


PYRAMID



Issue 3/8 June '09

CLIFFHANGERS

PULP ACTION!

by Sean Punch

**AIR DEVILS OF
THE SOUTH SEAS**
by Matt Riggsby

**INTO THE TEMPLE
OF THE HUNGRY STAR!**
by J. Edward Tremlett

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

Stock #37-2608

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Article Colors

Each article is color-coded to help you find your favorite sections.

- Pale Blue:* In This Issue
- Brown:* In Every Issue (letters, humor, editorial, etc.)
- Dark Blue:* GURPS Features
- Purple:* Other Features
- Green:* Recommended Reading

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IN THIS ISSUE

It's time for a two-fisted tour into yesteryear with this issue of *Pyramid*. GMs who need help with their 1930s-era pulp campaigns will find two adventures – one for **GURPS** and one generic – while players get assistance applying the **Action** supplements to their pulp heroes!

Sean Punch, **GURPS** line editor and **GURPS Action** author, explains how to adapt modern-day **Action** templates and rules to pulp-era adventurers in *Pulp Action!*

Matt Riggsby – author of **GURPS Locations: The Tower of Octavius** – takes heroes to an island paradise on the eve of World War II in *Air Devils of the South Seas*. Who or what are the monsters raiding villages, and why are they doing it? It's got full stats for **GURPS**, but the core mystery works great in any game!

In J. Edward Tremlett's adventure framework *Into the Temple of the Hungry Star!*, the heroes will discover horrifying secrets about South American artifacts and try to prevent the destruction of the world!

If the heroes are globe-trotting investigators, they'll love this issue's handout: a huge list of countries and territories of the world in the 1930s, including a map to plot and record their travels. It's great for GMs keeping track of global information, too!

Andy Vetromile and Matthew Pook explore games that can be used, perused, or abused for pulp-era inspiration in this month's *Recommended Reading!*

Finally, the *Last Word* comes to us from Leonard Balsera, one of the voices behind the fan-favorite **Spirit of the Century**. What is the last word on cliffhangers, and does it end in an exclamation point?!

*Without adventure, civilization
is in full decay.*

– Alfred North Whitehead

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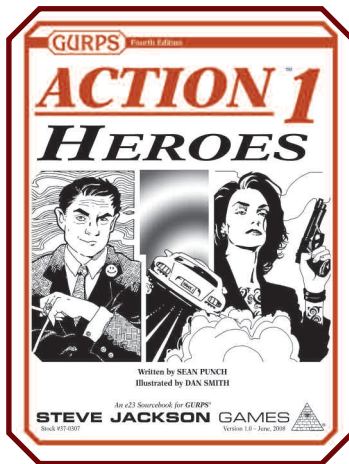
FROM THE EDITOR

WHEN SUDDENLY . . .

The world's seemed smaller and smaller with each passing year, and it's now possible to communicate with someone half a world away in milliseconds. But one of the earliest escalations of that global compression started during the "cliffhanger" era.

One reason I suspect for cliffhangers' popularity is that it bridges the old and the new, the possible and the impossible, the known and the unknown. It's entirely feasible to face a master swordsman in one scene and a madman with a machine gun in another. It can take six hours to wind your way from one side of Berlin to the other, and another six hours to fly to London.

Hopefully, then, this issue's adventures, rules, and ideas (including some support for the *GURPS Action* line) help you bridge the gap to the campaign you want to run. Whether it's a near-realistic tour of the 1930s or a near-sci-fi romp into yesterday's future, we've hopefully got something to whet your appetite.



IT HAPPENED HERE!

This issue contains another meaty handout. One of the things we've tried to do with the *Pyramid* revamp is to take advantage of the format and present items that can be used right now in a campaign. If you came up with any ideas for clever things to do with these handouts, tell us (or other folks) about your brainstorm. If you have any suggestions for future things you'd like to see in the mag, we *really* want to hear from you!

WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

We love to get your feedback! Please feel free to send letters and comments to pyramid@sjgames.com, or post online on our forums at forums.sjgames.com. If this is your first issue of *Pyramid*, then welcome aboard the adventure express! Regardless, we always welcome comments about what we're doing right and wrong. If you're inspired to contribute to *Pyramid*, please check out our Writer's Guidelines at sjgames.com/pyramid/writing.html for more information!



*I have all of [the issues of Pyramid] and they are excellent.
I really am digging this format.*

– Trentin C Bergeron, on the Steve Jackson Games forums

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PULP ACTION!

BY SEAN PUNCH

GURPS Action is a near-perfect match to pulp adventure. You roleplay larger-than-life figures who use guts, determination, two fists, and trusty pistols to tackle enemies – all of which nicely describes pulp heroes. This isn't surprising: Many early (and a few recent) action movies were silver-screen retellings of pulp stories.

The team-based approach of **Action** is actually a *better* match to pulps than to modern action movies. Most flicks today feature a lone hero, or maybe two buddies. Pulp fiction had its loners but frequently featured special police units, infantry squads, ships' crews, etc. Even Doc Savage didn't work alone, despite being pulp's paragon polymath.

There's even a bonus benefit: *The Cell Phone Problem* (**Action 2**, p. 9) goes away.

The snag is that **Action** assumes TL8. You can make a case for late TL7 – many of the genre conventions and gizmos originated then – but the age of cliffhanging adventure is TL6. The pulp era ends decades before the first hackers and satellites materialize. This necessitates changes to the baseline assumptions.

TEMPLATES

The templates in **Action 1** need some tweaks for a pulp campaign. In *all* cases:

- The Computer Operation skill is common as a background choice or better. Replace this with an Area Knowledge or Current Affairs specialty at the same level. Facts about people, places, and events reside in minds, not on Google.
- Unarmed skills for most pulp heroes are Boxing or Brawling for striking, and/or Wrestling for grappling. Judo and Karate play a role, but pulps portray them as Asian Secrets. Those who know them must make their Area Knowledge (above) something stereotypically *Oriental*.

Assassin

Pulp heroes are often killers, but people who kill *as* their job – as opposed to *while doing* their job, often in self-defense – are depicted as bad guys. Still, the stealthier kind of vigilante might use the template, which the GM can rename “masked vigilante.”

Advantages: Masked vigilantes are unlikely to have Zeroed; it's hard to doctor every paper on you in a bureaucracy that uses manila folders and not computers. Replace that option with Alternate Identity, which might be legal [5] or illegal [15], depending on the chosen lens.

Disadvantages: Vigilantes may opt for Intolerance (Crooks) [-5], Pacifism (Cannot Harm Innocents) [-10], or Sense of Duty (Law-Abiding Citizens) [-10] – or even Selfless [-5*] or Charitable [-15*] – in place of assassin traits like Callous, Code of Honor (“Stay bought”), Greed, Obsession, and Social Stigma. They may also take Secret Identity [-20] instead of Secret.

Primary Skills: Guns (Rifle) doesn't have to be the foremost Guns specialty; it might be swapped with Guns (Pistol, Shotgun, or SMG). The glorification of snipers is a post-WWII trope. Pulp killers favor pistols, shotguns, and Tommy guns.

Secondary Skills: Replace Electronics Operation (Security) with Lockpicking and Traps, both still (A) IQ [2]-12, on the list of options.

Cleaner

Like the assassin, this archetype borders on being too offensive for pulp sensibilities: Good guys might shoot first, but they don't need to hide the bodies. Still, a cleaner may fit a campaign where the PCs are spies who must avoid detection by Nazis or the like.

Advantages: Any Contact Group is almost certainly “the Mob.” As with the assassin, replace Zeroed with Alternate Identity [5 or 15].

Disadvantages: Unlike the assassin, someone who deliberately feeds bodies to pigs probably *does* have unpleasant disadvantages. This is a major part of why the character type isn't especially fitting outside of bleak espionage campaigns.

Primary Skills: The Driving specialty is customarily Heavy Wheeled. Cars have big trunks at TL6, but in most places, there aren't enough of them at night to avoid suspicion – and in the Egyptian desert, trucks are the only option that doesn't have four legs.

Secondary Skills: Electronics Operation (Media) isn't relevant if no one has security cameras taping you! Hazardous Materials is unlikely. In an urban setting, replace these options with Streetwise (A) IQ-1 [1]-13 and Urban Survival (A) Per-1 [1]-13; in a local campaign, Area Knowledge (The Harbor) (E) IQ [1]-14 is classic.

Demolition Man

The jittery, nitro-toting explosives specialist fits many pulp stories! In caper plots, he blows safes. In tales of manly adventure, he demolishes bridges from beneath truckloads of gun-waving minions, or even uses his skills for mineral exploration and construction.

Danger! A city, a newly found civilization, or even the world is in danger of being destroyed!

Making It Pulp

One of the distinctive traits of pulp and cliffhanging adventure is periodic bursts of action interrupting the main plot. Although the various threads of the investigation laid out here set out some action beats, they certainly won't be enough. Raymond Chandler famously advised that, when a story wasn't exciting enough, have two men with guns suddenly burst through the door. That's what the GM must do here, punctuating sleuthing with bursts of feverish – if potentially tangential – activity. If the investigation goes for two hours of play without action naturally occurring, the GM should insert one of the events suggested below to perk things up.

The White Devil (actually, the shadowy figure behind him) will make some desultory attempts to kill the adventurers and interfere with their investigation. The attempts are more inconvenient than an actual threat, partly because good help is hard to find and partly because the mastermind is perfectly happy to stir up anxiety and confusion around the raids and their investigation. Some attempts at interference include the following ideas.

- The investigators find a time bomb in their vehicle or residence, which will go off in seconds. They may try to escape, but they may feel compelled to protect bystanders as well.
- While on the road, a hidden sniper shoots out one of their tires, sending them veering over a cliff.

- The building the heroes are in is set on fire, or a bomb is set off.

- The investigators' vehicle's throttle has been sabotaged and becomes stuck at maximum power. In a plane or boat, this happens at a time when they need maximum control and maneuverability, such as during a landing or navigating through coral reefs.

- Because nothing compares to the classics, two men with guns burst into the room. If the adventurers are traveling, they're pursued by a vehicle containing two men with guns (plus the driver).

In all cases, the attackers have been hired or coerced by the White Devil but can't give significant clues as to his whereabouts; they were paid in advance, with veiled threats about what would happen if they failed. However, the White Devil isn't the only one who can cause problems and get the investigators running around. Instead of a nighttime burglar (see *The Foreign Agent*, p. 14), a daytime pickpocket grabs an investigator's notes as they're walking through Plantation Docks, leading to a chase. Using the Chase rules in **GURPS Action 2**, the streets and marketplaces of Plantation Docks are very suitable to attempts to Hide (for example, ducking under market stalls), Stunt, and Stunt Escape (such as running in front of approaching vehicles or beasts of burden just before they block a path). Barroom brawls are common occurrences in Plantation Docks, so sleuths can be regularly interrupted by a sudden need to beat people up.

However, they don't expect determined resistance and are disinclined to take many casualties, so they will fall back in good order (and in groups, covering one another's retreat) to their planes if the fight goes on very long. The White Devil is also determined not to leave anyone who can reveal his secrets, so badly wounded raiders can expect a bullet (or grenade) from their own side.

Alternatively, the adventurers might follow up on Kazumoto's suggestion that the raiders are holed up on a forbidden island. He's right, as it happens, so if the investigators explore this option, they'll locate at least one raider. Unfortunately, the raiders are likely to find them first. Intruders to the "forbidden" area will eventually be discovered by the White Devil's occasional air patrol or scattered lookouts on small, deserted islands. When that happens, the heroes are attacked by at least one large biplane; if the investigators are airborne, the White Devil sends enough planes to outnumber them. The White Devil's patrol tries to destroy any vehicle the sleuths have but doesn't stick around to finish off survivors.

If the team comes out of one of these encounters with a live captive, he's unlikely to be able to speak without significant medical care and recovery time, and the White Devil sends gunmen to make sure that the captive doesn't talk. If the investigators manage to shoot down or prevent the takeoff of any of

the White Devil's planes, they find that the planes are of good quality but relatively unremarkable, save for some unusually complex radio gear. A successful Electronics Operations roll indicates that it's specialized for detecting directional radio transmissions. A skilled electrical engineer could duplicate it, producing a device that would reveal whether or not it was in the path of a directional beam at a particular frequency. However, not knowing the approximate location of the transmitter nor when the transmitter is broadcasting, the odds against catching the beam are astronomical.

In any event, direct confrontation with the White Devil complicates things significantly. The BAD worsens to -2, and the White Devil starts making more concerted attempts to kill the investigators.

THE PIRATE

If the adventurers get to this point, it should be clear that they need to look seriously at the forbidden islands. If they indicate that they're willing to spend a significant chunk of money, Rosie (or, if they aren't hanging out at her bar, someone else with underworld connections) hints that she can put the investigators in touch with someone who can help them – for a price.

What if the pulps weren't fiction? GMs could have PCs meet characters from famous books or movies.

INTO THE TEMPLE OF THE HUNGRY STAR!

BY J. EDWARD TREMLETT

Priceless Artifact Stolen from Museum!

Ancient "Mystery Orb" Burgled in Broad Daylight!

Three Dead, Five Wounded at American Museum of Natural History.

– *New York Times*, Wednesday, January 6, 1937

Mystery Murder in Ambassador Hotel!

Three Men "Gruesomely" Killed by Unknown Assassin!

Neighbors Heard Screams, Saw "Strange Fellow" Leave!

– *New York Post*, Friday, January 8, 1937

New York, 1937: A story is rapidly unfolding, of greed and ambition intersecting with deadly ancient secrets. A pro-Nazi American industrialist and a disfigured German "archaeologist" have given the Führer dangerous knowledge – the location of a terrible weapon, hidden in a long-lost South American temple. The resulting expedition uncovered a strange, spherical vehicle from beyond the stars.

Hitler wants it for the *Luftwaffe*. The pieces that should make it fly once more are being gathered by servants of the Third Reich. Soon they will be assembled in the secret base the Nazis have constructed within the Peruvian temple.

When that moment comes, Hitler will have an invincible weapon . . . or so he thinks. The vehicle is actually controlled by horrible creatures that devour men in seconds. Most of the men who stole the second artifact in New York City are now dead because of them. If the vehicle takes off, it could well spell the end of humanity.

Fortunately, some stalwart heroes choose to stand between evildoers and the cataclysmic forces they would unleash! This collection of clues provides the skeleton of a two-fisted adventure that could see a party chasing Nazis from New York to Lima, and then into the lush and deadly jungles of Peru. Along the way, they may fight hired thugs, encounter the sinister

Ahnenerbe and alien monsters, and take part in a South American showdown that may decide the fate of the human race!

The article is generic, and could be used with *GURPS Cliffhangers*, *Adventure!*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *D6 Adventure*, *Savage Worlds*, *Thrilling Tales*, or any other pulp game that could be set in the 1930s.

A PAIR OF HORRIBLE OCCURRENCES!

There are two main hooks for this story: the break-in at the American Museum of Natural History, and the murders at the Ambassador Hotel. Clues found at one will lead back to the other.

The Museum

According to the *Times*, the five-man robbery took place at 4:00 p.m. on Tuesday, January 5. One man – an "odd fellow" – entered at 2:00 p.m., headed slowly toward the South American wing, and stayed at or around it. Two more men entered at 3:00 p.m., nodded to the first man, and walked the floor for an hour. Then the final two arrived at 4:00 p.m.; they rendezvoused at the orb exhibit and began firing at nearby guards.

Two guards died instantly. Another was shot in the arm and ducked for cover. Several stampeding museum-goers were hurt, and a young mother with a baby was taken hostage and threatened with being shot. The guards backed off.

The exhibit case was smashed, the orb taken, and then the men split up. Three men – including the "odd fellow" – left by a side stairwell and killed the back door guard. That victim was unaware of the robbery because a very loud delivery truck was idling outside, usual for that time of day.

The number of hobos in the United States surged during the 1930s. Primarily men, most honorable hobos were traveling workers who hitched rides, mainly on freight cars.

ABOUT *GURPS*

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of *GURPS* players. We can be reached by email: info@sjgames.com. Our address is SJ Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Resources include:

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ideas to add to your own game! The *Pyramid* web page is pyramid.sjgames.com.

Gamer and Store Finder (gamerfinder.sjgames.com): Connect with other people and places playing our games. Add yourself to our database so they can find you as well!

Bibliographies. Bibliographies are a great resource for finding more of what you love! We've added them to many *GURPS* book web pages with links to help you find the next perfect element for your game.

Errata. Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Errata pages for *GURPS* releases are available at sjgames.com/errata/gurps.

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.

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