

**FANZINE ARTICLE from ECHOES #92 (April 1997):**

# **PARDON HIS IRON NERVES**

*by Phillip Rey*



## **CAPTAIN FUTURE**

"Curt Newton was a tall, well-built young man. His unruly shock of red hair towered six feet four above the floor, and his wide lithe shoulders threatened to burst the jacket of his gray synthesilk zipper-suit. He wore a flat tungstite belt in which was holstered a queer-looking pistol, and on his left hand was a large, odd ring.

This big young man's tanned, handsome face had lines of humor around the mouth, crinkles of laughter around the eyes. Yet behind the bantering humor in those gray eyes there lurked something deep and purposeful, some hidden, overpowering determination. That tall, cheerful, red-haired young adventurer of the ready laugh and flying fists was the implacable Nemesis of all oppressors and exploiters of the System's human and planetary races. Combining a gay audacity with an unswervable purposefulness and an unparalleled mastery of science, he had blazed a brilliant trail across the nine worlds in defense of the right." [#1]

## **INTRODUCTION**

Four decades after his final departure for some uncharted region of the universe, Captain Future is still well remembered by a few enthusiastic readers throughout the world. Unlike characters like the Shadow or

Doc Savage, whose magazines attained 325 and 181 issues respectively, our good Captain only appeared in twenty novels of spatial challenges and enigmas. Of these twenty novels, Edmond Hamilton wrote seventeen between 1939 and 1943. The fans would have liked to see other book-length stories featuring Curt Newton and his Futuremen but the pulp magazine was canceled due to paper shortage. Hamilton brought his Captain Future back in seven novelets which were published in *Startling Stories* in 1950 and 1951. The Curt Newton he described had matured, and the stories themselves had another flavor of heroism. In all the Captain Future adventures he wrote, Edmond Hamilton concentrated a whole set of science fiction themes and created peoples, races and mythologies that gave these novels a lasting flavor to those who read them. A flavor I have now been tasting for fifteen years with almost always the same excitement and enthusiasm.

Almost!

Almost, because there have been times when I wondered about Curt Newton and his heroic behavior. Times when I would have liked each character to have more importance in the stories. Times when I felt Hamilton had not done such a good job with these characters, who had no psychology and acted according to a

set of prescribed rules of stereotyped behavior. But that was all before I knew that the pulps were products of an industry of stories written for the pleasure and entertainment of the readers. Not until I started to read pulp fanzines and books on popular fiction did I suspect that the Captain Future novels were anything but what

scholars call formula stories. And at that particular moment, I thought that instead of finding fault with stories written by Hamilton, I could use my critical ideas in order to write this non too serious essay on our good Captain's psyche. The novels I based my study on are only those written by Edmond Hamilton and they are:

Captain Future and the Space Emperor  
Calling Captain Future  
Captain Future's Challenge  
The Triumph of Captain Future  
Captain Future and the Seven Space Stones  
Star Trail to Glory  
The Magician of Mars  
The Lost World of Time  
Quest Beyond the Stars

Outlaws of the Moon  
The Comet Kings  
Planets in Peril  
The Face of the Deep  
The Star of Dread  
Magic Moon  
The Red Sun of Danger  
Outlaw World

### **HERO AND READERS**

While reading an adventure story, the reader generally identifies himself with the hero. By this identification the reader of a Captain Future story is carried away into an imaginary solar system created by Hamilton for this series. In this fictional solar system, the author plotted adventures for the Captain and his Futuremen. The first four novels present us a character, all at once, an invincible and a triumphing hero upon whom all our attention is directed and centered. Either in the title of the magazine *Captain Future Wizard of Science* and *Man of Tomorrow*, or in the title of the stories listed above, the name Captain Future is clearly everywhere because he is "the greatest adventurer in the solar system's history, the mysterious awesome figure whose legend dominated the nine worlds. This name and fame had rung around the system." [#1] Captain Future is the true successor of Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers, always ready to fight for freedom.

"Whenever the Solar Government president James Carthew would need of him, he would but signal and Captain Future and the three Futuremen would come." [#1]

The three Futuremen being Otho the lithe android, Grag the towering robot, and Simon Wright, the living brain housed in a transparent metal case.

Captain Future is quite stereotyped and omnipotent. And it is hard for a reader to identify himself to such a perfect hero, with incredible intellectual powers and a great physical strength. So much so that some readers of Captain Future reacted to Curt Newton's all-might and iron nerves in the letter department "Under Observation" of the magazine.

Among the few critical and valid analysis published by the editor, I found the letters of Stanley Kovan to be

interesting They addressed good questions to the author and the editor policy and provided good comments on the value of the novels. For example the "stories are too one sided. One side (always that of Captain Future) has all the advantages, while the other side has almost nothing." [#5] "Just why, may I ask, must Captain Future himself and his companions be the greatest so-ans-sos in the System? Greatest scientific genius, greatest pilot, ..." [#7]

Those were questions which made me think about my favorite hero. Was he really always that great of a Captain? I had no good answer to that question until, one day four years ago, fellow Captain Future fan Chuck Juzek sent me a copy of a letter written by Les & Es Cole for "the Ether Vibrates", the letter department of *Startling Stories*.

"Let us discuss that intellectual giant, the people's cherce, the great lover, the one-and-only Captain Future. We wonder about him. Here he has been going around with the dimpled-darling of the spaceways, Joan Randall, for some ten years, and he has yet to make an honorable woman of her. We think he should – and then retire. Permanently. Speaking psychologically, we could have predicted all this. You see, Fig Newton grew up on the Moon, surrounded by inept fatheads. Never having had a chance to resolve his oedipus, the kid was bound to be a pervert. The Futuremen series has over the year, shown abysmally poor plotting [I don't agree], no scientific background and phony, artificial characters [there is one idea]. In case you didn't get us the first time, we repeat Captain Future is a vacuous, vapid idiot. And that goes for his ghoulish, moribund crew, too!"

That letter, sometimes bitter as gall, nevertheless started me on a deeper reflection about our good Cap-

tain's iron nerves, strong will and artificial character. It nourished an idea I long had in my mind. It helped me find the words to describe a point of view I sometimes took while reading a Captain Future novel (or watched an episode of the Captain Future animated series).

The perspective I introduce here is not made to devalorize Hamilton's work which I like but is one particular look on a hero whose adventures have filled my head with starry dreams, visions of distant galaxies and nebulae. A character who brought me that "sense of wonder" so dear to Hamilton.

### **HERO AND LONELINESS**

In the adventures of Captain Future, Edmond Hamilton narrates the feats of that extraordinary man either fighting malicious and dangerous criminals or roaming the endless depths of interstellar space in a quest for knowledge and justice. Captain Future is a worthy representative of this issue of heroes who are young, athletic and experts in all the scientific fields. A galactic knight, without fear or weaknesses, who bestows his great skills and qualities to the evolution of the system in which he lives. But because he is different in his thinking and in his behavior from the other men, our hero is destined to loneliness. A loneliness from which springs his heroism.

But how can I speak of loneliness as I know that Captain Future is always with his three comrades Grag, Otho and Simon, and that his valiant heart is beating for the "strikingly pretty" Joan Randall?

Captain Future lives in seclusion on the moon, in his secret laboratory beneath the surface of Tycho crater, with the three Futuremen. In the beginning (of his life), it was not his choice but his mother's wish that he be kept "here upon the moon, until he is grown to manhood." [#1] Isolated from the rest of the human race, little Curtis Newton received, from his three tutors and guardians, an education as no human had ever received before.

"The Brain, with its unparalleled store of scientific knowledge, supervised the boy's education. It was the Brain who instructed Curtis Newton in every branch of science, making him in a short period of years into a complete master of all technical knowledge. And together the bodyless Brain and the brilliant, growing youth delved far beyond the known limits of science and devised instruments of unprecedented nature.

The robot instilled some of his own incredible strength and stamina into the boy, by a system of exercises rigidly maintained in mock struggle, the red-haired youth would pit himself against the great metal creature who could have crushed him in a second had he wished. Gradually, thus, Curt's strength became immense.

The android endowed the growing lad with his own unbelievable swiftness of physical and mental reac-

tions. The two spent many hours on the barren lunar surface, engaged in strange games in which the lad would try to match the android's wonderful agility." [#1]

Taught, trained and modeled to become a hero, I see young Curtis Newton's character as the sum of the nature and the personality of his three unhuman tutors. Not yet Captain Future, the boy still depends on his comrades. It is only when his training is completed that the leader of the Futuremen can enter the stage.

"Finally, when Curt had grown to full manhood, Simon Wright told him how his father and mother had died, and of his mother's dying wish that he war always against those who would use the powers of science for evil ends. And the tall red-haired young adventurer called himself Captain Future." [#1]

At this time, I see a reversal of perspectives. Curtis Newton is not the learner anymore. He has become Captain Future. And from that moment, I consider the Futuremen to be Curtis' aids and followers, not his teachers and tutors anymore. The three will stand by him and fight at his side. I now see them as copies, or incarnation, of one of Curtis Newton's mental or physical skills. The three Futuremen are embodiments, physical manifestations of Captain Future's inner psychic forces.

Thus, Simon Wright represents the scientific, intellectual and serious part of Newton's personality; Otho, the android symbolizes the litheness, the swiftness and physical quickness of our Captain; and Grag, the robot is the magnification of Future's muscular strength and robustness.

It is from that point of view that I see Captain Future's loneliness. The Futuremen being melted inside Curtis' character, Captain Future is truly alone on the moon. Furthermore, that perspective on our hero can be broadened to encompass his human friends on Earth:

James Carthew, the president can be seen as a symbolic father for Curtis. Ezra Gurney the iron-haired marshal might well be Curtis' elder brother. "For the veteran of the Police, in his long years of service, came to know the System's space-lanes and ships and the way of its evildoers better than anyone else." [#1] The same can be said for Captain Future: "As he grew older, Curt Newton started secret voyages through the Solar System [...] and so he came to know not only the Earthman colonies of each world, but much of the unexplored planetary wildernesses also." [#1]

And Curt Newton's most important friend, Miss Joan Randall, is yet to come.

### **HERO AND WOMEN**

Joan Randall is special among Captain Future's friends. She almost is the only woman character of the series and she plays an important role at Curt's side in almost every novel. "She technically is a member of

section three of the Police organization, by far the least known division of all. It is the secret service of the Planet Police." [#6]

Joan, as a secret agent, follows her father's steps in this job. Even if she has to be strong and independent in her work in the police, she is and remains the symbol of beauty, love, tenderness and sensibility in the series. I see her as the incarnation of Curt Newton's deep human feelings. Feelings that are implicitly buried deeply inside every male characters' heart. Feelings that have no true place in action-packed stories. Feelings Edmond Hamilton did not take time to describe at length and which would have given his characters a deeper personality. Feelings that often are kept secret. Secret and private as are Captain Future's deep feelings. They may be love, sadness, fear? Who knows? Curt Newton doesn't share much.

"Curt Newton's eyes were queerly abstracted as he sat at the throttles. He spoke to the Brain, slowly. 'That was a great girl, Simon,' he said. Then he added hastily, 'Not that it can mean anything to me, you understand.'" [#1]

I understand here that Captain Future denies his feelings of love the right to exist and conceals them inside his heart. That is the way his mother wanted it when she died on the Moon. That is the hard path he chose to follow when he swore the oath to be "fighting for the future of the whole Solar System." [#1] He must remain alone to be a hero serving justice.

### **EVIL HERO**

Last but not least of the embodiments of Captain Future's inner psychic forces are the villains of the series. Among the Comet Kings, the Wrecker, Doctor Zarro, the Life Lord or the Space Emperor, "a slender man, with the fine wrists and ankles and ageless looks of a Venusian, the pallid red skin and high forehead of a Martian and the intelligent black eyes and sleek black hair of an Earthman" [#5] stands out with distinction and conspicuity: Ul Quorn, the terrible Magician of Mars.

I consider the despised mixed breed, as Quorn was called, and the other criminals as well, to be shadowy and evil reflections of our "good" Captain. The incarnation of Curtis' dark and dangerous parts: his hatred and his anger. The Magician of Mars is a black Captain. As dark as Darth Vader is in Star Wars. A knight of evil and a perfect match for Captain Future.

"'There is nobody in the System to match Future in brilliance and audacity – except myself.' Quorn's voice rang oddly sincere. 'It's too bad that two men like Future and me have to be enemies, that soon I shall have to kill the only man I could accept as my equal. When I kill Future, I'll be killing the only man whom I really respect.'" [#7]

Quorn, like John Sunlight to Doc Savage, is the only

worthy foe Hamilton created to challenge Captain Future. To match Newton's skills and heroism, the true enemy had to have Curt's genius but the exact opposite goal in life. Conquer, kill and destroy instead of freeing and saving.

### **A CHOSEN PATH**

With this last comparison, the picture is complete. On a symbolic plane, Captain Future is lonely. Loneliness is always present under this perspective and it influences his behavior. When he chose to become Captain Future, he also chose loneliness as his partner. And so he is always free to war against crime or leave on a quest for scientific knowledge. As Joan tells him when the series has matured a little, "Curt, you belong to the whole System. I know you love me, but duty comes first – your obligation to use your scientific powers to help the System peoples." [#12]

And duty comes first also because it is intended so by the formula behind the scenes. Curtis Newton had to move along a chosen path. A path chosen by his editors, and also a path chosen by his writer Edmond Hamilton.

### **THE AUTHOR BEHIND**

This analysis of Captain Future has led me to sometimes wonder on Hamilton's maturity regarding the treatment of the characters, and especially the female characters, of his stories. Even if "the man was far more complex and interesting than most of his output" [J. Williamson in *Wonder's Child*], one thing shows clearly in Hamilton's Captain Future novels. The author was ill at ease with and detached from the subject of love-matters. For example, even if Curt Newton quietly, secretly, loves Joan, he remains distant and somehow afraid of his feelings of love for her. True it is that pulp heroes were not the James Bond type but I think Hamilton himself was a bit circumspect about love matters. I see Hamilton's uneasiness in Williamson's word about them both.

"I think Ed and I were equally ignorant and apprehensive of sex. We seldom talked about women, but he saw them as predators, marriage as a trap into some dull job that would threaten his chosen lifestyle – he hadn't yet met Leigh Brackett." This was in 1931 but Hamilton doesn't seem to have changed much over the years preceding his work on the Captain Future stories.

A striking example can be found in Hamilton's novel *Doom over Venus* published in *Thrilling Wonder Stories* in February 1940. This is not a Captain Future story but it is considered a feeler for the series.

At the end of the novel, the hero turns his back to adventure in order to get married. Explicitly, his friend, "shaking his head dismally," mourns that "there goes one of the best interplanetary spies that [he] ever worked with or against. Heading right for marriage and

a dull, respectable home-life. It's a pity – a terrible pity."

Hamilton's evolution came after his marriage with Leigh Brackett. "His later fiction shows far more care with mood and style and character" [J. Williamson in *Wonder's Child*], as we can see for example, in the Captain Future novelet *The Harpers of Titan*, or in other short stories collected in *The Best of Edmond Hamilton and What's It Like Out There*.

However, and whatever may have been Hamilton's point of view on marriage "the stories he wrote were strongly plotted and action packed, hammered out at white heat and never revised. Such pulp stuff wasn't literature nor was it meant to be." [J. Williamson in *Wonder's Child*] and the Captain Future novels weren't literature.

Hamilton himself testified that "so little was paid me for the early Captain Future novels that they were all written first draft right out of the typewriter. After the

first five or six, they paid me more, and I then did two drafts and they improved a bit." And it is true that they improved. Issues 7 through 13 of the *Captain Future* magazine featured the best novels of the series.

### **PARDON HIS IRON NERVES**

Paraphrasing the title of the Captain Future novelet *Pardon my Iron Nerves*, I titled this essay "Pardon his Iron Nerves", because when I learned about popular fiction and the history of the pulp magazines, I realized that Edmond Hamilton had written stories that were ordered from him by an editor. And so I could at last understand why Captain Future, the supreme foe of all evildoers of the Solar System, relied so much on his strong will and iron nerves

I owe very much to Hamilton. Especially, as John Clute says, "Edmond Hamilton took space opera seriously enough to do it well." And for that, may he be thanked.

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### **XEROX SWAP**

Here are some xeroxes that I would like to swap for xeroxes of stuff that I need. If you need any of these, and want to swap, let me know. Tom Johnson, 501 E. Morris St., Seymour, TX 75330: The Phantom Detective - THE CIRCUS MURDERS, 3/36; The Whisperer - MANSION OF THE MISSING, 2/37; The Green Lama - THE INVISIBLE ENEMY, 12/40; The Ghost/Green Ghost - CALLING THE GHOST, 1/40, MURDER MAKES A GHOST, Summer 1940, and THE CASE OF THE WALKING SKELETON, Spring 1941; Dusty Ayres - THE WHITE DEATH, 1/35; Tailspin Tommy - DOOMED IN THE AIR, 10/36; Dan Dunn - FIGHT OR DIE, 11/36; The Shadow - THE FIVE CHAMELEONS, 11/1/32, THE BLACK FALCON, 2/1/34, THE FOUR SIGNETS, 1/1/35, RIVER OF DEATH, 3/1/39. I'm especially looking for Dan Fowlers and Phantom Detectives, but will consider anything that I do not have. Write if you want to swap something.