

The Last Cavalier: H. Beam Piper

**By
John F. Carr
Part One**

“For all his knowledge, Beam was no dry intellectual. He was a storyteller; a man who could keep you up all night with his books and his tales. He had respect for the intellect and for intellectuals, but he was never one of the breed.

“He was a cavalier.”

Jerry Pournelle

On the weekend of November 6th, 1964 H. Beam Piper shut off the utilities in his apartment at 330 East Third Street in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, placed painter's drop cloths over the walls and floor, and shot himself with a .38-caliber pistol.

Marvin N. Katz, a reporter for Grit Publishing, wrote in the `Analog' letter column that there was a suicide note, but it did not give any reasons for the fatal decision. In a typically Piperesque comment, he did state: “I don't like to leave messes when I go away, but if I could have cleaned up any of this mess, I wouldn't be going away. H. Beam Piper.”

Any time an important artist or writer's work is brought to a premature end by death, those who love his work suffer the most tragic loss of all. Science fiction has known its share of tragedies, but few resonate as deeply as the suicide of H. Beam Piper. Piper, who was writing at the top of his form at the time of his death, had quickly and without the usual hype, fanfare and pyrotechnics established himself as one of the fields' finest authors. In the five years before his death, Piper had made the turn from promising short story writer to major novelist, with novels such as “Four Day Planet,” “Cosmic Computer,” “Space Viking,” “Little Fuzzy” and his final work, “Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen.” Both “Space Viking” and “Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen” deserve to be ranked right up with Robert Louis Stevenson's novels, “Kidnapped” and “Treasure Island,” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's “The White Company,” and Mark Twain's “A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.”

These are all books of heroic vision that appeal to young adults as well as the young at heart of all ages and can be read and re-read, passed from one generation to the next. Even Ace Books', the present Copyright holder of Piper's oeuvre, policy of benign neglect-having allowed most of the Piper canon to languish out-of-print for the past twelve years-has not stopped readers from searching out Piper's books at used bookstores and on the Internet. Piper's legion of fans gather at obscure websites and lists on the Internet to talk about and re-interpret his works and his millennium spanning Terro-Human Future History.

H. Beam Piper's surprise suicide is one of the true tragedies of science fiction.

Not that the SF field has been immune to tragedy; Stanley G. Weinbaum, who died at the age of thirty-six after a sudden and meteoric rise, and Cyril Kornbluth, whose prodigious talents were brought to an untimely end by a heart attack at age thirty-five, are two that come instantly to mind. But tragic as these unexpected deaths were, they lack the tragic irony of Piper's suicide, brought about his mistaken belief that his

career as a writer was over, only a few years before the big SF boom of the Sixties would transform science fiction into a cultural icon and in another decade make millionaires out of its top practitioners.

Jerry Pournelle believes that Piper would soon have been ranked among the top SF writers, Heinlein, Clarke, Asimov and Bradbury, and shared their economic success along with their growing literary reputations. As Lester del Rey noted in his June 1976 'Analog' book review column "Piper was rapidly becoming the best adventure writer in science fiction before his tragic death..."

That a man with Beam's talent could die alone, living in hunger and abysmal poverty, is a true tragedy. Of course, like all classic Greek tragedies, this tale has its share of personal hubris, too. H. Beam Piper was a man of great pride, who enjoyed the fact that his Williamsport neighbors viewed him as a successful author of International renown. Piper was unwilling, despite having several friends living nearby, to tell anyone of his desperate financial condition, desperate enough that he was shooting pigeons from his window sill for dinner. The idea of going on Relief wasn't open for consideration.

However, when the money arrived for a story sale, Piper did not budget his money well. After a celebratory dinner, he would go out to buy a new suit or two-keeping up appearances. Not really too much to ask for, except that Piper's income, even in his best year as a writer, was just above the poverty level. Piper had his standards and, unfortunately, his only controllable expense, was his food budget so when story sales dropped he starved himself, eating condiments at the Busy Bee or wildlife he shot himself. Authors in general are not good financial planners; some arrogantly eschew good business practices as being incompatible with art. Others are self-centered and are more interested in their work than in taking care of business. Some just don't deal well with the mundane realities of food, shelter and transportation. As Mike Knerr sums it up best, in one of his letters: "Piper made very little money, but he spent it as though it was Confederate currency."

In his 'Paeon to Piper' Dwight Decker gives us this interesting alternative view of Piper's career: "I have a feeling that the tragedy of H. Beam Piper is that he started too late. Ten years earlier and he would have been around for John Campbell's 'Astounding' revolution and the explosion of talent that introduced Heinlein, de Camp, del Rey, Asimov and so many others. If Piper had been in that wave, established a decade sooner, he could have developed into a major figure in his own right and have been far more successful by 1964 and not have felt honor-bound to take his own life."

In 'Ventura II,' a fanzine published shortly after Piper's death, contains several appreciations of Piper, including SF author Jack Chalker's Lights Go Out:

"H. Beam Piper (He never would tell anyone what the "H" stood for) was a talented and imaginative writer who endeared himself to the science fiction world not just by his superb writings, but also by his sparkling wit and personality at various conventions and conferences. He was one of the special group you looked forward to meeting again and again, and who, you know, would be the same cordial gentleman. No one was too big or too small, too famed or too unknown, that he could not talk

with Beam as a friend. His pixie-like mannerisms and his twinkling eyes were always at the center of attention. Beam loved people, all kinds of people, and he was never happy unless there was a group nearby discussing history and antique weaponry, and he was often the life of any party.

“He looked somewhat like the classic movie villain, with a thin moustache and a deep, piercing voice-but the twinkle in his eye betrayed his image, and this suited his impish sense of humor.

“It was only in the past few years that he truly matured as a writer, and found his forte in the form of the novel, giving the SF world such masterpieces as “Space Viking” and the novel that truly won him universal acclaim and recognition by all, “Little Fuzzy.” His juvenile novels for Putnams, “Four Day Planet” and “Junkyard Planet,” showed him a master of all levels, perhaps the only man who could equal the gifts of Heinlein and Norton in writing juveniles that did not play down, and were often far superior to the bulk of adult fiction. Beam never wrote for adults or for juveniles-he wrote for everyone.

“By 1964 it was very apparent that H. Beam Piper was one of the truly great SF authors, and from the time when he couldn't sell a novel to the magazine or hardback publishers (“Little Fuzzy” was universally rejected) he had, in a few short years, come up to where he would be ranked on the SF five foot shelf with every great writer in the business. In one sense he truly surpassed his contemporaries-his public knew and loved him personally as well.

“In 1964 Phillycon attendees were rather puzzled when Beam failed to appear for the festivities. He was so much a part of the East Coast's affairs that his very absence was almost physically noticeable. It was then that Sam Moscowitz told us that he had received word that on November 11, 1964, just a few days before, Beam Piper had said his farewell to this world and gone on.

Beam's thoughts ran deep. He was a very complex man, a very unique and unfathomable man. Behind the villain's façade, beyond even the twinkling eyes and the pixie manner, there were things that showed in no external symptom, and like the ancient ones he studied and loved, he chose his own time and place of farewell, for reasons concealed from us all.

The news passed like a great snake through the Philadelphia audience. Few would or could believe he was gone. There are those of us who really can't believe it even now.

In a year that saw us lose many great men, for different causes-Hannes Bok, Cleve Cartmill, Mark Clifton, Aldous Huxley, T.H. White, C.S. Lewis, Norbert Weiner, and others-this loss was saddening indeed. To those that had the pleasure of knowing Beam himself, the loss is doubly felt.

H. Beam Piper (1904-1964) is gone-but his name will not be forgotten until men cease to imagine far places, new worlds out among the stars...

* * *

There are even a few skeptics who believed that Piper's suicide was a cover-up for murder; a murder that echoed Piper's own locked-room mystery, "Murder In The Gunroom," too closely-they claimed-to be mere coincidence. In "Murder In The Gunroom" Lane Fleming, a noted collector of early pistols and revolvers (much like Piper's friend and mentor Colonel Henry W. Shoemaker, who had a valuable gun collection Piper had catalogued in 1927, and to whom his mystery was dedicated) was found dead on the floor of his locked gunroom with a Confederate-made .36-caliber revolver in his hand. That suicide was made to look like "death by accident" until Piper's detective Jefferson Davis Rand proved otherwise.

Just what were the events leading to H. Beam Piper's death and was it really a suicide? I fully intend to answer that question here and further illuminate Piper's life and career with information I obtained from Mike Knerr, one of Piper's Williamsport friends and his unpaid, part-time secretary, Paul M. Schuchart, Piper's schoolmate and life-long friend, and the H. Beam Piper/John Campbell correspondence which Perry Chapdelaine has so graciously allowed me to review. Along the way, I will attempt to answer some of the other questions that have long bothered Piper scholars and fans: Was Piper really his own man or just a John Campbell hired gun who wrote what he was told? Did the death of his agent, Kenneth White, play a pivotal role in Piper's suicide? Finally, what was the state of Piper's affairs at the time of his death?

Part Two

Henry Beam Piper was born on March 23, 1904, an only child, the son of Harriet and Herbert Piper, and his father was not a minister as previously recorded. According to Paul Schuchart, a lifelong friend of Piper's: "Beam's father was NOT a Presbyterian minister, but worked for the electric company. My father was a Methodist minister at Llyswen, a suburb of Altoona, and we lived about a half block from where Beam and his mother and father lived."

In Piper's own words he acquired an excellent education in history and basic science "without subjecting myself to the ridiculous misery of four years in the uncomfortable confines of a raccoon coat." Paul Schuchart adds: "I agree with you when you said Beam never had a formal education (in the introduction to "Federation"), but probably read more books than most professors. I graduated from Washington and Lee in Lexington. My recollection was that Beam was thrown out of Altoona High School, because he shot the bottoms out of several test tubes in the chemical lab."

Over a decade ago, the son of Ferd Simpson, a lifelong friend of Beam's, contacted me. The two of them had carried on a twenty-five year long correspondence. Ferd's son had collected his father's and Piper's letters together in book form and sent me a copy in hopes that I would be able to recommend a publisher. He was inspired by the posthumous collection of Robert Heinlein letters, titled "Grumbles From The Grave," and envisioned publishing them as a tribute to his father and his father's friend, H. Beam Piper. The letters provided a fascinating and rare look into the early life of this enigmatic writer. Unfortunately, I was not allowed to keep a copy of the manuscript or granted permission to reprint any of the letters, but I remember them well. The letters confirm that Piper was an avid hunter and hiker, who loved to camp and visit obscure historical sites. He also wrote historical fiction on various pieces of local Pennsylvania history, a few of which were published in local newspapers. The letters begin when Beam was in his early twenties, and the Piper dry wit and dark humor were already in evidence-even then-as was his passion for firearms and hiking. The opposite sex is rarely mentioned, but when Piper does talk about women it's in a reverential tone, and his crushes were almost always at a distance.

Unfortunately, Ferd (for many years the editor of the `Williamsport Shopper') and his family moved out of Williamsport in the Forties and the letters after the move become infrequent and not very informative. Unfortunately, the correspondence contains very little information on Piper's writings or his early struggles in getting published, or why he turned his hand from historical fiction to science fiction. The letters were passed from father to son, as were three or four early drafts of "Murder In The Gunroom"-all with different titles!

Beam's friend Mike Knerr gives us a wonderful description of Piper in one of his letters:

"Beam continually lurked in lonely silence behind his dark suit and the black overcoat he usually wore slung over his shoulders. Black hair combed straight back,

a somewhat pale and aquiline-featured face; he could have been a sort of Bella Lagosi walking the streets of Williamsport, muttering to himself as he plotted another story. He was also inclined to stubbornness, atheism and given the idea of creating an aura of the Victorian about himself most of the time. He often appeared to be a man from the last century, given to wearing white shirts and ties even when he wrote. True to his Victorian code, Beam seldom watched television (except the fights) and never owned one.

“A man of great contrasts, Beam was a skilled craftsman in his chosen field of writing-yet he couldn't produce stories without dozens of drafts on a manuscript. He would seldom “open up” in the presence of women, yet he would often talk freely with men. He was an historian, hunter, gun collector and a disciple of Niccolo Machiavelli, yet he wrote about space travel and science fiction. Being of practical bent (except where money was concerned) Beam wasn't exactly a proponent of space travel, nor the exploration of the galaxy.

“I tend,” he once said cautiously, “to put space travel off into the same corner of my mind as I do ghosts, flying saucers and other such things.”

“When asked about such marvels as the vehicles which transport men to the stars, he grinned: ‘Oh, one merely mumbles in their beard about stellar drives and space warps in a convincing manner...and voila! You're there.’

“Piper's kaleidoscopic character seemed to delight in opposites, and I'm quite certain that women were presented with a different view of him than were men. His friends a different sort of perspective than the casual acquaintance. He seemed always to be one thing, but display something else to the world. He read about the past and wrote about the future. He kept his own council and seldom, if ever, would bend. Until one came to know him well, he usually summed up his life by saying: ‘Man is born, he suffers, he dies; so far, I've done two thirds of this.’

“A craftsman in the field of science fiction, Beam's first love was history (16th Century Italy, in particular) but he found himself part of the science fiction fraternity. Piper truly wanted to write historical novels, but couldn't. As this became more of an obsession, he solved the problem by taking his knowledge of history to the stars-“Space Viking” and “Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen” being prime examples.

“Although, Piper never finished his opus in the historical novel field, he continued to plot it and to read history. Writing and writers were his friends and equals on one hand, while guns and gun collectors were his companions on the other.”

Piper's fascination with firearms is well documented. Besides cataloging his friend, and mentor, Colonel Shoemaker's extensive gun collection, Piper had a large collection of his own, with over a hundred antique and modern weapons and accessories, some of which he fashioned himself such as the powder horn listed in the Shoemaker catalogue. According to the September 1953 issue of ‘Pennsy Magazine,’ Piper's weapon collection ranged “from a four hundred-and-fifty-year-old French sword and a four-hundred-year-old Spanish poniard with a gold inlaid blade to a small

brass cannon once mounted on a pioneer's blockhouse during the Indian fighting and a nine-millimeter pistol of the type used by German SS troops in World War II.”

Beam put a great deal of his knowledge of warfare and weaponry into “Age of the Arquebus” (the lost historical novel Piper was writing about the life of Gonzalo de Córdoba, The Great Captain) and his last and maybe best novel, “Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen.” Paul Schuchart, in a letter to me, gave the following remembrance of Piper's fondness for gunpowder hardware: “He (Piper) came down some time later to accompany me to Washington to see the inauguration of Roosevelt as President. He came downstairs with a big gun, telling me he always carried a gun. I told him, regardless of whatever he always did, there would be no gun in his possession for that event. Beam couldn't understand that, but he was willing to trust his gun not to my wife, but rather to the girls, and we went on our way.” Even when destitute during the last years of his life, Piper still refused to sell his gun collection. Mike Knerr told me in a phone conversation in 1987 that Beam had donated the majority of his collection to a local historical museum, and would have found it impossible, regardless of desperate his own situation became, to ask for their return. “It wouldn't be honorable. And Beam could have never admitted to anyone just how broke he was—he'd die first, and did. I was one of his best friends and didn't have a clue, nor did any of his other friends.” In Piper's last years, there are a number of diary entries where Beam tells of selling various weapons, to fellow friends and gun enthusiasts, and spending the money on food or other necessities. But even in the diary he is careful not to let anyone know how important these sales are to him.

As with his passion for weapons, Piper's love affair with writing was lifelong. John H. Costello in his article H. Beam Piper: An Infinity of Worlds tells us: “at eighteen, he went to work as a laborer for the Pennsy, having been the veteran of rejection slips for two years. He continued to work for the railroad well after he became a selling author.” Piper corroborates his early start as an author in his dedication to his 1953 mystery, ‘Murder in the Gunroom’: “To Colonel Henry W. Shoemaker—an old and valued friend, who was promised this dedication, with an entirely different novel in mind, twenty-two years ago.”

Whatever special formula it took for Piper to become a published writer, he didn't discover it until he was forty-two-years-old and sold his first story, Time and Time Again, to John W. Campbell. After this sale, which appeared in the April 1947 issue, Piper was a regular contributor to Astounding/Analog for the remainder of his life. Besides, ‘Astounding,’ which was his primary market, Piper was published in ‘Weird Tales,’ ‘Future Science Fiction,’ ‘True,’ ‘Amazing,’ ‘Fantastic Universe’ and ‘Space Science Fiction’ throughout the Nineteen Fifties.

Probably the best description of Piper's own view of his sf writing during the early Fifties is contained in these words from “Murder in the Gunroom” made by Pierre Jarret—a science fiction author and confidant to the protagonist, Jeff Rand—in answer to the question: “What are you writing?”

“Science fiction. I do a lot of stories for the pulps... ‘Space Trails,’ and ‘Other Worlds’ and ‘Wonder Stories,’ mags like that. Most of it's standardized formula-stuff; what's known in the trade as space-operas. My best stuff goes to ‘Astonishing’ (a barely disguised ‘Astounding’ jfc). Parenthetically, you mustn't judge any of these

magazines by their names. It seems to be a convention to use hyperbolic names for science fiction magazine; a heritage from an earlier and ruder day. What I do for 'Astonishing' is really hard work, and I enjoy it. I'm working now on one of them, based on J.W. Dunne's time-theories (Piper's own Paratime series was based on Dunne's time theories. jfc), if you know what they are."

Here Piper provides us an accurate assessment of early Fifties science fiction magazine and a rare look at Piper's writing from his perspective. During this period Piper was working full time for the Pennsylvania Railroad at Altoona as a railroad detective and, while not wealthy, was not writing out of financial necessity. Piper continued to write detective novels (in fact a second Jeff Rand mystery was completed, "Murder Frozen Over," but never sold) throughout his career. But as Mike Knerr pointed out to me in another phone conversation in the mid-Eighties, "Here Beam was writing drawing room mysteries, when all the New York publishers were looking for hardboiled mysteries-Mike Hammer, that kind of anti-hero stuff. Even with his mysteries, Beam was out of step and out of time. He really did want to be a successful mystery author-it was more respectable. When I cracked the men's action market, Beam was really proud. He was my mentor. But it was Beam's science fiction that put bread on the table. Beam enjoyed writing it and was proud of a lot of what he wrote, but there was more money in mysteries and more respectability. But he had an intuitive grasp of the science fiction field, I think. That's what he's remembered for. I wasn't a fan so we didn't discuss his science fiction much. It's too bad, because that's what everyone's interested in these days."

Piper's most important writing relationship was the one he had with the legendary John W. Campbell, the editor who bought Piper's first and last stories. Since Piper's heroes were very often right out of John W. Campbell's editorials, many fans and readers have wondered just what his relationship with Campbell really was like. Was Piper just a Campbell puppet, like many other writers, who echoed John's editorials for a quick sale? Or did they share the same ideas and philosophies?

In Mike Ashley's analysis of the Analytic Lab (a feature where readers' votes for their favorite stories were tallied and the authors given a monetary bonus), in his "Complete Index to Astounding/Analog, Piper ranked third in overall cumulative Analytic Lab voting-which is amazing considering he didn't publish all that many stories and novels in the magazine-behind C.L. Moore (who is now almost forgotten!) and number one vote getter, Robert A. Heinlein.

Parenthetically, I'd like to state it has been said that John W. Campbell confided in a few associates that very few fans actually sent in Analytic Lab votes for their favorite stories (I know I never did!), so Campbell picked the winners himself, and used it as a means to up-the-word rate for those author's whose work he most valued. If true, it shows that Campbell valued Piper very highly, since many of the 'Astounding' regulars published two or three times more fiction in the Street & Smith publication as H. Beam Piper.

It was the early Robert Heinlein and H. Beam Piper, of all the 'Astounding' sf writers, who most epitomized Campbell's philosophies. Piper researcher John Costello says: "Into his (Piper's) stories he put a great deal of philosophy-of the Campbellian sort ... Piper was a 19th Century Liberal, a creature with whom neither

conservatives nor libertarians can be completely comfortable; and like their creator, he (Piper) did not believe that anyone had a right to automatic sustenance.

Throughout his career, he remained a 19th Century Liberal and a Citizen in the Campbellian sense- quite firmly dedicated to the ideal of Civilization and individual self-reliance.”

In many ways H. Beam Piper epitomized Campbell's Citizen: “The fully developed Citizen actually seems to be every bit as hard-headed, ruthless and dangerous a fighter as any barbarian- he just uses his ruthless determination wisely instead of egocentrically.” The essence of the Piper hero is best described by himself in *Oomphel in the Sky*, as a person who “actually knows what has to be done and how to do it, without holding a dozen conferences and round-table discussions and giving everybody a fair and equal chance to foul things up for him.” This is a fair description of Pappy Jack from “Little Fuzzy,” Calvin Morrison of “Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen,” Conn Maxwell of “Cosmic Computer,” Campbell's Citizen and- for that matter- Piper himself.

Jerry Pournelle describes Piper as a “Courtly gentleman, soft-spoken but determined, quiet, somewhat melancholy, but with a dry wit and self-reliant to an extreme.” Often at science fiction conventions, which Beam very much enjoyed, he could be found sitting in a corner by himself, or totally wrapped up in a conversation about politics or history with a fellow writer and a bottle of Jim Beam- his ‘signature’ drink in public: at home he drank Myers Rum. Marvin Katz in his ‘Analog’ obituary adds the following reminiscence: “At first reticent, even shy, Mr. Piper warmed to the conversation quickly once he felt at ease. He proved a charming, gracious man, soft-spoken and witty, perceptive in his comments.”

Due to the many similarities in thought and ideas, some critics have speculated that Piper wrote stories to John's editorial order. This is untrue. While most of the Piper/Campbell correspondence could be described as pleasant and mutually respectful, it's obvious from the tone and words of Piper's letters that this was no ‘yes man.’

In a 1951 letter, where Piper is discussing the pros and cons of dealing with agented story submissions, he says to John Campbell: I'm afraid, though that your suggested solution would do more harm than good, by angering authors; it could easily be reflected in author's instructions to agents: ‘Send it to anybody but that s.o.b. at ‘Astounding.’ Another solution, that of refusing to buy from anybody but agents, would result in shutting off the manuscripts from new authors- if you'd had a policy like that in 1946, I'd never have gotten published anywhere. It would leave you with a dwindling staff of old-timers, while the new writers were all going to Sam Merwin or Horace Gold.”

Here, we see that while Piper is respectful of Campbell's feelings, he's not afraid to be the bearer of bad tidings- even if it's to the man who made his writing career a reality. Piper, still working for the railroad, makes light of his economic dependence upon Campbell and Street & Smith in his letter's closing comments: “Sorry I can't think of an answer that wouldn't cost money, or lay me open to the accusation of scheming to bore a hole in Street & Smith's money-box to my own advantage and enrichment.”

In regards to their editor/author relationship, it's quite apparent from John Campbell's letters that Campbell had a lot of respect for Piper's work even if he didn't buy everything Beam sent him. In a letter to Piper's agent, Kenneth White, Campbell says, "Beam Piper's 'Slave' ('Slave is a Salve') yarn is a lovely thing; he's got some lovely lines in it-and some very sound philosophical points..." However, this June 5, 1962 letter from Campbell says it best:

"Dear Mr. Piper:

I don't know what plans you have to the next story project, but the world-picture you've been building up in the Sword World stories, or Space Viking stories, or whatever you designate the series offers some lovely possibilities. "Space Viking itself is, I think, one of the classics-a yarn that will be cited, years hence, as one of the science-fiction classics. It's got solid philosophy for the mature thinker, and bang-bang-chop-`em-up action for the space-pirate fans. As a truly good yarn should have.

"One of the beauties of the set-up you've got is that it allows the exploration of cultures of almost all conceivable levels of complexity and technology. They can be examined either internally or externally-i.e., either by a native, or by a visitor."

Campbell goes on with one of his legendary three page giveaway story synopses-interestingly enough one that Piper never followed up on. John Campbell was well known for buying stories based on the story synopses he tossed out to fellow writers; in fact, Randall Garrett made a living doing just that. Here, Piper, who was always having difficulty generating story ideas-according to his own diary entries-had a good plot thrown his way by a man known to buy such self-propagated stories, and Beam didn't even follow up on it!

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