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Redd Boggs' SPIROGG

SPACEHOUNDS OF IPC: A NOTABLE FAILURE (First of Two Parts)

This article was written, according to a note on the manuscript, 30-31 January 1962 and 1 February 1962 and was written by a person once wellknown to me who has something in common with me even after 32 years; he was myself of Minneapolis days. I think the article was intended as a companion piece to an article on the *Skylark* series, written some years earlier and published, perhaps, in Bob Silverberg's *Spaceship*. Next day after writing the present article I sent it off to *Shangri-L'Affaires* (again according to a note on the MS), but it never appeared there or, till now, anywhere else.

It hadn't been published by the time I took up residence in Los Angeles in the summer of 1962, and once on the scene I understood how things were, that *Shaggy* was then in a state of estivation and that my article would not appear there anytime soon. Therefore I applied to the editor of *Shaggy* or the keeper of the *Shaggy* MSS (who may have been Ron Ellik) for the return of my article. Once I had it back, I never offered it for publication again. Perhaps it was because, around that time or soon after, the "New Wave" went splashing tsunami-like around the microcosm, and an article about Doc Smith seemed a little passé, if it wasn't already when written.

The article remained in my files all these years, although it was brought forth now and then with a view to publishing it. Gretchen liked the article and even edited it lightly in pencil on one occasion. I have used some of her emendations here, but for the most part I have followed the typescript of 1962, written by that fellow I still remember and feel some -- if not a lot of -- affinity for. Any comments or criticisms of this article properly should be addressed to him, if you can find him, lost in the mists of the Kennedy years of sad memory.

-- Redd Boggs

Most Doc Smith fans seem to be about equally divided between the "Skylark" and the "Lensman" orthodoxies, but a small, embattled minority has always stood in the middle, proclaiming the supremacy of *Spacehounds of IPC*. Smith himself was said to be one of these heretics (although he was also on record as believing *First Lensman* his best novel). Norm Metcalf's little squib on *Spacehounds* ("probably Doc Smith's best...") in *Idle Hands #5* (fifth Shadow-FAPA mailing) says nothing that was not said by Lew Martin 20 years earlier in Phil Bronson's *The Fantasite,* March-April 1942, but such nonconformist views still have the power to amaze and infuriate the legions lined up on both flanks of this opinion.

Everyone agrees, however, that *Spacehounds of IPC* was in fact the one lukewarm success among Doc Smith's "classics," and that the novel met serious resistance from the science fiction readers of the day primariiy -- so the theory has it -- because it disappointed their expectations in failing to reach the interstellar and intergalactic proportions of *The Skylark of Space* and *Skylark Three*. Yet, when considered entirely on its own merits, *Spacehounds* stands tall, and when examined as a pivotal segment of the Smith canon, it presents some fascinating aspects.

Spacehounds was the third Smith novel to see print and in its original magazine appearance it fell between the second and third *Skylark* novels. It was first published in three parts in *Amazing* for July, August, and September 1931. Probably this novel was offered as a deliberate change from the galaxy-spanning epics that preceded it, and therefore stands as a Smith experiment that was never followed up. Moreover, it is the first Smith novel that shows the influence of the science fiction that Smith had read in *Amazing* since his first novel appeared in that magazine in 1928. The opening scene, depicting the IPV *Arcturus* in its launching cradle ready to shoot away to Mars, displays much of the fascination for the drama of futuristic transportation that prompted Hugo Gernsback to launch *Air Wonder Stories,* full of monster zeppelins and airliners lumbering through thunderstorms and meteor showers, carrying a human cargo of heroes, villains, and plutocrats. The action through most of the novel has been scaled down to the rather prosaic dimensions of the typical Gernsback-age story, which was notably less daring in concept than the *Skylark* novels.

All the action in the story takes place within the solar system, which is unique for a Smith novel. But it is customary to overlook an obvious fact: that, given the spaceships in *Spacehounds,* which operate on power-beams rather than Bergenholms, the solar system is relatively and subjectively as vast to the Spacehounds as the entire galaxy is to the Patrol with the inertialess drive. The scope of *Spacehounds* is no smaller than that of *Skylark Three* or of *Gray Lensman* except when measured by lightyears or astronomical units. Far more fascinating than the relative scale on which the physical setting is built are other evidences in the novel that Smith had decided to retreat experimentally at least a little way toward the snug harbor of plausibility.

The Skylark of Space, I take it, came straight out of the realm of boys' books, and if the close parallels between the two stories mean anything, Smith was most profoundly influenced by *Tom Swift and His Motorcycle.* The Victor Appleton formula did not alter materially till Dick Seaton visited Norlamin in Chapter 9 of *Skylark Three* and was abruptly converted, as it were, from a larger-than-life Tom Edison (in whose youthful image Tom Swift obviously was cast) into a larger-than-life Albert Einstein: that is, from an inventor of inspired gadgetry into a formulator of cosmic principles involving the basic structure of the universe.

Seaton's transformation was probably not deliberately engineered by the author, but the shift occurred, and Seaton became the prototype of Smith's all-purpose heroes. By the end of *Skylark Three* he was functioning as the Platonic ideal of all human aspiration: the great fantasy hero who virtually singlehandedly, by his own will and resources, moulds his own fate and that of the universe itself. In direst straits, when he was lost in the second galaxy, Seaton was forced to holler for help, but only from an unhuman agency, Norlamin (read: God), and only on a friendly god-to-god basis. Kimball Kinnison had his own deity, Mentor of Arisia, but when Stevens, hero of *Spacehounds,* wants to "tell his troubles" to someone who can help him, he sends out a call to his friends and colleagues, Brandon and Westfall. Clearly, then, Stevens is a different sort of hero from Seaton or Kinnison.

By the end of the second *Skylark* novel, Seaton had become such an invincible hero that Smith must have given long consideration to some method by which his next hero would not vastly outclass all opposition by himself alone, thus turning the struggle into no-contest. Smith's solution was to split Seaton into two parts: the doer and the thinker. Though the two realms of activity are of course not mutually exclusive, and the doer may sometimes be found acting as the thinker, and vice versa, Smith's attention in *Spacehounds* centers first of all on the doer, Stevens, who thus becomes the nominal hero. His attention does not shift to the thinker -- in this case, really two men, Brandon and Westfall -- till later in the story.

I don't mean to imply that Stevens is portrayed as an utter dub in the realm of theoretical science; I want only to point out that his true forte is not thought, but good old American know-how. I should hasten to add, too, that this circumstance is not at all unusual in dawn-age science fiction. From *The Time Machine* on, the sf hero was conventionally a brave young man who is hired by an old, sometimes mad, scientist to help test and perfect the older man's great invention -- and incidentally, often enough, to rescue the scientist's pretty daughter from the deadly menace unleashed by the experiments. Stevens' relationship with Brandon and Westfall

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fits this pattern. He is working for them, he tells the heroine, modestly but with some apparent accuracy, "in the sense that a small boy helps his father run a lathe -- they're the brains."

Unlike Seaton, who came equipped with a lengthy although not very illuminating biography, Stevens seems to possess no accessible background other than several Olympic championships won as a "high and fancy" diver. We know little or nothing of his personal history previous to the moment we glimpse him as a "burly young man" striding through the "triple doors of the double air-lock" of the IPV *Arcturus.* He may as well have been a newly minted robot especially programmed for his role during the 446 days covered by this novel. He never quite comes to life at any time during the story, but he twitches twice or thrice, which indicates that he might have attained the state if he had been put into a situation where only a living hero would suffice. At least he impresses the reader as more nearly lifelike than Seaton, Kinnison, or even Costigan of *Triplanetary*, the last-named perhaps coming closest otherwise.

Although the author was extraordinarily remiss in concocting any human situation in which Stevens might have played a part, he nevertheless invented a plausible circumstance in which to depict the hero as doer. By putting him through the ordeal of a space wreck and a Crusoe adventure on uninhabited Ganymede, third moon of Jupiter, Smith gave Stevens his big chance to display his dauntless courage and practical mind. If Stevens showed up less of a hero than Robinson Crusoe, it is only because the author cheats on us after all. Ganymede in the story is plainly not the frigid, barren moon described in astronomy texts. Rather, it is Crusoe's island jerked from the South Pacific and swing into orbit around Jove's planet. Furthermore, Stevens' efforts to survive and be rescued are assisted greatly by a deus ex machina in the form of "a decidedly unusual comet" that yields heavy metals for a transmitting tube, and the even more fortuitous advent of a spaceship crewed by natives of Titan, who assist him valuably. Stevens' battle is heroic, but in the end he achieves a thoroughly unexciting victory because it is a triumph, not of will, but of circumstance.

(First of Two Parts)

TEARS IN MY EYES

I was telling Nikki some stories about Gretchen and laughing so hard that I fell off my chair. "I don't understand," she said, leaning over and helping me up. "You've said many times how torn in half you were when Gretchen died. And yet whenever you talk about her and her doings you laugh yourself silly."

"That's not a contradiction," I said. "I miss Gretchen every moment of every day because she was such a pleasure to be with. Now my life is mostly dull and burdensome. Gretchen was something special. She was like a character out of Dickens, larger and more splendid than life. There's never been anything like her."

"You've told me that," Nikki murmured. "Many times."

"Did I tell you about the time she and I attended a play given in Wheeler Hall auditorium on the U. C. campus? We had parked in the library parking lot -- in those days I had a permit -- on the north side of Wheeler, and after the play we sought to leave by one of the exits on that side of the building, alongside the stage. We were stopped by an usher, a small pretty undergraduate, who told us primly that we could not leave by that door. If we did, she explained, we would set off the door alarm.

"We turned away, docilely enough, but as we started back up the aisle, Gretchen said lightly, 'Too bad! It would have been fun to hear the alarm clanging and sirens wailing just because we left by the wrong exit.' I had known Gretchen a dozen or more years by then, and should have known better, but I was foolish enough to remark, 'Aw, the girl's probably just fibbing. Why would they activate the alarm when all these people are in here?'

"I saw fire leap to her eyes, like a supernova going off. I may have been unwary a moment before, but I could read the danger signs. I hastened to grab her arm, but she shook me off. With a growl, she wheeled around and marched back down the aisle toward the forbidden door. The little blonde usher took one look at her and prudently fell back without a protest. The whole defensive front of the San Francisco Forty-Niners couldn't have stopped her. Gretchen hit the door and hurled it back with a crash that shook Sather Tower to its foundations and made wiggles on seismographs in Tokyo -- but no alarm sounded. The usher had been fibbing after all.

"I leaned against the wall, bent over with laughter, while the little usher and some others of the staff gathered to look with consternation at the door still shuddering from Gretchen's sudden departure. I intended to follow her, but now that several persons were on the scene, I decided not to attempt it. 'The cautious seldom err,' as Confucius pointed out. I had to leave by the front door and walk around the building to catch up with her."

"But why would she do such a thing?" Nikki asked, prettily puzzled.

"She hated to be lied to, for one thing," I said. "Despite her reputation to the contrary, she was really a considerate and generous person. It was only when she was lied to, or mistreated, especially by government bureaucrats, her professors, and similar officious types, that she got angry. And when she got angry, look out!

"I am not exaggerating when I say that I worried about her every waking moment, and many sleeping ones, for seventeen years, but this simple fact rests on a Yorkshire pudding of fancy. For she was never predictable. Life was difficult with her, but it was always exciting. There was never anybody like Gretchen."

I gazed back down the long corridor of time, trying to glimpse her again, and shook my head wonderingly. Then I looked at Nikki and wiped the tears from my eyes. Perhaps they were tears of laughter.

THE CAPTURED CROSS-SECTION

JEAN YOUNG, Animal Fair, RR 4, Box 47, Decorah, Iowa 52101

I loved your "larch" story in *Spirochete #67* ["A Sonoma Idyl"]. My family was like that, too, about funny words, mishearings and mispronunciations. "Soo-wert" for "dessert" (from my then baby brother), "dawky-bird," which my grandmother and then the rest of us used for "disselfink," that odd bird with the three-feather topknot seen in Pennsylvania Dutch designs. Grammy said that, as a child, she heard, in church, "Lord, I would be thy door-keeper" as "I would be thy dawky-bird," and later used it for any odd bird she didn't know.

The other pieces were fine, too. The "naming" story ["Rumpelstiltzkin, I Presume"] was a lot of fun. An alligator named Frank that could bark and wag his tail -- wonderful. Did you really dream that dream ["Tall Story"]? Being from Minnesota, you must have been used to tall women. Funny, most campuses I go to, the women come in all sizes and shapes, including short and fat. They are YOUNG, of course, but otherwise variable. Somehow I always imagined you were six feet one or six feet two. I only saw one full-length photo of you, that DAG took years ago.

JACK SPEER, 2416 Cutler N.E., Albuquerque, New Mexico 87106

Your version [of the "Jim Hill" song in "A Sonoma Idyl"] doesn't scan. The version I know goes "I know Jim Hill; he's a good friend of mine. Last year I rode rattlers all over his line," though I've also seen the latter part of your version.

I liked your takeoff on Genesis. That passage shows the ethnocentrics of primitive folk, whose only name for themselves is "the people" or "the real people," who consider their word for anything as its true name, and who think words have inherent meanings.

"Tall Story": Every generation is taller than the previous one; that's how we evolved from hobbits. There are women who proclaim superiority. I remember a passage by a lesbian extolling the superiority of sisterhood. I know there are more women than men in the US, but are they a majority of the human race? Considering female infanticide in places like China, I doubt it.

EC: Lots of song lyrics don't scan. School songs, for example, take a well-known tune like "Cheer, Cheer for Old Notre Dame" and alter it to "Cheer, Cheer for Humpelmeyer Junior Military Institute." You can jam lots of extra words or syllables into song lyrics if you must. Female infanticide (if it still exists) is balanced off by high male mortality rate from men being soldiers and engaging in hazardous occupations and activities like auto racing.

Women are more trouble than they're worth, but they're worth it.
