

WHO INVENTED TOM SWIFT'S ELECTRIC RIFLE ?

©1998 by James D. Keeline

"What sort of weapon is that?" cried Abe, as he helped Mr. Parker on board.

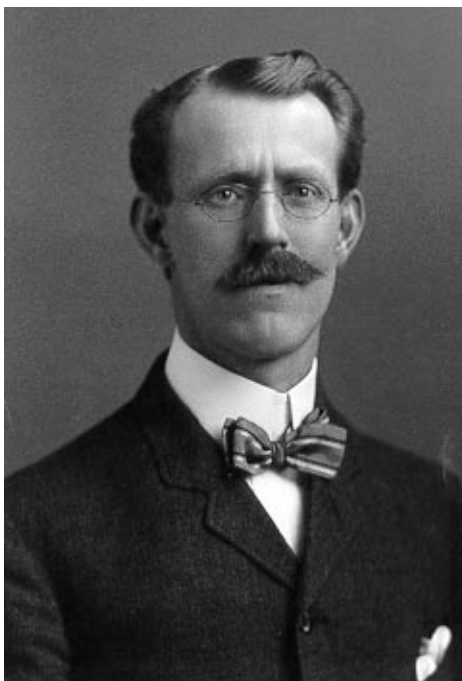
"It's my new electric rifle," answered the young inventor. "I don't know how it will work, as it isn't entirely finished, but I'm going to try it."

Putting it to his shoulder he aimed at the leading musk ox, and pulled a small lever. There was no report, no puff of smoke and no fire, yet the big creature, which had been rushing the ship, suddenly stopped swayed for a moment, and then fell over in the show, kicking in his death agony.

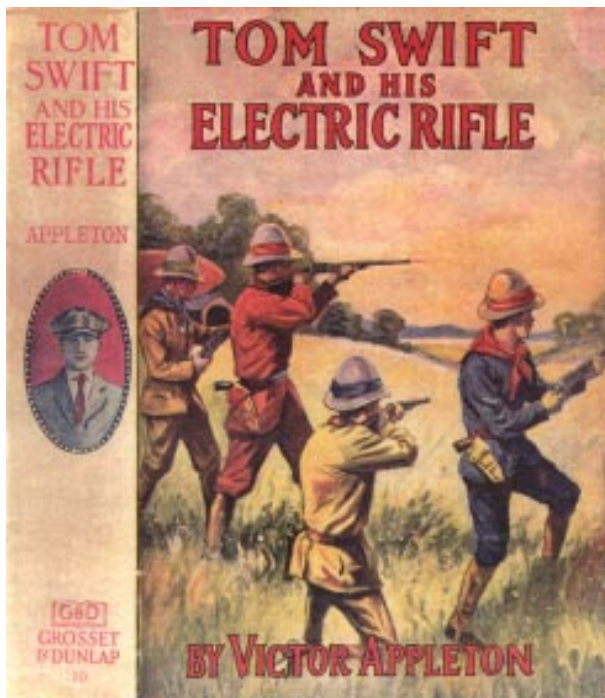
"One down!" yelled Tom. "My rifle works all right, even if it isn't finished."

[*Tom Swift in the Caves of Ice* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1911), chapter XIX, p 163]

Thus was resolved one of the many cliffhangers in a series of adventures that sold over six million copies. The **Tom Swift** series was published under the "Victor Appleton" pseudonym. This series was produced by the Stratemeyer Syndicate, an organization established by Edward Stratemeyer (1862-1930) to hire writers to complete juvenile series book manuscripts based upon his outlines. The Stratemeyer Syndicate was responsible for most of the popular series available in the



Edward Stratemeyer (1862-1930), author and proprietor of the Stratemeyer Literary Syndicate



Tom Swift and His Electric Rifle (Grosset & Dunlap, 1911) by "Victor Appleton" (Howard R. Garis)

United States in this century including series about the **Rover Boys** ((1899-1926) which Stratemeyer personally wrote under the Arthur M. Winfield name), the **Bobbsey Twins** (1904-1979) by "Laura Lee Hope," the **Motor Boys** (1906-1924) by "Clarence Young," **Tom Swift** (1910-1941) by "Victor Appleton," **Baseball Joe** (1912-1928) by "Lester Chadwick," **Bomba the Jungle Boy** (1926-1938) by "Roy Rockwood," the **Hardy Boys** (1927-1979) by "Franklin W. Dixon," **Nancy Drew** (1930-1979) by "Carolyn Keene," the **Happy Hollisters** (1953-1970) by "Jerry West," **Tom Swift Jr.** (1954-1971) by "Victor Appleton II," and **Christopher Cool** (1967-1969) by "Jack Lancer." In all, the Syndicate produced well over 1,200 series books in dozens of series, some of which were well-known while others are forgotten today. Few children could grow up in the United States and be unaware of at least one of these series and their famous characters.

Edward Stratemeyer was born in 1862 in Elizabeth, New Jersey. As a young boy, he read the novels of Horatio Alger, Jr. (1832-1899) and stories in serial papers and dime novels. One story about him says that he received a small toy printing press as a boy upon which he printed gifts for his family. While in his teens he worked on small chap books and amateur story

papers which did not realize success. At the age of twenty, he created his own story paper called *Our American Boys* which had two issues in 1883.

In time, Stratemeyer began to sell stories to the same types of serial papers that he had read as a boy. An often-quoted story says that the first story he sold was written on butcher paper during spare moments while working in his brother's tobacco shop. This story was called "Victor Horton's Idea" and was published in *Golden Days* in 1889. It was not his first story nor even his first paid writing but the \$75 he received gave him credibility with his father who doubted his ability to make a living at writing. He also edited one of these story papers that was published by Street & Smith, called *Good News* in the early 1890s.

Stratemeyer soon learned that the larger portion of the money to be made in the industry came to the publisher, not the author. He soon described himself as a "literary agent" and purchased many stories to offer them to story paper publishers and book publishers. His own books began to be published in hardcover in 1897. Stratemeyer would often pay to have the printing plates made and lease them to his publishers, thereby retaining control of them and allowing him to move to another publisher if sales fell below a prescribed level.

In 1899, he began his most successful series, the **Rover Boys**, featuring stories of three brothers attending a military academy-style boarding school called Putnam Hall. This series also contained stories of camping, travel, and military adventures during World War I.

Stratemeyer said that he admired Horatio Alger Jr. and wanted to write *like* him. He had also written *as* Alger. He wrote eleven volumes under the Horatio Alger Jr. name between 1900 and 1908. Stratemeyer had become friends with Alger and William T. Adams (1822-1897), who wrote as "Oliver Optic," while working as an editor for Street & Smith. Stratemeyer wrote at least one volume under the "Oliver Optic" name after Adams' death.

Stratemeyer soon realized that he had more ideas for stories than time (or possibly skill) to write at full-length for publication. By 1905, Stratemeyer formed the Stratemeyer Literary Syndicate with the intention of hiring writers to complete manuscripts based on his outlines and purchase and broker stories already published. Between 1904 and 1984, the Stratemeyer Syndicate produced more than 1,600 series book volumes.

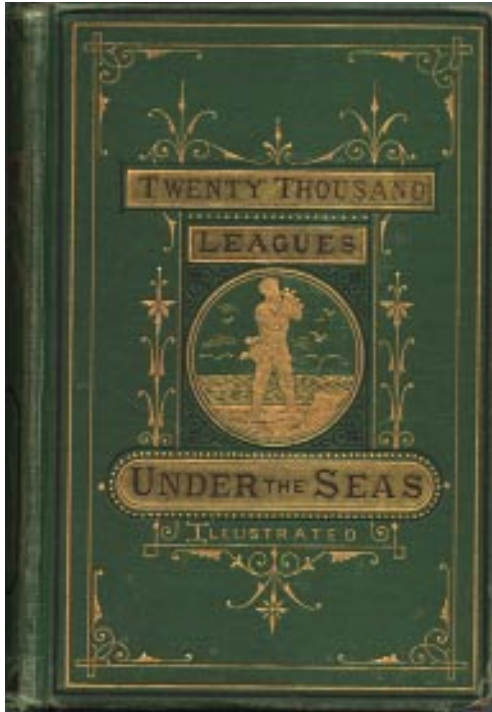
This organization has been compared to efforts by Balzac (1799-1850) or Alexandre Dumas père (1802-1870). In the case of Dumas, over 1,200 stories were produced under his name in France with writing being done by unnamed collaborators. It is interesting to note

the similarity of the quantity of books produced to those by the Stratemeyer Syndicate. However, it should be noted that many biographers of Dumas believe that he wrote most of the material in *The Three Musketeers* and some of his other famous stories published in the United States. The main difference being that Dumas tried to attract fame for himself by publishing the books under his name while Stratemeyer eschewed it by using several pseudonyms for his personal and his syndicate's writing to avoid the perception that 50%-75% of the juvenile lines from many publishers came from a single source. He used an array of pseudonyms for different series. Some names, like "Captain Ralph Bonehill" and "Arthur M. Winfield" were reserved for his own writing while "Roy Rockwood," "Allen Chapman," "Lester Chadwick," "Victor Appleton," and "Clarence Young" usually represented purchased stories or Syndicate-generated texts. One of Stratemeyer's ghostwriters for the **Tom Swift** series and several others was Howard Roger Garis (1873-1962), the author of the **Uncle Wiggily** stories (not owned by the Syndicate) about a rheumatic gentleman rabbit that was published in newspapers and in book form.

Stratemeyer died in 1930. His two daughters, Harriet S. Adams (1892-1982) and Edna Stratemeyer (né Squier) (1895-1974), who left after twelve years, continued the operation of the Syndicate after his death. In 1984, the remaining partners in the Stratemeyer Syndicate sold the operation to Simon & Schuster Pocket Books. Thus, new volumes in the **Hardy Boys** and **Nancy Drew** series continue to be created today.

Stratemeyer was about eleven years old when Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (George M. Hill, 1873) was published in the United States. While none of the biographical accounts of Stratemeyer indicate that he read the story, several of the stories that he owned suggest that he did. One story "written" by Stratemeyer was called the "The Wizard of the Deep; or, Over and Under the Ocean in Search of the \$1,000,000 Pearl" which was published in a story paper he was editing, *Young Sports of America* (10 Aug 1895-14 Sep 1895) under the "Thomas Edison Jr." pseudonym. The story was published in book form by The Mershon Company of nearby Rahway, New Jersey in 1900 as *The Wizard of the Sea; or a Trip Under the Ocean* under the "Roy Rockwood" pseudonym.

For discussion, this story can be broken into two parts. The first several chapters are nearly identical to "The Schoolboy Cadets; or, Fun and Mystery at Washington Hall," a story from a serial paper edited and published by Stratemeyer called *Bright Days* (5 Sep 1896 - 3 Oct 1896). The hero and his servant-like friend are in a boat on the ocean that is run down by another boat. They are picked up by a cruel sea captain who presses them into service. Within a few pages, a Doctor Homer Woodle, a know-it-all from the "Society for the Exploration of



An early American printing of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (George M. Smith, 1873)

the Unknown Parts of the World,” is picked up after his vessel is also wrecked.

From this point in the story, the writer engages in an unflattering plagiarism of Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*. The simplified story contains all of the basic elements of the Verne story, including the undersea hunting expedition and the proverbial squid attack on the vessel which is called the *Searcher*. The owner of the submarine is the mysterious Captain Vindex, who is a thinly disguised Captain Nemo.

To illustrate the point, it may be useful to focus on the undersea hunt shared by both stories. The captains of both submarines get their food supply by harvesting the array of life under the oceans. To hunt, expeditions are sent out on a reef armed with special rifles designed for this unique milieu. The description of these devices in the Verne story is as follows:

“Captain Nemo ... I must be allowed some reservations with regard to the gun I am to carry.”

“But it is not a gun for powder,” answered the Captain.

“Then it is an air-gun.”

“Doubtless! How would you have me manufacture gunpowder on board, without either saltpetre, sulphur, or charcoal?”

“Besides,” I added, “to fire under water in a medium eight hundred and fifty-five times denser than the air, we must conquer very considerable resistance.”

“That would be no difficulty. There exist guns,

according to Fulton, perfected in England by Philip Coles and Burley, in France by Furcy, and in Italy by Landi, which are furnished with a peculiar system of closing, which can fire under these conditions. But I repeat, having no powder, I use air under great pressure, which the pumps of the Nautilus furnish abundantly.”

“But this air must be rapidly used?”

“Well, have I not my Rouquayrol reservoir, which can furnish it at need? A tap is all that is required. Besides, M. Aronnax, you must see yourself that, during our submarine hunt, we can spend but little air and but few balls.”

“But it seems to me that in this twilight, and in the midst of this fluid, which is very dense compared with the atmosphere, shots could not go far, nor easily prove mortal.”

“Sir, on the contrary, with this gun every blow is mortal; and however lightly the animal is touched, it falls as if struck by a thunderbolt.”

“Why?”

“Because the balls sent by this gun are not ordinary balls, but little cases of glass (invented by Leniebroek, an Austrian chemist), of which I have a large supply. These glass cases are covered with a case of steel, and weighted with a pellet of lead; they are real Leyden bottles, into which the electricity is forced to a very high tension. With the slightest shock they are discharged, and the animal, however strong it may be, falls dead. I must tell you that these cases are size number four, and that the charge for an ordinary gun would be ten.”

“I will argue no longer,” I replied, rising from the table; “I have nothing left me but to take my gun. At all events, I will go where you go.”

[*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*. (Smith, 1873), chapter XIV, pp 82-83]

The Verne story uses glass spheres in the form of charged Leyden jars. These devices were first described in 1825. They consist of a glass jar with metal foil on the inner and outer surface of the glass. A large electrical charge can be stored in this early form of an electrical capacitor. The inner surface is connected via a wire that passes through an insulated rubber stopper in the opening of the jar. Verne does not describe how the inner surface is charged.

The description of the rifle used in the *Wizard of the Sea* is greatly simplified:

“But you must feel weary at times,” said Mont [to Captain Vindex].

“Never. I read, I think, and, when I want diversion, I shoot.”

“Where?”

“In the submarine forests. I have invented a square case to strap on the back, which is attached to a mask covering the head, and this will contain enough compressed air to last for several hours’ consumption, so that I can walk under the waves with ease and comfort.”



A copy of *The Wizard of the Sea* (A.L. Burt, circa 1912)

“And your guns?”

“Are air guns, also my own invention. I have several, and each is prepared to fire twenty shots by a mere movement of the trigger, the requisite force of air being placed in a hollow of the butt end; but all of these mysteries will become plain to you before you have been long with me,” answered Captain Vindex.

[*Wizard of the Sea* (Mershon, 1900), chapter XVI, pp 102-103]

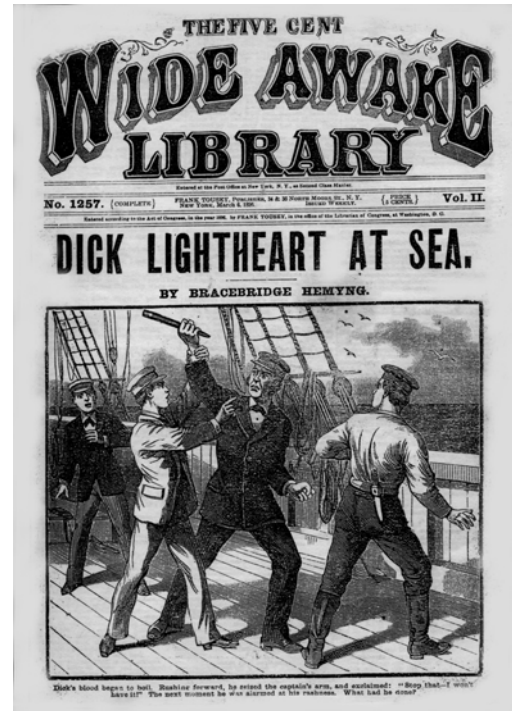
To each one was given a gun, the butt of which was of brass and hollow.

Here was stored the compressed air which discharged the electric bullets, one of which fell into its proper place just as the other had been shot away. The whole mechanism was perfect.

[*Wizard of the Sea* (Mershon, 1900), chapter XVII, p 109]

The Wizard of the Sea, a story owned by Stratemeyer, was not the only imitation of the Verne narrative. A story by Bracebridge Hemyng (1841-1901), called “Dick Lighthouse, the Scapegrace at Sea,” is another example of a shameless plagiarism of this famous story. It was first published in Frank Leslie’s *Boys of America*, a story paper imitating the British *Boys of England*, beginning in February 1874, just months after the English-language publication of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*. The story was reprinted as “Dick Lighthouse at Sea” when it was reprinted in Frank Tousey’s *Wide Awake Library* #1257.

The Hemyng story is similar to his own Jack Harkaway novels that had been popular in England since the



A reprint of the Bracebridge Hemyng story, “Dick Lighthouse at Sea” (*Wide Awake Library* #1257, 6 Mar 1896)

1870s. This latter series was published in the United States by W.L. Allison, Donohue Brothers, and the M.A. Donohue company. Stratemeyer owned a story that was published using a “Hal Harkaway” pseudonym that was published in *Golden Hours*. “Dick Lighthouse at Sea” starts out like a Jack Harkaway story and then picks up as an abridged version of Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*. Entire passages of text are copied and simplified. Hemyng even uses the “Captain Nemo” name for the submarine captain.

An interesting parallel to *The Wizard of the Sea* suggests that the author of the Stratemeyer-controlled story may have read the Hemyng story and copied it rather than the 1873 Verne story. “Crawley Crab,” the “know-it-all” character in the Hemyng story is also from the “Society for the Exploration of the Unknown Parts of the World.” Stratemeyer had used the same serial paper and book publishers that Bracebridge Hemyng used in the United States. The coincidence is striking. Nevertheless, plagiarism is unflattering whether from the original author or from someone else who has already stolen the idea in the first place!

Stratemeyer used submarines in several of his Syndicate stories including:

Edison, Thomas Jr. “The Wizard of the Deep.” *Young Sports of America*. 10 Aug 1895 - 14 Sep 1895.

Reprinted as *The Wizard of the Sea* (Mershon, 1900) by Roy Rockwood.

- Harkaway, Hal. "Holland the Destroyer." *Golden Hours*. 24 Nov 1900 - 12 Jan 1901.
Reprinted as *The Young Naval Captain* (Thompson & Thomas, 1902) by Captain Ralph Bonehill and *Oscar, the Naval Cadet* (M.A. Donohue) also by Bonehill.
- Rockwood, Roy. *Under the Ocean to the South Pole* (Cupples & Leon, 1907). **Great Marvel** series, vol. 2.
- Appleton, Victor. *Tom Swift and His Submarine Boat* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1910). **Tom Swift** series, vol. 4.
- Young, Clarence. *The Motor Boys Under the Sea* (Cupples & Leon, 1914). **Motor Boys** series, vol. 15.
- Appleton, Victor. *The Moving Picture Boys Under the Sea* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1916). **Moving Picture Boys** series, vol. 8.
- Appleton, Victor. *Tom Swift and His Undersea Search* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1920). **Tom Swift** series, vol. 23.
- Appleton, Victor. *Don Sturdy on the Ocean Bottom* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1931). **Don Sturdy** series, vol. 11.

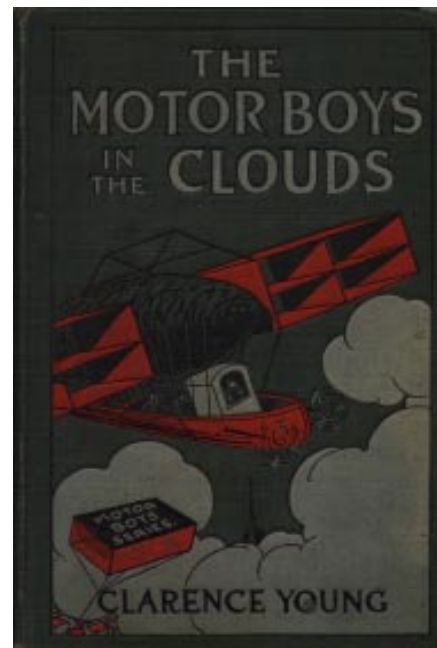
This wide-spread usage of the submarine in peace-time and in war suggests that Stratemeyer felt that this vehicle would play an important role in the future. Most of these submarine stories have original plots but some use elements of the Verne theme.

It is interesting to note that the use the name of a famous New Jersey inventor, "Thomas Edison" (1847-1931) as the basis for a pseudonym, would precede the Tom Swift series about a boy inventor by at least fifteen years. Stratemeyer had also used "P.T. Barnum Jr." as a pseudonym for a circus story and "D.T. Henty" (similar to G.A. Henty (1832-1902)) for a historical tale, *Malcolm the Water Boy* (Mershon, 1901), which first appeared in Stratemeyer's *Bright Days* (7 Nov 1896 - 26 Dec 1896).

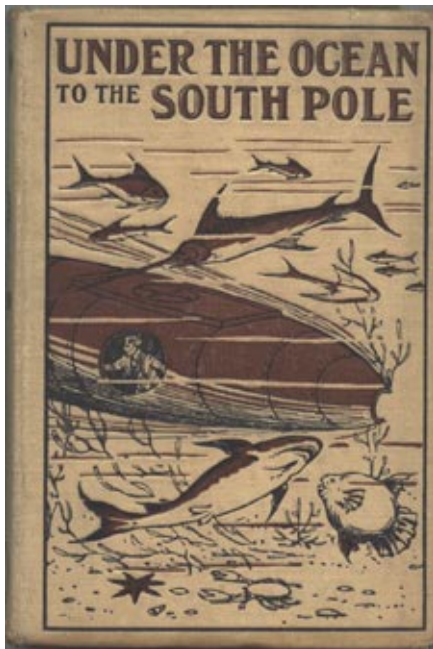
Another New Jersey fan of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* was Simon Lake (1866-1945), who spent most of his life perfecting vessels that fit the modern description of a submarine. When the U.S. Navy held a competition among inventors of submarines to develop a vessel appropriate to their needs in 1893, one of Simon Lake's competitors was John P. Holland. (1840-1914). Lake's design employed a method of using water in the walls of the vessel to create ballast weight which would be pumped out when the submarine was to surface. Unfortunately for Lake, the Navy opted for Holland's design and accepted delivery of the vessel into the fleet in April 1900. After several attempts to sell his submarines to the U.S. Government, Lake eventually sold eleven submarines to Russia before the revolution. Only when the decision of purchasing submarines went to the Congress did Lake succeed in selling the USS *Seal* to the U.S. Navy. This vessel was 161 feet in length and displaced over 400 tons. It housed a crew of 24 men and was commissioned on 28 Oct 1912. Lake cited his inspiration for working on submarine design from reading *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* at the age of eleven.

The Stratemeyer-owned serial paper story, "Holland the Destroyer; or, American Against the World" *Golden Hours* (24 Nov 1900 - 12 Jan 1901) by "Hal Harkaway" sets up an improbable situation where in the middle 1930s the other nations of the world become so jealous of the United States that they all attack to reclaim their former colonies. By this time, the U.S. Navy had purchased nine submarines from John P. Holland. The hero of the stories goes to the U.S. Government and promises to deliver a new generation of submarine. They accept and work is begun on the vessel which is to be called the Holland X because it is the tenth submarine in the U.S. Fleet. The submarine is captained by its inventor, Oscar Pelham, who uses it to sneak under enemy vessels and attach timed explosives, called "torpedoes."

Stratemeyer certainly had ample opportunity to be aware of Simon Lake since they were both living in northern New Jersey. Simon Lake had become a full-time inventor by the age of sixteen, the same approximate age that Tom Swift began to spend all of his time working on inventions. The Tom Swift series was written by Howard R. Garis for Stratemeyer based on short outlines supplied by the latter. Garis and Stratemeyer were close friends and they worked together probably as early as 1904 but certainly by 1906. Garis was paid \$75 to complete a **Tom Swift** manuscript. Before this, however, Garis had been writing early volumes in two series, the **Motor Boys** and the **Great Marvel** series, both published by Cupples & Leon under the "Clarence Young" and the "Roy Rockwood" names, respectively.



Motor Boys in the Clouds (Cupples & Leon, 1910) by "Clarence Young" (Howard R. Garis)



***Under the Ocean to the South Pole* (Cupples & Leon, 1907), the second volume in the Great Marvel series by "Roy Rockwood" (Howard R. Garis)**

The **Motor Boys** series described the adventures of three boys, Ned, Bob, and Jerry and their fascination with any vehicle propelled by a motor. One of the last volumes in this series described their adventures in a submarine.

The **Great Marvel** series was a collection of Verne-like travel adventures to remote corners of the world and to the Moon and other planets published under the "Roy Rockwood" name. The early volumes were written by Garis while later volumes were completed by other ghostwriters for Stratemeyer. The first volume is called *Through the Air to the North Pole* (Cupples & Leon, 1906). The second volume is *Under the Ocean to the South Pole* (Cupples & Leon, 1907).

In the second volume, Garis describes a peace time submarine voyage with the obligatory giant squid attack. The weapons used against the beast are similar to those described in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* and *The Wizard of the Sea*.

In spite of their fears at venturing out under the great ocean, the two boys were anxious to try the suits. So, after some hesitation, they donned them.

"Here, take these with you," said the professor, before their helmet were screwed on. He held out what looked like long sticks.

"What are they?" asked Jack.

"Electric guns," replied the professor. "But come on now, we have no time to lose."

Further conversation was impossible, for the boys had their heavy copper helmets on, and they were as

tightly enclosed as if inside a box. They grasped their weapons and waited for the next move.

[*Under the Ocean to the South Pole* (Cupples & Leon, 1907), chapter VIII, pp 62-63]

Suddenly the boys felt the professor grasping their arms. They looked in the direction he pointed. There in the diffused glare from the search light and the illumination of their helmet lamps they saw, wrapped about the forward shaft opening a gigantic squid or devil fish. Its soft, jelly-like body completely covered the opening of the shaft preventing any water from entering and thus stopping any forward motion to the ship.

This what had cause all the trouble. The Porpoise had run into the monster, who feeling what it must have thought an enemy, had grasped the submarine with its long sinuous arms.

The professor hesitated a moment. Then he slowly raised his electrical gun, and took aim at the hideous mass. The boys followed his example. At Mr. Henderson's signal they all fired together.

From the muzzles of the guns darted small barbs that carried with them a strong shock of electricity, from storage batteries in the shoulder pieces of the weapons. Three of them were enough to produce death in an animal as large as a whale.

[*Under the Ocean to the South Pole* (Cupples & Leon, 1907), chapter VIII, p 65]

A few years later, Stratemeyer commissioned Garis to



***Tom Swift and His Airship* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1910) by "Victor Appleton" (Howard R. Garis)**

write the **Tom Swift** series. This series about a boy inventor drew story ideas from many sources. In terms of the aviation aspects, Tom Swift resembled Glenn Hammond Curtiss (1878-1930), who set both aviation records and a land speed record on a specially designed motorcycle. The first two volumes of the series describe how Tom comes into the possession of a motorcycle and a motorboat and how he improves them and uses them in the course of a story. At the end of the second volume, Tom saves an aeronaut from a burning balloon. The aeronaut claims to have viable plans for an airship which they build in the third volume of the series, *Tom Swift and His Airship* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1910). The airship is a combination of an aeroplane and a dirigible balloon, a design which had been described in *Scientific American* as early as 1905.

Tom's father, Barton Swift, also an inventor, could not accompany Tom and his friends on the inaugural flight of the *Red Cloud* because he was working on a submarine for a U.S. Government competition. In the fourth volume of the series, Tom helps his father complete the vessel, called the *Advance*. After learning of a recently sunk ship carrying a large sum of gold, they abandon their plans for the Navy trials and go after the treasure. Their competitors catch wind of this and chase after them. At one point, the rival submarine collides with the *Advance*:

"Rammed us!" repeated Mr. Swift. "Tom, run out the electric cannon! They're trying to sink us! We'll have to fight them. Run out the stern electric gun and we'll make them wish they'd not followed us!"
[chapter XVII, p 148]

"What is this electric gun your father speaks of?"
"Why, it's a regular electric cannon. It fires a solid ball, weighing about twenty-five pounds, but instead of powder which would hardly do under water, and instead of compressed air, which is used in torpedo tubes of the Government submarines, we use a current of electricity. It forces the cannon ball out with great energy."

"I wonder what they will do next?" observed the captain, peering through a bull's-eye.

...
The electric cannon was a long, steel tube in the after part of the submarine. It projected a slight distance from the sides of the ship, and by an ingenious arrangement could be swung around in a ball and socket joint, thus enabling it to shoot in almost any direction.

It was the work of but a few minutes to get it ready and, with the muzzle pointing toward the *Wonder*, Tom adjusted the electric wires and inserted the solid shot.
..... "Now were prepared for them!" he cried.

...
"They're certainly at it again!" cried Tom, and peering from the bull's-eye he saw the *Wonder* shoot past mouth of the electric cannon. "Here it goes!" he added.
He shoved over the lever, making the proper connec-

tion. There was no corresponding report, for the cannon was noiseless, but there was a slight jar as the projectile left the muzzle. The *Wonder* could be seen to heel over.

"You hit her! You hit her!" cried Captain Weston.

[*Tom Swift and His Submarine Boat* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1910), chapter XVIII, pp 148-153]

The usage of an "electric gun" in *Under the Ocean to the South Pole* (1906) and an "electric cannon" in *Tom Swift and His Submarine Boat* (1910) can hardly be a coincidence. Both stories were written by Howard R. Garis for Stratemeyer. One of Tom Swift's best-remembered inventions was his "electric rifle" which was introduced in *Tom Swift in the Caves of Ice* (1911) while still under development. It was fully described in *Tom Swift and His Electric Rifle* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1911).

"How does it work?" asked Ned, as he looked at the curious gun. The electric weapon was not unlike an ordinary heavy rifle in appearance, save that the barrel was a little longer, and the stock larger in every way. There were also a number of wheels, levers, gears and gages on the stock.

"It works by electricity," explained Tom. "That is, the force comes from a powerful current of stored electricity."

"Oh, then you have storage batteries in the stock?"

"Not exactly. There are no batteries, but the current is a sort of wireless kind. It is stored in a cylinder, just as compressed air or gasses are stored, and it can be released as I need it."

"And when it is all gone what do you do?"

"Make more power by means of a small dynamo."

"And does it shoot lead bullets?"

"Not at all. There are no bullets used."

"Then how does it kill?"

"By means of a concentrated charge of electricity which is shot from the barrel with great force. You can't see it, yet it is there. It's just as if you concentrated a charge of electricity of five thousand volts into a small globule the size of a bullet. That flies through space, strikes the object aimed at and—well, we'll see what it does in a minute. Mr. Jackson, just put that steel plate up in front of the scarecrow; will you?"

[*Tom Swift and His Electric Rifle* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1911), chapter II, pp 16-17]

This story was written around the same time as the publication of Teddy Roosevelt's (1858-1919) descriptions of hunting called *African Game Trails* (two volumes, Scribners, 1910). In this volume, game animals are slaughtered by the dozen without much reason other than the sport of it. Stratemeyer was an admirer of Roosevelt and had written a biography of him in earlier years, *The American Boys' Life of Theodore Roosevelt* (Lee & Shepard, 1904). The **Tom Swift** story and the later **Don Sturdy** series (1925-1935) try to make the

animal killings seem justified since the animals attacked the heroes, but the primary reason for going to Africa with the electric rifle is to hunt elephants for their tusks. The **Don Sturdy** series, also written under the “Victor Appleton” name continues this theme which is uncomfortable for many modern readers.

The electric rifle concept inspired a modern inventor to create a non-lethal stun gun called a TASER. The inventor, revealed that he had read the Tom Swift books as a boy and named his device after the boy inventor. Thus “TASER” is an acronym for “Thomas A. Swift and His Electric Rifle.” As Verne inspired Simon Lake to develop a practical modern submarine, the Tom Swift books inspired Jack Cover to develop the TASER in 1976. The TASER shoots out barbed needles with electrical wires attached. When the barbed needles strike their target, a 50,000 volt discharge disables the target. This device received notoriety when it failed to subdue Rodney King in his infamous traffic stop.

The description of this device is more closely associated with the devices in *Under the Ocean to the South Pole* (1907) rather than its namesake, *Tom Swift and His Electric Rifle* (1911). Perhaps the inventor was unclear as to which of his childhood books gave him the idea for the device or maybe he felt that the Tom Swift name attached to it would increase sales. In any event, it is clear that Howard R. Garis’ writing for the Stratemeyer Syndicate, for he wrote both stories, directly influenced the creation of this invention.



The Air TASER, invented by Jack Cover and named after *Tom Swift and His Electric Rifle* shoots out two barbed darts and discharges a high-voltage jolt similar to the underwater guns in *Under the Ocean to the South Pole*.

In the same way, it could be said that Jules Verne “invented” Tom Swift’s Electric Rifle as well as the modern submarine and science fiction as we know it today.