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INTRODUCTION

"What is art but a matter of impressions, of pictures, emotions, and symmetrical sensations? It must have poignancy and beauty, but nothing else counts. It may or may not have coherence."

—H.P. Lovecraft, "In the Editor's Study," *THE CONSERVATIVE* (July 1923)

Welcome to the first ever *Startling Tale of Super-Weirdness!* Future titles in this series will explore other strange frontiers of superheroic adventure. But this issue, ***Adventures Into Darkness***, presents for the first time anywhere a roleplaying game adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft's superheroic stories, torn from the pages of the Golden Age of Comics!

The first section, "**H.P. Lovecraft and the Nedor Comics Lines**" is, strangely enough, the first essay ever dedicated solely to Lovecraft's comics work. Although space forbids anything like completeness, hopefully it will serve as a useful summary of this interesting interlude in HPL's brilliant career.

The next sections—"Heroes" and "Villains"—give descriptions and brief publishing histories of 17 Nedor heroes and 11 Nedor villains, with special focus on their treatment in Lovecraft's Nedor titles *Dream Master Comics* and *Adventures Into Darkness*. Data on their sidekicks, familiars, and typical Lovecraftian minions from ghouls to Yithian agents round out these sections. (Immediately after this, I've provided an Issue Listing and Price Guide for the Lovecraft Nedor titles

as complete as I could make it. Prices, of course, derive from standard references and searches on eBay. They shouldn't be taken as anything more than a rough snapshot.)

"**Write Comics the Nedor-Lovecraft Way!**" gives role-playing and campaign advice on blending the Golden Age comics feel with the flavors of H.P. Lovecraft. It specifically differentiates between superhero games accenting the horrific frisson of Lovecraft's core Yog-Sothoth Cycle stories of "cosmic indifferentism" and those aiming for the more free-flowing fantasy coloration of Lovecraft's "Dunsanian" works.

The last sections, "**Afterword for the Perplexed**" and "**Actual Bibliography**," should be fairly self-explanatory.

A final note—Lovecraft's publisher, Ned Pines, produced comic books under a dizzying array of imprints, including Standard, Thrilling, Better, and Nedor. For simplicity's sake, I refer to Pines' lines as "Nedor Comics" throughout.

And so, as the Cloaked Clairvoyant himself would say, "Dream On!"

H . P . LOVECRAFT AND THE NEDOR COMICS LINES

H.P. Lovecraft's work with Nedor Comics tends to be unfairly minimized by his devotees and scholars alike. Both primarily concentrate on his fiction (with one exception, restricted to the years before 1937) or his work at RKO in Hollywood, by which time he had completely abandoned what he called (in a letter to Ben Hecht) his "crudely coloured convalescence." As a result, many of the specific details of Lovecraft's comics writing career (which, after all, spanned almost a decade) remain murky or distorted by fannish legend and his own (not inconsiderable) embarrassment.



H . P . LOVECRAFT

"INSTRUCTIONS IN CASE OF DECEASE"

Although Lovecraft didn't actually script a single identifiable comics page until (at the earliest) December of 1939, the chain of events that led to his "donning the cape and bells" began with his serious illness in the winter of 1937. As most of HPL's biographers note, by March of 1937 his life was generally despaired of, not least by himself. S.T. Joshi has discovered medical records from Jane Brown Memorial Hospital in Providence demonstrating that such concern was far

from the "overblown hypochondria" that de Camp's biography calls it. In fact, after an emergency edema drain on March 14, Lovecraft fell into a coma for three days, and was barely conscious for the next two weeks. His remarkable recovery began only on the 28th, well after his aunt Annie Gamwell had already opened his "Instructions in Case of Decease." In accordance with that document, she had summoned his young friend Robert H. Barlow (who Lovecraft had named his literary executor) to Providence to begin the sorting of HPL's papers. Barlow (not even 20 years old at the time) stayed on through most of the spring as a kind of factotum. He helped the convalescing Lovecraft with reading and letter-writing (and

served as errand boy for aunt Annie) but also found the time to dig through Lovecraft's immense rat's nest of papers—which included many as-then-unpublished stories—with fannish glee.

The delight was tempered by the necessity of earning some money for Lovecraft's household. HPL had economized to the breaking point already, and although Barlow's parents were quite generous in sending him spending money (much of which went for food for the household), the young fan took his responsibilities as

"Repugnance—and a certain lack of natural cleverness and adaptability, definitely debars me from the popular 'action' field, so all I can do is to try honestly to write really better stories or give up the whole mess as a bad job—though possibly pulling off consciously mediocre yarns now and then for sheer amusement."

—H.P. Lovecraft, letter to Clark Ashton Smith, Nov. 20, 1931
(SELECTED LETTERS III, p. 436)

HEROES

"Only the cosmic framework itself—or such individuals as symbolise principles (or defiances of principles) of the cosmic framework—can gain a deep grip on my imagination and set it to work creating. In other words, the only 'heroes' I can write about are phenomena."

—H.P. Lovecraft, letter to E. Hoffman Price, Aug. 15, 1934 (SELECTED LETTERS V, p. 19)

For each hero, the first paragraph gives a quick summary of their origin and powers, and briefly discusses their mainstream Nedor Comics career. The second paragraph focuses on their appearance in the Lovecraft lines: *Dream Master* and *Adventures Into Darkness*. (For the Dream Master and Nodens, two heroes essentially restricted to the Lovecraft lines, the first paragraph simply discusses their powers and origins.) It covers some of their particularly popular or iconic adventures, nemeses, etc. in those books, but is obviously far from complete.



THE AMERICAN EAGLE

A strange "black light ray" struck government scientist Tom Standish and his youthful assistant Bud Pierce, granting them both the ability to fly and fight like true American eagles. As the American Eagle and Eaglet, they battled the Axis, starting in *Exciting Comics* #22 (October 1942). The American Eagle debuted alone the month before, in *America's Best Comics* #2. The American Eagle's flight can easily keep pace with a car, and he is strong enough to lift and throw a heavy construction crane.

Lovecraft borrowed the American Eagle for a guest appearance in *Adventures Into Darkness* #35, in which he fought "shantak-birds" summoned by Lucifuge. In a longer story (issues #40-44) the American Eagle explored "the Sargasso of the Skies," battling not just shantak-birds but giant vampiric moths, the fungoid Outer Ones, rogue night-gaunts, and all manner of other winged monstrosities. At the climax, the Eagle discovered his old nemesis the Little Führer at the center of the phenomenon. This villain, originally from *America's Best Comics* #12 (January 1945), was a midget super-genius who controlled a super-strong minion named

THE AMERICAN EAGLE PL 8

Abilities: STR: 26/13 (+8/+1) DEX: 22 (+6) CON: 15 (+2) INT: 15 (+2) WIS: 19 (+4) CHA: 12 (+1)

Skills: Acrobatics 2 (+8), Craft (electrical) 3 (+5), Disable Device 1 (+3), Intimidate 4 (+6), Knowledge (physical science) 7 (+9), Knowledge (technology) 7 (+9), Medicine 2 (+6), Notice 5 (+9), Profession (scientist) 4 (+8), Sense Motive 5 (+9), Survival 4 (+8)

Feats: Benefit (security clearance), Evasion, Fast Overrun, Favored Environment (air), Move-by Action, Sidekick 5 (Eaglet), Stunning Attack, Teamwork

Powers: **Enhanced Strength 13**, **Flight 4** (100 MPH), **Super-Strength 3** (Heavy Load: 3.45 tons)

Combat: Attack +7, Damage +8 (unarmed), Defense +7, Initiative +6

Saving Throws: Toughness +2, Fortitude +7, Reflex +9, Will +7

Drawbacks: Vulnerable (blow to the head; common, moderate) -3

The Math: Abilities 36 + Skills 11 (44 ranks) + Feats 12 + Powers 27 + Combat 28 + Saves 9 - Drawbacks 3 = 120

WRITE COMICS THE NEDOR—LOVECRAFT WAY!

"[W]e can revel in the ...Arcadia of an author who will play with the old ideas, atmospheres, types, situations, and lighting effects in a deft pictorial way; a way tinged with affectionate remembrance as for fallen gods..."

—H.P. Lovecraft, "Lord Dunsany and His Work" (1922)

The world of *Adventures Into Darkness* is one of two things: fundamentally horrific or fundamentally fantastic. Both, it should be emphasized, spring equally from the pen of H.P. Lovecraft. Both are cosmic—each stretches far beyond the fields we know in time, space, and dimension. But the first is a soul-crushing, terrifying vastness, and the second is rather an endless jungle of variation dwarfing even the capacity of human imagination.

THE HORRIFIC WORLD

This is the world of "Call of Cthulhu" and "At the Mountains of Madness" and "The Colour Out of Space"—as bleak, indifferent, and fatal as stomach cancer. Knowledge is death, and madness, and futility; the true world is old and uncaring and cruel. Human interests, and human goals, are vanishingly unimportant; superheroism is irrelevant at best, and misunderstood evidence of human insignificance at worst. The horrific world exemplifies cosmic horror in purest "indifferentist" style, viewed through four colors perhaps, but still a realm of stark hopelessness at its core.

This makes conventional superhero storytelling difficult, if not impossible. The core theme of Lovecraft's "cosmic indifferentism" is human powerlessness and irrelevance, while the core theme of the superhero myth is the complete power and relevance of one man (or super-man) at the right place, at the right time, usually with a right hook. Following from that, superheroics privilege the physical solution—even Batman's mind is usually no more than a targeting system for his fists—while most of Lovecraft's cosmic terrors are immune to conventional weapons, in the long term at least. However, there are a few common elements available for the GM desperate to run a purist blend of H.P. Lovecraft and Gardner Fox. Firstly,

of course, Lovecraft's fiction and the Golden Age of Comics share a common setting, at least in our 21st-century eyes: the Pulp Era of the 1920s through the 1940s. All the setting assumptions for the one hold true for the other—or are broken (superheroes exist, scholars know about books that drive people insane) solely to juice the narrative. This lets certain props and elements—Packard coupes, fedoras, tommy guns, newsboys, the Empire State Building, propeller planes—unify the two with every scene wipe.

FISTS, FEARS, AND FUTILITY

Both sets of stories revel in the physical—fistfights in the one, dripping slime in the other. Both likewise accentuate the grotesque: supervillains and gang bosses are almost as "twisted and malformed" as ghouls or shambling monsters. (Similarly, both the Golden Age comics and Lovecraft's stories fear and distrust other races, especially Asians in the former case. This is probably not material suitable for modern-day roleplayers, though.) Both genres are fundamentally stories of loners. The dark guardian of the city and the orphan with a secret he can tell nobody are as isolated in their way as the scholar who cannot publish the truth about Antarctica or the artist who communes with ghouls. Likewise, both genres highlight questions of identity: Who am I, really? Who is anyone? Identity is fragile. Who else might be possessed by a Yithian, or secretly worshipping Cthulhu? Is Starman a scientist disguised as a vigilante, or a vigilante disguised as a scientist? Where does Charles Dexter Ward leave off and Joseph Curwen begin, or Carter Hall and Prince Khufu? The "secret identities" of Kent Nelson, Jim Corrigan, and even Billy Batson (Dr. Fate, the Spectre, and Captain Marvel) are more godlike than human—a sentiment Wilbur Whateley could sympathize with, as could Kal-El. The narrator of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth"