

GLORY DAYS WITH THE ACE OF SPACE



Once a simpler sun shone. Brave, bronzed heroes rode the spaceways, probed eerie worlds, shot it out with the bad guys. At that time the Solar System swarmed with life. From the Sun's core to the frozen cliffs of Pluto, civilisations flourished and there was trade, adventure, struggle.

Through all this, riding on blazing jets, roared a splendid hero -- Captain Future. Born Curt Newton he was (is, shall be) young, lithe, red-headed -- a fighting, laughing, scientific genius. From 1940 until 1951, in twenty novels and seven short stories he was Earth's good champion and defender.

In that worthy role he was aided by Greg, a slow-witted robot; Otho, a synthetic man; and Simon Wright, a bodiless brain in a crystal case. These were the Futuremen -- and supporting them were Joan Randall, The Girl; and Ezra Gurney, the Good Gray Marshall of the Space Patrol. Plus inhabitants of the Solar System, selected star clusters and various dimensions.

The first issue of Captain Future sets the tone for the next six years. In Captain Future and the Space Emperor (Winter 1940) a murderous hooded fiend of crime, and his hordes of leering henchmen, uses super science to threaten the solar system, until the Futuremen cut them down. The action is fast, violent, simple. Terrible doom menaces. Astounding adventures. Incredible sights. Interplanetary cops and robbers -- hot-eyed Space Opera. All told by Edmond Hamilton, an old old pro of the pulps.

Calling Captain Future (Spring). Captain Future's Challenge (Summer). The Triumph of Captain Future (Fall). The series rings with ghost echoes from other pulp magazines. But who cares if Future and his aides have strong Doc Savage overtones, if the stories have the shape of those in The Phantom Detective? Here is a piece from The Shadow Magazine. There a fragment of an E. E. Smith concept. But who cares! Let the action roll!

Winter 1941: a descent into sub-atomic worlds via the code hidden in Captain Future and the Seven Space Stones. Spring: Star Trail to Glory and battles with the machine men of Mercury. In Summer The Magician of Mars and an invisible citadel of crime. Fall, The Lost World of Time and a world a hundred million years in the past is saved. Saved!

By 1942 the Solar System is proving too small for Curt Newton's exploits. Quest Beyond the Stars (paperback title: Captain Future's Quest) in the Winter issue leads him to the heart of the galaxy where a machine continually creates matter. Spring: The Outlaws of the Moon, in which he returns to Earth and is promptly framed for the murder of the President (He didn't do it -- really!). Then it's off to a visit to Haley's Comet (Summer: The Comet Kings) and its electrified people. With Planets in Peril (Fall) he again leaves the Solar System to battle for the freedom of another universe.

Wartime paper shortages cut Captain Future to three issues in 1943. Face of the Deep (Winter) shipwrecks the Futuremen and a load of homicidal killers on a disintegrating world. The next novel (Spring), Worlds to Come, is the first written by Brett Sterling (William Morrison). This story pits the Futuremen against invaders from another dimension. Finally, Star of Dread (Summer) by Hamilton matches them against a mutation machine manufacturing multitudes of monsters.

The final issues of Captain Future were published in 1944. Magic Moon (Winter) whizzes all about the Solar System with a motion picture company, bringing, incidentally, that ringing phrase, "The Ace of Space," into the language. In the Brett Sterling Spring issue, Days of Creation (paperback title: 10th Planet), Newton gets amnesia and has many hard times.

Now the series moves bodily to Startling Stories. In the Spring 1945 issue appears Red Sun of Danger, another Sterling (Danger Planet is the paperback title). Next, Outlaw World appears in the Winter 1946 issue. It's amnesia time again as Newton, temporarily, becomes a space pirate. Finally, in Fall 1946 Manly Wade Wellman contributes his only novel, The Solar Invasion. This brings back The Magician of Mars for his third and final appearance.

Then, for four years -- silence.

Not until 1950 is there further word from the Futuremen. Then they return in a fine series of seven short stories, published in Startling Stories. Immediately we plunge into a world altered significantly from earlier years. Newton has reached a strange new maturity. Having become harder, grimmer, he moves through odd stories of regret, subtle loss and sacrifice. Each story deals, in some way, with temptations of absolute power and the pain of relinquishment. The tone is adult, full of complex motives and disillusionment.

In The Return of Captain Future, Newton has returned from Andromeda with a strange creature that turns out to be the last of an elder master race. Revived, it siezes control of Joan Randall. To save her Newton permits it to sieze his own mind - but for a reason. The story is excellent. In May comes the superb Children of the Sun. In this Newton, seeking a lost friend, is transmuted into an energy creature and plunges into incredible freedom at the heart of the Sun.

The Harpers of Titan, published in September, is Simon Wright's story. Surgically emplaced in a dead man's body, Wright meets the terrible gentle Harpers, prevents a native uprising and encounters, again, the equally terrible delights of living in the flesh.

At this point the series is interrupted by a story featuring Greg. None of the comments about these stories applies here. Pardon My Iron Nerves (November) is a trifle; it labours to be comic but comes out low vaudeville.

The January 1951 issue, Moon of the Unforgotten, continues the high-emotion-content stories. Ezra Gurney, investigating the disappearance of elderly people on Jupiter, learns the cause personally in a bitterly poignant story. Earthmen No More (May) is a cutting study of alienation. It's the hard, decent frontier and corrupt cities dichotomy -- the future seen through the eyes of a man from the past. Newton, struggling to overthrow a rocket fuel monopoly, is grim, implacable, full of bitter humour, rage and sardonic outbursts. Strange emotions for a pulp hero. As a curious sidelight Otho comes totally alive as an individual of complex and unsuspected depths, subtly alien, as befits an artificial man.

The final story, Birthplace of Creation, appears in May. We return to the scene of Captain Future's 1942 quest. A misguided scientist steals the secret of the location of the matter-creating machine at the core of the galaxy. Newton
(please see the foot of the next page.....)

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GLORY DAYS WITH THE ACE OF SPACE (continued)

is barely able to redress the damage as the idealist creates a torrent of new worlds. Newton's intense personal struggle against the desire to wield that god-like power himself is vividly told and the story stands as a splendid finale to the Captain Future series.

So the record exists. Six years of space opera. Two years of something more. A hero who began in perfection and ended as a flawed man, grim, alone, gripped by psychological wounds we can barely understand. He saw too much.

But it makes for fascinating reading.

-- Robert Sampson