THE COMIX SECTION

A STOP BUTTON ZINE

SPRING 2025 NO. 1 SIDE 1

WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES VOL. 1

JUNE 2 - DECEMBER 29, 1940

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THE SPIRIT
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

There's a story behind **The Comix Section** but I'm not going to write about it yet. This first issue has had some ups and downs as far as coming together and I've either been injured or having something medical going on the entire time. And the story behind it requires some thought, which isn't to say this author's note won't have some thought, but I cannot promise editing.

Instead, I'll be talking—briefly, I assume—about why **Comix Section** isn't just a series of posts on **The Stop Button**, or some relaunch of **Comics Fondle** or even a launch of something called **Comix Section**. Why is it a PDF zine? Why is it a PDF zine weighing in at approximately 1.2 GB?

Sorry, I didn't know size. I still don't since this note goes in the "front cover."

CS is a zine because I wanted to drop it all at once. Or, all at once, while in distinct pieces. This volume of **Comix Section** has twenty-seven issues, which may take as long as five months to get out the door. I was shooting for three months to be quarterly, but we shall see. **Comix Section** is happening amid a lot, which has stayed rather outside because I've been doing this type of writing for twenty years.

That anniversary is ironic (I'm pretty sure, I'm not checking), but I'm not talking about why yet. Because I'd have to think about it, and I'm feeling very much like Gene Evans in **Park Row** in terms of going to press. Meaning, unlike the contents of this zine, I'm not proofing this note.

Andrew Wickliffe, 14 April 2025

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NOTES ON FORMATTING

The Comix Section's ideal reading format is a saddle-stitched flip zine. Saddle-stitching is beyond my current technology, but I'm going to try with a stapler tomorrow.

It should be read in color, obviously. The art's in color, it should be read in color.

There are four flavors of **CS #1**. **First version**: 1 and Side 2 in order, with Side 2's cover coming in the (approximate) middle of the PDF. **Second version**: Side 2 to Side 1, for those who love icky seventies writing. Or love to read someone talk smack about icky seventies writing. **Third version**: Side 1 and Side 2 separate.

Versions 1-3 are available in uncompressed (as much as it can be) PDF and CBZ, then a compressed PDF and CBZ. So many options.

Fourth version is a printable, color PDF. I'm exploring a black and white PDF, but the images convert something awful and they need to look better without color in print.

Though, like I said, I don't know yet how it prints in color either.

All versions are available for download at https://thestopbutton.com/cs.



"The Origin of the Spirit"

June 2, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Zoltan Szenics (letters)

The Spirit ends his first adventure leaving three burning questions unanswered. First, why is he remaining officially dead—we'll loop back—second, why doesn't he think everyone will recognize his blue suit, and, third, how does he have those little tombstone calling cards carved already.

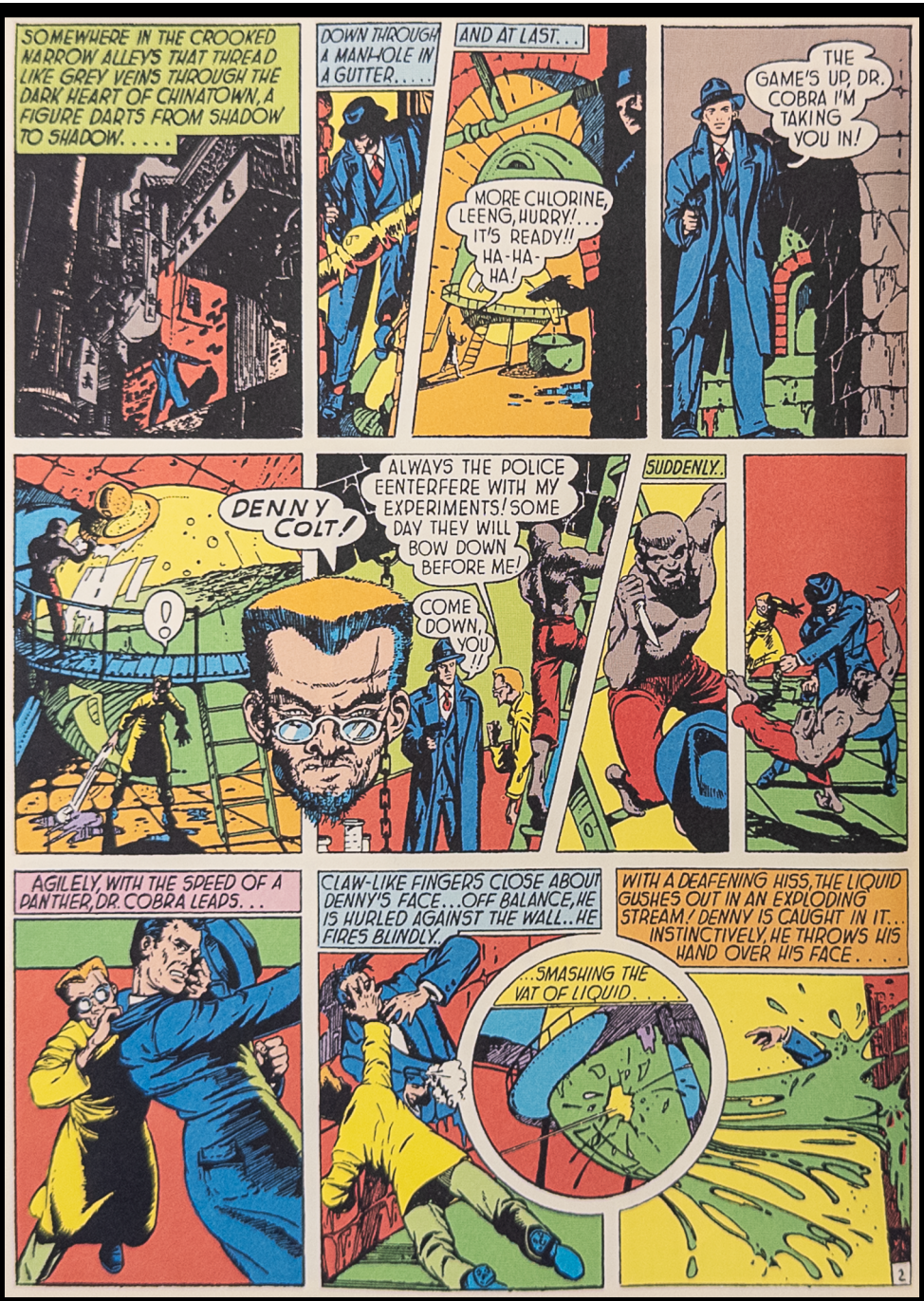
The strip—**Spirit** dropped as a weekly newspaper special—has thirties illustration sensibilities, almost PG-13 dialogue (as newspaper audiences include more teens and adults than a regular comic book), and sublime stage direction. Eisner doesn't waste any panels, big or small (the Spirit's resurrection is in extreme long shot in a small panel), but also saves some composition wows for the third act. Sure, Spirit is fighting escaped criminally insane Eastern European mad scientists with racist caricature henchmen, but the visuals of the showdown are pure noir (Technicolor noir?) fisticuffs. It's hard boiled hero stuff, even as the Spirit—despite being in it, at this point, for the money and not having to pay taxes—is a bit of a lug, especially for a vigilante.

This first strip introduces the Spirit (Denny Colt before death, just "The Spirit" after), police commissioner Dolan (who knows the Spirit's identity and approves of that plan to be a vigilante), and, in a one panel cameo, Spirit's future sidekick, Ebony White. Ebony's a cabbie; he doesn't get a name here. Ebony's a young Black man. The caricature is horrific. The villain—Dr. Cobra—has the Asian bruiser sidekick and it's a bit. Ebony's a lot.

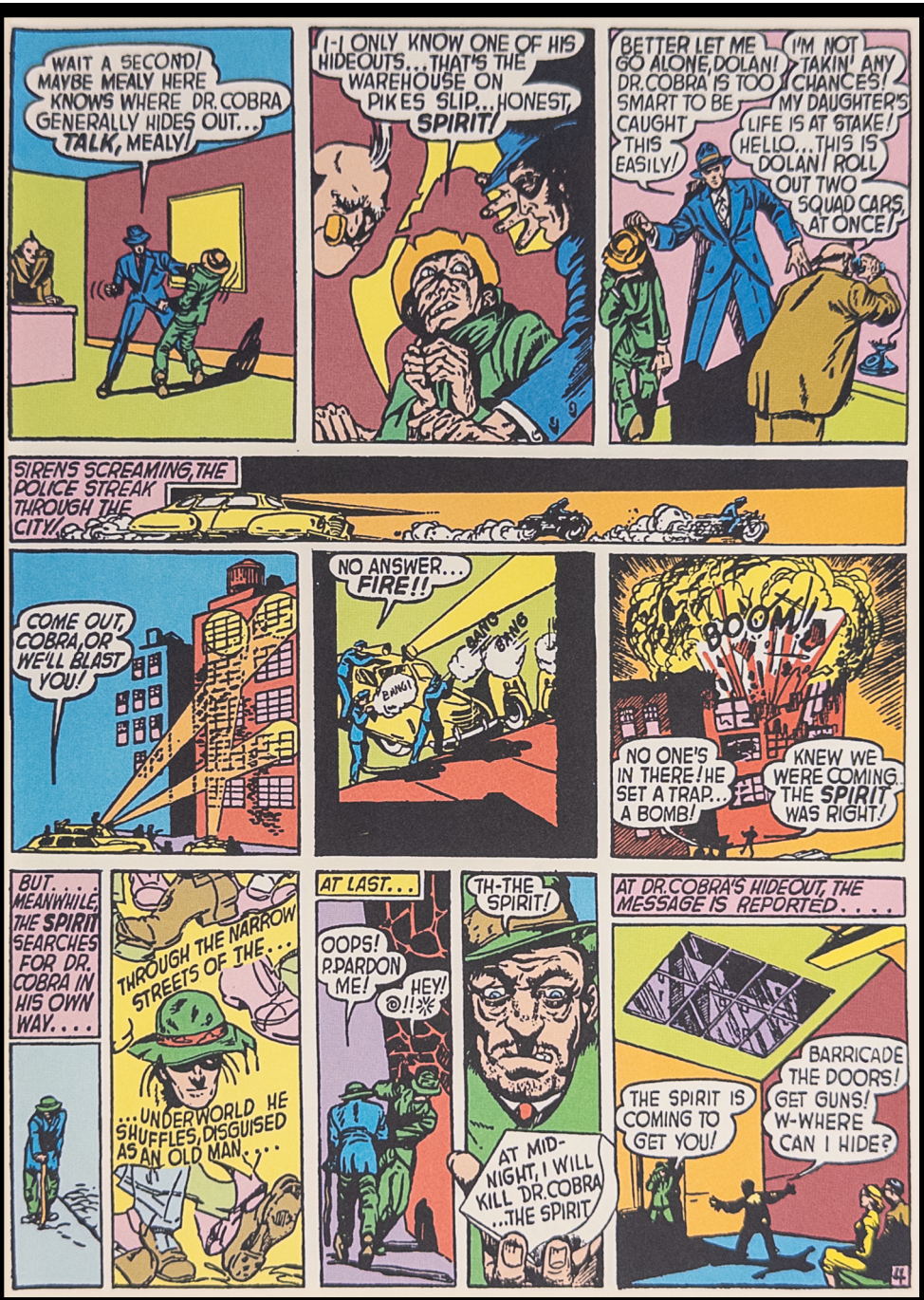
And it's just a panel (albeit observed with foreknowledge). But imagine how big a panel on the newsprint. **Spirit**'s greatest boon—being read with more potential detail—also can spotlight its unfortunates.

Bad, worse, good, mid, sublime, inspired, and genius—**The Spirit** has them all. Eisner (and his studio) deliver a visually compelling, narratively engaging comic spectacle. The exposition ranges from flat to purple, but the movement—and the movement's framing—is truly exceptional work.

Even if the exposition doesn't help, there are smarts to the plotting. For example, the two best visual sequences are Spirit's showdowns with Cobra. He's either had a jovial or moody setup



"THE ORIGIN OF THE SPIRIT" (JUNE 2, 1940), PAGE 2
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"THE RETURN OF DR. COBRA" (JUNE 9, 1940), PAGE 4
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).

for the showdown, then Eisner delivers the action goods. Vats of chemicals, henchmen, escape boats in the backgrounds and foregrounds, big and small parts of the action, and full of deeper implication. It's mood implication, though, not exposited.

Anyway.

The Spirit's off to a great start. Just hold onto your (blue) hat on the proverbial cab ride.

• • •

"The Return of Dr. Cobra"

June 9, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Zoltan Szenics (letters)

The strip opens with Spirit dropping into Ebony's cab. Literally, from a tree. Spirit then pulls a gun on Ebony, demanding a ride to town, while the passengers—Homer Creap and Ellen Dolan—sit terrified.

Ellen's in town to visit her dad, the regular cast member Commissioner Dolan, and to introduce him to her fiancé, Homer.

Homer Creap.

They're both nerds in glasses and Homer's got buck teeth. Eisner's not being subtle for the cheap seats. Is it worse than Ebony? No. Even with discovering the Easter egg of unconscious Ellen's side booby at some point, no, still not worse than Ebony in his handful of panels.

Ellen's also going to help returning villain Dr. Cobra escape because she's got book smarts not street smarts. She's a psychology major and Dolan lets her tour the ward. Cobra knows a couple marks when he sees them and convinces them to help him get out. He then takes them hostage, which sets Spirit on his trail.

We get Spirit's tombstone calling cards again. While the cops do big action sequences in small, beautiful panels, Spirit goes undercover on the street and passes them out. The cards say he's going to kill Dr. Cobra at midnight.

Action cuts to Dr. Cobra's at midnight, Spirit shows up to kick ass. At that point the strip becomes a glorious chase sequence through the city, with Cobra and Spirit pausing occasionally for a beautifully rendered action beat.

After that creative high, the strip needs to bring things back down to Earth for the finale, which has Spirit taking off Ellen's "ugly" glasses, letting her hair down, and revealing her to be a hot



chick. He and Homer then fight over who gets to kiss her first (Spirit as reward for saving her, Homer with the buck teeth because she's finally on that social capital level).

Might not have been the best time to be a lady. Just saying. Because, remember, this one's in the newspaper so the target readership includes the ladies.

If you can subtract the 1940, it's sublime. And—shudder—the 1940… could be worse.

• • •

"The Black Queen"

June 16, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Zoltan Szenics (letters)



The first panel sets up everything in the strip (save formal cast additions)—mobster Grogan on trial for murder, defended by "The Black Queen," his lawyer, and a side item about the school district running out of money for lunches.

Grogan gets off (with implications of a fixed jury), and Spirit drops by to ask him for a donation to the school lunches. Now, Spirit has just interrupted Grogan and Black Queen talking business… she's more than his lawyer, it's her mob and he's her proxy. Spirit either just missed that disclosure upon sneaking in, or he was too distracted, or he didn't think it warranted comment.

He will go out of his way to get a look at Black Queen in her undergarments because the strip's got a lot of implied misogyny. Can't trust dame lawyers.

Also, let's get this one done, too—Ebony gets his full name and hired on as Spirit's sidekick. His assignment goes from being a cabbie to holding a gun on the coroner, the district attorney, Grogan, and Black Queen. For a criminologist, Spirit has a profoundly confusing understanding of the criminal justice system. Perhaps they're in a universe without double jeopardy, in which case Spirit's plan isn't to torture and extort Grogan, or they are in a universe with double jeopardy and it is Spirit's plan to torture and extort him.

It's strange either way, and the action all seems toned down. Lots of longer scenes to get out dialogue, normal length chase scenes. There's still some lovely composition, but it plays like the opening newspaper headings exposition device is the strip's most significant success and,



"THE BLACK QUEEN" (JUNE 16, 1940), PAGE 6
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"VOODOO IN MANHATTAN" (JUNE 23, 1940), PAGE 6
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).

upon making the hit, Eisner and studio coasted a bit.

The last panel has Spirit and Ebony heading to the Wildwood Cemetery—where Denny Colt was buried in the first strip and Spirit's been hiding out since (doesn't he miss plumbing?)—and the moment's from Ebony's perspective. They have a little banter and… well, the Spirit's a weird dude.

Maybe on purpose, maybe not. Even as the dialogue and exposition improve this strip—Eisner (or whoever) realized the art doesn't need a lot of words slowing it down—the Spirit gets a little more distant. Eisner hasn't decided how to position the reader with the Spirit yet. This strip tries some things, but doesn't have room to evaluate them.



Maybe next time.

• • •

"Voodoo in Manhattan"

June 23, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

The strip opens with Ebony and a lodge brother in Wildwood Cemetery looking for the Spirit. They find him, appearing out of smoke, and request his assistance--their lodge building seems to be haunted, can Spirit investigate? After some whinging, the Spirit agrees. The scene reveals some of the Spirit's setup at his underground crypt lair. Just stairs and a chemical lab, but it's something.

The Spirit misses the lodge meeting and arrives afterwards so he can investigate without anyone around. The lodge meeting—a secret society supporting Black orphans, which makes no sense—isn't great—lots of racist caricatures.

The Spirit showing up to investigate works much better, even with the panels leading up to it. He spirits (no pun) Ebony away from a lodge brother, which leads to a "running away" gag. Eisner and studio open with scary cemetery stuff, move into "comedy" with lodge meeting, and then into an action strip.

It doesn't take much investigating for the Spirit to uncover the culprits. Spirit's got to punch his way out of a couple tough situations, finding the Harlem mansion full of secret rooms and underground water tanks.

The water tank's especially important because we get the Spirit out of his shirt for the last few pages of the strip, showcasing the beefcake

(which, it turns out, is a very cold way to go around).

The exposition is a little purpler than last time; it's mostly for mood and works. The action is pretty contained, some fisticuffs, breaking through walls and floors in the mansion, plus the water tank sequence.

The resolution with the villain leaves some questions unanswered. Spirit has his theory of the case, and nothing exactly contradicts him, but because it's so rushed, motive questions go unanswered.

Given the constraints of setting and scope, the strip does an excellent job showing how **The Spirit** can do big things in a small story.

• • •

"Johnny Marston"

June 30, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

Johnny Marston's splash panel has a short blurb explaining the Spirit's origin—of note because it's a strip standard from now on. It's also the first strip where the Spirit stumbles into an ongoing adventure.

Johnny Marston is a blue-blood fallen on hard times. Dad gambled away all the money, now Johnny's wife is deathly ill and he can't afford to get her out west, where the dry air will save her. With their last thirty bucks (not even), he goes gambling. Successes don't turn out to matter because the gangster running the joint isn't going to let Johnny cash out.

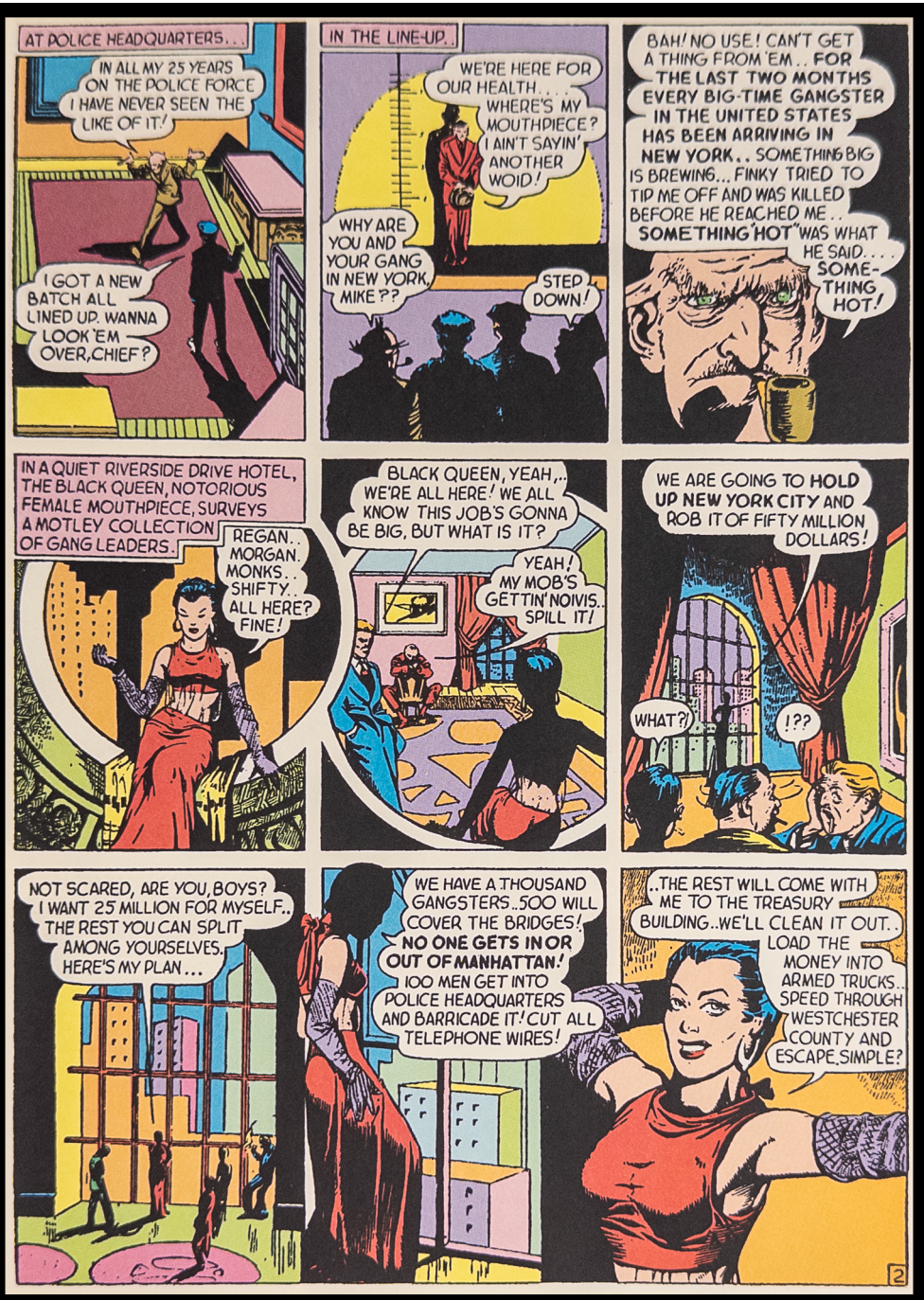
The gangster's muscle beats Johnny close to death and they dump the corpse-to-be in Wildwood Cemetery. Luckily, the Spirit happens to be on a walk when he sees the body being dumped and can gather enough information to try to take down the gambling establishments. Ever opaque about the Spirit's actual skills, Eisner and studio do not explain how someone can have a whirlwind night at the casinos without ever losing. Maybe it's the Spirit's blue top hat, which he dons for the outing.

There's some great art. Not much in the way of fisticuffs, with gambling antics and a big car chase sequence providing the action this time around. There are still some fisticuffs, of course, but not only fisticuffs. The panel layouts with the Spirit getting interested in taking down the





"JOHNNY MARSTON" (JUNE 30, 1940), PAGE 6
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"THE BLACK QUEEN'S ARMY" (JULY 7, 1940), PAGE 2
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



gambling dens and the car chase are particular standouts.

There's also the Spirit getting mad at Dolan for the police department not coming through right, which is an interesting detail if a throwaway. And the last sequence, with a postal delivery person having to go to Wildwood Cemetery, is cute.

Outside the dumb luck factor—tying Johnny and the Spirit—being a tad slight (Eisner spends so much time on Johnny's setup, he doesn't have the space to tie them better), it's a good strip. Sympathetic characters, determined Spirit, it works out.

And we get to see a little more of Spirit's crypt lair. He's at least got a bed down there.

• • •

"The Black Queen's Army"

July 7, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

Eisner and studio tell one heck of a full story in these eight pages. The splash panel gives the Spirit origin and shows Wildwood Cemetery very close to New York City proper, with an airplane below the cemetery. But the story of *The Black Queen's Army* begins with a stool pigeon getting shot dead and the cops unable to make an arrest. Even though gangsters from all over the country have been coming to Manhattan, no one can figure out what they've got planned.

Well, they're going to rob the Federal Reserve Bank (or something) of a million dollars in gold bullion. And they're doing it for that notorious female mouthpiece *The Black Queen*. Since her last appearance, she's gone full Bond villain—note, the Spirit should've known she was the gangland mastermind but missed that one—and has a straightforward plan. Block the bridges, take the police headquarters hostage, and parachute hundreds of gangsters with Tommy guns into the city.

The visual execution of the mega-heist is sublime. Eisner doesn't deal with the large-scale assault, instead zooms in on Commissioner Dolan's losing fight for headquarters and the police radio's message reaching the Spirit and Ebony. Also sublime this strip is the art. Eisner and the studio have gotten their line work down. They're still a little sharp, but there are fewer of them and they're doing more work. There's some excellent detail in this one.

Including—awkwardly as ever—on Ebony's caricature features.

Ebony's a full sidekick this strip but doesn't get anything to do except give the Spirit a conversation partner. He doesn't even appear as the third act action takes over—oh, forgot—Spirit is putting together his flying car this strip. Thanks to the car he can get to Manhattan to save the day. The flying car stuff is ridiculous, but the rendering of it is so gorgeous it doesn't matter. Eisner's packing this strip. Dolan gets whole kidnap and rescue scenes, Spirit takes out multiple bands of crooks; it's a full-on action comic. And it's fantastic.

Eisner showcases the strip's ability to do exciting—all in eight pages—and it's glorious.

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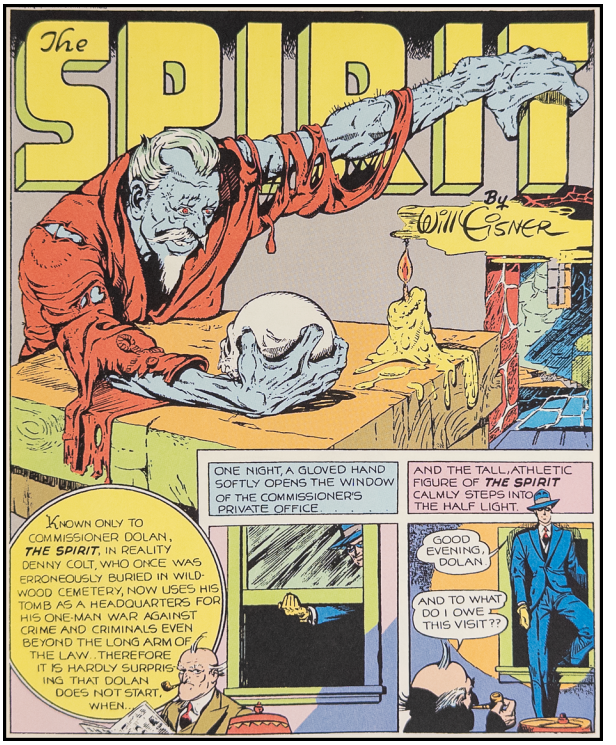
"Mr. Midnight"

July 14, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

There's a lack of consistency to *Mr. Midnight*. After a gorgeous splash page, featuring the dramatically posed new villain, with the intro text recapping the Spirit's origin segueing naturally into the exposition's start, the art seems to go from Eisner's drafting table to someone else's in the studio.

Many other someones, in fact. *Midnight* barely maintains style between panels, much less pages. The lines go from busy and erratic to clean to busy. There are some ingenious panels throughout, like when Spirit is facing off against Midnight and they're both just little stick figures in the distance.



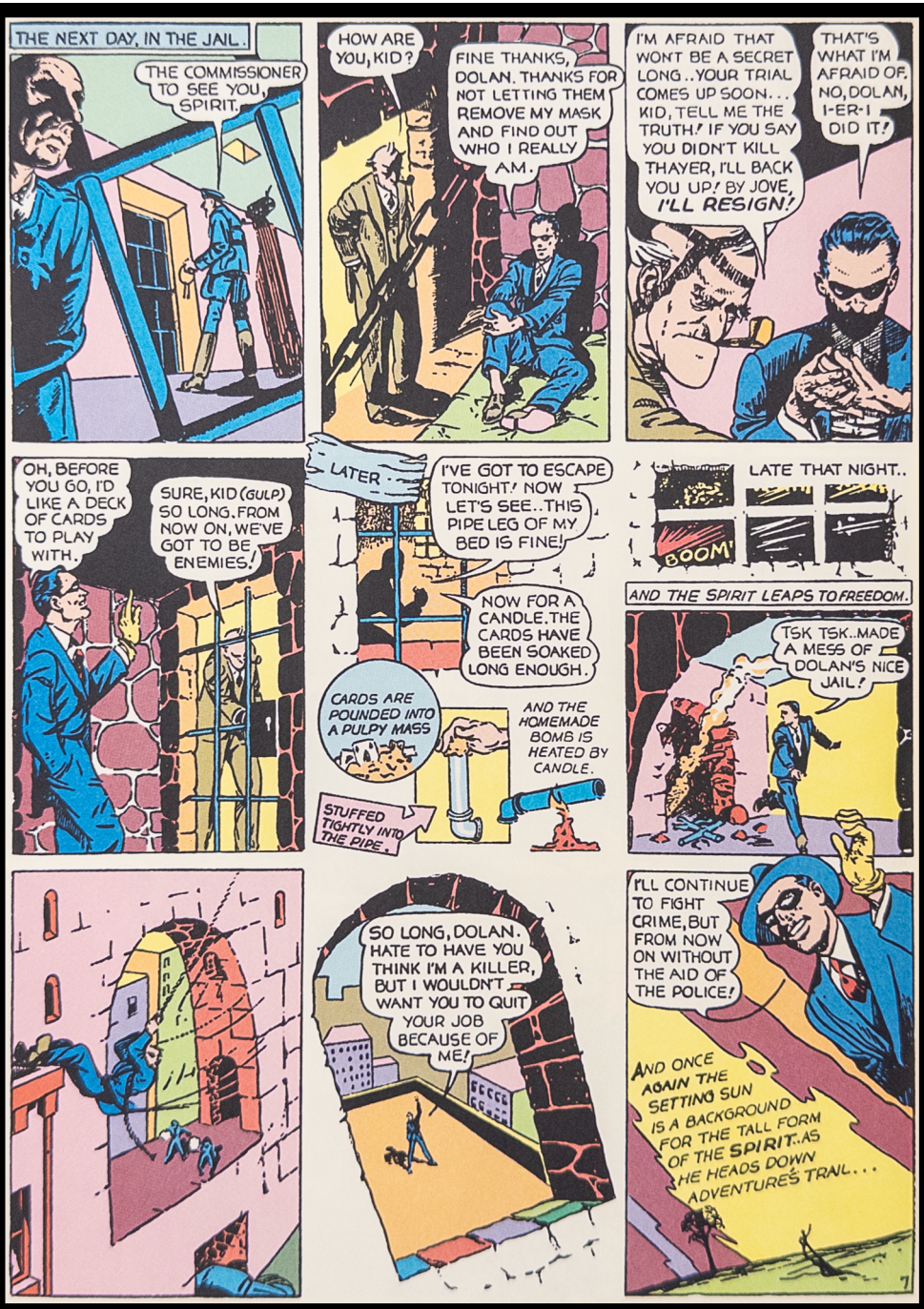
Even at its worst, the art only ever seems way too rushed, never bad enough to slow the pace of the story.

The story involves Mr. Midnight taunting the Spirit with a perfect crime. Midnight's going to murder someone in front of Spirit and Commissioner Dolan and they're going to let him go. I could also mention here Mr. Midnight is Smurf blue, which is barely a plot point and seems like something just done for the visuals… or another of the seeming miscommunications between writers and artists—pin in that one.

Eisner ratchets the suspense during this sequence, having Dolan, Spirit, and Midnight having to wait around for Midnight's victim to arrive. So there are two full story beats before Spirit even has anything to do on his own. And even when does something, it's not a lot. He just



"MR. MIDNIGHT" (JULY 14, 1940), PAGE 5
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"ELDAS THAYER" (JULY 21, 1940), PAGE 7
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).

follows Mr. Midnight home, and, thanks to his autoplane, gets there before Midnight.

Some villain monologuing and sinister chess playing ensue; it'll eventually get around to fisticuffs and high action.

Eisner (and Spirit) save the mystery resolution for the last few panels after the action has been resolved. It's an engaging ride, even if Midnight's not a good villain (he's just Smurf blue), and Spirit and Dolan kind of let him kill that guy in the first scene. They sure didn't try to stop him.

And that sequence—with Midnight taunting everyone before (ostensibly) committing a murder—is where the strip gets confused on details. The script says there should've been a visual tell, but there's no visual tell when you go back.

It's an odd, uneven, entertaining outing. And that gorgeous splash page is gorgeous.

• • •

"Eldas Thayer"

July 21, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

Eldas Thayer is the name of a miserly old rich guy who's refusing to pay for his niece's medical treatment. Thayer's doctor has just given him the bad news—he's got a day to live. The Spirit shows up just after, pleading for the niece's life. Thayer doesn't appreciate the Spirit's tone, especially since Spirit heard the doctor's report.

"No," says Thayer. "I'd kill you," says Spirit, "but morale code blah blah."



Thayer then concocts a Rube Goldberg contraption to kill himself and blame Spirit because screw that guy. Thayer's not just a bad guy, he's visually unpleasant. *Thayer* will have some fantastic action sequences, strip-best dialogue, and—I believe—the first significant Spirit character development. But the art's rough at open. Dots instead of lines. So Thayer's, like, repugnant in his close-up.

He successfully frames Spirit for his murder, Spirit goes to visit Commissioner Dolan, unaware he's wanted for murder, the mayor just happens to be there, tells Dolan to arrest Spirit, Dolan pleads with Spirit to proclaim innocence and Dolan'll quit the force for him to fight for truth.

Upon hearing his only confidante's pledge, Spirit decides he cannot deprive fair Gotham of



her police commissioner and says, "No, I killed him."

So then begins the chase portion of the story, which—remember—is called *Eldas Thayer*--cops are after Spirit, Spirit is trying to save the dying niece. Thank goodness someone remembered her.

Panel after panel, there's great art and brisk storytelling. The art's never quite sublime in terms of line work (except the splash page), but the composition and the writing establish a beautiful rhythm. Tiny panels composed like classic Hollywood montage shots; the panels get downright exquisite for the last few pages. At nine panels a page. It's some genuinely exceptional art this week.

And then the writing.

Having to deceive Dolan (for his own good) immediately opens up a whole new layer to Spirit. He's gone from white knight to dark knight. I did check: Gordon did appear in *Detective* before **Spirit**... but, based on a cursory look, that work marriage wasn't anywhere near this far along yet.

Spirit makes the move fearlessly, the Spirit announcing (addressed to Dolan but for the reader) they've got to break up so Spirit won't drag him down. But don't worry, if the forces of evil should rise again, to cast a shadow on the heart of the city, the Spirit will be there. Just as an outlaw.

It's a gorgeous finish, too. Extreme long shots, clean lines, sublime composition.

Easy strip best to this point.

• • •

"Palyachi, The Killer Clown"

July 28, 1940

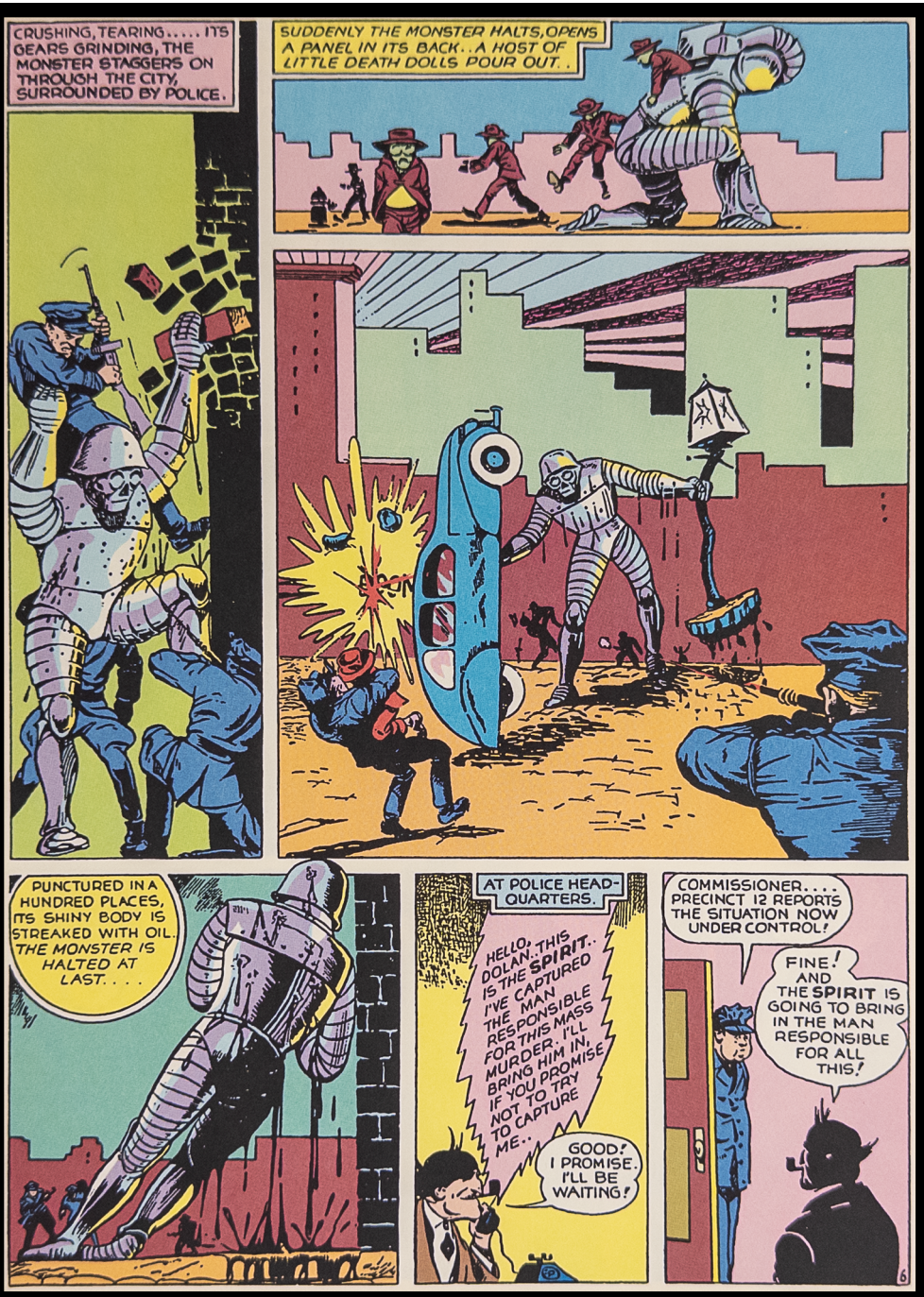
Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

Since the last strip, when the Spirit confessed to a murder he did not commit to save Commissioner Dolan's reputation and career, he's apparently been taking it easy. The strip opens with a gorgeous, gigantic splash of the title character--*Palyachi*, introduced by a ringmaster as "a killer clown."

We get Palyachi's story—he gets laughs at the circus, but Marka—the maybe belly dancer (it's never established)—still won't return his affections. Maybe if he'd kill for her she would,



"PALYACHI, THE KILLER CLOWN" (JULY 28, 1940), PAGE 3
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"THE DEATH DOLLS" (AUGUST 4, 1940), PAGE 6
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).

starting with one of the trapeze acrobats. Palyachi's reluctant, but once he gets going with his criminal ways, he can't stop himself, going on a rampage around the city.

Despite the first panel after the splash establishing the circus is right near Spirit's hideout in Wildwood Cemetery, he and Ebony have no idea it's there. Days into Palyachi's crime spree (he's trying for a million bucks to sway Marka), Ebony brings a recent crime to Spirit's attention in the newspaper.

Spirit immediately deduces it involves a circus, and to their surprise, there's a circus out the window (of the crypt) they hadn't noticed for days on end. It's a little thin, even for a comic strip, but once Spirit gets to the circus—where Marka is going to literally strip down to seduce him, very risqué—it turns into an excellent action strip, and the occasional bumps don't matter.

The Spirit goes into the situation entirely clueless as to what he's uncovering and lets Marka convince him Palyachi's the mastermind. Well, maybe. Spirit definitely plays along with Marka (who gets naked waiting for Spirit to return after dealing with Palyachi), but when he starts suspecting her involvement isn't clear despite him finding her in possession of all the loot from Palyachi's heists.

The fight scene has the two running around a circus, including trapeze action, and even a killer gorilla. Lots of beautiful panels, with phenomenal flow, even as the inking is uneven. Someone in Eisner's studio still thought dots were going to win over lines.

The finale involves the police, who are after Spirit (the opening origin blurb even includes Spirit being an outlaw now) and don't care he's trying to solve a crime spree for him.

It's rather good, even with the occasional thin plotting, or, in the case of the ending, thin sentiment.

• • •

"The Death Dolls"

August 4, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

While *The Death Dolls* do play a part, the most impressive element of this strip is the proto-Nazi killer robot. "Proto" because Eisner wasn't willing to be too explicit in 1940. But there will



be a robot shaped like a German soldier (the helmet is the giveaway) who tries to destroy New York.

But that raid is in the last couple pages….

The strip begins with the Spirit tracking evil munitions engineer Yagor to a small New England coast town. The overly verbose—but finding its charm—introductory exposition has the Spirit arriving by boat, giving the town an isolated vibe. The isolation is just to provide the moody setup. And possibly just some Spirit showing off with his motorboat pursuit.

He's tracked Yagor from the city, the obvious culprit in the murder of another weapons engineer. Yagor stole his plans to sell to a German guy. Again, the strip's not explicit—the guy just happens to be named Emil Kampf, but he could be representing any global superpower with a name like Emil Kampf in 1940.

Instead of just shooting the Spirit on the spot, Yagor lets Spirit douse him with some exposition about the murder case in the city, which involves Spirit catching wind of the deal with Kampf. So Spirit's going to hang around and watch the deal, thereby witnessing Yagor selling secrets to a foreign power, which is just good business when you think about it.

Except Kampf thinks the robot Nazi is a bad product (he shoots it a couple times, causing oil leaks), and storms out. Then Yagor unleashes the death doll, which tracks Kampf back to his hotel in New York City—walking across New England, which totally means Spirit could've driven—and detonates when it reaches Kampf.

Spirit tries to stop Yagor, but the robot is still functional and it kicks his ass. As Yagor and the robot leave to start their reign of destruction on the world for refusing to buy his stolen arms (why was a U.S. company making robot Nazis… oh, never mind, **Spirit** takes place in a reality close to ours), he leaves a death doll to take care of Spirit.

Obviously, the Spirit will foil the doll, escape, and save the day. However, when the robot hits the city, it's fighting an army of cops, forecasting a fifties sci-fi monster gone amuck. Spirit concentrates on Yagor, and negotiating a temporary truce with Dolan.

It's another great strip, with a few pages of sublime lines, and a fun finish after some phenomenal action; the studio just can't unlearn the reliance on dotting for inking fast enough.

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"The Kidnapping of Daisy Kay"

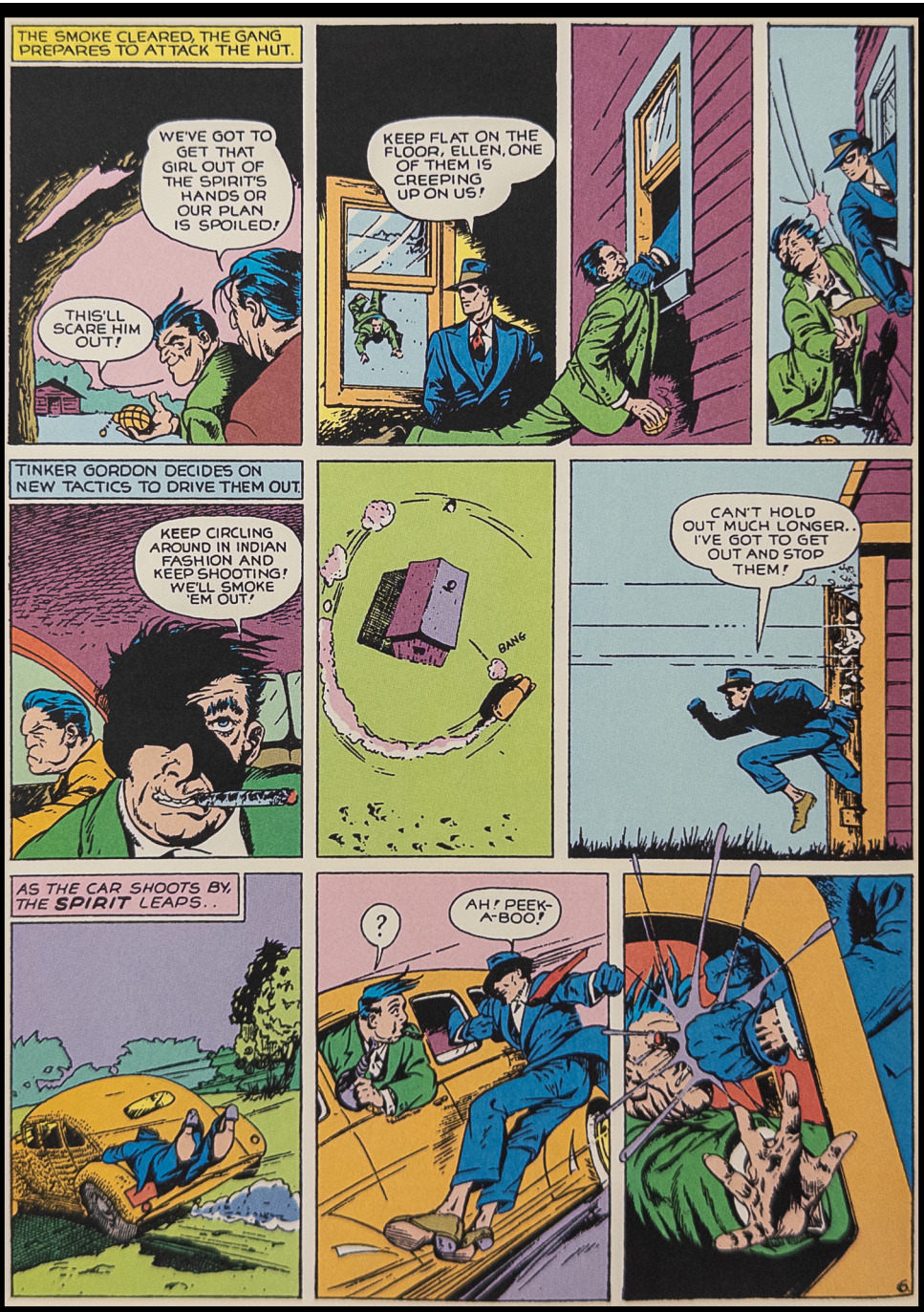
August 11, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

Daisy Kay's kidnapping involves a lot more action than the setup will imply. The strip opens with Homer Creep (renamed from the previous, presumably French spelling, Creap) bursting into the Spirit's crypt lair with a pistol at the ready. Spirit handily disarms Homer and invites him into the lower portion of the lair—the living quarters and laboratories.

Homer even asks about the renovations.

Since we last saw Homer in the second **Spirit** strip, his fiancée has left him. The fiancée is Commissioner Dylan's daughter, Ellen, who the



"THE KIDNAPPING OF DAISY KAY" (AUGUST 11, 1940), PAGE 6
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"THE MORGER BOYS" (AUGUST 18, 1940), PAGE 6
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



Spirit gussied up at the end of that strip in a profound act of misogyny. He and Homer discussing it here explicitly objectifies the character again, and Ellen has clearly internalized it. She's no longer interested in criminal psychology, she's going to be a chorus girl.

The Spirit has a plan, however. He's going to kidnap Ellen and then Homer will come and save her. She'll think Homer's a hero, Spirit's a sap, and everything will be jake.

Except Ellen is working for a gangster. But that gangster—who's producing her show on Broadway—doesn't know about it until opening night, when one of his flunkies recognizes her. She's there under a pseudonym—Daisy Kay. There's a quick scene to establish Dolan's worry that she'll ruin his reputation as police commissioner, which is precisely the gangster's plan. Reveal her true identity, humiliate the commissioner, get the mayor to fire him for having a low-class kid.

So the gangsters don't like it when Spirit swings down onto the stage and grabs Ellen, running off with her over his shoulder. They give chase, which results in a fantastic series of action sequences. First there's an autoplane bit, then there's a Spirit fighting guys in a car bit, then there's Ellen and Spirit under siege in a remote cabin with gangsters circling them firing on the cabin bit. It's all glorious, it's all beautifully visualized, even if the interludes are just Spirit being a mega-jerk to Ellen for Homer to capitalize on eventually.

Will Homer save the day and get the girl? Or are things more complicated in love and war?

More importantly, what happened with the last big action panel—despite all the two-fisted fisticuffs, Eisner and the studio can't render the slightest dodge?

Maybe they just didn't have the space. Doesn't matter; it's an excellent strip. Minus the active and passive misogyny, of course.

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"The Morger Boys"

August 18, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

Morger Boys has maybe one bad moment, some missed opportunities, a peculiar finish, and fantastic action. The strip opens twenty-five years ago—so, you know, 1915—with the execution of a notorious murderer, Morger.

Mrs. Morger makes their four sons promise to avenge Papa's death twenty-five years later.

The story jumps ahead, revealing the Morger Boys all look alike—kind of jovial so their murderous ways contrast—and are ready to execute their plan. One of them reveals the targets, and the brothers get to work. Never explained are their preparations for this plan. Nor if they're all dressed the same as a bit or because it's just a good visual idea (for Eisner).

The brothers only drive the strip for the first few pages, then one of their targets hires the Spirit as a bodyguard. The Morger brothers are ready for Spirit, who is very much not ready for them. After the quick fisticuffs, Spirit is knocked out.

Luckily, from his criminology studies—which did not include clearing a room, based on this strip—Spirit remembers the Morger family had a weird old stone cabin near the jail and it'd be the perfect place to execute your enemies.

The contrived eureka moment gives way to Spirit busting into the house just in time to save hostages and kick ass. There are some startling panels this strip; sublime work, with the lines getting more and more assured. **Spirit** is coming into its own, visually, week by week.

Eventually, Dolan will arrive and follow up on one of his own related leads. Dolan and Spirit don't talk about the Spirit being wanted for murder, instead they kick the Morger Boys' asses. I think it's the first time Dolan ever starts busting heads in the strip.

The finale is bizarre, involving what could possibly be considered character development for Spirit but also maybe isn't; it's notable



primarily because it tries to leverage the "grateful dame" trope.

Maybe only in the funny pages.

It's a solid strip, with that bad moment—pointlessly flexing supernatural—sailing past for another fine action thriller for the Spirit.

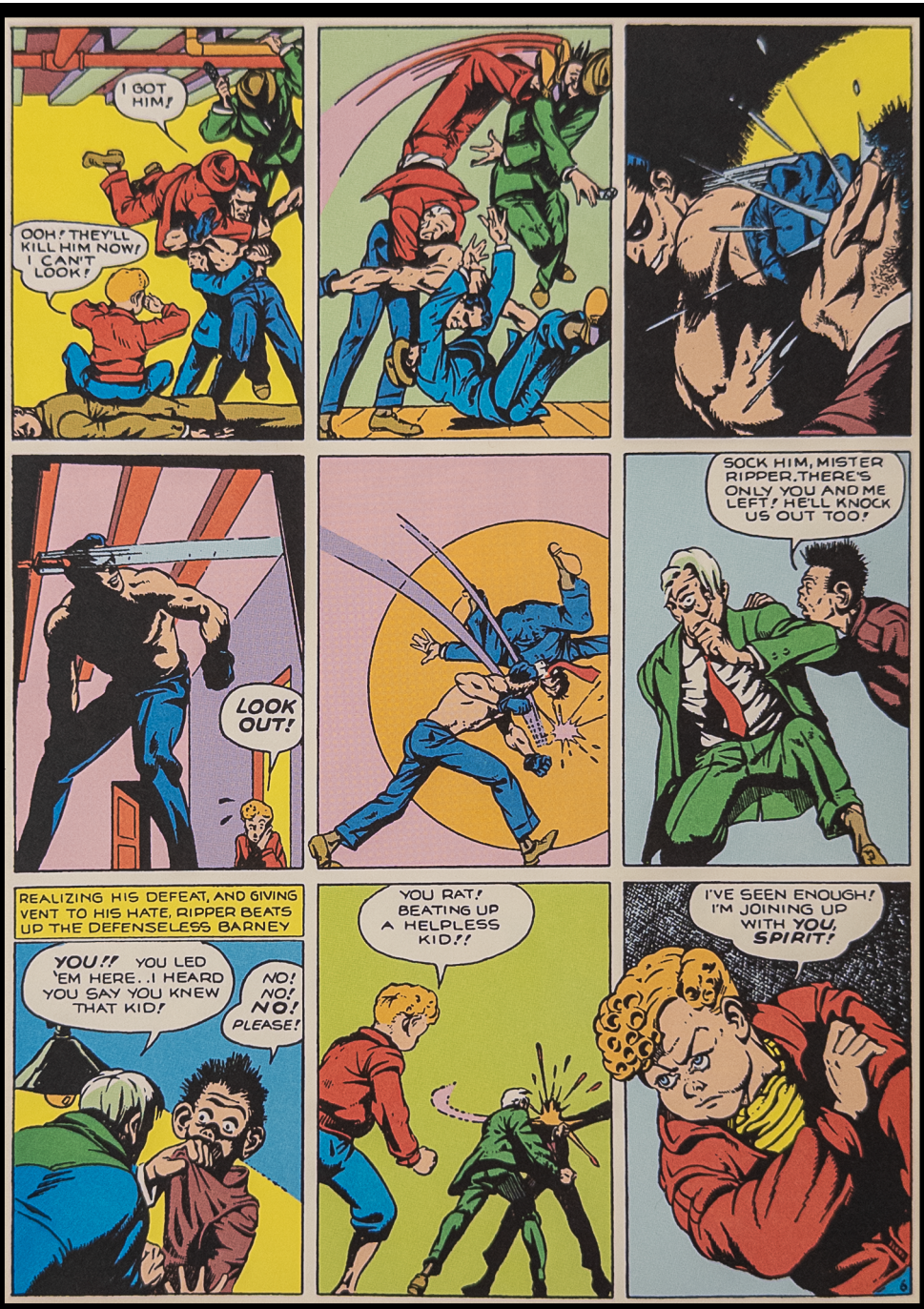
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"The Orphans"

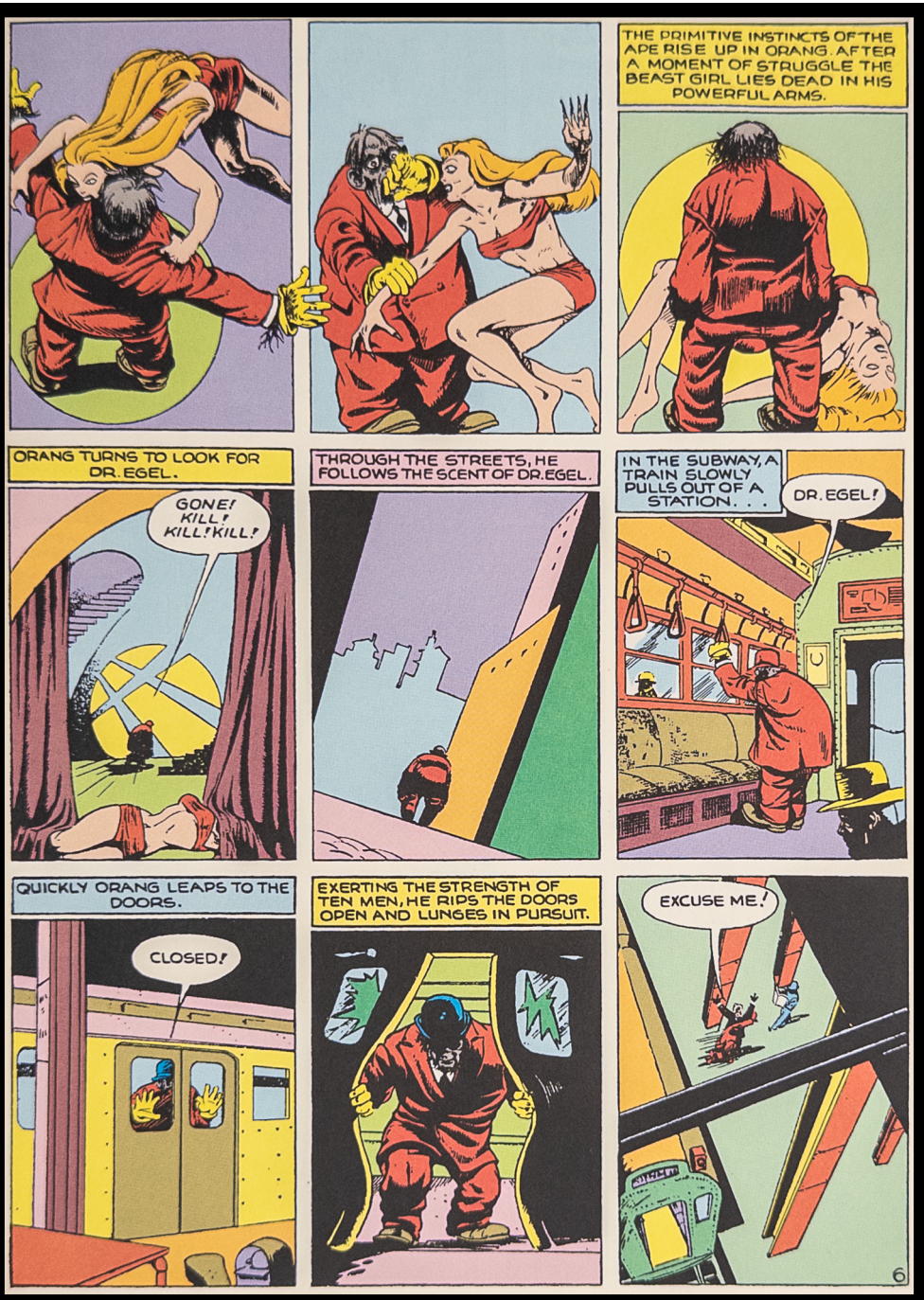
August 25, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

Orphans is about the Spirit taking a young orphan, Billy, slumming in the underworld. Spirit comes across Billy and his friend, Barney, in the cemetery smoking cigars and getting sick



"THE ORPHANS" (AUGUST 25, 1940), PAGE 6
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"ORANG, THE APE-MAN" (SEPTEMBER 1, 1940), PAGE 6
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).

from it. Barney's trying to convince Billy to join a gang with him. Spirit interrupts; Billy thinks Spirit's swell, Barney thinks "crimefighters" stink.

After Barney heads off to join the gang, Spirit takes Billy back to the crypt lair to get some information on Barney's future mob boss. Once they've got that information, they head out, with the Spirit busting heads until they get to the big boss.

The "boss fight," which barely involves the boss, has Spirit fighting a dozen opponents. It's a beautifully choreographed punch-out, starting with Spirit escaping his restraints and knocking heads. The Spirit moves between panels gracefully, almost patiently, working his way through one thug or four. It's a beautiful sequence. And then it keeps going. And keeps going again. It's an incredibly long, absolutely fantastic action scene. Eisner keeps coming up with something new; even some of the familiar poses, with Spirit's sockless ankles visible, are fresh; Eisner's figured out how to string the visuals together, finding the rhythm of the scene, and it's sublime. *Orphans* has some of the best art in the strip so far, even if the splash page is an almost hokey picture of the Spirit, looking like the cover of a country western album. It's a combination of the concept, the pose, and some very stiff lines.



Then, the art of the boys is very expressive and fun. Eisner and studio exaggerate their expressions, particularly when sick from cigar smoke, giving the strip some extra pizzazz.

Until the mega fight starts, *Orphans* is just Spirit lecturing Billy about how crime doesn't pay. He shows him some examples, but they're exaggerated ones involving comic strip gangsters. Billy's eventual reckoning doesn't even involve any "organized" crime. It'll be an emotional reaction, which is weird. But it's also a very thin message—kids always need to remember to tell other kids: crime doesn't pay.

It's a gorgeous strip, with some solid writing on the kids (Barney's a fun little shit), and the didactic stuff can't overwhelm the strong comics.

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"Orang, The Ape-Man"

September 1, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

Orang is a Frankenstein story from the monster's perspective. The Spirit is still around, but he doesn't have anything to do with the actual action of the strip. Instead, it's the sad tale of Orang, an orangutan, turned into a being with human-level intelligence thanks to a mad scientist.

Eisner and studio do a fabulous job setting up the story. There's a scientist arriving from war-torn Europe, escaped and ready to reunite with his daughter, Elsa, in his friend's care. Little does Elsa's father know his friend is a fiend and has used parts of Elsa's brain to make Orang smarter. He has left Elsa a savage.

So we get a cave girl and an orangutan in a suit for the action here. There ought to be more tripping on tropes, but somehow there isn't. Eisner avoids sentimentality, even as horrifying tragedies unfold, even as Orang comes to the realization he does not want the burden of reason, and begs his creator for mercy.

There's some excellent art. Lots of establishing panels this strip, setting the stage, but also giving Eisner a chance to summarize in long shot. The strip's rapidly paced; once Orang decides he wants to devolve, it's pretty much all action. Fight, chase, fight, tragic finish, with the Spirit only arriving to provide commentary on the sad situation.

Without ever having met Orang himself.

The Spirit's subplot is very moody. He gets drawn into Elsa's father's troubles, having gone to meet the scientist to ask about some experiments. Long shadows as he enters and exits through balconies and so on. The father's anguish gets some attention, too. Not verbalized like Orang's will be, but very carefully visualized. *Orang*'s got its *Frankenstein* ambitions and whatnot, but the strip excels because of the craft on display, where Eisner and studio flex, where they do not. It's tragic. And lovely. Just excellent work all around.

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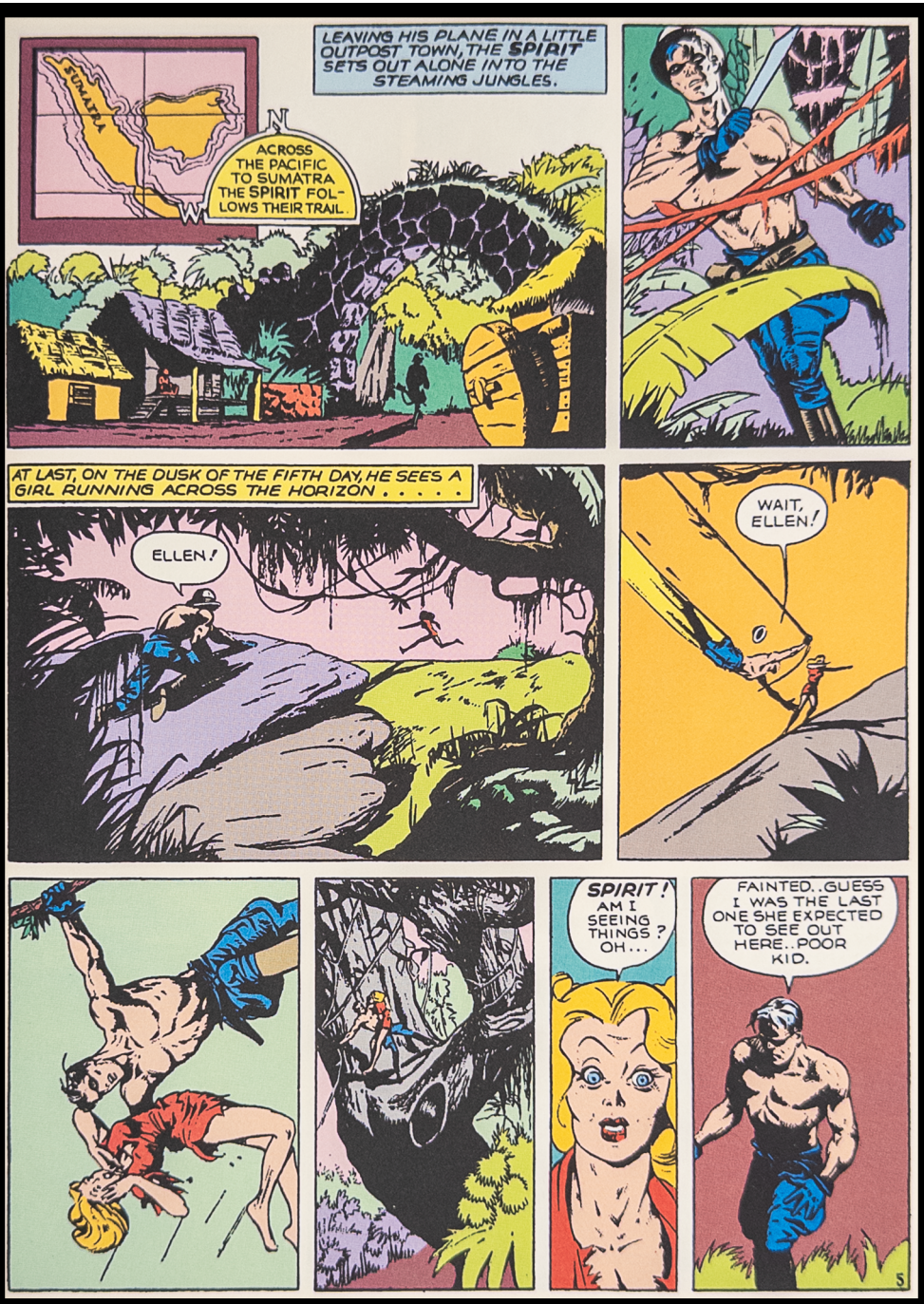
"The Return of Orang, The Ape That Is Human"

September 8, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

Despite the immediate follow-up to last strip, we still don't get a big Spirit versus Orang scene. Spirit will track Orang to the ends of the Earth (well, Sumatra), but they never have a real,





"THE RETURN OF ORANG, THE APE THAT IS HUMAN" (SEPTEMBER 8, 1940), PAGE 5
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"EBONY'S X-RAY EYES" (SEPTEMBER 15, 1940), PAGE 6
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).

intellectual or physical showdown. Instead, they're still in slightly different stories; ships passing in the night.

The strip opens with Spirit recounting last week's conclusion—Orang is apparently dead, at his own hand. No real mention of him killing his creator, which is important since after Orang drags himself out of the river and to a doctor, he's ready to be released on his own recognizance. His suicide attempt last strip came after he killed his creator, but he's forgotten that guilt. And no one's looking for the mad scientist.

Or at least not Commissioner Dolan, who goes to the doctor's to see the talking ape. Dolan can't come up with a reason to hold Orang, so instead, he offers him a place to crash while Dolan tries to find a law Orang's existence violates.

Bored of waiting and seeing an opportunity after Ellen Dolan comes in and passes out at the sight of him, Orang kidnaps her and heads back to the jungle to rule among the lower apes.

All of these events occur in the first four pages of the strip (including the splash page); the remainder is the Spirit tracking Ellen and Orang through the Sumatran jungle and getting involved in the politics of Orang's found tribe. Now, those politics involve fights to the death and the Spirit tied to a stake, but they're just political squabbles. Spirit and Ellen are in a riff on a *Tarzan* story, complete with swinging on vines and (unlikely) punch outs with orangutans.

Then the finale—weeks and weeks after the start of the strip—gives Ellen and Spirit their first private moment (despite implying, you know, weeks and weeks of them).

Orang remains a very sympathetic villain and shirtless Spirit hacking through the jungle is definitely a vibe, so it all works out quite well. It's just too bad Orang and Spirit never got to talk philosophy.

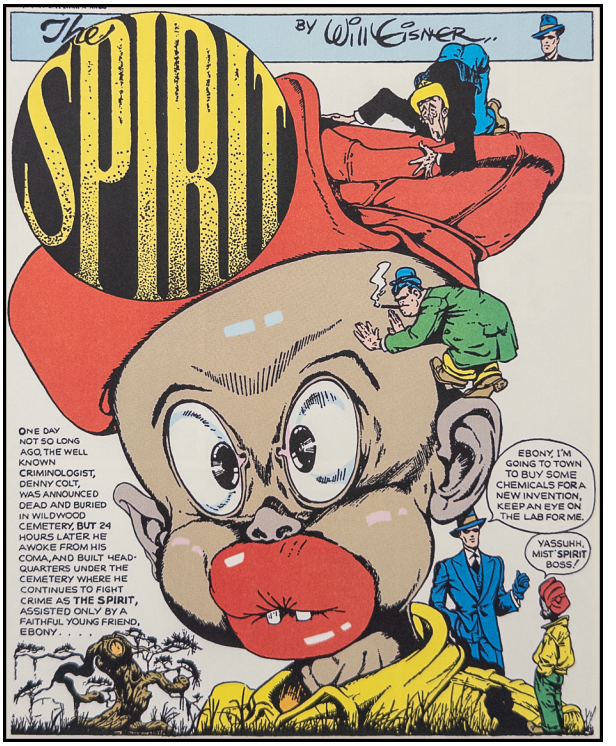
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"Ebony's X-Ray Eyes"

September 15, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

Ebony's X-Ray Eyes show the problem with caricature, racist and otherwise. At the start of the strip, Ebony gets some of the Spirit's x-ray juice in his eyes and can see through things. He



quickly happens across some crooks who've decided to go into the crooked optometry racket. Once they meet Ebony and get a load of his peepers, however, they decide to become bank robbers.

Spirit discovers the lair in a mess (assuming Ebony's been kidnapped and didn't just have a damaging reaction to the x-ray juice) and starts tracking Ebony down. Now, Spirit's not going to learn exactly what happened until the last page or so—and it might be more implied than explicit—so he's just going to luck into conclusions and discoveries. He's assuming Ebony's been kidnapped along with the x-ray juice—the x-ray juice being the prize here.

Ebony will have some ups and downs with the first set of crooks, who will pass him off to a second set pretty quickly. It's about young Ebony being moved from one traumatizing situation or another. Eisner and studio address that situation in the writing, albeit with more humor than angst, but the reader's clearly supposed to be sympathetic to Ebony's plight. Except then he's rendered as usual, in a racist caricature one wouldn't want to describe objectively in polite company.



Once Ebony realizes the Spirit is trying to stop the crooks, he takes (some) matters into his own hands, with the rest working out in payroll (i.e. criminals being a superstitious and cowardly lot and not ready for the Spirit). Ebony's got agency, eventually, even though his clumsiness is a principal characteristic.

Outside being horrifically visually racist, it's a good strip. It's well-paced and the comic relief (one of the crooks) is good; **Spirit** is proving it can scale big action to small and stay nimble with its genres.

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"Gang Warfare"

September 22, 1940

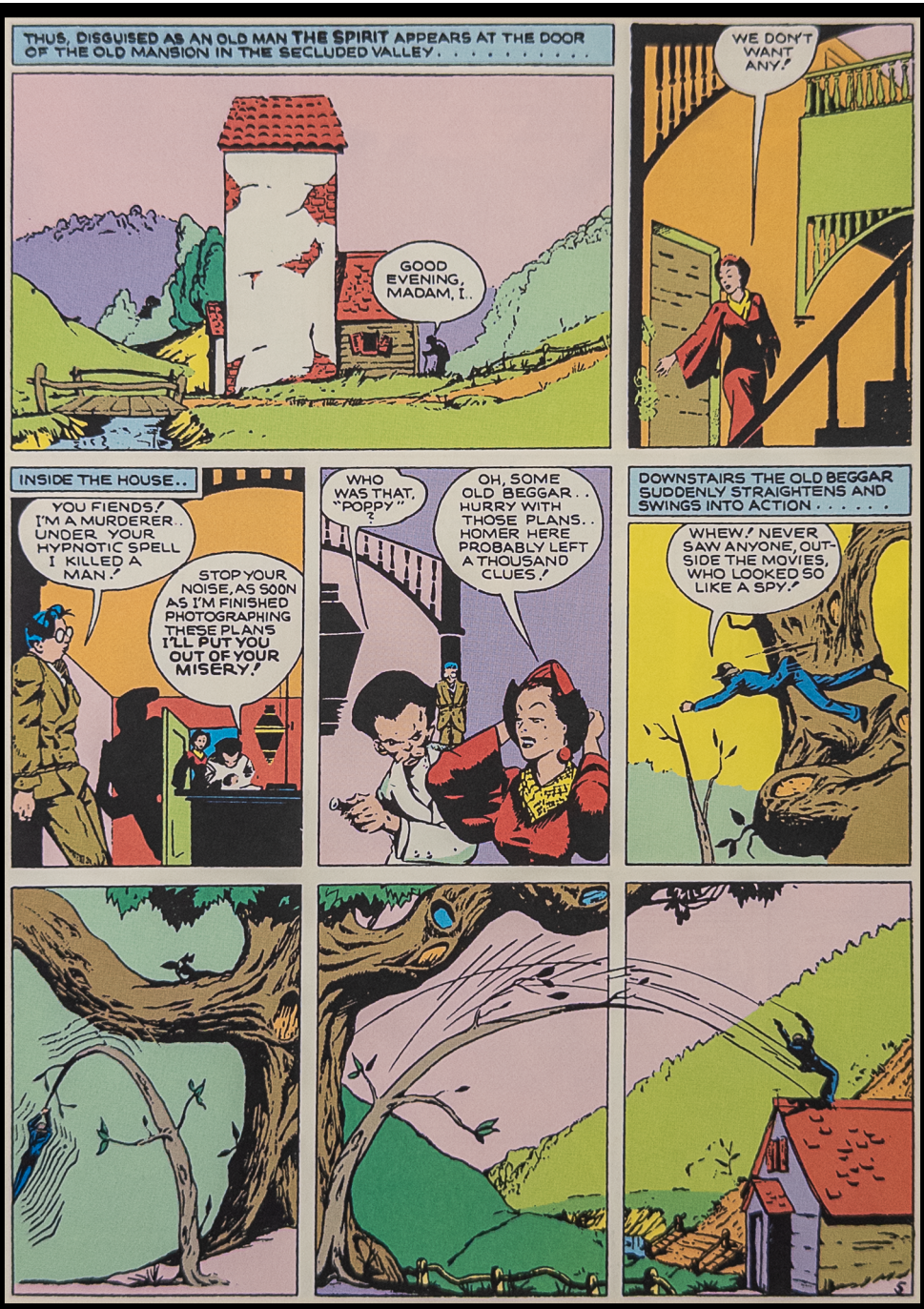
Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

The entire strip seems to be just a way to do a panel of Spirit with a Tommy gun taking out the mob. It's a striking visual, and the strip itself is solid, but *Gang Warfare* is more like *Gang Meddling*.

The strip opens with the Spirit saving a gangster from getting rubbed out. Spirit helps him get away—to meet later in Wildwood Cemetery—and deals with the other crooks, then running



"GANG WARFARE" (SEPTEMBER 22, 1940), PAGE 7
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"ORIENTAL AGENTS" (SEPTEMBER 29, 1940), PAGE 5
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).

himself to escape the police because he's a wanted man (something the strip doesn't exactly remember as much as not address).

The crook meeting the Spirit in Wildwood is just a way for the Spirit to meet the crime boss, who will then turn out to be the head of an anti-crime society organization. So, eventually, it'll all be about Spirit trying to take out a corrupt businessman.

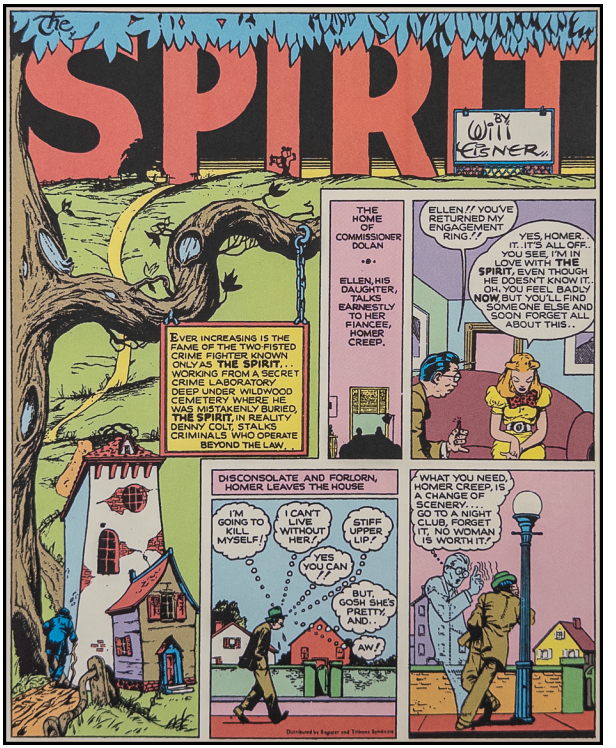
One with friends in city hall, which means Commissioner Dolan's working both sides of the street. The mayor is sure his pal isn't a crook, Dolan's sure the Spirit wouldn't steer them wrong.

Eventually, it leads to limited gang-busting action sequences, with more emphasis on Spirit (and Dolan) uncovering the boss's guilt.

Ebony will have a fairly significant role in the resolution, since he's the only friend the Spirit's got (as Dolan can't take too active a part; Spirit's still wanted for murder, after all). It's another of those strange "Ebony's a cute character but looks like Confederate propaganda" vibes. The racism hurts the comedic sidekick potential.

There's also a very strange sequence—entirely done in extreme long shot—where the Spirit pulls a gun on the crime boss in public, presumably to force a confession, only to immediately give it up when someone tells him such behavior's illegal. For a thin strip, strung together between set pieces, *Warfare* does all right.

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"Oriental Agents"

September 29, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

Despite the (already) ominous title, *Oriental Agents*' main cringe-factor doesn't involve the titular spies. Instead, wow, does **The Spirit** think very little of Ellen Dolan, and in general, the female of the species.

The strip begins with Ellen dumping Homer Creep (née Creap) because he's not the Spirit. Homer goes off and gets drunk, gets picked up by a spy, and kidnapped. Ellen's mortified at the thought of him… finding another woman. Just because she doesn't want him doesn't mean she wants some other girl having him.



This generally gross vibe continues throughout the strip, whether when Ellen tries to tag along with the Spirit to investigate or when she gets to the resolution and finds no one cares about her feminine wiles.

The spies—from the "Asiatic Embassy"—kidnapped Homer to hypnotize him and get him to kill an industrialist. Despite them being the title characters, until the Spirit arrives at their lair—a remote castle—they're barely around. Most of the time is spent with Ellen, Homer, or the Spirit. Dolan's got a little time fretting over Ellen's romantic decisions and expositing about Homer being a murderer (he's not the first guy they've hypnotized into murder). Ebony's also around for a few panels; he was out doing investigating for the Spirit, who isn't as disinterested in the case as he conveys to Ellen. He just doesn't want to be cleaning up her love life.

Once it's clear their cases are entwined, Spirit will relent and take Ellen along in his pursuit. That pursuit will involve the Spirit putting on a disguise. The disguise is on his face: muss to make him look old and a ruffled hat. Otherwise he does not change his blue suit. No one can recognize him with that face makeup, despite him wearing the same suit as the scene before.

It's an okay strip, certainly the least in a while. While the *Oriental* aspects of the story seem like they should be in the spotlight, they're very mild. Ellen being an unlikable, shallow harpy, however, is a problem. Especially since the strip itself seems to dislike her.

Big "he-man woman haters club" energy here.

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"The Mastermind Strikes"

October 6, 1940

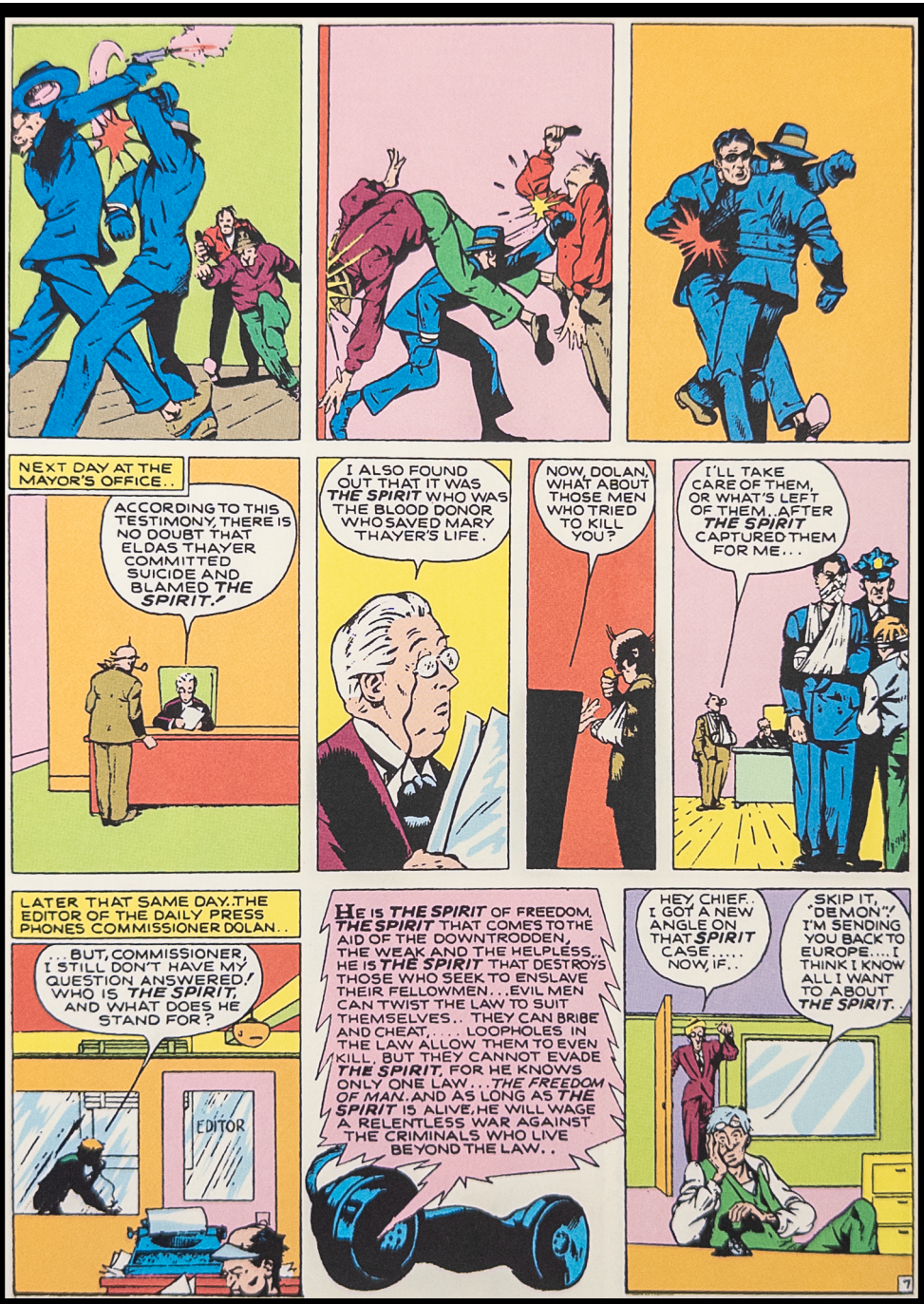
Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

The Spirit tries—very gently—a "whodunit," with the reader getting as much information as Spirit or the cops; more, actually. The whodunit aspect seems half-baked, similar to the rest of the strip. While *The Mastermind* avoids any of **Spirit**'s problematic pitfalls, it's also barely a story.

The strip opens with a mayoral candidate's aide dying by poison gas, which the coroner can't figure out. When the candidate visits Dolan to demand action, the Spirit shows up and the candidate remembers Spirit's wanted for that murder from months ago. The candidate



"THE MASTERMIND STRIKES" (OCTOBER 6, 1940), PAGE 6
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"THE SPIRIT! WHO IS HE?" (OCTOBER 13, 1940), PAGE 7
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).


THE SPIRIT! WHO IS HE?

Daily Press launches campaign to discover identity of mysterious crime fighter. "Are you society's friend or foe?" asks editor Robert E. Grit.

Ever since his mysterious aid in the capture of Dr. Cobra, an escaped mad killer, the mystery man, known only as The Spirit, has secretly helped the police in many ways.

According to information collected by our reporters stationed at Police Headquarters, the solutions of most of the major crimes in our city were due to the efforts of The Spirit.

It was The Spirit who really smashed Tony Morgan's gambling chain. The fantastic attempt by this country's big gang leaders to rob the Sub-Treasury was frustrated by The Spirit. From reliable sources we learn that Yagor, the fiendish creator of the huge robot that ran amuck in our city not long ago, was believed to have been captured and placed in the hands of the police by The Spirit. The four Morger boys had the name of The Spirit on their lips before they were executed by the State.

On one hand he is obviously aiding society, yet on the other this mystery man is accused of causing the death of Eldas Thayer, a respected citizen, and is branded an outlaw by the Police.

What is the explanation? Who is The Spirit?

His description, offered by persons who have seen him, is: over six feet tall, wears a blue mask and blue suit. Any information leading to the identity of The Spirit will be appreciated and kept confidential. All correspondence should be addressed to the editor.

MAYOR AND CIVIC LEADERS APPROVE OF PRESS CAMPAIGN

In a letter addressed to this newspaper today, the Mayor, speaking for himself and the various civic societies, said that he approved highly of this new campaign to learn the identity of The Spirit. "His frequent escapes," he added, "have made a laughing stock of the Police Force and The Spirit's continued exploits lowers the prestige of our law enforcement bodies."

BY WILL EISNER

demands Dolan arrest the Spirit, but obviously the Spirit escapes.

One more murder and then the "Mastermind" is after the Spirit too, hiring a kid to deliver a bomb to him. Spirit will enlist the kid's help, intentionally putting him in harm's way at one point, as he unravels the case. Except he's just operating off that early clue the reader also got, so it's not a lot of unraveling.

The last few pages have the Spirit getting in a fight with the villain. Lots of empty backgrounds as they punch it out. Even the finish is slight, with Eisner and studio wrapping the whole thing in the last couple panels, including the villain's motives. Given the strip starts promising a "Mastermind"—standing over a pile of skulls on the splash page—having the villain not just be a done-in-one, but also be far from devious and really just in possession of explosives and poisons the cops can't identify.

There are some nice establishing shot panels of the city—long shots with good angles and nice line work. The action at the end is fine; it just dawdles through action and hurries through the exposition.

Even as the least impressive of **Spirit** so far, it's still rock solid work, technically speaking. Eisner just seems like he's run out of things to try this one.

Outside that gorgeous splash page, of course.

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"The Spirit! Who Is He?"

October 13, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

The splash page for this strip is a newspaper article about the Daily Press declaring its mission to uncover the Spirit's identity. The article gives a rundown of (some of) the strip so far, including the Spirit being wanted for murder.

That murder will get discussed a few more times—and its "solving" is so simple one wonders why the Spirit waited so long to get it cleared up—and Eisner and studio clearly did not think all their readers were getting through that newspaper article. Every time it comes up, we get extra exposition on the subject. At one point, the mayor makes Commissioner Dolan tell him all about the murder charge only to remember

he was in that scene so knows all the information.

Separate from the Spirit's quest to clear his name, a gangster decides to impersonate the Spirit (all it takes is a blue suit, after all) to commit crimes and taunt the police. Oh, and the Daily Press reporter—in from the war in Europe, but this story's bigger—gets help from a cop to uncover Spirit's secrets.

The three subplots never quite converge—the reporter's adventures stay mostly distinct except when the plot needs to move along a little—and then Dolan gets the ending. In some ways, it's an entirely functional strip: the Spirit's (false) murder charge gets resolved. Along the way there's some humor at the reporter's expense (Ebony's contribution) and a variety of action. Besides the Spirit going around town, the gangster impersonating him is out causing trouble. It all leads to some glorious fisticuffs.

While the strip itself isn't particularly ambitious, Eisner has several art flexes. The repetitive exposition usually gets some inventive panel composition. Even with the heavy-handed finish (Dolan talking about the Spirit being the dark knight the city deserves), it all works out. The art and narrative choices put the relatively slight story over.

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"Ogre Goran"

October 20, 1940

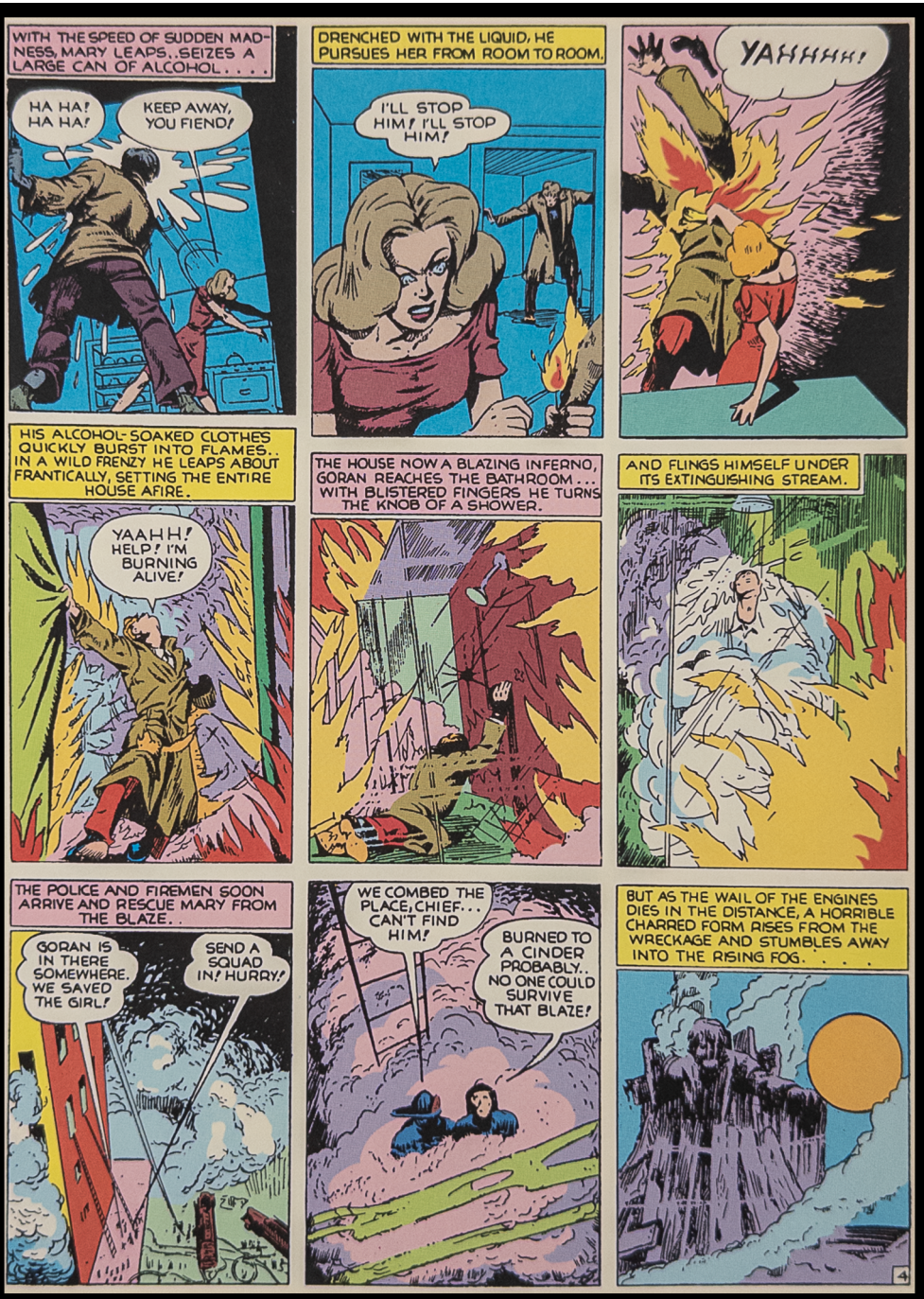
Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)



It's another slighter strip, with the Spirit rescuing a damsel in distress from her ex (the titular *Ogre Goran*), a psychopath who's just escaped prison.

The opening is the prison break and it's relatively solid business. The line work is wanting this strip, but the moody long shots of the action are still effective. The action shifts to the damsel, Mary, discussing Ogre's prison break with her husband. Since it's a comic strip, Ogre appears immediately following her statement, shooting her husband dead on the spot and ready to kidnap her. Luckily, Mary dowses him in alcohol and sets him (and the apartment) on fire.

Now, we know Ogre gets away because he gets in the shower and turns on the cold water. Also, there's a panel (maybe the least discernible in the series to date) of Ogre getting away.



"OGRE GORAN" (OCTOBER 20, 1940), PAGE 4
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"CONSCRIPTION BILL SIGNED!" (OCTOBER 27, 1940), PAGE 5
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).

Fast forward a few days to Ebony trying to get the Spirit interested in the case. After initially discounting Ebony's thoughts on Ogre's survival (Spirit thought the shower was only running because someone wanted a bath), the Spirit agrees with Ebony's conclusions—Ogre's alive!

The Spirit tries to find Mary, only to learn she's gone away with a man entirely wrapped in bandages. Ogre, post-burns. Thanks to Commissioner Dolan giving him information about Ogre's old hideouts, Spirit heads (by boat) to an abandoned lighthouse where Ogre's got to be holding Mary. Dolan heads to the lighthouse, too, wanting to beat the Spirit to the punch.

Spirit's only cleared his "name" of a murder charge in last week's strip, so Dolan competing with him doesn't make much sense. It also doesn't make sense how Spirit gets to the lighthouse by boat, but then his boat disappears and he can't take it back to shore at the end of the strip.

Also nonsensical is Ogre having a new wife, who can—presumably, more appropriately—beat up Mary.

We don't even get to see Spirit and Ogre's fisticuffs.

Not a lot of pay-off in the strip, though it's nice to see Ebony developing as a sidekick.

It's also the dottiest the art's been in ages. The line work gains slide back here.

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"Conscription Bill Signed!"

October 27, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)



It's a good thing Spirit cleared his name since he needs Dolan's official recommendation this strip.

FDR has just signed the Selective Training and Service Act—a peacetime draft—and, being a good jingoist, the Spirit wants to sign up. He's got some conditions, however. He doesn't want to reveal his identity and he wants to be put to good use (based on his skills).

The Army thinks he'll make a good espionage agent, especially when the Spirit immediately uncovers a spy in the Army recruitment office. As a try-out for the Army, he roots out the rest of the spies, who call him "Americano" but also have guys named Adolf. **Spirit** still isn't willing

to be specific about which foreign powers are the baddies.

The action's pretty straightforward, with Spirit tracking the bad guys back to their hideout and taking them out. He's got Ebony along for backup, so there's some comedy action involving Ebony flying the autoplane and seeing trouble on the ground.

Dolan's particularly pissy about Spirit this strip. Dolan's jealous about Spirit breaking all the big cases, a bit of character development Eisner's had on a slow boil for a while now, though it never made sense when Dolan was lowkey protecting the Spirit from the rest of the police force.

The jealousy just leads to banter—and whining—as the Army comes to realize having the Spirit on the payroll will work out, after all.

While it's an interesting attempt at being timely—though the draft was for twenty-one to forty-five and the Spirit says it's just until thirty-five, so they needed some copy-editing—it's also just propaganda. At times well-illustrated propaganda, to be sure, but there's no oompf to the story.

And Spirit mansplaining the United States being the only place on Earth where a man can live in freedom and peace to Ebony (thankfully in long shot in one of those pretty propaganda panels) is one hell of a flex.

• • •

"The Manly Art of Self Defense"

November 3, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

The splash page is Ellen Dolan with a black eye, reading *The Manly Art of Self Defense*. Given Ellen's last appearance in the strip, it's a sensational and not unconcerning opener. But it'll all work out, with *Self Defense* possibly the best **Spirit** strip so far.

We open in Wildwood Cemetery, Spirit running into the crypt, begging Ebony to hide him. Ebony wonders what could have the Spirit so scared… why, it's just Ellen Dolan. She's told the Spirit she loves him and he's run away. She decides to catch a criminal to prove herself worthy of his attention.

Except the criminal she goes to catch is dead, and an enforcer is just arriving to find her there.





"THE MANLY ART OF SELF DEFENSE" (NOVEMBER 3, 1940), PAGE 3
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"THE KISS OF DEATH" (NOVEMBER 10, 1940), PAGE 6
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).

Luckily, the Spirit convinces the thug Ellen's not the killer, except she then wants to identify herself as the commissioner's daughter, which would complicate matters.

The Spirit will eventually find the killer, defeat the gangsters, and generally save the day. Ellen will get that black eye. And, then, in the glorious last page, pay the shiner back in full. Along the way, there are multiple action and suspense sequences. The line work is gorgeous, as are all the shadowy panels. Eisner and studio really go for mood this strip and it pays off. They also play with color in the last action scene, setting it in the dark (blue), and it's a dynamite visual. The Spirit's got a lot of gangsters to get through before the day'll be saved. The strip's seven pages, not including the splash, and three of those pages are superlative. The flow between the panels, the change in angles and distance, the expressions, the fisticuffs… it's all just fantastic.

But what will put it over is how the strip deals with that first plot line—Spirit and Ellen—things have gotten a little more complicated and there's not exactly a lot of time to wrap it. Still, Eisner leaves the couple's relationship in a far more interesting place than it's ever been before. And without being crappy to Ellen.

Maybe minus her naïveté in going after the criminal at the beginning (the strip has forgotten she's in school to be a criminal psychologist or whatever).

Anyway.

Manly's a beautiful piece of work.

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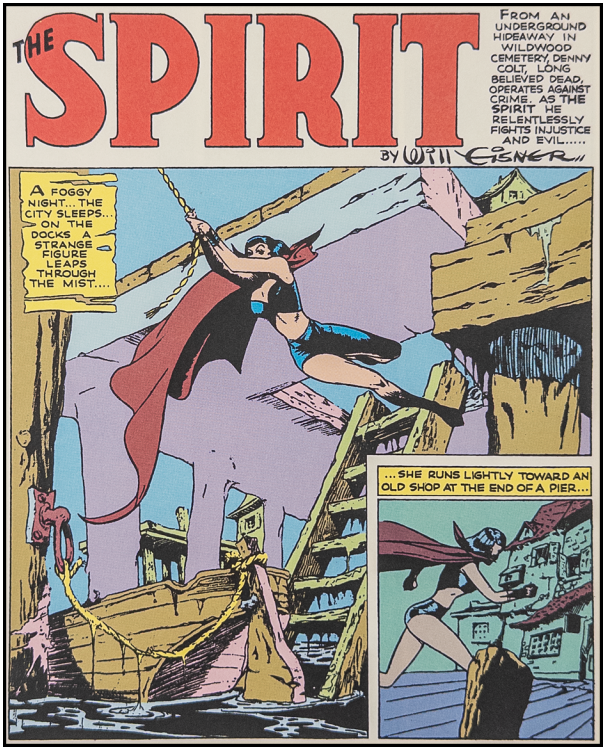
"The Kiss of Death"

November 10, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

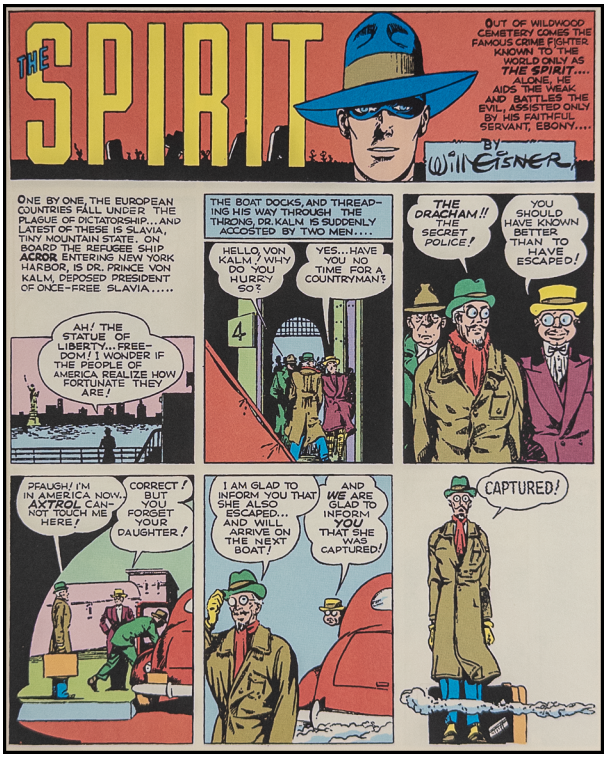
The Black Queen's back again, this time fully in her supervillain period, wearing a skimpy outfit and a cape. Far cry from when she was a "notorious female mouthpiece." But also a far cry from her scheming in the shadows to take over the city with an army of gangsters.

Now she's just seducing men, getting them to betray their employers (and wives), then killing them for good measure. With killer lipstick, something Commissioner Dolan really should figure out before the last page of the strip.



It's mostly an action strip. After some setup with Black Queen and the connection between her victims, Spirit starts chasing her, and then there are only occasional interruptions to their action sequences. They have a big showdown on a bridge, with Eisner and studio getting to do a lot with the angles not to mention the actual fisticuffs (or whatever the equivalent since Spirit doesn't want to hit a lady).

While Black Queen becoming a supervillain is certainly a surprise character development (especially since her plotting has downshifted from robbing the federal reserve to robbing a jeweler), the strip's got so many great moments one doesn't slow down to think it through especially since there's so much humor running through it.



One of Dolan's cops is convinced—always—the Spirit has done it. So every once in a while, someone will have to remind him, but no, it's obviously not the Spirit. But the recurring humor gag works, especially once it's clear they're not giving it up just because Spirit didn't do it.

There's also some "Spirit invents" this strip, with suction cup shoes playing into the chase sequence at one point. Again, despite Black Queen putting on a leather bikini, a cape, and some stilettos—it's a great kitchen sink of **Spirit**. There's personality from Dolan (contending with his dimmer bulbs), Spirit getting in some banter, and a nice "first act" setting things up.

And the art, obviously. The art's so dang good. And the exposition's working on getting witty, too.

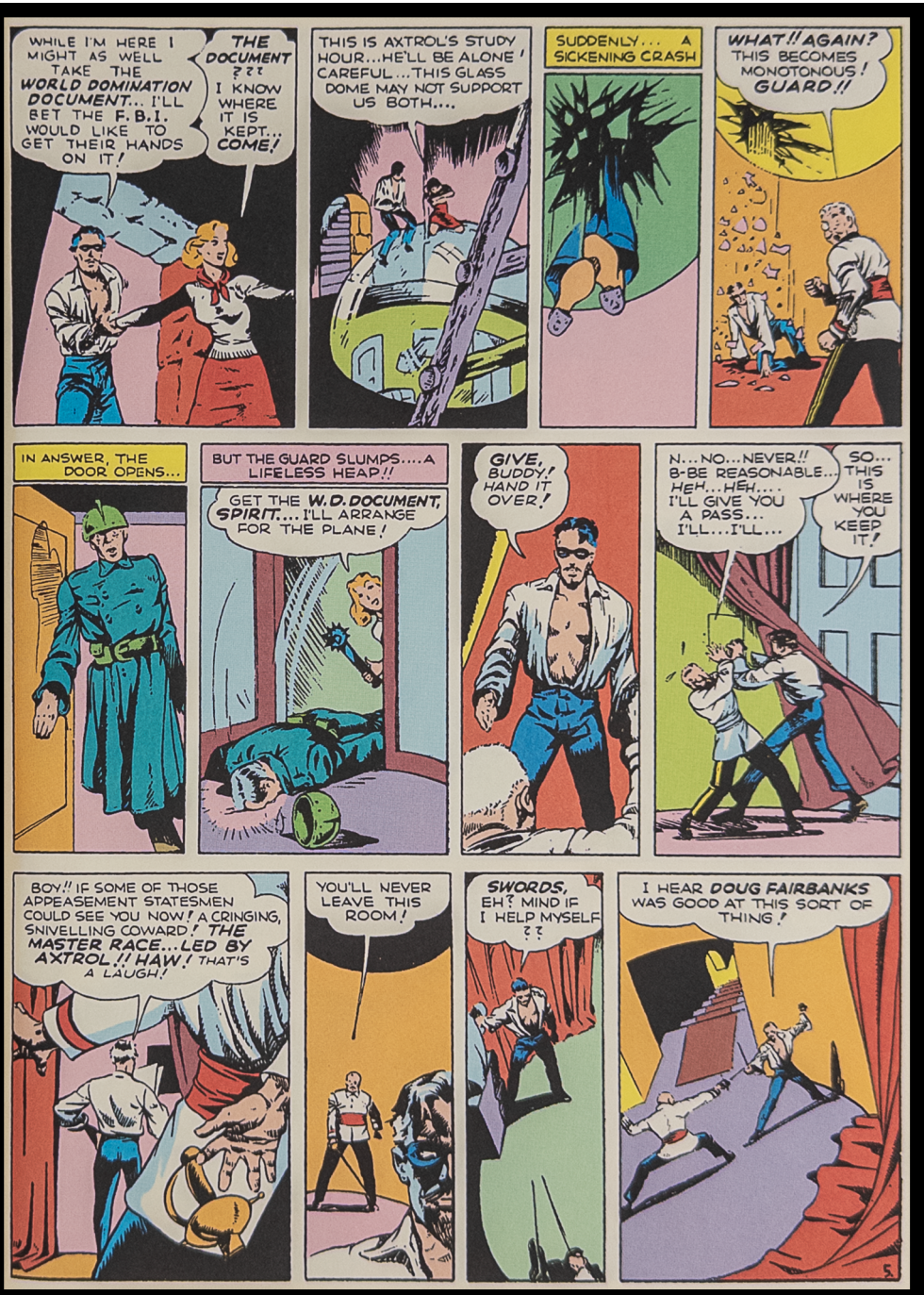
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"Dr. Prince Von Kalm"

November 17, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

It's another political intrigue strip, with a European writer arriving in the U.S. after escaping growing fascism in his country. He's immediately confronted by secret police from his country, who taunt him with the news they've captured his daughter and will execute her unless she returns. So he plans to return immediately, but not quick enough the Spirit doesn't confront him and offer a plan. What if the Spirit poses as the writer, goes in his place, and gets the daughter out?



"DR. PRINCE VON KALM" (NOVEMBER 17, 1940), PAGE 5
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"THE KIDNAPPING OF EBONY" (NOVEMBER 24, 1940), PAGE 5
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).

Being an American, the Spirit doesn't give the writer any choice in the situation, and they start prepping Spirit for the mission.

Once in the (fictional) European country, the disguised Spirit has a brief meeting with the daughter—long enough to discover the country's dictator isn't going to free her in exchange as promised—and then goes about breaking out of his cell. There are a couple escape-related gags, with Eisner and studio hurrying things along so they can get to the action.

In addition to escaping the guards in the palace, Spirit's going to have to do some swashbuckling, some flying, and some reassuring (the daughter has never heard of the Spirit, being a European gal and all). There's also the "world domination plans," which Spirit and the daughter decide to grab before they leave, leading to a few more panels.

The strip moves briskly, never slowing down too much for an action sequence, though clearly reveling in the swashbuckler sequence. It's a good sequence. They've also got the Spirit in disguise for a good few pages of the strip, leading to the disconcerting moment when they do some beefcake of Spirit punching his way around the castle. It's fun stuff, if a little slight. This one's how you do the overt jingoism (save the obnoxious American superiority business, obviously).

The last page is mostly post-resolution, with Ebony getting his own quick adventure. However, it does draw attention to the strip not knowing what to do with supporting cast when the Spirit's ostensibly on a six week mission and whatnot.



Minor gripe for an otherwise solid strip. And it's not like the finale isn't amusing, it's just... nonsensical, too.

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"The Kidnapping of Ebony"

November 24, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

It's an all-action strip, opening with a thug on the run from the Spirit, desperately clamoring to be let into the hideout. Moments later, the Spirit breaks through the door.

The thugs have kidnapped Ebony in order to lure the Spirit away from his hideout, so they can then torture the location information from Ebony and go plant a couple bodies there. The



police will find them and the Spirit will be a wanted man.

Now, as ever, none of the thugs think about just shooting Spirit dead when they have him standing idle, listening to their schemes. Instead, Ebony's able to get Spirit a pistol—in what, visually, seems to be a racist caricature gag but we'll not dwell—and so Spirit can start kicking butt.

Despite being restrained for some of it, Ebony plays a big role in that butt-kicking. It's a good "dynamic duo" strip for Ebony and Spirit. The thugs' plan is entirely based on their partnership and friendship, and even though Ebony's not two-fisted like Spirit, he's got some moves when it comes to putting down the gangsters. And he never squeals, even though they're torturing him.

Juxtaposed with this extended action sequence is the gang's seemingly legit boss trying to convince Commissioner Dolan and the mayor to investigate the Spirit's hideout for bodies. The boss just doesn't know where the hideout's located… yet.

The scenes at Dolan's office—at least after the first one, which sets up the strip—are breaks from the relentless action. And even though it is just action, Eisner and studio turn it up as far as panel composition and choreography. At one point, Ebony is swinging on a hanging light and we get some great POV shots of the floor. Even that opening chase sequence has a lot of angle work. It's a great looking strip.

Spirit's such a delight. Minus the occasional Ebony visual cringes.

• • •

"Girls' Dorm"

December 1, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

The splash page has Spirit with Ellen over his knee, giving her a spanking for some reason. That reason? Only the Spirit knows.

Anyway.

The strip itself has Ellen luring the Spirit up to her college so she can make him take her to prom. She's told all her friends she can do it and just needs a cadaver from the medical school to make it work. One panicked call to Daddy (Commissioner Dolan) and Spirit and Ebony are winging their way in the autoplane.



"GIRLS' DORM" (DECEMBER 1, 1940), PAGE 6
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"THE HAUNTED HOUSE" (DECEMBER 8, 1940), PAGE 2
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



We'll also get some nice, gentle teasing about Ellen from Ebony, who knows the Spirit likes her attentions and troubles more than he's letting on. It's another of those incongruities with Ebony; he's the Spirit's only confidant (Dolan knows his origin and home address, but little else), a faithful, determined sidekick, and yet visualized as racist caricature.

Ebony will have a particularly good strip, since he's the one who discovers the actual murder. It just so happens one of the college professors will end up dead as Spirit's investigating Ellen's fake murder. She does try to get him to ignore the corpse and take her to the prom, but Spirit's all business.

The strip is a mix of gentle, pointed, funny, and dangerous, which seems like a perfect **Spirit** combo. Except then the art's a bit of a mess. There's some outstanding composition, both for the slapstick action (chase and fisticuffs) and the expository long shot panels, but the detail is some of the worst in ages. It's thin, fine lines, then dotty inks on everyone's face. It feels like a new **Spirit** but with the earliest style trappings.

Almost all of the strip plays for laughs; even when you think it's going to be a danger moment, it resolves as a comedy one. So, despite the uneven art and the (more gentle than usual) sexism, the strip's another perfectly solid entry. If only Ellen could come along as a character a little more. Or, at least, not lose her gains between strips.

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"The Haunted House"

December 8, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

For a relatively simple strip—the Spirit and Ebony go to investigate a supposedly haunted house—there's a lot of exposition involved. We get a history of the haunted house—owned by a guy who has disappeared, the bank is about to foreclose, and it'll go to a gangster who wants to use it as a gambling den (and general purpose hideout), but the Spirit wants the state old folks' home to get it.

About halfway through the strip, we'll get some more exposition about the house, explaining what happened to it before the foreclosure rumblings. A few pages later, we'll get even more. For all that exposition, however, there are still several unanswered questions in the strip… including why the gangster wanted the house

(other than its remote location) and why he never took a look at it.

The "haunting" elements seem to be permanent installations, so any estate agent and prospective buyer would see them.

But, no, it's just Spirit and Ebony bantering on the way there, then Ebony getting scared by everything and Spirit realizing there's something else going on. Even as there end up being multiple fisticuffs opponents, and a handful of gags related to haunting the house, the strip finishes feeling more than a little slight. The stakes at the beginning—Spirit wanting to keep the house from the gangster—change in the middle, then change before the end, then are different once again in the last few panels. It's like Eisner and studio had the idea for a setting, but not really what would go on in it.

Especially considering they reuse actual (and somewhat nonsensical) set pieces.

It's still a perfectly okay strip, with Ebony around for the banter and some slapstick. The haunted house stuff proves fake reasonably quickly, so not a lot of Spirit in "supernatural" situations, but some nice, shadowy panels for sure. Even if the art's never quite as tight as it could be.

Again, **Spirit** has raised the bar so much technically, even slighter strips are fine outings.

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"Slim Pickens"

December 15, 1940

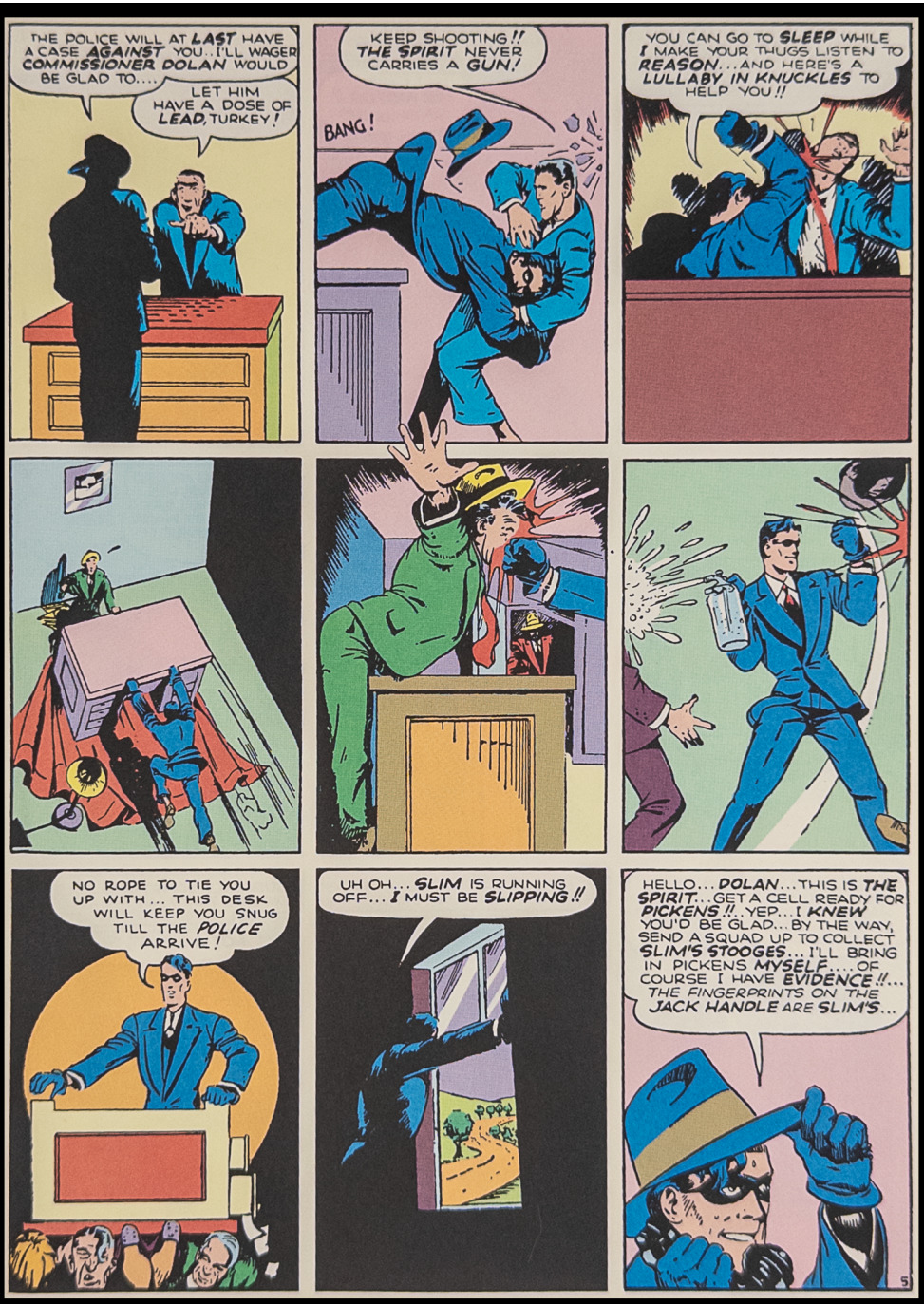
Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)



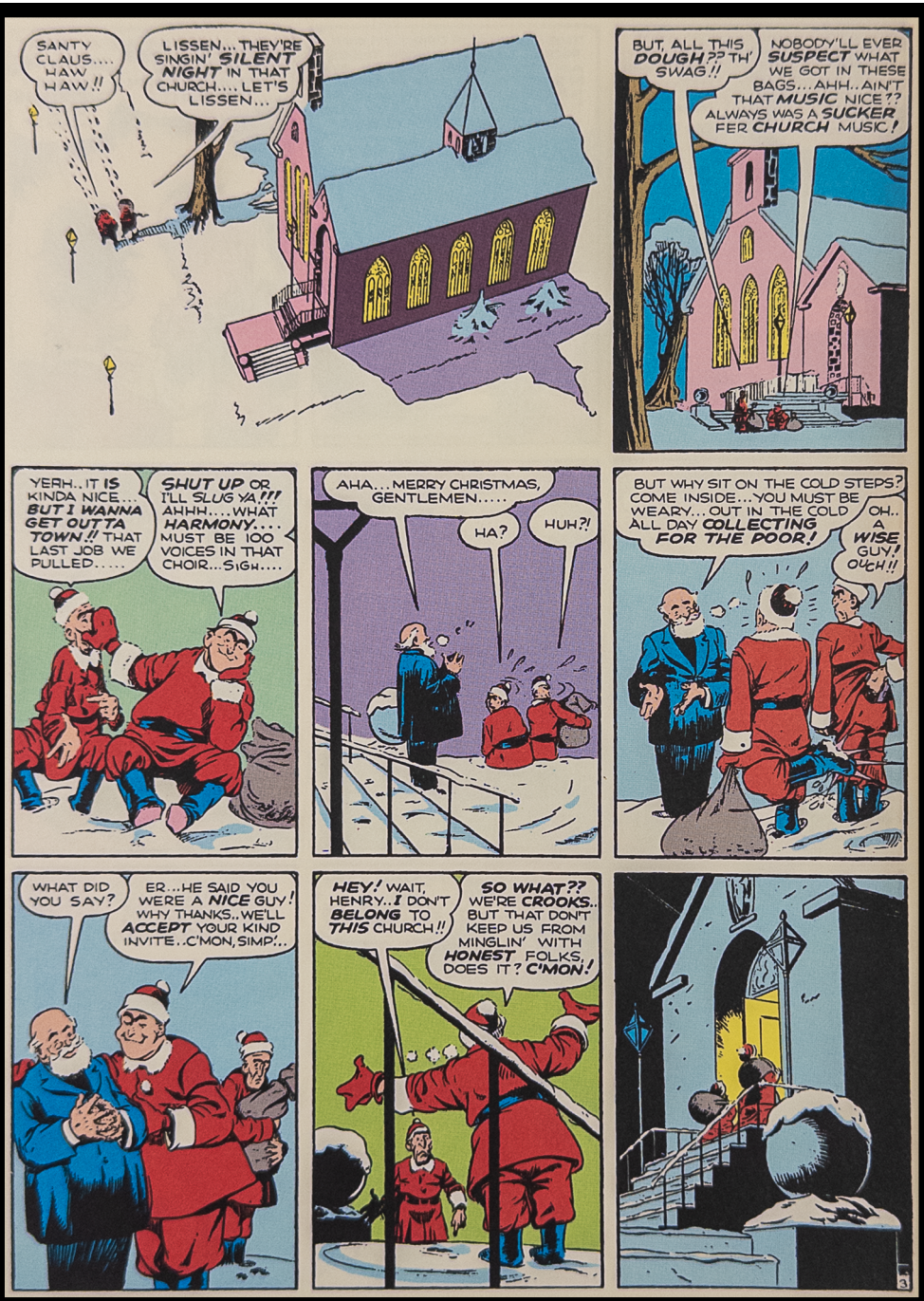
This strip's an incredibly (and intentionally) didactic tale. A young prisoner is about to be paroled and plans on joining the *Slim Pickens* gang. But just before his parole, wouldn't you know it, he's got a new cellmate… Slim Pickens.

Pickens regrets his successful life of crime. To convince the kid crime doesn't pay, he gives his life story, starting with robbing a grocery warehouse and selling the produce on the street. That robbery includes killing the grocery store owner (who Slim worked for), which proves rather crucial later in Slim's tale.

Then we get a recounting of Slim's rise to power. Whenever he finds someone in his way, he just knocks them off and keeps knocking them off until he's a-number one. Commissioner Dolan, the Mayor, and the Spirit are the only people he



"SLIM PICKENS" (DECEMBER 15, 1940), PAGE 5
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).



"CHRISTMAS SPIRIT OF 1940: BLACK HENRY AND SIMPLE SIMON" (DECEMBER 22, 1940), PAGE 3
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).

can't bribe or kill.

When the Spirit finally comes knocking, looking for evidence to lock up Slim, everything starts going wrong. Not for the reader, who gets the treat of Spirit taking out Slim's entire office of thugs in a beautifully rendered sequence. This strip's got a bit too much of the dotty inks (with some very nice line work, too), but that page where the Spirit two-fists his way through the gangsters is sublime.

Minus some occasional Spirit observations, the strip sticks with Slim. We don't follow the Spirit chasing him, but Slim running from the Spirit. He finds himself in an utterly contrived situation, and it convinces him he should've just stayed straight and not become a crook.



After Slim finishes telling his story, the postscript drives home the "crime doesn't pay" message, just in case any readers missed it the other three times.

It's a decent enough strip. The didacticism isn't a surprise (or even particularly cloying) and the way Eisner constructs the narrative, the various reveals work well enough.

The dotty inking hurts some pages worse than others, but never enough to drag it down.

Spirit's found a very reasonable minimum level. Even when the story's a little simple, there's always enough creativity in the art—if not the narrative—to keep things running well enough.

• • •

"Christmas Spirit of 1940: Black Henry and Simple Simon"

December 22, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

For Christmas, the strip does a story without the Spirit. He shows up in the bookends; at the beginning—with some lovely art—Spirit and Ebony discuss Christmas plans. Ebony had been expecting Spirit to go after some known crooks, but instead, Spirit's going to leave it up to the "Spirit of Christmas."

The action cuts to those known crooks, who've decided to rob a bank. It's Christmas Eve, people are busy, and the bank's just gotten a ten thousand dollar deposit (from the Spirit, actually); perfect night for a heist.

They even dress up as Santas to pull it in the holiday spirit.

The robbery itself goes swell, but when the crooked Saint Nicks are on their way out of town, they slow to listen to the tranquil sound of Christmas carols from a nearby church. Worse, the kindly priest comes out and invites them in—after all, they've spent their whole day working with the needy or whatnot.

After some consternation, the crooks agree to attend, and get a dose of the true meaning of Christmas. In addition to the church having a peaceful vibe, their fellow attendees show them kindness, which softens our crooked Santas a little. They just get softer when they hear the money they stole was going to get needy orphans their first ever Christmas presents (and Christmas dinners).

The crooked Krises Kringle scurry out, the guilt too much.

Their individual (and, eventually, joint) resolutions will get the strip to its appropriate Christmas vibes, with the Spirit and friends returning for the finish. They're still not involved in the case—they're just reading about it in the paper on Christmas morning. It's interesting to see who makes the regular cast at the Dolan house—Dolan, Ellen, Spirit, Ebony, and Finnegan, one of Dolan's coppers (who I'm pretty sure at least once tried to railroad Spirit). However, Finnegan's just there as a gag, not participating in the revelry.

It's a good strip. Lots of dotty inking but not too severe. Little cloying but it's Christmas, after all. It's the time of miracles. And spirits.

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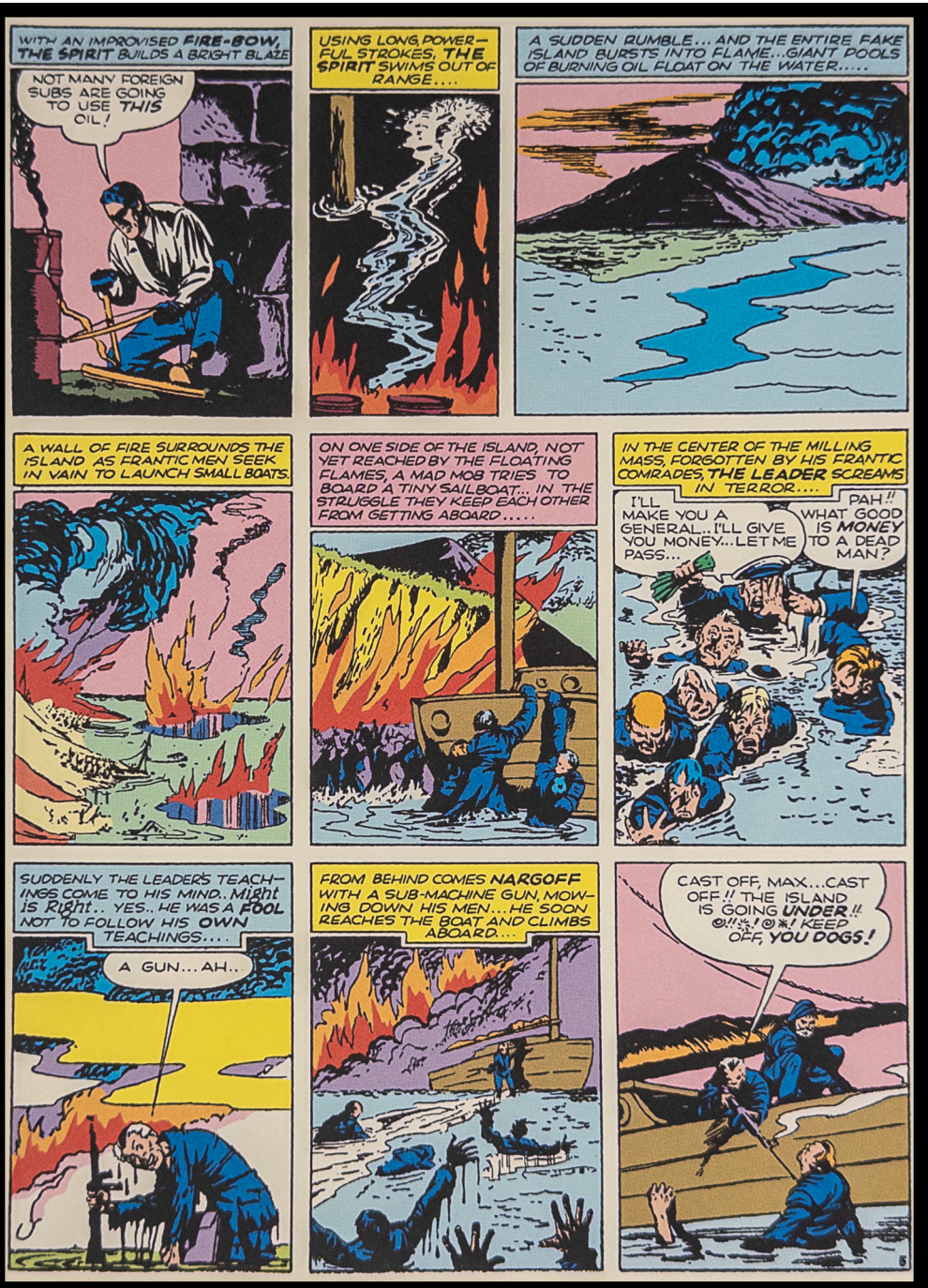
"The Leader"

December 29, 1940

Will Eisner (editor, script, pencils, inks)
Joe Kubert (colors)
Sam Rosen (letters)

The Spirit gets his first mission as a special government agent: identifying enemy powers' fuel depots on the Mexican coastline. The military doesn't want to let the Mexican government know about it because then they'd want to investigate and they don't want to investigate themselves because gunboats will scare off the other bad guys. So they send the Spirit, who meticulously plots his jump point from the military plane, but fails to expect armed sentries.





"THE LEADER" (DECEMBER 29, 1940), PAGE 5
WILL EISNER'S THE SPIRIT ARCHIVES, VOL. 1 (DC COMICS, 2000).

By this time in the war, Italy had joined on the Axis side. Eisner and studio had plenty of possible ways to go with the enemy forces. They went with "Nargoff," which is neither German nor Italian. According to the Internet, it's either Norwegian or Jewish. And Germany had been occupying Norway for months at this point. Maybe he's Norwegian; Nargoff, the enemy leader.

He's also an author, who's written a book about world politics with gems about larger countries having the right by size to take smaller ones. Spirit helps Nargoff understand that system on a personal level later in the strip.

First, Spirit's got to disrupt the submarine fueling station, which he's able to do rather conveniently because it's made out of wood—and wood burns.

The strip goes through three distinct sets of stakes in its eight pages. The Spirit's got to investigate and resolve the possible fueling station. Then the stakes move to Nargoff having to survive that resolution. And then there's Nargoff having to survive, well, the Spirit.

When the Spirit's adversaries die, they rarely do so with the Spirit directly involved. In many cases, he may not even be present. And he generally turns the crooks in alive. So despite the lively, colorful art—lots of blues—and the energy to the action, the strip's third act is dark. The Spirit's solution for the situation is just a little unexpected given his… amiable vibe.

But, it's not wrong about how you deal with fascists.

The strip's got lumps and bumps; also, some rather solid moments. Spirit's first mission as agent could've gone a lot worse.

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THE COMIX SECTION

A STOP BUTTON ZINE

SPRING 2025

NO. 1 SIDE 2

SUPERBOY, THE LEGION OF SUPER-HEROES, AND THE SUPER SQUAD

OCTOBER 1974 - JUNE 1977

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A PANEL FROM “LITTLE NEMO IN SLUMBERLAND,” BY WINSOR MCKAY
(NOVEMBER 26, 1905)



ADDITIONAL NOTES

The Comix Section has two homes on the web:

- https://thestopbutton.com/cs
- https://comix.omg.lol

They’re both currently sparse.

The original author welcomes feedback at thestopbutton@gmail.com.



Superboy #204

October 1974

Cary Bates (script)
Mike Grell (artist)
Ben Oda (letters)
Murray Boltinoff (editor)

What a strange comic book. Cary Bates and Mike Grell contribute both parts, feature and backup, though "feature" is a bit of a stretch.

The lead story is a retcon. In the farther-flung future than the Legion of Superheroes, future Earthlings are obsessed with watching the past through time travel television or something. Except then the kid's time TV is broken and is changing history instead of just observing it. The device has somehow changed Superboy's trials for Legion membership, and now he's not a member anymore, and the fate of reality is at stake.

Oddly, however, the story doesn't show how Superboy failed the trials. Neither is the future kid's resolution—Anti-Lad is his only moniker, the one he takes when he travels back in time to join the Legion to get history back on track. Bates also doesn't do anything with the future repercussions of Superboy not joining the Legion. It's easier to identify all the things Bates doesn't do with the story than the things he does.

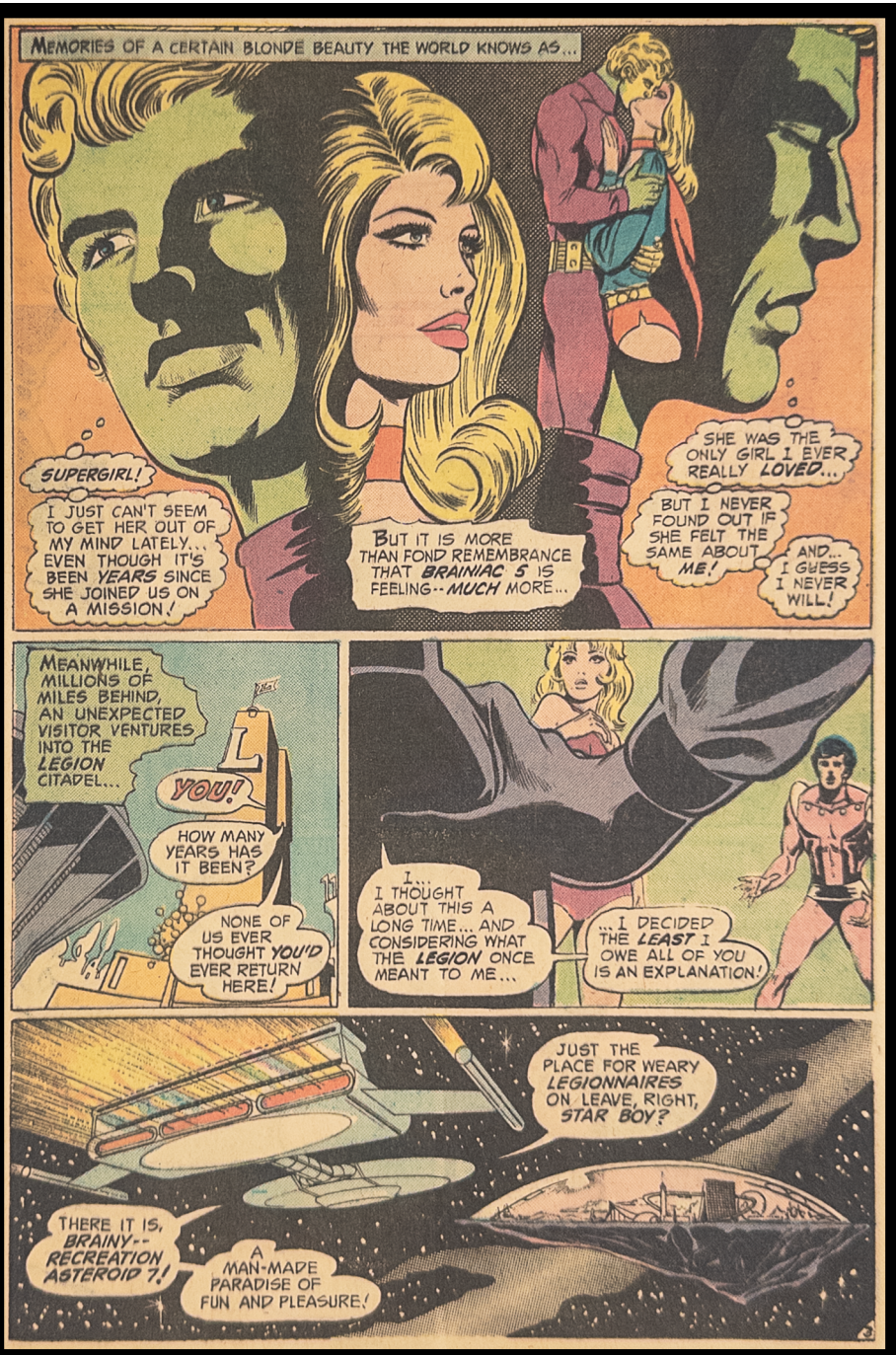
So the comic promises the secret story of Anti-Lad, the Legionnaire no one remembers (because he wiped their memories). It delivers some time travel banter, lots of talking about Superboy but no real Superboy in his own book, Anti-Lad besting the Legionnaires during his membership trial, and Brainiac-5 deducing something's off about the new prospect.

Not much of a story. Grell's art also leaves a lot to be desired.

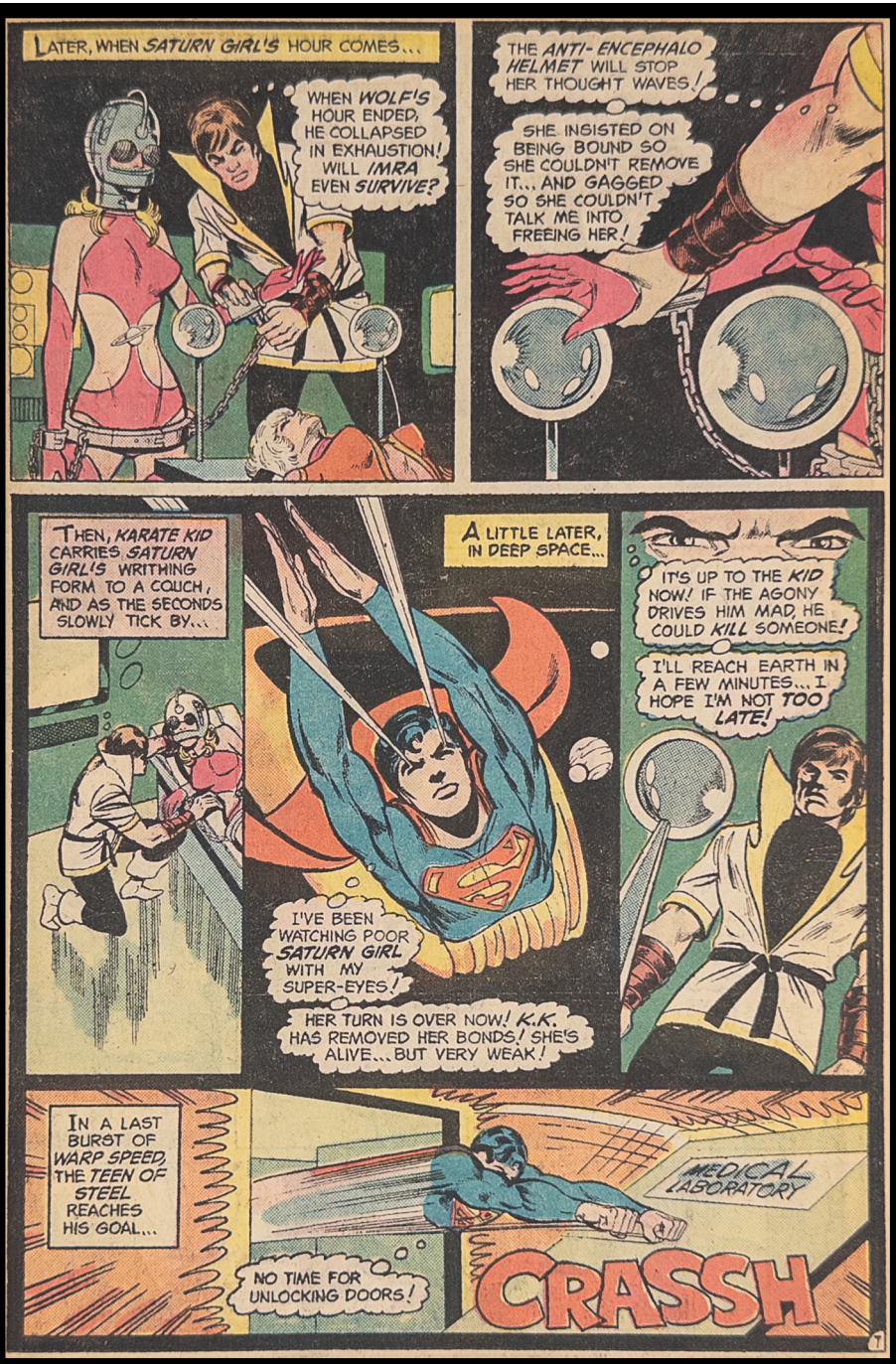
The backup, however, is incredible. Incredibly creepy and bad but still incredible.

It's all about Brainiac-5 being really tired, and, wouldn't you know it, he's really tired because he's made himself a fully functioning Supergirl android. He misses his 20th-century gal, you see, so he makes a new version of her.

Except he doesn't know he's made the android version, so there's a bunch of bait and switch to get to the big reveal. It's utter nonsense in terms of plotting—it's hard to tell if Bates is trying to



"BRAINIAC 5'S SECRET WEAKNESS!", PAGE 3
SUPERBOY #204 (DC COMICS, OCTOBER 1974)



"WHO CAN SAVE THE PRINCESS?", PAGE 7
SUPERBOY #209 (DC COMICS, JUNE 1975)



be inventive and not clearing the bar or if the comic thinks so little of its readership—and then Grell's art… doesn't help. There are even panels where Grell's art goes from hot to cold as they're read, drawing attention to the deficiencies.

The first story's pointless and bad, and the second story's pointless, bad, and icky.

Though I did just realize Bates doesn't address whether Brainiac-5 admits to his teammates he's using Legion resources for his sex toys.

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Superboy #209

June 1975

Jim Shooter[1], Cary Bates[2] (script)
Mike Grell (artist)
Ben Oda[1], Joe Letterese[2] (letters)
Murray Boltinoff (editor)

The first story, from Jim Shooter and Mike Grell, opens with Princess Projectra's shuttle crashing as she attempts to land at Legion headquarters. Timber Wolf is there to save the day, complaining about "women drivers" the whole time. Karate Kid shows up in time for the Princess to stumble out of the shuttle and fall unconscious. They're sweethearts, so he's very concerned.

Turns out Projectra has a rare "pain plague," which causes terrible pain for a number of hours then passes. It's technically not fatal, except the pain kills you, so who cares if the disease doesn't. The Legion comes up with a solution—each Legionnaire will take an hour of the pain so it doesn't kill anyone, and Projectra will be spared.

They immediately find out the pain intensifies as the illness develops (so hour two's pain is worse than hour one's). They also discover the Legionnaire who takes the pain will lose control of their powers (and mind), attacking everyone around them. So it's all very dangerous. Good thing Superboy is flying across the galaxy at warp speed to get there for the final hour.

Even if it weren't poorly written and poorly illustrated, the story's also poorly plotted. A deus ex machina resolves everything, with every page bringing some immediately resolved problem to keep the story going. Shooter's sexism might be the move of a dick writer, but

the rest of the story is just the moves of a bad one.

Cary Bates handles writing chores for the backup (with Grell returning and arguably much worse). Some tween has won a contest to spend the day with the Legion, complete with his own flight ring. Pay attention to the flight ring thing; it'll be "important."

First up on the tour is getting the mail, except this time someone has sent the Legion a "witch wolf," the most dangerous animal in the solar system (our solar system?) because it emits poison radiation and mind controls people's powers to backfire on them.

One by one, the Legion goes into the room with the witch wolf, and, one by one, it reverses their powers and knocks them out. Will the guest star tween somehow figure out what's going on, something the professional superheroes just can't intuit on their own? Most definitely.

And will he be rewarded at the end with the promise of sexual contact from the female Legionaries, their male colleagues cheering the lad on? Also, most definitely.

The comic starts and ends icky from the sexism. In between is bad writing from two different writers and tepid (and worse) art.

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Superboy #212

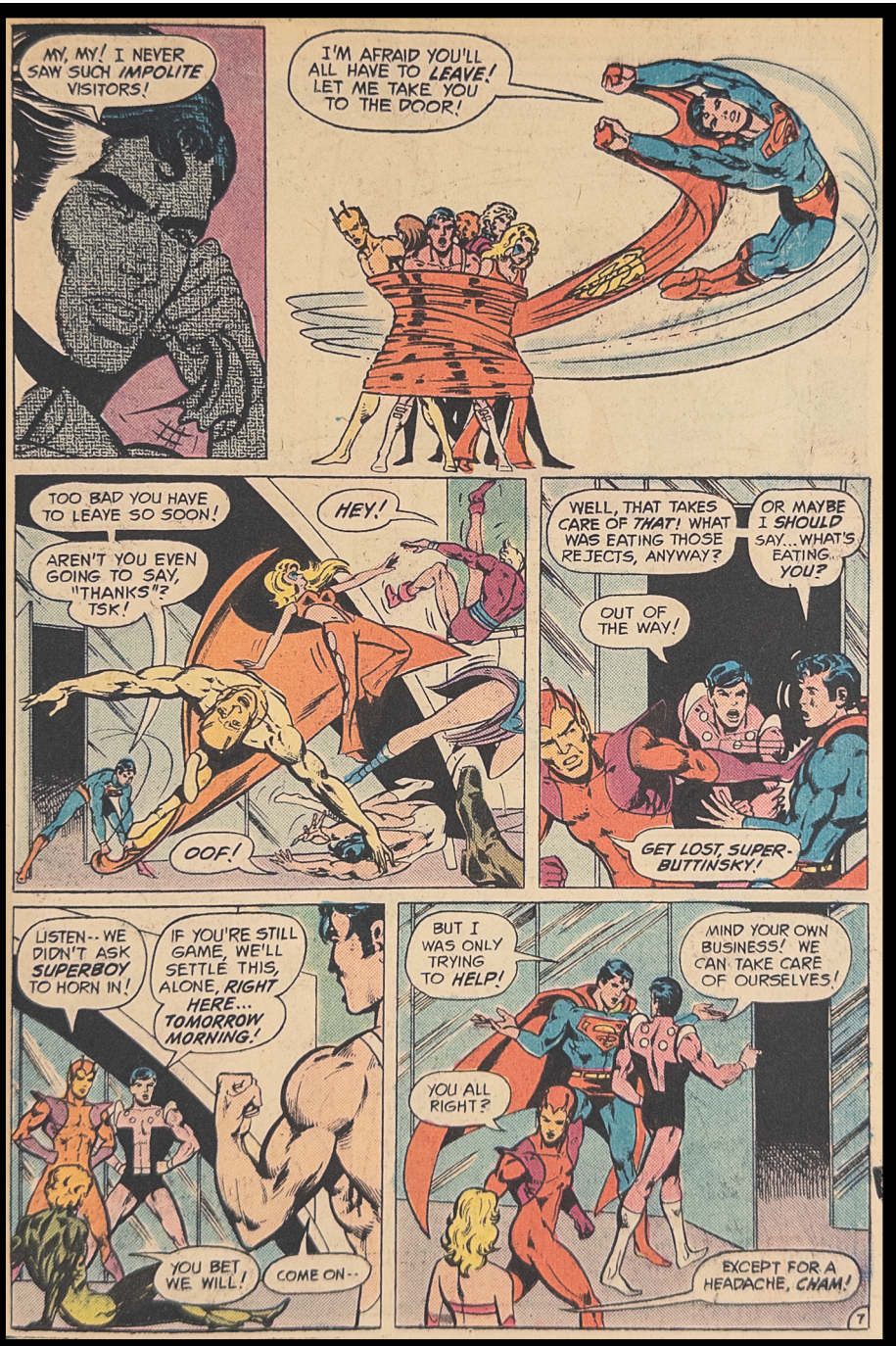
October 1975

Jim Shooter (script)
Mike Grell (artist)
Ben Oda (letters)
Jack C. Harris (assistant editor)
Murray Boltinoff (editor)

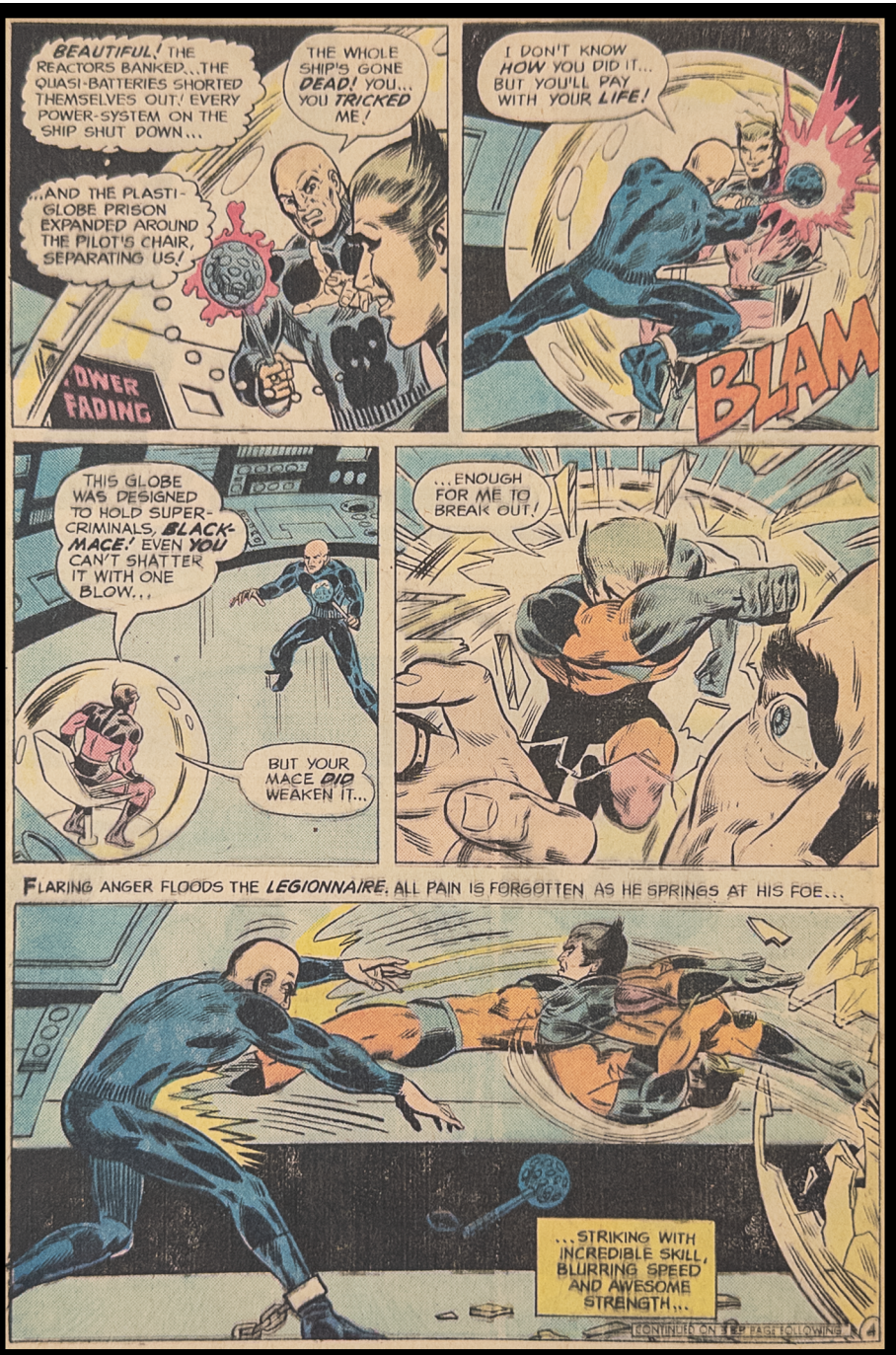


Jim Shooter and Mike Grell contribute both stories this issue and offer little quarter. Grell's art is slightly better than usual (or at least not as obviously deficient), and I guess Shooter could be worse.

The first story is about a bunch of Legion rejects busting into the Legion headquarters and kicking the Legion's butt. Each of the rejects is from the same planet as their opponent and uses those same powers to overwhelm the Legionnaire. It's not until Superboy shows up the fight ends.



"LAST FIGHT FOR A LEGIONNAIRE", PAGE 7
SUPERBOY #212 (DC COMICS, OCTOBER 1975)



"TRAPPED TO LIVE-- FREE TO DIE!", PAGE 4
SUPERBOY #213 (DC COMICS, DECEMBER 1975)

Except then his teammates are mad at him for stopping them from getting their brains beat in. So they challenge the rejects to a rematch the next day. Little do the rejects realize the Legionnaires have a plan, and that plan is teamwork. You can beat the crap out of lots of people if you plan on how you're going to do it.

Not really sure **Superboy** is a morally virtuous comic book.

Anyway, the rejects once again pair off against their opposites, with a different result this time.

There's also a nonsense subplot about some cop coming to take away one of the Legionaries. He's got a surprise (at least what Shooter considers a surprise) reason.



It's a bad story about a bunch of teenagers trying to beat up a bunch of other teenagers.

The backup is about Legion of Substitute Heroes member Night Girl trying to take down a common criminal gang; only the common criminals know her weakness-she doesn't have any powers in light. Thank goodness Shadow Lass comes along at the right time to save her, but they're still not powerful enough together to take out the regular human criminals with guns.

I don't think the crooks make any remarks about the heroes being girls and, therefore, lesser (though the first story does so), but Night Girl's boyfriend, Cosmic Boy, will make fun of her for being a girl superhero. He dumps her for it only to discover his replacement date is wanting.

Too bad the crooks decided to start killing Legionnaires—him first so he doesn't get mad at them for taking out Night Girl. Action, misogyny, and resolution ensue.

It's another unpleasant issue. Even when Grell may have an interesting idea for the panel composition, his detail work is bad. Not as bad as some of his figure work, however; in Grell's future, no one has rib cages when they fly. Or their rib cages are as high as their pectorals.

Doesn't matter; bad comic.

• • •

Superboy #213

December 1975

Jim Shooter (script)
Mike Grell (artist[1], pencils[2])
Bill Draut (inks[2])

Jack C. Harris (assistant editor)
Murray Boltinoff (editor)

Despite a poor opening, the feature's not terrible. I mean, Mike Grell's mid-forties-looking Superboy is always a thing, but otherwise—besides the incessant bickering between the Legionnaires—it's an okay story. Once you get past Superboy's introduction to the story, which is thankfully the worst Jim Shooter exposition we get in the whole story.

The introduction promises Ultra Boy cracking under the pressures of being a superhero, but it's actually something tied to a very specific trauma for Ultra Boy. The resolution to it entirely invalidates the introduction teaser, but whatever. It could be much worse.

The Legion's hanging out at headquarters when someone breaks in, getting past all their advanced defenses. It's the best thief in the galaxy; come to tell the Legion he's going to steal their miracle machine. Brainiac-5 accuses the thief of being a liar because Brainy's never heard of him.

The thief points out he's never been arrested or caught because he's the best, so how would Brainiac-5 have heard of him? Brainiac-5, being written by a Jim Shooter-level intelligence, has no rejoinder.

The thief transports out or whatever, promising to return, and the Legion has a fit about what to do next. They take a vote on destroying the machine, only to discover they can't destroy it anyway; it's too well-built. So they up the defenses and stand guard.

We still haven't had Ultra Boy cracking under pressure, by the way. We've got to wait for them to try to track the thief down, running into a space dinosaur instead, and Ultra Boy hates space dinosaurs. Good thing the comic's called **Superboy** and Superboy can see across the universe.

There's nothing particularly good about the story, but there's also nothing particularly bad—Shooter made it through a whole story without any sexism—and while Grell's going to Grell, maybe it's worn me down by now.

The backup's similarly indistinctly "not terrible." Also not at all good. Shooter scripts, Grell's on art with Bill Draut. Is Grell better with someone else inking? Not really. Draut makes the lines bolder, which isn't really Grell's problem. None of the body work is improved.

On a solo mission, Timber Wolf answers a distress call, but something else may be going on. To survive, Timber Wolf will have to use his smarts and knowledge of the Legion policy and procedure handbook.

So many thought balloons from Timber Wolf. None of them thoughtful, but also none of them filled with the character's usually sexism.

The comic's not so much not bad as inoffensive. It's still not anything good, but inoffensive is a good start.

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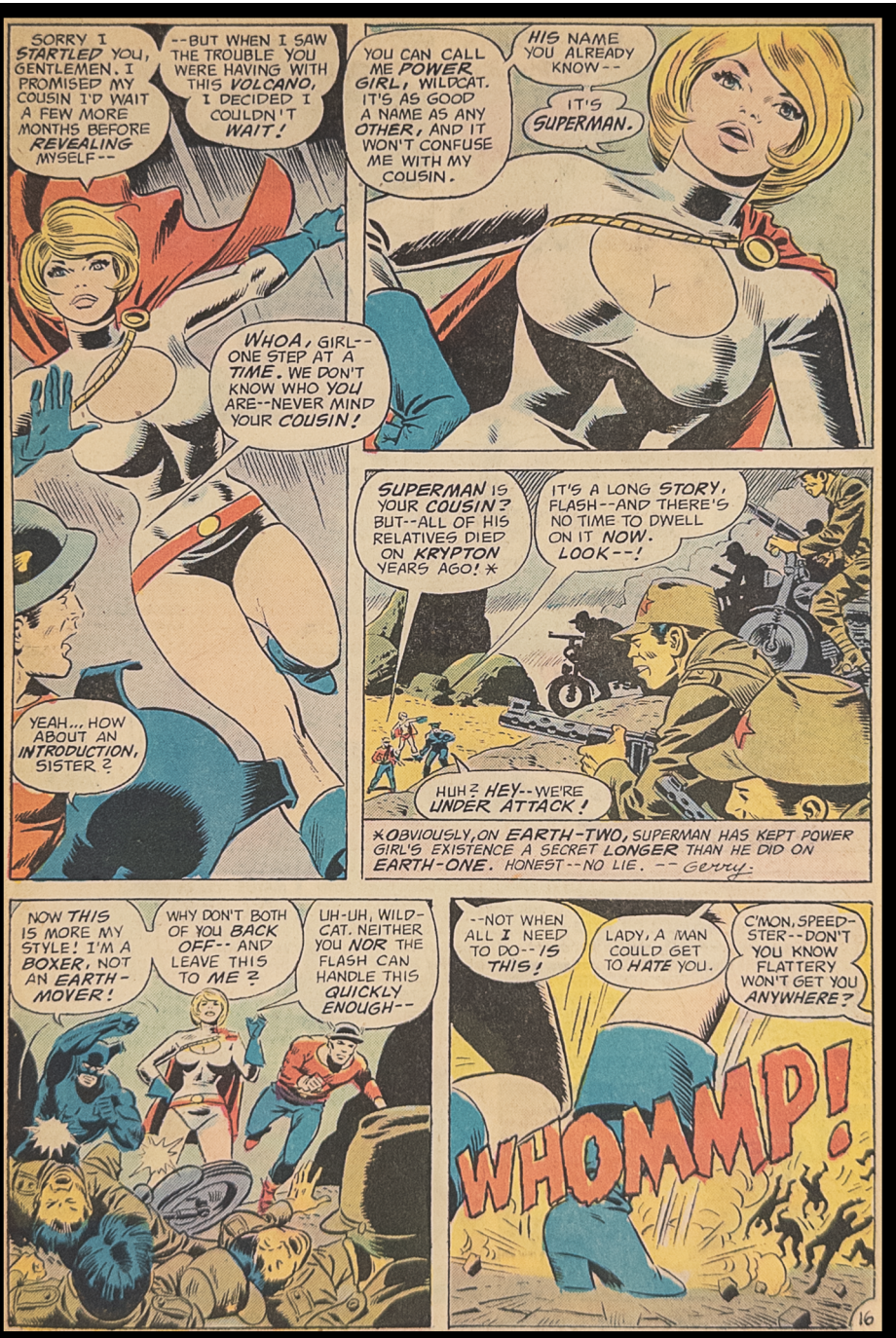
Superboy #214

January 1976

Jim Shooter[1], Cary Bates[2] (script)
Mike Grell (artist[1], pencils[2])
Bill Draut (inks[2])
Ben Oda[1], Joe Letterese[2] (letters)
Bill Draut (inks[2])
Jack C. Harris (assistant editor)
Murray Boltinoff (editor)



"NO PRICE TOO HIGH", PAGE 8
SUPERBOY #214 (DC COMICS, JANUARY 1976



"ALL STAR SUPER SQUAD", PAGE 16
ALL-STAR COMICS #58 (DC COMICS, FEBRUARY 1976)

Ah, yes, the valiant superheroes of the future… who are willing to sacrifice a little kid's life because they don't like him. Well, not all of them, but definitely Wildfire and maybe Karate Kid. Thank goodness Superboy (with his forty-five-year-old Grell features) is there to remind them they're not supposed to let innocent people die just because they're unpleasant.

The Legion's on an automated factory planet. The planet's been attacking ships trying to land, including one after the Legion arrives. Superboy saves the ship's pilot before the planet's lasers zap it. Turns out the pilot is an obnoxious little kid (who barely seems aware of the Legion, which ought to be interesting but isn't), son of the planet's owner.

Too bad the villain turns out to be a fired overseer who hates the planet's owner and would kill the kid at the first opportunity. So Superboy does his best to try to keep the kid safe, even as the kid thinks the heroes are just trying to cramp his style. Wildfire takes a different approach—let the kid die so the Legion can escape.

Maybe if writer Jim Shooter had a better moral compass, the story would read better; as is, the reader's supposed to identify with Wildfire but eventually agree with Superboy, who's actually not showing all his cards. So… the needs of the few only outweigh the needs of the many when you're playing with marked cards.

At the very least, there are a couple okay big action splashes from Mike Grell. They're usually cushioned with some strangely distorted human faces or whatever's going on with Wildfire's helmet, but there are at least a couple okay visual moments.

The backup—Grell on pencils, Cary Bates writing, Bill Draut on inks—is about Brainiac-5 trying to help Shrinking Violet with a mental health issue. She's just had a nasty near accident with another Legionnaire in the gym—she almost got stomped on—and now she can't shrink any more. Brainy ignores Saturn Girl's "professional" psychiatric advice on how to deal with it and pushes forward with an extreme treatment.



It's a terribly plotted story—the first few pages are all talking heads about Violet's problems (talking about her, she's not conscious for it because she's so near her mental breaking point), then there's some setup of Brainy's treatment idea. But then the actual action of the story is barely a page and a half, and it's… about getting stuck in a big ball of wire.

Once again, Brainiac-5 doesn't seem very smart at all.

Overall, however, the issue's nowhere near as bad as its creators can get. Unless, of course, you want your superheroes helping people instead of pushing them under busses.



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All-Star Comics #58

February 1976

Gerry Conway (editor, script)
Ric Estrada (pencils)
Wally Wood, Al Sirois (inks)
Ben Oda (letters)
Paul Levitz (assistant editor)

The issue opens with the JSA reading their email—no joke—and an anonymous sender telling them there will be disasters in three major cities: Seattle, Capetown, and Peking. The heroes split into pairs to investigate.

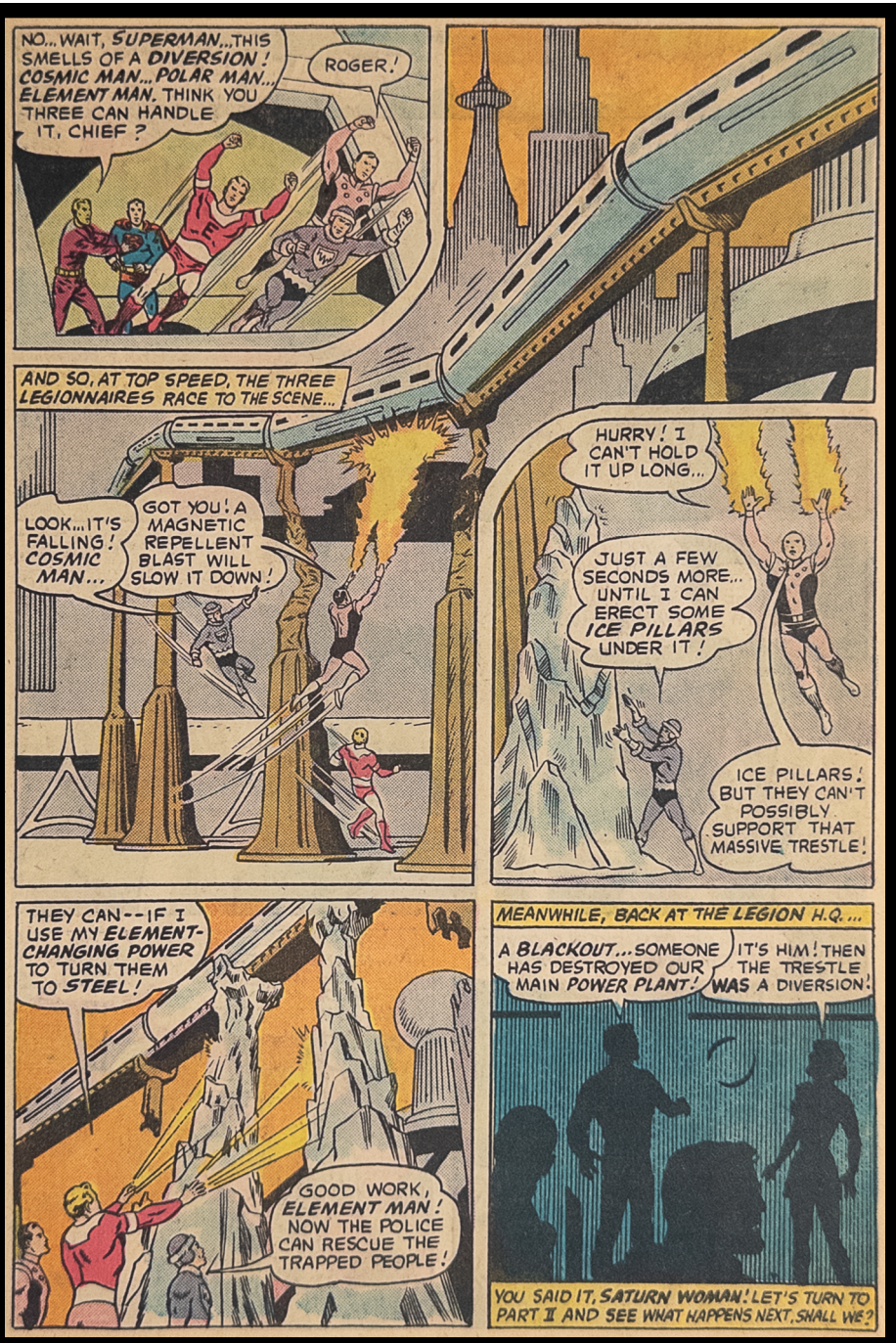
Seattle is Dr. Mid-Nite and Hawkman, except the action there begins with Star-Spangled Kid foiling a bank robbery. Once we get a bunch of Kid's thought balloons about his cosmic rod (literally a cosmic rod, not his… anyway), it's time for an earthquake. Hawkman and Dr. Mid-Nite see him trying to save people from above; Hawkman wants to help, but as Kid's psychiatrist, Mid-Nite, says if they help, it'll give Kid a complex.

So they just watch as maybe people die because one superhero isn't enough for an earthquake.

In Capetown, Dick Grayson—oh, right, JSA is Earth-Two, which means everyone's older… kind of like they'd kept aging after WWII but not really because Dick Grayson's in his twenties, not his late forties—Dick Grayson's a UN envoy and he's there when a gas attack occurs. Dr. Fate and Green Lantern show up and do most of the work, with Green Lantern whining the whole time about how he's not very smart and he wishes he were smart.



"BRAINWAVE BLOWS UP!", PAGE 2
ALL-STAR COMICS #59 (DC COMICS, APRIL 1976)



"THE ADULT LEGION!", PAGE 12
DC SUPER STARS #3 (DC COMICS, MAY 1976)

Finally, in Peking, we get Flash and Wildcat arriving just in time to stop a newly appeared volcano. Power Girl gets there after a page, sealing up the volcano and explaining the conceit of the comic to the heroes—writer Gerry Conway has already laid it out at least once for the reader, so he's really hammering it in with Power Girl's exposition. What if there were three disasters and three young heroes who really did all the work while the JSA was powerless? Wouldn't that make a great concept for a comic?

Having read the comic, no, not really. Especially not since Conway's wordy exposition oscillates between vapid superhero worship and redundant griping. Wildcat, for instance, spends most of the comic throwing in some asinine remark. But the rest of the heroes are still at least a little pissy about… being superheroes. Maybe some of the disconnect is all of them ostensibly being grown-ass men in at least their forties, yet still utterly feckless. Or Conway just doesn't have a comic so much as an idea for one.

Ric Estrada and Wally Wood are on art. Lots of weird body poses, particularly with the flying (and not just Power Girl, who Estrada makes sure to get her cleavage and her leggy legs in every panel), but it's such a rushed story, it doesn't really matter.

All-Star Comics—returning after a twenty-five-year hiatus (sort of)—is off to a soggy start.

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All-Star Comics #59

April 1976

Gerry Conway (editor, script)
Paul Levitz (assistant editor, plot assist)
Ric Estrada (pencils)



Wally Wood, Al Sirois (inks)
Ben Oda (letters)

All-Star slightly improves from last time, mainly because Wildcat has fewer opportunities to be a sexist prick. There's a huge one at the beginning, so much of one the Flash comments on it (internally) and assumes his friend is upset about the disasters threatening the world when it's just because a Power Girl is stronger than him.

But Wildcat, Flash, and Power Girl are away most of the issue, on a rocket to intercept Brainwave's spaceship.

Instead, the action checks in with the other heroes—Robin, Green Lantern, and Dr. Fate; they get their scene, which reveals the villain is hypnotizing the heroes into believing regular people are his evil henchmen. In the very next scene, Hawkman, Dr. Mid-Nite, and Star Spangled Kid beat the ever-loving shit out of a bunch of henchmen. So either the bad guy had some real henchmen and some fake henchmen, which seems like a lot of extra work, or our heroes beat up a bunch of civilians.

Because despite writer Gerry Conway's inability to stop with the superhero worship thought balloons of most of the characters—and then the general exposition, too—he underwrites the book's action. But still somehow paces it really well. The issue's nowhere near a success, but it's got some good art (Ric Estrada and Wally Wood again).

It's also got some not-good art, and it's still weird how Estrada contorts Power Girl's cleavage and gams into every panel. Even when she's saving the world. Conway's going on and on about how it's so much more heroic because she's not Supergirl of Earth-One, and Estrada's drooling on the page.

Then there's the villain, Brainwave. He's got googly eyes. Googly eyes had been a craze by the time this comic came out; the creators must've known, yet still, they did googly eyes.

Much of the issue is spent with Brainwave. We get his recent backstory, just how it pertains to the current event, and then he's around a lot. When the action gets to him after the hero check-ins, it stays with him, which makes Conway's plotting even more successful.

The finale's way too purple in the exposition, but it's dramatic enough. It's mostly Dr. Fate talking, and Conway doesn't give Fate any personality, which makes him likable because everyone with personality seems like a dick.

Of course, Estrada and Wood have problems with Fate's helmet.

Baby steps.

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DC Super Stars #3

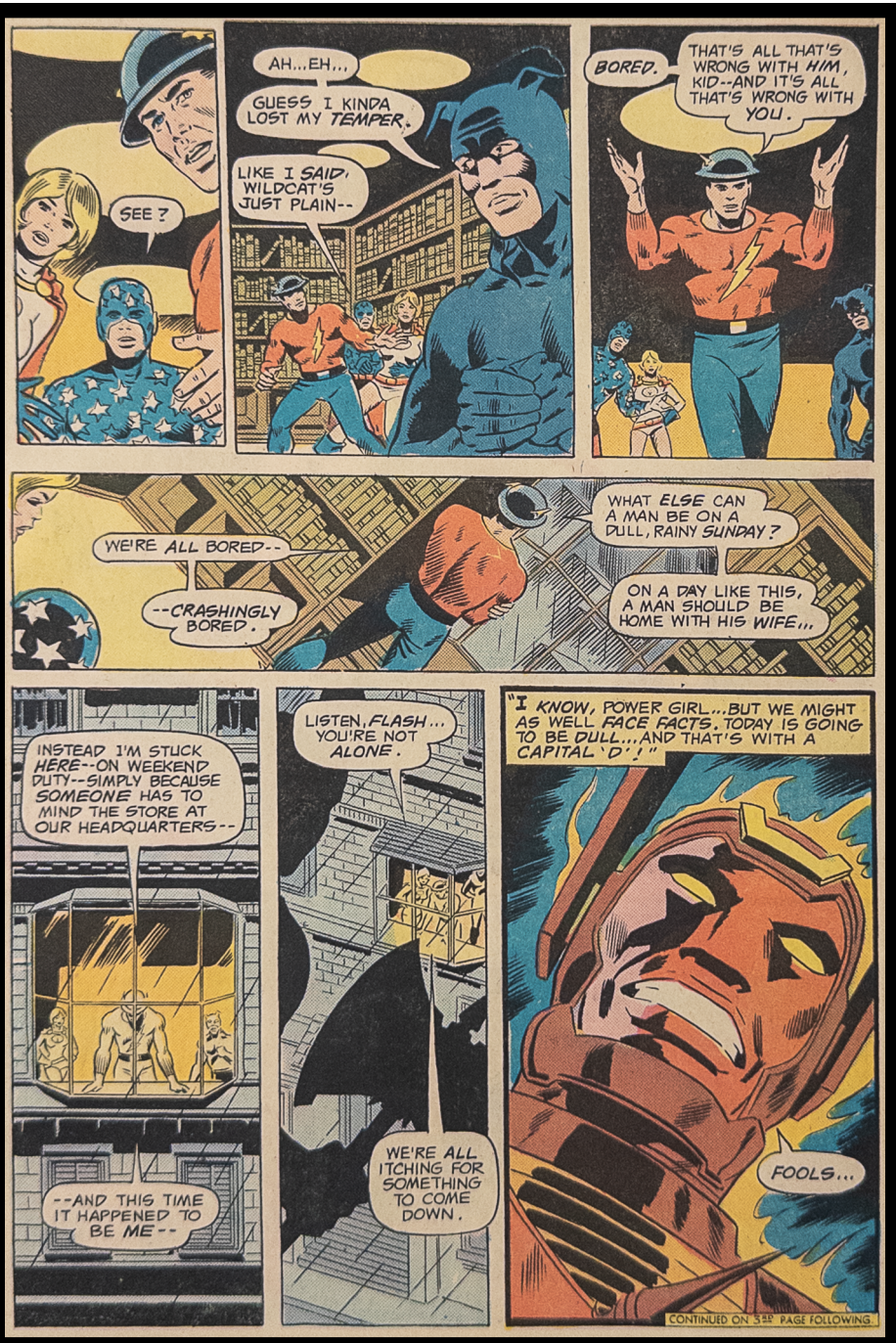
May 1976

Jim Shooter (script, layouts)
Curt Swan (pencils)
George Klein (inks)
Milt Snapinn (letters)
Mort Weisinger (original editor)
E. Nelson Bridwell (editor)

This issue of **Super Stars** reprints an eight-year-old **Adventure Comics** two-parter about Superman visiting the Legion a little further in the future, so they're all adults. The script is one of those infamous teenage Jim Shooter scripts, and, you know, it's not bad. I mean, it's heavy on exposition, but the story's mostly a tour of the future for Superman.

Eventually, after the rest of the Legion assembles, we find out someone is wrecking Legion property, and Brainiac-5 can't figure out how it could be happening. Thank goodness Superman's there to remember a factoid to reveal the whole story, something Brainiac-5 presumably should've known.

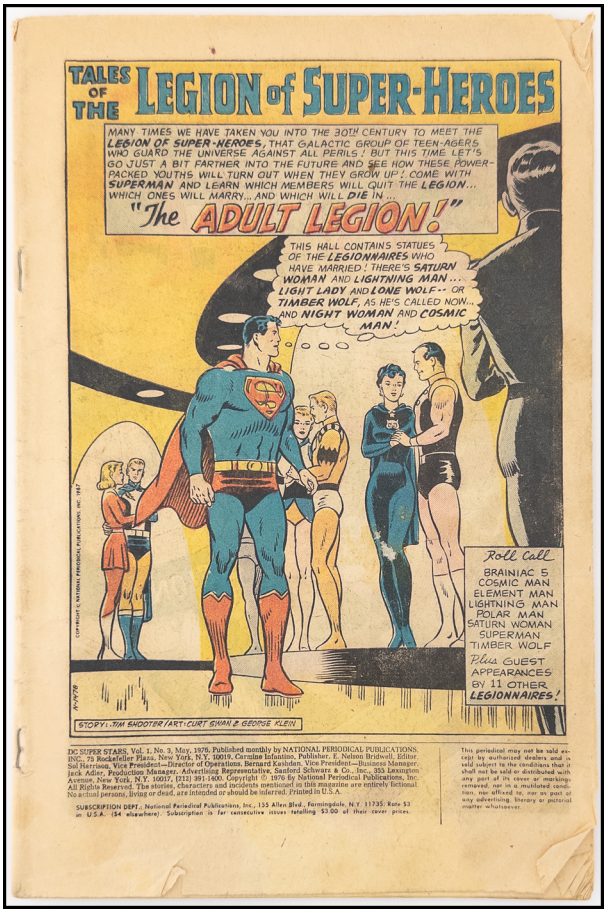
Superman's tour is all quite genial and pleasant. The art from Curt Swan and George Klein is charming and energetic. Swan's always at least solid, with some fantastic panels on occasion.



"VULCAN: SON OF FIRE!", PAGE 4
ALL-STAR COMICS #60 (DC COMICS, JUNE 1976)



"THE SECRET VILLAIN THE WORLD NEVER KNEW", PAGE 8
SUPERBOY #218 (DC COMICS, JULY 1976)



The second part of the story reveals the returning villains who engineered all the drama the first time around. Superman, however, doesn't get to participate. Instead, various adult Legionnaires go to remote destinations to fight supervillains in order to free a fellow Legionnaire. Shooter does all the math on the hero and villain's superpowers, somehow canceling one another, or maybe something in the environment. It's thoughtful and thorough without being particularly entertaining or creative.

But there's also the Swan artwork to keep things moving smoothly. Shooter doesn't have a single bump in the issue. Not even the bewildering finish, which features the adult Legionnaires needing help and getting it from an unlikely pair of guest stars. Presumably, there's a story behind the cameos.

Overall, it's an entertaining read. It gets a little long at times—even if you're curious about adult Legionnaires, they're rarely in it for more than a panel or two. Those cameos never add up; at least in the second half, the story's got some urgency. Despite part one's villain being more dangerous than anyone in the second half, the future tour sets a relaxed pace. Superman solving the mystery is very relaxed, too. Shooter keeps multiple details from the reader in these stories, just to surprise in a couple of pages. It's lazy, but… Swan mostly covers it. And at least those abbreviated scenes move a little faster.

The stories are decent enough Silver Age DC Comics. Not Swan's best work (and I'll never know on Shooter's) but it's a successful enough, engaging enough two-parter.

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All-Star Comics #60

June 1976

Gerry Conway (editor, script)
Keith Giffen (layouts)
Wally Wood (pencils, inks)
Al Sirois (inks)
Ben Oda (letters)
Paul Levitz (assistant editor)

It's a few weeks after last issue (and adventure) and the doldrums of being a superhero have sunk in. The issue opens on a rainy day at the JSA brownstone, with Power Girl challenging the Flash to a race. Wildcat's busy having anger management issues about television while Star-Spangled Kid wonders what's wrong with him.

Flash will excuse away Wildcat's behavior (again). It's annoying as if writer Gerry Conway had to include some nonsense excusing of it, which just makes Flash seem like he's full of it, too.

But they won't be bored long, because new villain Vulcan attacks them. Vulcan looks a little like a Jack Kirby character; he's got a New God headband, for instance. The art this issue is Keith Giffen and Wally Wood; Giffen doesn't change Power Girl's outfit or anything, but he doesn't emphasize her, well, bare flesh the way Ric Estrada did the last couple issues. It's a welcome change.

Even if Conway's dialogue for Power Girl constantly has her making remarks about women's liberation, usually in reference to some dude not being into it. Conway's also the editor on this book, so clearly, he's not getting the guidance he actually needs. Particularly given the tangents the comic goes on.

So, the new villain is attacking the brownstone. Then we cut to Green Lantern's office woes (his newspaper's running out of money). Dr. Fate shows up—in civvies just to drag it out a few more panels—to collect Green Lantern so they can go to a top-secret Army briefing.

About Vulcan.

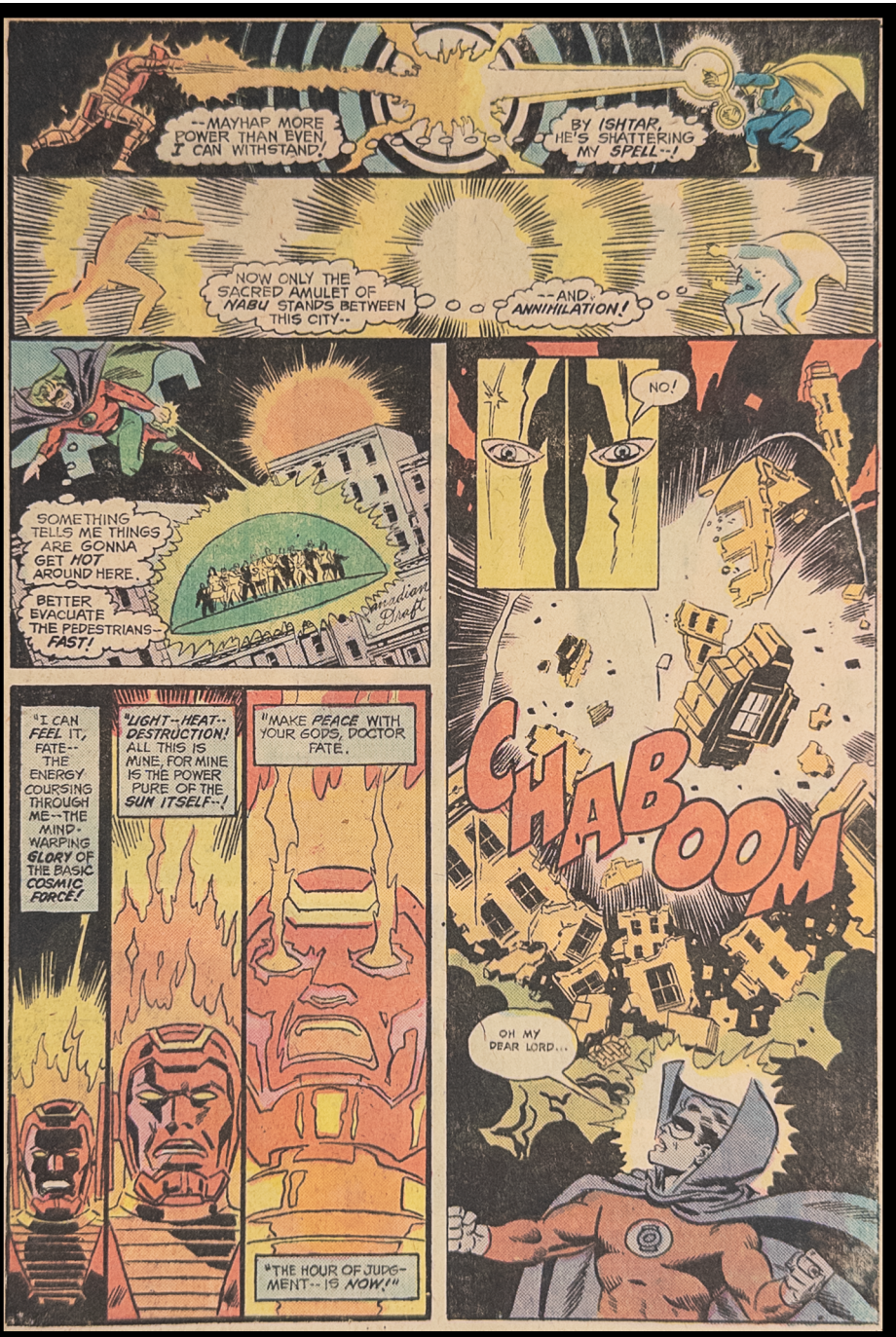
There's a flashback about Vulcan; he's a JSA-worshipping astronaut who cracked under the pressure of actual space travel, killing his crew mates, then becoming a fire creature. It's simultaneously a little and a lot.

Then Green Lantern and Dr. Fate go to confront the bad guy, and the comic's over. It's so oddly plotted, especially since the Army briefing scene

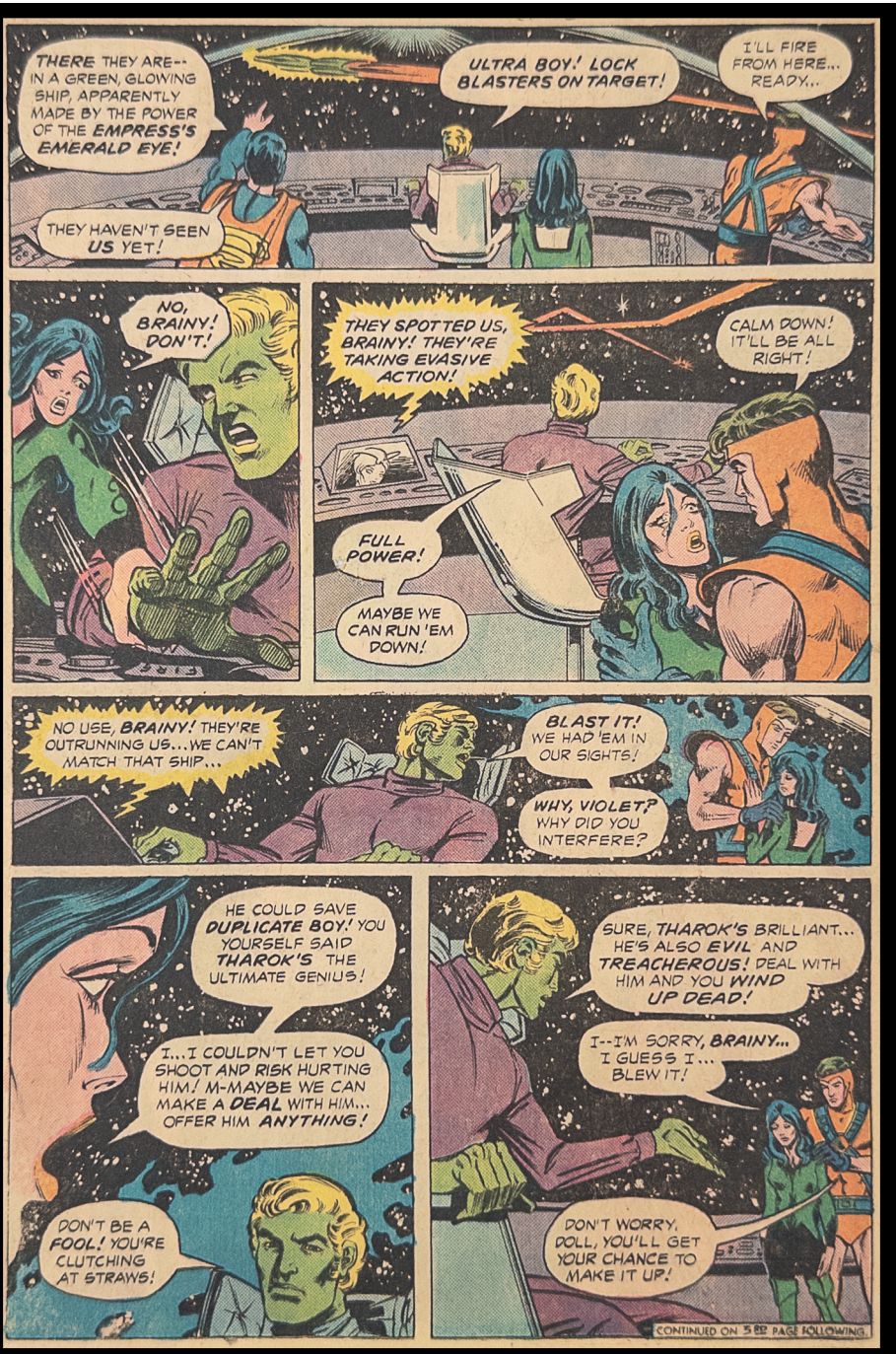


was mostly connecting the dots to the first scene with Vulcan. It might've made more sense if... the JSA headquarters had some kind of alarm system to alert the other members of the attack.

As far as characterizations go, Power Girl and Dr. Fate stand out the most. Wildcat's played for (bewilderingly targeted) laughs, Star Spangled Kid is bland, Jay Garrick's full of shit, and Green Lantern's a buzzkill and a half. Power Girl's at least sympathetic—even if Conway's not convinced she's experiencing misogyny at every turn, he's still writing it for her to experience—and Dr. Fate's flat but competent.



"HELLFIRE AND HOLOCAUST", PAGE 5
ALL-STAR COMICS #61 (DC COMICS, AUGUST 1976)



"THE PLUNDER PLOY OF THE FATAL FIVE", PAGE 7
SUPERBOY #219 (DC COMICS, SEPTEMBER 1976)

Who knew competent superheroes were so much to ask for?

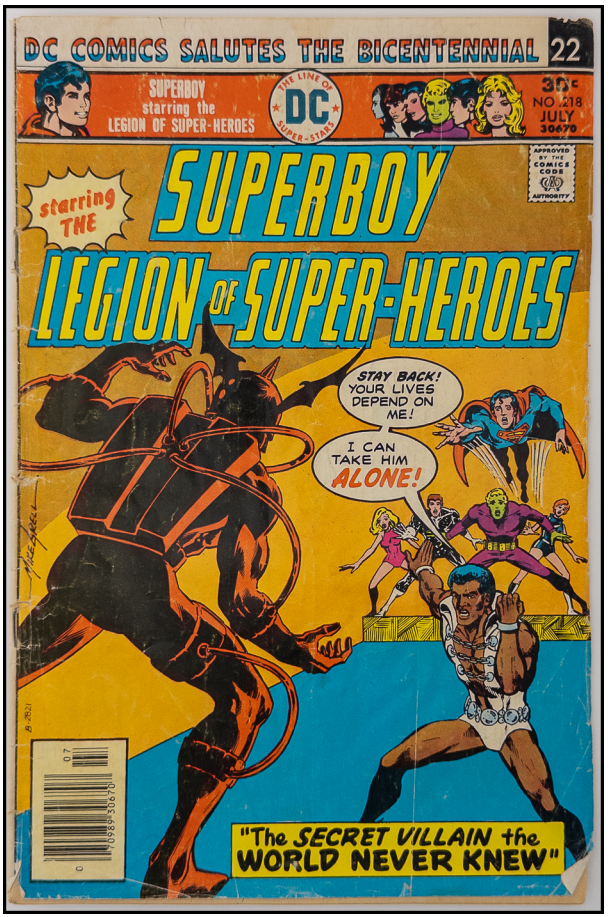
Not much better than the previous outings, but a little.

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Superboy #218

July 1976

Cary Bates (script)
Mike Grell (artist)
Jack C. Harris (assistant editor)
Murray Boltinoff (editor)



This issue features Tyroc's formal admission to the Legion, which will be handled entirely in long shot. Given it's the ostensible point of the whole issue—the story's about Tyroc's last test before membership—the abrupt finish is a little disconcerting. Except it shouldn't be unexpected considering the rest of the issue; writer Cary Bates aims the reader's attention at some very specific scenes and details, all meant to distract from the subterfuges going on (or to emphasize them).

Of course, more on Tyroc might not be better. Bates has the Legion discussing their new member—a being from a "black race" they discovered somewhere on Earth—who thinks the Legion's a tad white. Bates makes sure the white Legionnaires explain to one another (certainly not Tyroc) how they can't possibly be racist because they have blue-skinned aliens on the team or whatever. It's trash, and the less of it, the better.

The issue opens with some Legion rejects leaving headquarters dejected once again. Is it important? You know it. Bates seemingly is using it as a way to introduce Tyroc to the story; he's flying away. A scene later, he will teleport himself back to headquarters and say he's doing it from the shuttle parking lot. All of the action in the issue relates to the Legionnaire's individual powers, and Bates is showcasing them, but these showcases aren't... good. Or compelling. They're not even the most visual. Like everything else in the issue, they're perfunctory.

Tyroc has brought all his gear to move into Legion headquarters, but his admission ceremony gets interrupted by secret supervillain

Zoraz. Zoraz has all the Legionnaires' DNA, so he can counter their powers. He can hide out in the HVAC system in headquarters, and they can't find him.

Because Legion defenses are only as good as the story requires.

After taking out all the Legionnaires around Tyroc, Superboy and Sun Boy show up to fill him in on the villain's backstory, then explain since he's the newest member and his DNA isn't on file, Tyroc will have to take down Zoraz.

The reason the Legion has DNA is so they can clone Legionnaires after the Legionnaire has been killed. It's a throwaway line, but… maybe deserves some attention. Not in this comic, of course.

We'll get some filler—mainly with the Legionnaires watching their teammates canoodle on the closed-circuit video cameras, which can't pick up the villain in the ducts anywhere. Then it's Tyroc's turn for some action.

Then, it's time for some more action after a reveal or two.

The action's not good, the characterization's not good, Mike Grell's art isn't good (at times it seems downright unfinished). The comic could be worse but there's certainly nothing to recommend it.

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All-Star Comics #61

August 1976

Gerry Conway (editor, script)
Keith Giffen (layouts)
Wally Wood (pencils, inks)
Al Sirois (inks)
Carl Gafford (colors)
Ben Oda (letters)
Paul Levitz (assistant editor)

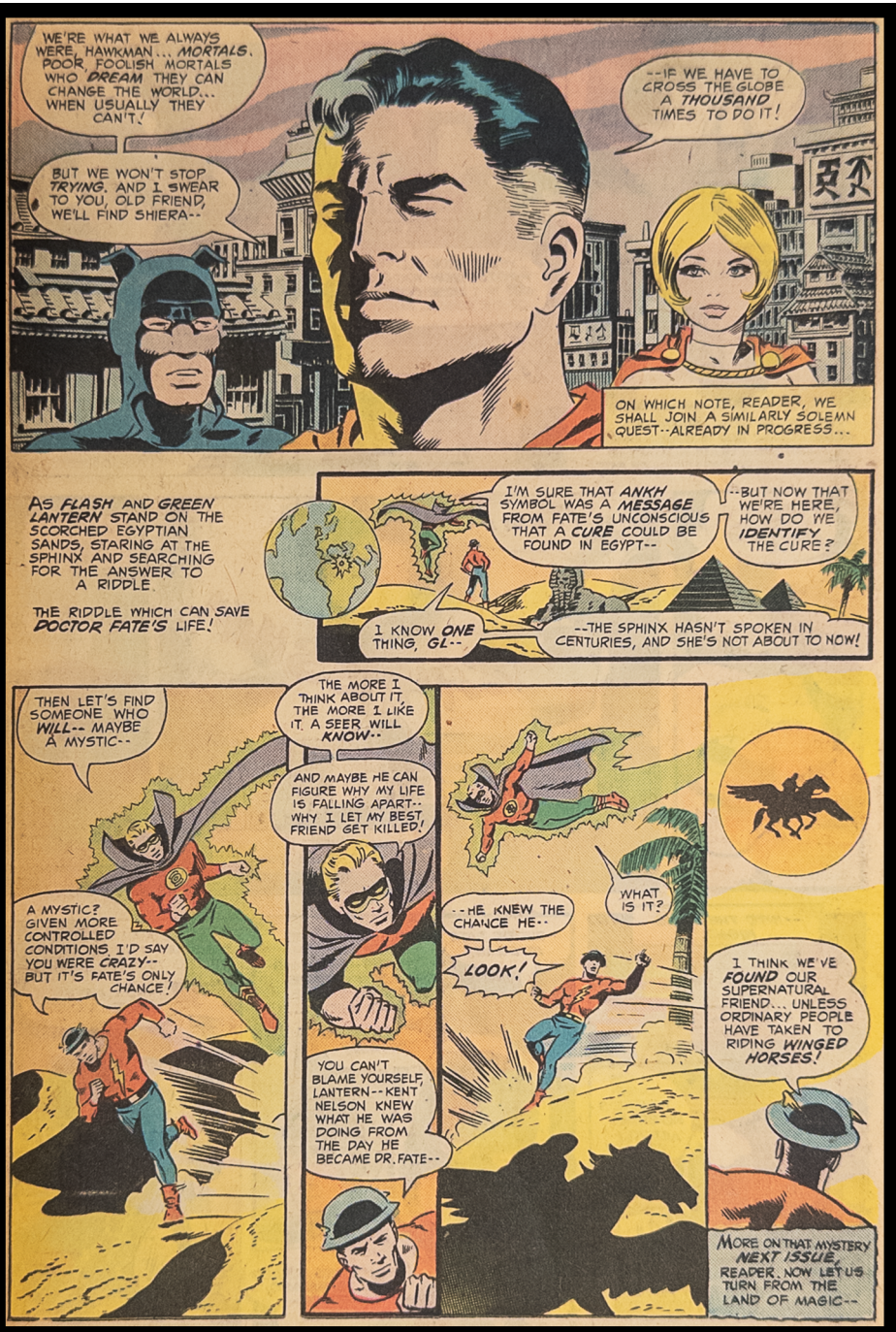
Writer Gerry Conway likes deus ex machinas so much, he flies one in on a spaceship for this issue. The issue's got multiple comes and goings, like there was only so much time each hero got in each subplot. For instance, when the deus ex machina lands, the only superhero going to intercept is Power Girl, ducking out on another scene.

She ducked out just after Mrs. The Flash came to the burned up headquarters from last issue and told Jay it's time to come home because he's not young anymore. It's very strange. Especially





"WHEN FALL THE MIGHTY", PAGE 10
ALL-STAR COMICS #62 (DC COMICS, OCTOBER 1976)



"THE DEATH OF DOCTOR FATE", PAGE 7
ALL-STAR COMICS #63 (DC COMICS, DECEMBER 1976)

since other heroes then arrive to bring the numbers back up.

The majority of the issue involves the JSA trying to take down Vulcan, having discovered he's the rogue astronaut gone mad with power. Or maybe he went mad first; doesn't end up mattering. Conway must've decided even though the **All-Star** heroes are a bit squarer than their Earth-One counterparts, the comic's going to get unexpectedly and unnecessarily dark from time to time.

There's oddly more internal griping from Green Lantern this issue, too. It's like Conway's got his various character personality bits to get in—Star-Spangled Kid going on about his cosmic rod, Wildcat being a shallow bully, Power Girl (usually accurately) finding misogyny everywhere. Alan Scott, the Green Lantern, is a petulant man-child narcissist who cannot stop thinking about himself. Even when Dr. Fate runs into trouble, Green Lantern centers himself entirely in the panic.

There's some setup for next issue with Hawkman's alter ego's museum-related subplot. And Dr. Mid-Nite shows up to do some doctoring, but also do be the only one with x-ray (close enough) vision. Conway's got everything very neatly arranged, even if all the details are bland.

Power Girl does get a relatively decent solo mission intercepting the spaceship and its pilot. There's a multi-page punch-out with penciller Keith Giffen doing some elaborate page layouts. Wally Wood keeps up on the finished art, of course, but when Giffen actually gets to do a busy, creative page, it works out.

It's not a particularly compelling read, however. Giffen's few pages of Power Girl versus space invader, which has panels ranging from the most sci-fi superhero comic fight to a journey through the mind, are very welcome. Except there's no pay-off because the timer's gone off, and Conway's ready for the next batch of characters.

Despite saving the planet every other issue, the book doesn't seem at all necessary.

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Superboy #219

September 1976

Jim Shooter (script)
Mike Grell (artist)
Jack C. Harris (assistant editor)
Murray Boltinoff (editor)
Ken Klaczak (suggestion)

Without getting effusive, this issue might be one of artist Mike Grell and writer Jim Shooter's best **Superboy** collaborations. There's only so much wrong with it; they both keep the comic packed and moving, and none of the Legionnaires are exceptionally crappy.

I mean, they're still crappy. Lightning Lad's ableist and Colossal Boy is only nice to the girl he likes when he thinks her boyfriend is going to die so he can get some action. And then Brainiac 5 is a bloodthirsty, callous creep most of the time.

But other than those characters, it's all reasonably solid. Lightning Lad barely has anything, and Brainy becomes background. Colossal Boy's thing recurs (and gets the last word), but it's amidst a lot of action.

The Legion's nemesis team, the Fatal Five (there are like twenty Legionnaires and five bad guys,

and the bad guys keep them busy), is pulling a series of heists throughout the galaxy. They're stealing android parts, experimental goo, toxic gases, and a planet fragment. One of the Fatal Five—Validus—is a super-powered giant who can tear up planets. Comes in handy for this exact story.

Shooter splits it into three parts. The first part has the villains striking and almost killing non-Legionnaire but still superhero future teen Duplicate Boy, leading to his girlfriend asking Brainiac 5 for help and kicking off the whole thing with Colossal Boy, too. Brainiac 5 has given up hope on saving Duplicate Boy, so he's ready to kill the Fatal Five whenever the opportunity arises.



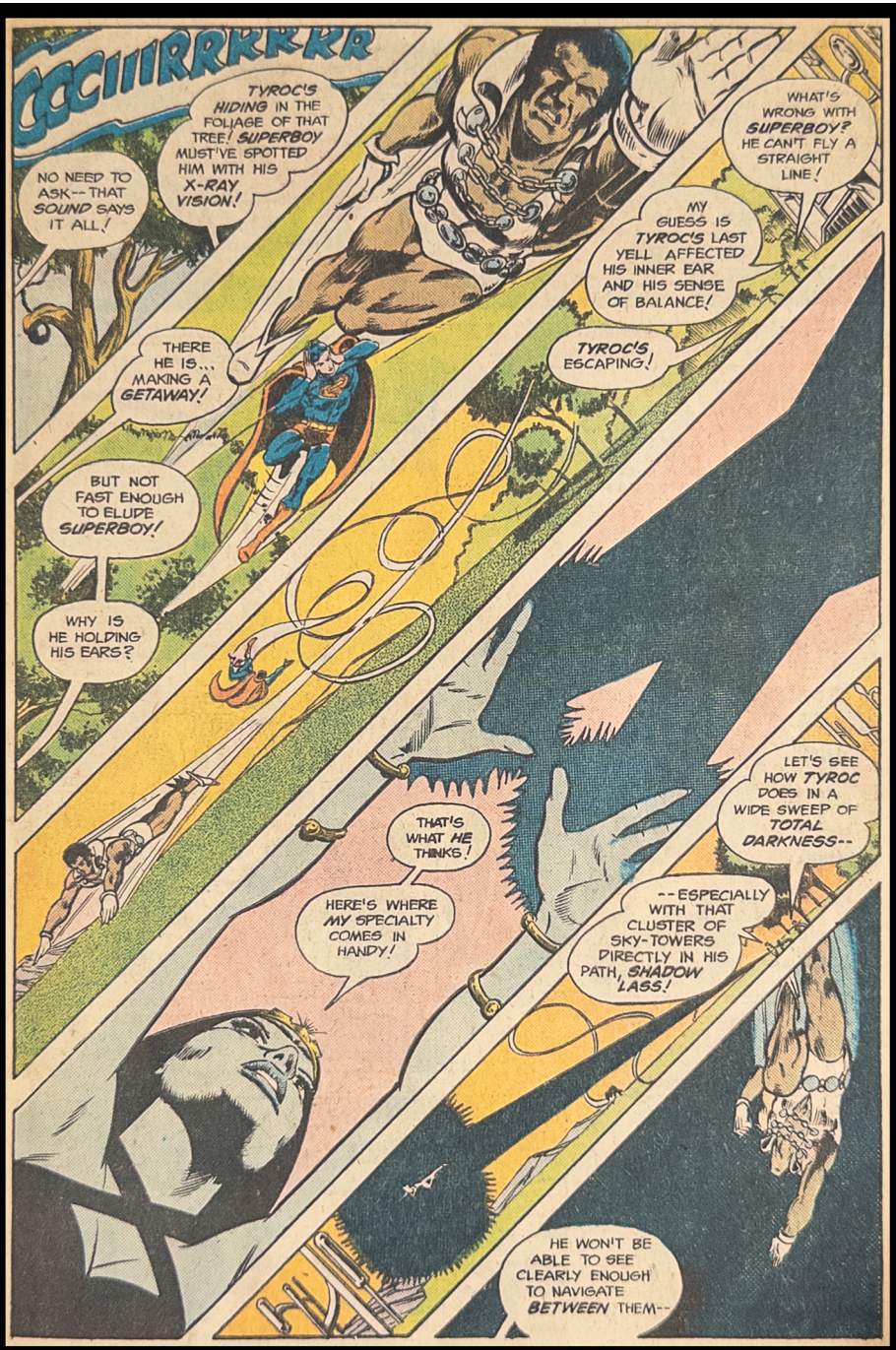
Now, one of the "charming" aspects of the comic is Superboy wondering what the heck is going on with his teammates. He'll practically stare through the fourth wall, trying to get the reader to pay attention to the weirdness going on around him. It happens a few times this issue, including for that goofy last story beat.

The rest of it—the Legion splitting into pairs so they can fight the Fatal Five—is all right. There's some silly stuff; Emerald Empress has the major hots for Superboy, but without, you know, good writing. And they always talk about her deadly gadget, which is called the Emerald Eye. It's a silly name, made even more ridiculous how they keep referring to it by the full name. Often with a possessive (the Emerald Empress's Emerald Eye). Even when they do a whole bit about Validus being a literal infant (with props), the Emerald Eye business is still sillier.

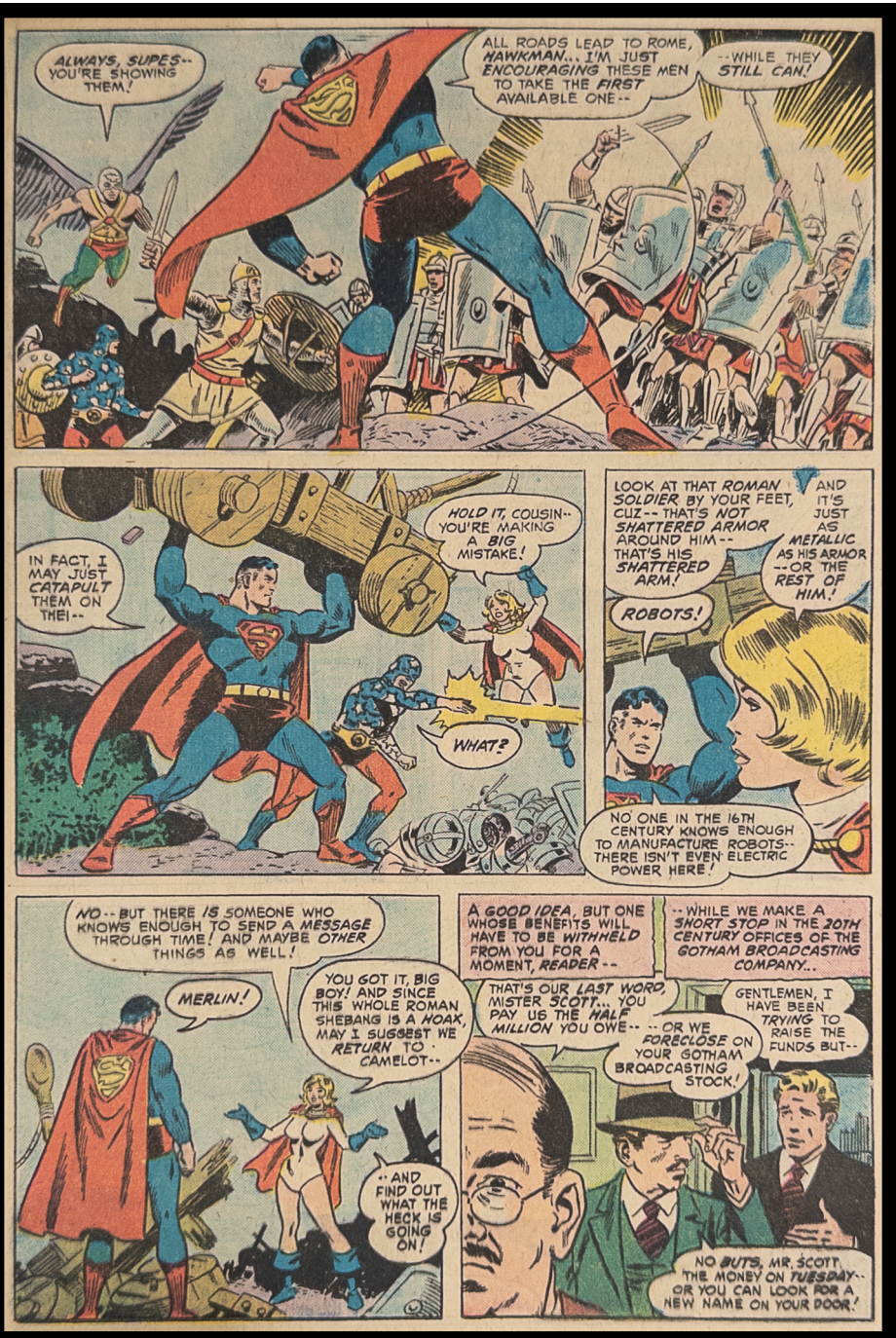
Now, despite Shooter and Grell keeping things moving, it's not like it's a good issue for Grell. His facial characteristics continuity is nil, and you'd think he'd be better at scaling between characters (Colossal Boy and Validus versus the normal-sized folk). However, some of Grell's more design-oriented moves work better, and they don't demand much attention.

The issue feels rote, but it's a (relatively) okay routine.

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"THIS LEGIONNAIRE IS CONDEMNED!", PAGE 5
SUPERBOY #222 (DC COMICS, DECEMBER 1976)



"YESTERDAY BEGINS TODAY!", PAGE 11
ALL-STAR COMICS #64 (DC COMICS, FEBRUARY 1977)

All-Star Comics #62

October 1976

Gerry Conway (editor, plot)
Paul Levitz (assistant editor, script)
Keith Giffen (layouts)
Wally Wood (pencils, inks)
Al Sirois (inks)
Carl Gafford (colors)
Ben Oda (letters)
Jack C. Harris (assistant editor)



If the scripter weren't Paul Levitz, I'd almost wonder if he were making fun of (plotter and editor) Gerry Conway's take on **All-Star** to this point. JSA chairman Hawkman comes off like a dipshit; Superman is the only adult on Earth-Two, except maybe Hourman, who spends his guest appearance thinking about how unheroic superheroes have become.

Because they're acting like Conway's still writing them.

The issue opens with everyone trying to save Dr. Fate, who's near death from last issue. They use Star-Spangled Kid's cosmic rod on him while trying to play his internal monologue for his teammates to hear (or actually see). But all they discover is the Ankh, which reminds Green Lantern Dr. Fate's big into Egypt and magic and stuff and maybe there's a better way to save him than cosmic rod life support.

Though at some point, Star-Spangled Kid will pass out off page and stop providing the life-maintaining energy, and presumably, Fate still doesn't die. But we don't spend any real time on it because Hawkman's too busy being a dipshit.

Hawkman sends Green Lantern and Flash to Egypt, tells everyone else to mind Dr. Fate, then heads home to get into bed with his good lady wife and maybe, just maybe, play around with the giant ancient Lemurian sorcerer he's got encased in amber. Too bad the amber melted and the sorcerer kidnapped the good lady wife (and killed Hawkman's treacherous assistant curator).

At that point, Hawkman immediately sounds the all-JSA alarm—which did not go off in any of the issues where they were saving the actual planet Earth (two)—and recalls Superman to duty. They all meet up at headquarters, where Wildcat and Power Girl have been bickering, and Hourman has been embarrassed to be in a union suit with such unprofessionals.



Hawkman then whines at the assembled heroes about them not caring enough about his kidnapped wife—one of them has the gall to point out Dr. Fate's in trouble, too—before everyone just goes along with him. They go to Tokyo, where the sorcerer has Mrs. Hawkman in inter-dimensional suspended animation.

The people of Tokyo are paralyzed and lying prone on the street. When the JSA arrives, Hawkman tells everyone to concentrate on what's important—his wife—and ignore the civilians. Superman reminds them to do the opposite, actually.

I don't think Levitz is having a laugh at Conway's expense. I think they're still playing it straight. But good grief, they're all a bunch of twerps except Superman and—so far—Housman.

Interestingly, Levitz doesn't continue Conway's characterization of Power Girl as a vocal proponent for women's lib. She'll mouth off to the fellows, but Levitz plays it like she's just a brat. He also makes sure the old men leer at her and talk about it.

Speaking of old men… Golden Age Superman. Wally Wood—over Keith Giffen layouts—draws Superman like he's got an almost static head shot every time. Still brings life to it, but it looks like he's following some style guide from 1943. It's a vibe.

The issue moves well enough thanks to the energy in Giffen's layouts and Wood's contributions. It's not like there's a particularly high bar to clear for **All-Star** to make par.

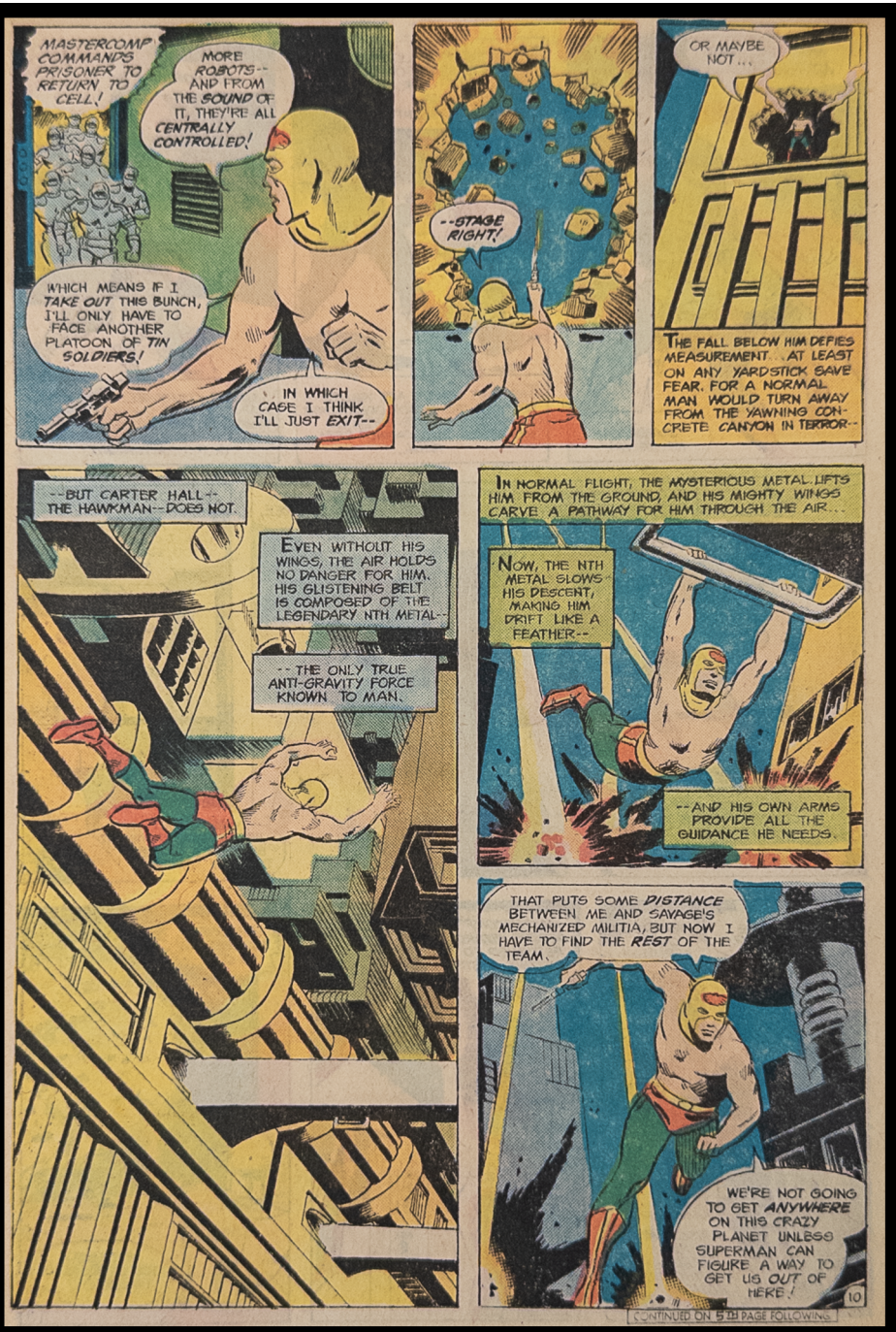
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All-Star Comics #63

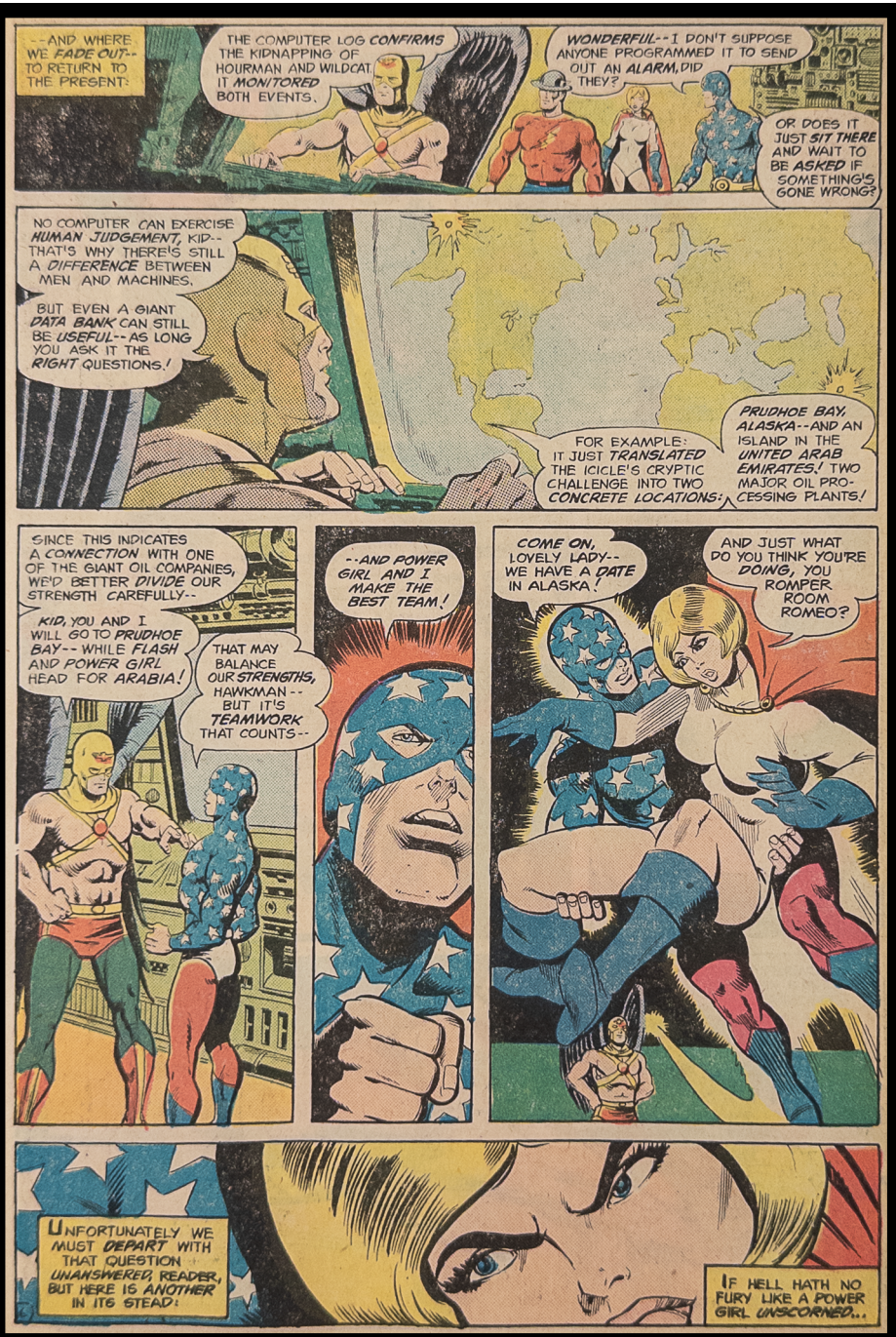
December 1976

Paul Levitz (assistant editor, script)
Keith Giffen (layouts)
Wally Wood (pencils, inks)
Al Sirois (inks)
Carl Gafford (colors)
Ben Oda (letters)
Joe Orlando (editor)

Paul Levitz takes over the full writing gig, no longer only dialoguing from a plot, and… well, at least there's not all the misogyny. Otherwise, there's not much improvement. It's definitely somewhat different—we get lots of heroes standing around moping about how they can't possibly be heroes when there's so much against



"THE MASTER PLAN OF VANDAL SAVAGE", PAGE 10
ALL-STAR COMICS #65 (DC COMICS, APRIL 1977)



"INJUSTICE STRIKES TWICE!", PAGE 6
ALL-STAR COMICS #66 (DC COMICS, JUNE 1977)

them. Dr. Mid-Nite quits, and so does someone else (who's quit at least once before in **All-Star**, with Levitz using it for the same story beat again). And the whole thing is supposed to be about how Dr. Fate's on death's door.

If only there were a deus ex machina to resolve it. Unexpectedly, it comes a page after filler about Green Lantern and the Flash being in Egypt—at Fate's subconscious request—to find a cure. There's also a silly bit with Flash making fun of "mystics," even though Dr. Fate's a literal sorcerer and Green Lantern has a magic ring. It's not so much the internal logic of **All-Star** not making sense, it's Levitz not even acknowledging it should.

The issue opens with a big fight scene involving Hawkman, Wildcat, Solomon Grundy, and the Fiddler. The Fiddler has brainwashed Wildcat into beating Hawkman to death. Despite the promises he's killed him, Hawkman is, in fact, fine. The exposition goes on and on about Wildcat's fatal fists, but apparently, he didn't do much actual damage. As the fight resolves, we find out in addition to Wildcat misunderstanding how killing Hawkman (or anyone) works, we find out the JSA has been operating under the assumption Superman and Power Girl are dead from last issue.

They are not.

Wildcat then makes it sound like they just let Superman do all the actual work and wait to see what he's come up with. With all these heroics on display, what can the rest of the issue hold? Not much aside from the aforementioned moping about not being heroic like in the old days, some oddly static fight scenes (with nice detail from Wally Wood, just not a lot of energy).

The various stakes of the issue—including the supervillains trying to kill the JSA—either get punted or resolved off-page. Hawkman's "Real Men Could Save Their Wives" arc is another page-burner. Levitz hasn't got any actual material, just gristle.

The various setups for next time don't promise much, either. More mysteries, more supervillain plotting, presumably the same contrived plotting.

Levitz doesn't distinguish himself as the solo writer yet. And doesn't do anything to imply he will.

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Superboy #222

December 1976

Cary Bates[1], Jim Shooter[2] (script)
Mike Grell[1], Michael Netzer[2] (pencils)
Bob Wiacek[1], Bob Layton[2] (inks)
Jack C. Harris (assistant editor)
Murray Boltinoff (editor)

Mike Grell gets an inker for his pencils on the feature, but Bob Wiacek doesn't bring anything to improve on them. In fact, the figures might be worse. Some of the close-ups, from certain angles, are better than usual for Grell. Not so the rest.

Cary Bates contributes the script, which has Tyroc rampaging around Metropolis, angry the Legion doesn't want to move its headquarters to his island. Even without the later clarifying details, it's an incredibly thin setup. We get the science police complaining to the Legion, the Legion revealing Tyroc's having a tantrum, and

then the Legion going after him. They catch up to him at a park, where they capture him.

Not the end of the story by a long shot because then the Legionnaires show up at the jail with another suspect and a whole story about how Tyroc has been framed. If only it weren't a way for Bates to kill two pages before wiping the stakes and loosing Tyroc back onto the unsuspecting populace. What could be causing the Legion's latest member to break so badly? Just hang on for two more narrative feints, and Bates will explain everything!

The remainder of the story is then Bates backfilling on the reasoning for a bunch of other details throughout. The whole thing's set up to have the reader, the public, and some of the Legionnaires convinced Tyroc isn't Legion material (seriously, he was the first Black guy on the team, and they gave him this story). It's unremarkably bad, except in the historical sense. And to see how an inker can somehow make Grell's figures worse. Superboy goes from having a bulky torso and skinny legs to a skinny torso with skinny legs.

Jim Shooter, Mike Nasser, and Bob Layton contribute the backup. Superboy, Timber Wolf, and Lightning Lass are going to a faraway planet for some celebration. The president of Earth couldn't be bothered to attend. On the way, they watch their favorite superhero movies starring Questar, who will also be at the ceremony.

I assume Shooter didn't know he'd be following up a feature with a multiple narrative switchbacks, so when he does two of his own… well, it rounds out the issue overall, I guess.



The art's not as good as the feature, which isn't a particularly high bar, but either Nasser or Layton doesn't understand how fingers look. There are other things they don't understand, but not knowing how fingers look….

It's a particularly bad finish for Superboy, too. He comes off like a callous prick.

The feature's tedious and unrewarding. The backup's more of the same.

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All-Star Comics #64

February 1977

Paul Levitz (dialogue, co-plot)
Wally Wood (pencils, inks, co-plot)
Al Sirois (inks)
Elizabeth Safian (colors)
Ben Oda (letters)
Joe Orlando (editor)

Wally Wood takes over the full art duties and eighty-sixes Power Girl's cleavage window, making **All-Star** immediately feel a little more grown-up. Helping set it back—writer Paul Levitz now makes special time to gripe about Power Girl being too into women's lib and not gracious enough to the men around her.



Otherwise, the majority of **All-Star**'s ongoing problems get a respite. There's still the whining—Hourman whines about how no one needs him, Green Lantern whines about how no one cares about his money troubles—but there's also time travel to Camelot and a big reveal at the end.

In the present, Star-Spangled Kid has turned his cosmic rod into a belt, which doesn't really feature in the story at all. Other than Kid pissing off Power Girl because he does something nice but she can't appreciate how men are, actually, just trying to help her. Levitz takes the time to point out her personality defects after these moments, which is cruddy but now expected.

Superman—who last issue promised he was retiring (again) from the JSA—rejoins this issue (he's back at headquarters for some reason too, even before rejoining). It works out because Wood clearly enjoys doing Golden Age Superman in "modern" comics. Quotations for modern because they really lean into the Camelot time travel for a bit, complete with slight costume changes.

They're back in the past because Flash and Green Lantern show up at JSA headquarters with Shining Knight, who they discovered in Egypt while looking for Dr. Fate's cure (Dr. Fate's recuperating off-page). Presumably, original series writer (and editor) Gerry Conway had a different development in store for the Egyptian sojourn, but Levitz uses it to send the team into the past; the Romans are attacking Camelot, which is ahistorical (Camelot being

historical could just be an Earth-Two thing, right?).

After that whining from Hourman and Green Lantern, the team heads back, fighting some knights before ending up at the castle for their briefing with Merlin and Arthur. Despite being a seemingly essential guest star, Shining Knight disappears around this point. He's definitely not there once the heroes realize something else is going on.

Specifically, Power Girl notices something else is going on, bringing it to her cousin Superman's attention. Now, if Golden Age Superman is the crème de la creme, why doesn't he notice it? Because he's too busy crying havoc. One wonders if editor Joe Orlando was ever once concerned with internal consistency. Again, probably not.

The Wood art is nice, even when he's brushing over plot holes (or creating them himself).

All-Star's not exactly good, now, but it's majorly improved.

Also doesn't hurt Wildcat is nowhere to be found.

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All-Star Comics #65

April 1977

Paul Levitz. Paul Kupperberg (script)
Wally Wood (pencils, inks, plot)
Al Sirois (inks)
Elizabeth Safian (colors)
Ben Oda (letters)
Joe Orlando (editor)

I spoke too soon. Paul Levitz is back to solely dialogue this issue, with artist Wally Wood contributing to the plot. Presumably, then, it was Wood's idea to do this issue of **The Legendary Justice Society of America in All-Star Comics with the Super Squad** as a Golden Age Superman comic. Some of the other heroes get page time, mostly Star-Spangled Kid it works out, but it's just a Superman comic. Only it's Superman as icon, not character.

The issue opens with Power Girl and Superman breaking free of Vandal Savage's force field bubble to find themselves—apparently—in the far future. Now, they're not in the far future (it's never clear where they are, actually, maybe something else for next issue… Levitz promises two other things already), but it doesn't stop



Superman from destroying a bunch of robotics while Power Girl tries to figure out what's really going on.

Power Girl isn't around long; well, she's not around and conscious long. Savage's plan involves sapping Kryptonian life energy to replenish his immortality, and he takes her down first, charging himself up so he can handle fisticuffs with Superman.

Meanwhile, the rest of the JSA—now imprisoned in Savage's future place—get free, one by one, and try to help Superman and Power Girl. The Flash starts back in Camelot times, going to the future and the distant past, in an excuse for Wood to do some trippy time travel art. It doesn't serve any narrative purpose otherwise. At least Green Lantern moping about losing his business because he was too busy being a selfless superhero like a chump will be relevant next issue.

I mean, promises, promises.

Hawkman gets a decent all-action sequence after being so annoying a few issues ago. Merlin—in Savage's future—frees Hawkman, who quickly frees Star-Spangled Kid and gets himself a fresh set of hawk wings. Now, Flash was talking to King Arthur in the past, which means for whatever reason Savage brought Merlin along. It's never clear whether Savage actually needs Merlin's magic—maybe just for the time travel—because he's big into robot armies.

Star-Spangled Kid's new cosmic converter belt is silly and looks like a wrestling belt, which may be better than the cosmic rod in terms of giggles but still strange energy.

The cliffhanger promises next issue will have something to do with the now three-issue old Injustice Society subplot. And Shining Knight gets a mention. Not an appearance, but a mention.

All-Star Comics is incredibly uneven—Wood's art this issue, for instance, isn't as good as the previous one, even though he does seem invested in the Superman in a **Flash Gordon** future stuff.

But a handful of neat visuals don't a comic make.

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All-Star Comics #66

June 1977

Paul Levitz (script)
Joe Staton (pencils)
Bob Layton (inks)
Elizabeth Safian (colors)
Joe Orlando (editor)

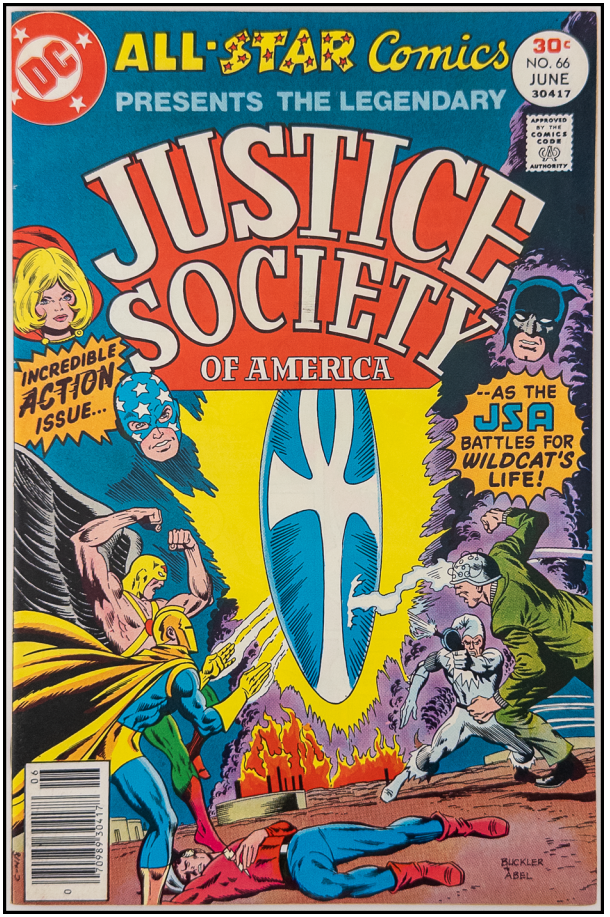
If I take back the things I said about Wally Wood being mid last issue, can he come back retroactively and save me from Joe Staton and Bob Layton? We can keep Paul Levitz finding his sexism towards Power Girl and embracing it: turns out he needed Star-Spangled Kid to creep on her like a lech.

But Levitz does get a couple points for Earth-Two (maybe not when Gerry Conway was writing the book, incidentally) no longer having an apartheid South Africa. The exposition also mentions superheroes started on Earth-Two in the forties, not the fifties; maybe the extra ten years ground out the fascist, racist trash.

Anyway. Back to Joe Staton and Bob Layton. Staton's figures are often bewildering, and

Layton inks into the "curve." There are a handful of okay close-ups, including Bruce Wayne (who seems to be a character Levitz might actually want to write; time will tell), but the bodies—and especially the extremities—are bad; real bad.

Levitz opens the issue in a flash-forward so he can wrap up the cliffhanger from last time (no Shining Knight, again; his agent obviously told him to stay away from **All-Star Comics**), which basically means Superman going off on his own so he won't just save the day. Before Superman leaves, Power Girl is not nice enough to him, and she regrets it. However, she does not regret



whining there are too many male heroes for her to compete with.

These character moments are nowhere near the most unpleasant. Star-Spangled Kid gropes her and gets away with it, then at one point pervs on her instead of saving Wildcat. It's a lot. Especially since Kid's in the silly power belt (and also, the colorist at one point gives him white outside undies), he's just a creep—and Levitz's lead character on that plot line.

The story has the JSA trying to save Hourman and Wildcat; the reunited Injustice Society has captured them. Injustice Society's been after the heroes for a few issues now, starting during Conway's tenure, and one has to wonder if their motivations were always the same. Levitz hasn't got a lot of time for them. They're disposable, easy-to-defeat villains, especially once Dr. Fate comes back.

Levitz also seems to like writing Dr. Fate, who he characterizes as taking over the human host with no concern for its well-being, even having Mrs. Dr. Fate plead with Fate not to leave. It's an all-right bit.

All things considered.

The ending sets up (adult) Robin coming back into the book--maybe—while Power Girl, Kid, and Wildcat (the book's most obnoxious grouping, presumably worse now) going on an adventure together.

Swell.

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