



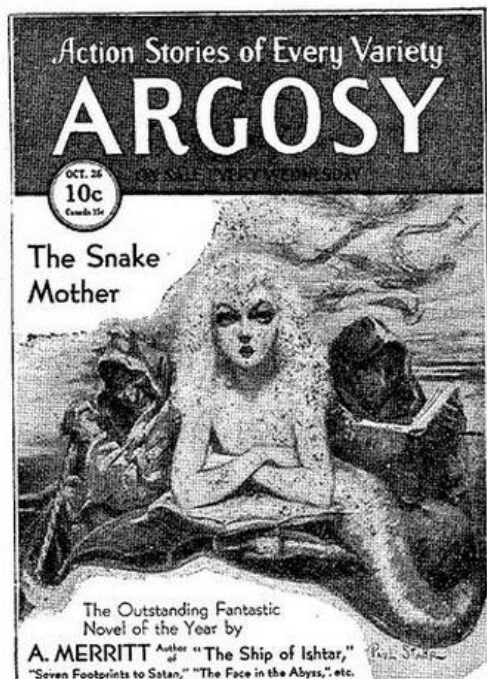
# The Marvelous A. Merritt

**Lord of Fantasy**

**by Sam Moskowitz**



A. MERRITT



Reproduction of the cover from *Argosy*, October 25, 1930, by Paul Stahr, illustrating the first appearance of one of Merritt's greatest science fantasies, "The Snake Mother."

THE WEEKLY ADVENTURE fiction magazine *ARGOSY*, fifty-eight years old in 1938, conducted a poll of its readers to determine the most popular story published in the history of the magazine. That story was to be reprinted. *ARGOSY* was then the most prominent adventure story magazine in the history of the Western World. At one time it had achieved a greater circulation than any other magazine in America, regardless of type!

The votes pouring in honored a fabulous group of storytellers: Edgar Rice Burroughs, creator of the imagination-stirring *Tarzan*; Albert Payson Terhune, gifted writer of dog stories; Frank L. Packard, renowned for *The Miracle Man* and his Jimmy Dale series; John Buchan, whose *Thirty Nine Steps* is a cloak-and-dagger show-piece; James Branch Cabell, author of perhaps the most widely discussed novel of the twenties, *Jurgen*; Howard R. Garis, beloved chronicler of the children's animal favorite, Uncle Wiggily; Johnston McCulley, whose flashing tales of *Zorro* still thrill on TV's magic mirror; Erle Stanley Gardner, perennially best-selling detective novelist; Gaston Leroux, universally known through the motion picture versions of *Phantom of the Opera*; Max Brand, one of the truly great writers of the old west and Ludwig Lewisohn, whose fiction will probably endure as literature, to name only a few of the many outstanding authors who made it possible for *ARGOSY*, in 1938 to "point with pride" to a record of more than seven hundred hardcover books reprinted from its pages!

The winner was *The Ship of Ishtar* by A. Merritt and the reprinting of that story in six weekly installments commenced with the October 29,

SATELLITE SCIENCE FICTION



*It isn't often that a writer of fantasy leads an outwardly adventurous life or even an extremely active one. But A. Merritt was a far-roaming traveler in his youth, and a newspaper supplement editor of outstanding brilliance in his middle and later years. But one suspects, somehow, that he would have liked best to be remembered as—a dreamer of dreams!*



A dramatic scene from one of Merritt's most effective short stories, "The People of the Pit" in which an Alaskan explorer is trapped by remnants of an ancient race at the bottom of an extinct volcano. Its literary quality has been favorably compared with Poe.

1938 issue of *ARGOSY*. The ranks of adventure writers, the legions of pulp magazine followers and, more particularly, the editorial vote-counters were astounded. But to Albert J. Gibney, associate published of The Frank A. Munsey Company this evidence of popularity seemed to confirm and justify a top-level *ARGOSY* decision made many years before.

"We paid A. Merritt the highest word-rate given anyone in the history of the magazine," he revealed, in a fascinatingly candid appraisal. "This only proves he was worth it!"

A. Merritt loved the craft of writing. It is doubtful if he wrote a single line of fiction with monetary considerations in mind. For 25 years he had been right-hand man to Morrill Goddard, editor

of *THE AMERICAN WEEKLY*, a magazine supplement distributed with the Hearst newspapers with a weekly circulation of five million copies. Morrill Goddard earned \$240,000 a year in that capacity.

It seems reasonable to suppose that as second man in the organization, Merritt also received rather exceptional remuneration. That such was the case was evidenced by a second home in Indian Rock Key, Pinellas County, Florida; a 75-acre experimental farm in Brandenton, Florida, where he raised avocados, mangoes and litchi, and an experimental farm near Clearwater, where he planted the first olive groves in Florida. He also maintained a hot house of rare poisonous plants. In 1937 Morrill Goddard died and Merritt became the editor of *THE AMERICAN WEEKLY*

Recognition similar to ARGOSY's had been given Merritt by his most devoted followers, the science fiction readers, a few years earlier. WONDER STORIES, under the aegis of Hugo Gernsback, conducted a survey of its readers aimed at determining the favorite science fiction of their entire reading experience. *The Moon Pool* by A. Merritt headed the list, even though the story had been published in magazine form almost a decade previously and no stories by Merritt had ever appeared in WONDER STORIES!

The first sampling the science fiction readers had of A. Merritt was his 6,000-word short-story *Through the Dragon Glass*, which appeared in the November 24, 1917 issue of ALL-STORY. Merritt's initial effort might have attracted little attention, if the cover of that issue had not illustrated a new four-part interplanetary novel, *The Cosmic Courtship*, by Julian Hawthorne, son of the great American author, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Lured by the promise of Hawthorne's cosmic romance, science fiction readers found themselves considerably more enthralled by Merritt's brief fantasy of Herndon, who raided the Imperial Palace of Peking during the Boxer rebellion and came away with a green stone on which was carved twelve dragons with emerald eyes.

Herndon passes through this stone into another world, where seven artificial moons revolve perpetually around a mist-shrouded valley walled with fire. There he meets the maiden Santhu and is attacked by a winged beast, whose master hunts him as a quarry in a cruel and ingenious game. Badly clawed, he escapes from the Dragon Glass, to pass through a second time with an elephant gun. He never returns.

The next tale from Merritt's typewriter was bona fide science fiction. The January 5, 1918 issue of ALL-STORY carried *The People of the Pit*. This story of an Alaskan explorer who discovers a stairway leading down into a volcanic crater, at the bottom of which exists a strange city inhabited by tentacled, transparent, snail-like monstrosities, who float in the air and exert a powerful psychological influence upon him, is a polished masterpiece. It is trite and sometimes condescending to state that an author's work is worthy of Edgar Allan Poe, but had Poe written *The People of the Pit*, it would today be held up as one of the brightest jewels in the diadem of literary masterpieces which crown his genius.

Fame was not to come to Merritt the hard way. He would not have to build a tremendous literary pyramid composed of rhetorical blocks and mortared with imaginative inspiration, to show above his contemporaries. One more novelette, *The Moon Pool*, published in ALL-STORY for June 22, 1919, and letters by the hundreds began to pour across the desk of Robert H. Davis, the famous Munsey editor who had discovered Merritt.

The master touch in the handling of the highly individualistic prose that had been so conspicuously evident in *The People of the Pit* was repeated in *The Moon Pool*. The imaginative concept of a pool of force created by the vibrational pattern of seven different lights, which provided the transfer mechanism from the surface to some strange realm

below and "The Shining One," an alien entity of radiant matter which acted as a guide between worlds, fired the imagination, arousing a clamor for a sequel which could not be ignored.

Bob Davis, who had felt that fifty dollars a story had been generous pay for Merritt's shorter lengths, dangled forth forty times that sum if he would write a full-length sequel.

With the publication of only two short stories and a novelette, Merritt had become the "hottest" writer in science fiction since Edgar Rice Burroughs. Though there was a divergence in styles, there was also a pronounced affinity between Burroughs and Merritt.

Merritt represented the furthest extreme that the scientific romance—ushered into phenomenal popularity when Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Under the Moons of Mars* delighted the ALL-STORY readership of 1912—was to go. Much of Merritt was then and would continue to be, sheer fantasy. Stories which because of their scientific aspects—never obtrusively introduced—qualified as science fiction, were in mood and spirit fantasy.

Like Burroughs, Merritt's intent was solely to entertain. Yet no single author of his period was to exert greater influence upon his contemporaries and upon the science fiction writers still in embryo.

Son of quaker parents, Abraham Merritt was born January 20, 1884, in Beverley, N. J., a small community near Philadelphia. Merritt, in his youth, had a predilection for the Law. He attended lectures at the University of Pennsylvania but was mostly self-educated. Poor family finances compelled him to abandon law and at the age of nineteen he obtained a reporting job with the PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER. That first job was the turning point of his life.

As a cub reporter he was an eyewitness to an event—the nature of which he assiduously kept secret—which was to have serious political implications. To avoid repercussions and to prevent young Abe Merritt from "spilling the beans," he was prevailed upon by parties unknown to leave the country, with all of his expenses paid.

The following year, spent in Mexico and Central America, played a strong developmental role in Merritt's thinking. As a youth he had been profoundly influenced by the novelist S. Weir Mitchell, who had encouraged free inquiry into folklore and strange phenomena. Dr. Charles Euchariot de Medicis Sajous, renowned for his pioneer studies into the functions of the ductless glands, taught him a respect for science and the scientific method. Both of these intellectual fevers he fed at the "sacred well" of Chichen Itza; exploring the Mayan city of Tulum; treasure hunting in Yucatan and undergoing rites by which he became the blood-brother of an Indian tribe in Miraflores.

When the heat lifted, he returned to the PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER and eventually rose to the position of night city editor. Veteran companion journalists, James J. O'Neill and Colonel George Kennedy remembered him as a "superlative" newspaperman whose flair for vividly covering executions, murders, suicides, hangings and at least one "personally conducted lynching," was unsurpassed.



Inordinately sensitive, Merritt drank himself into restfulness after each of these sessions. This wholesale contact with the more gruesome and soul-sickening aspects of life were later compensated for by escape into fantasy.

His work as Philadelphia correspondent for Morrill Goddard, editor of *THE SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT* of the Hearst newspapers, resulted in an offer which brought him to New York in 1912 and a life-time career on the publication which was to evolve into *THE AMERICAN WEEKLY*.

Always a six-day-a-week job during Goddard's reign, life on *THE AMERICAN WEEKLY*, while well paid, permitted a young writer little time for side ventures. Yet, encouraged by the adulation he plunged into the writing of his first novel-length story, a sequel to *The Moon Pool*, entitled *The Conquest of the Moon Pool*. The reaction that followed the completion of the sequel, published in six weekly installments beginning in the February 15, 1919 *ALL-STORY*, verged on hysteria.

Speaking of his personal feelings, Edmond Hamilton, veteran science fiction author, echoed the fascination of thousands when he said: "I had a newspaper route about that time and when Merritt's long-awaited sequel to *The Moon Pool* came out, I carried papers one night each week with the *ALL-STORY MAGAZINE* held three inches before my eyes, avoiding automobiles and street-cars by the grace of God, and heaving every paper on the wrong porch."

Re-read from the vantage point of the somewhat more sophisticated modern reader, *The Conquest of the Moon Pool* reveals glaring flaws. In contrast to *The Moon Pool* there are sequences that show obvious signs of haste. The movement of events follows the standard pattern of earlier period thrillers. The characters are stereotypes: Larry O'Keefe, the Irishman; Olaf, the Scandinavian and Von Hertzdorf, the treacherous German (who, in a later edition and in a different political climate, is converted to Marakinoff, the Russian devil); Lakla, the hand-maiden (personification of good), and Yolara, dark priestess of evil.

Along with them are such stock chillers as frog men, dwarf men, and dead-alive men and the love scenes make no concession to a world already climbing out of Victorian prudery.

Yet the novel holds a unique magic for readers. It is an honest story. It evokes more than a hint of the strangest mysteries and the imagination of the author never falters in his brilliant preoccupation with the unearthly, the terrifying and the bizarre.

It also promises rich, colorful, heroic action in the tradition of the *Odyssey* and it keeps that promise. The age-old struggle between good and evil with the cleavage sharply differentiated, forms the basis of the plot. In this contest, the reader is thrilled by flights of imaginative fantasy reminiscent of the best of H. Rider Haggard.

Greatest victory of all, Merritt transcended the coldness and dehumanization that frequently accompanies pure fantasy. His word pictures form a mood.

Humanity shines from this work. For every stock

character there is a brilliantly original one of his own creating. The Shining One, a robot of pure force with fantastic powers, becomes believable as its intelligence acquires human-like drives of personal pride, and desire for achievement and power.

The Silent Ones, ageless, godlike men from an ancient civilization which created The Shining One—now aloof and inscrutable—call upon ancient science to thwart the ambitions of this strange thinking force and its dreadful omniscience. When they have destroyed their creation: "No flames now in their ebon eyes—for the flickering fires were quenched in great tears, streaming down the marble white faces."

Basic patterns for other Merritt novels were established in *The Moon Pool*. Future stories would always be built on the conflict of light against darkness. There would always be a beautiful priestess of evil, and the villains would be memorably, brilliantly characterized. Forms which are generally symbols of repulsion, the frog men in *The Moon Pool*; the spider men and the snake women in *The Snake Mother*; Ricori, the gangster in *Burn, Witch, Burn*, are converted by literary sorcery into sympathetic and admirable characters.

One of the most impressive aspects of Merritt's success was the period in which it was achieved. Within the space of not much more than a year, the era of the scientific romance had blossomed to its fullest flower. Competing with Merritt for the public's attention, often in the same publications, were a glittering assemblage of fantasy classics by masters of the art. J. U. Giesy had broken new ground only eight months previously with the first of his occult-interplanetary trilogy, *Palos, of the Dog Star Pack*. Praise for Victor Rousseau's surgical fantasy, *Draft of Eternity*, still echoes in the readers' departments. *Citadel of Fear* was the work of Francis Stevens, a woman whose stories displayed such beauty of style and narrative skill that for years it was thought that Merritt had written them under a pen name. *Who Wants a Green Bottle?*, a brilliant effort by the greatly underrated Tod Robbins, had appeared only three months before.

A young man who—forty years later—would earn the title of "The Dean of Science Fiction Writers," Murray Leinster, had an early story, *The Runaway Skyscraper* in that year's *ARGOSY*. Max Brand was also making memorable contributions to fantasy with *Devil Ritter*, *John Ovington Returns* and the grisly *That Receding Brow*, which ran in the very same issue as the first installment of *The Conquest of the Moon Pool*.

While Merritt's novel was still being serialized, Ray Cummings' *The Girl in the Golden Atom* appeared and a clamor for a sequel, only slightly less intense than that which had greeted Merritt's *Moon Pool* arose. *The Planeteer*, *The Lord of Death* and *The Queen of Life*, the threesome that established Homer Eon Flint's reputation were soon to follow.

Scarcely was Merritt's novel concluded, than Austin Hall's imaginative triumph, *Into the Infinite*, was begun. Before the year's end the brilliant scientific romancer, George Allan England was to thrill a wide audience with *The Flying Legion*.

*BLUE BOOK* had a short time previously pub-

lished what many believe to be Edgar Rice Burrough's best story, *The People That Time Forgot*, sequel to *The Land That Time Forgot*. In the same magazine, a brilliant but little-known Britisher, William Hope Hodgson, increased his reader following with *The Terrible Derelict*.

ARGOSY, had old-hand Garrett Smith taking bows for *After a Million Years*. On every side, competing for attention were such renowned story tellers as Sax Rohmer, Edison Marshall, Philip M. Fisher, Charles B. Stilson and Loring Brent.

That Merritt was singled out and accorded unique prestige amidst such a brilliant galaxy of performers, reveals how completely he captivated the imagination of the readers, and explains why no one has contested the title conferred on him—A. Merritt: *Lord of Fantasy*.

Using the battlefields of France as a locale, Merritt next wrote a short story entitled *Three Lines of Old French*, which appeared in the August 9, 1919 issue of ALL STORY. The style was an abrupt departure from that of his just-published novel. It was restrained, almost journalistic in tone, but still had about it much of the same hauntingly imaginative quality which had characterized *The People of the Pit* and *The Moon Pool*.

It deals with a surgeon in France who decides to conduct a psychological experiment on a soldier almost paralyzed with battle fatigue and half-hypnotized by strain. The medical man presses a piece of paper in the soldier's hand with a line from a French ballad, *And there she waits to greet him when all his days are done*. Then he passes a sprig of flowers before the man's eyes.

The soldier's subconscious mind accepts these symbols and he is plunged into a fantasy world in which he is carried into the past, to the garden of beautiful Lucie de Tocquellain. He falls in love with her, but rejoicing in the knowledge that there is another life, he wills to return so that he can tell his comrades that death is an illusion. Before he leaves, the French lass scribbles three lines on a piece of paper and thrusts it into his pocket.

Emerging from his trance, the soldier is crushed by the realization that it was all an experiment—until he finds the crumpled slip of paper and reads the girl's brief and moving message.

Nor grieve, dear heart, nor fear the  
seeming—  
Here is waking after dreaming.  
She who loves you,

Lucie

As a work of art, there is no question that *Three Lines of Old French* would not be out of place in an anthology of outstanding American short stories, even though elements of it show the influence of Robert W. Chambers' charming fantasy, *The Demoiselle D'Ys*. A stranger tribute was to be Merritt's reward, however; one similar to that experienced by Arthur Machen when his short story, *The Bowmen*, appeared in the LONDON EVENING NEWS for September 29, 1914. Letters began to pour in, particularly from England, praising Merritt and thanking him. Bereaved parents, grasping for a spark of reason in the tragic loss of a loved one in

battle had taken hope from Merritt's intimation of a life after death.

*The Moon Pool* and *The Conquest of the Moon* were combined under the title of the original novelette and issued in hard covers by Putnam in 1919. The book sold well and Liveright later took over the reprint rights. "*The Moon Pool*" has been constantly in print for forty years, selling steadily through prosperity, war and depression, despite three magazine reprintings and pocket book editions totaling several hundred thousand copies. Never a hard-cover best seller, it has nevertheless become an established classic of fantasy.

The most controversial work of Merritt's has always been *The Metal Monster*, published as an eight-part serial in ARGOSY—ALL-STORY, beginning with the August 7, 1920 issue. Merritt said of the story: "I have never been satisfied with it. It has some of the best writing in it that I ever did and some of the worst. It has always been a problem child."

The novel is in a sense, a sequel to *The Conquest of the Moon Pool*, since one of the lead characters and narrator Dr. Walter T. Goodwin appears again, and references are made to incidents in the previous stories. Sensitive to the slightest criticism, Merritt lost confidence in this work when reader reaction proved mixed.

Merritt let out all the stops on *The Metal Monster*. That it is overwritten, Merritt himself was the first to acknowledge, but far from being a failure it is probably his most successful novel. Beginning with its opening passage: "*In this great crucible of life we call the world—in the vaster one we call the universe—the mysteries lie close packed, uncountable as grains of sand on ocean's shores. They thread gigantic the star-flung spaces; they creep, atomic, beneath the microscope's peering eye. They walk beside us, unseen and unheard, calling out to us, asking why we are deaf to their crying, blind to their wonder,*" the novel strikes a serious philosophical and later an intellectual note which interpenetrates the action.

Ray Bradbury in his short story, *Forever and the Earth*, tries to imagine how Thomas Wolfe would have described space and other worlds, had he put his mind to it or had the opportunity to visit them. Wolfe could hardly have improved on the inspired cosmic passages in which Merritt visualizes a world of metal intelligences hurtling through interstellar space, seeding uncounted worlds with offspring—one of them our earth!

*The Metal Monster* is the best unified of all Merritt's earlier novels and the tremendous descriptive passages delineating the fantastically alien concept of sentient, intelligent, metallic life succeeds admirably in poetically transmitting a mood of near-belief. A triumph for so difficult a theme.

Three years passed before Merritt completed another work, *The Face in the Abyss*, a 35,000-word short novel. Restraint was evident throughout the narrative, a restraint enlivened by a masterful technique and a bell-like clarity. There were invisible flying snakes, dinosaurs, spider-men and, most striking of all, a superb characterization of the Snake-Mother—part woman, part serpent. She was the last survivor of an ancient race, custodian of



secrets and wisdom far in advance of human achievement. All this Merritt projected against the inspired backdrop of a tremendous carved image of an evil face, from which flowed tears of molten gold!

Readers who had reservations as to Merritt's entertainment index, and who had found his *tour de force*, "*The Metal Monster*," too much for them, were completely won over by the spell of this new fantasy. With so much hinted at, and so very much left unsaid, *The Face in the Abyss*, which appeared in the September 8, 1923 issue of ARGOSY—ALL-STORY, demanded a sequel.

But Merritt was no longer compelled or disposed to drive himself night and day to turn out inspired follow-ups for fickle audiences. His revenge was incomparable.

He made them wait six years for the sequel! He could hardly have been hard-pressed for time, because two other novels appeared during the interim, but he had apparently made up his mind to write only what he wanted, when he wanted.

Some months after the appearance of *The Face in the Abyss*, Bob Davis received a novelette from Merritt entitled *The Ship of Ishtar*. He returned it to the author, saying it was a shame to cramp so wondrous an idea by confining it to novelette length. Why not expand the basic concept to full novel length?

Merritt tried, but chafed under the task.

He wrote some of the last chapters first as independent episodes, then gradually filled in the gaps between. The novel showed it. The early portion, where the two ends of the ship are separated by a wall of force, is quite clearly a different sort of tale from the central section which hinges on action adventure or the final portion which is composed of a series of superbly wrought literary exercises. Yet superb craftsmanship is evident in every line and the singing rhythm of the prose carries one along with intense fascination to the very end, despite glaring inadequacies of plot and narrative construction.

This story is not science fiction, even by courtesy. It is sheer fantasy, but a truly remarkable fantasy with at least one chapter, "The King of Two Deaths," closer to genius than to talent.

*The Ship of Ishtar* began in ARGOSY—ALL-STORY for November 8, 1924, and ran for six weekly installments. The accolades that followed were sincere, as ARGOSY's poll fourteen years later confirmed. But now something new was happening in the science fiction world. Even as the period of the scientific romance blossomed and reached its height, another concept of science fiction was being revived. It challenged romance solely for entertainment's sake, and demanded that science fiction incorporate the plausible logic of Edgar Allan Poe and the prophetic vision of Jules Verne to become an expression of man's thirst for knowledge and progress. It was headed by Hugo Gernsback, who, as far back as 1911, in his popular scientific magazine, MODERN ELECTRICS, had written *Ralph 124C41 Plus*, a true miracle of plausible prophecy.

As his MODERN ELECTRICS metamorphosed into ELECTRICAL EXPERIMENTER and finally into SCIENCE AND INVENTION, he continued to pro-

mote science fiction of this type. Shortly after *The Ship of Ishtar* appeared, ARGOSY—ALL-STORY was forced to take cognizance of the new trend by introducing Ralph Milne Farley with a great hullabaloo as to his scientific qualifications and the technical accuracy of his *The Radio Man*.

The instantaneous success of the first science fiction magazine, AMAZING STORIES, introduced in 1926 by Gernsback, with the accent on more science, was the handwriting on the wall for the scientific romance. As high priest of the old order, A. Merritt stood to lose the most.

Then a remarkable thing happened. With the entire honor roll of the past to choose from in the field of reprints; with the necessity of selecting stories that most closely typified his ideas imperative, Hugo Gernsback made a startling exception. That exception was A. Merritt. He elected to reprint every science fiction story Merritt had written up to that time—the book version of *The Moon Pool*, *The Face in the Abyss*, *The People of the Pit* (twice, once in the monthly and once in AMAZING STORIES ANNUAL). Most astonishing of all, he had Merritt revise *The Metal Monster* and ran it as *The Metal Emperor* in SCIENCE AND INVENTION in twelve monthly installments.

The reading public's response was electric. It was as if Merritt had been discovered for the first time. Readers referred to him as a "genius." Manuscripts from new writers distinctly betrayed his influence and such later well-known names as Jack Williamson and P. Schuyler Miller openly acknowledged their literary debt to him.

The old order would die, and with it most of the "Elder Gods." But Merritt would reign on!

To conquer the specialized new world of the science fiction magazines Merritt had fired a fusillade; the realm of weird-fantasy he toppled with a single shot.

It happened this way. A novelette whose theme symbolized the ages of struggle between man and the forest, *The Woman of the Wood*, was submitted by Merritt to ARGOSY—ALL-STORY. In one of his rare errors of judgement, Bob Davis rejected it as being "plotless." On condition that not a single word be altered, A. Merritt offered it to WEIRD TALES, where it was published in the August, 1926 number. Merritt did have to prove himself again. Years later, Farnsworth Wright admitted that this hauntingly atmospheric tale of the birch forest which assumed human shape to save itself from destruction, was the most popular novelette which WEIRD TALES had ever published.

Bent on campaigns of literary imperialism, Merritt next invaded the mystery field with *Seven Footprints to Satan*, a five-part novel beginning in ARGOSY—ALL-STORY for July 2, 1927. Loyal science fiction and fantasy fans were disappointed, but the mystery fans were delighted. Built around the sinister figure of a man who calls himself Satan, the novel deals with the activities of a cult formed to play a deadly game where the stakes are fortune or death. Replete with dozens of unique melodramatic devices and a full retinue of stock ones, the novel was a set-up for Hollywood and First National had it in movie houses even before the appearance of the Boni & Livewright hard cover edi-

tion in February, 1928. Within a month the book had gone through three editions and into a low-price Grossett & Dunlap reprint, illustrated with stills from the motion picture.

This was heady brew for A. Merritt. Only one year earlier, Putnam had been unable to sell a pitifully small edition of a thousand copies of *The Ship of Ishtar* in book form and the sheets for the last 300 copies were finally purchased by Munsey, bound and distributed to readers of ARGOSY—ALL-STORY MAGAZINE.

For the next three years Merritt rested on his laurels, toying with a new novel he had picked up and put down without completing since 1923—*The Fox Woman*. Unable to develop the plot properly he put it aside with only about 15,000 words completed—he never did complete it—and started work on a sequel to *The Face in the Abyss*.

Seven years had passed since that story had first appeared in ARGOSY—ALL-STORY. With *The Snake Mother* he returned to the fold. The title character is the best rounded, most sympathetic and memorable one he ever created, though in this novel, which ran to seven installments beginning in the October 25, 1930 ARGOSY, he fashioned a villain with truly captivating appeal—Nimer! Nimer is a disembodied intelligence—evil incarnate—who is able to take over a human body as easily as changing to a new suit. The calibre of his strategy and his unquestionable courage, even against formidable odds makes him a figure of irresistible appeal.

A marvelous blend of action, superb characterization, philosophy, poetic prose, involving such elements as atomic powers and the strange Dream Makers (who could fabricate a hypnotic illusion like a story on a moving picture screen) *The Snake Mother* is an imaginative triumph.

If there has ever been any doubt that Merritt was escaping from the brutalities and injustices of the world in his novels and short-stories, it was dispelled by *The Dwellers in the Mirage*, which began in the January 23, 1932 number of ARGOSY. The yellow-haired Leif Langdon is unquestionably the youthful A. Merritt. Tsantawu, the Cherokee, Leif's guide, parallels the Indian who accompanied Merritt during his early sojourn in Mexico. The architecture and surroundings in the fictional land of the mirage is reminiscent of the Mayan ruins he explored.

With many Merritt readers this story is an all-time favorite. The tiny golden people, the nightmarish Kraken, the good and beautiful Evalie, Leif himself, (whom all believe to be a reincarnation of Dwayanu, once lord of this underground realm and lover of Lur the witch woman) are elements unified by the struggles of two women to gain the love of Leif. One, the dark Lur, believes him to be the reincarnation of Dwayanu, who once loved her and whom she loved in return. The other Evalie, is the epitome of everything fine, noble and good in women. In the magazine and book version, Lur, with her faithful white wolf, is killed trying to destroy Evalie. Then Leif takes Evalie back to the surface world.

Laying bare the human temptation and gnawing

doubts that haunt all men, the author has Leif reflect:

"Ai, Lur—Witch-woman! I see you lying there, smiling with lips grown tender—the white wolf's head upon your breast! And Dwayanu still lives within me!"

Abruptly, Merritt did another switch. With a theme borrowed from Fitz-James O'Brien's *The Wondersmith*, he produced a tale of witchcraft which he originally called *The Dolls of Mme. Mandilip*, but which ARGOSY changed to *Burn Witch Burn!* The novel, which began in the October 22, 1932 number, bears the stamp of a skilled professional as it moves at a breathless pace to unfold the story of a sinister old woman who sends her animated mannikins from a night-shadowed doll house with their poisoned needle-swords to slay her unsuspecting victims. Like *Seven Footprints to Satan*, the film producers quickly seized upon this one, casting Lionel Barrymore in the role of Mme. Mandilip in *The Devil Dolls*.

*Creep, Shadow!*, commencing in ARGOSY for September 8, 1934, marked the end of Merritt's most productive period. *Creep, Shadow* is a sequel to *Burn Witch Burn!* This time, Merritt dwelt in sombre imaginative fashion on the near-lost powers of witchcraft surviving from 10,000 years in the past, implying shadow life and shadow creatures. Where before he was impatient to plunge into his wonder-worlds, now he proceeds deliberately, examining the problem intellectually before increasing the tempo of the action. There are some brilliant scenes and fine artistic passages in the novel, but it reveals a Merritt more concerned with the method than the substance of his art. Though he lived another nine years, Merritt never completed another story, contenting himself with revising his old ones.

Pride in his art remained, but he ceased to dream.

Always gracious toward his admirers, Merritt gave generously of his time to the science fiction fan movement. When ARGOSY begged for something from his pen, he pleaded lack of time, but he presented as a gift to the editors of FANTASY MAGAZINE, a short story, *The Drone*, to commemorate the second anniversary of that fine fan magazine in 1934.

Even in this tiny realm of amateur publication, Merritt was to establish his supremacy. Seventeen authors were asked by the editors of the same magazine to write a chapter each in a round-robin novel, *Cosmos*. Each writer was requested to continue from where another left off, but the chapters had to be complete in themselves. The authors were Ralph Milne Farley, David H. Keller, Arthur J. Burks, Bob Olsen, Francis Flagg, John W. Campbell Jr., Otis Adelbert Kline, E. Hoffman Price, Abner J. Gelula, Raymond A. Palmer, J. Harvey Haggard, Edward E. Smith, P. Schuyler Miller, L. A. Eshbach, Eando Binder, Edmond Hamilton, and A. Merritt himself. A vote of the readers established that Merritt's chapter, *The Last Poet and the Robots*, describing how a scientist-poet destroys a world of robots who have rebelled and conquered man was overwhelmingly the favorite.

Emile Schumacher, a well-known feature writer



for THE AMERICAN WEEKLY, returned to New York on Thursday, August 29, 1943, after completing an unusual assignment given him by A. Merritt, who was now full editor. He had been sent to secure eye-witness material about a volcano that had blasted out of a Mexican cornfield to cover seventy-five square miles of surrounding countryside with ash.

"I knew the story would appeal to A. Merritt with his tremendous fondness for the occult," Schumacher said, quite possibly to justify his linking of the mysterious volcano's eruption with the dying curse of an Aztec Emperor, which he fabricated from whole cloth. He found Merritt cheerful, but looking tired and haggard and about to fly down to Florida for a rest.

"Have the library dig up a really spectacular photograph of the volcano belching smoke and fire," was the last order that Merritt gave him. "Then I'll have Lee do a portrait drawing of Moctezuma the Second, who mistook the invading Cortes for the fair god Quezacoatl of the Aztec legend—a mistake that subsequently proved fatal," he added contemplatively.

The next morning Merritt was dead of a heart attack suffered at the age of fifty-nine while at Indian Rock Beach, Florida.

His work lives on. Popular Publications, Inc. brought out a new periodical—A. MERRITT'S MAGAZINE—so entitled because of his continuing popularity with readers everywhere. It appeared in December 1949 and ran five bi-monthly issues. No other fantasy author has been so honored.

Avon Publications, publishers of pocket editions, reprinted *all* of his fiction. Edition has followed edition for the last seventeen years. The seven novels and one short story collection have sold upwards of four million copies, Avon estimates, and the end is not yet. *Seven Footprints to Satan* has sold one million copies alone, and *Burn Witch Burn!*, 500,000.

Liveright reports that five Merritt novels are still in print and selling steadily in hard covers, despite the pocket book editions. The five novels are *The Moon Pool*, *Dwellers in the Mirage*, *The Face in the Abyss*, *Seven Footprints to Satan* and *Burn Witch Burn!*

Abraham Merritt could not have wished for a more appropriate monument.

## YOUR SPACE



WHETHER OR NOT it is wise for a science fiction magazine to publish a *letters-from-readers* department has always been a highly controversial subject wherever editors, writers and fans congregate. The arguments, pro and con, if threaded on a single beam of light, would probably stretch from here to Betelgeuse. We won't go into them here—it would only provoke more argument and the end-result would be interspatial chaos, with the contending sides waging a battle which would make Armageddon seem no more than a small, local conflict of minor significance.

We've always believed that the best way for an editor to slice through a problem like that and reach a major decision is—to be guided by his ESP impluses. And those impulses whisper to us—in a very insistent way—that a *letters-from-readers* department strengthens the bond between writers and readers and has so much to commend it that the opposing arguments shrivel up and fall away, however convincing they may seem to the opposition. So—you will get space—at least two pages—for as long as you wish to occupy it.

If we had any doubts at all, the many enthusiastic letters we've received since *SATELLITE* went large-size has completely dispelled them. You *do* want a forum, and we propose to establish one, even though space limitations impose certain restrictions. We can't undertake to comment editorially on your letters, for instance. If we attempted to do so there would be far less space left for the letters themselves and the over-all diversity of the opinions expressed would be diminished. And we've always felt that a really discerning letter speaks for itself and needs no editorial garnishing. Candor and sincerity are the major criterions.

LEO MARGULIES,  
Publisher

