

FOREWORD



WHEEE! I never think I live to see this day, Manhunter!" And as Zook's pal, J'Onn J'Onzz, the Manhunter from Mars, crushes the Idol-Head of Diabolu with his bare hands, the otherdimensional imp's gleeful sentiment is echoed by many of HOUSE OF MYSTERY's readers. The supernatural Idol-Head of Diabolu was introduced to justify the Martian Manhunter's move from the back-up feature in DETECTIVE COMICS, a title editor Jack Schiff lost to Julius Schwartz because of declining sales, to the lead feature in HOUSE OF MYSTERY, which Schiff had edited since issue #1, had briefly turned over to his assistant editor, George Kashdan, and had resumed editing with #143, the first issue featuring the Martian Manhunter. HOUSE OF MYSTERY had begun in 1951 as a horror/fantasy title. Science fiction was added to the mix in the mid '50s. J'Onn J'Onzz, added to the book in the mid '60s, was its first super-hero feature. (In fact, he was the book's first feature character of any kind. Previously, the stories did not have recurring characters.) Schiff wanted J'Onn's stories to be similar in style to the other stories that appeared in HOUSE OF MYSTERY, so in each issue the Idol-Head would conjure forth bizarre monsters for our hero to battle. But

whether it was Iwangis the Creature King or the Giant Genie of Gensu, the monster with little or no personality always had the same simple motive, wanton destruction. The stories were repetitive, readers were losing interest and sales were dropping. Schiff didn't want to lose another title, so after 16 issues (2 whole years for a book published 8 issues per year) the Idol-Head of Diabolu was destroyed, never to be mentioned again—not ever, not in 40-plus years—in another DC comic.

By this time another super-hero feature, Dial H for Hero, had taken over as HOUSE OF MYSTERY's lead, with the Martian Manhunter continuing as back-up. During J'Onn's brief run as lead feature, the book had continued to feature horror/fantasy/sci-fi stories as back-ups. But now there were only two stories per issue, both featuring super-heroes. With HOUSE OF MYSTERY now an all-super-hero book, Schiff no longer felt obliged to include supernatural elements in J'Onn's stories. However, he still liked to mix up different genres. In DETECTIVE COMICS #225 he had introduced a detective feature with a twist: plainclothes Detective John Jones was secretly a Martian—a manhunter from Mars! Eventually super-heroics took over, and the last DETECTIVE COMICS story even

featured the “death” of the Martian Manhunter’s John Jones identity. Then, the Idol-Head of Diabolu gave super-heroics a supernatural twist. So what next? Well, how about a super-hero who was also a super-spy?

In the 1960s James Bond was arguably the world’s most popular fictional character, spawning imitations in every entertainment medium. Other movies had Dean Martin as Matt Helm and James Coburn as Derek “Our Man” Flint. Bond, Helm and Flint had originally appeared in novels. The success of the film adaptations led to more books, which in turn became movies, etc. Television gave us *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *The Avengers* and *The Prisoner*, as well as plenty of genre-mixing, with cowboys as super-spies in *The Wild, Wild West* and Don Adams as the bumbling Agent 86 in the sitcom, *Get Smart*. The comics publishers tried to cash in, of course. Marvel did it best with *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, thanks to work by two of comics’ greatest talents, Jack Kirby and Jim Steranko. DC’s best effort was SECRET SIX. Created by E. Nelson Bridwell and Frank Springer, it only lasted seven issues, but over the years has become a fan favorite. And then there’s Marco Xavier. What? You haven’t heard of Marco Xavier, internationally famous playboy and mystery man of the jet set, who wages a one-man war against the secret criminal organization, Vulture? Then you must not have been reading HOUSE OF MYSTERY in the late ‘60s. But that’s okay, a lot of people weren’t reading HOUSE OF MYSTERY in the late ‘60s.

“Manhunter’s New Secret Identity” from HOUSE OF MYSTERY #160 (with a splash page that would have aroused comment from Dr. Freud) is a departure from J’Onn’s recent

adventures—not just from the silly Idol-Head stories, but also from the later super-hero tales in DETECTIVE COMICS. It harkens back to the early stories from the 1950s, when J’Onn had a secret identity, and this secret identity actually played a significant role in the stories, and the villains were not aliens or monsters, but human criminals that a real-life detective like John Jones, or an undercover agent like Marco Xavier, might encounter. The weapon chosen by the Vulture agents in this story is not a death-ray or some other super-fantastic doohickey, but a submarine armed with a torpedo—and it’s not even a very big submarine. And as in his earliest stories, J’Onn must work alone. A cute otherdimensional imp would be as out of place in this story as prehistoric giants or Plutonian Devil Men.

The next story, issue #161’s “The Unmasking of Marco Xavier”, continues the shift in style by showing us a grimmer, more cynical Martian Manhunter. His reaction to the bad guy’s death is, “Tough, but that’s what happens to nasty villains who play with disintegrator weapons!” Yes, there is a disintegrator gun in this story, and also a “mind-duplicator” which can transfer the entire contents of a person’s brain—every thought, every memory—to a reel of magnetic tape. (These were the pre-digital, analogue days.) We’re also introduced to Marie Fouchere, a French Secret Service agent who may have been intended as a sidekick (among other things) for Marco Xavier, but who is never seen again. J’Onn calls her a “pretty French chick”.

In fact, he now calls all women chicks. “Let’s hit the beach, chicks!” he’ll say, or, “Sorry, chicks—but I just remembered—I’ve got a heavy date!” To uphold his international playboy image, Marco Xavier is always seen

in public surrounded by beautiful women, and he's always having to give his chicks the brush-off so that he can save the world from Vulture.

The third Xavier story, "The Lair of Mr. V" (#162), continues the more realistic trend. Vulture's scheme this time is a simple con job: stealing a rare art object from a millionaire and then selling it back to him.

But then we have "The Doomed Captive" (#163). Not only is there a "captive-ray" gun, which traps its target in an indestructible bubble, and another disintegrator gun, but this time the disintegrator gun is wielded by a criminal from the planet Mercury. Vulture, who have the captive-ray, join forces with the Mercurian. Once again we get a glimpse of J'Onn's darker side. When the defeated Mercurian begs not to be sent back to his homeworld, where he will be hunted by Mercurian police, J'Onn says, "Tough! On your way...before I toss you off this planet without your space ship!"

There's a return to realism in "Marco Vs. Manhunter" (#164) and "Marco Xavier, Manhunter's Ally" (#167), the last two stories without futuristic super-weapons, monsters or aliens (other than J'Onn himself, of course), but from now on the fantasy elements become more dominant. The title character in "Thantos—the 3-in-1 Man" (#168) is as bizarre as anything spawned by the Idol-Head.

Toward the end of the run of Idol-Head stories, J'Onn would sometimes take a break from battling Diabolu-spawned monsters, usually to have a rematch with Prof. Arnold Hugo. Those of you who read the previous MARTIAN MANHUNTER ARCHIVES volume may remember Prof. Hugo from DETECTIVE COMICS #322's "The Man Who Destroyed J'Onn J'Onzz". This volume has two Arnold

Hugo stories from the Idol-Head period, "The Giants Who Slept 1,000,000 Years" (#153) and "Manhunter, World's Greatest Clown" (#157). The macrocephalic madman turns up one more time in "The Deadly Martian" (#165), to provide what J'Onn hopes will be "a pleasant diversion from battling Faceless and his Vulture syndicate". The diversions from the Idol-Head were a sign that the stories' creators, the readers, or both parties were getting tired of Diabolu, and J'Onn's fourth and final battle with Prof. Hugo (to date he has not appeared in another DC comics story) would be followed by two more diversions from Xavier and Vulture, in "Thantos—the 3-in-1 Man" (#168) and "The Martian Marauders" (#171).

Another sign that the more realistic approach established in the first Marco Xavier story is now being abandoned is the return of Zook in "Vulture's Crime Goliaths" (#166). While a baby-talking little orange demon would have been an unwelcome intrusion in the first three Xavier stories, he's right at home in this tale of a "molecular-ray" that turns ordinary men into super-strong giants. He'll return two issues later in "Thantos—the 3-in-1 Man" (that title again!), then two more times in "The Martian Marauders" (#171) and "Manhunter's Stolen Identity" (#172), before being banished to comic book limbo, only to show up four decades later in an Ambush Bug mini-series.

As with the Idol-Head stories, the so-called Marco Xavier "saga" is really just a collection of separate stories that share the same plot device. The opening story establishes the premise and poses a problem for our hero to solve. Every full moon a new menace will spring forth from the Idol-Head of Diabolu until the evil object is found and destroyed. Our hero must infiltrate the

criminal organization, Vulture, and discover the identity of its mysterious leader. Eventually there is a final story in which the Idol-Head is found and destroyed, or Vulture's leader is unmasked. In between can be any number of stories in which the Idol-Head creates a new menace, or Vulture's mysterious leader gives Marco Xavier a new assignment. How many stories depends on how long the writer can sustain the reader's interest. The Idol-Head stories were published over a two-year period, beginning in DETECTIVE COMICS #326 and ending in HOUSE OF MYSTERY #158. The Marco Xavier stories in issues #160-173 of HOUSE OF MYSTERY cover a similar time-period (with #159's battle with "The Devil Men of Pluto" sandwiched in between the two "sagas").

The last Xavier story, issue #173's "So You're Faceless", is a return, despite the sought-after "ultimate weapon", to the realism of the opening story. Maybe you'll be surprised by the unmasking of Vulture's leader, as some of HOUSE OF MYSTERY's younger readers may have been. Of course, it would be a big letdown if J'Onn pulled off Mr. V.'s mask and it was someone we didn't recognize. If the big reveal is to make dramatic sense, we're not left with a lot of possibilities. (And no, he's not Thantos—the 3-in-1 Man.)

The end of Xavier and Vulture was also the end of the line for the Martian Manhunter, who had enjoyed, beginning way back in 1955 in DETECTIVE COMICS #225, a twelve-and-a-half year run of 133 solo stories, every one of them drawn by Joe Certa and many of them written by Jack Miller. What brought the end was the same thing that had brought about the move to HOUSE OF MYSTERY: a new sheriff had come to town. Joe Orlando took over as editor and booted out both

J'Onn J'Onzz and Dial H for Hero. HOUSE OF MYSTERY was once again a horror/fantasy book.

Jack Schiff had retired from comics, and no other editor offered a home for our hero. He even had to resign from the Justice League of America, which he had been a part of since its founding. There would be guest appearances throughout the '70s and early '80s, and a three-issue run of back-up stories in ADVENTURE COMICS #449-451, which were supposed to be a lead-in to finally getting his own book, but which didn't happen for various reasons. He rejoined the League in the mid '80s, and remained a fixture in it through its many relaunches and revamps over the next two decades. There were two mini-series' in the late '80s and early '90s. The second one, MARTIAN MANHUNTER: AMERICAN SECRETS, written by Gerard Jones and drawn by Eduardo Barreto, is one of the best things DC has ever published, and deserves to be reprinted. At long last, in 1998, DC published a MARTIAN MANHUNTER ongoing series, but sales were disappointing and it only lasted three years. A few years later another mini-series followed, which gave him a new coneheaded look. He was even dead for a time, but he got better, and ditched the conehead. What will the future bring for our favorite Martian? Another ongoing series? A cameo in an Ambush Bug mini-series? Whatever it may be, at least for now we can enjoy the reprints.

—Wade Greenberg

WADE GREENBERG does not live in a posh Mediterranean villa, has never had reason to fake his own death, and has never ever ever called a woman "chick".