

On The Air

by Edward Morris

Red velvet proscenium curtains draw up to the sounds of Red Nichols and Bix Beiderbecke's signature mediaeval flourish of horns! The mind-melting lunar landscape of the main soundstage backdrop is unmistakably the work of Picasso himself. The stagehands, the true stars, backlight the backdrop and slowly rotate the follow-spots to make outer space come alive.

Up in the control booth, Irving Berlin fusses with the big cans on his ears, face close to the glass like a child window-shopping at Hanukkah, not caring that he still can't read music. His Visitor's Pass flaps as he conducts along, gesturing down, left, right and up, down, left, right and up. Down on the podium, Igor Stravinsky answers the gestures back, feeling every note.

In the pit, Gene Krupa is in the zone, high on tea, wide awake, delighted, spider hands weaving the web of the macumba beat with soft bop brushes over cymbals he invented. Professor Theremin's donated monster organ rises to power in the hands of Hoagy Carmichael, a volunteer here like the rest of these men.

The wind section steel themselves against Benny Goodman's vicious glare, hoping instead that he loses himself in the moment. Goodman does, and counterpoints Nichols and Beiderbecke in an Eli Eli Lama Lama Sabathani cry on the licorice stick that raises the hair of everyone watching. At the last note, Walter Page's big black mythic hands walk up and down the bass once, and wait, as he looks down and to the left.

The main percussion riser is given over, as always, to a crazy Dada sculpture of chimes and beer bottles and a pedal-steel guitar. The works look to have been built whole around a fresh-faced, smart-assed, whip-thin kid in cook's whites, a bow tie and a ridiculous checkered jacket. With the pedal-steel and a wildly disparate variety of kitchen utensils, Spike Jones twinkles out the eerie signature theme song of tonight's show.

"*Ostinato, ostinato...*" Stravinsky sings along with Spike under his breath, drowned by the Narrator's unmistakable directorial rumble.

"Do not attempt to adjust your television set. We control the rotation of the disk. We control the short wave. We operate from a place beyond that which is known."

"*Ostinato, ostinato...*"

"I'm Orson Welles, and your television is tuned to 'The OuterZone' on WRNY New York, from the Roosevelt Hotel studios at 45th and Madison in Manhattan. This broadcast was made possible by a grant from Governor Cox, the support of those like you tuning in at home, and the co-president of this station, founder of *Amazing Stories* magazine and Chief Executive Officer of the DeForrest-Zworykin Television Cooperative."

"*Ostinato.. Boot-doot-dootleootleooo.*" Then, silence from the pit.

"Mr. Hugo Gernsback urges every American to demand public access to the airwaves. Thomas Jefferson wrote that democracy's success depends... upon... an informed majority. Build your family a television set today to entertain, to enlighten, and most importantly, to

educate in a way of which no human invention has been capable since Gutenberg built the first movable press. Purchase a DZTC Home Television Hobby Console Kit from your local True Value Hardware Store today. The future... is yours!®”

The commercial is over. Orson Welles just got paid. He beams at Irving Berlin, then resumes speaking into the big bingo-mic.

“Tonight’s first story, ‘Mark of the Beast’, is, by popular demand, a return to the world of Detective John Thunstone, brought to you by Mr. Wade Wellman of Tennessee. Tonight’s second episode comes to us from London, and the distinguished expatriate Charles Fort, second installment in Fort’s serial ‘The Outcast Manufacturers.’ ”

They all know what’s going to happen. But every member of cast and crew waiting in the wings is still breathless.

“Ladies and gentlemen in our studio audience, and all of you watching from as far away as, I am told, Philadelphia, before we begin, our fearless leader has a few words to say...”

Thrust out into the spotlight by an unseen stagehand, the man wears a ribboned peruke, a huge black tri-corn hat with a peacock feather; white ruffled pirate-shirt, velvet jacket and pantaloons. Most of the audience recognizes Hugo Gernsback in costume at once, his nose like the great prow of a rocketship offset on one side by his famous monocle.

“How dare you?!” Gernsback bellows in his big radio voice at the stagehand . “I! Am Barrrrrron! Muuunchausen! Oh, what life is this, where an explorer can be so maligned, so molested, set upon the road, spit upon and curst! If there is a universal mind, must it be sane?”

The crowd roars with laughter. Baron Munchausen is an old favorite on the show. Clutching a copy of the evening’s *New York Times*, Gernsback surveys the audience and begins to tread the boards. The heels of his kid congress gaiters clock across the stage like Tom Mix’s boots over a hardwood saloon floor.

“Last week, my old friend Herb and I visited Flanders Fields, and I was stunned. Instead of a wilderness torn apart by artillery fire, a garden of rushes and wildflowers grew. Thousands of white butterflies fluttered everywhere like the souls of dead doughboys set free upon the spot. I could hear their wings, the beat-beat-beat of their tiny wings, each one changing the wind that blows across the globe.”

Hugo has the room. He *has* them. There is not a pin-drop, not a cough, not a rude flatulence or snap-crackle-pop of ill-placed stagehand wire in the joint. Even the band is worshipfully still.

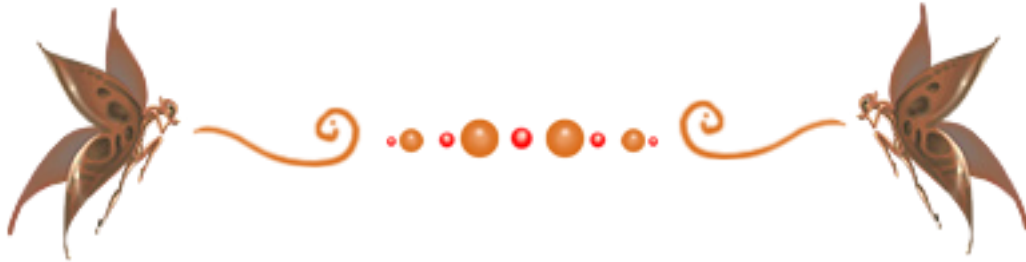
“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for welcoming me into your homes. Those of you in our studio audience, welcome to mine. I beg your continued indulgence. Tonight is a special night. Not only does this evening, September 10, 1930 mark The OuterZone’s one-hundredth broadcast, it is also Armistice Day, where we as a nation celebrate freedom from the draft.”

The audience laughs, and loosens up. He scratches the fake Don Quixote goatee on his chin, picking at the spirit-gum, squinting, considering. In the front row, a young English boy on holiday with his Mum looks up at him worshipfully, clutching his autograph-book as though it

were the Nag Hammadi Scrolls. The visitor's pass on its lanyard around the boy's skinny neck reads ARTIE CLARKE. Gernsback smiles at him, and makes a sweeping bow.

"When you look back on it all, it's amazing to think that things went the way they did, and horrifying to wonder what would have happened if they hadn't. History is a house of cards, my good viewers. One little pull, and down come the whole works. How then does it all not sound like Fabulism, like scientifiction?"

At that, the good Baron von Munchausen trudges back to center stage, and truly begins holding forth.



Armistice Day. It all makes a bad taste in my mouth, and a strange, bright light in my eyes. That light makes you feel so alone sometimes that everything makes sense. When you see it, you walk in a lost world, peopled only occasionally by every one of us experiencing the outer shard of something much larger, subjectively.

It is the duty of every human being to Keep The Camera Alive, no matter what form your own camera may take. I knew from the age of five that I wanted to write science fiction, as it is now called. But you kind viewers have also allowed me to live it, tonight moreso than ever. .. before... in History.

My crony Herb over in England, the great Mr. H.G. Wells, truly spoke from that light when he foretold what was to come, thus...This is from *The War of the Worlds*---

A hammy clearing of throat, a flourish of shopworn hands whose right index and middle finger are callused at the insides of their second knuckles thicker than the armor on a Bombardier Tank.

"No one would have believed, in the last years of the nineteenth century, that human affairs were being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than Man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their affairs they were scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water."

Hugo paces close to the front row of spectators, peering at them through his monocle and waving the newspaper, brandishing it as he speaks.

To the best of my knowledge, kind viewers, we are not presently being studied by alien beings... but by ourselves, through the visionaries among us. One of those just found Archimedes' lever. To quote the great Charlie Fort (who was kind enough to give us a new installment of his Mars story for later in this program,) an explorer has returned from a San

Salvador of the sky.

Charlie said we should give this fellow a parade. His name is Eugen Sänger, and he asks me to say a few things to you tonight, in my own idiom.

It's just as much a matter of chance that any of our visionaries survived the Great War. No soldier outlives their nine lives, but they all believed that the Being who made the stars would give them such luck to trust.

We forgot what war was like, going into the Big One. We hadn't really had one of consequence for almost a century and a half, I daresay. But a few nations told their people that the country that controlled the seas controlled the world, and used this as a bully bullwhip to keep the factories smoking and the welfare rolls low.

Sooner or later, it came time to pay the fiddler. The imaginary countries of the world poured out their hatred down shell-holes through the corpus of their young men until the veins ran dry. Europe gnawed at its own entrails. The old order of blood aristocracy was forced to cede to corporate aristocracy, military-industrial complexes, shadow governments, the blood lust for power and disdain for the common man *too* common among the great moneyed houses of the world.

Triple Entente or Triple Alliance, the last thing those great houses wanted was the dissolution of big countries. Heavens, no. Then we'd really have democracy on our hands, let alone that Marx fellow whose books scared people half to death.

The August Madness was carefully planned and orchestrated. The great moneyed houses told the world that the war would be over in a few months, and pay for itself in captured swag. Then we could all scamper off home for a week of ticker-tape.

Like Dante Alighieri, I am not very proud of my species, sometimes. We turned a regional conflict in the Balkans into the bloodiest, most needless war in human history. We invented poison gas, barbed wire and machine-guns, sub-marine and trench warfare and the Bombardier Tank, fulfilling the darkest visions of Jules Verne.

Twelve million people died, chewed up by the future and gasping the knowledge to anyone nearby as their own waters flowed back into the world sea and the demented choirs of shells sang in the heavens louder than God.

America should have joined the conflict a lot sooner than 1916, thereby ending it a lot sooner. The United States is a great beast, slow to rouse, and must have its gadflies. That's where I come in, folks, and so do every one of you watching at home, and in our studio audience.

Still, it could have been a lot worse. Who knows what kind of bloody casino would have transpired without Eleftherios Venizelos letting us use Greece as an Allied staging area? God love the Greeks. And the Russians. Without the many tacticians serving Empress Anastasia, the war could have taken years longer.

I cannot imagine that little girl's resolve, and iron will, to run an entire country in wartime at her tender age, with or without all the help. She ordered her dear, martyred sister's

traitorous advisor, a monk named Grigori Rasputin, burned alive by her Palace Guard. Rasputin's heart and head were removed and separately incinerated. They buried him at sea. You may mock, but peasant superstitions aside, that man would one day have marched on a road of bones, mark my words.

Outside the palace and the war, Anastasia also kept things together enough to order Vladimir Ulyanov neutralized from the first time she heard the word 'Bolshevik' in a newspaper. The Tsarina's Third Department finally caught up with Mr. Ulyanov the day his little coffee-klatch stopped handing out leaflets and tried to stage some sort of "push", as they called it. They were going to storm an armory, and use stolen rifles to overthrow the Imperium. No one remembers that now. We must not forget.

I remember. I remember reading of Ulyanov's secretary bowing out on him, and what Ulyanov said. "You are free to say anything you like, and I am free to shoot you for saying it." An hour later, Ulyanov was himself shot dead while running away, while thirteen of his men bled to death in the Moscow streets.

Perhaps Lenin, as Ulyanov styled himself, is in a better place now than that unmarked grave. That isn't mine to say. But his secretary, the visionary Premier Trotsky, turned himself in and lived to fight another day. Almost single-handedly, almost overnight, Leon Trotsky knitted the Petrograd Soviet into Russia's first parliament, and opened a new era of diplomacy with the West. He co-signed the Armistice with Anastasia. Visionaries, the both of them.

When we finally went Over There, the Germans knew their days were numbered. Everyone was afraid there'd be a hundred little countries killing each other afterwards. What If.

What If. Everyone knows now that President Wilson lived his last three years in the White House unable to move or speak following the poor man's stroke. The good Mr. Hearst was kind enough to leak that story, may he forever rot in peace, but at the end of the day it was the vision of First Lady Ellen Axson Wilson who formally made the U.S. a member of the Allies and the League of Nations, and got the caissons finally rolling along.

Even then, General Ludendorff went mad in the last days of the war and nearly turned Paris into an abattoir while Black Jack Pershing's men had their hands full of General Pasha's Ottoman *mujaheddin* guerillas at Armiens. What would we have ever, ever done without the Parisian Resistance rising up as one, crying *Encore, une fois*, slaughtering gunner and storm-trooper alike with kitchen utensils, with sticks and stones, with bare hands and watch-chains? The mind turns away in horror, and the senses rebel.

Under the leadership of an overeducated ambulance-driver named André Breton, those ragged bohemians stormed and dismantled every Krupp railway gun on the Seine, and drove Ludendorff's divisions clear back to the starting-point of the war, horrified, bewildered and badly wounded. Breton's men... and women... fought like army ants. They fought like Surrealists.

History calls them the Dada Brigade. At the time, the name was a joke among American doughboys. Now Prime Minister Breton's long poem 'L'Internationale' hangs on a brass plaque at Versailles Palace, the one that finishes, thus,

*Long after I forgot her, my lover returns from Chaos,
Wrapped in stars, on a black horse, to snatch me up
Out of the field, count my scars and medals, and
help me to die,*

*Help me to die. I am your vacuum-diode phosgene bastard,
I am your Johnny Come Rolling Home. In the end,
The ancient world remains,
And only Nature overtakes.*

No matter what that... teamster... Joe Hill in Chicago says, I get through my day by believing that our species has not yet given away all its power to the rich. Tsarina Anastasia, Leon Trotsky, André Breton,

Herb Wells, Ellen Wilson... All of them are real visionaries, like the noble Baron, who prove that one person, even working alone, can affect change. In the end, it is people, not the market or armies or moneyed houses, who make History.

What would we do, without our visionaries? Where, oh, where would this planet ever be?

All of you *Amazing Stories* readers, stop holding your noses and groaning. I'll editorialize as little as possible tonight.

"Too late!" Spike Jones wisecracks from the pit, blowing twice on his beloved Klaxon horn.

"You're doing an excellent job, Spike." Gernsback's answering, prolonged finger gesture is not caught on camera. "No. Really."

After that charming interruption by my learned young colleague, I beg you to excuse my cornball globalism, folks. I know this isn't a newsreel. There is a point, and I'm getting to it. Bear with me.

From the same species which invented barbed wire and machine guns and poison gas, another medic like Breton, a German named Hermann Oberth...

Excuse me, folks. I... something in my eye. I... I met Hermann Oberth last week, when I could get in to see him. I only knew him through his writing. Herb Wells was kind enough to do the leg-work with the Weimar government and get the three of us a meeting. I can say that Herb and I are both the richer for our visit. And so, now, is Planet Earth.

Dr. Oberth told me that the only thing he learned as a medic in the Great War was that he didn't really want to study medicine. Instead, he took up physics, but his doctoral dissertation on rocket propulsion was rejected as 'too Utopian', and 'too speculative.' *This time, Gernsback waits for the audience to laugh at that. They do.*

So was the thesis of his star pupil, former combat pilot Eugen Sänger. So the two of them decided to play hooky, and went into business for themselves.

They threw away schoolbook and rulebook alike, and went out to the park to fly model rockets with a couple of kids named Willy Lev and Wehrner von Braun. Playing hooky, indeed, in the same park where Goethe sat under the beech tree and wrote *Faust*. They tore up the game-plan and lived out loud. Visionaries.

Ladies and gentlemen, the *Times* was kind enough to inform me this evening that Dr. Oberth's *Silbervögel* plane has just returned to the Peenemünde Science Center from an altitude of seven miles. It employs something called an ion-wind engine, and a very tall rocket called an A-4, propelled by liquid oxygen. They set it loose like a glider, from a much larger plane, it... It's all in the paper right here.

Eugen Sänger has returned from outer space, that San Salvador of the sky. I promised him I'd tell you people if he made it.

I read here that Fritz Lang was kind enough to film the whole works. RKO's already bought the rights. The movie's called '*Triumph des Willens*.' It'll be in every movie-house in Times Square outside of a week, it... This is...

I'm at a total loss for words, folks, not that I ever let that stop me before.

This is what happens when we don't fight wars. President Al Smith and Vice-Presidents Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt (...*another ripple of laughter*...) have agreed to meet with Weimar Chancellor Von Hindenburg immediately to discuss the scientific applications of this incredible, incredible event.

Von Hindenburg has emphatically denied any plans for military applications of the 'Silver Bird.' The League of Nations weapons inspectors will, of course, soon clear this little formality and pave the way for... (gulp)... undreamed-of exploration.

I...uh... Yes. We'll be running the news, folks, as soon as it becomes available to us. For now, the Baron bids you good night...and may we all continue to watch the skies, ever outward. 1930 is the dawn of a new age of the world. We're here to go.

The show must go on, friends. We now return you to your regularly scheduled program already in progress. I give you Wade Wellman's "Mark of the Beast", and thank you very kindly for your attention.

For Paul DiFilippo and Lou Antonelli

