CALLING CAPTAIN FUTURE

by

Don Hutchison

James Carthew went to the window and stepped out onto the little balcony. He looked up at the full moon that sailed in queenly splendor high above the soaring towers of nighted New York.

There was a look of desperation in the President's aging, haunted face as he gazed up at the shining white face of the lonely satellite.

Far out beyond New York's towers, the moon was declining from the zenith. They could see the distant rocket-flash of liners taking off from the spaceport for far Venus or Saturn or Pluto.

"Why doesn't Captain Future come?" North Bonnel burst out, unable to keep silent longer. "That ship of his can get from the moon to the Earth in a few hours --he should be here by now."

James Carthew's gray head lifted.

"He will be here. He's never yet failed to answer our call."

"As a matter of fact, I'm here now, sir," said a deep, laughing voice.

It came from the balcony outside the window. A big, red-headed young man had miraculously appeared there, as though by magic.

"Curt Newton--Captain Future!" cried the President eagerly.

Right. Captain Future it was. The smartest, handsomest, most daring good guy on all the nine planets.

A strapping red-haired scientific adventurer, Captain Future was the past's future crimefighter, an implacable Nemesis of all oppressors and exploiters of the System's planetary races. Whenever a menace threatened to conquer, enslave, or destroy hapless Mankind, President Carthew had but to send out a distress call to Cap's secret base beneath Tycho crater on the moon (a kind of extended bat-signal) and Captain Future would zoom out, proton pistol in hand, to do battle with the wicked.

The good Captain was the titular star of his own magazine (the only space opera character to be so honored) which ran from early 1940 to 1944, as well as a series of further adventures in Startling Stories which ran sporadically from 1945 to 1951.

Captain Future

There is little question that Captain Future is the one magazine that apologists for pulp science fiction would prefer to have forgotten. Both the magazine and its title were unabashedly juvenile in tone--considered a joke or even an insult by many SF fans of the day who foresaw great possibilities in the nascent genre.

When the first issue of Captain Future burst forth, the so-called Golden Age of science fiction--that memorable and to some almost legendary period--was just beginning. John Campbell was on his throne at Astounding Science Fiction and he was developing new and exciting writers who would extend the horizons of the field. Many of the Campbell proteges--Robert Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, Isaac Asimov, A.E. van Vogt--were soon to give it status as a mature and even thoughtful literature. By comparison, the advent of Captain Future must have seemed an ill-timed embarrassment.

Why then is Captain Future still remembered fondly as we approach the eve of the character's 50th birthday? The answer has to be in the story-telling magic of the writer hired to produce the series. His name was Edmond Hamilton.

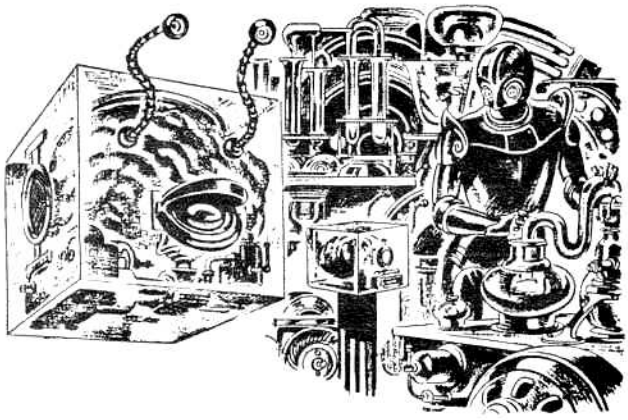
Edmond Hamilton was born in Youngston, Ohio in 1904 and was raised on a nearby farm. When he was young the term science fiction did not exist --it had yet to be invented--but the precocious country boy devoured the scientific romances of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne and later snapped up copies of adventure pulps like All-Story and Argosy when they ran serials featuring lost races and pioneer interplanetary romances.

As Hamilton recalled in a fanzine article published in 1934:

> I have been a strong science fiction fan since 1916, when I started in with the old Argosy tales of Burroughs, Julian Hawthorne and others. I had a newspaper route about that time and when Merritt's long-awaited sequel to "The Moon Pool" came out, I carried papers one night each week with the All-Story Magazine held three inches before my eyes, avoiding automobiles and street-cars by the grace of God and heaving every paper on the wrong porch.

At an early age he determined to become a professional writer and devote his own life to entertaining people, as he had been entertained, with yarns of derring-do on far planets and wondrous worlds. At the time of that momentous decision he had no idea that science fiction was about to become a category in its own right or that it would eventually encompass scores of magazines specializing in just that brand of fiction.

When Edmond Hamilton's first pulp yarn appeared in the August 1926 issue of Weird Tales, science fiction magazines were just five-months old (Amazing Stories, April 1926, was the genesis). Hamilton's initial venture into SF, bearing the simplistic title, "Across Space," was published only a month later. Within a short time he was routinely selling stories that took men out



Simon Wright, the Living Brain

beyond the planets to the stars, then to other galaxies, and finally outside the known universe altogether.

Hamilton was almost the perfect pulpster. Working in the fabulist tradition of story telling, his wildly imaginative, action-packed space operas just about jumped off the page with writer-to-reader urgency. He once recalled how, in putting the finishing touches to an epic space battle, he became so excited that he punched his typewriter so hard that the machine "walked" over the surface of his old flat-topped desk--with the writer following it, banging away at it as he finished his climactic scene.

Such stuff wasn't great literature, nor was it meant to be. But his readers caught the excitement, and the Edmond Hamilton byline sold tons of magazines.

As a full-time pulpster Hamilton also wrote under the pseudonyms Robert Castle, Robert Wentworth and Hugh Davidson, as well as the house names Brett Sterling and Will Garth. He worked other fiction categories--mystery, detective, and even the supernatural--but he thought of himself and was thought of as a science fiction writer.

Hamilton was a founding father of the SF pulps. His "Interstellar Patrol" stories (1928-1930) constituted the first space opera series, predating E.E. "Doc" Smith's more famous "Lensman" series by several years. The author of such archetypal yarns as "The Universe Wreckers," "Crashing Suns," and "Locked Worlds," his virile brand of far-out adventure stories soon earned him the sobriquet "World-Saver," or alternatively, "World-Wrecker" Hamilton due to his penchant for smashing worlds around like glass marbles.

If characterization was virtually nonexistent in Ed's early stories, he more than made up for it with his prodigal inventiveness, rocketing narrative drive, and deep-felt instinct for the heroic. He wrote about "the great booming suns of outer space"--and readers didn't stop to ponder whether suns could "boom" or not. It sounded just right.

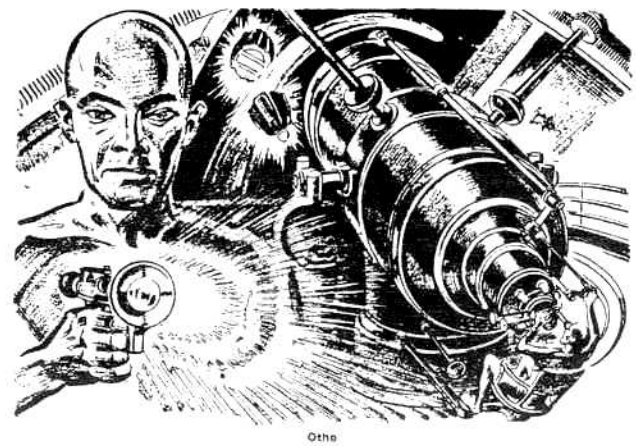
As his career progressed, the old superscience melodramas were occasionally supplemented by more thoughtful stories in which depth of characterization and emotional drives became prominent. Hamilton proved he could write as sophisticated a story as the best of them and some of his short stories remain small masterpieces.

Ironically, we seldom choose our own monument. In 1940, when science fiction was just beginning to take itself seriously as a mature literary form, Edmond Hamilton was assigned the job of writing a series of book-length novels for a brand new magazine: Captain Future. The new title was designed to carry the breathless adventures of a futuristic Doc Savage-type superhero, aimed mainly at teenagers.

Legend has it that Hamilton was given the assignment for the series while attending the First World Science Fiction Convention in New York City, July 2, 1939. Leo Margulies, the feisty little editorial director of Standard Magazines, was also at the convention and had been impressed by the enthusiasm of the early SF fans. Margulies announced on the spot that he planned to create a new pulp hero magazine aimed at younger readers in an effort to win them over to the new brand of future fiction. He reasoned that this innovation would do for science fiction what The Shadow had done for mystery and what Doc Savage had done for adventure.

The fact was that the Captain Future magazine had been planned some months before, and the World's first-ever SF convention had been deemed an appropriate place to announce the new title's imminent arrival.

Originally the new magazine was to be called Mr. Future...Wizard of Science. Hamilton was supplied a story and character outline by the publishers. In the publishers' scenario Curt Newton was not a man of heroic proportions but a biological mutant with a small body and big head, born of radioactive emanations, like some freak in a 1950's exploitation movie. His three companions were to be: an old man who was a little more than a living memory bank, a telepathically controlled robot who served as a metallic Doppelganger for Mr. Future, and a crystalline warrior from Ganymede, who was to be a living jewel set in Future's ring. Hamilton found the outline and the characters unworkable and he was forced to go to New York and argue with publisher Margulies and editor Mort Weisinger for days until the proposed set-up was changed to his liking. Eventually the character--now called Captain Future--emerged in a form acceptable to Hamilton, his new bosses, and their suitably impressed young readers.



Otho

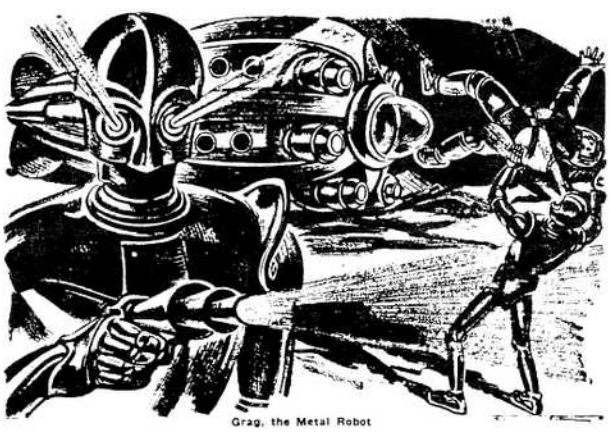
In the freshly devised legend, Captain Future was really Curtis Newton, the son of a brilliant biologist who had established a secret base on the moon to escape an unscrupulous enemy. When the elder Newton is murdered by his old foe, young Curt Newton is raised by his father's three

unhuman aides--the strangest trio of sidekicks in the annals of pulp literature.

Known as Futuremen, Captain Future's three companions are:

The Brain--Simon Wright, who at one time had been Earth's greatest biologist. Faced with mortal death, the elderly Wright had proposed to Curt's father that his brain be transferred into a special serum-case in which it could live and think and work. Imprisoned forever within the transparent, indestructible case, the Brain's optic nerves are attached to artificial lens-eyes, while other nerves operate such appurtenances as microphone-ears, and the resonator by which he speaks. (At first the Brain could not move about by himself--one of the other Futuremen had to carry the serum-case by its attached handle--but Hamilton found this too hampering a restriction and eventually equipped his bizarre Futureman with tractor beams to supply locomotive powers).

Otho, the android--not human but a living man of synthetic flesh created in the moon laboratory by The Brain and Captain Future's father. Otho's hairless, streamlined body is many times stronger and more flexible than that of normal humans, enabling him to run faster, jump higher and move more quickly in an emergency than almost any other creature. By softening and resetting his synthetic skin Otho can disguise himself as almost anyone--or any thing--in the system.



Grag, the Metal Robot

Grag, the robot--another creation of Curt's father. He towers over seven feet in height, a massive, manlike figure of gleaming "inert" metal. The robot was not designed to be merely an automaton but to have an intelligence and individuality of his own. The only thing not built into Grag was a sense of humor, as humans know it. The giant, naive robot would like nothing better than to be considered human. One of the running gags in the Captain Future novels is an ongoing battle between Grag and Otho (ala Monk and Ham in the Doc Savage series) as to which is the more "human" of Captain Future's unhuman pals.

Perhaps the Futuremen's only true human link is that of Curt Newton himself, the child they helped raise to manhood, a perfect specimen of mental and physical human superiority.

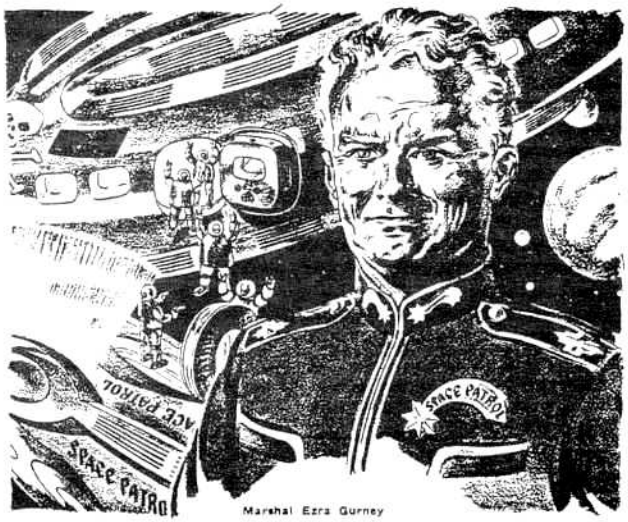
Not all of Curt's friends were unhuman. Romance entered the series in the person of Joan Randall, a young secret service agent of the Planet Police. She first met Captain Future in the Space Emperor mystery and then again when she was kidnapped by Doctor Zaro's legion of Doom. Joan and grizzled Marshall Ezra Gurney, another friend of Curt's, are listed on "special detached service" with the Planet Police in order to hold themselves in readiness to aid Captain Future and his band when the occasion requires.

Almost as important as the cast of living characters was the Futuremen's cyclotron-powered space ship, the Comet--the flying laboratory of Captain Future and his roistering space soldiers. The Comet was designed like an elongated tear drop, a piece of art deco streamlining that would have no value in the resistanceless depths of deep space. It looked pretty, however, and must have impressed the natives of remote worlds as it zapped along their space trails.

The first issue of Captain Future appeared on the stands in late 1939, inexplicably cover-dated Winter 1940. The heroic cover painting featured Cap Future and his two mobile sidekicks, Grag and Otho. The Captain was decked out in a red space-suit and bubble helmet, his proton blaster firing what appeared to be expanding Lifesaver mints, while Otho was pictured with tv antennas jutting from each of his dead white shoulders. (Simon Wright was to appear on only two of the series' covers, indicating bias regarding the visual appeal of raw brains in see-through boxes).

Hamilton called the first novel "The Horror on Jupiter," but that title was changed to "Captain Future and the Space Emperor," in order to capitalize on the Captain Future name.

Space Emperor was not an auspicious debut. It and a half dozen stories to follow read like first draft efforts (which they were) rushed out to meet deadlines. Five of the first seven stories were to feature the same basic plot, in which Captain Future--an amalgam of Doc Savage and the publisher's own Phantom Detective in a futuristic setting--must catch and unmask a criminal in disguise who threatens Earth's solar system. None of the stories took place outside that system--a snug group of nine cozy planets with breathable atmospheres and native races of human descent. At this point the author was clearly working to restrictive and unadventurous guidelines.



Marshal Ezra Gurney

"To tell the truth," Hamilton admitted, "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 then I did two drafts and they improved a lot."

To say that they improved was an understatement. In the first issue an anxious editorial had solicited advice: "Shall the scope of Captain Future's quests be limited to our Universe? Or shall his experiences plunge him into the fourth dimension--into the past, remote eons of time--or into the far-distant vistas of eternity a million years from today?" Reader response must have been positive because the editors finally allowed Hamilton to drop the "scientific detective" constraint. From that point on not even the sky was the limit in Captain Future's Universe. "World Saver" Hamilton had been unfettered.

In "The Lost World of Time," crime takes a holiday as Cap and his buddies travel a hundred million years back in time to an Earth were carboniferous plains are lit by flaring volcanoes and the silver glow of twin moons. In order to save the native inhabitants of Katain--the tenth planet which exploded aeons ago, forming the asteroids between Mercury and Jupiter--the Futuremen leap another three billion years backward still, only to find themselves stranded in an unthinkable time before the planets of our Solar System existed.

The following novel, "Quest Beyond The Stars," took the red-haired sojourner out of our Solar System altogether. In order to save the dying planet of Mercury, the Futuremen traverse strange zones of space in which all ordinary scientific laws are overturned. They flash past alien suns, great meteor swarms, somber dark stars, and skirt the flaming coasts of gigantic nebulae of glowing gases. No piker when it came to travel, Hamilton brought his adventurers clear to the heart of the Galactic core in search of the mysterious Birthplace of Matter.

In "The Comet Kings," Captain Future pursues disappearing space ships into the gaseous heart of Halley's Comet. He encounters a world of electrical splendor and terror, a race of glowing beings, and invaders from a four-dimensional region outside the universe. And that's just for starters.

"Planets In Peril," finds Curt Newton cast in a stellar role as the saviour of a dying island universe where the very stars are flickering out. He must battle the Cold Ones--living products of a disastrous chain of biological events that took place on the frozen planet of a long-dead star.

And so it went, with each new issue presenting breathless variations on a cosmic feast as "World Saver" Hamilton upped the fictional ante to become "Universe Saver." Then an upheaval occurred when Hamilton's name was dropped from the series.

"I wrote all the Captain Future novels until Pearl Harbor in December 1941," Hamilton explained. "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 thirty-eight years old, so, on the verge of being inducted, I was ruled out, and went back to writing Cap. Future again. Some of my stories then appeared under the 'Brett Sterling' byline, and others under my own name."

Seventeen issues of Captain Future were issued between 1940 and 1944. Fifteen of the novels were written by Hamilton, and two by William Morrison (pen name of Brooklyn author Joseph Samachson). The Morrison stories, "Worlds to Come," and "Days of Creation" were more than acceptable entries in the series, capitalizing on the potential of Hamilton's freakish heroes.

"Star of Dread," a Brett Sterling byline penned by Hamilton, continued to pursue Curt Newton's new destiny as dedicated cosmic archaeologist. This was the story in which the author went deeper into his consistently developing "Past History" of the Solar System. On the distant planet Deneb it is learned that our human race came originally from another galaxy many millions of years ago. Before they came, two non-human races held sway in the galaxy--the protozoan Linids, whom our ancestors conquered long ago, and the mysterious Kangas, "the mighty lords of darkness who sailed the starways and sucked power from the suns a billion years ago." It seems that all of mankind has descended from the Denebians, who terraformed and settled many of the other planets as well.

In William Morrison's "Days of Creation," it is revealed that Captain Future's beloved Solar System is bulging at the seams with population density. To solve matters, the ingenious super scientist proposes to do nothing less than create a brand new world between the orbits of Earth and Mars--the artificial planet Futuria. Create it he does. And Futuria becomes a decent enough answer to the housing shortage--if you have nothing against carniverous plants and Jovian flame breathers as neighbors.

"Worlds to Come," Morrison's second and final CF yarn, features a return trip to the Saggitarian System, the scene of Cap's previous epic voyage in search of the Birthplace of Matter. This time our adventurers lock in mortal combat with the deadly Sverds. The Sverds? Ah yes, the Sverds. Ten-foot high, green-gray dog-headed creatures half in and half out of another dimension. Upon the outcome of the cataclysmic battle hinges not just a single star system, but possibly the entire universe.

Despite apologists and critics, nearly all of the Captain Future novels were entertaining stories filled with color, excitement and fantastic adventure. Like all the hero pulps, the magazine had but one aim: to give the reader an hour or two of simple, infectious escape from life's hardships. The extent to which it succeed-

ed was reflected in a fan letter in the Winter 1944 readers' column:

> Dear (editor):
> If the paper shortage becomes so acute that you must cease publication of some of your magazines for the duration, may I suggest that you hang on to CAPTAIN FUTURE until the very last?
> I do the work of four or five people every day. I have an invalid father and an ailing mother to care for and it's up to me to look after everything besides performing heavy manual labor every day six days a week on my railroad job. I'm so tired and exhausted that I almost collapse. So, occasionally, when I have an hour or so to spare, I treat myself to the super treat of treats--CAPTAIN FUTURE! That gives me the lift necessary to carry on. But without CAPTAIN FUTURE, my life would be dreary, gloomy and lonely indeed.

Despite editorial assurance that Captain Future was one of the lustiest of the science fictioneers, the lonely railroader must have been bitterly disappointed when no other issue of the magazine was ever issued. It had, indeed, been cancelled due to wartime paper shortage.

One consolation was that three additional Captain Future novels had already been written; these were published in Startling Stories, one of the publisher's companion magazines. The first of them, Hamilton's "Red Sun of Danger" sported a memorable cover painting of Grag the robot entwined in battle with a winged, fire-breathing "night dragon."

The final Captain Future novel, "The Solar Invasion," was ghosted by Manly Wade Wellman, a highly regarded American regional writer and fantasist. Unfortunately, science fiction was not Wellman's long suit, and his lack of enthusiasm for Captain Future's milieu resulted in an uninspired adventure for the rugged red-haired space hero.

While "The Solar Invasion" marked the end of the "book-length" novels, the character staged something of a comeback in 1950 with a series of seven "novelettes" (pulp euphemism for long short stories), all written by Hamilton. In this third phase, the mood changed from juvenile adventure to stories emphasizing atmosphere and characterization.

While even the longer novels were seldom as stereotyped as they have been depicted, the later Captain Future novelettes are excellent fiction by any standards. They are beautifully written stories revealing an unexpected sense of melancholy as the aging writer examined the brevity--and frailty--of human life set against the vastness of space and brooding eons of time.

Edmond Hamilton's final Captain Future story, "Birthplace of Creation," appeared in the May 1951 issue of Startling Stories. In it, a more somber Curtis Newton again travels beyond Sagittarius to the fount of the universe, the birthplace of material creation. There, in teeming star jungles ablaze with the glow of drowned and captured suns, he must wrestle with--and ultimately renounce--the opportunity of godhood. As a pulp hero's swan song, it was an ending that couldn't be topped.

While the Captain Future novels were aimed at a younger audience than most of the magazines, Hamilton's fecund imagination and zest for story telling insured that they were great fun to read. Who can say how many young readers were influenced by them and went on to shape the very future they dreamed about? There are no statistics on such things.

A few years before his death in 1977, Ed Hamilton and his wife Leigh Brackett (one of the great SF writers herself) were invited to sit in the reporter's press box at Cape Kennedy and they watched Appollo 12 take off to the moon. Ed later wrote about his reactions to the launch:

> So as I watched Apollo 12 rise in flame and thunder, if anyone at that moment had asked me, 'Was it worthwhile to spend 44 years writing science fiction?' I would have unhesitatingly answered 'Yes.' For I feel we had a part ...a very tiny part...in this. We did not plan or build or launch this craft. We only dreamed about it. But perhaps the dreams helped a little to create a climate in which it could be planned and launched and built...
>
> Without a single exception all of my oldest friends, and some of them go back forty years, are science fictionists. Many others who were friends are now gone. And as the rocket soared up into the clouds, I found myself thinking of them all... looking back to the days when we were all looking forward, when we met in tiny groups and tried to peer into the future, discussed it, argued about it, and attempted awkwardly to put it into fiction. And it did not seem to me, with the thunder still echoing in my ears, that what we did or tried to do was completely unworthy.

Who is to say where imagination ends and reality begins?

Up from the waves rose a hideous reptilian head as Captain Future raised his proton pistol (CHAP. XVI)

THE STAR OF DREAD

By BRETT STERLING