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INTRODUCTION:

WHAT'S ALL THIS, THEN?

Strange Tales of the Century (or STotC) is a supplement (and kind of a sequel) to Spirit of the Century (or SotC). Strange Tales will provide your Spirit game with lots of new material, including new eras, archetypes, stunts, gadgets, and locations. Strange Tales will also provide you with guidelines and suggestions to adapt both SotC and STotC to Fate Core, the latest evolution of the award-winning Fate roleplaying game system upon which Spirit was originally built. Finally, Strange Tales acts as a resource to bridge the time between SotC and the upcoming Shadow of the Century RPG from Evil Hat.

THE "PULP ERA"

The Pulp Era is amorphous and poorly defined. Generally the phrase “the Pulp Era” is used to cover the 1920s and ’30s, with the beginning of World War II for the United States (1941) sometimes seen as the era’s end. Many pulp games are set in the 1920s, the decade most often thought of as being truly “pulpish,” but the heyday of the pulps was the 1930s, and it wasn’t until the end of World War II that they began to fade away and die.

When the phrase “the Pulp Era” is used in Strange Tales, it refers to the years 1919-1951, with this book covering the years from 1935 to 1951.

What We Mean By A “Pulp”

The traditional definition of a “pulp” magazine was a fiction magazine printed on cheap wood pulp paper in a 7˝-by-10˝ format. But a significant number of pulp characters appeared in the “slicks,” magazines printed on better quality paper and billed as aesthetically superior to the pulps.

Strange Tales uses “pulp” as shorthand for the many genres and media of the era—what Roland Barthes called a “metaphor without brakes.” For our purposes, “pulp” will refer to every medium of the era from around the world that presented pulpish characters in pulp-style adventures: from novels and comic strips to radio serials and movies... and so much more.

BYOMKESH BAKSHI? SUN KOH? WHO ARE THESE GUYS?

A large number of characters appeared in magazines published outside the United States. These magazines, known as “story papers” in England, gialli in Italy, and heftromane in Germany, were the foreign equivalent of American pulps, but appeared on different paper and in different dimensions.

One of the purposes of Strange Tales is to describe the major characters of the pulps of the world. Many of these characters are unknown to Americans and have never appeared in the English language—but inside their home countries, they are as big as Doc Savage and the Shadow. (For source material on these characters, see the Bibliography on page 497).
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PULP FICTION AND REALITY

Most people don’t have pulp-style adventures, because most people just don’t live high-octane lives. But in every time and place, there are men and women whose lives read like something out of an adventure story, and the pulp era was no exception. The following example, while unusual, is one man’s account of his real-life adventures. In response to a story in Popular Magazine in 1916 claiming that no one escapes from the French Foreign Legion, one man wrote in, begging to differ:

In number May 20, 1916, is an article, “Stories of the Legion” by H. de Vere Stacpoole. He states nobody escaped from the Legion. Well, I have done so, though it involved me becoming a Mohammedan and joining a wandering band of Touaregs and took two years to accomplish. I finally wandered across the Sahara, helped in the looting of caravans, and sailed from Cape Tuby with the assistance of Baba Hamid of the Wad Lagine Hamenea Tribe, on the western Sahara seaboard below Morocco on a Spanish fishing boat to Teneriffe, Canary Islands. I am longing for the desert, the smell of the camel dung fire, and the freedom of the everlasting sand ever since. The hardship, adventures and escapes I went through are incredible. This took place ten years ago, since then I have been an elephant hunter in Central Africa, in the army of Emperor Menelik of Abyssinia, pearl fishing off North Australia, diamond digging at the Cape, and in a revolution in a Central American republic, not to mention fighting with Muley Mohamed El Hiba, the son of Sheik Ma-el-deinne of South Morocco against Muley Hafid, the Ex-Sultan of Morocco.

Most men and women during the pulp era won’t have lived this kind of life—but there’s no reason a SotC/StotC character can’t.

“WHAT IF WE MADE HIM A WOMAN?”

“What if we made him a woman?” is the (possibly apocryphal) response comics writer Chris Claremont gave whenever an editor at Marvel Comics suggested a new character for Claremont’s X-Men books, which is why Claremont’s books had a much higher number of female characters than most other superhero comics.

Game writers who ask this question of characters in this game do so from the best of intentions. But a writer of a pulp game has no need to do so, since surprisingly large numbers of characters in the pulps of the world were women; a smaller but still sizable subset were non-WASP (“White Anglo-Saxon Protestant”) women. Any player wanting to play a female or non-WASP pulp character will find numerous examples in Strange Tales, because there is both fictional and historical precedent for any type of character background.
SO, THIS IS A “POLITICALLY CORRECT” GAMING BOOK?
Not in the sense of warping something for political ends, no. The truth is that
the pulps of the world were as full of women and other heroes who weren’t the
white upper-class Americans and British of the pulps of the U.S. and Great
Britain. Many pulp games have not reflected this variety, and Strange Tales is
intended to remedy that fact.

WEREN’T THE PULPS RACIST, SEXIST, AND IMPERIALIST?
WHY WOULD I WANT TO PLAY A GAME OF THAT?
It’s true that much material found in the pulps was racist, sexist, and imperialist.
This doesn’t mean your pulp game has to be. The pulps have within them all the
material any GM or player would need to play a game without racism, sexism,
or imperialism—Strange Tales of the Century is written for those who want to play
that sort of game.

The pulps were certainly chock full of negative attitudes and characters,
but they also had characters who were surprisingly subversive and progres-
sive. Strange Tales will enable a player wanting to play a Chinese gun-slinging
cowboy or an Indian private detective to find inspiration in actual characters
who appeared in the pulps.

DO I HAVE TO USE EVERYTHING HERE? I DON’T WANT TO HAVE ALIENS IN
MY GAME, BUT THE PLANETARY RESOURCE HERO REQUIRES THEM, AND
THE RED MARTIAN INVASION SUBPLOT HAMSTRINGS MY CONTINUITY.
No. The stories and continuity in Chapter One (Strange Tales of the Century
Magazine) and the Archetypes in Chapter Three (Pulp Archetypes) are optional.
All the stories and continuity offered in Chapter One are suggestions rather
than requirements. If the Martian Invasion is too “sci-fi” for you, ignore it.

The Archetypes in Chapter Three come from the actual pulps of the world.
However, each individual genre (mystery, adventure, science fiction, occult
horror) used their own archetypes, and a few of the others available. If the pulps
themselves weren’t going to mix/match/mash genres, you don’t have to have to either.

The point of all this is to have fun. As with any roleplaying game, if any
of what you find here in Strange Tales isn’t going to work for your group, then
don’t use it.
CHAPTER ONE:
STRANGE TALES OF THE CENTURY MAGAZINE

Sample file
STRANGE TALES OF THE CENTURY: THE MAGAZINE

Strange Tales of the Century Magazine (and its successor Tales of the Century) were two of the more successful British story papers during the pulp era. While never popular on the level of Adventure, Wizard, or Union Jack, Strange Tales/Tales quickly earned a devoted following and proved to be one of John Bull Press’s most profitable story papers. Interestingly, Strange Tales/Tales did not follow the model of other British story papers in featuring short chapters of numerous serials in each issue, but instead imitated the American pulps in featuring one main story (usually part of an extended serial) and two or three backup stories in each issue. Some of these serials only ran for a few months, while others, like the famous “The Emperor in Scarlet” epic (see below), ran for over a year. These months-long story arcs make it relatively easy to separate the magazine’s existence into four separate periods, each with its own flavor and themes.

NEW SPIRIT OF THE CENTURY CHARACTERS

Character “seeds” (Aspects and Skills) have been provided for most of the new characters mentioned in this chapter. GMs (or players) should feel free to customize them—especially through picking Stunts!

PART 1, 1931-1937

“Bow to me, humans! Bow to Gorilla Khan, the new Master of Atlantis!”

Strange Tales of the Century began inauspiciously, with established heroes like Barrington Drake, “the Schoolboy Sherlock Holmes,” being used to lure longtime readers into buying the new magazine. The stories themselves were no different from the offerings of competing story papers of the 1920s: ordinary and humdrum, with relatively mundane crimes and heroes whose enemies were more colorful than they were.

BARRINGTON DRAKE, SCHOOLBOY GREAT DETECTIVE

Some Suggested Aspects: Edwardian Morals • Justice Must Prevail
• What’s Good for The British Empire Is Good for the World
In his own adventures, Drake had mentioned his membership in the Century Club, and in “The Cross-Continent Costume Crimes” (Strange Tales, Feb-Apr 1931), he tracks a gang of European costume shop robbers to Hamburg, teaming up with the German consulting detective (and Century Club member) Frank Kling to catch them and discover their strange secret. In “The Maroon Walloon and the Fourth Form Revolt” (Strange Tales, Apr-Jul 1932) the Luxembourgian boy reporter Tabac (as always, in search of a story) visits St. George’s School For Indigent Boys and discovers a Red plot to turn the school into a nest of Soviet spies. And in “The All-American Boys” (Strange Tales, Aug-Oct 1932) the Mexican teen trio Los Tapatios track three apparently incompetent criminals back to the Oaxaca lair of their boss, the notorious crime lord El Guapo.

FRANK KLING, GERMAN FOP

Some Suggested Aspects: Languid • Justice Will Get Around To It, In Her Own Good Time • Don’t Bother Me With Politics


TABAC, LUXEMBOURGER (BOY) REPORTER

Some Suggested Aspects: Go-Getter • Insatiable Curiosity • If There’s No News, MAKE SOME!


JORGE, JOSE, AND JUAN: LOS TAPATIOS, MEXICAN CHILD HEROES

Some Suggested Shared Aspects: Closer Than Siblings • Neighborhood Protectors • Mexicans si, Yanquis ¡no!


EL GUAPO, OAXACAN CRIME LORD

Some Suggested Aspects: Famed in the Annals of Infamy • Good Help Is So Hard to Find • My Name Strikes Fear In All Hearts

Some Suggested Skills: Guns, Fists, Deceit.

Pretty standard fare.

It was not until 1933, and the now-famous “The Conquest of Atlantis!” serial (Strange Tales, Feb-May 1933), that the fantastic and unusual—in the person of Gorilla Khan—might be said to have entered Strange Tales of the Century for good. “The Conquest of Atlantis” was followed by “Into the Hollow Earth!” (Strange Tales, Jul-Oct 1933), in which French master thief LeBeau, bored with Europe and his inconclusive jousts with Barrington Drake, ventures into the Hollow Earth to steal the God Ruby from the primitive natives there.
LeBeau is pursued by Jet Black, the Spanish adventurer Agustin Miró, and other members of the Century Club. What begins as an attempt to catch the uncatchable crook becomes a desperate attempt to stay alive in the face of attacks by unimaginable creatures from forgotten branches of evolution.

GORILLA KHAN, CONQUEROR APE (1933)
(see SotC, pages 356 and 401.)
Possible Changed Aspects: Legacy of Khan to Ruler of Atlantis

LEBEAU, FRENCH GENTLEMAN THIEF
Some Suggested Aspects: Steal Only the Best • Challenge Makes Things FUN! • Lighten Up
Some Suggested Skills: Deceit, Burglary, Alertness.

JET BLACK, THE FLYING SOLDIER (1933)
(see SotC, pages 353 and 395.)
Possible Changed Aspects: Over My Head to This Is What I DO!

AGUSTIN MIRÓ, SPANISH ROOTLESS VETERAN
Some Suggested Aspects: Haunted by the War • Society Doesn’t Want Me • Waiting to Die

It may never be known if Sughit and Kaffesson, the longtime editors of Strange Tales, meant for 1934 to become a year in which the pulp’s readers were systematically introduced to the rest of the world—but that is what it turned out to be.

In the first long-form serial of the magazine’s history, “Around the World In 80 Capers” (Strange Tales, Feb-Dec 1934), four master thieves from England, the Netherlands, India, and China team up to steal the greatest works of art from the world’s major museums. To capture the crooks, the leaders of the Century Club dispatch a trio of heroes: Barrington Drake, the Anglo-Indian costumed adventurer known only as King Cobra, and Sergeant Johns of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Each story in the serial delivers the usual thrills and escapades, from the Red Revolution in Graustark, to Lisbon where the trio meets Professor João as he attempts to create a biological thinking machine. The newly formed quartet of heroes also comes into contact with new branches of the Century Club throughout the world, including Paris where the Club is known as the Club d’Siecle, to Tokyo where they are known as the Kitsune. The cumulative effect of the story was to make the readers aware that their familiar heroes were not only active on the global scale, but had friends and allies around the world.
KING COBRA, ANGLO-INDIAN COSTUMED ADVENTURER
Some Suggested Aspects: I Have Little Mercy for SCUM! • My Husband Cannot Know! • English Order Is Better Than Indian Chaos

SERGEANT WILLIAM JOHNS, HARDCORE MOUNTIE
Some Suggested Aspects: No One Escapes the Mounties • Born to the Saddle • Justice Is Inexorable
Some Suggested Skills: Survival, Investigation, Resolve.

PROFESSOR JOÃO, PORTUGUESE BIG-HEADED DWARF GENIUS
Some Suggested Aspects: You Will All Pay! • Smarter Than You • Invent Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast

The high point of the early years of Strange Tales—and a story sequence still fondly remembered by connoisseurs of the pulps—was “The Emperor in Scarlet” serial (Strange Tales, Jan 1936-Feb 1937). “The Emperor in Scarlet” is all nonstop action (obviously written in imitation of the American pulp success Operator #5’s “The Purple Invasion” arc), achieving a scope and scale of epic adventure which wouldn’t be reached again until the legendary “Red Planet” epic of 1950-51. Many of the elements previously established in Strange Tales were brought together: the existence of the Club d’Siecle, the Jahrhundert Klub, and various other European and Asian branches of the Century Club; the Hollow Earth, its unbelievable size, and the many races of prehistoric creatures still existing within it; and the (remarkably for the time) ongoing consequences of the actions of members of the Century Club—the things they did had repercussions that showed up later. During its run, readers of “The Emperor in Scarlet” were awed and overwhelmed by the level of threats and action throughout the serial: enormous sinkholes appear in every major city on Earth, followed by a global invasion from the Hollow Earth. Pterodactyl-and T. Rex-riding Neanderthals (armed with primitive artillery, wielding primitive magic drawn from their primal gods, and still bearing a grudge over LeBeau’s theft of the God Ruby) begin to raze the world’s cities, slaughtering every modern man they see.

Even today, the high-points of “The Emperor in Scarlet” can be recited from memory by fans: the mid-air combat between and Jet Black and the Neanderthal warlord Atok the Horrible; the (seeming) last stand of the Century Club on the shores of Lake Michigan, and their escape in the Nautilus; the frenzied dash to Iceland while pursued by enraged plesiosaurs and Neanderthal sea shamans; the daring North Sea rescue of the Club members from the sinking Nautilus by the Jahrhundert Klub members and the Polish aviator Karol Sliwinski, the Club’s once-rival and now-ally; the discovery of the abandoned zeppelin base
on Novaya Zemlya, now occupied by the Soviet superman Aleksi Saadak and his New Men, callously indifferent to the world’s plight, concerned only with forging a Communist Utopia; the garbled radio transmission from Odessa; and the mysterious, incomplete message from Menetnashté Mansour about “The Emperor in Scarlet.”

The finale of the epic did not disappoint. “Red Flames Over The Kremlin” described the heart-stopping last stand of the Century Club in Moscow, with only Mack Silver, Dan Dynamite, and German Legionnaire Heinz Falk standing between the occult Amber Room and the scimitar-wielding Lidenbrock Baboons of the Emperor in Scarlet’s Dare-to-Die Battalion. And in “Beneath the Scarlet Mask,” Dirk Dashwood and Canadian spy X-4 slip past the Emperor in Scarlet’s bodyguards and discover that the Emperor is actually Wu Fang, “Lord of Inner China,” and the longtime foe of the Century Club and its Chinese branch, the Household Gods.

In retrospect, “The Emperor in Scarlet” can be seen as a forerunner for the uncertain and even dire times to come in real life, and for the change in tone of Strange Tales beginning later in 1937.
MACK SILVER, ENTREPRENEURIAL PILOT (1937)
(see SotC, pages 354 and 396.)
Possible Changed Aspects: Black Sheep to Scruffy Rogue

DAN DYNAMITE, THE WALKING DISASTER (1937)
(see SotC, page 355.)
Some Suggested Aspects: Fists of Granite • I Think I Broke Your Building • Hey, That Tickles

HEINZ FALK, GERMAN LEGIONNAIRE
Some Suggested Aspects: Long Live the Legion! • Wanted for a Crime I Didn’t Commit • Reluctant German Patriot
Some Suggested Skills: Guns, Endurance, Resolve.

DIRK DASHWOOD, INTERNATIONAL MAN OF MYSTERY (1937)
(see SotC, page 355.)
Some Suggested Aspects: Move Like Smoke • Been Everywhere • Friends in Dark Places

X-4, CANADIAN SPY
Some Suggested Aspects: Canada Has No Friends, Only Temporary Allies • Needs Must When the Devil Drives • Woman in a Man’s Profession
Some Suggested Skills: Deceit, Empathy, Drive.

WU FANG, LORD OF INNER CHINA
Some Suggested Aspects: Kneel Before Wu Fang! • The Science of Poison, the Poison of Science • Depose the Qing, Restore the Ming
PART 2, 1937-1945

“Und soon, for ze glory of ze Reich, ve vill CONQUER ZE VURLD!”

By 1937, with Hitler’s notorious “Lebensraum” speech, Great Britain knew that war was coming sooner rather than later, and the stories in STRANGE TALES began to reflect that. Halfway through Volume 6 of STRANGE TALES, reportedly on orders of Editor-in-Chief Kaffesson, the stories took on much darker tones.

Beginning with “The Black Angel” (STRANGE TALES, Jun-Sep 1937), the heroes of the Century Club and its global branches grappled with the Fascist threat on a monthly basis. (STRANGE TALES’ politics were generally left-leaning, and the stories’ villains were usually Fascist rather than Communist). For two years, this threat came from smaller countries which were emphatically not named “Germany” (including Ruritania in “The Black Angel,” and Dravalia in “Zombie Soldiers of the Crimson Warlord”; see STRANGE TALES, Oct 1938-Jan 1939). During these years, the dangers to the heroes of the Century Club were real enough, but the threats were kept at a level that, it was thought, would not cause nightmares for the children reading STRANGE TALES.

In “The Black Angel,” Canadian intelligence agent X-4 and the blind French detective known as L’Aveugle engineer the downfall of the dictator known as the “Black Angel” and overthrow the Fascist government of Ruritania, preventing a war which threatened to engulf Eastern Europe. In “Zombie Soldiers of the Crimson Warlord,” Norwegian scientist-vigilante Kjell Richter and Chinese gun-for-hire Madame Yang slip into Dravalia and destroy the chemical works producing the dreaded “Obedience Formula” that was turning the citizens of Dravalia into mindless goose-steppers. And in “White Poppies, Yellow Perils” (STRANGE TALES, Feb-May 1938), Finnish mercenary Simo Hirvonen, British officer Colonel Hughart, and Turkish policeman Peyami Bedii ensure that the four major opium lords of Kurdistan, Bhuristan, Yanistan, and Afghanistan will not sell the new “Red Haze” opium to the West and that Wu Sheng—“Satan’s Scientist” (and cousin to Wu Fang)—will not be able to use these new opium addicts as his agents.

It was not until the beginning of World War II, in September 1939, that war—real war as it was being experienced in Europe, rather than the pseudo-wars fought in earlier stories of STRANGE TALES—truly entered the pages of the magazine. The advent of the war caused one of the more memorable “ret-cons” of the pulp era, in “The Yellow Rose of MURDER!” (STRANGE TALES, Jul-Nov 1939). In the July, August, and September stories the reporter Tabac, American newsman Bob Devlin, and roving adventurer Jonas Hathaway carry on a taut duel with the femme fatale and spy code-named “Yellow Rose” in the Germanic country of Rivânia. But in October (the first month after the invasion of Poland by Germany and the Soviet Union), Tabac, Devlin, and Hathaway are suddenly inside Germany, trying to escape to France and safety. The Japanese actions in French Indochina inspired “The Jungle Drums Sound Doom” (STRANGE TALES, Sep-Nov 1940), a short, intense serial about the Malaysian con man Sayyid Ariff and jungle adventurer Steve Boshell fighting a rearguard action in protecting a native temple against plundering Japanese troops.
L’AVEUGLE, BLIND DEFECTIVE DETECTIVE
Some Suggested Aspects: Blind But Sees More Than You • Your Accent Is Very Distinctive • Think Before You Speak
Some Suggested Skills: Investigation, Contacting, Empathy.

THE BLACK ANGEL, FASCIST DICTATOR
Some Suggested Aspects: Listen to My Words • I Can Heal You! • Flights to Heaven, Affordable!

KJELL RICHTER, NORWEIGIAN INVENTOR OF THE UNKNOWN
Some Suggested Aspects: Child Prodigy, All Grown Up • Weapons Are the Easiest Things to Make • All Non-Aryans Are Inferior

MADAME YANG, CHINESE GUN MOLL
Some Suggested Aspects: This Gun Isn’t for Show • I Like Men Fine...Just Not as Lovers • One Dead Jap Is a Good Start
Some Suggested Skills: Guns, Intimidation, Resources.

SIMO HIRVONEN, FINNISH MERCENARY
Some Suggested Aspects: Killing Has Never Bothered Me • Honor the Contract No Matter What • “Eh... It’s a Living”

COLONEL HUGHART, AFRICAN HAND OFF THE LEASH (SEE PAGE 185)
Some Suggested Aspects: People Die But the Empire Endures • Africans Are Children in Need of a Firm Hand • Protect Africa from Europe
Some Suggested Skills: Contacting, Investigation, Academics.

PEYAMI BEDII, TURKISH WATT (SEE PAGE 405)
Some Suggested Aspects: Not as Dumb As I Seem • It’s Not the First Time I’ve Been Shot • Hands Like Hammers

WU SHENG, “SATAN’S SCIENTIST”
Some Suggested Aspects: My Chemicals! • Farther Than Man Was Meant to Go • Your Mind Belongs to Me!
The entry of the United States into the war brought a new group of heroes into the fray, with men like the obese armchair detective Troxell Scott, the lethal vigilante The Laughing Monk, and the famous scientist-detective Colby Winter—all using their talents to defeat the Axis powers—and new types of stories, like “Guns Speak Louder in Moonlight” (Strange Tales, Jan-Mar 1942), in which the Filipino detective Hilario Lakan joins Jet Black and Professor João in fighting the undead Japanese warlock known as “The Golden Bat” and the fire-breathing dragon planes of Japanese aviator-mad scientist Chôya in the Philippines. The submarine war between the Germans and British, and the Japanese and Americans, was reflected in “Full Fathom Five the Red Sun Dives” (Strange Tales, Jun-Aug 1942), a gripping story of undersea war in the South Pacific, with Japanese submarine captain Kaidanj and the insane disembodied brain calling itself Ixsander dueling with Colby Winter and the Dutch sailor Kapitein Arne.

The darkest stories of the war—and some of the darkest in Strange Tales’ entire history—appeared in print over the next two years. 1943 saw desperate, bloody battles as the tide of war turned against the Axis powers, and they began...