

Hell hath no fury like a Spectre scorned ... as the Ghostly Guardian is about to demonstrate by leaping into another fierce fray from which only he will emerge unscathed.

Hank dropped the newspaper he was reading and spun around from his desk to face the green-garbed figure standing behind him. A moment before, he had been alone in that room. The door was still locked from the inside. How had the stranger gotten in?

"Who are you?" he forced himself to speak, though his hands were trembling, his forehead dotted with beads of perspiration.

The apparition stood perfectly still, its billowing green cape flowing to the floor, its cloak casting a shroud of darkness over the colorless face, from which shone two white slits, eyes totally devoid of mercy or humanity.

"Men call me ... the Spectre!" This must be the guy that got Charlie! thought Hank. Two days before, Hank and his partner had pulled an armored car robbery, killing three policemen in the process. Then, last night, Charlie had phoned him, screaming something about being pursued by a 'spook'—a dead thing that bullets could not kill. Twenty minutes later, Charlie was killed when his car went over a cliff on a deserted mountain road.



A Spectre Is Born: This cover from MORE FUN COMICS #52 (1940) heralded the first appearance of the green-caped avenger, in a tale written by Jerry Siegel and illustrated by Bernard Bailey.

Now Hank was face-to-face with the Spectre. His trembling fingers closed around the stock of the sub-machine gun in his drawer. He aimed the weapon at the shadowy figure's chest.

DC reprinted the origin of The Spectre in SECRET ORIGINS #5, as Jim Corrigan's spirit floats skyward where, after a brief conference with the powers that be (in this case God), he is transformed into The Spectre. Though he's spent many years in retirement since his creation in 1940, the Disembodied Detective has refused to die.



Though undoubtedly Comicdom's most ruthless and awesome avenger of evil, The Spectre has enjoyed what may best be described as a checkered career in his 35 years in the four-color world of the comics. An invincible superhero sans mercy or limits, the Spectre has probably sent more sneering villains to their graves, and via more imaginative and ghastly routes, than any of his comic page peers. Here to recount the horrific history of the Ghostly Guardian is Spectre scholar Frank Verzyl, who begins his biography herewith ...

# THE SPECTRE RETURNS

BY FRANK VERZYL

"You're not gonna get me, ya crummy spook. I'll kill ya!" "But you can't kill me, Hank. You see, I am already dead." The words echoed and resounded in the small dingy office, a voice from beyond the grave. Hank was paralyzed with fear; he could not pull the trigger while those glaring orbs burned into his brain. He could only sit and gape,

and await his doom. "What're you doin' here? What do you want???"

"I want to sleep forever in a nice, warm grave, Hank. I want the everlasting peace that is rightfully mine, but the stench of evil men like you will not let me rest!"

The Spectre gestured at the seated criminal, a mere wave of his hand, and the barrel of the machine gun sortened and drooped, like an ice cream cone left out in the sun. When the entire gun had liquified and run like water through the gunman's hands, the killer stared in horror as his own hands began to melt, his fingers dripping liquid flesh. His eyes bulged with terror as he felt his entire body softening, his atomic structure altering.

"What's happening to me? PLEASE! Don't make me melt like this!! PLEASE!!!"

A piercing scream rent the air, as Hank's entire skeletal structure disintegrated into powder, leaving only a quivering, pulsating mass of gelatin, cartilage, and liquid flesh, hardly identifiable as a human being. A thin smile played across the Spectre's face as he watched Hank's remains ooze over the edge of the chair and form a steaming puddle on the rug. Another evil-doer had fallen victim to ... the Wrath of the Spectre!

## DEAD AND WELL

The SPECTRE—Awesome Avenger of Evil, an earthbound ghost who punishes evil with a fearsome vengeance from beyond the grave. So writer Mike Fleischer describes him. The SPECTRE—his very gaze can kill. Truly a master of men, he bends and shapes reality to suit his purposes. His mortal body dead, he is denied everlasting peace until he has abolished crime on Earth. A seemingly impossible task, you say? But ... is anything impossible for the Spectre?

Spectre fans rejoiced when National Periodicals announced their plans to revive the disembodied detective in 1974, giving him top billing in ADVENTURE COMICS. For months, the powers-that-be at DC had searched for a strip good enough to revive their readers' waning interest in the mag, which is now entering its 35th year of publication. Sales figures were dropping,

YOUR MISSION ON EARTH IS UNFINISHED... YOU SHALL REMAIN EARTHBOUND BATTLING CRIME ON YOUR WORLD WITH SUPERNATURAL POWERS, UNTIL ALL VESTIGES OF IT ARE GONE!!

BUT I DON'T WANT TO RETURN TO EARTH! I WANT ETERNAL PEACE! I...

With understandable reluctance, Jim Corrigan receives instructions from above to return to Earth and battle the forces of evil in this panel from The Spectre's origin story.

as feature after feature met with cancellation. Then Editor Joe Orlando decided to bring back the Spectre, not reprints, mind you, but all-new adventures of the Spirit Sleuth. Taking into consideration the Spectre's long history of cancellations, this decision seemed a risky one. But success was insured when Orlando placed the strip into the hands of two capable men like Mike Fleischer and Jim Aparo, two top talents in the National bullpen.

The Spectre was created way back in 1940 by Jerry Siegel and Bernard Bailey (the creator of Hourman). The Ghostly Guardian first appeared in MORE FUN COMICS #52 (February 1940) and was featured on the cover. The first story, entitled simply "The Spectre," supplied him with an origin unlike that of any of his predecessors, for in order to become the Spectre, he had to undergo a process that no other superhero had to experience—he had to be murdered.

## ORIGIN OF THE SPECTRE

When Detective Jim Corrigan foiled a



robbery at the Westmore Warehouse and captured the thieves single-handedly, he was marked for death by Gat Benson, leader of the mob. Corrigan and his fiancée Clarice Winston were kidnapped by Gat and his men and taken to an abandoned warehouse on a pier. While Clarice was dragged into an adjoining room, the thugs encased Corrigan in a barrel of cement and dumped him into the Hudson River. Corrigan's mortal remains rested amid the sand and seaweed of the river bed, but his spirit was drawn spaceward.

Regaining consciousness at the Gates of Heaven, Corrigan realized he had died and tried to enter the realm of eternal peace. Then he heard the Voice and learned his destiny. "Jim Corrigan, your mission on Earth is unfinished. You shall remain earthbound, battling crime on your world with supernatural powers until all vestiges of it are gone." Before he could protest, he was teleported back to Earth.

He was soon to discover the frightening extent of the awesome powers that were his to command in his ethereal form. He could become invisible and walk through walls, defy gravity and levitate objects regardless of their size or weight. He could shrink to the size of an atom, or grow as large as the Universe itself. He could alter his body into any conceivable shape or state and transform matter, mystically rearranging an object's atomic structure. He could hypnotize, read minds, foretell the future, and communicate with the spirits of the dead. But his most god-like power was his ability to kill simply by staring into the eyes of his victim, or by giving him the "touch of death."

Truly the Spectre was the personification of Death; he acted as Fate's servant, taking the lives of those whose time had run out. Jim Corrigan had become all-powerful, invincible, immortal. Yet his ghostly form retained all of the properties of his mortal shell; not even his closest friends could tell he was a ghost. (The only giveaway was the fact that he did not breathe.)

Returning to the warehouse where he had met his death, Corrigan's spirit form arrived just in time to save Clarice from a similar fate. He projected gruesome illusions of death into the minds of Gat Benson and his men, causing them to go insane.

Later, Corrigan broke off his engagement to Clarice. "I love Clarice as much as ever, but I am no longer of this earth. I have no right to marry a human being." Corrigan then created a green & white costume and adopted a new identity—that of the Spectre! Perhaps the most unique aspect of the Spectre was that he could become both identities simultaneously. While working on a case in New York as Jim Corrigan (he still held his job with the police force), his Spectre self could be halfway around the world, involved in a totally different situation.

In a later story, the Spectre was given permission to retrieve his mortal body from the river, restore it to life, and use it as a shell for his spirit self. Corrigan and his Spectre self were merged at times but remained two separate entities, each one independent of the other.

By this time, World War II was on, and Jim Corrigan joined the army to fight for his country. Simultaneously, the Spectre lost interest in his war against crime and decided to go abroad and take on the Axis powers. His later adventures abound with tyrants, Nazi saboteurs and insidious Orientals.

The Spectre was also featured in **ALL-STAR COMICS**; at first in solo adventures, then later as a member of the Justice Society of America, together with Flash, Dr. Fate, Green Lantern, Hourman, Sandman, and the rest of DC's Golden Age greats. He appeared in **ALL-STAR** issues 1 through 23, after which he was dropped from the JSA lineup.

His own strip in **MORE FUN COMICS** lasted exactly five years. His last appearance was in #101 (February 1945), when the strip was cancelled.

#### THE SPECTRE AWAKES

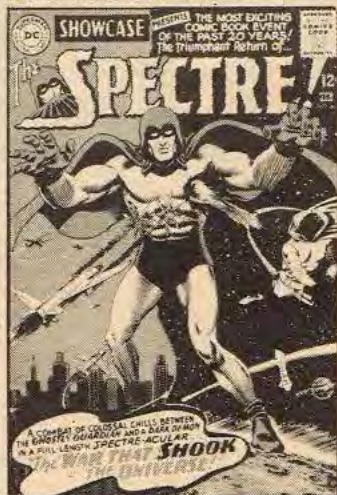
Twenty-one years later, National revived the series by featuring all-new Spectre stories in **SHOWCASE**, a title that served as DC's testing ground for new series. **SHOWCASE #60** (February 1966) boasted "the triumphant return of the Spectre." The story, entitled "The War That Shook the Universe," was written by Gardner Fox, and was continued in **SHOWCASE #61's** "Beyond the Sinister Barrier." This time around, the art chores were handled by



A trio of evildoers meet separate but equally grisly fates at the ethereal hands of The Spectre. Victim #1 was turned to wood and vivisected by a buzz saw; victim #2 died of instant old age; and victim #3 was transformed into a mannikin and burned. Forgiveness is not one of The Spectre's stronger virtues.

Murphy Anderson.

Gardner Fox's plots were much more complex than the Golden Age yarns of two decades before. He even attempted to explain the Spectre's absence between 1945 and 1966 (an astral being known as Azmodus had caused him to remain trapped inside Jim Corrigan's body, but with the aid of a magic spell the Spectre finally managed to overcome). But Fox changed the whole feel of the strip ... while the Golden Age stories pitted the Grim Guardian against the underworld in pulp-like yarns, Fox, no doubt influenced by the popularity of Marvel's **DR. STRANGE** series, expanded the strip to cosmic proportions. Now the Spectre



The Spectre has undergone many changes in his long history as a comic book superhero. At DC, writer Gardner Fox and artist Murphy Anderson often had him battling outer space evils, and otherwise deviated from the old image of The Spectre with tales like "The War That Shook the Universe" in **THE SPECTRE #60** (1966).

fought super-villains capable of destroying the Earth on a whim. And the setting of his adventures? No longer the streets of a

crime-ridden city or the battlefields of war-torn Europe, but outer space, different ages, and weird dimensions. The Spectre was soon transformed into just another superhero in the DC line-up, National's answer to **DR. STRANGE**.

In December 1967, the Spectre got his own magazine, due to the success of his **SHOWCASE** appearances. The title lasted 10 issues and underwent an incredible succession of changes before it was cancelled in 1969. Gardner Fox and Mike Friedrich were the series' most consistent writers, while artists Murphy Anderson, Neal Adams, Jerry Grandenetti, Jack Sparling, and even Berni Wrightson did their best to keep the series alive. Some issues featured book-length tales, while others contained 3 or 4 short stories. During this time, the Spectre was putting in guest appearances in many other DC magazines. With issue #9, Julius Schwartz turned the editorship over to Dick Giordano, but not even he could prevent the Spectre's discontinuation. Cancelled a second time, the Spectre seemed destined never to see print again.

Now, five years later, National has revived the Astral Avenger a third time, in a strip of his own, **ADVENTURE COMICS #431** (February 1974) featured the return of the Spectre in a tale entitled "Wrath of the Spectre," not the Gardner Fox-Spectre, but one much more faithful to the Golden Age version. Mike Fleischer's Spectre is angry, vengeful and merciless. In fact, he borders on the bizarre and the bestial. No longer does he hover between galaxies, fighting astral beings and super-villains. Fleischer's Spectre is terrifyingly real, a true avenger of evil, a hunter of men, taking the lives of criminals with no show of pity or remorse.

Mike Fleischer, a relatively new talent in the comics field, started last year at National scripting horror stories for their mystery titles, stories that abound with grue and gore in the old EC style.

Artist Jim Aparo originally worked for Charlton Comics, later making the move to DC to work on the Batman strip in **DETECTIVE COMICS** and **BRAVE & THE BOLD**, as well as a few Aquaman stories, at least a dozen issues of the **PHANTOM STRANGER**, several westerns, and a host of horror stories. Over the past 5 years, Aparo has worked his way to the top, and

today is considered one of the most capable artists in the field. His style fits Fleischer's Spectre perfectly.

#### WRATH OF THE SPECTRE

"Wrath of the Spectre" relates the Spectre's hunt for three killers involved in an armored car robbery in which innocent lives were taken. One by one, the Ethereal Avenger tracks them down and mercilessly dispatches them. He finally catches up with the leader of the mob on a jet bound for South America. Before the eyes of the startled passengers, and in the space of a single heartbeat, the crimelord is transformed into a grisly skeleton, a swaying pyramid of bones that clatters to the floor and shatters into calcium fragments and tiny bits of cartilage.

Three successive adventures rapidly followed: "The Anguish of the Spectre" (**ADVENTURE COMICS #432**, April 1974), "The Swami & The Spectre" (May 1974) and "The Nightmare Dummies Vs. The Spectre" (July 1974). In these four stories alone, the Spectre claimed the lives of nine criminals, each death gruesome and unique.

Yet, as awesome and intriguing as the Spectre may be, he still lacks something that is obviously considered an essential element in the character of a comic book superhero: a weakness. The majority of the super-beings who populate the pages of the comics are as vulnerable to death as you and I; they can be shot, stabbed, poisoned, killed in a fall, etc. Batman falls into this category. The more invincible characters usually have one specific weakness: Superman must avoid the element Kryptonite, fire can kill J'Onzz, the color yellow nullifies the effect of the Green Lantern's power ring, and so on. Yet the Spectre has no weakness; he is invincible and immortal. He cannot be killed because he is already dead.

The question is this: Can the adventures of a totally invincible character continue to be interesting? Where is the suspense when the reader knows the hero can't be killed, or even harmed? In all four of the aforementioned stories, not once is the Spectre in any kind of danger. When a criminal is cornered by the Spectre, he can't release a trap door beneath the feet of his foe, nor can he whip out an object that has a particularly strange effect on the do-gooder. He must simply stand there and accept the inevitability of Death.

Only once, and very briefly at that, did the Spectre have a weakness. In **THE SPECTRE #8** (1969), an angered God inflicted the Spectre with blindness to punish him for almost having killed an innocent man. But the Spectre's sight was restored by story's end and never again



Spectre freaks were shocked at seeing The Spectre afflicted with a temporary weakness in **THE SPECTRE #8** (1969). The Spectre was equally shocked at not seeing anything at all. By story's end, however, his sight was restored and the Ghostly Guardian returned to being his same old avenging, invincible self.

was he to suffer from any such affliction. The Spectre's lack of a weakness can only be seen as a negative factor when contemplating the future success of the strip.

Aside from this, however, the series is one of the best currently being produced at National. The scripts are all well-written, the artwork top-notch. Using Alex Nino's **Captain Fear** strip as a back-up feature, Joe Orlando has really put **ADVENTURE COMICS** back on its superheroic feet again.

Yes, there's no denying that the Spectre is back. And this time it looks as if he's here to stay. Of course, only time—and sales figures—will tell. That's one future not even the Spectre himself can foresee.