

**NOTES
AND
COMMENT**

NUMBER TWO

NOTES AND CONTENT

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THE STORY OF 'WONDER' (Part 1)

Gernsback's Science Fiction Mission

Of the three American science fiction pulps begun before the war whose files cover more than a single shelf, Wonder Stories had the most chequered, and therefore most interesting, career. From the time it was started by Hugo Gernsback, after three years of nursing Amazing through its teething troubles, to its end in 1955, it changed its title twice, its format three times, its price four, and bore the imprint of five different publishing companies. (Actually the magazine had only two publishers, the other imprints belonging to subsidiaries.)

Once, for a brief but agonising period, it disappeared from the newsstands altogether, to be revived and remodelled by the firm which developed it into Thrilling Wonder Stories, long the most consistently popular of the science fiction magazines catering for a general readership as well as an informed following. Always the element of adventure in its stories was more noticeable than the science, the atmosphere more important than the writing. At times its literary standards sank to a dismal low: during the war years it presented a dull round of pure hack-work while it pandered to the most juvenile instincts. But by 1948 it developed a surprising maturity, both in its stories and its editorial slant.

It was the "old" Wonder that sponsored the Science Fiction League, outcome of a long campaign by founder Gernsback to encourage the crusading spirit of SF fandom by such devices as "Science Fiction Week", when youthful enthusiasts sought to spread the gospel by sticking propaganda labels on walls and lamp-standards. But if it ever added at all to Wonder's circulation fandom failed to save it from the fate which overtook it in 1936, when distribution troubles forced its suspension until Standard Magazines acquired the title, prefixed it with the "Thrilling" trademark, and gave it a new lease of life.

The first issue of Science Wonder Stories appeared in June 1929 under the imprint of the Stellar Publishing Corporation, its striking cover proclaiming it "A Gernsback Publication", its editorial page flaunting an imposing array of Associate Science Editors whose function was to pass upon the scientific bases of its stories. Gernsback himself assumed the role of Editor-in-Chief, with David Lasser as Literary Editor and Frank R. Paul as Art Director. A slogan declared "Prophetic Fiction is the Mother of Scientific Fact", while Gernsback editorialised on his twenty years' promotion of the movement of SF in America (incidentally for the first time calling it by its modern name, science fiction, not scientific fiction or scientific-tion) and of a circle of authors whose support he still retained after his loss of Amazing Stories. He claimed that the title of the magazine had been selected by its potential subscribers, who had been

circularised in advance: the response had been "truly amazing". Its fans, he pronounced gravely, regarded the "tremendous new force with a sort of reverence": witness the first of the prize-winning letters he published on "What Science Fiction Means to Me", in addition to the enthusiasms of "The Reader Speaks".

On the face of it, the new rival to Amazing was not vastly different from the magazine which editor-publisher Gernsback had left to the tender mercies of his old associate Dr. T. O'Connor Sloane. Paul's unvarying artwork was conspicuous inside and out; size and make-up were very similar, though pictures of the authors were an innovation. Another new idea was a science news feature; later came "Science Questions and Answers".

The second issue reflected the growing interest in astronautics (which Editor Lasser encouraged further by writing the first English book on the subject, "The Conquest of Space", N.Y. 1931) in the shape of a serialised translation of "The Problems of Space Flying" by the German engineer writing as Captain Hermann Noordung. (July-Sept. 1929)

In fact, from the standpoint of the experienced SF reader, Science Wonder's stories were at first hardly more interesting than its non-fiction content, in spite of the infiltration of several of Amazing's favorite contributors. But such tales as Jack Williamson's "The Alien Intelligence" (July-Aug. 1929; reprinted Captain Future Spring-Fall 1942), David H. Keller's "The

Human Termites" (Sept.-Nov. 1929; reprinted Captain Future Winter-Fall 1940) and D. D. Sharp's "The Eternal Man" (Aug. 1929; reprinted Startling Jan. 1939, Wonder Annual 1950) linger in the memories of those who belong to a generation more concerned, then, with the quantity than the quality of the reading available to them. Their powers of discrimination were not so dull, though, that they did not find something lacking in the untutored efforts of some of the new writers Gernsback introduced, mostly through the pages of Air Wonder Stories, the companion publication he launched in July.

Through this he hoped to attract to science fiction the immense air-minded following of the aviation story magazines, by applying the same technique of extrapolation to their tales of aeronautical adventure in the manner of Victor MacClure's "The Ark of the Covenant" (July-Oct. 1929) and George Allan England's "The Flying Legion" (Jan.-April 1930) which classics he reprinted. But if these and a few new efforts by old hands like Edmond Hamilton, aided by Paul's illustrations, made the magazine reasonably interesting, the venture succeeded only in so far as it catered for the voracious SF lover, in deference to whom the imaginative scope of the stories was enlarged to embrace interplanetary travel. It also provided an opening for several promising new authors (e.g. Neil R. Jones, Leslie F. Stone, Henrik Dahl Juro, Lloyd Arthur Eshbach), who graduated to Science Wonder and enlarged on their success when, almost inevitably, the two

magazines were combined to form Wonder Stories in June 1930.

Prior to the fusion, Gernsback heightened his reputation for fostering new writers by organising cover story contests in both magazines, on the lines of that which had discovered fresh talent for Amazing not long since. As before, Paul did a brace of intriguing covers apropos of nothing in particular, around which tyro authors were invited to write short stories. As a consequence Charles R. Tanner, J. Harvey Haggard and P. Schuyler Miller, among others, made their debut in the field; while Raymond Z. Gallun, Ed Earl Repp and Raymond A. Palmer, who were to become firmly entrenched in due course, insinuated themselves without winning any prizes.

Another abortive attempt to extend the feelers of SF into another field was made through the less stylised pages of Scientific Detective Monthly. Specialising in crime thrillers with a scanty background of science, it had as its Editorial Commissioner Arthur B. Reeve, author of the Craig Kennedy stories, which it featured prominently, with several by Edwin Balmer and W. B. McHarg previously presented in Amazing. Dr. Keller weighed in with his detective Taine of San Francisco, and such practised SF writers as R. F. Starzl, Ralph Milne Farley and Otis Adelbert Kline, augmented by newcomers Jones, Eshbach and Repp, did their best to give the magazine a scientific flavor. But in spite of vanishing criminals, safe-cracking robots, lie-detectors and an essay by Clark Ashton

Smith into "Murder in the Fourth Dimension" (Oct. 1930), *Amazing Detective Tales*, as it became with its sixth issue, faded after four more into science fiction's limbo of almost-forgotten things, leaving readers' demands for interplanetary crooks unsatisfied pro tem.

Science Wonder Quarterly continued handsomely, however, to supplement the monthly *Wonder*, with an appropriate adjustment of title after three issues. In discarding the "Science", Gernsback explained to readers of the new *Wonder* that the word had given to the uninitiated the impression that it was "a sort of scientific periodical" rather than a fiction magazine, thus hindering its mission as the organ of SF. Said the Scienceers, an earnest group of the initiated, sending congratulations on *Wonder's* first anniversary: "The omission has our hearty approbation." Seldom again was the oft-repeated argument about identifying science fiction as science fiction to be so amicably settled.

To hands that have become accustomed to the slim, pocket-sized magazines of this era, the bulky, 144-page *Wonder Stories Quarterly* of thirty years ago seems distinctly Brobdingnagian. To the fans of those days it was something you could really get your teeth into. Appearing concurrently with an equally massive *Amazing Quarterly*, it went to supplement the regular diet of science fiction provided by the rival monthly publications with a periodical feast of reading which was often more satisfying, both to the appetite and

to the discriminative sense. The novel-length stories it presented all in a lump instead of in the irritating serial form, its plentiful illustrations and tight-packed columns, all contributed to its delicious meaty aspect; and if the fare proved a little too lumpy at times, it was mostly digested quite happily. The only drawback to the heavy-weight, solid-bound issues was the necessity of clamping them firmly down to a board in order to cope with them comfortably, especially if you liked to read in bed.

The Rise of the Interplanetary Story

Resplendent with a gilded cover, *Science Wonder Quarterly* started off by featuring a translation of Otto Willi Gail's "The Shot into Infinity" (Fall 1929; reprinted *Science Fiction Quarterly* Winter 1941); its sequel, "The Stone from the Moon", followed in the Spring 1930 issue. These somewhat heavy but then quite fascinating tales were inspired by the astronomical ambitions of the German rocketeers, of whose Society for Space Travel one Willy Ley duly wrote in a letter to "The Reader Speaks"; he proposed to give his fellow members a talk on science fiction, as a change from the technical dissertations of Professor Oberth... at that time, astronautics and science fiction made progress together.

In the same correspondence columns, Associate Editor C. P. Mason was informing *Wonder* readers of the formation of the American Interplanetary Society, of which

Managing Editor David Lasser and contributors Laurence Manning, Fletcher Pratt and G. Edward Pendray were other prime movers. (Later two more SF writers, Nathan Schachner and Dr. William Lemkin, became the Society's Secretary and Librarian.)

As Gawain Edwards, bearded Vice-President Pendray had amused himself writing "A Rescue from Jupiter" (Feb.-Mch. 1930) for the monthly Science Wonder; it, too, had a sequel, "The Return from Jupiter" (Mch.-Apr. 1931). It was Manning who, after collaborating with Pratt on "The City of the Living Dead" (May 1930; reprinted Startling July 1940), wrote those classic interplanetary pieces, "The Voyage of the Asteroid" (Summer 1932) and "The Wreck of the Asteroid" (Dec. 1932 - Feb. 1933), followed by the "Man who Awoke" series and the popular Stranger Club stories. Pratt, an earlier collaborator with Irvin Lester on "The Reign of the Ray" (June-July 1929), which played with the idea of a war against the USSR in the 'thirties, distinguished himself with "The Onslaught from Rigol" (Winter 1932; reprinted Wonder Story Annual 1950); by which time the demand for "interplanetary" stories had become so marked that Quarterly issues consisted of little else, and were labelled to advertise the fact.

R. H. Romans' "The Moon Conquerors" (Winter 1930; reprinted Science Fiction Quarterly Summer 1940; PB 1944, London) and "The War of the Planets" (Summer 1930) were among the first full-length stories to set this trend, to further which an Interplan-

etary Plot Contest was organised.

By offering prizes to readers whom he could not induce to try their strength as authors, Gernsback persuaded them at least to part with their ideas for such stories so that his established contributors might put them to good use when they were stuck for a plot. Such fertile writers as Ray Cummings, Clark Ashton Smith, R. F. Starzl and Jack Williamson were not above accepting assistance from fans who proved capable of constructive thoughts along these lines as well as the withering criticisms that inspired the competition.

Discounting those relying on "a war between two planets, with a lot of rays and bloodshed", which were discouraged in favor of "new points of view on interplanetary exploration", the editors found an originality and freshness in many readers' ideas "often unmatched by the best of our authors."

Among those who managed to maintain their reputations unaided in the Quarterly, Stanton A. Coblenz with "Into Plutonian Depths" (Spring 1931; PB 1950, N.Y.) and John Scott Campbell with "Beyond Pluto" (Summer 1932; reprinted Fantastic Story Fall 1951) were fairly conspicuous. More so was Australian mystery writer J. H. Walsh, whose tale of intrigue and adventure in space, "Vandals of the Void" (Summer 1931; reprinted Fantastic Story Spr. 1951) saw book publication in England that year, though "The Vanguard to Neptune" (Spring 1932; Wonder Story Annual 1952) was not so

fortunate, appearing only as a pocketbook as late as 1952. (Both were published in French in the '50s.)

The final issue (Winter 1933) divided the honours between German Ludwig Anton's "Interplanetary Bridges" and "Exiles on Asperus" by Britain's John Beynon Harris (now John Wyndham), who was still to contribute further to the monthly in which he had made his appearance in May 1931 with "Worlds to Barter".

Other British writers in the Wonder magazines at this time were George B. Beattie and Benson Herbert. Festus Pragnell was another English reader who was to turn contributor before long.

Aided by expert C. A. Brandt, who had rejoined him as Literary Editor, Gernsback continued eagerly to implement his policy of presenting the work of European writers, holding out to his readers the promise of several interplanetary novels he had secured on a trip to England, France and Germany in 1932.

The Teutonic school was well established already. Early in the career of the Quarterly it had featured the slow-moving stories of Otfried von Hanstein, "Electropolis" (Summer 1930) and "Between Earth and Moon" (Fall 1930); later, three more were serialised in the monthly. Bruno G. Burgel's "The Cosmic Cloud" (Fall 1931) was another German product. "A Daring Trip to Mars" by Max Valier, rocketry's first martyr, appeared posthumously in July 1931.

In due course the monthly reflected the French influence with S. S. Held's "The Death of Iron" (Sept.-Nov. 1932; Wonder Story Annual 1952) and Eugene Thebault's "The Radio Terror" (June-Oct., 1933). If all this foreign infiltration was frowned upon by the now considerable host of American SF writers, they did not demur. After all, SF was truly international, as the letter columns testified, and at least it kept the translators busy.

In his constant design to organise his readers as propagandists for his stock-in-trade, Gernsback offered 500 dollars in prizes for letters on "What I have done to spread science fiction", which he published in the Quarterly. "The editors feel they have a great mission", he wrote earnestly, "But it is impossible for us to succeed... unless our readers preach the gospel of science fiction. The select group of readers which now exists is a marvellous nucleus for a far greater mass... yet to come." He suggested talking to club meetings, writing letters to the papers, and selling magazine subscriptions to relatives; though carefully he emphasised that "this is not a subscription contest. Our purpose is only to convert others to the cause of science fiction."

In Science Wonder, he harped on the "Science Fiction Week" which was specially set aside for an intensification of this campaign to confer "immense benefit on all who have not yet had the pleasure and profit that comes from close acquaintance with science fiction." Supporters were to

publicise "the existence and power of this great educational force...in several interesting ways which [would] bring them into the public eye and mark them as pioneers of science fiction." One of these was to blaze a trail of sticky posters (available to all who cared to write in for them) on shop windows, news-stands, telegraph poles, and other sites suitably eye-catching. Thus science fiction, by degrees, was bound to sweep the world.

For attesting to his own efforts in this direction, a prize went to Raymond A. Palmer, who had developed the Science Correspondence Club; but "it is in the production of more accurate and better s-f that I am now greatly interested." He had started a scientific library which authors concerned with the accuracy of their work might consult, and established contacts giving rise to collaboration. It was the same Palmer who fourteen years later as editor of Amazing Stories was to sponsor the Shaver Mystery.

Another prizewinner was Ralph Milne Farley, who claimed that by writing and publishing newspaper articles on the field he had "furnished more ammunition than any fan." In due course Gernsback announced that the contest had been an unqualified success and, together with the Week, had given SF greater impetus than it had ever received before. But he was not entirely satisfied.

"There is no doubt but that the general public is still unaware of this newest of all forces in literature...it is a

sad commentary on our general level of taste or intelligence that, despite the growing popularity of science fiction, the appetite of the American magazine reading public still inclines to Wild West bronco-busting stories and sex thrillers... The editors have never believed so firmly as they do now that science fiction will one day sweep the country. But until that day comes, there is the steady winning of new converts by those we now have. So we go on year after year, building substantially the great army of science fiction fans..."

It was going to be a long, hard struggle.

-- Thomas Sheridan

(to be continued)

In the FSS Library:

THE HOPKINS MANUSCRIPT
by R. C. Sherriff

The moon is discovered to be lagging behind its eclipse schedule, with the obvious conclusion that it is slowing down and will fall upon the earth. It does fall in seven months, and the daily life of the leading character (a prize chicken breeder) during that period is given in excruciating detail. Throughout the book he is much more interested in his own small affairs than in the tremendous drama of catastrophe taking place around him. But the catastrophe is described in harrowingly graphic detail.

Mankind survives (though I doubt such survival from an actual collision) and begins a slow build-up from scratch to a livable civilisation on the ruins. But the debris of the shattered moon is found to contain valuable mineral resources. The usual political blundering and universal greed bring about wholesale war and destruction. Our hero is left to starve. Apparently man can survive anything but his own folly.

-- Stanley Millen

Published 1939 (Collancz, London; Macmillan, N.Y.; Ryerson, Toronto) 1940 (Collancz) 1958 as "The Cataclysm" (Pan PB, London) Serialised, e.g. Women's Weekly, Sydney, 2-9 June 1954.

LAST AND FIRST MAN
by C. S. Lewis

For a long view of the earth, its meaning, and its future carried into the infinite reaches of time, try "Last and First Man". Starting at the present, we journey rapidly with Mankind along the futile course of racial emergence, development and the inevitable decline. First Man (ourselves) falls and is succeeded by Second Man, et seq.

In each case, man contends with his own technology, masters it, and then goes down to eventual defeat through his own emotional and intellectual weakness. The moon falls (one chapter here) and you follow the various mutations of the human (?) race in weary and desperate pilgrimages from one alien planet to another, through ages of adjustment to environments, from triumph to catastrophe--and each time the philosophical implications of the experiment are etched with acid clarity. The book ends as it began, with the communication from a doomed Last Man to the currently doomed First Man by means of some unexplored corridor of time.

-- Stanley Millen

Published 1930 (Methuen, London) 1931 (Methuen; H. Smith, N.Y.) 1932, 1934 (Methuen) 1937 (Pelican PB) 1953 (S. F. Book Club, London) In collection "To the End of Time" (Funk & Wagnalls, N.Y. 1953)

THE FLAMES

by Claf Stapledon

The approximate 30,000 word length of Dr. Stapledon's last story scarcely warrants his publishers' description of it as a novel unless they were using the word in an older sense. As one would expect, there is novelty in it, but it is a novelty more of detail than of form or content.

The concept of vital and sentient flames as symbols of spirit is about as old as sun worship. The attempt to compromise between spirituality and practical cunning is even older; nor is there a great deal of originality in the reflection that man's obtuseness and pottiness has him headed for his own destruction. Even the ingenuities of concept by which the sentient flames originating in the sun may be resuscitated in the high temperatures attainable through atomic fission, and thus, if men are willing, spread the benison of their spirituality so that a state of psycho-scientific symbiosis will develop, can scarcely disguise that the story is a simple restatement of the view that homo still shows little prospect of becoming sapiens.

"The story", say the publishers, "may be taken as symbolising some of the contemporary human problems." It may — and perpetual ones, too. It also indicates a line of contemporary pessimism. It does not see man taking voluntarily any way out of his present impasse. But though it does not share the dejection of spirit

which darkened Wells' final observations on our self-destructive career, there seems little difference of expectation between the two authors concerning the fate of this civilisation.

Their main dissimilarity lies in scale of view. The spirituality with which Wells was concerned was limited and almost measurable. It is implicit in his works that he considered man, with no very great modifications, to be evolution's last word; failure, therefore, must mean utter defeat — the end. For Dr. Stapledon, however, spirit — life in evolution — is more important than such temporary manifestations of it as mankind. Were it not for that, he too might be oppressed to the same unhappy sense of futility at the prospect of the unregenerate homo astutus blundering closer to the end of his tether.

— John Beynon

Published 1947 (Secker & Warburg, London) in collections "To the End of Time" (Funk & Wagnalls, N.Y., 1953, "Worlds of Wonder" (Fantasy Pub. Co., Los Angeles, 1949)

THE COSMIC GEODS AND ONE OTHER
by John Taine

Billions of years ago, faced with the destruction of their cosmos, the dawn race of Eos wrote: "We know that Eos must vanish like a dream, and that all our substance must become less than a dream. But we shall survive. Our life, our intelligence, shall outlast our extinction by ages.

These records which we have sealed up in hundreds of millions of shells resistant to all destructive agencies except directly applied nuclear disintegration, will be scattered broadcast throughout the universe with the annihilation of our planet. For nearly the whole five million years of our Decline we have labored to compile and safeguard in these records... all the science of our race, now about to vanish from the universe..."

In this book John Taine records that the first of these "man"-made meteors -- spherical repositories of pre-human, extragalactic history and wisdom -- was found on Earth in 1879. The story opens in the 22nd Century, by which another forty-three of the geoids have been discovered and their contents partly deciphered by members of the Alliance of World Scientists. The world is in a bad way 300 years hence. The Seventh World War is in progress, and by the end of the story Earth's total population has been reduced to a mere twelve million, and science has been scrapped. Man has turned his eyes from the stars, and with a clouded mind's eye looks to the star-gazers -- astrologists -- instead.

The Eos of this book has nothing to do with the Eos of Taine's "The Time Stream", incidentally. The author considered it his best work, but I doubt if many of his admirers will agree with him. It is scarcely a story; rather, we have a sort of combination of "Death into Life" and "Star Maker", and the style strongly suggests Stapledon. Yet I cannot enthus-

astically recommend it, except to those who can't get enough Stapledon.

I missed the crackle of character conflicts so ongrossingly developed in "Quayle's Invention" and "The Iron Star", though I must give Taine credit for his invention of a set of Stapledonian intelligences -- the Controllers of Life, the Fully Living, the Living Dead and the Hopeful Monsters.

Since there is no description in the story of the Eosians whom he elected to depict on the jacket and twice in the interior illustrations, Lou Goldstone can only be praised for his highly imaginative concept of these alien beings.

At least, I learned from this book what I am -- a descendent of the Eosian Renegades. For they felt that life was but a torment to its possessors of intelligence, and that a nihilistic acceptance of planetary extinction was the only humane solution for "humanity", with which rare streak of sanity I heartily concur.

As for "The Black Goldfish", which fills out the last 77 pages of the book, it does little more than that. Its science is slim, its plot and style second-rate. Its original title was "Vitamines Alpha and Omega": the spelling of vitamins will give you an idea of when it was written.

— Forrest J. Ackerman

Published 1949 (Fantasy Publishing Company, Los Angeles)

ROGUE QUEEN

by L. Sprague de Camp

This volume is a wonderful example of science fiction not having to depend on pulp magazine sale to earn the writer a living. It is doubtful if any magazine, *Galaxy* included, would have published this, for it is a novel of sex: not pornography, but sex as handled from a scientific viewpoint. De Camp has set up a world in which people operate a form of government similar to bees. There are several self-contained city-states (or hives) populated by neuter males and females who are the laborers and soldiery, a selected group of functioning males who have but one function, and finally the queen herself who maintains the status quo as regards a healthy and stable population.

Into this situation comes a survey ship from Earth, containing among others in the crew a pair of lovers, who carry on in Earthly fashion to the astonishment and eventual enlightenment of a rebel girl who stole an male and deserted her city. Against a background of inter-city warfare, de Camp spins a delightful comedy in following the awakening of the neuter-female rebel. One of this author's very best works, and highly recommended.

— Wilson Tucker

Published 1951 (Doubleday, N.Y.) 1952
(Dell PB, N.Y.) 1954 (Pinnacle PB, London)

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