

THIS-'N'-THAT

It has been almost two years since the last Commentator appeared. During this time many subscribers wrote us, asking what had happened, and whether the magazine were being abandoned. Some of these communications were acknowledged; many others were not. To those who wrote, and also to those who didn't, an explanation of sorts is surely due.

Editing and publishing a magazine, like all hobbies, is done during one's leisure time. When vocational duties curtail this leisure, or when it is used instead for hobbies that seem more rewarding, comparatively large-scale projects like Commentator are bound to suffer. And that, in a nutshell, is the story.

Fantasy Commentator is not being abandoned---it is too interesting (to its editor at least) to be given up. It will be issued more infrequently, however: perhaps a couple of numbers a year instead of the former four. Brought out in this fashion, with no hard-and-fast deadlines to be adhered to faithfully, it should continue as long as its subscribers like it well enough to buy it.

The unfortunate hiatus just past has messed up this number rather badly. It was planned in the summer of 1950, and about two-thirds stencilled in December of that year. Not until December, 1951, however, was it completed. The book reviews, once topical, are no longer so. (To atone for this, we shall try to include a couple of new ones in F.C. #26.) To squeeze in the letter column it was necessary to omit an installment of "The Immortal Storm"; Sam can't complain however, as his Weinbaum article takes up so much space! Anyway, part eighteen, the ms. for which is on hand, will certainly be in the next number too. Whether we shall catch up on two years' of fantasy book publishing is another matter; in any event, there follows a selection of recent titles in the genre below.

The only other point to mention is the price of Commentator. Subscribers are now being asked 25¢ a copy instead of the former 20¢. Like everything else in sight, the material of the magazine---stencils, ink, paper and the like---has gone up in price. We'd be willing to absorb this alone, but the new hike in mailing rates coming on top of everything made the increase really necessary.

- Acton, Harold: Prince Isadore (Methuen, 10/6). Evil eye.
- Archibald, Wm.: The Innocents (Coward-McCann, \$2½). Play based on "The Turn of the Screw"; intr. by Clifton Fadiman and drawings by the author.
- Asimov, Isaac: Pebble in the Sky (Doubleday, \$2½). A better done s-f novel. Reprinted at \$1 by same firm now.
- Balint, Imre: Don't Inhale It! (Gaer, \$2¾). 1965, and testing a super hydrogen bomb. Not so hot.
- Bayer, Wm. Gray: Minions of the Moon (Gnome, \$2½). First book appearance of an amusing Argosy serial. Entertaining.
- Bleiler, E. & Dikty, T., eds: The Best Science Fiction Stories---1950 (Fell, \$2.95). Believe us, the best is none too good. 13 entries are included.
- Bond, Nelson: Lancelot Biggs: Spaceman (Doubleday, \$2½). Ingratiating.
- Bradbury, Ray: The Martian Chronicles (Doubleday, \$2½). Successive visitors to the red planet, A.D. 1999-2026. A heartily recommended title.
- Brennan, Frederick H.: Irish Lullaby (Rinehart, \$2). Modern miracles, too slick and technicolored for comfort.
- Clement, Hal: Needle (Doubleday, \$2½). Excellent, if mild, detective fantasy. Now available (same firm) as a \$1 rpt.
- Coates, John: Here Today (Macmillan, \$2¾). A rather tame account of mental time-travelling. (Methuen, 10/6 too.)
- Coblentz, Stanton A.: After 12,000 Years (FPCI, \$3). A satirical view of the far future, capably written.
- Conklin, Groff, ed.: The Big Book of Science Fiction (Crown, \$3). 32 tales, but an extremely poor selection. Always low in anthologies.

---A.L.S.

SPACE OPERA

by
George O. Smith

(Editor's note: This article has been adapted from an address delivered by Mr. Smith in December, 1949 to the Eastern Science-Fiction Association.)

The subject I have chosen to discuss really has nothing to do with the fact that both Pattern for Conquest and Nomad are space operas. It's just that I happen to be a lover of space opera from way back, and that it's up my alley.

I believe the form as we know it is about as old as mankind. Some of the earliest books mentioned in historical books on science-fiction deal with adventures in space. I don't recall titles or dates offhand, but I do remember an account of early Egyptian times in which a pharaoh or one of the high priests of Ra made a trip to the moon in a gadget made by tying birds along the edge of a basket.

However, most of these earlier stories are not truly the space opera we know today. Usually they verged on the utopian novel; the writer, miffed at the way civilization was treating him, wrote of some land or place where things were run his way. These early attempts took mankind to a place where life was happier---in the eyes of the writer, of course---mostly because every race and every culture insisted that there was no other place to go. The Egyptians knew nothing of North America, for example, but they could see the stars and so they set their utopias in space.

Then with the inception of science-fiction as a literary type all its own, novels consisted either of the Terran scientist doing nothing regarding space travel, or else simply using space travel as a means to get to some planet where the writer could display his imagination.

As far as I am concerned the first space opera as we consider it today is The Skylark of Space. Here most of the action takes place while headed toward space or in space itself. Take just the first third of the novel: We have Seaton's discovery of "X," the space-drive metal, its development, and finally the construction of the Skylark. Mingled with this is romance, a couple of shady characters, and some adventures that display the potency of "X." Then the villain kidnaps Seaton's sweetheart and takes off for parts unknown.

Well, I'm certain there's no need of my recapping the synopsis of this novel, which remains one of the most popular of all time in the genre. Seaton and his friends go through any number of remarkable adventures, both in space and on various far-off planets. But none of these are utopian, nor can you call Doc Smith's opus one a travelogue.

For the science-fiction adventure tale is one thing and the travelogue is quite another. This last is a more narrative affair (possibly Weinbaum's "Martian Odyssey" is the most famous) in which nothing happens to the hero except that he goes there and sees it himself. You get the same thing from people just back from Spain, or Old Man Fitzpatric, and you feel that the whole thing should end with some chant like this: "And so we leave cold, sterile Mars, with its dead seas and a lonely Tharkian roaming along a ruined canal, and pass between Phobos and Diemos on our way back to friendly Terra---"

No, even though Skylark I visits a lot of planets and has a lot of odd happenings to recount, in no way do you get the impression of having gone somewhere just for the fun of seeing the oddities. The characters get into a jam at the first cliff hang, and extricating themselves from one scrape lands them bang into another until the end of the tale.

In Skylark Three and The Skylark of Valeron E. E. Smith went on to bigger and better adventures until he collided with the Law of Diminishing Returns. Seaton went from planet to planet, adding to his general store of knowledge. And the villain, DuQuesne, went with him, getting tougher and tougher. They hopped into another galaxy, were rotated into some sort of subspace. Seaton had built a ship that was, as I recall, some fifteen hundred kilometers in diameter. (Fifteen hundred kilometers, friends, is nine hundred thirty miles---or roughly the distance between New York and Chicago.) DuQuesne became an indestructible entity of pure mental force. No wonder the Law of Diminishing returns caught up with the good doctor.

He then wrote two novels called Spacehounds of IPC and Triplanetary, both space operas also. They too were adventures, not travelogues. If the difference between the two types still seems nebulous to you, consider this analogy: Fitzpatrick visiting the Grand Canyon via a movie technicolor short is travelogue. Hopalong Cassidy chasing rustlers through the same section of the country, using identical scenery background and technicolor, is adventure. But take the livestock---from the rustlers to the stolen cattle---out of it, and it becomes travelogue again.

Before I continue with E. E. Smith I must mention a character called Campbell. The essential differences between these two gentlemen are many. For one thing, Doc is old enough to have called John's father. At the time, he was a chemist, working out ways of making things like Post Toasties and Wheatena more palatable, while Campbell, when he started to write, was studying science at MIT. T. It has been said that neither man could depict a real, live character. But the fact is that in "the good old days" nobody gave a tinker's damn about characters. Hugo Gernsback claimed that science-fiction was one thing, and if you wanted characterization, go read a detective story or a wild west tale or Captains Courageous. He wanted Science.

So when Campbell discovered at the age of seventeen that people would pay money for science---especially when classified as fiction---he put both hands on the keys, pulled out all the stops, and let 'er blow. Not for him was the build-up. The Mightiest Machine took off from a flying start and approached infinity along a logarithmic spiral. Power was sucked out of the sun, fabulous gadgets were invented, entire planets were exploded.

John's philosophy was that nothing need be explained in dry technique. If you had a gadget, go ahead and use it. If you had a strange set of conditions on some world to talk about, put people there and concoct some sort of adventure consistent with natural limitations. It was not until he began to write as Don A. Stuart that characterization appeared, but few---if any---Stuart tales can be called space opera. But then Campbell became editor of Astounding Stories, and stopped writing entirely.

Doctor Smith, on his part, took off again with the Lensman novels. And here comes the real space opera. Now it is virtually impossible to divorce the action from a planet. This is because the human animal is an air-breather which suffers from loss of interest in life once exposed to the vacuum of space. But the general idea is that the several planets upon which these adventures occur bear the same relationship to each other as do the cities of a given country. Or the homes of the various people in a detective story. Obviously a race native to a waterless world would consider the earth a sort of liquid hell; and any race evolving on a fluid world would consider Mars as a hell likewise. So the Lensman stories deliver a space epic, one about characters from vastly different locales who live mostly in space. And here, for one of the first times in the history of space opera, came the semblance of a cohesive plot.

In an effort to explain my own feelings in the matter of plots I shall resort again to analogy. It is quite difficult to make clear the exact differentiation I have in mind. A sea story is a sea story regardless of who plays in it, just so long as the action does take place on the high seas. Moreover, some very fine sea stories have been written about sheer landlubbers who get involved with the sea. For that matter, some fine space operas have been written about planet-lovers who get involved with space travel.

Yet for the purpose of plot I prefer--mind you, prefer--to think that real space opera is best written along other lines. In earlier stories, most of the problem and conflict of plot was more or less dragged into space with the characters. In Skylark, Seaton's main problem was DuQuesne, an earthman. In the Lensman tales, our earthmen go out into space and meet real live villains there without taking them with them. This again started a trend: the justified villain.

This business of the justified villain can stand a lot of discussion, because in space opera it is possibly the hardest factor to adhere to. I believe the idea began to emerge at the turn of the century; by now the pendulum has swung so far that if you neglect fixations and complexes and say a gangster is an s.o. b. pure and simple you are decidedly unfashionable.

Not that justification is out of place. In far too many early space epics villains were strictly of the Simon Legree type. They enjoyed pulling arms and legs off human beings just because they liked to see the blood run. Precisely why the Martians attacked the earth in Wells' War of the Worlds is not at all well defined. The Fenachrome of E. E. Smith's epic were more reasonable: they wanted empire. But they were a long way from being the superbeings they claimed to be. So were the Eddorians, Boskonians, Eich, Ploorans and their ilk. For a sensible villain must have a logical reason for his action just as a sensible hero should. An everlasting battle between good and evil is not enough.

For good and evil lies in the eye of the beholder. Murder is evil. Yet when an enemy of society is murdered in the electric chair, murder is right and good. Theft is evil. But when Society subtracts about twenty percent of my income without my being able to do anything about it, this is good. Parlor stories that cause ladies to blush or giggle behind their hands are greeted with a dull stare in a gent's smoker. Yet a smoker story would get the teller tossed out of a mixed party, and a parlor story would probably not be suited for the town I last went to church back in 1927-28.

A villain should be a villain only because he happens to want something that the hero does not care to part with--not because he kicks in the clinches or drills the hero behind his back. A good, smart hero should, by all means, employ any tactics he can command in order to defeat the villain, because that's what the villain hopes to do to him.

And if we get a smart, well-justified villain, he'll be wise enough to play it close to his vest and make his life exemplary. We don't believe in any outdated Simon Legree, twirling his black mustasche and leering, "Your daughter Clarissa's fair white body or I foreclose the mortgage!" We just laugh. And if this sort of stuff is carried over into space opera, we just laugh harder.

This brings me to another point in the growth of science-fiction which is a very healthy sign. It has, incidentally, been very important to me in the last few years. This business of explanation: a rather silly, if rather interesting business. Early space operas went to great lengths to explain everything. Let's concoct a couple of paragraphs that might have appeared in any one of a dozen titles:

Rasmussen levelled a coagulator and depressed the firing button. The beam lashed out, humming in a fiercely elec-

tric buzz almost inaudible to the human ear. The Martian heard it and stood in the beam.

"Rasmussen, you fool," jeered the tall green creature, don't you realize that your ardent radiation has no effect on the brenatine in my blood? It destroys only the phrenalaphranin that flows in the human!"

Now, let's take this apart statement by statement and see what makes sense.

"Rasmussen levelled a coagulator...." That's not too bad. We have a guy aiming a new, different, mysterious type of weapon. But would a teller of Westerns say "Rasmussen extracted a Smith & Wesson .44 from his holster and then pointed it"? Nope. It would go "Rasmussen drew and fired in a single motion." The Western writer is depicting action and not the flanged-up stuff of science-fiction where the framework is more important---by which I mean that the important thing is what Rasmussen used to fire, and of lesser importance is the fact that he did fire. In the example above a fairly good medium between description and action has been hit, however.

"...and depressed the firing button." Again it is obvious the weapon is new and different. But why a button instead of a trigger, which is the end-result of decades of engineering investigation? If buttons were better than triggers the crummiest guns would have 'em. And I'll top that: The firing mechanism on at least three types of heavy artillery is made by mounting an electrical contact in a gadget that looks for all the world like a short-barrelled pistol with a wire coming out of the barrel. So much for that---and I object strenuously to Rasmussen's button, even if it does accentuate the weapon's strangeness.

"The beam lashed out, humming in a fiercely electric buzz almost inaudible to the human ear." This may come as a shock to many, but the only reason the musket replaced the bow and arrow is the fact that the bow and arrow gave a twang that let the would-be victim alert himself soon enough to step aside and return fire. The report of a gun and the impact of a bullet come so close together that the victim is killed before he has warning he is attacked---and furthermore, he never sees the bullet.

Let us, for goodness' sake, invent energy beams that are invisible and that do not hum! Why on earth should a beam of energy be visible, anyway? We know of no visible light that is deadly. Why complicate matters by superimposing a light beam on the ray? And don't tell me it makes aiming easier; anyone who has tried out one of those beam-of-light-aiming gadgets will know the difference. And the argument against turning on the beam and slashing at your opponent with it, while long and involved, is sound---believe me as an engineer.

Next comes the Martian's speech, the piece de resistance. Instead of drilling our chum Rasmussen full of large and airy holes, the Martian pauses to deliver a lecture on physics and biology. He says, in effect: "Dear reader, this jerk you call your hero is not smart enough to know that the coagulator works on phrenalaphranin only, and not on brenatine, which is green, and the main reason why Martians are green-skinned. The coagulator, by the way, employs a beam known as ardent radiation."

Let's neglect the fact that there are no such things as brenatine and phrenalaphranin and get back to the point. You see what I mean by explanation. It's mostly doubletalk, and while there is a place for it, let's forget it unless it's really necessary. Doc Smith used deLameters and Lewistons without telling the reader exactly what they were. Ditto for me with Modines and MacMillans. A gadget called a tork was employed by Otis Adelbert Kline. Edgar Rice Burroughs

had characters running around with radium rifles, but he carefully explained that this was probably an error because the Martian term made no sense in English and he translated it into "radium" for want of a better word. Burroughs also used the Ninth Barsoomian Ray to lift his airships, but he never attempted to explain how it operated. Good old Edgar.

I think the best way to rephrase our incident would be to have friend Rassmussen jerk his chiller and fire, missing the Martian. Then he dodges behind a tree as the Martian fires back---and the duel is on. To the devil with brenatine and a discussion of nuclear physics. A duel between two members of different races is worth more wordage anyway.

Ike Asimov is a good name to mention at this point. His yarns are real modern space opera. Galactic in scope, well written, with no attempt to explain everything including the third, fourth and fifth foundations, and yet not mysterious to the same degree as the null-A labyrinth. The wonders of a magnificently advanced culture are eminently displayed in simple terms. Ideas and ideologies flow from planet to planet, and the problems are presented by sentient beings and not things. There is no alien culture that lives on human meat and raises Genus Homo like we raise steers; no culture that pulls off arms and legs for the fun of it; no culture so far advanced that they think we ought to be eliminated because we're too dumb.

I must squeeze in one more item about Doc Smith. I've just read First Lensman. In it, the Palanians have colonized Pluto, since that planet's climate is akin to their own world's. But they don't give a hoot about colonizing Terra---in fact, they don't even want to be bothered by Terrans.

This is a far cry from the earlier space operas in which any alien was automatically a no-goodnik. It's also darned good sense.

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WRIGHT, S. Fowler

The Throne of Saturn

Sauk City: Arkham House, 1949. viii-186pp. 19½ cm. \$3.

Review: Despite his considerable reputation as one of the best and most respectable of living science-fiction writers, I had for some reason never read anything by this author prior to the present book. The jacket flap states that "no collector of science-fiction tales will want to overlook this unique volume," and I am somewhat inclined to agree.

Certainly these tales of Mr. Wright's are quite unlike anything to be found in contemporary magazines specializing in the genre; for that matter, I rather doubt if many could find a place in the pulp field of today at all, though this is no reflection on Wright. The majority of these pieces, however professional the author's intent, appear to have been written by one who had something to say and was more interested in saying it properly than with commercial limitations.

The range of this collection, said to contain all of Wright's shorter work in the genre that he considers of value, is great; here you will find humorous commentary on the almost present-day scene as well as an utterly grim picture of the end of civilization. In all of these it is the style and individuality of the author which makes them impressive.

Science-fiction has so often been the vehicle of satire that we almost automatically look for it when we encounter the medium in the hands of a writer of serious purpose, as opposed to the professional who must necessarily be more in-

terested in word-count than idea. Certainly a large percentage of these stories appear to be satiric in intent, much in the same way as the recent Nineteen Eighty-Four by George Orwell. And this, of course, recalls the same question that accompanied that notable novel---is it satire at all? Or is it just the logical continuation of an existing situation into the future?

As an answer consider "Automata," a short story that has gained some stature in the past. In a deceptively quiet style, Wright describes how machinery, created to serve man, slowly supplants him as the dominant creature, till at last but one human remains alive. And when he fails to do the job allotted him properly and ^{an} automaton takes him by the arm and leads him to expected doom. There is no thought of rebellion: "Evolution had triumphed." And so has Wright, with a prophetic little tale which is likely to haunt your memory.

A good portion of these stories are impregnated with a pointed wit and a strong sense of mockery. Even in "This Night" (which I thought the weakest piece in the book), where the essential story is almost conventional in nature, he still satirizes accurately and brilliantly the modern tendency of mankind to idolize the scientist. The fault of this story lies not in his major premise, but in that the events related to bring the premise to life fail to come off. It is but fair to add that this is the only story here of which this is true.

In common with an author like John Taine, Wright seems to derive a good deal of pleasure from his writing. The style, though addicted to long sentences, is clear and graceful, in manner half-sympathetic, half-derisive. He is not interested in the stock plot and type characterization such as the pulps exhibit; instead he sets up a situation and explores it according to his inclination.

"Justice" is in the same class as "Automata." Here Wright's style is even more benevolently sarcastic as he describes a civilization where the young people revolt against the necessity of maintaining the old, and rise up to slay their elders. And nowhere is Wright more smoothly persuasive than in "Proof," when he discusses the grisly possibility, when the head is chopped off, of the severed brain continuing to suffer briefly. From this situation he creates a mood of irresistible though somewhat morbid humor.

On the other hand, "P.N. 40" combines a sharp dig at the idea of controlled breeding for humanity with a simple and touching love story of a boy and girl who held the atavistic ideal of selective marriage. The much-anthologized "Rat" is the narrative of a doctor who discovers a formula for giving mankind eternal life. As in David Keller's Life Everlasting, there is much concern about the effect this will have on humanity. The protagonist here reaches a conclusion very similar to the actual results as developed in the Keller novel. Outside of this, the stories are in no way alike.

Of particular interest to American readers is "The Temperature of Gehenna Sue," in which the author abandons England to delve into an American scene, including such peculiar people as a Broadway star, a drunken multimillionaire, and the world's greatest chemist. Of these elements he tells an exceedingly funny story. His use---or misuse---of American slang reveals his unfamiliarity with the vernacular, but this is not to be held against him. Admittedly this story lacks subtlety and art, but it is altogether amusing nevertheless.

"Brain," reprinted not too long ago in a science-fiction anthology, gives free rein to Wright's remarkable talent for irony. It concerns an England ruled by a council of scientists, each of whom is trying to outwit the rest in an effort to further his own ambitions. One of them, under the benevolent influence of a drug he has discovered, believes that it would be a better world if the group were destroyed, an opinion plainly held by the author. Certainly Wright looks upon the encroachment of science upon humanity's rightful precincts with a good deal of suspicion and distrust.

Probably the best story in the book, and unquestionably the grimmest, is "Original Sin," where we again find civilization developed to an extreme. Since man has no more obstacles to overcome in this mechanically-perfected world, he has grown stagnant and readily embraces the doctrine of futility which says that man is merely an evolutionary accident. So mankind resolves to erase the mistake by eliminating itself completely. But one boy and one girl plan to---and do---escape the fate in order to make a new beginning for the race. Human selfishness steps in partly to spoil the attempt.

Obviously Wright is without illusions about people, but he does not lack faith. In the somber but somehow exalted "Choice" there is the thought that mankind is good because it struggles against evil; not because it wins, but because it tries; and this is somehow better than goodness without challenge.

In Sidney Fowler Wright you will encounter an author who is not afraid to think. You may not like him; but if you do, you will like him very much, for he is civilized, witty and most gifted in the essential art of story-telling.

---oOo--- ---Thomas H. Carter.

THE GHOUL-CHANGELING

by
George T. Wetzel

Who has not puzzled over the identity of the narrator in Lovecraft's "Outsider"? Even his "Rats in the Walls" has several unanswered questions posed within its fictional framework. The mystery produced in these two tales is seemingly to be explained only by their careful study in conjunction with the clue furnished by a later title, "Pickman's Model."

To my mind, the start of this mystery was the earlier "Picture in the House" (1920). Here an ancient countryman possessed a book containing pictures of a hideous butcher shop of the Anzique cannibals, and he himself was cursed with a cannibalistic craving.

Then in 1921 we have the nebulous and Poesque horror of "The Outsider." Many explanations as to the nature of the narrator have been put forth by readers of this tale, though it is significant that Lovecraft very obviously refrained from any. Even the climactic discovery of the narrator that a monstrous creature which appals him is his own mirrored reflection does not completely reveal his nature. Beyond the fact that he has existed in a subterranean place below a graveyard, all is vague.

The horrendous "Rats in the Walls" (1923) was next to appear. Herein the motifs in the above two tales reiterate and are further developed. In the grotto beneath Exham Priory a ghastly butcher shop is found. There are cases of fratricide in the family history of the de la Poers, the owners of the place, for the implied reason that the secret of their character, or their true nature, has occasionally been revealed. But most significant is the fact that the passage descending from the priory cellar to the dreadful grotto below was chiselled upward through the foundation rock.

All these evil adumbrations reach a peak in "Pickman's Model" (1926). The protagonist of this story is degenerating, and a ghoulish trend is strongly hinted. Richard Pickman speaks authoritatively of ghouls who kidnap human children, leaving their own daemon offspring in their stead. Old graveyards, he says, are frequently inhabited by ghoulish things that burrow through the earth.

Piecing these clues together gives us a single common theme. The decadent countryman of "The Picture in the House" now assumes the character of a ghoulish-changeling. The tomb-dweller in "The Outsider" is a kidnapped human who has dim memories of some teacher similar to the ghoulish mentors painted by Pickman in his picture "The Lesson." The fratricides in "The Rats in the Walls" were perhaps necessitated by discovery that family members were ghoulish-changelings; certainly the evidence of the subterranean passageway bespeaks close connection of some sort between human beings and underground creatures.

If we grant this common undercurrent in all four stories we have a pure Lovecraftian invention of considerable interest. The ghoulish-changeling theme nowhere appears as such in any racial folklore or legend, although varieties of its two components are of course known. And while this theme was largely jettisoned by Lovecraft in favor of his popular Cthulhu mythos, it throws light on occasional vague spots in later stories, as well as a plot-germ mentioned in his "Commonplace Book": a recluse, living beside a graveyard, suspected of ghoulish outrages---an idea suggested by Dr. Grimshawe's Secret of Hawthorne.

Whether or not the narrator in "The Outsider" was meant by Lovecraft to have the identity I contend, the evidence seems strong. One could also cite "The Commonplace Book" in this regard, for there we find recorded the idea of the climax of this tale with a question mark preceding "identity" of main character.

In parenthetical connection with this story, it may not be out of place to mention the similarity in general situation between "The Outsider" and Hawthorne's "Journal of a Solitary Man," from which the following is quoted:

I dreamed one bright forenoon I was walking through Broadway, and seeking to cheer myself with the warm and busy life of that far famed promenade.... I found myself in this animated scene, with a dim and misty idea that it was not my proper place, or that I had ventured into the crowd with some singularity of dress or aspect which made me ridiculous.... Every face grew pale; the laugh was hushed...and the passengers on all sides fled as from an embodied pestilence.... I passed not one step farther, but threw my eyes on a looking-glass which stood deep within the nearest shop. At first glimpse of my own figure I awoke, with a horrible sensation of self-terror and self-loathing...I had been promenading Broadway in my shroud!

Lovecraft, we know, was thoroughly familiar with the works of Hawthorne. Could this paragraph be the original inspiration of "The Outsider"?

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BROWN, Frederic

What Mad Universe

New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1949. 255pp. 20 cm. \$2½.

Review: Off-trail mystery novels featuring distinctly odd characters and wacky situations have been this author's chief claim to attention up to now. Who can forget The Fabulous Clipjoint, Murder Can Be Fun and the recent Screaming Mimi? Mr. Brown's agile mind has, however, proved equal to the task of switching to what the editor of Bantam Books prefers to call "science-fantasy."

In What Mad Universe we have a tale which has long been needed: a reductio ad absurdum of all the dogmas, conventions and shibboleths of pulp sci-

ence-fiction. Yet, surprisingly enough, with Mr. Brown's technique it remains a good story---suspenseful and engrossing throughout---and with a satisfying ending. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the satire is done with a friendly, gentle hand. There is nowhere a trace of malice in the work; naught but kindly tolerance and a splendid sense of humor. It is somewhat as though Mr. Brown from an Olympian height had lovingly but ruefully administered a chastising back-of-the-hand to the posterior of a noisy, precocious infant.

The story concerns Keith Winton, editor of Surprising Stories (and ex-editor of Bloodcurdling Tales). It seems that in 1954 the first attempt to send a rocket to the moon was made; something went wrong with it en route, however, and it boomeranged back to earth. It also happened to blast onto the estate of publisher L. A. Borden, at whose place Winton was weekending. Everyone was supposedly incinerated in the ensuing holocaust, but by some inexplicable quirk of fate Winton was merely knocked out. He recovered his senses and wandered off before any rescuers arrived.

So far the world appeared entirely normal. He couldn't find the Borden estate, though, so he hitched a ride to the nearest village with a farmer in an old model T Ford. Nobody he spoke to had ever heard of L. A. Borden, nor was he listed in a current telephone directory at the village drugstore. Winton had paid scant attention to the fact that there was no coin slot in the phone booth, nor to the latest issue of Surprising Stories on the adjacent magazine-stand. A second look at the latter shows a subtle difference between his recollection of the number and actuality. The monster on the cover was more horrible than he remembered; and the girl it was chasing was (if possible) more shapely, revealing and desirable. More, a quick glance at the contents-page showed much difference in story-titles.

Keith Winton was by now slightly bewildered, but the real shock came when he gave the druggist an ordinary quarter in payment for a coke. The druggist all but collapsed, but after much mysterious talk and guilty actions surveyed the coin as though it were a rare treasure, and finally offered a thousand credits for it, although admitting it was worth twice as much. Winton could not decide whether he or the druggist---or both of them---were raving mad, but suddenly recalled that the cover of Surprising, instead of the customary legend "20 cents," had borne a cryptic "2 credits." He longed to ask a million questions but already the druggist was acting suspiciously and Winton's innate good sense and long training in science-fiction warned him to be careful. He pocketed the huge roll of currency and leaves. From here on the story really begins to move and never lets up until the ending.

The druggist denounces Winton as an Arcturian spy, and after a narrow escape in which he is wounded manages to get a room at a cheap hotel. He hears, to his horror, that a general alarm has been given and he is liable to be killed on sight. A house to house search is begun. Luckily when the police come to his room one turns out to be a science-fiction fan who has corresponded with Surprising Stories' "Ole Rocketeer" letter column. This fortunate fact, together with his identification papers, satisfy the authorities and he is able to leave town on a train bound for New York.

Naturally Winton wonders what has happened to the world, but he has already seen the mortal danger of acting like an alien and asking questions. He hopes to resolve his difficulties when he arrives in New York, but this city is worse than ever. It is evening, and none of the arrivals at Grand Central leave the building; instead they all sleep on cots which cover all available floors. Winton hears sinister talk of the "mistout" and the "Nighters" but in ignorance passes through the police guard at the station entrance and goes into the street.

Outside is literally total darkness---and thick, black mist enshrouds everything. There are no pedestrians or traffic---all is dead silence and locked doors. As Winston creeps blindly alongside buildings and stumbles over the curbstones. Here, it must be admitted, the story packs an authentic punch: there is real, paralyzing terror of the unknown. Suddenly the silence is broken by a tapping as of dozens of blind men's canes, and Winton realizes instinctively that it must be the dread "Nighters" of whom he has heard horrifying whispers. He remembers they are said to go down the streets with locked arms and their tapping canes so that nothing can escape them. There is a commotion ahead ending in a gurgling scream as some luckless person like himself falls to his death in their clutches. As he turns to flee he hears from the opposite direction a faint chorus of cane-taps, and realizes the Nighters must patrol the streets both ways. Blind, animal panic fills him as he runs down a side thoroughfare, falling continually and colliding with mailboxes and lamp posts. The author has done a first-rate job in creating an atmosphere of cosmic horror and supernatural awfulness.

One would like to go on summarizing the plot of What Mad Universe, but in order to leave some unexpected chuckles to the reader it may merely be said that Keith Winton eventually finds out from books and newspapers that the solar system is at war with the Arcturian system, and that space travel is as ordinary as eating a ham sandwich. The ruler of the solar system is a legendary person called Dopelle who seems to combine the best traits of Orson Welles, Errol Flynn and Einstein. His alter ego is a mechanical brain which floats along behind him in a metal globe: it sees and knows all knowledge, can solve all problems, and is nicknamed "Mekky" by the worshipping populace. There is a special caste of "space girls" who wear nothing but almost non-existent bras and panties along with their boots and helmets. Metal money has been declared illegal because the Arcturians have been counterfeiting it wholesale.

Winton becomes acquainted with "moon juice," a paralyzing drug combining the salient features of a violent aphrodisiac and mental space travel. The typical Van Vogtian touch is included when he meets the editor of Surprising Stories who is named Keith Winton but who bears no resemblance to him. In the end Winton carries out a final attack against the Arcturians single-handed, and in the resulting chain-reaction is thrown back into his normal world again.

Of course, any reader with even a rudimentary acquaintance with science-fiction has long ago recognized the particular gambit of this novel as that of parallel time streams. The author has a particularly horrifying premise, however: he postulates an infinity of time-streams in which all possible universes exist. Mr. Brown has perpetrated the supreme, blasphemous infamy of projecting us into a universe conceived in the mind of Joe Doppelberg, a typical fan who corresponded with the "Ole Rocketeer." It seems that Winton had just been reading a letter from Doppelberg and trying to envision his universe when the moon-rocket hit the Borden estate; he was immediately transferred to the kind of cosmos existing in the mind of a typical science-fiction fan. And if you think he wasn't typical just wait until you read the letter he wrote---it's one of the most delightful ribbings this reviewer has ever seen.

It is obvious that Mr. Brown with tongue-in-cheek has pulled out all the stops and just let himself go. Surprisingly enough, however, he has produced an excellent entertainment and his minor tour-de-force may well become a classic of sorts. It is unreservedly recommended for a fine evening's fun. Not the least of its merits is the picture of the author to be found on the back of the dust-jacket---it must be seen to be appreciated!

---Matthew H. Onderdonk.

STANLEY G. WEINBAUM: A COMPREHENSIVE APPRAISAL

by
Sam Moskowitz

(Author's note: This article was originally written in August, 1945. At that time I was working on the main body of "The Immortal Storm," and interrupted composition as a favor to Francis T. Laney, then editor of The Acolyte, who claimed to be very much in need of material. The subject seemed appropriate since 1945 was the tenth anniversary of Weinbaum's death, and it had been several years since anyone had taken much notice of him. A solid week of research, rereading, indexing and writing was required to produce the work. It certainly was then (as it probably is today) the most complete and documented essay on Weinbaum composed.

After delaying its appearance for several months, Laney finally published the article in the Winter, 1946 issue of The Acolyte. Previously he had written me that he liked it. But without a single word of advance notice to me he deleted sixty percent of its text, deliberately altered my opinions by injudicious editing, and then later printed another article by somebody else which was in effect a rebuttal to an opinion he himself had altered! He completely omitted the irreplaceable bibliography of source material as "irrelevant."

When I protested these actions, asking that he print a statement from me disclaiming the article as it had appeared, he refused to do so, threatening if I forced the issue to print defamatory assertions side by side with any such statement I might make. So I consented to his publishing a weak, watered-down objection of his own phrasing in which, on actual appearance, the spelling of my first name was altered to read "Dam." (This last, of course, Laney claimed was a typographical error.)

By way of consolation, he informed me that his and Russell's revision of the article had improved it "500%," that he had saved the reputation of The Acolyte and my reputation as a writer, and that I should be thankful he hadn't claimed co-authorship for his editing job.

Since the article was at the very end of the issue of the magazine, it was obvious---all prevarications to the contrary---what had really happened. Only six pages of space were available; the ms. as written needed fourteen; so the editorial knife went to work slashing out wordage. Where Laney strongly disagreed with my opinions he changed them by deleting adjectives that either praised or condemned individual stories. Criticism of The Black Flame was cut out and only the praise left in. He removed an entire paragraph emphasizing the important points in The New Adam and retained merely the criticism, probably because The Acolyte already had on hand another article which was a rebuttal. He excised the two final paragraphs which summed up the entire analysis. Thus was my article recast into opinions and interpretations I never intended. If there isn't a law against signing a person's name to something he wouldn't have written there certainly ought to be.

Fortunately I was able to get the original ms. back from Laney, though in such condition that considerable erasing and retyping was necessary. But my troubles were not yet over. Will Sykora offered to publish it as a printed FAPA booklet. I submitted the article to him under those terms. It was never published---and it took me three years to get it back as he systematically lost it time and again.

Now at about this time in Minneapolis, Minnesota Redd Boggs was publishing a very promising fan magazine titled Chronoscope, which he hoped to fashion into a mature, literary type of journal. He was looking for long lead articles for this publication, and upon hearing of my unpublished Weinbaum ms. asked for it. I knew that Boggs had a good reputation for reliability in the **field** and was willing, subject to certain conditions. These he readily agreed to: If the article was not published within six months it was to be returned; all editorial corrections and changes were subject to my okay; and in payment for the article Boggs was to stencil and mimeograph for me an eight-paged FAPA magazine titled Different, for which I would pay production costs---i.e., material. These were the strictest terms I have ever imposed on anyone, but I felt that possibly they would raise the value of the article in the eyes of the "purchaser" and favorably affect his subsequent handling of it. However that may have been, in a very short time Boggs sent me a complete dummy copy of the work with questions and suggestions for a few minor changes. All necessary adjustments were made, and stencilling commenced. At this point someone talked Boggs into editing, stencilling, mimeographing and partially writing the 1950 fantasy annual, which ran well over a hundred pages. Boggs never published Chronoscope again, and I don't think he has ever been the same since. The six months came and went, but since he had already finished Different I scarcely felt in a position to insist on return of the manuscript. However, tied down with other commitments, Boggs returned the article to me voluntarily, and matters ended with no hard feeling on either side.

It was painfully apparent by this time that the article was jinxed. Searles expressed an interest in it, but I was reluctant to give it to a good friend, especially one who had successfully and regularly published a magazine for over six years with no serious delays. I finally resolved to tempt fate, since length had never fazed Fantasy Commentator, which had undertaken to print my 150,000-word fan history. But nine months passed without sign of the next issue of that magazine, and all I know is that Searles has asked me to bring this introductory note up to date by adding this and the preceding paragraph.

In any event, all the above leads to this: "Stanley G. Weinbaum: a Comprehensive Appraisal" is now appearing in substantially its original form. The adjective in the title has been changed. There has been a reshuffling of several early paragraphs, necessitated by deletion of a short opening paragraph that is no longer topical. The last two paragraphs have been expanded. New material on "The Mad Brain," which I had not read in 1945, has also been added. Finally, the bibliography has been brought up to date by inclusion of new data. These, then, are the only major changes in the original ms. as submitted to Francis T. Laney. I am freely submitting it for publication in this form, and I leave to readers the question of whether it ruins my reputation. ---Nov. 6, 1950)

When Charles D. Hornig, then editor of Wonder Stories, wrote the blurb for Stanley Weinbaum's "Martian Odyssey" in July, 1934, he knew that he had obtained for his magazine something entirely new in interplanetary fiction. But realizing that more fiction is killed than made by editorial comment he simply said: "Our present author...has written a science-fiction tale so new, so breezy, that it stands head and shoulders over similar interplanetary yarns."

"A Martian Odyssey" should have been a burlesque. Indeed, Weinbaum intended his first story to be just that, but a quirk in his personality added too convincing a note to the bizarre menagerie. Imagine this dramatis personae: an intelligent ostrich armed with a manufactured popgun; an immortal silicon monster with no apparent sense which spends all its time burping bricks and piling them

neatly on the ground; a plant with tentacles capable of luring its food by a process of hypnosis; headless creatures ("We are V-r-r-riends, Ouch!") bringing barrels of rubbish up to a huge wheel which crushes it to powder---and who are quite amenable to adding their own persons to boost production; a German named Putz. The literary feat of blending the above into a straight-faced yarn of grand entertainment has never been surpassed in the field. As a natural result, it was acclaimed with impulsive enthusiasm. In reply to a reader's ecstatic letter, Horig said: "Weinbaum's story has already received more praise than any story in the history of our publication."

When one envisions the loudly acclaimed tales Wonder Stories had featured in the past, such well-remembered titles as "The Eternal Man," "Exiles of the Skies," "The Forgotten Man of Space," "The Time Stream," "The Conquest of Two Worlds," "The City of the Singing Flame," "The Venus Adventure," "The Moon Era," "The Man Who Awoke," "Brood of Helios" and scores of others, the magnitude of the compliment becomes fully comprehensible.

The praise that followed in the wake of "A Martian Odyssey" surprised its author most of all. To the day he died Weinbaum had no confidence in the selling power he commanded. He lived in awe of the editor, cudgelling his brain for more unique ideas, constantly fearful of rejection, and so afraid that his success in selling to Astounding Stories month after month was temporary that he had Julius Schwartz, his literary agent, sell "The Adaptive Ultimate" under the pseudonym of John Jessel so that editor Orlin Tremaine might not get the impression that he was overstocking his magazine with the writings of one author. (And also, we conjecture, to assuage a possible doubt in his mind that his stories were selling on the strength of "A Martian Odyssey's" success and not on their own intrinsic worth.)

When Wonder Stories asked for a sequel to "A Martian Odyssey," Weinbaum in his haste to comply submitted "Valley of Dreams," which actually had been composed before this initial success, but which he had held back in favor of an elaborate rewrite. It was now given a few quick touches to make it appear a sequel. Readers promptly commented that rarely had a sequel so completely captured all the charm of a predecessor. Little did they suspect that they actually had read the same story twice!

Many will recall Wonder Stories' "new story" policy of 1934, when every tale had to embody a new idea or an original twist of an old one. When "Flight on Titan" arrived in Wonder's editorial office the most careful perusal failed to reveal even a microscopic fragment of a new idea. It was a simple yarn of adventure, with seemingly trite perils and situations. So it was rejected. Anyone could have recognized a great story such as "A Martian Odyssey," but it took Orlin Tremaine to recognize a fine writing style in an ordinary adventure yarn. When Astounding readers picked up the January, 1935 issue, they found the magic, airy touch of Weinbaum with his inspired gift of queer animal creation and his infallible knack of telling a smooth story as obviously present in "Flight on Titan" as it had been in the two earlier efforts.

So it was, too, that Wonder Stories lost what might have been an exclusive option on Weinbaum's imagination and the reader-appeal that went with it. And thus it was that Astounding's progressive policy recruited a name which was to be a major factor in that magazine's success.

In the stories he wrote for Astounding, Weinbaum attained the heights of his creative ability. Three are linked together by common characters: "Ham" Hammond and Patricia Burlingame. The first of this Ham-and-Pat series, "Parasite Planet," was similar to its predecessor, "Flight on Titan," except that Weinbaum's story-telling style had by this time matured to a thing of sheer delight. Inter-

penetrating a bizarre but strangely realistic vision of life on Venus was a boy meets girl story of imperishable charm. Here are Jack Ketch trees that fling lassos to catch their prey; doughpots, the mindless omniverous masses of animate cells that slough through the jungles, eating everything in their paths; cyclops-like triops noctivans with their malevolent semi-intelligence. Weinbaum once more proved that his magical style was a key to his success, for with a threadlike plot to guide the reader he turned a travelogue of an alien planet into light, almost frothy, reading.

"The Lotus Eaters," second in the series, is rated by many as the author's finest story. Few critics could place it second to "A Martian Odyssey" with a clear conscience. Here is Weinbaum with style and an idea! Those who have read it will never forget Oscar, the bushel-basket-shaped being with almost omnipotent intelligence, who had not the slightest qualms about being eaten by other Venusian beasts and would make no attempt to deter them. And the narcotic, will-energizing spores he dispensed! Here is an almost perfect science-fiction story, one with no plot or counterplot, but with ideas and writing that charm the reader with the potency of Oscar's own spores.

The third story of the trilogy, "The Planet of Doubt," is the poorest of the three, yet by no definition inferior science-fiction. The fault here is that one can sense that Weinbaum is straining for new oddities of life-form, that the romance of the chief characters has lost its initial glamor, and that having figuratively written a story called "Ham and Pat on Venus," he is compelled by popular demand to produce a sequel about Ham and Pat on Uranus. The outstanding creation in the story is a race of creatures that attach themselves together like railroad cars and rush along uncannily like a train. "The Planet of Doubt" suffers in comparison with "The Lotus Eaters," but is nevertheless enjoyable.

In returning to Wonder Stories, the scene of his original success, with "Pygmalion's Spectacles," Weinbaum again displayed his boy-meets-girl fixation carried over from his earlier days as a newspaper writer. In this tale of a new type of moving pictures, the hero is self-hypnotized into believing himself a character in a play, and experiences all the sensations and emotions of that character. Later the hero is delighted to learn that a girl he wooed in this way actually exists, and is none other than the niece of the pictures' inventor. This is a likeable yarn, but not one of much stature. It was evident that Wonder's half-cent-a-word rate would not purchase the quality of Astounding's higher one.

I have had but one complaint against Wonder Stories' one time "new policy" criterion for buying fiction. Like Astounding's "thought variant" policy, it produced many fine examples of original thought. But forcing Weinbaum to accept the onus of a "new policy" writer and create accordingly is a difficult mistake to forgive. For he was an exception to prove the rule. He could write a better story around an ancient, moth-eaten plot framework than most writers could around an inspired new theory. In order to sell to Wonder, Weinbaum had to produce a new idea in each of his stories. As a vehicle for these new ideas, he used the "irresistible" Van Manderpootz, bringing another trilogy into being by use of this character. It was not worthy of the man's talent.

"The Worlds of If," first of the group, deals with a machine that will photographically show the subject what would happen if---he had not missed an airplane, had not married his wife, had quit his job, been seen lunching with that blonde---and so on. It is a story of exploring sidewise in time the worlds of if. Hitherto Weinbaum had assembled the most ludicrous imaginable creations and made of them by his ability a serious tale of science-fiction. Now he was deliberately trying to be funny, and his attempts were crude slapstick. Nowhere in the Van Manderpootz series does he allow himself adequate length to develop a story pro-

perly. His humor, scientific explanation and love-interest are no longer carefully blended, but become isolated motifs that will not amalgamate. Never adept at formulating a strong plot, he proves himself incapable of exploiting the possibilities in his "Worlds of If" idea. The story is readable, but merely fair in quality.

The garnering of his first cover illustration for the second in the series, "The Ideal," in no way enhanced its virtues. Here Van Manderpootz builds a machine that will assemble the composite likes of a man's mind and show on a screen his ideal---whether it be a woman, an automobile, a fantasy magazine, an ice cream sundae---whatever the subject's epitome of perfection of anything happens to be. The threadbare plot in this story (as well as the other two of the trio) involves Dixon Wells, a ne'er-do-well, skirt-chasing millionaire, always late and always sorry, who discovers through each new Van Manderpootz invention a girl he loves and promptly loses through a quirk fate as she marries somebody else. The stories are thus almost identical in plot as well as in quality.

The Van Manderpootz invention in "The Point of View" is the attitudinizer, whose wearing will give you the point of view of the person you are looking at---a mechanism "to see ourselves as others see us." Dub in the plot outline given in the last paragraph and you will have the story. Perhaps Weinbaum had the last laugh over the series, since he sold the same story and same idea to Hornig three times while Wonder Stories remained blissfully unaware of the situation.

"The Red Peri" in Astounding earned Weinbaum his second cover, which he was already too sick to appreciate when it appeared (November, 1935). The story received a big build-up and was intended as the first of a series which Stanley never lived to continue. The Red Peri is a woman space-pirate of phenomenal cunning and resourcefulness, but she has a woman's capacity for love, even toward Frank Keene, an American physicist who intends to capture her. The story is trite, but Weinbaum's handling is entertaining. Perhaps the only new idea to be found is the author's assertion that the vacuum of outer space might actually have little harmful effect on the body if one were exposed to it for only a very short period of time. What destroyed much of this story's appeal to science-fiction fans was the fact that the situation could just as well have been transplanted to a mundane background. Most of Weinbaum's other stories are true science-fiction, in the sense that their action cannot be presented effectively in any other medium. Except for scattered incidents, "The Red Peri" does not adhere to this pattern. It is a fast, entertaining, well written adventure yarn---no more than that.

Present in the same issue of Astounding as "The Red Peri" was Weinbaum's John Jessel tale, "The Adaptive Ultimate." It is little wonder that few suspected the identity of this apparently new author, for though stylistic clues were present, so was the tightest, best-developed and most serious plot Weinbaum had ever created. There were no freak animals, no lightly humorous situations. In this story a sickly, dying girl is injected with a hormone that increases the rate of adaptability to her environment to an infinite degree. A love-interest buttresses the story with deftly-handled, poignant situations. This may eventually become Weinbaum's best known work, for it is virtually the only one that does not have to be read to be appreciated: it has a plot strong enough to make an impressive radio drama. This story of an almost indestructible woman, inevitably on her way to the control of all mankind, who is tolerant of attempts to destroy her by the man she loves, and of the inner conflict that drives him on, knowing he must thwart her for the good of mankind despite the fact that she could give him the world---this is indeed a powerful, moving tale.

"The Mad Moon," published a month later, was the last of Weinbaum's so-called "screwy animal stories." Here it almost seemed as if he **were** attempting

to end the craze for inane aliens that had initiated his popularity by introducing creatures so ridiculous that it would be next to impossible to build a serious story around them. Here the selection includes long-necked, big headed, giggling "loonies"; a "parcat," half cat, half parrot; and semi-intelligent, ratlike "slinkers." With his accustomed masterly touch Weinbaum knitted this incongruous material into an appealing adventure tale, complete with a throat-catch at the end, that definitely ranks among his best efforts.

By the time "Smothered Seas" appeared, the sands had run out in the hour-glass of Stanley G. Weinbaum's life. It is doubtful if he ever saw this collaboration with Ralph Milne Farley in print. Both men were members of the Milwaukee Fictioneers; since both were predominately writers of science-fiction they had much in common, and probably were good friends. Why Weinbaum should have desired a collaborator is difficult to divine. Perhaps he felt that there was in his own work some lack of background or of plot that another writer, strong where he was weak, could correct. Perhaps he collaborated for the sheer fun of it---just to see what the result would be. Or perhaps it was Farley, not he, who suggested the idea. Regardless of the reasons, and with all due respect to Ralph Milne Farley, who has written some excellent stories and is personally a very fine fellow, the collaboration weakened Weinbaum's style and resulted in an inferior story. I am convinced that all references in "Smothered Seas" to military operations are the work of Farley, an old military man, and that the love-interest unquestionably is Weinbaum's. There is the same mysterious, beautiful and powerful woman---in this case a foreign spy in a war between the United States and the Asiatics in the year 2000---who falls in love with the very man she should be on her guard against. The plot of the story (which would also appear to be Farley's) deals with a form of algae that suddenly begins to multiply uninhibited till it covers the seas of the world with a thick scum which makes navigation all but impossible, and then begins crawling onto the land, impeding transportation there. Both the war and the algae are stopped by natural causes, and there is the usual cliché at the end. "Smothered Seas" makes fairly entertaining reading, but there is little solidity to it and it leaves no lasting impression.

"Redemption Cairn" was the first of a long parade of "last stories" by Stanley G. Weinbaum. It was evident here, as in the succeeding work, "Proteus Island," that illness was beginning to affect his creative effort. Much of the sparkle and zest that characterized earlier tales was missing. Sometimes the story appeared to move only with effort, and Weinbaum's magical style glittered but dully. It tells of an attempt to locate the cairn of an old scientist on the moons of Jupiter, and is searched for by a cracked-up space-pilot trying to redeem his reputation, a beautiful girl racing-pilot called the Golden Flash, and Grogol, the villain of the piece, who actually knows the location of the cairn and plans to sack it for himself for the valuable information it holds. The story proceeds and ends in formula style, enlivened only occasionally by flashes of Weinbaum's light romance and a single funny creature, the "bladder-bird."

"Proteus Island" is the story of an isolated place where each offspring turns out to be a different, often freakish, mutation of its parent. The cause is an invention of a long-dead experimenter which has affected the genes of all fauna on the island. When Carter, the hero, lands he finds a beautiful bronzed girl leading a nightmarish array of creatures. The expected adventures and love affair follow. This story is probably an attempt to repeat the success of "The Adaptive Ultimate" by introducing strong motivating emotions into an otherwise simple situation. Indeed, the worried doubts that the girl he loves cannot bear normal children which plague Carter do provide the substance for a strong story. However, Weinbaum seemed incapable of summoning that needed extra effort for the task. "Proteus Island" thus remained no more than a good, readable yarn.

Now that the immediate shock over Weinbaum's death had subsided editors began furiously to search their piles of rejected manuscripts for his stories. Julius Schwartz was contacted to see if anything remained in his files, and all other likely sources were promptly investigated. The first published result of this scraping the bottom of the barrel was "Circle of Zero," which Schwartz, having had no hope of selling, had already announced for appearance in Fantasy Magazine. It had probably been written with Hornig's "new policy" in mind, and resembled the Van Manderpootz series. The humor here is not quite so calculated and therefore occasionally effective. The yarn tells how one Professor Ne'ant tries to evoke, by advanced hypnotism, deep-buried memories of the past and the future. The account of his experiments is detailed and in spots highly imaginative as Ne'ant's methods conjure up strange memories of the dim past and equally bizarre visions of the future. "Circle of Zero" is topheavy with new ideas and explanations of them, and the story part seems incidentally tacked on. It is really more of a synopsis than a finished work, and its rejection is easy to understand.

"Brink of Infinity" was one of the most unusual stories Weinbaum ever wrote or Thrilling Wonder Stories ever printed. It was obviously never intended for publication, for its entire point revolves about a minor problem in mathematics. A chemist who has been crippled because a mathematician misplaced a single decimal point in a formula decides to revenge himself. He kidnaps the mathematician and agrees to release him only if he can guess a mathematical quantity he is thinking of. The victim is allowed ten questions in the process of identification. This story should have been a dry bore, of interest only to the man who wrote it (and perhaps some mathematicians), but the amazing manner in which Weinbaum describes the mental contortions and cogitations of the victim makes it genuinely interesting. Weinbaum's ability to sugar-coat science was enough to make papa Gernsback wax ecstatic. "Brink of Infinity" is a truly remarkable tale.

The Weinbaum name had by now acquired a certain sales value, and so it was that Mortimer Weisinger and Julius Schwartz induced Stanley's sister Helen to complete a story for which he had written a few hundred words. The story was "Tidal Moon," and it ultimately appeared as a collaboration. In this yarn Helen Weinbaum, using "A Martian Odyssey" as a model, introduced enough crazy "gadzooks" to shame her inspiration. But though she mimicked her brother's formula and technique very well indeed, she could not duplicate the lilting lift of his style---and that made all the difference in the world. So "Tidal Moon" remains merely a readable yarn about a young man and a girl fleeing before a Ganymedeian flood and encountering freak animals on every page.

In all justice it should be stated that Helen Weinbaum had never herself really believed that she could duplicate her talented brother's style. She had simply responded gracefully to urgings that she provide a scoop for Thrilling Wonder Stories. If there was any faint hope in anyone's mind that she could take up where Stanley had left off it now quickly died. Her writing ability was better expressed in other fields: in science-fiction she probably would never have risen above capable mediocrity.

But this disappointing effort did not abate the urge to capitalize on the dead author's renown. Those who walk in the footsteps of the great often do not envision the full stature of their greatness, since they are prone to judge them only by the width of their posteriors. So it was that John Russell Fearn metamorphosed into Thornton Ayre for the sole purpose of imitating Weinbaum. Arthur K. Barnes was quick to join him, and was swiftly followed by Eric Frank Russell, who was perhaps the most successful in capturing the style of the original. (Russell also was the only one sensible enough to quit after his first try.) Among them the trio invented sufficient freaks and entities to stock a good-sized zoo.

Heroes chased heroines through every nook and cranny of the universe, and hardly a situation or an institution was safe from their veiled satire and corny jokes. They did everything Weinbaum had ever done in his most successful stories, and sometimes the imitations were transiently popular. But slowly the truth began to penetrate: Weinbaum had not initiated a new era in science-fiction; he had not pioneered a new trend that anyone could follow or expand upon. He had merely discovered and thoroughly explored a delightful literary blind alley whose entrance became forever closed with his death. There was no "gimmick" to his success. He simply possessed an individuality of style and an inborn creative ability that could not be duplicated by mechanical aptitude alone. No one but Weinbaum could write a Weinbaum story.

It was not until Weinbaum had garnered several rejects from his two regular markets that he sent a story to Teck's Amazing Stories, where it was duly accepted. At this, Julius Schwartz wryly commented that Weinbaum was "preserved for posterity," since Amazing paid only upon publication and often held stories for as long as three or four years, so that a writer might well have passed on to his just reward before a check was sent him. The obvious reluctance of any author ~~es~~ urgently in need of money as Weinbaum to contribute to such a magazine is readily understandable. "Shifting Seas" eventually saw print. Here, as a result of volcanic action, a huge channel opens between North and South America, diverting the warm gulf stream which Europe needs to keep the continent habitable. European countries wish to migrate here, and war approaches as the United States refuses. The problem is finally solved by construction of a gigantic wall which forces the current to resume its former course. The plot is hoary, but Weinbaum made an interesting and, in places, spectacular yarn of it. Of some interest also is the time of the story took place largely in the period 1940-42.

Shortly after Weinbaum's death his circle of good friends, led by Raymond A. Palmer, Conrad H. Ruppert, Julius Schwartz and the Milwaukee Fictioneers, conceived the plan of erecting a memorial to his memory---a book composed of his best stories. To add incentive for purchase of this volume, which eventually appeared in an attractive leather-bound limited edition, they led it off with a hitherto unpublished story "Dawn of Flame," from which the collection derived its title. When Mort Weisinger was assembling the tenth anniversary issue of Thrilling Wonder Stories he decided to include this yarn. To prime it for publication he pared off much superfluous wordage, and "Dawn of Flame" became a beautiful, swift-paced novelette. The characterization was excellent, and Margot, the Black Flame, was introduced to readers for the first time. The condemnation Weisinger received for his editing is unwarranted; he simply polished a rough-cut jewel and the result was dazzling in its brilliance. Here the historical background of the Black Flame and the attempts of this immortal woman to break a mortal man to her will, first through torture and then through love, are strikingly expounded in one of Stanley G. Weinbaum's most artistic efforts.

"The Black Flame" lacked much of the beauty of writing style so noticeable in "Dawn of Flame." This feature novel in the first issue of Startling Stories told an enthralling tale of a man from the twentieth century who awakens in the far future and, after a series of unusual adventures, lives to marry the Black Flame, Margot of Urbs, and gain immortality. The story is a vast canvas of the world of the future against which is set an adventure story of undeniable excellence. Still, a bit of cutting might not have been amiss to remove passages of inferior quality which drag down the average of the work. "The Black Flame" as it stands is not a great story, but it is a nicely turned romance which is eminently readable and enjoyable.

When Ziff-Davis took over Amazing Stories and old-time fan Raymond A. Palmer assumed the editorial reins, he went hunting for something with Weinbaum's

name attached that might help boost circulation. He found it in a partially completed story bearing the tentative title "The Dictator's Sister." Ralph Milne Farley, who had previously collaborated with Weinbaum, was commissioned to finish it. Like much of Weinbaum's work, "The Revolution of 1950" (as it was retitled) utilized a near-future setting, events as early as 1940 being cited. This device gave his stories a pertinence and realism, and doubtless he felt that this advantage outweighed the drawback of quickly dating them after a few years. "The Revolution of 1950" again showed the great attention to detail characteristic of his fiction. Such touches as naming an American general Saltonstall, ringing in the well-known peanut vendor outside the Capitol, and displaying adroit familiarity with American politics stood out sharply. This story describes the build-up of a dictatorial regime in the United States that utilizes the present outline of government, and chronicles the attempt to overthrow this well-established clique and restore a truer democracy. Again we have a very beautiful heroine who really is someone of importance (in this case the dictator's "sister"), the surprise twist being that the girl herself is actually the dictator. It may be said for Farley that in this story it is difficult to tell where Weinbaum ended and he began. This is even true of the denouement, where the master's touch was most difficult to approximate: ostensibly it was written by Farley, but had an authentic Weinbaum ring. Despite these clever touches, "Revolution of 1950" does not rise noticeably above average.

Many have ventured the opinion that much of Weinbaum's popularity was artificially engendered by inspired press-agentry of personal friends and business associates. It is quite true that those close to him pushed him along with every artifice at their command, but it is not true that his fame was in any large measure due to this fact. No publicity preceded the successful "Martian Odyssey," and for almost a year afterward---the period in which Weinbaum's reputation became firmly rooted---there was no undue publicity on the part of well-wishers. Indeed, most favorable publicity came after his death, and was in the form of inspired eulogies or interest-provoking editorial comments. The science-fiction public as we know it will not praise reading fare merely because editors go into ecstasies over it---indeed, the exact reverse is usually true: fans are wont to be unwarrantedly critical of a story merely because an editor praises it highly.

The ballyhoo and build-up accompanying appearance of Weinbaum's novel The New Adam (1939) led one to expect a great story, even if some of the quotations by Edgar Rice Burroughs, A. Merritt, Ralph Milne Farley and Raymond Palmer on the book's dust jacket did seem a trifle ambiguous on careful perusal. But the truth could not be hidden, and Thomas Gardner's scathing denunciation of the work as "the greatest disappointment of the year" echoed general opinion despite the few who faithfully rallied to its support. The New Adam, unquestionably one of the author's earliest fantastic writings, is crudely done. He fumbles about in circles, scarcely knowing how to handle his characters properly. Here and there extremely well done love scenes betoken Weinbaum's later abilities, and somehow, riven through with faults of omission and commission as it is, the novel does succeed in conveying a unit impression. It does make the reader think, and he can usually recall the story. Perhaps Weinbaum was attempting to answer in fictional form self-queries that had baffled him; perhaps he, like his protagonist Edmund Hall, felt alone and different in the world. Superman Hall searches through chapter after chapter in search of an adequate philosophy of life, and in the end can find no better answer to the riddle than suicide. Did Weinbaum himself grope similarly for a philosophical staff? If we are correct in believing many of his thoughts and problems were transposed into Hall's, careful study of the novel might reveal little-suspected facets of Weinbaum's character. For

this reason The New Adam must not be lightly glossed over as something unworthy of consideration.

Every important fantasy of Stanley G. Weinbaum has been covered with the exception of The Mad Brain. For some time this remained one of science-fiction's greatest mysteries. Intriguing clues drifted from such sources as John W. Campbell, Jr., who said: "It's a good yarn...but much too hot to handle in a magazine. We'd be put off the stands in a dozen cities for a yarn like that." Other sources also hinted at the spicy quality of the novel. Marvel Science Stories almost published it, then abruptly switched policies. With the advent of the small fantasy book publishing houses, I felt that it was only a matter of time before someone brought it into print, if for no other reason than to cash in on the sales value of Weinbaum's name. I also felt very strongly that the bad impression of Weinbaum's abilities created by the publicity attending The New Adam should not be repeated. Therefore I took it upon myself to contact Stanley's widow in order to borrow the work if possible; and after an exchange of correspondence she agreed to loan me the manuscript in exchange for an honest evaluation.

This last was written and published in the Summer, 1947 issue of Fantasy Commentator, together with a detailed synopsis of the novel itself, and interested readers are referred there for fullest information. In brief summary, however, the work deals with Nicholas Devine, a man with a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality. At times he is pleasant, sympathetic and charming; at others lascivious and cruel---so much so that he several times attempts to rape the girl with whom his "better self" is in love. In the closing chapters she shoots him in self-defense. At the hospital, where he is operated on for a serious head wound, it is discovered that a tiny second brain in his skull has been responsible for his split personality. This second brain, fortuitously the only thing damaged by the bullet, is removed, and all ends happily. The Mad Brain dates back to the 1928-30 period, and in all probability is the very first fantasy novel attempted by Weinbaum. Though not without intrinsic merit, and certainly of historical interest, it is meretricious and badly written; the characterization is poor, the dialogue stilted, the pace pedestrian. Curious readers and followers of this author can peruse the novel for themselves now, however: it has just been published this year, its title changed to The Dark Other.

In the line of marginalia there is little to tell about Weinbaum. Such correspondence as he left behind is mainly businesslike. His amateur contributions are few. The only one of these of consequence is the non-fantasy "Graph," a very short story that has twice appeared in fan magazines.

Frequently in "The Black Flame," "Dawn of Flame," "The New Adam" and other of his stories we find brief bits of poetry. It would appear that Weinbaum had aspirations as a poet; perhaps a sheaf of poetry lies somewhere among his trivia even today. Perhaps his best effort along such lines is his "Last Martian"; though its lines are not outstanding, it does have an interesting thought behind it:

Pass, hours, and vanish. When I die, you die---
 All hours and years for these are fantasy
 Lacking the mind that ticks them as they fly
 To unreal past from vain futurity.
 All knowledge, space and time, exist for me,
 Born in my mind, my slaves, my instruments,
 Tools of my thought, and somewhat more sublime
 In that it soon must perish, and go hence
 Taking all concepts with it. Ages ago
 When our young race knew hate and love and lust,

Courage and fear, I might have feared to know
 This brain of mine should flow away in dust---
 A gray streak on the ruddy sand of Mars,
 A broken flask of knowledge, contents spilled
 Beyond recovery.

Going from tree to seed to tree,
 Unthinking plants surviving in my place,
 Not individual immortality
 Lives on, but immortality of race.

In the June, 1935 issue of Fantasy Magazine appeared an autobiographical sketch of Stanley G. Weinbaum. In this sketch Weinbaum revealed little of his past life beyond stating that he had had some editorial experience; that he had been graduated in the same class with Charles Lindbergh; that he wrote all his stories in longhand; that writing fiction was a tedious grind; that he had to plan his work in advance elaborately, and then truly labor over it. He cautioned that science could do little more than suggest, that modern ethics decided as to its disposition. "It is a road map, not a standard." He deplored the fact that authors had never adequately taken cognizance of the wonderful opportunity science offered them to improve the world through criticism. "It's a weapon for intelligent writers, of which there are several," wrote Weinbaum, "but they won't practise its use." David Keller, Miles J. Breuer and John Taine were mentioned as a few of those who had even tentatively plumbed the genre's infinite possibilities. Most emphatically of all Weinbaum deplored the "super-scientists, Earth-Mars wars, ant-men, tractor rays, and heroes who save country, Earth, solar system, or universe from the terrible invaders from Outside."

In evaluating Weinbaum's works we must remember that in the past he had been a writer of newspaper serials and complete novels. His decision to write science-fiction was prompted not simply by love of literature but by prime necessity. For more than anything else---for love, recreation, from inspiration--- Weinbaum wrote for money. He wrote for money because he was semi-invalided by cancer, and in writing lay his sole hope of support. Much of his correspondence in the hands of friends will never be printed for it is entirely mundane, dealing largely with the business of selling his stories.

His success in the science-fiction field was entirely unexpected. No such accolades of praise had ever been his lot in the newspaper trade. Many people predicted that he would be graduated to the slick magazines and a blazing career as a writer of general fiction. The truth of the matter, however, is that Weinbaum had already deserted the sophisticated slick story for fantasy. His talent for writing was single-tracked, and if he had ever gone back to the slick magazines it would have had to be without compromising his own method.

We find in the final analysis that Stanley G. Weinbaum deplored the light trend he was accused of leading. We find him not the proponent of escapism in science-fiction but a true believer in its potentialities as a teacher of science, a critic of humanity, a pointer of morals. No one realized more acutely than he himself that the type of story he wrote was a dead end. He wanted none of the laurel wreaths that were thrown over his brow as a "pioneer" who had led the way from stodgy, stiff-necked norms; he realized how much more futile his own type of story was even than the ones that immediately preceded it. Only a fortuitous talent in an unworked vein enabled his fiction to stand out.

No one knew better than Stanley Weinbaum that he was not treading the road to greatness, but rather to a temporary popularity that would last only as long as his facile brain remained capable of making time-worn situations interesting, and then expire to a hack's monotonous mediocrity when the spark and en-

thusiasm had gone. Remember that "Dawn of Flame," "The New Adam" and "The Black Flame," which represented his best efforts to produce something more than mere entertainment, were rejected manuscripts before his death, and were published later only because of his romanticized reputation. This was the answer editors gave Weinbaum's quest for something literary and mature in the field of science-fiction. To compete through the decades with the world's library of escape literature, just for the privilege of providing an evening of light reading fare for a limited number of people, was something Weinbaum never intended to do.

If his works live and endure it will be for the same reason that C. Henry's fiction is still purchased and read: because it is entertainment of the grandest sort. Beyond that, fate gave Stanley G. Weinbaum no time to go.

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Addenda and errata to bibliography:

- Part I (A): Fantastic Story Quarterly (Spring, 1952) contains "The Dawn of Flame" and "The Black Flame"
Avon Fantasy Reader (#15, 1951) contains "Flight on Titan" under the title "A Man, a Maid and Saturn's Temptation"
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- Part I (C): "The Sowing Song" (an excerpt from "Dawn of Flame") in Nepenthe #1 (1940)
- Part II (A): "Weinbaum's Forgotten Story" appeared in the June, 1947 Vampire
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Author's note: This last page of the article represents material added for publication in December, 1951. Interested readers are urged to call to the attention of myself or Fantasy Commentator any further corrections or emendations for this bibliography. I should like, in conclusion, to offer thanks to Lloyd A. Eschbach, who kindly supplied information on reviews of books of Fantasy Press.

---oOo---

THE SILVER BIRCHES

by

A. Merritt

Silver maidens of the woods
 Whispering 'neath your leafy hoods
 Who's your forest lover?

Argosies of crimson berries
 At your feet are gleaming;
 Spells to guide your dreaming
 Cargoes in greenfaery wherries
 Launched by woodland rover
 O'er the tossing bracken sea---
 Lithe white ladies of the lea,
 Must we ask the fickle bee,
 Ask the gossip plover?
 Who's your lover?

Slender sisters, when dusk falls
 On your deep cathedraled halls
 Which is he who would aspire

Te your mystery of green fire---
 Who's it comes a-wooing?
 Debonair the tasseled larch
 With his charmed, misty runes,
 Shadow wraiths on twilight's arch,
 And his troubadourish tunes
 Lilting from his wind-swept lyre---
 Comes the larch a-suing?

Is't the burgomaster pine?
 Or the courtly plumed cedar?
 Is the fir your fancy's leader?

Which is he you fain would follow---
 Damoiselles of hill and hollow,
 Who's your forest lover?

(from Nepenthe #1, 1940)

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Back issues of Fantasy Commentator available: #12, 20, 23 & 24 only. Price, 30¢ each, four for \$1.

MASTER OF FANTASY

by
Darrell C. Richardson

One of the least known among fantasy writers is Frances Stevens. The life and background of this author have been as mysterious and intriguing as the fanciful tales of this legendary person. Frances Stevens has long been thought by many to be a pseudonym of A. Merritt. Arguments supporting this belief have cited the similar beautiful lyric style of the two, and have pointed out that Stevens wrote during the same period of time and for the same publications that printed "Through the Dragon Glass," "The Moon Pool" and other Merritt tales. It is extremely doubtful, however, that this theory is correct. Not only do these similarities represent rather shaky evidence, but it is known that Merritt himself expressed praise for several Stevens titles---something that modesty would probably have prevented his doing for works of his own authorship.

Several of the fantasy publishing houses have expressed a wish to place such outstanding novels as "The Citadel of Fear" and "Claimed" between hard covers. None of them, however, has been able to locate their author. None can say whether Stevens is alive or dead; in fact, it is not even definitely established whether Frances Stevens is a man or a woman.

I have searched for years for knowledge concerning the life of this writer and have only recently been able to glean a few facts. The information I unearthed dates back to 1920. Most of it, first of all, appears to indicate she was a woman. At any rate, Frances Stevens was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota of parents with literary tastes. She was brought up in the midst of books, but had to leave school at the end of the grammar grades and go to work. It is said that Stevens had considerable artistic talent and had the ambition to become an illustrator. This ambition was abandoned only after studying nights several years. Her first story was composed at the age of seventeen while working in the office of a department store. In the words of Frances Stevens:

My first story had just one merit, as I remember it, and that was a rather grotesque originality. Of course, in the writer's estimation it was a very wonderful story, but, nevertheless, I was more than surprised when the All Story Weekly, the first magazine to which it was submitted, accepted it. Within a week or so of this date the Youth's Companion accepted a couple of verses which were also a first offering, and naturally, being seventeen and optimistic, I believed my literary career established. But they were both "beginners luck" flukes---and though I prospered for a while my success did not.

This was in early 1917. A few years later, after spending some time in newspaper work, Stevens abandoned the writing field. And since July, 1923, when "Sunfire" appeared serially in Weird Tales magazine, she has not been heard from again.

Frances Stevens was a quality rather than a quantity writer. Of short stories, only four were published: "The Nightmare," "Friend Island" and "Behind the Curtain" in All Story Weekly, and "The Elf Trap" in the Argosy. In addition, five serial novels appeared in these Munsey publications: "The Labyrinth," "Citadel of Fear," "Avalon," "Claimed" and "Serapion." Two novels saw publication elsewhere: "Heads of Cerberus" in the 1919 Thrill Book, and the already-mentioned "Sunfire" in Weird Tales four years later. Fortunately, many of these works have been reprinted in Famous Fantastic Mysteries and the Canadian Super Science Sto-

ries, so thus younger readers have had an opportunity to read them.

Personally, I feel Frances Stevens should be classified with such writers as A. Merritt, George Allan England, Charles B. Stilson, Garrett Smith, Howard P. Lovecraft, Ray Cummings, Garrett Serviss, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Homer Eon Flint, Austin Hall, Tod Robbins, John Taine, Otis A. Kline, William Hope Hodgson, Philip M. Fisher, Victor Rousseau J. U. Giesy, H. Rider Haggard, Murray Leinster, R. F. Starzl, Harl Vincent, Robert W. Chambers, Ralph Milne Farley, Talbot Mundy, Jack London, M. P. Shiel, "Ganpat," Arthur Conan Doyle, H. C. Wells, Jules Verne and several others that might be named as one of the old masters of fantasy. I do not mean that all of these men are great writers---though some undoubtedly are---but I do believe we owe them a great deal for their pioneer work in the field, for paving the way for our modern fantasy craftsmen. Considering the time that they were written, I believe Frances Stevens has produced some real gems to be ranked with the very best fantasy we have.

---oOo---

TIPS ON TALES

by

John C. Nitka

L. H. Rogers' Kite Trust (1900): Four boys, each from a poor family, are brought together by fate; they form a combine, which by shrewd stock manipulations makes them rich. After lulling the reader into believing he has picked up an Horatio Alger story, however, Harding hits him with some stiff lectures on social science and mathematics, with considerable U. S. history thrown in, so that for a time I wondered if I were back in school again (grisly thought!). After beating the reform drums, the author then plunges deep into occult seances and Blavatsky as a counter-irritant. This confused melange may technically rate as fantasy, but it hardly qualifies as good fantasy.

Thames Williamson's Beginning at Dusk (1935) is a better bet. This is a supernatural novel much in the manner of Thorne Smith. It is humorous, but less slapstick than Smith, being on the whole better written. Though dealing with a conventional fantasy gambit---ghosts which rise from their graves at nightfall---it is none the less enjoyable, and to be recommended for evening entertainment.

William LeQueux's Great White Queen (1898): Because LeQueux wrote similar material in much the same period as H. Rider Haggard, his work has been overshadowed to a great extent by this more famous contemporary. This is a pity, for there is much excellence and beauty in his work. Like Haggard he holds his readers' attention to the last page, and unlike Haggard he does not subject a popular character to excessive use. This lost race tale begins prosaically enough in an English school, where the son of an African queen has been sent---ostensibly to be educated, but actually to have him assassinated. It is only through the cupidity of the intended murderer that the boy escapes. Along with a companion, he plots a successful overthrow of his ruling mother, which is accomplished in the usual fashion complete with narrow escapes and daring escapades. The plot is trite, but the telling is masterful, primarily because Le Queux takes it seriously.

Neal Fyne's Land of the Living Dead (1897): Three survivors of a shipwreck are cast ashore on an unknown land where aborigines worship a previously castaway of England as a god. The three successfully overthrow the ruler, the hero gets the inevitable girl, and all return home with enough gold to live like lords for the rest of their lives. Trite, but barely acceptable.

OPEN HOUSE

(letters from readers)

The infrequent appearance of "Open House" and (of late) of Commentator itself have conspired to delay publication of this letter (dated Feb. 19, 1950) longer than your editor likes. Better now than not at all, however. Writes Kenneth Sterling, M.D., member of the Department of Medicine of Harvard Medical School and the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, and friend of the late H.P. Lovecraft:

It is unfortunate that Keller's misleading article "Shadows over Lovecraft" (Fantasy Commentator II, 237) has remained uncontradicted so long. As science-fiction it may be interesting reading, but unfortunately it makes pretensions to being more than speculation.

A chain is as weak as its weakest link, and there are several rather rusty links in the chain of argumentation Dr. Keller has constructed in an effort to demonstrate that Lovecraft had congenital syphilis.

To begin with, Lovecraft's father allegedly died of paresis in 1898 according to the death certificate. Prior to Nogushi's demonstration in 1913 of treponema pallidum in the parietic brain, the understanding of the disease was fragmentary and its association with syphilis controversial. One can hardly accept without reservation such a diagnosis on the basis of a death certificate issued in 1898. Keller himself is aware of this and says (ibid., p. 242): "At that time the relation between paresis and syphilis was not clearly understood." Yet a few lines later he throws caution to the winds and is calling Lovecraft, senior "definitely syphilitic."

Obviously cognizant of the inconclusiveness of the death certificate, yet undaunted in his anxiety to build up a case, Keller tries (ibid., p. 244) to bolster up the diagnosis of paresis with some meagre evidence bearing on the final illness. Unfortunately for his hypothesis, however, critical appraisal of the dates makes the probability of paresis diminish rather than increase. We are told, concerning Lovecraft's father, "...there was a period of some years when he was deteriorating mentally, and this period of mild psychosis terminated in a cerebral insult." His affairs were then taken out of his hands and he was evidently disoriented during the ensuing five years, after which he died. This bit of history is presented as a "partial picture of the father's last ten years." While it is not impossible that this could be paresis, it is certainly infrequent for an untreated parietic to survive this long; most die within two to five years (cf. J. Earle Moore, Modern Treatment of Syphilis; J. H. Stokes, Modern Clinical Syphology). In Diseases of the Nervous System, W. R. Brain states that survival for more than three years was exceptional before the introduction of malarial therapy for paresis by Wagner-Jauregg in 1917. Yet Keller's conclusion, based on this questionable evidence and in spite of his own qualifications, is that Lovecraft's father was "positively syphilitic."

Keller then sets forth three "axioms in medical science", the first of which is dubious at best, and the second and third of which are utterly false. To consider these individually:

"(1) Cerebral insults, in men forty or younger, are almost always the result of syphilis." This used to be widely taught, especially concerning cerebral insults occurring in the twenties of a man's life, but in recent years non-syphilitic lesions such as congenital aneurysms of the circle of Willis or its branches (cf. Richardson and Hyland, Medicine 20:1, 1941) have been found as frequent causes of subarachnoid and also intracerebral hemorrhages; many clinicians feel the incidence of such is definitely greater than that of neurosyphilis.

Moreover, Winfield Lovecraft had his stroke at forty, at which age premature arteriosclerosis and hypertension are certainly sufficiently frequent to make this "axiom" practically worthless.

"(2) The wife of a syphilitic is a syphilitic." Keller should know better than this. According to Moore (op. cit., p. 20), even where an individual has early syphilis (i.e., the communicable stage, with darkfield positive genital lesions) the spouse may escape infection. Moreover, in late syphilis (after two years and especially after five years) the likelihood of infection is slight. Even if one grants that Lovecraft's father had paresis, it is perfectly possible that he contracted syphilis at twenty, married at thirty and developed paresis at forty, Lovecraft's mother escaping infection altogether. The usual long period between the initial infection and the onset of paresis (Keller himself says fifteen or twenty years) makes such a chronology as likely as any. Since the date of the marriage is unknown, there is no ground whatever for Keller's assertion (p. 242) that Lovecraft, sr. was "...at that time...definitely syphilitic, in the communicable stage of that disease." The fact that he has even tried to claim that the disease was then communicable suggests he is aware of the falsity of his "axiom."

"(3) The child of a paretic is a syphilitic." This probably stems from the obsolete Colles' "law" of 1837, claiming the paternal transmission of syphilis without infection of the mother. According to evidence of recent decades, a "...child in utero cannot be infected unless the mother herself has syphilis" (Moore, op. cit.). If this axiom were true there would be no need for Keller to try to prove the mother syphilitic, again suggesting that he knows better.

To complete this shaky edifice Keller states: "Finally, if both Lovecraft Sr. and wife were syphilitic, then the son was a case of hereditary syphilis." Moore quotes from the records of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, where of 155 children of untreated syphilitic mothers over a third showed no evidence of congenital syphilis. While maternal syphilis is a prerequisite for congenital syphilis, it does not necessarily make its occurrence inevitable.

Thus has Keller propounded a hypothesis based on questionable premises and supported by a number of exploded myths. His attempt at armchair psychoanalysis is as wild as his syphilology. Particularly erroneous is the effort to make it appear that in his writing Lovecraft "...was, as the narrator, actually...experiencing all the horror of the situations he so carefully described," and that "...he lived it, under a shadow from which he could not escape." To unravel the web of unfounded speculations thus woven about Howard Lovecraft's personality development would be more arduous than the subject-matter warrants.

It is to be hoped that Keller's active imagination will in the future be given its free rein in the writing of fantasy rather than in attempting to cope with the cramping bonds of historical research.

Writes Donald V. Allgeier, subscriber and long-standing fantasy reader:

I have been enjoying Commentator a great deal, and particularly Moskowitz's "Face of Fantasy: 1950" in the last issue. However, I want to take issue with him on one point at least.

He states that there just isn't a market for Unknown Worlds at this time. I maintain that such a fact has never been really proved. The test revival was not a fair one; here, without much publicity, was one trial issue of reprints. Can one issue tell the story? Many people had already read the stories and did not care to buy them again. Not everyone is a collector or cares to re-read stories, even if they are good ones.

The biggest mistake, however, was the use of Cartier on the cover. For the aficionado, he's fine---but his cartoon-like style is hardly appropriate for attracting new readers, those who know nothing about the magazine. This cover,

with elves and all, gave the impression of a magazine of fairy tales. Many potential fantasy fans were frightened away. To attract new readers, the cover should have been toned down a bit so that they would at least look at the contents. Also, another number or two should have been tried, and there should have been more advertising in Astounding.

I believe there is a market for the Unknown type of fiction. Witness the way books reprinting Unknown's stories are selling: virtually every novel and most of the short stories from the magazine have been reprinted and have been devoured avidly. Surely if they sell to book-buyers they will sell to magazine-buyers. The top writers are still tops with the fans. The occasional fantasies appearing in Astounding and Startling are popular. No, Sam, I don't think a fair test was made. I think there is a market. Maybe the Magazine of Fantasy will tap it---but I'd still like to see Unknown back on the stands.

And contributing editor Sam Moskowitz replies:

It was with considerable pleasure to learn that Donald Allgeier, whom I remember from readers' columns in the 1930's, has retained enough of his initial interest in fantasy to rally to the defense of Unknown Worlds.

First he states that the test of one issue alone is unfair. I believe this is flying in the face of facts. Unknown and Unknown Worlds have not been tested for one issue but for forty---and certainly that is a fair trial. When the first (March, 1939) number appeared it had been preceded and was accompanied by a much stronger blare of publicity than pulp magazines usually get. Trucks of the American News Company, which distributed it, carried huge posters announcing the new magazine. Ads appeared in most of Street & Smith's other publications. The company purchased full-page advertisements in most of the important semi-pro science-fiction and fan journals of the period, including convention programs. One Unknown cover was even reproduced in Time magazine (July 10, 1939). Let us remember, also, that Unknown appeared at a time when fantasy interest was booming and that it received superior distribution. In addition, it offered buyers more pages for the money than any other title of the period save its companion, Astounding. As to the quality of its material, I agree with Mr. Allgeier: it was exceptional. Street & Smith is not a firm that gives up new publications easily; it has been known, in fact, to carry some titles that lost money for as long as three or four years before giving them up. Sometimes, as in the case of Romance Range and Air Trails, its publications would eventually show a profit after several years of steady losses. This was the case with Unknown. Editor John Campbell has stated that towards the end it was hovering at the break-even point---but the acute paper shortage then prevalent made it advisable for Street & Smith to use Unknown's quota for magazines that were showing greater returns. During this period of trial, while Unknown made little or no profit, this period of more than four and a half years, Street & Smith tried everything within pulp reason to make it succeed. It actually became the company's official experimental magazine. There were continual changes in the cover design, size, styles of type-face, lay-out and illustrations; there were experiments with serials, complete novels, issues with nothing but short stories. It is also known that some of the higher officials in the company liked the magazine personally, bent over backwards to keep it rolling, and later were willing to attempt its revival.

Why did Unknown fail? The reason is simple, and it applies to all magazines that feature weird and fantasy material predominately: the American public prefers outright science-fiction. This is psychologically understandable. We live in a country of machines, production and advanced technology. Our entire history is one of mechanical progress. At a fantastic pace we have brought into reality more and more of the prophetic dreams of early science-fictionists. Sci-

ence teaches that almost anything is possible. In this country we do not have to amuse ourselves with wishing for betterment through miraculous or supernatural means, for we are usually able to bring dreams to quick fruition through the applied diligence of science. Fantasy and weird fiction may offer temporary escape but science-fiction offers both escape and hope---a confidence that great things will yet happen and that we may see them within our lifetimes. While perusing pure fantasy (such as the type offered by Unknown) you may be entertained, but eventually you must put the magazine aside and face reality. Science-fiction, it seems to me, not only entertains but makes it easier to face reality by projecting through logic the fact that practical things may be done to make life better. And in the eyes of the majority of the reading public this type of appeal cannot be overcome by the superior manner in which most pure fantasy is written.

During Unknown's period two other predominately weird titles appeared: Strange Stories and Uncanny Tales; but these showed little sales appeal and soon expired. Strange Tales had of course died some years earlier, and Weird Tales, despite superb editing and an amazingly high pulp standard, never made more than a slight profit in its best days, and probably has not been doing well for the past fifteen years. Fantastic Adventures, which features predominately straight fantasy, has never sold as well as its sister Amazing Stories, on Palmer's own admission, and has several times been on the verge of collapse, its most striking gains having been registered when featuring a science-fiction cover illustration.

It is true that Unknown's greatest difficulty was in adequately expressing its contents on the cover. The very nature of the material made this a nearly impossible task, but I think Cartier came closer to achieving the objective than any other artist Street & Smith used.

The revived Unknown annual was certainly one of the biggest magazines from the viewpoint of size and wordage to be found for a quarter anywhere. It appeared during a new boom of science-fiction. It received excellent distribution. And it had a year to sell. While we admittedly might argue with the selection of stories chosen to reprint, these were at least adequate, and the number of copies printed was large. Despite all these things, sales were disappointing. Publishers cannot continue a title merely to satisfy the whims of a minority. Facts are facts. This type of fiction does not sell!

Mr. Allgeier states: "...virtually every novel and most of the short stories from the magazine have been reprinted...." I am afraid this is a bit too enthusiastic. Many stories have indeed been reprinted from Unknown---admittedly a far larger percentage than are reprinted from many so-called "quality" magazines---but not virtually every one. I have taken the trouble to compile a list of all stories from Unknown reprinted in books as of December, 1951. This can be summarized as follows: out of the 42 novels featured, twenty have appeared as books; this is a little under fifty percent. Out of 206 short stories and articles, 34 have been reprinted in book form; again a commendable number, but not "most" of them, for this is roughly seventeen percent. Almost half of the reprinted novels (nine) are by one author, L. Sprague de Camp; five more are by L. Ron Hubbard---which finds two authors responsible for seventy percent of the total. In the matter of shorts, over half are by three writers: Lester del Rey, Frank B. Long and Theodore Sturgeon. I think one might propound a reasonable argument for the reprintability of Unknown fiction being due to a small handful of very popular authors rather than a particular type of fiction in view of these figures, by the way; but I believe the other points I have brought out are sufficiently telling as to make it unnecessary. I wonder what Mr. Allgeier would think of that!

In any event, I sympathize with his desire to see Unknown Worlds back on the newstands once again. I always liked the magazine very much, and knowing why it failed did not make me less sorry to see it go.

THE SWORD OF GENGHIS KHAN

by
Thyril L. Ladd

Picture to yourself a vast torch-lighted hall with a row of elevated pedestals, in the center a great, jewelled throne. Picture, too, a magnificent image of a parrot, carved by some lost art from a single emerald, and before the throne a pedestal that bears a curved, magnificently gem-encrusted sword. This is the scene and setting of the climax, the tense culmination, of the weird adventures making up The Strange Story of William Hyde (1916), by Patrick and Terence Casey. Not only is the book a thriller among thrillers, but it is a well-plotted and well-written "lost race" novel as well.

William Hyde himself tells the story. He introduces himself as a drifter or beachcomber, making his food and whiskey-money by tricking the East Indian natives with artful chicanery. He is an enormous man---huge in stature, broad of build, with flaming red hair and blue eyes. This unusual appearance has much to do with the tale.

As he tells it, Hyde found himself in Borneo while searching for rare and exotic orchids. He hears local legends of a hidden race (alleged to have supernatural power) that is supposed to dwell in the bowels of an extinct volcano and seeks out the spot. Hyde finds the volcano, and manages to enter it by following a dry stream-bed through a river-carved tunnel---to find himself in a strange land indeed!

The lost race which he discovers comprises pure-blooded descendants of a Tartar army dispatched centuries ago by the Great Khan to conquer Borneo. The people are ruled by an almost-white golden-haired warrior-queen of unusual beauty. Her authority is secular, for in religion an equally beautiful, raven-tressed priestess commands. The people dwell in a city of great stones---boulders that have been hollowed out, by hand, to make homes and a temple. Twice daily, at dusk and dawn, these boulders "sing"---due to vibrations caused by the changing temperature.

Though it has been the custom to slay all strangers entering the land immediately, William Hyde is received with acclamations and reverence, led to the throne-room, and there crowned king. He takes the warrior-queen to wife. Back of this coronation is a prophecy, now seemingly fulfilled.

It had been reported to Genghis Khan that the army which he had sent to Borneo had been defeated. Now, it had been the Khan's resolute command that no Tartar might suffer defeat and live, so he had sent to those in Borneo his great jewelled sword, with the order that every warrior should fall upon it and die as penalty for failure. With this order came the warning that he would send forth one of his own sons who would personally execute every soldier who disobeyed.

It having been the custom, in those days, for wives to travel with the army, many of the defeated Tartars were loth to slay themselves and leave their families destitute in an unfriendly country. Therefore they retired to the volcano hideaway, safe from both the local enemies and their leader's wrath.

When Hyde appeared, his appearance was almost identical with the likeness of the great Khan, which was pictured in an ancient tapestry in the throne-room. He was, therefore, hailed as the long-awaited (and long-feared) ancestor and avenger. He was crowned king by right of his heritage, and when he seizes the great sword, breaks it in twain across his knee instead of summoning the descendants to execution, the people hailed him king indeed.

But in marrying the warrior-queen, Hyde unfortunately spurned the love proffered love of the high priestess. She, moreover, discovers that he is not

the prophecied messenger, but merely an adventurer. Convulsed by jealous hatred, she causes the people to rise, and Hyde can do naught but for his life. He himself escapes, though not without severe wounds inflicted by the priestess' enormous guardian ape, but his wife is left behind---nor does he ever learn her fate.

The conclusion of the book pictures Hyde planning a return trip to the lost land, since he believes his queen may still live, and the final pages of the story show him about to make his way once more into the Borneo jungles.

This is a terrific tale, one few readers will be able to set aside until finished. The aura of danger and suspense is beautifully sustained, and it seems the more vivid against a background of a weird and exotic environment. In this writer's opinion, The Strange Story of William Hyde is unquestionably one of the very best novels in the field of "lost race" fantasy.

---oO---

THUMBING THE MUNSEY FILES

with William H. Evans

(continuing the summaries of fantasy tales from Allstory-Cavalier weekly in 1915)

- July 3 "The Indigestible Dog Biscuits" by J. U. Giesy (8pp): The famous professor X. Zapt invents a wireless ray that explodes gunpowder at a distance. Complications develop when the device is tried out. Amusing.
- Sep. 18 "The God of the Invincibly Strong Arms: (1) The Affair of the Double Alibi; (2) The Temple at Marley-le-Roi" (13 & 18pp): The first pair in a series of six connected short stories dealing with the same theme and characters---the revolt of East against West, as personified by Hussian Khan of India and his opponent (who foils him), the American Stuart Vandewater. The series is well-written and interesting, and contains several fantastic touches. Recommended.
- Sep. 4 "The Fatal Gift" by George Allan England (4 parts: 28, 16, 18, 12pp): An extremely interesting and unusual novel, more a psychological study than an out-and-out fantasy, of the attempt to create a perfect woman.
- Sep. 25 "The God of the Invincibly Strong Arms: (3) The Tale of the Living Corpse" by Achmed Abdullah (16pp).
- Oct. 2 "The God of the Invincibly Strong Arms: (4) The Affair of the Million Francs Gold" by Achmed Abdullah (17pp).
- Oct. 9 "The God of the Invincibly Strong Arms: (5) The Mystery of the Missing Syllable" by Achmed Abdullah (20pp).
"The Ghostly Crocodile" by Elmer Brown Mason: Van Dem collects, by indirect means, a sacred albino crocodile from a temple in India. This story just barely scrapes in as fantasy.
- Oct. 16 "The God of the Invincibly Strong Arms: (6) The Affair of the Luminous Death" by Achmed Abdullah (16pp).
- Oct. 30 "Mask of the Red Garden" by Rothven Wallace (39pp): The appearance of triceratops footprints near a mysterious chateau in eastern Canada begins the action. Rockford investigates, finds the usual mad scientist, meets and falls in love with his daughter. Finally he finds the father makes "fossils." Some very good atmosphere in the first part.
- Dec. 4 "The Son of Tarzan" by Edgar Rice Burroughs (6 parts: 27, 21, 22, 17, 39, 24pp): Tarzan's son is kidnapped, lands in Africa, and manages to do as much as his father did.