

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

No. 34

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Editor: ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES DOROTHY B. SEADOR, Asso. Ed.
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≡ Editorial ≡

YESTERDAY'S WORLD OF TOMORROW:

1927 II

IN 1927, transplantation of organs was considered a fitting subject for prophetic fiction; and in the blurb for W. Alexander's "New Stomachs For Old", *Amazing Stories*, February 1927, the editor referred to Dr. Walter Finkler's successful experiments in transplanting the heads of insects. The blurb continues, "So the operation of exchanging your old stomach for a new one may, after all, not be an impossibility. . ."

True enough, such an operation is still in the realm of science fiction; so far as today's knowledge goes, there are difficulties attending the transfer of organs over and beyond surgical requirements. Tissue and cell dissimilarities still make it impossible for you to

give or take an eye, for example, to or from anyone except your identical twin. Any science fiction dealing with transplanted organs today must include an awareness of these difficulties, and offer some sort of explanation about how they were overcome.

Amazing Stories' editor did not, however, see any objection to something else in the Alexander story—a type of reasoning which is fatal in science fiction. In the story, a wealthy man, whose stomach has been weakened by high living, pays a healthy peasant-type immigrant ten thousand dollars to exchange stomachs with him. The operation is a success, but both men experience a strange after-effect: the young Italian finds himself

assailed by cravings that are satisfied only by the most expensive foods; Colonel Seymour no longer enjoys eating at the Ritz, but has to seek out low-class restaurants.

NOW THERE'S an unstated assumption behind this—an assumption that a man's soul is immanent in each part of his body, and that each organ expresses the soul's personality in its own fashion. More—when an organ is transplanted into someone else's body, the part becomes greater than the whole; Colonel Seymour's stomach is more powerful than the young Italian's will power, and vice versa. (Psychological vagaries *might* have some such results in an individual instance, but both author and editor treat the phenomenon as physical; in the end, the operation is reversed, and both patients are "normal" again.) All of which may pass for some sort of magic, but it isn't science; it isn't logic; it's bad theology; and it doesn't belong in science fiction. (In *Weird Tales*, it made some very good stories, though.)

The same assumption underlie two other surgical tales printed in later issues of *Amazing Stories*: "The Black Hand" by Charles Gardner Bowers (January 1931) and "The Ambidexter" by David H. Keller,

MD. (April 1931). I have seen this theme many times since then, in stories purporting to be science fiction; and perhaps you may have seen instances in recent years. It's the sort of fallacy which seems to have a peculiar fascination for writers of imaginative fiction, even some who could be presumed to know better.

IN THE SAME February issue, (all stories mentioned here come from 1927 issues of *Amazing Stories*, unless otherwise specified), we have "The Thought Machine" by Ammianus Marcellinus. The author is presumably one of those "scientists" who, Hugo Gernback relates, were willing to write scientifiction providing that the stories were not published under their own names.

The thought machine is:
 ... a device of a hundred thousand parts, that in its different divisions would perform nearly all the simpler operations of the human mind, with a degree of accuracy of as high degree, as the accuracy of his old friend, the adding machine, and without fatigue. But as the adding machine had been no match for a trained bookkeeper, the Psychomach, as Smith called it, was no match for a trained thinker. It occupied a large circus tent ...

The Psychomach is the beginning; for the rest of the Twentieth Century, scientists and engineers turn out increasingly bigger and better Psychomachs. Eventually, mankind lets the thinking machines do everything for him, and is reduced to savagery when, in the far future, they break down and no one can repair them. The machines warn and threaten men with disaster before the event, but have no control over them.

The theme of the relation between Man and "thinking machine" is still a fruitful one in science fiction. Since the Marcellinus story, we've seen innumerable tales where the thinking machine attained personality of its own and (1) revolted and tried to destroy humanity, (2) deserted Man in order to find its own destiny, (3) controlled Man benevolently until it was destroyed by those who decided that humanity was being ruined (4) deserted Man and/or destroyed itself for humanity's good. Don A. Stuart's "The Machine" (*Astounding Stories*, February 1935) is an outstanding example of the last.

IN THE MAY issue, "The Singing Weapon" by Ben Prout is the first story where-in an invasion of America is

foiled by supersonic weapons, which strike notes that disintegrate the enemy's aircraft.

In the June issue, we have "The Lost Comet" by Ronald M. Sherin, an interesting mixture of sound science fiction, acceptable magic, and utter nonsense. The protagonist, who describes himself as a humble star-gazer and visionary, and who has dreamed up a new system of mathematics, reveals that the principal part of Viela's comet did not disintegrate, as was believed. The story is supposed to take place in 1930. Professor Alphonse Montesquieux declares:

"Now listen to this: when Biela's comet divided in 1845, the smaller fragment continued in its course; but the main body was deflected and changed orbit. A real mathematician would have perceived this during its last appearance in 1852, when the two nuclei were already over a million miles apart. *But Biela's comet is at last coming back, and it will strike the earth exactly upon the vernal equinox, six months from today!* . . . I have mathematically deduced its greatly elongated orbit and proved the point in which it must appear within a second of an arc. . ."

THE REASON why we are in for a catastrophe, the

professor explains, is this:

"... And do not think that comets are so harmless as optimistic astronomers teach. The density of comets, like that of planets, varies with age and chemical constitution. The coming comet possesses a nucleus of considerable density, as its attractive power and gravitational resistance clearly prove. All comets contain carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen, but the relative proportions in which these elements are compounded are not known; consequently there can be no certainty regarding the effect of cometary gases upon terrestrial atmosphere and organisms. ..."

Fair enough, so far; the author has given an acceptable explanation of why the "missing" part of Biela's comet did not break up, as did the rest of it. (While it's generally believed that both halves of the comet *did* disintegrate back in 1852, we do not have absolute proof.) Now the author inserts a bit of magic. I refer to "magic" in the sense that Dr. Macklin, with whom I discussed this story some weeks back, uses the term in analyzing science fiction. It's using magic when, in a story, something exists, or operates, etc., because the author *says* it does—as in the

instance of planets beyond Pluto, or Dr. E. E. Smith's inertialess drive. "Magic" of this nature cannot be attacked, at least not according to scientific knowledge at the time the particular story was written; one can only pick flaws in the way an author has developed his magic, if his logic is faulty. This is quite different from writing stories about a hollow Earth, chemicals that will shrink people to the size of insects, etc., things which are ridiculous by the light of what is known.

"... My opinion, however, is that these elements, combined with a new substance which I strongly suspect to exist within comets, would be absolutely fatal to organic life based upon amorphous carbon. The conclusion, therefore, is evident: terrestrial humanity is about to come to an end, even though the earth itself is not totally destroyed."

MR. SHERIN'S magic is very modest indeed. The professor does not specify his substance, does not claim to have isolated it, nor does he tell how the substance combines with known elements to produce the lethal effect, nor does he indicate just what the effect is. We cannot dispute

him; however, since he has no data except a strong suspicion, it is no wonder that no one believes him. And since he has deduced the orbit of the "lost comet" by the manipulation of only two orbital elements (and, in addition, through a new system of mathematics which he has invented himself, and which no one else understands) it's small wonder that no astronomers or mathematicians will believe that the professor knows what he's talking about. After all, it actually takes the manipulation of six orbital elements to figure out cometary orbits!

Unlike the protagonists in later such stories, the professor has no plan or invention which will prevent the disaster, or save the world. He can only give warning.

Well, it's no great surprise when the professor is incarcerated in a sanitarium, but Biela's comet *does* show up; however, the professor's calculations have been a little off:

"...By an act of Providence, the central nucleus of the comet missed the terrestrial surface by a distance which could not have exceeded 300 miles. The concussion we felt a few moments ago was due to the debris emitted by the coma. ..."

And Professor Montesquieux says sadly:

"I have made a serious and unforgivable mistake. This deviation in the comet's path is wholly accounted for by the perturbation caused in passing the Jovian orbit. ..."

THAT'S PUTTING it mildly, even if we assume that the professor meant that Jupiter was close to the comet when the comet crossed the Jovian orbit. Since it was Jupiter's gravitational field which broke up Biela's comet in the first place, the professor's oversight was indeed serious. That he was able to predict the orbit as closely as he did, with his secret system, is an amazing story in itself. Which all proves that mad geniuses with new mathematical systems had better leave comets alone if they want to keep their freedom.

However, like the wolf in the fable, Biela's comet *did* show up; and to believe that no astronomer was able to predict its return, or that no one thought of Biela's comet, and set out to calculate its orbit in the conventional manner when the first phenomena of its return became visible, is sheer nonsense.

Here we have another unspoken assumption which is to be found in a great deal of fiction (and in some stories is spoken out plainly): that is "conspiracy" theory of scien-

tists' behavior. It assumes that all the scientists are banded together in a clandestine hierarchy, one of the by-laws of which is that no one will pay any attention to anyone who comes up with a startling conclusion derived by unorthodox methods, (or by orthodox ones, if the claimant lacks the "proper" pedigrees) and that any such person persisting in his efforts to get his claim examined, will be railroaded into an asylum, etc.

A particular astronomer or mathematician might well have snorted at the professor's claims, at first. But when the

first phenomena of the "lost comet" became visible, to assume that *no astronomer or mathematician* would sit down and try to determine if this thing really could be that "lost comet" the old professor was talking about some months back is utter nonsense.

Still, Sherin's "Lost Comet" is a model of virtuous science fiction, compared to the numerous "comet doom" stories written and published in later years.

There were a few more "firsts" in 1927, and we'll get to them in the next issue.

R.A.W.L.