

SCIENCE FICTION NEWS

No. 99
June 1986

ISSN 0156-6342

SIXTY YEARS OF AMAZING STORIES (continued)



Gernsback reprinted his own Baron Munchausen's Scientific Adventures, from 1915, in six parts commencing February. A radio ham named I. M. Alier (sic) tunes in on the good Baron on Mars and hears of innumerable inventions and marvels. Mars is naturally strictly from Lowell. A typical exploit in the series is falling into a Moon crater which proves to be a bottomless pit right through to the far side. The same idea treated seriously (quite a feat when you think of it) appeared in D. D. Sharp's Captive of the Crater in 1933.

Also in February The Disintegrating Ray by David M. Speaker introduced not only the proposed weapon but total mass-energy conversion and transmutation at will. Fortunately the device and its inventor were removed from the scene by experimental error.

A heart transplant was proposed in The Fighting Heart by W. Alexander. It was treated in rather primitive style, represented as changing the personality of the recipient: something like the hand transplant in the old shocker The Hands of Orlac which had its first English translation the following year. It all turned out to be a hoax, another common ending.

March featured Lakh-Dal, Destroyer of Souls by W. F. Hammond, a terrible piece of claptrap about an evil Oriental mastermind plotting against Western civilisation (yes, just like him, and him) a theme that has now happily gone out of style but been supplanted by others just as tasteless. All the 19th Century yellow peril paranoia appeared, bringing in everything from dope to bubonic plague. This seems to have been a move to attract Weird Tales readers, that magazine having a weakness for Oriental villains, especially as it was given the cover.

Ten Million Miles Sunward by Geoffrey Hewelcke had a scheme to change the earth's orbit by transferring water from the Black Sea to the Caspian (readers were invited to spot the fallacy, no great feat) with the

laudable aim of dodging a comet that was due to connect otherwise. It is represented as an incandescent body as massive as Earth, but who's perfect?

The Yeast Men by David H. Keller in April proposed a novel weapon in a satire on traditional warfare and militarism. Mobile yeast masses crept forward into the enemy's territory, eventually decaying into a foul-smelling mess disabling those nearby through nausea. A trick that might work once by surprise...why wouldn't the enemy just turn them around? Shush, you're not supposed to ask that.

The Miracle of the Lily by Clare Winger Harris was a disorganised affair, the title referring to a future revival of plant life in a barren world. But the main point related to contact by radio with the people of Venus. The Venerjans are beleaguered by what is understood to be an insect plague: but when a television link is made to work it shows that they are large beetle-like creatures and the pests midget anthropoids.

A Biological Experiment by Keller in June was set a thousand years hence, when radio and television have replaced books and writing is suppressed -- yet the bureaucracy still makes people fill in forms! Ectogenesis is universal, but a pair of dropouts decide to go back to nature, live in a cave and reproduce by re-discovered historic technique.

Microbes that nosh on iron were another idea that appeared around this time. Probably the earliest example is The Great Steel Panic by Irvin Lester and Fletcher Pratt in September. No sweat, they can be zapped with a moderate electric current.

To the Moon by Proxy by J. Schlossel in October had a robot remotely operated by a paraplegic inventor, a concept echoed many times later. One oddity of design is that the robot's head -- oh, it's person-shaped of course, robots then generally being conceived as Mechanical Men -- is "covered with a thick thatch of fine wire in lieu of hair." After some preliminary

trials on the ground, clobbering an armed robber and as escaped lion (far-fetched, but it made a great cover scene) it goes to the Moon, only to be bopped on the wire-topped head by unimpressed Lunarians.

The Voyage to Kemptonia by E. M. Scott in October provides a remarkable contrast to the interstellar jauntings of The Skylark of Space, concluding in the same issue. It deals with a hitherto unrecorded small satellite of Earth, having a surface of some 25,000 acres (that's 37.5 square miles: diameter 3.45 miles). in orbit "about thirty miles distant from our globe." A conspicuous object. "This little follower of our Earth travels through space at the rate of about three miles a minute, requiring approximately six twenty-four-hour days to complete its orbit." That would be about right, except that that velocity is a bit less than orbital, and at thirty miles there's a phenomenon known as air which would create some problems.

The Ananias Gland by W. Alexander in November was blurred as "an excursion into lighter psychology" which "holds up the average human being in a most surprising light." The supposed procedure is nonsense, but after all in 1928 psychology was a lot further from being on a sound footing than even its current doubtful status. Quite a good story of a compulsive liar, cured of the fault by surgery but then going to the other extreme and ruining his marriage and his stock-broking business, and resorting to another operation to make him able to lie again and therefore survive in a civilised community. "You will be reasonably truthful, but with discretion" he is told: "The man who will not lie a bit to save the feelings of another is no gentleman."

Remember the cold of space? How about this neat piece of engineering from The Moon Men by Frank Bruekel in November? "Between the inner and outer shell" of the antigravity powered moon-ship "is a vacuum space to keep the inside temperature normal and to keep out the intense cold of interplanetary space." It does not seem meant as a joke.

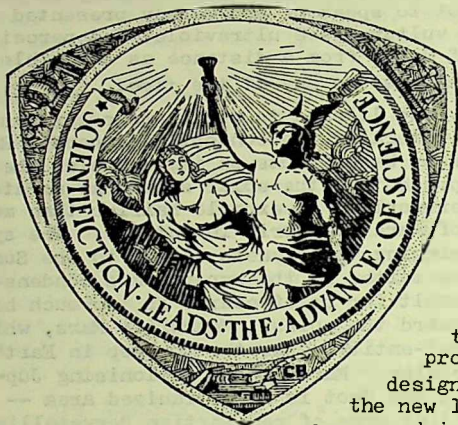
The Eye of the Vulture by Walter Kateley in November had no plot to speak of and merely presented the suggestion that vultures see ultraviolet and perceive the effluvia of decay from a distance as a visible sign. As good a guess as any at the time.

Atoms were once likened to miniature solar systems, and taken literally the concept died hard. Ray Cummings and others based plots on it, and also the inversion of representing the solar system as an atom in a higher order world. An example hairier than most was The Menace of Mars by Harris in October. The system contracts, bringing the planets closer to the Sun -- due to gaseous matter in the hypercosmos condensing. But the result for us of course is too much heat and a retreat toward the poles. Meanwhile Mars, which is a single planet-entity, operates to keep in Earth's shadow to keep cooler. Mars is also colonising Jupiter -- the Great Red Spot is a Martianised area -- and next a spreading area of red Martian "crystalline protoplasm" appears on Earth...

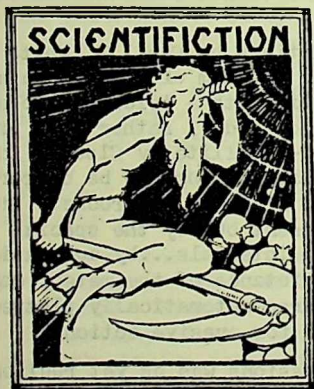
An incidental thought from this story: Life is "merely a disease of old material after its radiant energy is spent...a sort of fungus that infests matter in its old age."

The Return of the Martians by Cecil B. White in April had an answer to the problem of meteors in space. A lookout surveying the void with a telescope to spot large ones so they can be dodged. A rather more practical suggestion was in Sub-Satellite by Cloukey in March: "When any meteor large enough to be dangerous came within fifty thousand miles of the rocket, it reflected the radio signal sent out by the special transmitter at five second intervals...by automatic calculating machines the distance of the meteor could be ascertained and its course automatically plotted on the celestial chart..." for evasive action.

The feedback in Discussions was as yet rudimentary, but useful letters were appearing. Names such as A. L. Glasser, P. Schuyler Miller, Jack Darrow, Ray Palmer.



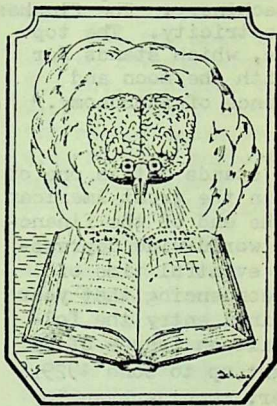
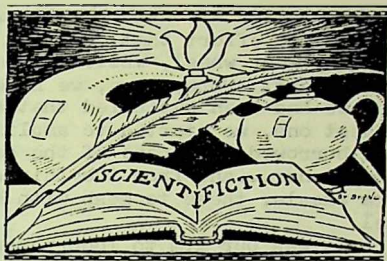
The prize contest for an appropriate symbolic design representing the new literature was announced in the April editorial, and Paul provided a cover painting showing intelligence represented by the human eye and images of evolution, science and progress.



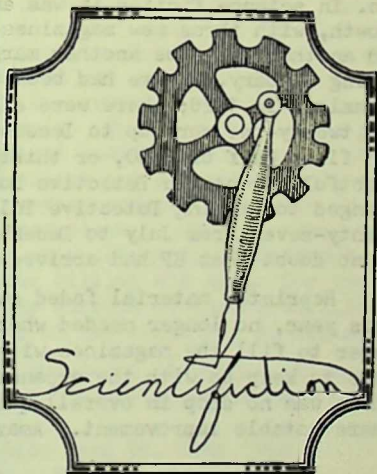
Could readers do better? They were invited to send in their suggestions. "The prize-winning design must be self-explanatory and must be descriptive of Scientifical." September gave two pages of selections from the 965 entries received -- the offer of a hundred dollars as first prize, a good offer in 1928 money, was attractive but clearly it was

an exciting challenge to a lot of people eagerly following the magazine -- to express their own discovery of the basic idea in something to be taken in at a glance.

And of course it couldn't really



featured for some time thereafter. The winning design of a gear and pen by A. A. Kaufman (it would be gratifying to say he figured more than this in the history of SF, but alas, he didn't) was as Gernsback remarked



"a crude design at best, but it was the idea and not the artistic effort that counted. Science is represented by the gear wheel, while the pen represents the fiction part. Here, then, we have Fact and Theory. After we had been satisfied that Mr. Kaufman's idea was the best one, we started to amplify his original idea. ...we borrowed the shape of the design of the second prize winner...and from the third...we borrowed two extra wheels, these to mesh with Mr. Kaufman's single wheel.

"It was our aim to incorporate as much science as possible...so the frame of the design, representing structural steel, suggests more machinery. The flashes in the central wheel represent Electricity. The top of the fountain pen is a test tube, which stands for Chemistry; while the background with the moon and stars and planet gives us the science of Astronomy."

1929

In hindsight the year 1929 stands out as one of the great times of transition, when the great American stock market collapse signalled the end of the financial fools' paradise and the great world-wide depression. In science fiction it was an eventful time of growth, with three new magazines commencing that year and another one plus another marginal entry the following January. There had been sixteen issues of SF magazines in 1928; there were eight up to June 1929, and twenty-one more up to December; twenty-seven in the first half of 1930, or thirty-three counting the doubtful Scientific Detective Monthly which soon changed to Amazing Detective Tales; twenty-two or twenty-seven from July to December 1930. There could be no doubt that SF had arrived.

Reprinted material faded away almost completely this year, no longer needed when there was a group eager to fill the magazines with new work. They were able to keep up with the expansion of the market and there was no drop in overall quality. Yet neither was there notable improvement. Amazing did not seem to

change much through the year except in the art work, although by the end of 1930 there would be a distinct flavor compared to the competition.

The January cover showed Manhattan's skyscrapers collapsing under the ice of The Sixth Glacier by Marius, telling of the rapid onset of a new ice age and the desperate adjustments of the world order under the pressure of the cold.

Cauphul, the City under the Sea by George Cookman Watson -- another one never heard from again -- has Atlantis in full plumage, with everything from the Mayan Alphabet to extradimensional travel to other planets.

But the most interesting item in the issue to the modern investigator is The War of the Planets by Harl Vincent, a sequel to his first publication, The Golden Girl of Munan, in the previous June. The plot with its rather senseless aggression by denizens of Venus with Martian support foreshadowed for a planned but unwritten sequel is no great shakes, but there is a wealth of innovation.

In the 25th Century television has been developed as the videophone for personal communication. Broadcasting is restricted to news. This was the direction usually predicted for its growth in the 20's. Radio broadcasting was after all new and scarcely significant as entertainment. One wrinkle here is a scrambler system to preserve privacy. Aviation has led to private aëros for the general public -- no mention of a traffic problem -- and cities are generally enclosed with continuous construction and roofed moving footways, the standard future scene. When it comes to space flight, power is no problem: space is chock-full of "stray electrons filling all space for thousands of miles around the surface of the earth...lost from the energy systems of the world for centuries..."

There is an early treatment of warfare in space, using energy weapons but also intercepting and board-

Sixty Years of Amazing Stories

ing. Weapons include hand disintegrators, already becoming a stock element; also a large so-called Atomic Storm device used against a city. Not what you'd call constructive, but future warfare has been a major concern in SF and here we see early versions of some common ideas.

Two notable stories were in the February issue. The Death of the Moon introduced Alexander M. Phillips, who wrote occasionally and unevenly. Here a reconnaissance party from Luna, near death from exhaustion of resources, lands on Earth in the Cretaceous era and is disposed of by a Tyrannosaurus. A mood piece begging many questions, yet an enduring story that still reads well. And it provided a great cover scene.

The Last Man was Wallace West's first appearance in Amazing, and his next was a reprint of this story in April 1966! He was yet another who had begun in Weird Tales, and he wrote sporadically for other SF magazines over forty years. This ~~is~~ a classic on the theme of the throwback type appearing in an advanced, dehumanised future: here a lone man in a world of women who meets a throwback female misfit and you can guess what.

March featured The Airlords of Han by Philip Francis Nowlan, his second story and his last of any consequence. Continuing the 25th Century life of the revived 20th Century man Anthony Rogers (whose idea was it to call him Buck?), this shows the life of the decadent Han cities with considerable insight.

In the same issue Keller's The Worm, devoid of his usual jaundiced exposure of human follies, is an anecdote, story is too strong a word, about a ginormous worm-thing chewing through the rocks below and breaking through to the surface. Symbolism fanciers should find it a rare treat, but curiously it doesn't seem to have had any attention.

The Face of Isis by Cyril G. Wates had an ancient formula for a Cavorite-like gravity shield based on a unique mineral find. An attempt to make it fails due

to mistranslation, and using an acid where an alkali was called for.

The April issue was a particularly weak one with no story of much interest. It was notable however as the last produced under Gernsback's control. In February he had found himself forced into bankruptcy and lost his chain of magazines -- Radio News, Science and Invention and others -- and book publishing business. It was easy to raise funds to start all over again, it was still a time of illusory prosperity with no warning of what was to come and his name was good for credit. It was to give science fiction a tremendous lift, for his new Science Wonder Stories, Air Wonder Stories, Science Wonder Quarterly and Scientific Detective Monthly not only more than doubled the field but without doubt prompted the Clayton group to start their Astounding Stories of Super Science in 1930. If there had been any danger of the idea failing with its one and a quarter magazines in the depression to come, now it was certain to survive.

But Amazing now passed into other hands, though its editorial staff remained with it. Someone called Arthur Lynch was listed as Editor briefly, but Sloane and Bourne assisted by Whitehead and Brandt got the magazine out as before. Sloane's first editorial in May said little more than that Amazing would continue as before, although he could not resist remarking: "The change in editorial management, which this magazine has recently experienced, will result in a great improvement." How this was to be remained vague. Briefly reviewing the progress to date: "It is a completely new idea, and in the business world new ideas are recognised as very dangerous. Amazing Stories, however, won success from the start...The basic idea of the magazine was the publication of fiction, founded on, or embodying always some touch of natural science." A clear enough statement for anyone tiresome enough to insist on a definition. "The first issue...contained nothing but reprints of the best scientific fiction of the past. More and more authors have been attracted by Amazing Stories as

Sixty Years of Amazing Stories

a vehicle for their work, and now we have become virtually a magazine of new stories...We are now receiving so large a number of excellent stories...that we can be more and more discriminating in our choice." Discussions would continue as an important feature, "Write us your opinions and give us constructive criticism by which we may be guided."

Yet the next eight months at least give a definite impression of the available material being spread too thinly through the several outlets, with not much that really stood out, and it is not hard to see part of the reason for it. Jack Williamson has recorded that he sold *The Girl from Mars* and *The Alien Intelligence* to Gernsback for *Amazing*, and he took the manuscripts with him for his new publishing group. He must have taken his obsice of the best of the inventory.

Up to July most of the content had been ready for use as shown by the Paul art work; several illustrators of generally slight merit appeared next, soon reduced to Hans Waldemar Wessolowski, signed Wesso, who wasn't bad (and also did most of the art for the new *Astounding Stories*) and Leo Morey, who certainly wasn't good.

(To be continued)

SCIENCE FICTION NEWS
No. 99, June 1986

ISSN 0156-6342

Issued irregularly for members of the
Australian Science Fiction Association

GPO Box 4440, Sydney 2001
Annual subscription \$5.00

Graham Stone, Secretary