The Once & Future Captain

By WILL MURRAY

Blasting from the past, this fantastic '40s space opera hero was the SF adventure king of Edmond Hamilton's pulpy planet tales.

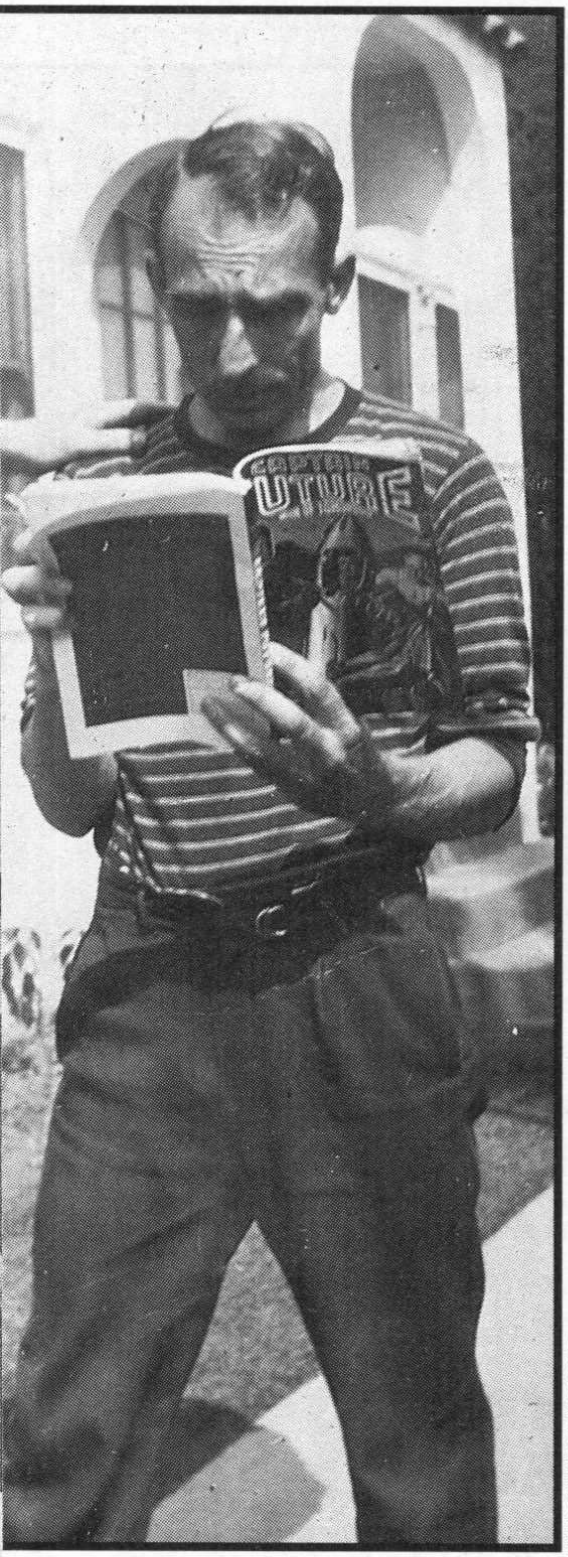


PHOTO: COURTESY JULIUS SCHWARTZ

Edmond Hamilton peruses the latest issue of *Captain Future* in this 1941 gag photo. Julius Schwartz's intruding arm represents the agent's 10 per cent cut.

The early history of science fiction chronicles a galaxy of space-busting heroes. Long after modern technology has made their science quaint, the adventures of Doc Smith's Kimball Kinnison, Philip Nowlan's Buck Rogers, Jack Williamson's Legion of Space, Anthony Gilmore's Hawk Carse, and others, are still in print.

That's *not* true of one of the greatest of those characters, the legendary Captain Future. He was the only American space opera hero ever given his own pulp magazine. Although his adventures were recorded by the equally legendary Edmond Hamilton, Captain Future was not the creation of the writer nicknamed "the World-Saver."

Popular belief is that Captain Future was born in an appropriate place: the First World Science Fiction Convention, which was held in New York City in July 1939. Attending out of curiosity was one of the premier pulp SF publishers, Standard Magazines' Leo Margulies.

Margulies, a diminutive man with a notoriously foul temper, was nevertheless impressed by the small but historically important gathering.

"I didn't know you fans could be so damn sincere!" he blurted out at one point, and there and then, the story goes, he suddenly announced a new magazine he claimed to have conceived on the spot.

Margulies already had two SF titles, *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Startling Stories*, so he decided that this new title would feature the exploits of a single hero, like his own company's *Phantom Detective* and *Lone Eagle* magazines.

Margulies kicked the idea around with his top SF editor, Mort Weisinger, who later became the guiding genius who revitalized the Superman line of comics during the '50s and '60s. Together, they developed a prospectus for their character, a telepathic mutant named Curtis Newton who fights interplanetary crime, circa 2015, as Mr. Future, Wizard of Science. His three assistants were an automaton duplicate of himself, an autistic human encyclopedia named Simon Wright, and Otho, a crystalline alien masquerading as a jewel set in Future's insignia ring.

In fact, the prospectus was dated *June* 1939—indicating that Margulies had the magazine in mind *before* the convention. Even if he did slyly take advantage of convention excitement to announce an existing title, his choice of an author was sincere.

The logical person to write the magazine was 34-year-old Edmond Hamilton, one of the chief proponents of space opera. Hamilton, who pioneered the now-cliche Planet Police concept, had just written "The Three Planeteers" for *Startling Stories*, the story of an Earthman and two aliens fighting planetary injustice. It was a forerunner to Captain Future—not the character Margulies had offered Hamilton, but the version that emerged in the first issue, dated Winter 1940.

"I had to go to New York and argue with them for *days* before they would let me change their proposed set-up," the late Hamilton once recalled. "I convinced Leo and Mort that these three characters would be very hard to use in a story. Simon Wright became an aged scientist who, about to die, had his living brain transferred into an artificial serum case, and was known as the Brain. Otho became an android, a living man of synthetic flesh created in their Moon laboratory by the Brain and Captain Future's father. And the automaton became Grag, the intelligent robot, who wasn't very brilliant, but was immensely strong and very faithful."

Future's History

As explained in the first novel, *Captain Future and the Space Emperor*, Curt Newton was born in the Moon laboratory of his biologist father. Roger Newton was in hiding from would-be dictator Victor Corvo, who coveted his artificial life project. Newton's experiments had succeeded in creating, in succession, the Brain, Grag, and finally the android, Otho. But Corvo had the Newtons assassinated, leaving the infant Curt Newton to be raised on the Moon by the unhuman trio.

When Newton reached manhood, he vowed to fight the kind of super-criminals who had killed his parents and who threatened the stability of the nine worlds. A brash redhead who wore a grey synthesilk zippersuit and a phaserlike proton-pistol at his hip, Captain Future—Margulies had ordered Hamilton to change the name from Mr. Future to the more romantic form in the middle of writing the first novel—was part scientist and part space cowboy.

"You will be fighting for the future of the Solar System," the Brain told Curt Newton.

"For the future?" repeated Curt. The humor came back into his grey eyes. "Then, I'll call myself—Captain Future."

It was an origin inspired by Street & Smith's Doc Savage, as were many other trappings of the Captain Future series.

Operating from his father's secret lunar laboratory and flying a cyclotron-powered art deco spaceship, the *Comet*, Captain Future battled interplanetary criminals like the Wrecker, the Life-Lord and the Captain's recurring foe, Ul Quorn, the so-called Magician of Mars and son of Victor Corvo.

The first issue of *Captain Future* met with enthusiastic newsstand reception. It also caught the attention of two important writers. One was humorist S.J. Perelman, who parodied that first novel in one of his *New Yorker* columns, a deadpan recitation of the story's plot.

Hamilton's feelings might have been hurt, but he knew he was writing space opera, not literature. Later, he admitted his initial Captain Future novels were not exactly his best work.

"To tell the truth," he said, "so little was paid me for the early ones that they were all written first draft right out of the typewriter. After the first six, they paid me more, and I then did two drafts and they improved a bit."

The other writer who noticed Captain Future was Lester Dent, who as Kenneth Robeson, wrote the Doc Savage series. Dent, recognizing Hamilton's creditable handling of his own ideas, offered Hamilton a job ghosting Doc Savage novels.

"I was flattered," Hamilton recalled, "but had to say I was too damn busy with Captain Future to think of more work."

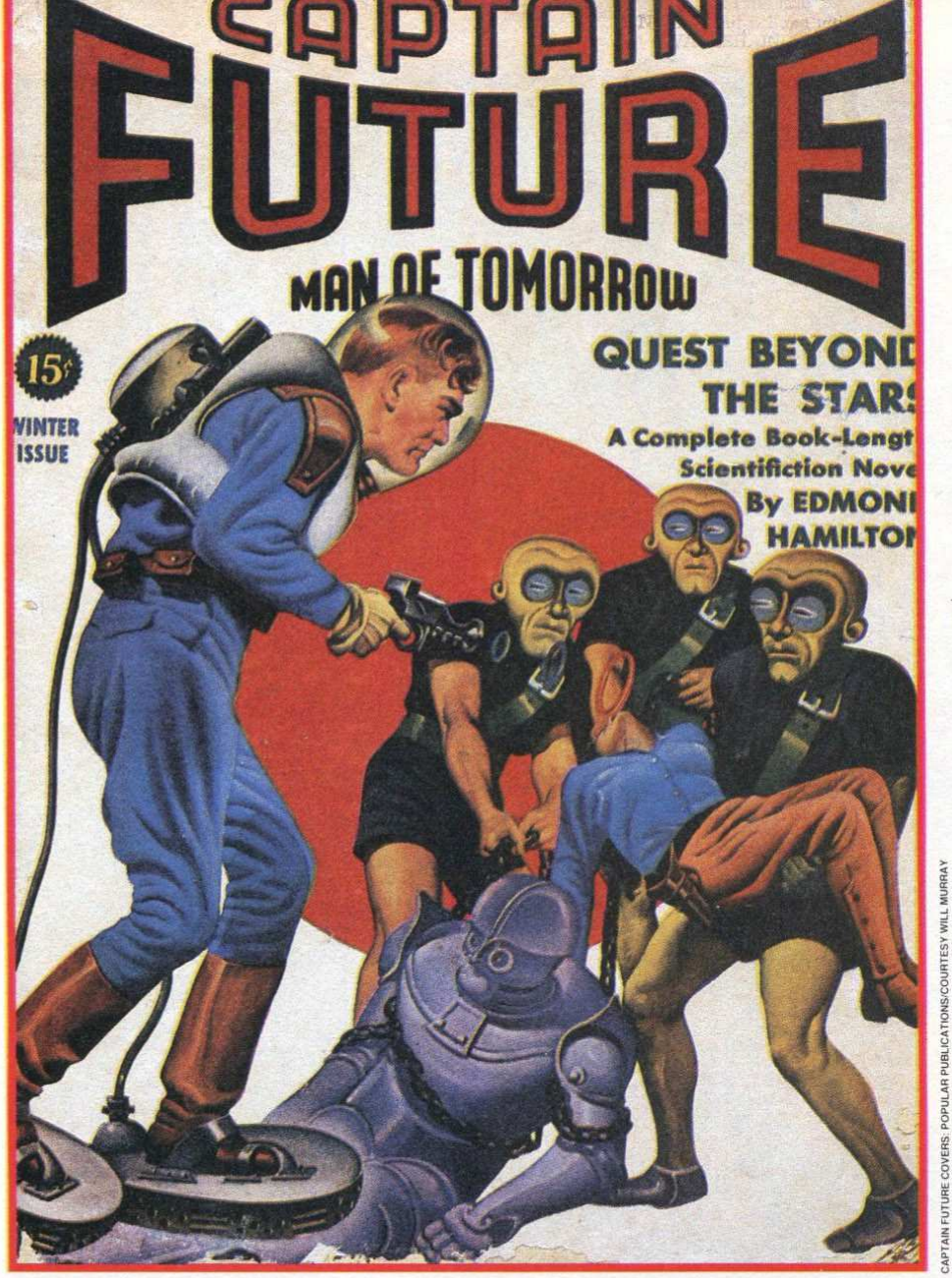
In fact, Hamilton's adventures writing Captain Future sometimes rivaled his hero's whirlwind escapes. Because the magazine was a quarterly, Hamilton had to turn in a 12-page synopsis of the next novel with each manuscript. The editor used that to write a teaser for the upcoming issue. Once, the synopsis didn't arrive in time, and the editor wrote a blurb promising an imaginary story, *The Face of the Deep*. Hamilton was obliged to write the next novel from that hasty teaser. And he pulled it off. He was a professional.

Just when Hamilton had settled down to the regularity of series work, fate intervened.

"I wrote all of the Captain Future novels until Pearl Harbor in December 1941," Hamilton recounted. "As I was then a bachelor and figured I would soon be in the Army, I notified Leo that I wouldn't be able to write any more, so he got two other writers and changed the authorship of the magazine to the pseudonym, 'Brett Sterling.' But, in 1942, the army ruled they would not accept men over age 38, so, on the verge of being inducted, I was ruled out, and went back to writing *Captain Future* again. Some of my stories then appeared under the Brett Sterling byline, and others under my own name."

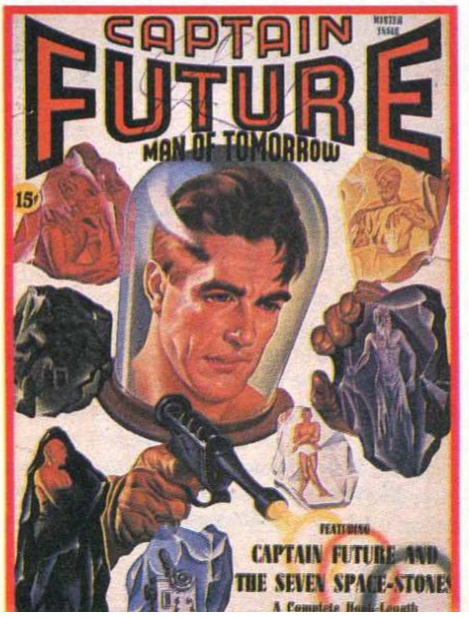
The other two writers were William Morrison (in real life, Joseph Samachson) and fantasist Manly Wade Wellman. Between them, they only produced three novels. Some readers, at first upset by the change, later wrote in to claim they thought "Brett Sterling's" novels superior to Hamilton's—never realizing they were comparing stories by the same writer!

Some readers thought the Future exploits written by "Brett Sterling" were superior to Hamilton's tales—never suspecting that "Sterling" was a pseudonym for Hamilton who wrote *all* but three of the Captain Future adventures.



CAPTAIN FUTURE COVERS: POPULAR PUBLICATIONS/COURTESY WILL MURRAY

During his *Quest Beyond the Stars*, Captain Future first learned of the legendary Birthplace of Creation.'



The editorial juggling of multiple authors once led to a minor crisis for the conscientious Hamilton.

"In '42 or early '43," he related, "I submitted a synopsis for a Captain Future novel called *Outlaw World*. The main idea of the novel was that Captain Future would lose his memory and wouldn't know he was Captain Future. The editor approved the synopsis and I went ahead and wrote the novel. Then—I think it was spring 1944—appeared the *Captain Future* magazine with one of Morrison's novels, *Days of Creation*. I was horrified to read it and find that it had the same plot idea . . . that of Captain Future losing his memory.

"The editor had OKed my plot, forgetting

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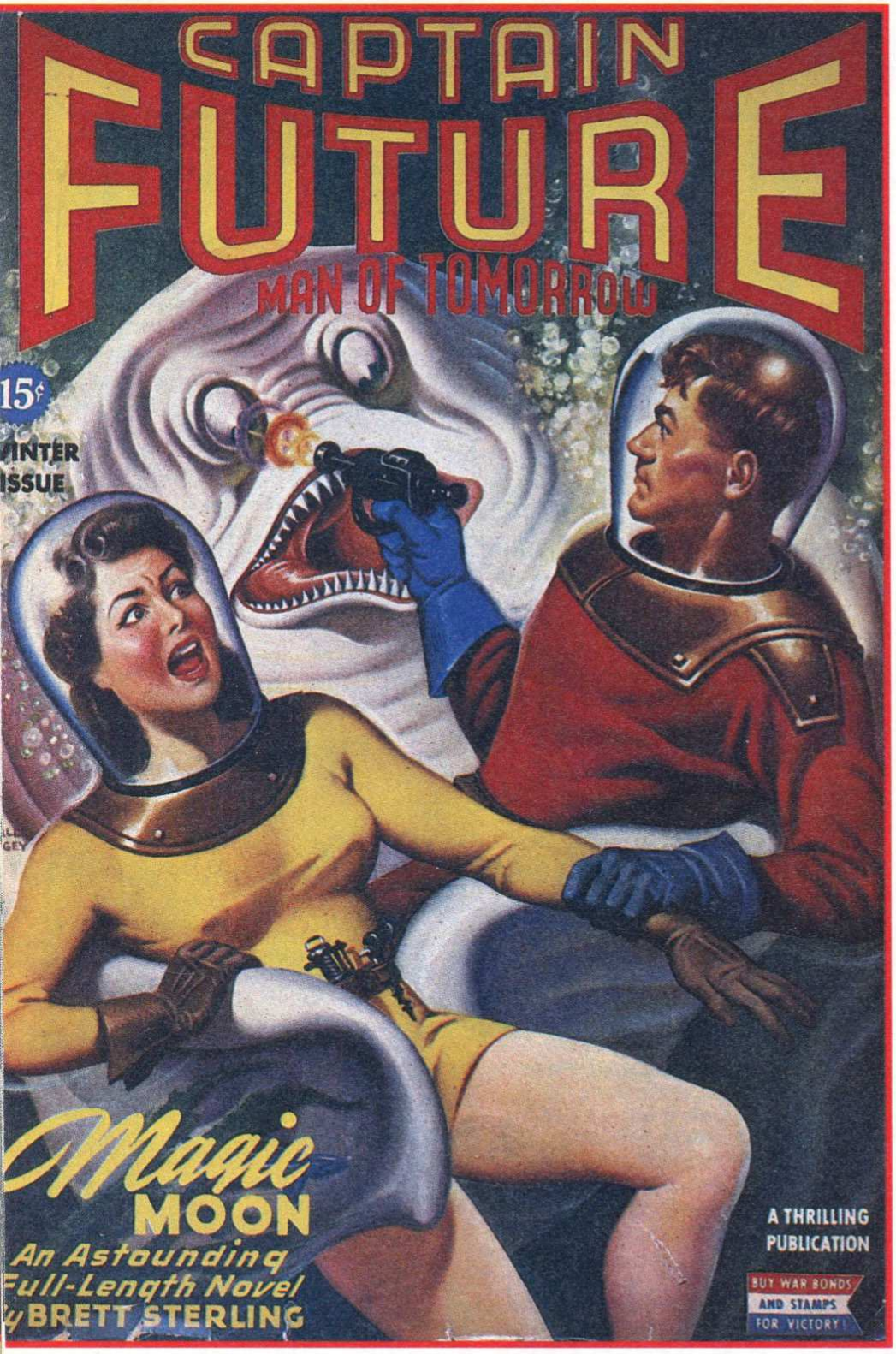


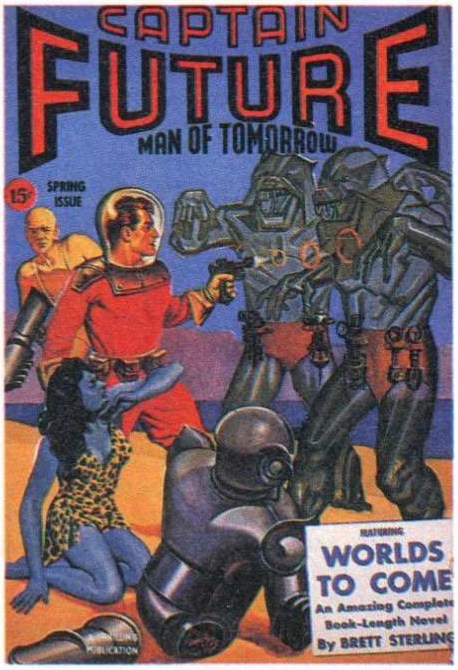
Wartime customs officials seized the *Magic Moon* manuscript from Hamilton, thinking it might be top-secret stuff. The move delayed the story's publication until 1944.

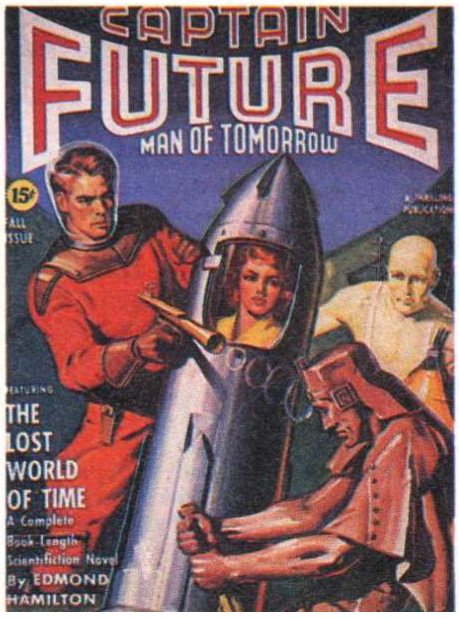
strict. Now, I always did two departments of the *Captain Future* magazine. . . one called 'Worlds of Tomorrow,' with a map of the planet on which the action took place. The customs men seized upon my map of a totally imaginary world, and with it, the whole novel manuscript and sent them to Washington for closer examination. It was *months* before I got them back."

There had been no time for Hamilton to write a replacement novel, so the issue was simply skipped. *Magic Moon* finally saw print in the Winter 1944 issue.

Not content with guiding Captain Future and his Futuremen through the Solar System, Hamilton expanded the series' scope in later issues, sending Newton on his first deep space mission in *Quest Beyond the Stars*, back

Originally, the ultimate SF hero was to be dubbed Mr. Future, but a publisher's decree promoted him to Captain while the first story was being written.





that he already bought the same idea from Morrison! I was terribly upset, for everyone would think Hamilton was imitating Brett Sterling's story. So, I sat down and rewrote about two thirds of *Outlaw World* and sent it to the editor, explaining that there had been a mistake on his part and that I had rewritten the story so that the same gag wouldn't be used. The editor never even answered my letter. But when they printed *Outlaw World* later, they did use my rewritten version."

Captain's Quest

During the war, when paper shortages killed pulp magazines, faithful readers of *Captain Future* jumped to the conclusion that their favorite magazine had fallen victim to insufficient paper when the Fall 1944 issue failed to appear in drugstores all over America.

They never suspected the true story.

"In winter '43, I lived for a few months in Monterrey, in old Mexico," Hamilton related. "I wrote there the Captain Future novel called *Magic Moon*. When I returned to the States, the wartime customs inspection of all papers and written materials was very

More than 30 years later, Hamilton's *Lost World of Time* was transformed into an animated feature in Japan.

through time in the classic *Lost World of Time*, and into another dimension in *Planets in Peril*. Along the way, a new facet of Curt Newton emerged—the serious scientist seeking the origins of the universe.

In *The Star of Dread*, clues in earlier novels culminated in Newton journeying to the star Deneb, the home system of an extinct race which had seeded human life throughout the universe. In *Quest Beyond the Stars*, Newton first learned of the so-called Birthplace of Creation, the source of all cosmic matter. These scientific quests, rather than the interplanetary manhunts, marked the Golden Age of *Captain Future* magazine.

Eventually, the paper shortage did kill *Captain Future*. The character continued for a short time in *Startling Stories*, including Manly Wade Wellman's *The Solar Invasion*, pitting Newton against his arch-enemy, Ul Quorn, in a final, decisive encounter.

Hamilton found that five years of writing *Captain Future* had damaged his reputation as a serious SF writer. This was the era of John W. Campbell's editorial tenure on *Astounding Stories*, and the emergence of the Campbell school of writers. Never a part of that school, Hamilton toiled for the pulpier *Startling Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder*, branded as a hopelessly juvenile writer even as he examined more mature themes.

Almost perversely, he revived Captain Future in the pages of *Startling Stories* in 1950. Although the first story, "The Return of Captain Future," with its classic Earle Bergey cover showing Grag clutching a buxom brunette, promised old-style space opera, it was not.

The new stories—all novelettes—dwelled on sensitive characterization, not formula adventure. "The Harpers of Titan" showcased Simon Wright in a poignant tale in which he briefly regains, then renounces, human form. Grag romped through the humorous "Pardon My Iron Nerves."

But it was Hamilton's portrayal of Curt Newton as a somber, inquisitive scientist which showed that Hamilton had risen above blasters and bug-eyed monsters. In the final Captain Future story, "Birthplace of Creation," Newton at last reached the Birthplace—and passed the ultimate test of his character and humanity.

It was a fitting end for the ultimate space opera hero.

Captain Future took his final bow in 1951. A year later, Edmond Hamilton finally shook off his unjust reputation as space opera jockey with the publication of "What's It Like Out There?," a grim and unromantic story of space exploration in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. Fans and critics alike hailed the "new" Edmond Hamilton, and Hamilton's own editor went so far as to pronounce that "Now, Science Fiction has grown up. And so has Edmond Hamilton."

In fact, Hamilton had written the story nearly *20 years* before, but no pulp magazine would take it. Hamilton had been ahead of his time.

For the rest of his career, Hamilton divided his hours between writing SF and scripting the comic-book adventures of Superman and the Legion of Super-Heroes for his old *Captain Future* editor, Mort Weisinger. Interest in *Captain Future* faded in the '50s, but in the '70s, Captain Future flew again. In America, Paperback Library—a division of CBS which had acquired Leo Margulies' old Standard Magazines—reissued the series. Without any attention to sequence, uniformity of byline or even packaging, they reprinted 13 of the best Captain Future novels. The better covers were by Frank Frazetta and Jeff Jones, but most were uncredited reprints from German editions of a latter-day descendant of Curt Newton, Perry Rhodan.

In Sweden, similar reprints triggered a Captain Future fan club. In Japan, the novels led to a short-lived *Captain Future* animated TV series. The Japanese took their *Captain Future* very seriously. Although they made cosmetic changes in the characters, they adapted several of the novels—among them *Calling Captain Future* and *Lost World of Time*—as faithful four-part serials. The show is available on video in America.

Interest in the character hasn't been as strong in his native country, and any thought of a Captain Future revival ended with the untimely death of Edmond Hamilton on February 1, 1977.

But Captain Future did not die. His spirit lives on in *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* and every other modern space opera vehicle. The earlier explorer's corny name aside, the gap between Captain Future and Captain Kirk is not very wide. And according to *Captain Future and the Space Emperor*, the baby who would grow up to be the Wizard of Science entered this world in the year 1990. That's only three years away. Captain Future cannot die. He hasn't been *born* yet! ☆

Hamilton revived his interplanetary hero for further adventures in *Startling Stories* with "The Return of Captain Future" in 1950.