

CAPTAIN FUTURE

YESTERDAY'S MAN OF TOMORROW

by Will Murray

Edmond Hamilton was possibly the most famous name in pulp science fiction during the thirties. He was a pioneer, a master of a then-new form, called "Space Opera." In an absolute sense, he was to pulp SF what George Lucas is to film SF today: a giant. As such, he was the logical choice to write Standard Publications' new SF hero, Captain Future, who was created by Editorial Director Leo Margulies and editor Mort Weisinger in response to the First World Science Fiction Convention held in New York in the summer of 1939. Margulies, the story goes, attended the convention out of curiosity, and was struck by this early manifestation of organized fandom. "I didn't think you fans could be so damn sincere," he blurted. Huddling with Weisinger, they created a character they called "Mr. Future, Wizard of Science," who would best be described as a futuristic version of Doc Savage. Weisinger, still years away from editing Superman, wrote a long prospectus for the character, which he outlined as a genetic superman who battled evil in the twenty-first century along with a trio of alien sidekicks. An extremely gimmick-minded editor, he must have thought Doc Savage the greatest series in history, because everywhere he went he brought Doc Savage ideas with him. (He was a personal friend of Doc's main writer, Lester Dent.)

But Weisinger had ideas of his own, too. A couple of them appeared in the Mr. Future prospectus and were never used. They later showed up in Superman when Weisinger took over that comic. One was Mr. Fu-

ture's device which intercepted light rays that had traveled off into space, thus enabling him to see events in the past. Superman needed no such device to accomplish this handy feat, however. One of Future's sidekicks, as outlined by Weisinger, was a robot constructed in Future's likeness, designed to substitute for him in emergencies. This is the source for Superman's robots.

This unnamed robot, along with the other supporting characters, which included a tiny, rubylike alien named Otho, which Future wore set in a ring (!), and Simon Wright, a walking encyclopedia with a photographic memory, but no initiative of his own, were an unwieldy group. When Margulies and Weisinger hired Hamilton to take on the series, the latter objected loudly to this supporting cast, and over a series of meetings Hamilton and the others refined the entire concept. The robot became Grag, a hulking mechanical man who combined strength and good-natured loyalty; Otho was turned into a white-skinned, emerald-eyed android who possessed the wit and intelligence Grag did not; and Simon Wright was recast as an elderly scientist who, at death, had his brain encased in a transparent box fitted with artificial eyes and force beams for mobility. Hamilton dubbed the trio the Futuremen, and somewhere along the line Mr. Future was rechristened Captain Future.

The end product of all this work was a novel, Captain Future and the Space Emperor, which appeared in the Fall 1939 issue of Captain Future. The quarterly was subtitled

"Wizard of Science," which became "Man of Tomorrow" not long after Superman acquired that particular nickname. Hamilton's first Captain Future novel attracted its share of attention. Lester Dent read it, probably at Weisinger's urging, and decided Hamilton had done such a good job imitating the Doc Savage style that Dent asked Hamilton to ghost Doc Savage. Hamilton declined. He was too busy. Humorist S. J. Perelman also picked up that premier issue and it inspired him to pen an article for the New Yorker titled "Captain Future, Block That Kick!" It consisted of a rather arch plot synopsis of the novel to make Hamilton and his hero look silly. Still, Perelman did admit that "Beside Captain Future, Wizard of Science, Flash Gordon and the Emperor Ming pale to a couple of nursery tots chewing on Holland rusk." But perhaps even that much was not meant to be complimentary.

Captain Future and the Space Emperor may not have been the greatest SF novel of all time, but it was good, escapist pulp, recounting Captain Future's battle with the evil Space Emperor, who is fomenting unrest on Jupiter where Earthmen co-exist peacefully with the native Jovians. The Space Emperor is the first of the many super-criminals Captain Future chased around the solar system. Others included the Wrecker, The Life-Lord, Dr. Zarro and Future's eternal adversary, Ul Quorn, aka the Magician of Mars. More on him later.

As explained in that first novel, Captain Future was really Curt Newton, the orphan son of scientist Roger Newton who fled to a secret laboratory on the moon in order to escape an enemy named Victor Corvo and to conduct experiments in artificial life. These experiments led to the creation of Grag and Otho, and the technology which preserved Simon Wright as the Living Brain. But after Newton's son Curtis was born, Victor Corvo caught up with him and killed Roger and

his wife. In revenge, Grag and Otho killed Corvo barehanded, and a dying Elaine Newton entrusted the upbringing of her infant son to the inhuman trio.

True to her wishes, Simon Wright, Grag and Otho raised Curt Newton in the solitude of the moon, teaching him, acting as surrogate parents and ultimately transforming him into a physical and intellectual superman along a program obviously borrowed from Doc Savage--but which really goes back to the 1880s and Nick Carter. When he reached maturity, Curt Newton, scientist and adventurer, dedicated himself to preserving the future of the solar system against the forces of evil and took the name of Captain Future. He was not a Doc Savage clone, however. He was a brash, boyishly cocky redhead who may have owed much to C. L. Moore's grim space-farer, Northwest Smith.

As Captain Future, Newton patrolled the solar system in his tear-shaped ship, the Comet, which could perfectly imitate the look of a comet in flight when necessary. He always wore a gray or green zipper suit (although the Earle Bergey covers invariably showed him attired in red or blue spacesuits) and carried a worn proton-pistol cowboy-style. The rest of the system, including the Planet Police, had to content themselves with crummy blasters known as atom-guns. Future's unique sidearm had a discretionary stun capability, much like a Star Trek phaser. Eschewing any special costume, he was known by his special signet ring, whose jewels revolved in their setting to represent the nine worlds. A good friend of Earth's President, James Carthew, as well as various members of the Planet Police, including special agent Joan Randall, his main squeeze, Captain Future operated without official interference. His headquarters was a sort of Fortress of Solitude on the moon.

Initially, Captain Future concerned himself with just our solar

system--an editorial requirement as ironclad as those which demanded three big capture-and-escape scenes per novel and a futuristic sports game in every issue. With the ninth novel, Quest Beyond the Stars (Winter 1941), the Futuremen finally venture beyond Pluto to the Birthplace of Matter, which may contain the only method of regenerating Mercury's dying atmosphere. The Birthplace of Matter is somewhere beyond Sagittarius, they discover, and it contains an artificial world built eons ago by a strange race known as the Watchers, who have since vanished. Naturally, Captain Future's mission is a success.

As the series progressed, the scope of Newton's adventures broadened. He discovered a hidden world in a comet (The Comet Kings, Summer 1942), and in The Lost World of Time (Fall 1941) he traveled back in time to the lost world of Kaitain, where he discovered that all human life in the universe originated with a race from the Deneb system. In The Star of Dread (Summer 1943) he finally went to Deneb. Author Hamilton, nicknamed "the World-Saver" because his heroes often rescued entire planets from awesome destructive agencies, created a consistent milieu for his characters to romp in. Often, old characters, places and backgrounds were revisited.

One of these recurring characters was Ul Quorn, the renegade scientist whose red skin, ageless looks and black hair and eyes reflected his mixed Martian, Venusian and Terran blood. He first appeared, along with his sultry Martian girlfriend N'Rala, in Captain Future and the Seven Space Stones (Winter 1940), returned in The Magician of Mars (Summer 1941), and finally met his end in The Solar Invasion (Startling Stories, Fall 1946). The enmity between Captain Future and the Magician of Mars was not limited to good-versus-evil. Ul Quorn was the son of Victor Corvo. Theirs was a blood feud.

Captain Future was a wonderful magazine, but Hamilton's stories were considered too juvenile by many in the SF field, which was just beginning to mature at that time. A number of story elements were pretty childish. For one, Grag and Otho were always bickering. This was another Doc Savage gimmick. Doc's aides, Monk and Ham, acted the same way. In that series, both characters acquired silly pets. So did Grag and Otho. In one story, Grag adopted a metal-eating moon-pup and dubbed him Fek. Not to be outdone, Otho later found himself a meteor-mimic, Oog. Oog is described as a white, doughy creature with four legs and two big eyes. It's called a meteor-mimic because it could change its shape and impersonate any creature or object near its size. The idea for these pets may have been Weisinger's, but when Hamilton later went to work for Weisinger writing the Legion of Super-Heroes, he dug back into the pages of Captain Future and dusted off Oog for that series, rechristening him Protty. Weisinger and Hamilton worked together well wherever they went. Even when Hamilton reworked the original Mr. Future idea, he kept as many of Weisinger's ideas as possible. The original Otho was obviously the inspiration for Captain Future's signet ring, and as for the robot which was to have been Curt Newton's double, that idea was carried over in the android Otho, who often made himself up as his "chief."

During World War II, just when Captain Future was hitting its stride, it ran into problems. Edmond Hamilton resigned from the series because he expected to be drafted. Leo Margulies hired two writers to replace him, Weird Tales regular Manly Wade Wellman and Joseph Samachson, who wrote under the pen name of William Morrison. To cover this change, a house name was summarily attached to the series while Hamilton was still writing it, and the "new" author became

Brett Sterling. Then Hamilton discovered he wasn't going to be drafted, after all. He continued the series as Brett Sterling, but that wasn't the end of his troubles. Once, customs agents seized the manuscript to his story, The Magic Moon, because they were concerned over maps and diagrams which were part of two background features he also wrote for the magazine, "The Worlds of Tomorrow" and "The Futuremen." They were seized as he crossed the Mexican border and relayed to Washington where Hamilton's map of the imaginary planet Vulcan was closely examined by war-weary censors. Captain Future had to skip an issue; later, Hamilton got his story back. Another time, he was shocked when he read Joseph Samachson's Captain Future novel, Days of Creation (Spring 1944). It contained the same plot--Captain Future loses his memory--as a story he had just turned in, Outlaw World. Not wanting to appear to be imitating "Brett Sterling," Hamilton hastily rewrote Outlaw World. His editor, who approved all outlines in advance, must have been asleep. It wasn't Mort Weisinger; he joined National Comics (now DC Comics) in 1941, from which he was drafted into the Army himself.

Outlaw World never appeared in

the pages of Captain Future. The paper shortage killed the magazines. Several leftover novels were dumped into a companion magazine, Startling Stories; then Captain Future was retired in 1946. But not for long. For years later, starting with "The Return of Captain Future" in the January 1950 Startling Stories, Curt Newton returned. This time it was in a series of sharp, poignant novelettes heavy on character and short on action. Hamilton's reputation in the SF field had taken a beating because of the Space Opera aspects of Captain Future. He had already redeemed himself by 1950 with many good, mature stories, and now he was out to clear the good Captain's name.

This he did with a vengeance. Through seven novelettes, each focusing on a different character, Hamilton explored the Captain Future cast. Simon Wright briefly regained human form in "The Harpers of Titan" (September 1950), and Curt Newton's character was tested in a beautiful final story, "Birthplace of Creation" (May 1951), when he returned to the Birthplace of Matter to stop a scientist from tampering with the power to create worlds and found that even he was not immune from

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final Asteroid Planet was blown to pieces. Of course, an oversupply of anything can bust market-value. But romantic appeal still remains, doesn't it?"

Norensen paused. Experience had dimmed the charm of his younger viewpoint for a while. But it had refused to die.

"Vesta is a chunk some two hundred miles through," he went on. "Quite large. It came from deep down in the original planet. And it glows with a shining, pinkish brilliance. Almost like gold . . ."

the end of those poor Ionians, and the end of the pyramid! The end of the whole thing. Suicide, you might call it. You see, back there in the telepathy kiosk, I wished that too, and the machines were made only to obey. I hope that when Earthmen, in the future, learn as much science as existed here on Io, they'll know how to use it, too. We're much too young a race yet, I guess."

Clara Arnold's awe softened after a moment. "Come on, Evan," she said. "Let's forget all about that for now. I want to show you the kitchen, here. It's ducky! . . ."

the corruption of power. Captain Future had grown up.

Having closed off one phase of his SF career, Edmond Hamilton moved on, ultimately going into comics where he scripted Batman, Superman, and a series probably best suited to his skills, the Legion of Super-Heroes. All the while, he continued doing SF stories and novels, until his death in 1977.

As for Captain Future, he did not die. Not exactly. In the early seventies, Popular Library reissued thirteen of the novels with a few nice Jeff Jones and Frank Frazetta covers--although most of the covers

were awful reprints from the German dime novel series, Perry Rhodan. Better packaged reprints appeared in Sweden and Japan, where the character remains popular. The Japanese produced an animated TV series of Captain Future's adventures. It is now available here on videocassette. Maybe it will lead to a resurgence in interest in one of our earliest--and best--space opera heroes. Captain Future deserves a comeback. After all, it's only two years until 1990, the year in which, according to Edmond Hamilton's original story, Curtis Newton was (or will be) born.

