

# A Shot in the Dark

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It may have been a coincidence that wasn't quite coincidental.

In the Summer 1941 issue of the pulp magazine *Captain Future*, author Edmond Hamilton opened the lead novel (“Magician of Mars”) in a prison far out in space:

*“This dreary, forbidding little world was Cerberus, one of the three moons of the planet Pluto.”*

That by itself was a leap of imagination because it wasn't known that Pluto even had any moons until 1978. As small as Pluto had turned out to be, even smaller than Earth's moon, probably no one thought such a thing was likely. But the real bull's-eye was the name Hamilton gave one of the Plutonian satellites:

*“In the starry sky bulked the great white sphere of Pluto, the ice-sheathed outpost world of the System. Beyond it gleamed its two other moons, Charon and Styx.”*

Charon was in fact the name given to Pluto's first discovered moon, with no likely connection to a forgotten *Captain Future* yarn of over 35 years before.

The story is that the discoverer, James Christy, actually wanted to name the moon after his wife, Charlene, and hit on Charon as a scientific-sounding variation of her nickname “Char.” Only then he found out that her name was close enough to that of the mythological boatman of the River Styx in Hades to be compatible with astronomical naming conventions.

Two other Plutonian moons were dubbed Cerberus and Styx by Hamilton. In the fullness of time, two further moons actually were discovered, but they were named Nix and Hydra. It seemed as though Hamilton's chances of scoring more hits were finished — except that in 2011 and 2012, fourth and fifth moons were discovered.

The discoverers of the additional moons then ran a contest early in 2013 to select names for them, and the winners were Vulcan and Cerberus, with Styx in third place. Vulcan was a late entry provided by William Shatner himself, and if it hadn't been for *Star Trek* fans stuffing the ballot box, so to speak, Styx might have placed at least second. As it was, it was out of the running, and Vulcan and Cerberus were duly submitted for approval to the International Astronomical Union, which is responsible for celestial nomenclature.

On July 2, 2013, the IAU announced its decision. Vulcan was disqualified because Pluto was at the wrong end of the solar system. The name Vulcan had already been applied to a hypothetical planet between Mercury and the Sun, and while no such planet had ever been found, “vulcanoid” was still the term for asteroids within Mercury's orbit. So the IAU opted for Cerberus and the third-place winner, Styx. Unfortunately, Cerberus was already in use as the name of an asteroid. In the end, the compromise was to apply the alternate Greek spelling of the multi-headed watchdog of Hades, Kerberos, to Pluto's moon.

In short, that old science-fiction warhorse Edmond Hamilton scored a direct hit by imagining Pluto had moons at all when none were known or probably even considered likely, and he hit another bull's-eye by naming one of the moons Charon. He improved his score still further with Styx, but lost out on Cerberus due to a technicality. Since Kerberos is an alternate spelling of the same mythological character, however, he was at least close even there.

Of course, all this wasn't as random as all that. Hamilton operated in something like the real universe, and Pluto was already the established name, setting the tone for any further names. Since Pluto was the god of the Underworld, such names would likely be derived from well-known Hades-related mythology. Charon was one obvious name, and it occurred to both Hamilton and the moon's actual discoverer independently. The real coincidence is that strange story about the discoverer's wife's name that happened to resemble Charon.

As for the man behind the *Captain Future* story himself, Edmond Hamilton was born in 1904 and sold his first story to *Weird Tales* in 1926 at the age of 22. After that, he was off and running as one of the most prolific science-fiction writers of his time. A typical house ad in *Thrilling Wonder Stories* around 1941 might list him as not only having a short story in the next issue but also “novel-length” lead stories in the concurrent companion magazines *Startling Stories* and *Captain Future*. He must have worn out more than a few typewriters. While he could hack out world-destroying pulp stories with the best of them, he was capable of more thoughtful stories as his later work showed, though his reputation suffered for a long time due to his association with *Captain Future* when space opera fell out of fashion. His wife, fellow SF writer Leigh Brackett, said he taught her how to plot stories while she taught him something about style. He died in 1977 after a career spanning over half a century.

It may be difficult at this late date to tease out the exact credits for who did what, but *Captain Future* seems to have been the initial creation of editor Mort Weisinger, with Edmond Hamilton fleshing out the concept of a space-going super-hero and his oddly assorted companions, and writing most of the actual stories. I think it's safe to say that even if Weisinger suggested the issue's plot, something minor like naming a planet's moons when the matter came up in a story would have been Hamilton's department.

Hamilton may have written the *Captain Future* story as just a routine adventure in a pulp series aimed at the more juvenile end of the science-fiction spectrum, but he anticipated something better than probably even he knew while he was at it. Unfortunately, he died a year or so short of living to see how right he had been.

Lucky guess, coincidence, sharp thinking, or just a case of shoot enough arrows and occasionally one or two hit the target... whatever. The memory of Edmond Hamilton deserves a salute here.

NOTE: The Summer, 1941 issue of *Captain Future* with the story “Magician of Mars” is currently in print as a facsimile reprint published by Adventure House and is available from [adventurehouse.com](http://adventurehouse.com) or [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).

For the International Astronomical Union's announcement of the names for Pluto's fourth and fifth moons, see:

[http://www.iau.org/public\\_press/news/detail/iau1303](http://www.iau.org/public_press/news/detail/iau1303)

