The Corona

Here’s another issue for you. I was waiting till I had some decent content to drop in here for you, and I’d been in a bit of a delay in amassing much, I’m afraid. But this one should be one of my better issues, so I think it was worth a wait. As I wrote this, there’ve been some bad doings in the world, and we should all remember the French people and others who are under great strain at this time. It’s been a good month for movies, with the new James Bond film in theaters to encouraging acclaim and box office receipts. A new Star Wars film is on the horizon for next month, great new books are coming available, and old classics are getting new faces. You’ll hear about a few of those this time around. So sit back with a nice drink, maybe a soothing hot tea, grab onto this thing and read away. I truly hope you enjoy it.

Books in Store:

Please note a few developments in books that have become available in retail stores I’d like to mention. I feel the following titles would probably be of interest to some of you who read Orschy’s:

Barnes and Noble budget classics:

L. Frank Baum’s fifteen OZ books, including all the novels and the short story collection, are now on sale in three omnibus hardbacks at your local Barnes and Noble. I’ve been watching this develop for about three months. At the beginning such time I bought the first two volumes on faith that a third book would actually appear. And it has done so. It must have come out during October, 2015.

“OZ?” you say. “But aren’t those easily available in many formats?” Yes, I must confess that this is true, but I found these agreeable because they have readable type and the original illustrations for the books, and because they are from Fall River press, a publisher that I have long admired. These OZ books are not very sturdy; only one so far is available as a leather-bound book. They’re printed on pulp paper and have commercial dust jackets, but they’re only eight dollars or so per volume. It’ll be hard to find OZ in new hardcovers at 24 dollars anywhere else.

Some of you may recall Waldenbooks had a leatherbound line of Borders Classics which provided all of the OZ books, and even the non-OZ Baum fantasies in three volumes. That line is in my opinion also a nice set and perhaps is more suitable as gift or keepsake, but it doesn’t have the short stories or illustrations, and I’ve found the typeface to be a bit small and strange to the point of distraction.

My hope, of course, is that Fall River
Press will acquire the rights to do all of the non-OZ fantasies in a third book, which would get everything back in print with the illustrations in place.

Couch-Potato Moves to Movies:
By Mi-Ughin

I don’t even know what I’ve seen, honestly. It’s a chore to even think about them, but I’ll list a few I liked:

**Jem and the Holograms:**

I saw this the same weekend that I saw The Last Witch Hunter and Crimson Peak, and for my money it was the best of the three, especially if you like life-affirming stories that would probably be okay for the kids. That’s my honest opinion—I really did like it even though it wasn’t a big budget film, and the production standards were a little cheap, maybe more than a bit so. Not bad enough to bother me, just low enough that I felt like I noticed it. The storyline was interesting and clever with a little bit of science fiction thrown into a coming of age story involving three sisters who are signed to a rock and roll contract. Plus you’ve got Molly Ringwold.

**Crimson Peak**

I’m a Guillermo del Toro fan, and this movie had all of the great gothic art that you get in his films. Big production artistically, and it had big stars and a decent storyline, but it was a pretty run of the mill entry in a gothic “secret story” arc tradition: a young woman is wooed by an elegant European stranger who sweeps her away to England as his bride, where she is to make a life with him and his sister. The story gets spooky and the secret is revealed and the requisite stuff pretty much happens. I also liked this movie, but the storyline didn’t have enough thematic weight in it to suit me—it did not resonate with me on a level of character in the way that I was in a mood for, especially after seeing Gem.

**The Last Witch Hunter**

Vin Diesel as a sort of Goth Witch Hunter out of the dark ages, seals the fate of a witch and himself—he is forever after to be a sort of Wandering Jew type: doomed to hunt witches for all eternity. It grabbed me pretty hard and I was excited at how the story switched time frames—it threw me off balance in a good way: it surprised and delighted me, but this was somewhat short lived. In the end I just watched this one—it got a bit muddled and I didn’t feel very invested by the end.

**The Visit**

M. Night Shyamalan got it right in this film. It’s one of his, for sure. But it was pretty shocking, and a lot more of a gross out film than we usually see from him. Go ahead and watch it; it’s pretty good. But be ready for it—you might want to void your stomach. Grandkids visit more than a granny in this one. I’m an armchair fan of M. Night Shyamalan—I own nearly all of his films on DVD— The Last Airbender is among them which some of you might not realize, and I’ve found them watchable, while some of them are pretty amazing.

A First Glimpse:
The Stories of Cordwainer Smith—Part I.
Mankind. I’ve been reading the definitive version of it in The Rediscovery of Man: The Complete Short Science Fiction from NESFA Press. I’m not finished with it, but I’ve read about half the stories, enough to do a Part I and read others in between reading novels. Let’s call it an appetizer of teasers for the ones I’ve read so far. With that, it’s these as the roll call:

No, No, not Rogov!
This is about a pair of Soviet scientists who are brilliant, get married and then are assigned to a super-secret project that a lot of people go around whispering about, and get all excited with admiration about these two scientists and what they’re up to. It is no less than (vaguely spoken here, no worries) a series of metaphysical experiments on more or less tuning the human brain to see into the far distant future of mankind, and it is about the results of these experiments.

War No. 81-Q
This one has to do with a form of sanitized warfare involving a bunch of pre-selected warriors who battle each other in a contest to earn the most points, and in which the winners and losers of said contest shall decide the fate of nations.

Mark Elf
This is the first badass story in the collection for my sensibility— it’s a tale where a young woman named Carlotta, a German, has been cryogenically held in an orbital ship for ages on end, until such time as ship crashes or something and deposits her on earth of the far future. She’s wakens in a time so far distant that she faces animals which have evolved, or been genetically engineered or mutated till they think with psychic abilities and talk somewhat like humans. She finds long-derelict AI war machines policing the land in a clueless attempt to continue a war on mankind, unaware that the war has ended, and in which we the reader bear witness to Smith’s first, serious look at our far future destiny. Really great, so weird it’s got to be one of the best. For my money, Mark Elf and the next three or four are the cream of this block of stories.

The Queen of the Afternoon
Mark Elf and this story are related in the focus on the characters, and the far future time frame which has advanced here, but not so much so that the feel and approach, and perhaps the task or point of the story is very different. Both stories are meant to introduce the reader to the early history of Smith’s Instrumentality of Mankind, defining such strange concepts as True Men, Underpeople, Morons, Unauthorized Men, the heretofore mentioned AI machines, which in Mark Elf we learn are called Menschenjagers, and even things called Fighting Trees which seem to suck up the latent nuclear fallout into pods in their root system and somehow use it either against certain of these peoples or perhaps (more likely?) in their favor by attempting to defend against its effects. In this one we get a central character named Juli, who is still young when her ship arrives on the future earth. Juli is about to discover that time has advanced faster on this earth than it has for her, and she does so by meeting her long-lost sister Carlotta, whom we met in Mark Elf. Carlotta was young in that story, but here has grown very old while Juli is yet young. This story is about how Juli is intended to fit into the ongoing saga of the Instrumentality. It involves the role she will play when Carlotta dies, and how some among her relatives become the first great Scanners.

Verdict on Queen of the Afternoon: it’s amazing; fantastically weird, useful to our understanding of what the Instrumentality is, how it started, and the overall future history that led us to this point. I loved both this
story and Mark Elf and will definitely read them both again.

Scanners Live in Vain
Possibly Smith’s most famous short story, this one is the tale of a man who is a Scanner, a psychically gifted warrior of The Up and Out. That’s a term for outer space, I think, or a merger of that with a psychically charged vision of it which gifts the Scanner with the capacity to guard earth from strange otherworldly, or other-dimensional, threats that have begun to attack earth over ages since our time. The Scanner is a far future version of mankind who has evolved or been genetically engineered. Such people are revered as heroes, and in the state in which they scan using psychic energies, they’re exalted as above normal humans. Scanners are able to remove themselves from this state of high-mind, if you will, and in so doing they are more capable of emotion and caring and other human capacities. These are the rules under which one particular Scanner faces a moral decision involving all this stuff, and an execution scheduled to be carried out in the name of such things as those the Scanners hold dear. Did I like this story? Yes, but it wasn’t as weird as Mark Elf or Queen; it was tamer, maybe not quite as much fun. Maybe I’ll read it again; that often helps.

A couple of side notes: This book has a facsimile of Smith’s cover letter to the editor stating that Smith considered Scanners Live in Vain to be a literary story, in case that would make any difference to the editor. For any who might find it useful information, I’ll also say that this story was selected by vote as one of the greatest science fiction stories ever published when it was selected for inclusion in The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, an anthology series edited by Robert Silverberg.

The Lady Who Sailed The Soul
This is the story of Helen America and Mr. Grey-No-More. The Instrumentality has moved out of the rather mythical style and fairytesque feel of Mark Elf and Queen of the Afternoon into a more modern setting of the far future. This is a story of how mankind was able to travel to the stars in spacecraft that used gigantic, stellar wings that push the ship along on the force of winds of stellar light that press against them. Helen America is the first woman pilot of such a ship, and her great love is Mr. Grey-No-More, another ship’s captain whom she meets as she is being vetted and then trained as a captain. This story’s intent is to show the trajectory of their love story and to show the very great dangers facing captains of ships like the one Helen America must helm on her first flight. The dangers are largely consigned to her ship, oddly enough: she has to be physically wired into the ship using a sort of cybernetic technology, and there’s always the chance that technology will fail and all sorts of terrible possibilities. This is another great story—Cordwainer Smith wrote this one in collaboration with his wife.

When the People Fell
This story returns to a planetary setting, and it’s another very strange story. It tells us about a calamity aboard a starship where an order is given to eject thousands of ship’s passengers in order to let them fall to the planet’s surface. The image of all these people falling really sticks with me—it’s just so very odd. And then there’s the story that this image is embedded in: one which is of a young woman of noble bearing who is a bit irascible living on planet. She’s being wedded off to a guy of good reputation. She goes gallivanting off to try and save a bunch of these ejectees and she goes missing. Very good story due to the wild nature of the idea and what suspense it can muster as guy goes search for the girl, and for what will become of the marriage.
Think Blue, Count Two
This is the first one since War No. 81-Q that I felt indifferent toward. It has some memorable moments as it is another story of interstellar travel. I’m sure I remember this one as being a story which is told internally by a caregiver to a young girl about a time past when ships travelled using the sails we heard about in The Lady Who Sailed the Soul. So, if the story told here by caregiver is understood to be one of the past, then we get that the current time frame of the story must take place after that: it’s a time when the sails are no longer used, having been replaced by a process that uses subspace for interstellar travel. This process is called Planoforming. More on that comes later in stories that focus on it. I didn’t quite like this story as much as some of the earlier ones because it sort of reiterates ideas we’ve already read about.

Nevertheless, the story told is one of a mutinous crew on a ship who threaten the captain, and what becomes of the situation as it plays out. So it has that if you have any interest. One really shocking moment comes at about the three quarter pole. Pretty cool, and hardly expected. I’ll leave it alone beyond that and let you decide if you even notice it. It’s among a few things that I enjoyed about the story.

The Colonel Came Back from the Nothing-All
This one has a special character unlike any other Smith character I’ve met in this block of stories: there’s a Quaker girl who is chosen to make an effort on behalf of two officials to reach a catatonic planoforming captain who had gone missing in subspace, only to arrive home mysteriously in a state unresponsive and lying face down on the floor. The unforgettable thing about this for me was the respectful and devout speech of the girl—she’s very formal and humble all at once. A short story with very memorable characters, gets very high marks.

The Game of Rat and Dragon
This is the strangest Instrumentality of Mankind story in the collection, thus far. It’s our first opportunity to see planoforming in action, how it is used in a defense plan and how a pairing of telepaths, animal and human, has supplanted the great Scanners as defenders as time marched on. This was so weird I barely got what was happening, but it was very good and is recommended. I’d say read the parts about actual defensive acts and attack maneuvers carefully. You’ll get the overall process of the telepathic linkage pretty easily, but the actions are hard to follow. For me they existed a little too much as abstracts. I’ll be reading this story again myself—it’s not long, but it is the strangest of all of these.

The Burning of the Brain
This is another planoforming story where the captain arises as a factor in how the story plays out. If I said much about this one I’d give it completely away because it’s a very short story in this list. It wasn’t a favorite of mine is about all I’ll say.

From Gustable’s Planet
This story is a rather tongue-in-cheek, comic outing for Cordwainer Smith. It’s a cringeworthy thing, in my opinion about a bumbling attempt at a first contact scenario that turns alarming pretty fast. Worth a read, but it’s in no way typical of a Cordwainer Smith Instrumentality of Mankind story in its tone or even really in its use of a first contact trope. It’s not what I think of as a Cordwainer Smith story.

Signing off:
That’s all I’ve got this time. There’d have been more reviews, but I was ready to do Part I of the story guide. So hopefully these will do, till next time… E.P.D