

The Immortal Professor

By Mike Ashley

Back in 1979 I was corresponding with Neil R. Jones about a book I was planning (and am at last now writing) about Hugo Gernsback. I happened to mention that I was also toying with the idea of assembling a volume of "lost" stories, stories that had been accepted by magazines for publication but which for one reason or another, usually the magazine folding, were not published and have remained unpublished. Neil Jones promptly sent me two lost Professor Jameson stories "Battle Moon" and "Exiles from below". Both had been written for "Super Science Stories" in 1951, and "Battle Moon" had been accepted, but Super Science folded. Jones was keen to see one of these stories in print to establish the Professor Jameson stories as the longest surviving series. I was only too pleased to oblige but somehow never got round to completing that book.

A year ago Bob Price showed interest in running one of the stories and on February 11, 1988, I wrote to Neil Jones to say that at last Professor Jameson would live again. Alas, that letter never reached him. On February 15th Neil R. Jones died at the age of 79. I was very sad to realize that he would not know that his wish was achieved, and that after 57 years a new Professor Jameson story is in print. This article, originally envisaged as a history of the Jameson stories, must also now serve as a tribute to one of the legends of the SF pulps.

The professor Jameson stories were amongst the most popular in the SF pulps of the 1930's. The basic premise of the series was simple, but revolutionary; Professor Charles Jameson schemed in his final years for a way to preserve his body after death and finally hit upon the idea of being encased in a satellite and shot into orbit around the Earth at a distance of 65,000 miles. Here the vacuum of space would keep his body as fresh as the day he died. After forty million years, long after all life on Earth has perished, the Zoromes, errant space explorers from the planet Zor, enter our solar system and discover Professor Jameson's satellite. The Zoromes had perfected their own means of immortality by encasing their brains in robot bodies. They now did the same for the professor, and he was brought back to life as a Zorome. Thereafter the series traced his adventures around the universe.

The first story had been called "The Jameson Satellite", but in the original form was completely different from the one finally saw print. Jones had thought of the idea in 1929 and worked on the piece as his third completed story. At that stage the story ended with the professor's death and the firing of the rocket into space. The manuscript concluded with a series of questions about the fate of the satellite and Jones, somewhat audaciously, penned on the bottom of the manuscript: "A sequel, '40,000,000 Years After,' will be written following the publication of the story."

He submitted the manuscript to Hugo Gernsback at Science Wonder Stories, who had already accepted two of Jones's stories. Gernsback was attracted by the concept but felt that the story as it stood did not contain sufficient action. Noting Jones's reference to a sequel, he wrote to the author on December 12, 1929, and suggested he use the essential details from the story as a prologue to the main story.

This Jones did, working on the revised story during early 1930. By now he was having problems with Gernsback's delays in payment for his first two stories and the rub came when Jones received only \$40 for his 22,000-word story "The Electrical Man" published in the May 1930 Scientific Detective Monthly. Even at the anticipated miserly rate of half-a-cent a word Jones had expected at least \$110. He wrote to Gernsback to complain and received in response a five page letter explaining the need for the reduced payment. Gernsback had said that the manuscript had needed retyping at a cost of \$11; time was then spent in copyediting the manuscript which had not been anticipated, bringing the total to \$70 and this had been deducted from the author's payment!

Jones was not going to be caught twice. Although he had now re-written "The Jameson Satellite" in its complete form, he submitted it instead to T. O'Connor Sloane at *Amazing Stories*, who promptly accepted it but, with his usual reckless haste, took over a year to publish it. "The Jameson Satellite" eventually saw the light of day in the July 1931 *Amazing Stories* and was an instant hit with the readers.

One of those readers was a young Isaac Asimov, who remained sufficiently fond of the story to include it in his bumper anthology "Before the Golden Age" (Doubleday, 1974). In his postscript to the story Asimov remarked that the kindly Zoromes had stayed with him when he came to write his first robot stories and served as the source that made him make his robots benevolent. "It was the Zoromes, then," Asimov wrote, "who were the spiritual ancestors of my own 'positronic robots' all of them, from Robbie to R.Daneel."

Frederik Pohl was also enraptured by the stories and in his autobiography, *The Way the Future Was*, (Ballantine, 1978), he tells of another influence of the stories. Young fan Robert Ettinger had read the stories and years later, recalling Jones's concept of deepfreezing Jameson's body, began his own scientific exploration of the idea, Ettinger went on to become the father of Cryobionics, the concept of a body being deepfrozen after death in the hope of a possible future revival. If any are thawed out and brought back to life, "they will owe quite a bit to Neil R. Jones," Pohl wryly mused.

In his book *Seekers of Tomorrow* (World, 1966), Sam Moskowitz suggested that Jones may have drawn his idea of the Zoromes from Edmond Hamilton's story "The Comet Doom" (*Amazing Stories*, January 1928), and remembering that Jones was originally working on his story less than eighteen months after Hamilton's appeared, its influence is entirely possible. In that story a race of benign aliens who have also transferred their brains to metal bodies befriend a human and offer to take him on a galactic tour. Neil Jones conceded that "The Comet Doom" was one source of inspiration, but equally so was H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, where his far from friendly Martians had transferred their weak bodies to mighty war machines. Further influence came from Sewell Peaslee Wright's Commander Hanson stories then running in *Amazing Stories*. "It was Wright's space patrol stories which helped give me inspiration for continuing adventures of the machine men of Zor." Jones told me.

We all have many to thank. With the public response to "The Jameson Satellite" Jones went to work on the sequel. "Planet of the Double Sun," which appeared in the February 1932 *Amazing Stories*. There would be twelve in all published in *Amazing* under editor T. O'Connor Sloane. Jones felt that Sloane had something of a soft spot for Professor Jameson, since Sloane was also an ageing professor, approaching his eighties, and only too aware of his own mortality. Sloane however, was not the most exiting of editors, turning out editorials on such riveting subjects as the light bulb, and firmly of the belief that man would never conquer Everest, let alone venture into space. *Amazing* stories during the thirties therefore, became a less than exiting magazine and its circulation inexorably spiraled downwards. It is entirely possible that the Professor Jameson stories were amongst the few items that retained loyal readers to the magazine, and caused it to survive long enough to be purchased and brought back to life, almost in Jamesonian fashion, by Ziff-Davis publication in 1938. Since *Amazing* is still going today (with a circulation not much different from that of 1937) and after 62 years the oldest surviving magazine, we have something else to thank Neil R. Jones for.

Commenting on "The Jameson Satellite" in *Before the Golden Age*, Isaac Asimov was generous in his views of Jones's writing ability, "probably the least skillfully written story in this anthology," He was right. Jones was not a particularly good writer. David Lasser at *Wonder Stories* and Harry Bates at *Astounding*, regularly rejected his stories because they were badly written and inadequately plotted. How many of these Jones salvaged himself and how many were rewritten by the assistant editors, I don't know, but to the readers Jones was tops. The letter columns were full of praise. Guy Saunders of Brooklyn writing in the July 1932 *Amazing* said:

"Planet of the Double Sun" was a story which had me in the edge to the very end. The superb way in which it was written cannot be described by mere words. Neil R. Jones, as an author, is one in a thousand.

In the following issue James Dawley wrote in to say:

I have just finished reading the story "The Return of the Tripeds" and I would like to compliment Mr Jones on it. It was equally as interesting as the first two 'adventures' of Professor Jameson. The interest in these stories, I think, is because they have plots that possess originality and have characters that are different from the usual story. However, these weren't the only good features, for the story was very well written. In general the story was an excellent example of science fiction....

Isaac Asimov may have been considering the story from the more sophisticated seventies, but it is clear that to all the readers of the thirties that the writing was more than adequate, and Jones had also captured a depth of vision and wonder in Jameson's adventures that kept the readers clamouring for more. It is interesting to consider that if Gernsback had not been so cautious with his fee for Jones's earlier stories he might have been publishing the Jameson stories and it might have saved Wonder Stories from its early grave in 1936.

When Amazing passed to a new publisher in 1938, Raymond Palmer became the new editor. Along with Bernard Davis (father of Joel Davis, publisher of Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine and Analog today), Palmer radically changed Amazing's publishing policy by introducing stories to appeal to a much younger audience. The space-hopping adventures of Professor Jameson may have seemed ideally suited to this change but Neil Jones was having none of it. "It would have meant changing the tradition on which the series was based," he told me. "New readers might not have known the difference, but the old readers would have been disenchanted. The series would have lapsed into limbo."

He was fortunate in finding a new market in Astonishing Stories, edited by former Jameson fan Frederik Pohl. Pohl was editing two science fiction pulps, Super Science Stories being the other. Astonishing published four Professor Jameson stories before the war put an end to the pulp. After the war Astonishing was left to rest in peace but Super Science Stories was revived and Professor Jameson with it. Editor Ejler Jakobssen helped Jones plot several of the stories, and a further five appeared before Super Science was again laid to rest.

There might have ended, after twenty-one published stories. At that time the series was already the longest-running in the SF field, and according to some sources it had notched up the greatest wordage. In 1965 it would be overtaken by Edward Elmer Smith's Skylark Du-Quesne stories but, amazingly, Professor Jameson fought back.

Donald Wollheim, the editor at Ace Books, decided to publish the series in book form. Five books appeared in all, reprinting fourteen of the stories, including all of the first- and the best- twelve, and adding two more. Before the series was stopped Jones had set to writing some more stories, bringing the total series to thirty, but the other stories remain unpublished until now, when you have the chance to read "Exiles from Below."

There are other features of Jones's work which are worth recalling, albeit briefly. He is credited with inventing the word "Astronaut", which is used in his first published story, "The Death's Head Meteor" (Air Wonder Stories, January 1930). More significantly, however, he also used a common historical background to his stories and was thus the first author to project the concept of a future history in the SF magazines. The idea was later honed to perfection by Robert A. Heinlein, but it was Neil R. Jones who started it all.

Jones was also a pioneer in another field. After the war he invented an Interplanetary disc-and-counters game that became quite popular. Jones, therefore had the pre-computer age forerunner of the space invaders!

Perhaps the affection with which Professor Jameson is held was best expressed by Donald Wollheim. Back in 1967, when Ace Books were reviving the series, Wollheim's assistant, Terry Carr, suggested a plot that would finalise the series. Wollheim would have none of that. "Don't kill him off," he cried.

Well we haven't. Neil R. Jones may have passed on to that great satellite in the sky, but Professor Jameson and the Zoromes continue to explore the spaceways. Come in, 21mm392, the stage is yours.