see, as the tenants wanted to get back at Rodman for constantly violating their privacy. They were on the stage and used a magician's trick to delude Rodman. A cheat as far as letting the reader guess the culprit, however fancy the explanation is.

"The Footprint In The Sky" is one of those annoying stories where the protagonist wakes up with no memory of recent events and slowly reconstructs what happened. This cliché involves a young woman who is a sleepwalker and is accused of a murder. It snowed during the night, there are no tracks in the yard, but there are footprints along the top of a hedge that no one could possibly have walked on. The real killer used the woman's slippers but got a little too silly. He will hang. I skimmed through parts of this story because there was too much angst on the part of the woman. Even 75 years ago this type of plot was over-done.

"The Crime In Nobody's Room" involves a young man coming home to his apartment while under the influence of much partying and hilarity. So much so, that Ronald Denham wanders into the wrong apartment, and finds a dead man

slumped in a chair. Denham is conked on the back of the head and is later found in a hallway, unable to remember which apartment he had been in. You know how it is with such buildings; the individual units all look alike. The dead man did some traveling as well, the corpse having been found in the elevator. D-3 are called in because they are used to working with such strange cases. The solution, that of the murderer doing a quick re-decoration job on the apartment, was ingenious and within expectations. However, the reader is once again jarred by facts that were not stated until the denouement, that the murderer was colour blind and could not see blood on the floor. The colour blindness is heavily emphasized in Colonel Marsh's lengthy lecture at the end.

"Hot Money" details the after-effects of a bloody bank raid that left two clerks dead. Police locate the ringleader in a manor house, and have proof that the loot was in one particular room. They can't find it though, despite a meticulous search, so Col. Marsh is called in from D-3. He quickly pinpoints the one thing the police never thought to search, the steam radiator. The conclusion is rather abrupt and hurried, but the beginning of the story, how the bank raid was carried out, is chilling and brisk.

"Death In The Dressing Room" starts off with a nightclub murder, mixed in with a pickpocket ring. The ring has a subtle variation in wallet lifting. They only take some of the money in a wallet, smuggle it back into the victim's pocket, and he assumes he must have spent the missing money some place, so doesn't raise the alarm. The pickpockets unfortunately become involved in the murder much to their horror. A neat little trick of impersonation is uncovered when a fake dancer finishes her routine a few seconds too soon, ahead of the orchestra. Col. Marsh notices such things.

"The Silver Curtain" is about Jerry Winton, a foolish young man who loses big money at a casino. In desperation, he becomes mixed up with an underworld figure who is subsequently murdered, with Winton the suspect. The plan was overly elaborate and difficult to believe. Pearl smugglers, who put them into medicine bottles and then shipped them as pills. A murderer who drops a knife from a rooftop onto his victim in a rainstorm, trusting that witnesses can't see the knife falling in the rain.

"Error At Daybreak" is about a man who fakes his death on a seashore where witnesses saw him supposedly die despite no one anywhere within target range of him. Plenty of clues but no real evidence to capture a killer. The deceased was a financier in London whose companies were about to go smash. Col.

Marsh takes in the man’s niece and has her charged with the murder in order to flush out an answer. That answer is that the supposed victim comes out to face the music.

The collection then veers away from the Department of Queer Complaints into unrelated short stories added to fill out the book.

“The Other Hangman” is set in Pennsylvania back when and is the account of a man being hanged for murder. Nothing at all to do with D-3 and Col. Marsh. A guilty man is going to swing but a last-minute reprieve comes through. The hangman gets word that the reprieve is coming and hustles to finish the job before the papers can be served. Justice and the courts are not the same thing, and the hangman wants justice to be done. A clever plot.

“New Murders For Old” is about an hotel owner and his jealous brother. One wants to murder the other on a cruise ship and substitute a doppelganger. The idea fails when the doppelganger botches it up. No actual murders, just suicides one after the other as the guilty ones are found out.

“Persons Or Things Unknown” is a manor house ghost story about vengeance dating back to the English Civil War, men dancing on Cromwell’s grave, and all that sort of thing, told by a genial host to his Christmas guests. Everyone tries to solve how the ancient murder in the manor house was done, when a man was hacked to death in a locked room but no sign of the weapon. The culprit escapes because no one can prove how it was done, but years later gets his the same way when his avenger learns that a glass knife is invisible in a transparent jug of water. A neat little twist.

The final story is “Blind Man’s Hood” is another manor house ghost story, about a love triangle of the 1870s that turns deadly when one woman dies a horrible accidental death that everyone else thinks was murder. The story is told by the ghost about how an innocent man was condemned for her death. He was the third point of the triangle and should have done something to save her but didn’t. Murder can be done without touching the victim.

The story collection as a whole hasn’t withstood the test of time, although a few items in it are still quite readable.

THEY SHALL MOVE OUT OF THEIR HOLES LIKE WORMS OF THE EARTH: PART 3

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 and 2 appeared in OPUNTIA #307 and 308.]

Underground Wars.

Many wars in history had sappers digging tunnels towards enemy lines, but the technology didn’t come into full bloom until World War One, when machine guns and concertina wire forced millions of troops on both sides into the trenches and tunnels. World War Two was the opposite as the Germans learned to go around obstacles instead of fighting through them. Mobility has ruled ever since.

During the Cold War, the idea of underground wars became a popular trope among SF writers, the premise being that a full-scale global thermonuclear war would force the survivors underground to escape the radioactive surface. There are countless such stories. It must be remembered that in the 1950s the threat of atomic war was very real to the general public and seemed imminent. The stories of underground war therefore had more immediacy than they do today.

“The Last Objective” by Paul Carter was an early entrant, originally published as a short story in the 1946 August issue of ASTOUNDING. I haven’t read that one but I did listen to the adaptation of it for a 1951 episode of the old-time radio show DIMENSION X. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org.)

Whatever the merits of the original story may have been, the radio adaptation comes across exactly as one of those WW2 submarine movies. It is about a crew of a military drilling machine who are slowly cracking up under the psychological stress of constant battle action. The fighting is deep underground and done by drilling into enemy tunnels, engaging them with infantry in the shafts and drifts. Matters are worsened by suspicions of the crew that one of their members is a cyborg, which they despise. The machine is run in naval style, with orders given and responded to as if it were a ship at sea. “*Helmsman, drill elevation up 5 degrees*” “*Aye aye sir, elevating 5 degrees*”.

A listener tuning in late to the episode, and missing the premise that it was an underground war between drilling machines, could be forgiven for thinking that

it was a run-silent-run-deep epic. The story attempts to be a psychological study but only succeeded in putting me to sleep as I listened to it. I don't exaggerate; I nodded off for about ten minutes after an endless sequence of officers shouting orders and crewmen replying. I woke up in time for the unstartling conclusion when the cyborg's identity was revealed.

Philip K. Dick's "The Defenders" (1953 January, GALAXY, later an X MINUS ONE episode aired 1956-05-22) has civilization living underground after atomic warfare but the Soviets and Western Allies fighting on the surface with robots. The radio show changed the enemy to Asia for no good reason and as is inevitable in broadcast and movie adaptations, added in a romance.

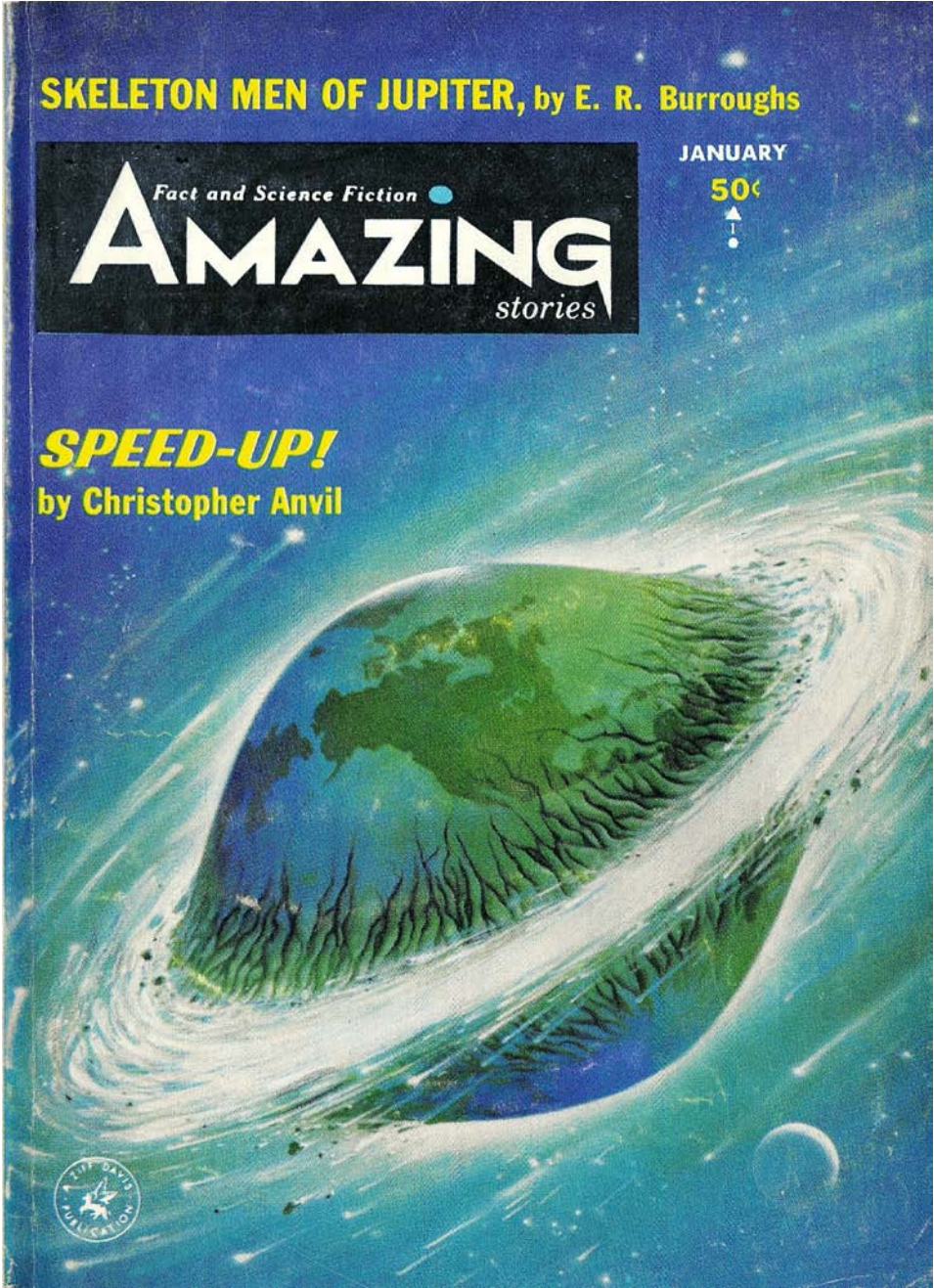
The same idea appears in "Hello Tomorrow", an original radio play by George Lefferts first aired on DIMENSION X on 1955-11-03. It is the year 4195, and civilization has spent two millennia underground hiding from the radiation of World War Three. Humans have to mate according to genetic purity tests, and those who fail are outcasts. A young couple in love find their way to the surface and discover that it is now livable. The plot could be seen coming about ten minutes before it got there.

"Tunnel Warrior" by Joseph P. Martino (1966 October, WORLDS OF IF) postulates a World War Three where the Soviets and Americans have an unspoken agreement to leave each other's country intact but fight the war in Europe. The war began when a border incident between East and West Germany escalated to tactical nukes, as a result of which the land is radioactive rubble constantly churned by nukes. The underground war has stagnated like WW1. The story follows a company Sergeant as he slogs through the futile actions, hoping to live long enough to be rotated back home. There is no resolution at the ending; the Sergeant will go back to the tunnels. Basically like one of those gloomy WW1 stage plays where everybody dies.

Because We Can.

In OPUNTIA #69.1C, I reviewed the movie THE CORE, in which the brave crew of an underground probe drilled deep into Earth's core, the probe firing a laser beam ahead of it to melt the rock and make the way easy. They then detonated some nukes to re-start the core spinning and thereby save the planet from death without a magnetic field.

"Speed Up!" by Christopher Anvil (1964 January, AMAZING) is a remarkable predecessor to that movie, where an automated rocket is being fired into Earth's core, using a laser to melt the way ahead. It has a nuclear warhead because its makers want to see what will happen if one explodes in the core. The thing is being done because they can.



Simultaneously, a different research team is scrambling to launch two spaceships filled with colonists because those scientists have a good idea of what will, and does, happen. The detonation at the core tears the planet apart and turns Earth into a new asteroid belt. The survivors head out into space to begin anew.

Vermis.

Life underground seems to breed many monsters. Not for nothing is “worm” considered to be a derogatory word. “The Worm” by David H. Keller (1929 March, AMAZING) is about John Staples, the sole remaining inhabitant of a Vermont valley. Once it was prosperous, including his ancestors who worked a grist mill built on bedrock two centuries ago. The mill has been silent for decades.

Staples hears a grinding noise one night, which over the next few days gets closer and eventually results in a bottomless hole forming in the floor of the grist mill. A giant worm comes out and explores, looking for something. It has no teeth but does have grinding plates around its mouth to slowly cut through the bedrock. For the last two centuries, it has been drilling its way up to the surface to find the source of the grinding noise, which it thinks is a possible mate. But the noise went silent and it can’t find what it is looking for.

Staples doesn’t understand and fights back unsuccessfully. He tries to drown it by diverting the mill race into the hole, but the water drains away and doesn’t fill the hole. He tries red-hot metal, but the worm spits it back up. Finally it is too late; the worm catches him while it is searching the mill. Not a bad story for its age, copyrighted 1927. The worm isn’t evil because monsters are evil; it is just trying to discover where its potential mate had gone.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Ward, L.M., et al (2016) **Timescales of oxygenation following the evolution of oxygenic photosynthesis.** ORIGIN OF LIFE AND EVOLUTION OF BIOSPHERES 46:51–65

Authors’ abstract: “*Among the most important bioenergetic innovations in the history of life was the invention of oxygenic photosynthesis, autotrophic growth*

by splitting water with sunlight, by Cyanobacteria [blue-green algae]. It is widely accepted that the invention of oxygenic photosynthesis ultimately resulted in the rise of oxygen by ca. 2.35 Gya, [billion years ago] but it is debated whether this occurred more or less immediately as a proximal result of the evolution of oxygenic Cyanobacteria or whether they originated several hundred million to more than one billion years earlier in Earth history. The latter hypothesis involves a prolonged period during which oxygen production rates were insufficient to oxidize the atmosphere, potentially due to redox buffering by reduced species such as higher concentrations of ferrous iron in seawater. To examine the characteristic timescales for environmental oxygenation following the evolution of oxygenic photosynthesis, we applied a simple mathematical approach that captures many of the salient features of the major biogeochemical fluxes and reservoirs present in Archean and early Paleoproterozoic surface environments. Calculations illustrate that oxygenation would have overwhelmed redox buffers within ~100 kyr following the emergence of oxygenic photosynthesis, a geologically short amount of time unless rates of primary production were far lower than commonly expected. Fundamentally, this result arises because of the multiscale nature of the carbon and oxygen cycles: rates of gross primary production are orders of magnitude too fast for oxygen to be masked by Earth’s geological buffers, and can only be effectively matched by respiration at non-negligible O₂ concentrations. These results suggest that oxygenic photosynthesis arose shortly before the rise of oxygen, not hundreds of millions of years before it.”

Speirs: We know from fossil microbes that once photosynthesis evolved among cyanobacteria (known as blue-green algae but technically not algae) Earth’s atmosphere changed dramatically from a methane-ammonia atmosphere to the oxygen-carbon dioxide atmosphere we have today. The question is how long did the process take? The original thinking was that it was a long slow process of hundreds of megayears before the photosynthesizers overwhelmed their anaerobic competitors. This paper indicates that the process took place in about 100,000 years, a blink of the eye in geological times. The initial oxygen release was quickly removed by chemical reactions in the atmosphere and the soil, known as redox buffers, which locked up the oxygen as iron oxide or other types of reactions. However, the photosynthesizers had such a tremendous rate of oxygen production that it was faster than the rate at which it was sequestered. In less than 100,000 years, Earth’s atmosphere was converted to oxygen, wiping out anaerobic life. Today anaerobes can only survive in a few specialized environments away from any oxygen.