

Captain Future vs. the Old Ones

by Will Murray

H. P. Lovecraft's ideas and creations have turned up in some of the damndest places, and still do. The power of his Cthulhu Mythos has exerted a strong influence over several generations of writers since the heyday of Weird Tales. But of all the places for the Lovecraftian influence to creep in, the pages of the rather juvenile space opera pulp, Captain Future, seems an unlikely place to discover shoggoths.

Captain Future chronicled the star-busting exploits of a twenty-first-century superman born Curtis Newton, but better known as Captain Future. He saved the Universe a whole bunch of times along with his sidekicks, Grag the robot, Otho the android, and Simon Wright, the Living Brain, in the pages of his own magazine and in Startling Stories between 1939 and 1952. Science fiction author Edmond Hamilton wrote most of the Captain Future novels under his own name and an occasional pen name, Brett Sterling.

One of the Brett Sterling opuses was Red Sun of Danger (Startling Stories, Spring 1945; in paperback as Danger Planet), in which Captain Future journeys to the distant planet Roo, where the natives are becoming a problem. Roo, it seems is the sole source of a plant called vitron, a kind of super-vitamin which slows down the natural aging process. The entire solar system is dependant upon the stuff, which is harvested by human colonists. The native Roons, however, have taken to attacking the Earth colonies and disrupting the vitron harvest.

Captain Future and his sidekicks, collectively known as the Futuremen, pile into their starship and head for Roo.

Their investigation leads them to question a Roon named Gaa:

"Why have you Roons been attacking the colony?" asked the Brain's rasping voice.

"I have already told you," faltered Gaa. "You starmen must leave Roo before disaster comes."

"What disaster?"

Gaa hesitated, then answered. "The Old Ones will come back in wrath."

"The Old Ones?" There was a sharp, startled quality in the way the Brain echoed it.

"What is it, Simon?" whispered Joan, impressed by his reaction.

Simon Wright did not answer her. He spoke again to Gaa. "The Old Ones cannot come back. They died a million years ago."

"No!" Gaa's voice rang with superstitious fervor. "They did not die. They are too mighty for death. We have seen the omens with our own eyes! You must go away before you wake them and bring horror upon us. That is why we must drive you from Roo."

The term "Old Ones" is not new to Captain Future's ears. But he doesn't connect the phrase to the works of H. P. Lovecraft—who is evidently out of print in the twenty-first century—but with a half-forgotten interstellar race known as the Kangas. These Kangas are not native to Roo (otherwise awful "Kanga-Roo" jokes would roll across the page) and in fact supposedly no longer exist, but Captain Future knows of them.

He knows because of his archaeological expedition to the star Deneb back in the novel, The Star of Dread

(Captain Future, Summer 1943), when he went to investigate a planet circling that star which was supposed to be the source of all human life in the universe. Edmond Hamilton covered this topic first in his column, "Worlds of Tomorrow," in that same issue in a way that foreshadowed the events of Red Sun of Danger when he wrote that prior to the Denebian Empire, the Universe was ruled by the Linids, "a mass of highly intelligent protozoa, who had learned the ability to cooperate in large or small numbers." Little was known of the Linid, and even less about the pre-human race who came before the Linid, "they who held the galaxy long before us and reigned in greatness, they of the darkness whose name was fear, the mighty Kangas whose somber glory had passed away and is forgotten."

All this sounds a lot like the milieu generated by H. P. Lovecraft in his stories of the Cthulhu Mythos with their dead but deathless Old Ones and successions of pre-human races on Earth and on other planets.

Captain Future tries to explain to another character about the first humans from Deneb and the various pre-human races:

"According to archaeological researches," Newton continued swiftly, "before their time the galaxy was ruled by a great pre-human race. We know almost nothing about them except that they were a powerful, wholly alien, star-travelling race. They are generally referred to as the Kangas, though the legends of many star-peoples speak of them as the Dark Ones or the Old Ones.

"The Kangas ruled this galaxy more than a million years ago. It is thought that they were not many in number. They exerted their sway through a subject race of protozoan creatures whom they created. But the star-conquering men of ancient Deneb found scientific means to defeat the Kangas and their creatures.

We learned about that when we visited Deneb. The Kangas vanished, became extinct.

"But superstitious dread of them still haunts many worlds. It's present even in the distorted legends of the Solar System. And the Roons believe it utterly. They have an ancient dread of the Old Ones. Now something has made them believe that the coming of the colonists is threatening to awake the Old Ones."

That "something" is renegade Venusians who have tampered with the so-called Crypt of the Old Ones (shades of Cthulhu!) so that it appears to be opening. Captain Future and crew instigate a frantic search for this Crypt, which they discover is on Black Moon, Roo's satellite. Or more precisely, on a white plateau on the moon's surface, where it's visible from Roo. The plateau is not named, but Lovecraft readers might be inclined to call it the Plateau of Leng.

Racing to the Black Moon, the Futuremen are on hand for the awakening of the Old Ones:

Up over the edge of the crater, from the newly gouged depths, was coming a fat, black, obscene thing. It was a big, semiliquid, plastic mass, that heaved itself painfully over the rim and was followed by another of its kind.

The Kangas! He was looking at creatures no human eye had fallen upon for ages. They were looking back at him.

For they had eyes. It was the only recognizable feature of those insanely plastic black bodies--the two enormous, pupil-less eyes that fixed solemnly upon Captain Future.

Fortunately for the Universe, Curt Newton has the twenty-first-century equivalent of the Elder Sign--the Denebian Wands of Power, actually psycho-amplifiers which absorb the powerful mental influence of

the Kangas and turn it back against them. The menace of the Kangas is effectively squelched.

Fans of H. P. Lovecraft will recognize many borrowed concepts, including a tendency on the author's part to contradict his own background. The "subject race" of protozoan creatures mentioned in Red Sun of Danger are obviously the Linids. Whether or not they were created by the Kangas depends on which of Hamilton's accounts one reads. In The Return of Captain Future (Startling Stories, January 1950), Curt Newton encountered the last surviving Linid, which is described as consisting of a "central core of denser darkness, cowed by looped dark capes and veils." No mention of the Kangas is given.

The essence of the novel, Red Sun of Danger, seems to be a retelling of Lovecraft's At the Mountains of Madness with variations. The Kangas and the protozoan Linids more or less correspond to the star-headed Old Ones and their subject race, the shoggoths. Except that Hamilton describes his Kangas in terms reminiscent of Lovecraft's shoggoths, whom HPL described, variously, as looking like a "plastic column of foetid black iridescence" and "a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and unforming as pustules of greenish light . . ." The protoplasmic qualities of the Linid are also reminiscent of the shape-shifting shoggoths, and I suppose there's a vague correlation between the star-headed Old Ones who seeded the planets with various life forms and the human Denebians who colonized the Universe with their seed.

That Edmond Hamilton consciously borrowed from Lovecraft is undeniable, as his distinctly Lovecraftian adjectives prove. He was a regular Weird Tales contributor and had to be familiar with HPL's fiction there. Lovecraft was no fan of Hamilton's

interplanetary stories, and said so in letters and a Hamilton parody he once wrote. He might have turned over in his grave when Red Sun of Danger was published.

So it's curious to see these Lovecraftian ideas materialize in a space opera epic. Or is it?

Although Lovecraft wrote horror stories, they were forward-thinking horror stories, with strong SF elements. At the Mountains of Madness, after all, first appeared in Astounding Stories, a science fiction magazine. And Hamilton was not the last to borrow from the Cthulhu Mythos when writing space opera. Consider the following scene from Chapter 12 of Alan Dean Foster's Star Wars novel, Splinter of the Mind's Eye, when Luke Skywalker encounters the following in a temple on a jungled planet:

Each swimming in his or her own thoughts, the five walked across the spacious floor toward the far side of the temple. A colossal statue was seated there against the dark wall. It represented a vaguely humanoid being seated on a carved throne. Leathery wings which might have been vestigial swept out in two awesome arcs to either side of the figure. Enormous claws thrust from feet and arms, the latter clinging to the ends of armrests on the throne. It had no face below slanted, accusing eyes--only a mass of Medusian, carved tentacles.

"Pomojema, god of the Kailburr," Halla whispered, without knowing why she was bothering to whisper. "It almost seems familiar, somehow." She chuckled nervously. "That's crazy, of course."

Oh, I don't know. I think a lot of people would find Cthulhu familiar, whatever he's called.

When you think about it, Lovecraft isn't all that incompatible

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where else to go; if you don't land on Callisto, or go off into deep space, you have to land on Callisto-Alpha, to unload your ingots of rhodium and vanadium and--"

"Why did The Blur concentrate on metals like that, anyway, I wonder?" muttered Captain Quolk. Star Pirate grinned again.

"I can even answer that one, too, I think! He wanted to get a sufficiency of non-ferrous metals to build an undetectable space-cruiser that wouldn't show up on a magno-detector! This would give The Blur and his gang of outlaws the freedom to roam the spaceways at will, leaving the Space Patrol helpless to pursue them. They could have preyed upon the ship-

ping of world after world, bringing Interplanet Lines to its knees. And when we investigate The Blur's base on Callisto-Alpha, I'll bet you fifty credits we find a space-cruiser made of noble metals, and about half-built!"

Captain Quolk heaved a hearty sigh of relief.

"Young fellow, you are a remarkable person. And if you don't mind accompanying me to my quarters, I have been hoarding a cask of century-old Martian fire-brand for just such an occasion as this one has proved to be. . ."

"Lead the way, sir," said Star Pirate, with a smile.

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with science fiction adventure. As a matter of fact, I suspect the very SF elements that are inextricable with the Cthulhu Mythos are going to ensure that Lovecraft's work survives into the twenty-first century. And if there are Earthmen venturing into deep space a hundred years from now, when they want a good scare, they're not going to bring Stephen King or Edgar Allan Poe with them, they're going to bring along the works of H. P. Lovecraft, whose style has all the creepiness of the past, but whose tales of "the nameless larvae of the Other Gods" which might be pawing and groping at the hull of a U.S. starship will definitely be relevant to any future age. When the first exploration to a black hole nears its goal, I'm sure at least one astronaut is going to be thinking about "the spiral black vortices of that ultimate void of Chaos where reigns the mindless de-

mon-sultan Azathoth" and hearing "the thin monotonous piping of a daemonic flute held in nameless paws"--in his imagination, at least.

But for my part, having read of Hamilton's shoggothian Kangas, I can now fully appreciate the dire suggestiveness of the line in At the Mountains of Madness which runs: ". . . Abdul Alhazred whispered about . . . 'shoggoths' in his frightful Necronomicon, though even that mad Arab had not hinted that any existed on earth except in the dreams of those who had chewed a certain alkaloidal herb." When Lovecraft wrote that "the mad author of the Necronomicon had nervously tried to swear that none had been bred on this planet," he was of course setting up his readers for the ultimate horror, but he seems also to have inspired Edmond Hamilton to write about shoggoths from Out There.