

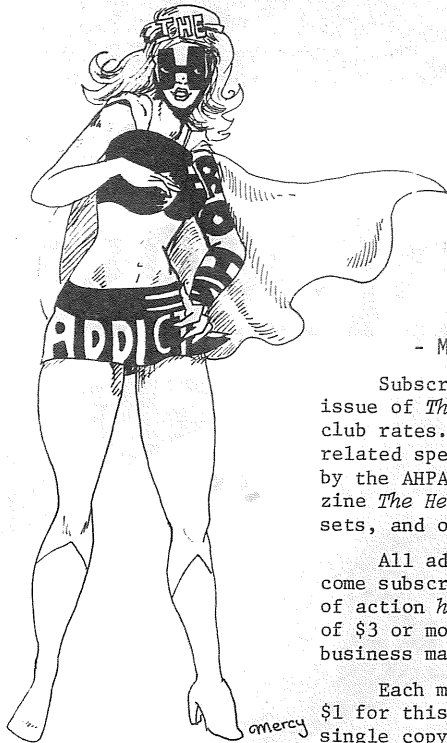


the  
**Adventuress**

No. 1



Here she is: CHEFAC, presenting... THE ADVENTRESS #1, September, 1975.



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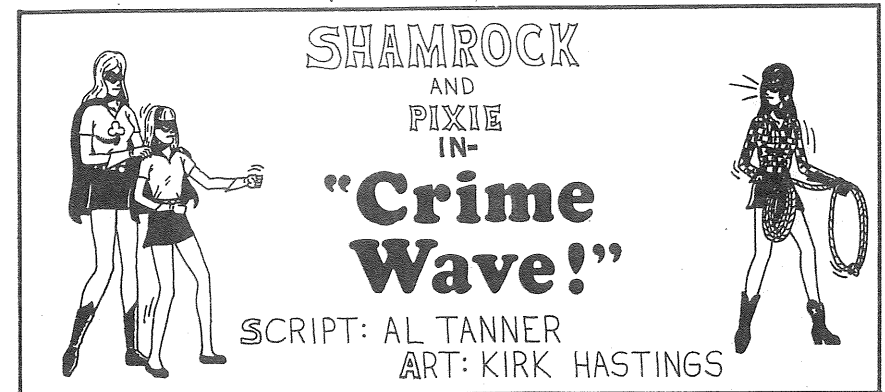
#### ATTENTION HEROINE ADDICTS:

You've asked for *THE ADVENTRESS*, and here it is! In this and future issues, we are living up to our promise to bring you original material designed specifically to meet your interest in the intriguing, dynamic adventure heroine.

If the characters, stories, and artwork in this issue don't fully match your taste, we ask only that you stick with us while we develop others which will. By the way, we already have additional characters, created by other artists and authors, all lined up for you to meet in TA #2 just two months from now. Don't miss that issue!

As a limited-press organization, we are in a position to respond quickly and directly to the preferences of the majority of our readers, so please send us your comments of all kinds. - A.T.

EDITOR & PUBLISHER: Al Tanner. SHAMROCK & PIXIE created by Al Tanner and illustrated by Kirk Hastings; ALIX & ILLESONE created and illustrated by Carol Strickland; SHANG CHICK created and illustrated by Chris Padovano; SKULL GODDESS created by Jeff Thompson and illustrated by Tom Luth. Cover by Carol Strickland; Chefac illos by Mercy Van Vlack.



The little black pinto was anything but conspicuous, and yet because so few cars used that out-of-the-way suburban road it did attract a curious glance from a lone stroller who lived nearby. He had seen the car several times before and had always found it rather puzzling in one respect.

As usual, it contained two occupants, but though he peered intently through both the front and side windows as the car rolled briskly past him, he could obtain no clear view whatever of the figures inside. There was little light this late in the evening, but the puzzling thing was that even in broad daylight he had never been able to see more than oddly distorted images through the windows of this particular car. He had no way of knowing that many others had noticed the same strange effect, or that it was created quite intentionally through the use of specially-designed glass.

Moments later the Pinto pulled smoothly into a wide driveway and followed it to the off-street side of a quietly impressive stone residence. A pair of lithesome young ladies emerged. Their colorful garb would have seemed both attractive and startling had there been anyone in a position to observe them during the few seconds it required for them to glide through a darkened doorway into the house.

They entered a small entrance hall and were greeted in hushed tones by a somerly dressed man in his early fifties. "I trust there was no problem tonight, Miss Heather," he inquired with quiet concern.

"Nothing we couldn't handle, Victor," replied the older of the two arivals. Heather Donovan's tanned complexion and graceful movement made her appear even younger than her twenty-three years. Her long blonde hair sparkled prettily as she led the way into a bright, comfortably furnished living room.

The three were welcomed by the pleasant smile of a gray-haired lady seated alone in the furthest corner. "I can't imagine what you two have been doing upstairs all this time," she said.

"Well, you know it takes a lot of work to keep a stamp collection in order, Grandma," Heather's younger sister responded. Bonnie's tone was so casual and guileless no one would have doubted that the pair had indeed spent the evening upstairs in their rooms. With practiced carelessness she quickly changed the subject. "Don't you want to hear the news tonight? It's past eleven."

"My, is it that late already? Victor and I were talking, and the time just flew by. Turn on the television, Bonnie."

Bonnie crossed the thick-napped carpet to pull a brass nob and bring forth the familiar voice of a local news commentator.

"...latest event in the recent crime wave to hit the city. Tonight's aborted jewel theft was the third attempted robbery within two weeks to be thwarted by the mysterious intervention of the unknown crime-fighters who

call themselves Shamrock and Pixie. Police spokesmen stated just minutes ago that the colorfully-masked young female vigilantes subdued the four would-be thieves in a brief but violent encounter while the only store employee on hand, Janice Franklin, frantically telephoned the police. As usual, the amazing young law-enforcers disappeared from the scene before police arrived to find the criminals unconscious but not seriously injured. ...We'll be back in a moment with the latest in sports."

"Turn it off, Bonnie," said Heather. "There won't be anything worth hearing tonight." The brass knob summarily silenced an earnest commercial message.

"Well, I certainly don't care about the sports news, but I'm surprised you two don't want to hear it," Mrs. Donovan said.

"We know what's happening," Heather assured her. "We checked the UPI ticker this afternoon."

Mrs. Donovan frowned slightly. "You and your sports! Heather, I sometimes wonder that you're not a sports writer instead of a crime reporter. I really wish you were when it comes right down to it."

"Well, after all, Dad reported crime all his life. I guess it just runs in the family, Grandmother. Besides, with all the police and court contacts he gave me before he was killed, I had sort of a running start." Her blue eyes glistened as she turned to her sister. "And if Mother were alive...I don't think she'd object." Bonnie's expressive young face conveyed mute agreement. They understood things together.

Mrs. Donovan's thoughts followed a different course. "I'm not so sure. I don't think your mother would have been any happier than I am about the idea of your spending half your time in police stations and courtrooms. For one thing, you're too young to be coming into contact with all those tough criminals."

"I've told you, Grandmother, I don't have much contact with suspects. I mean not directly....Not very often. And nothing has happened to me yet." As she spoke, Heather removed her specially-padded green gloves and gingerly rubbed a slightly swollen knuckle on her left hand. Unbidden, Victor removed a small container from his jacket pocket and silently applied a soothing spray to the swollen area. Heather flexed her fingers, smiled, and nodded her appreciation. Victor looked to Bonnie and raised his eyebrows in inquiry. The youngster tentatively felt her right elbow, then declined aid with a gesture.

None of this served to interrupt the conversation. "Well, something's going to happen to those two girls who keep getting mixed up with robberies," Mrs. Donovan proclaimed emphatically. "Imagine that! Why, the younger one is no older than you, Bonnie."

"They don't know how old Pixie is, Mrs. Donovan," Victor pointed out. "No one knows anything about her."

"I know, Victor, but they say she looks like she's not even twelve."

"She must be older than she looks," Bonnie ventured. "I am twelve. At least I will be next month. Can you imagine me getting mixed up with those men?"

"Of course not, dear. That would be terribly dangerous. What an absurd idea!" Her amused smile dropped to a worried frown. "I just wish you would stop playing all those rough games at school," she scolded. "And don't say they aren't rough. You know you sprained your wrist just last week."

"It wasn't exactly a sprain - and I'm all right now."

"Why were you playing baseball anyway, dear?"

"The boys didn't want to play basketball," Bonnie scowled.

Her grandmother gave up the futile protest. "Victor, are you certain Bonnie's wrist is perfectly all right?"

"Yes, it's fine now."

"I really don't know what we'd do without you, Victor. And I do wish you'd let us pay you more. With all the things you do for us, you deserve

a better salary."

"I'd tell you if I weren't satisfied, Mrs. Donovan."

"You admit you'd be making more money if you were still working as a medical technician."

"Yes, but there are other things than money involved. I live very nicely here with you and the girls."

"You certainly take good care of us all."

"He sure does," agreed Bonnie, exchanging knowing smiles with Victor and her sister.

Heather sighed wearily. "Let's go up to bed, Bonnie. It's been a long day for both of us."

"Right-o, Sis." They bid a brief goodnight and left the room, followed by Victor.

"Shall I put the Pinto in the garage, Miss Heather?" he inquired.

"Yes. I left it out so you could check the transmission when you move it. See what you think about the overdrive. We didn't need it tonight, but when we do..."

"I'll check it." He left the girls as they started up the main stairs.

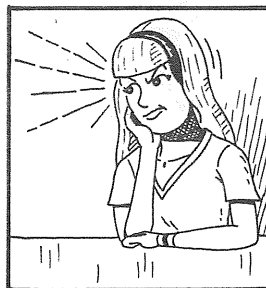
"I just can't help wondering what Grandma would say if she could see us in these costumes," Bonnie mused, removing her emerald green mask and pertly tossing her flowing blonde hair.

"Well, we know she never will," Heather replied as she unfastened her own slightly larger mask.

"I wish Grandma wasn't blind," said Bonnie sadly. "I'm glad we can keep our secret from her though. I wouldn't want her to worry about us."

"I know. She worries too much as it is, just because we're both so active in sports." The pair parted at the top of the stairway. "Well, good-night, Pixie."

Bonnie's characteristic, radiant smile returned and broadened. "Good-night, Shamrock," she chirped contentedly.



"That little gal can sure concentrate hard," marveled Roberts of the Morning Chronicle.

"Oh, she's probably daydreaming. Bonnie's in a world of her own when she does that," Heather explained. She and Roberts continued to look through the one-way glass partition which allowed them to see Lieutenant Crowley questioning the four prisoners in the adjoining room without being seen themselves. Through concealed microphones, they could also hear the stuccato conversation, but it was true that young Bonnie was obviously oblivious of all that was said. She often seemed lost in thought like this on the fairly frequent occasions when she accompanied her sister to police headquarters.

For another fifteen minutes Crowley hammered away on the same theme: had these four men attempted the jewelry store heist entirely on their own? They stubbornly refused to implicate anyone else, and finally the detective gruffly called for them to be returned to their cells.

The reporters adjourned to the station entrance hall, where Heather quietly used her influence to obtain from the duty sergeant the address of a visitor who had talked briefly to one of the four prisoners in his cell earlier that afternoon.

While she did so, her sister engaged Roberts in conversation near the main entrance. "Are you going to do a story on this?" she asked.

"No, it looks like there'll be no follow-up story here. If Crowley can't get 'em to talk, nobody can." He gestured toward the sergeant's desk. "Heather must know every cop on the force. What do you suppose she's talking to that guy about?"

"Oh, nothing important," smiled Bonnie disarmingly.

In a moment Heather joined her and the two made their way toward a red and white Maverick in the parking lot. "The Chronicle won't have a story tomorrow," said Bonnie.

"No, of course not."  
"Will we have one?"

"Well," Heather conjectured, pursing her lips in thought, "you know what old Kevin Keller said as he watched his uncle's funeral procession roll past."

"What?"

Heather's eyebrows arched meaningfully. "That's a hearse of a different Keller!"

"Oh, that's terrible!" laughed Bonnie as they slid into the Marverick.

"Well, it wasn't terrible for Kevin," Heather observed dryly. "Okay, Pixie, what did you pick up? Any clear impressions?"

Bonnie transferred a new piece of bubble gum from the car's glove compartment to her mouth. "I wish this tennis dress had pockets," she complained. "Yes, the impression was very clear...although fear was the strongest thing I sensed. Those men are scared to death."

"Of jail terms?"

"No, it's more than that." Bonnie picked her tennis racket up from the floor and inspected it thoughtfully. "They weren't behind that robbery themselves, and the impression I got was that all of them are plenty scared of whoever was."

"Well, your psychic impressions have always been accurate enough where strong emotions are involved, so there's no reason not to trust this one. I'd have bet on it anyway. Those hoods aren't smart enough to set up a wave of crimes like this on their own. That's what Crowley has in mind."

"Definitely. So what do we do now, Sis?"

"Well, it seems they had visitor today, and he

might be interesting. Tonight we're going to find out."

"Suits me," chomped Bonnie. "Do we go as Shamrock and Pixie?"

"Sure and that's what I have in mind, m' bonnie lassie," affirmed her sister in the exaggerated Irish accent she occasionally affected.

"Good! I have plenty of pockets in my costume!"

"You sure do. You carry more junk than a circus train in those hidden pockets," Heather teased.

Bonnie frowned. She hadn't quite outgrown the pouting age. "Well, I might not if you'd let me carry gas pellets like you do."

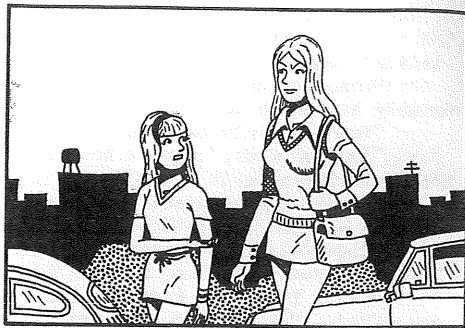
"No way! You could get into trouble with those. Just let Shamrock handle the pellets. Pixie has her own role to play." Her fond smile kindled an even broader one on Bonnie's face.

"Right-o!" she beamed. She never sulked for long.

"I still think we ought to blow this town."

"Since when are you a thinker?" the scar-faced man scowled. "And this next job is a perfect setup. Look at the way the boss has it laid out: every detail!" A tall, somber-faced man ambled over from the far corner of the large room and glanced down at a pile of papers on the table. He nodded in approval of the notes and diagrams.

Unknown to the three confederates, another interested party also nodded with satisfaction, and as she did, Shamrock stepped out from her place of concealment in an adjoining room. She and her diminutive companion had



overheard more than enough to justify their visit. She pulled a large pellet from a pocket in her belt and hurled it sharply to the floor at the feet of the mobster just as he looked up and discovered her arrival.

"What the...?" He took a step toward her, then fell limply to the floor as if in a dead faint.

"Who the hell are you?" grunted the one called Eddie in astonishment.

"It's that masked gal! Shamrock they call her!" exclaimed the other. "Get her!"

"I'll be damned!" Eddie pulled a wicked looking revolver from his belt.

"No guns, you idiot! If people hear shots in this building, there goes our whole setup!" He leveled a haymaker at Shamrock's jaw, but when the punch arrived she had nimbly ducked. He was doubled over by the force of a countering jab between his ribs. She adroitly stepped to the side and he was felled by a lightning-quick chop to the base of the neck.

His ally had grabbed a chair and stood poised to bring it crashing down on Shamrock's head. She prepared to dodge the blow, then reacted to a

better opportunity. Her left hand darted forward to her assailant's chest and pushed...and he toppled backward over Pixie, who had planted herself behind him on her hands and knees. His head bounced once on the hard, grimy wooden floor and he lay still.

"Down!" called Pixie. As if by reflex action, Shamrock dropped to the floor, barely avoiding the gleaming blade of a heavy stiletto which had been thrown with deadly intent from a doorway behind her.

"Ah, the reinforcements have arrived," piped the little battler

as she and her partner leapt to their feet and moved apart. Brandishing a second knife, the newcomer moved menacingly toward Shamrock. She circled to her right, away from the corner, moving with the lithesome grace of a ballerina.

"Come here, you guys!" he called, and footsteps sounded in the room from which he had entered. Pixie glided quickly into position behind the open door. In a moment two unshaved men came through it and stood staring at Shamrock in obvious confusion. "Watch Pixie," said the knife-wielder.

"What's a Pixie?" asked one, his forehead furrowed in bewilderment.

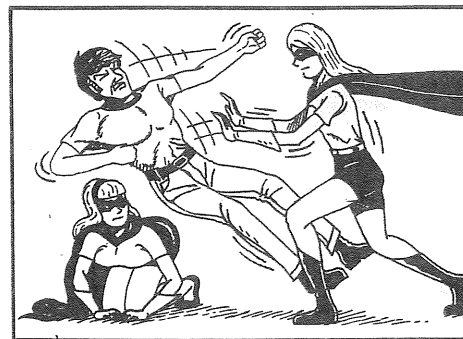
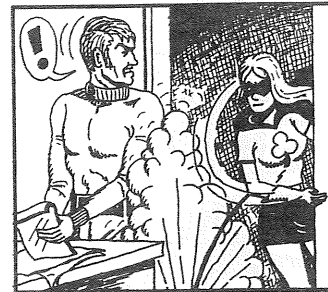
"A Pixie is one of those cute little Irish things ain't it?" opined his slightly better-informed companion.

"Flattery will"...*Whonk!* said her shoe as it met his spine..."get you nowhere!" Her blow sent him pitching forward onto his face. Pixie sidled warily away from the other, bigger man.

The knife-wielder's attention remained on Shamrock. They circled one another cautiously, then suddenly the girl's movement was halted as she came up against the side of a low-contoured chair. Given a momentary opportunity, he set himself to thrust his weapon home.

As he did, a tiny flying object struck his hand with stinging impact, and he dropped the knife with a startled snarl of pain. This was not the first time Pixie's collapsible sling-shot had been used to turn the tide of battle.

"Get him, Sis!" urged the young marksman.





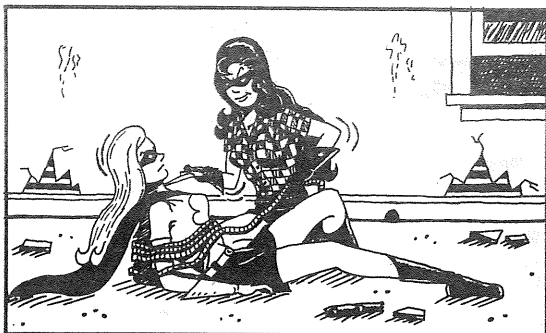
Shamrock's booted foot made direct and effective connections with his chin, leaving him lying dazed several feet away.

"Let's get the *little* one, Gus," directed a harsh voice, and the remaining two men moved to trap Pixie in a corner.

She started to her left, suddenly reversed direction, avoided an outstretched arm, and darted agilely between the two. "The good old fake-and-cut!" she chirped. "I've scored a lot of lay-ups off that move."

"Not bad, Pix! Now I'll lay those two out and we can summon the gendarmes." She pulled a gas pellet from her belt, but before she could put it to use, a circle of rope dropped silently over her body and arms and instantly tightened to immobilize her.

Now for the first time the two adventuresses saw the new arrival standing near the door behind them. She appeared to be about Shamrock's age, and she too wore a brief costume obviously designed to allow unencumbered action. Her black mask failed to conceal either her youthful beauty or her malevolent grin.



Before Shamrock could react, a sharp tug on the lasso left her lying prone on her back, and in an instant the raven-haired girl was kneeling beside her and holding a bowie knife at her throat. "Well! We met a might sooner than I 'spected, li'l heffer," she sneered, revealing an unmistakable Texas drawl.

"I don't believe we've been properly introduced," Shamrock replied caustically.

"They call me Lasso Lass gen'rally."

"I can see why." Shamrock glanced with grudging admiration at the rope which held her arms pinned to her sides.

"You ain't seen nuthin' yet," her captor confidently assured her. She turned to the alertly-poised Pixie. "Calm down there, li'l filly, and jus' do as yer told. That is, unless you want t' see yer pardner here with a low-cut throat."

Assessing the gleaming blade which rested under Shamrock's chin and the speaker's readiness to put it to quick use, Pixie decided against any long-shot attempt to renew the battle. She stood tense but immobile as one of the thugs took a painful grip on her arm and neck.

"Y'all get some ropes," Lasso Lass commanded with sublime self-assurance, "an' we'll truss these two up so they won't give y' no more trouble." Her henchmen's response left no room for doubt as to her leadership. Two of them promptly went to carry out the errand.

"Okay, get up an' have a seat over yonder," she instructed Shamrock, indicating a heavy wooden chair across the room. "You two been causin' us a bit o' trouble, a lot more than th' cops have."

"Thank you," smiled Pixie sarcastically.

"Shut up!" growled the man behind her.

"Well, yer through causin' trouble now," Lasso Lass drawled. "In fact, y' showed up here *just* in time."

The two men returned with several long coils of rope, and she used much



of this to tie Shamrock very securely to the chair, binding her wrists behind her and then anchoring her arms and legs tightly with a skill that was admirable but not encouraging.

Meanwhile Eddie and the knife-throwing member of the gang, who was called by the unlikely name Bronco, attended to Pixie. As she lay on her stomach, they tied her ankles together and secured her wrists behind her back. Then, coiling her lasso expertly, their pretty leader called the gang into session in some other room of the large building, leaving their prisoners alone.

When the group were clearly out of earshot, Shamrock said softly, "Come on, Houdini, do your thing."

"I'm glad you made me practice this now," whispered Pixie as she began to squirm methodically in her bonds.

"Can you do it?"

"I think so. The knots are tight, but that big creep was too dumb to tie my wrists separately. He just tied them together."

"I'll bet he never tried to *tie* a squirmy little eel like *you* before."

"Yes, there are times when it helps to be *small*. This is going to take a while though."

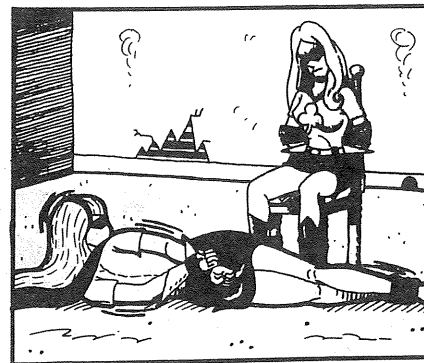
Shamrock gave up her own efforts to escape. "There's no way I can get out of *this*. It's up to you, li'l filly."

"Oh, shut up with that filly stuff!" snapped Pixie. "I'll filly *her* when we get out of this!"

"It's pronounced *filet*, Pix. It means to remove all the bones."

"That ain't a bad idea at all, ol' heffer! Ah b'lieve thas *jus'* what ah'll do!" Pixie mimicked. The pair had discovered that, inappropriate as it might have seemed to others, a flow of cheerful banter had always helped them to avoid panic and keep their wits about them when in danger.

Now, however, Shamrock turned serious. "What kind of mental impression did you get of the boss-lady in there, Pix?"



"Ugh!" grunted Pixie, straining to loosen her bonds just a bit more. "There's no fear of *anything* in *that* gal. But she's greedy...and she's clever, *real* clever."

"Is she running the whole show, or does she take orders from somebody higher up?"

"She's running this...rodeo all right. With the kind of personality waves I picked up from her, I know she wouldn't take orders from *anybody*, Sis."

"She's a cocky little miss all right," Shamrock nodded. "I can tell that even *without* ESP. And she sure knows how to use a rope."

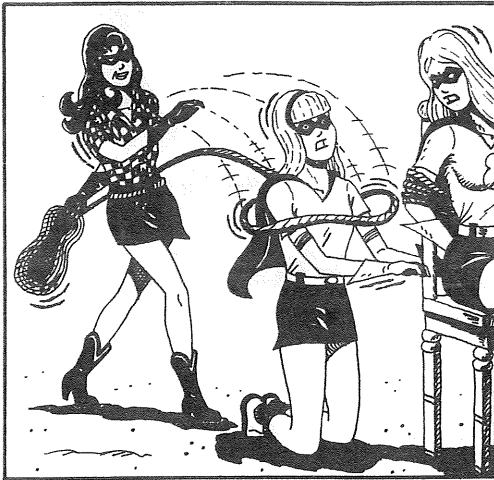
"Well, *Eddie* doesn't." With a final tug, Pixie pulled her hands apart, leaving her left glove encircled in the rope. She rubbed her reddened wrist briefly, then retrieved the glove and replaced it. "There. Now I'll take a crack at those knots." Without taking time to untie her ankles, she dragged herself across the floor and knelt behind the chair to which Shamrock was bound. "Wow! She knows how to handle ropes all right! I've never *seen* a job like this."

"Untie those ropes behind the chair first...and hurry!"

"I can't even find the knot she used."

"Then get my hands untied. But hurry."

"Okay. These knots are really tight....I can't...I know! I'll use a nail file to pick them." She drew a small file from a hidden pocket in her cape lining and started to work.



Shamrock was dumbfounded. "What are you doing with a nail file?"

"I don't know," Pixie said noncommittally. "I just stuck it in a pocket. I have a little comb too, but I don't suppose that would..." A spinning circle of rope dropped neatly over her shoulders and she found herself abruptly yanked a good six feet backwards. Lasso Lass had a way of making unobserved entrances.

"Damn it, Eddie," she hissed, "can't you do *anything* right!"

The rebuked hoodlum behind her was anxious to make amends. "I'll tie her again, boss, and this time I'll guarantee you she won't..."

"No, I'll guarantee you she won't!" his masked leader inter-

rupted. "Tote her into the back room and put her on that big steel bed now. Bronco, you bring along some ropes."

Her instructions having been carried out, she removed the rope from around Pixie's ankles and methodically anchored her wrists and ankles to the ends of the strong metal head- and footboards of the bed, making sure to allow no slack. After meticulously inspecting the result, she smiled with satisfaction. "Let's see y' squirm out o' *this*, li'l filly."

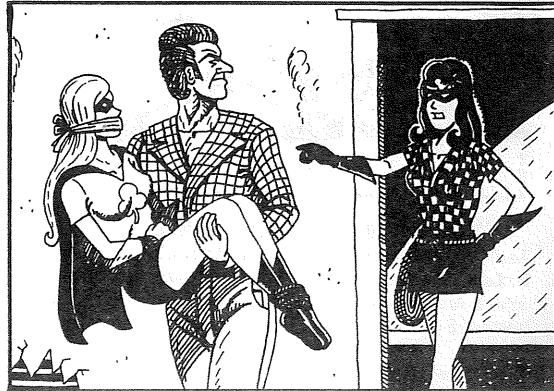
"She ain't goin' nowhere, boss," Eddie growled, stating the obvious.

"No, an' neither are you, Eddie. You're gonna keep an eye on this one while we take her pardner with us on our li'l job tonight. Come on, y'all, let's go fetch her."

Left temporarily alone, Pixie wasted no time in testing the effectiveness of her bonds. Her tugging and wriggling only served to prove, as she had expected, that it was clearly impossible either to work her limbs free or to alter her prone position. She gave up the useless effort and was deep in thought when the gang returned a few minutes later.

Bronco carried Shamrock in his powerful arms. She was securely tied hand and foot, definitely the work of the meticulous Lasso Lass, and was tightly gagged with cotton and cloth.

Lasso Lass was equipped with similar material with which she began deftly to gag Pixie. "Yer pardner's gonna make a li'l visit with us," she declared. "If she cooperates well enough, then Gus'll bring her back here



when we're through. An' by then, the rest of us'll be long gone."

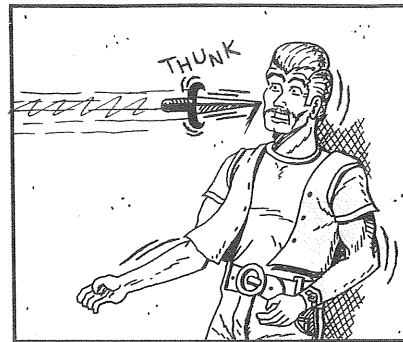
"What a setup for a heist!" Bronco enthused. "We'll have one hostage right along with us and another one hidden back here with Eddie."

"Yep! These two gals have turned out to be right useful...Now remember, Eddie, when Gus gets back here with our pal Shamrock - an' with the... the profits from this job - you an' him gotta move out real quiet-like an' meet the rest of us at...Well, you know where an' when."

"Right, boss."

"An' don't mess up!" She glared meaningfully at Eddie and Gus. "An' don't go dippin' in the...the profits. Bring it all along, just the way we leave it in the car."

"We wouldn't cheat you, boss. You know that," Gus assured her. "After all, without you..." He stopped and stared open-mouthed at Bronco, from



whose flashing hand a knife came whipping across the room and stuck with a deadly thunk in the wall scant inches from his head.

"Without me, yer *nuthin'*," Lasso Lass purred, "so I figure you'll meet up with us right on time."

"How about these two?" asked Eddie, gesturing toward the prisoners. "When Gus an' I pull outta here, what do you want us to do with them?"

"Leave 'em here, stupid."

"You mean - *alive*?" he wondered.

"I didn't say that...Looka' here, boys. That's how y' put a gag on so it stays on. Don't worry, Eddie, this li'l doll won't be invitin' no neighbors in while you're here. An' she won't be goin' visitin' either."

"That's for sure," Bronco certified, appraising her work admiringly.

Shamrock looked questioningly at her sister, but Pixie shook her head in negative reply. This time no amount of squirming would help at all.

The gang departed to carry out its illicit mission, and Pixie wondered if they would stick to their announced plan and have Gus bring Shamrock back with him. Eddie paced the room nervously, and she could sense that he was wondering the same thing. If Lasso Lass switched her plan and left him to fend for himself, it wouldn't be the first time a gang leader had deserted a cohort.

The two ignored each other as the minutes crawled past, measured by Eddie's restless pacing. Then suddenly he halted in his tracks and squinted anxiously toward the window. "What's that, kid?...It sounded like a *siren*."

Pixie's only response was a hostile stare.

"Was that a cop car, kid? You live in this town. You know what kind o' sirens these cops use. Is that what that was?" The girl ignored his question. Eddie stepped over to the bed and raised his fist menacingly. "Was it!" he demanded.

She nodded sullenly.

"That's what I thought," he said. "It sounded close - like maybe right out front." Again Pixie nodded confirmation. He moved to the window and peered out, scanning the street below. "There ain't no cars out there. There's *nuthin'* in that street!" He cocked his head, listening. "There it is again, louder." He checked the street as far as he could see in both directions.

He spun around to face Pixie. "That ain't no siren!" he growled angrily. "You're *lying*!" She turned her head away.

"What are y' *lyin'* to me for?" he snarled. "What good do y' think that's gonna do ya?"

"Um futt wuff," explained Pixie through the wads of cotton in her mouth. He didn't believe that either. "I have a good mind to...Wait a minute."

What do I got to worry abouts cops for anyway? They don't know about this place. They don't know anything about..." He paused and his tone changed. "Hey, kid. The cops didn't know you two was comin' here did they?"

Pixie shook her head emphatically. For the first time, her face betrayed apprehension. Her captor was quick to react. "You're lyin', ain't ya!" he snorted. You lied to me about that siren, and now you're lyin' to me again! I know it!"

Again she shook her head in denial. Angrily he crossed the room and stood over her. "Come on, who knows you came here?" he persisted. She turned her head away stubbornly.

"Quit lyin'!" he shouted. "Look, kid, you got to do some talkin'." He removed the gag from her mouth. She could feel his hands shaking, and her extra-sensory perception told her that he was rattled and confused.

He cocked his huge hand, ready to slap her face. "Talk!" he commanded.

"And *this* time tell me the truth! Who knows you came here?"

Her wide eyes stared at his upraised hand. "Lieutenant Crowley...at Northeast," she murmured.

"Oh, God! Now what do I do?" Eddie groaned. "I can't leave - but if I stay here too long, the cops'll show up for sure."

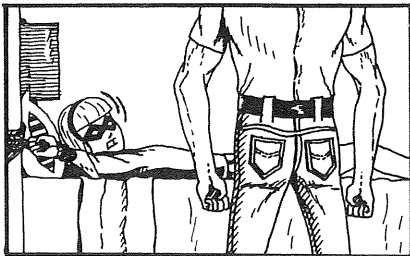
"You aren't going to hurt me are you?" Pixie muttered.

"Why would I hurt you, kid?" he said indifferently, preoccupied with his unaccustomed need to make a quick, vital decision.

"I thought you might try to make me telephone Lieutenant Crowley."

"Are you kiddin'?" he gasped in astonishment. "Why in hell would I want you to call a cop?"

"Well, I'm glad you don't...but even if you *tried* to make me, I wouldn't tell him everything is all right."



"You wouldn't tell...Hey!" His face lit up. "Kid, you sure are stupid. You just gave me a great idea even though you didn't mean to. You are gonna call that cop, an' yer gonna tell him there's no problem, everything's fine."

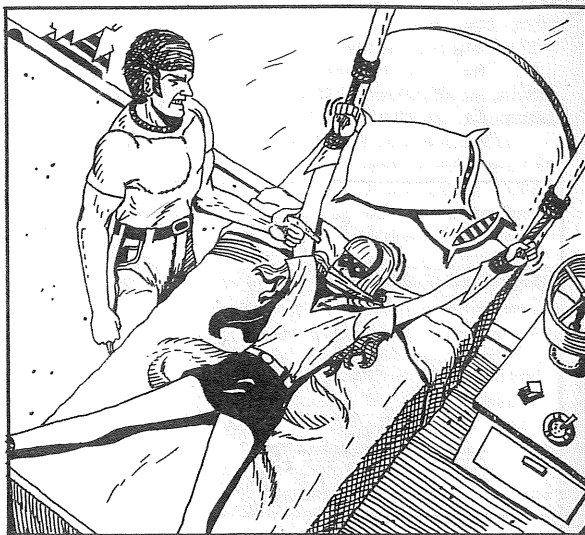
"No! I won't!"

"Oh yes you will. An' just to be on the safe side, you ain't gonna tell him where you are or nuthin' else. You ain't gonna pull no tricks on me."

Pixie was undaunted. "I'm not go-

ing to make any phone call."

"That's what you think," Eddie growled. He raised his hand to strike her face, and she closed her eyes in anticipation. But no blow came, and when she opened them again, his face reflected an incongruous inhibition. With a gesture of frustration he lowered his arm and frowned in thought. She watched him apprehensively.



"I got it!" His face lit up with sudden inspiration. "My kid used to be stubborn too - till I found a way to *make* him do what I wanted. From then on, he was you call a model child...right up till they busted him on a dumb rap and sent him to that fool reform school."

He sat on the edge of the bed and gripped Pixie's leg just above the knee with one of his ham-like hands. "I know how to make you get on that telephone." The hand tightened like a vise.

"Oww!" she gasped.

"You gonna call?" he demanded.

"No! I won't!" She wriggled and squirmed frantically, but there was no way she could twist away from his grip.

He increased the pressure.

"Do what I tell you!"

Her teeth clinched tight in obstinate resistance. "No!"

He gripped her other leg and applied pressure with both of his powerful hands.

"Oh, no!" she groaned. She redoubled her efforts to wriggle free, but the ropes held her helpless.

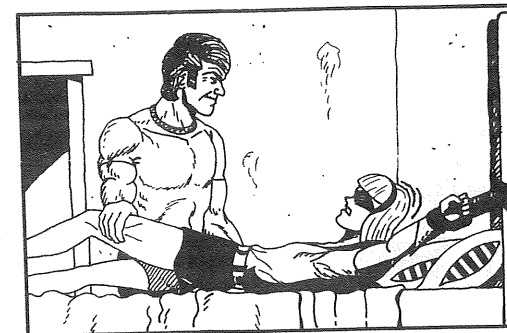
"Stop!" she cried.

"Are you gonna call?" he growled, continuing the relentless pressure.

She ceased struggling and nodded agreement. "Yes! I *will*!"

With an expression of obvious relief, Eddie released his grip and stood up. "Okay," he said, "I'll untie you so you can go to the phone." With considerable difficulty, he freed her arms and she rubbed her wrists to restore the circulation.

"Don't try any tricks," he warned, "or I'll belt your pretty little head off!"...Then he began to untie her ankles.



After checking to make sure there was no one in sight in either direction, Gus braked the speedy new black sedan to a stop. He reached over to open the curb-side door, and as he slid across the seat he easily scooped up

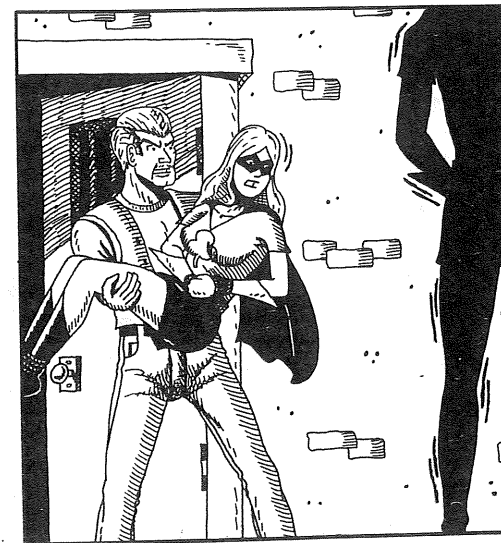
the trim body of Shamrock, who had been lying bound and out of sight beside him. "Thanks for the help, honey," he taunted as he carried her around to the side of the old brick building. "That guard mighta set off an alarm if he hadn't seen we had you along for company."

"Don't mention it," his unwilling companion bit off sarcastically.

Gus opened a half-hidden side door, glanced around to again make sure he was unseen, and carried her in.

"What the *hell*?" he piped in surprise.

"Bonnie!" gasped Shamrock, too shocked to use her sister's assumed name. They were reacting in their own ways to a most unexpected sight. A rope hung suspended from a ceiling light fix-

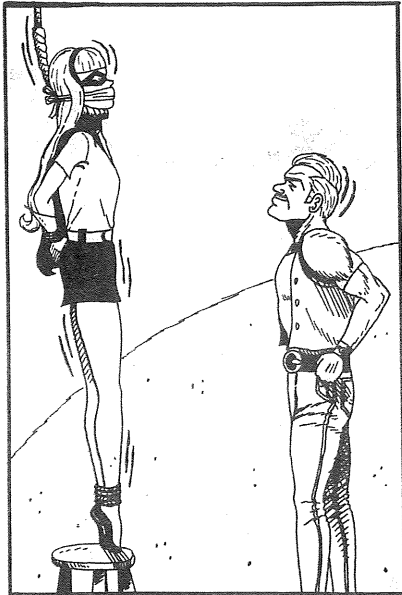


ture in the center of the room, its lower end forming a hangman's noose that encircled Pixie's neck. She was standing, balanced on the balls of her feet, on a wooden stool. Her hands were tied behind her back and her ankles were bound tightly together. From her gagged mouth came urgent but unintelligible sounds.

"How about *this!*" observed Gus sardonically. "It looks like Eddie got a little impatient."

"Get her down!" Shamrock implored. "She can't balance on her toes like that for long. If she goes down on her feet, she'll *strangle!*"

"It looks like that's what Eddie had in mind," Gus assumed. He kicked the door shut behind him and, none too gently, set Shamrock down on the floor. Then he turned and walked over to Pixie, whose wide eyes stared at him anxiously through her mask.



He yanked the gag downward away from her mouth, and Shamrock was relieved to see that she managed to keep from dropping onto her heels. "Where's Eddie?" Gus asked.

"He had to go outside for something. He didn't tell me what. He left me like this. Get me down."

Gus relaxed, satisfied that everything was well under control. He smiled, but his eyes didn't. "Okay, little pixie, glad to oblige. Sure I'll get you down." He took a step backward...and suddenly he kicked the stool out from under her toes.

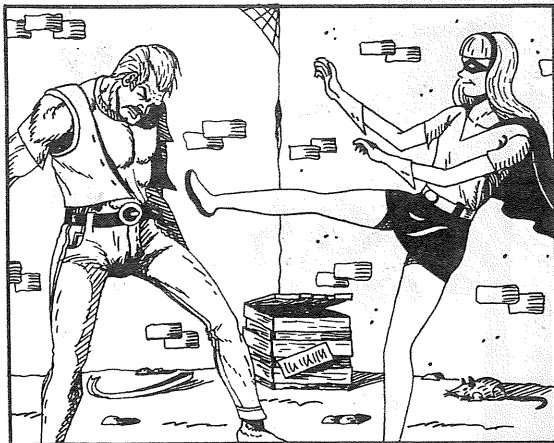
"No!" cried Shamrock, horrified.

Pixie dropped like a lead weight, straight down. The hanging rope fell freely with her, however, and she landed unharmed on her feet. The apparent restraint of her wrists and ankles proved to have been equally illusory, for she pulled them free before the astonished Gus could do more than croak an exclamation of amazement.

The element of surprise more than made up for her smaller size. She attacked with a telling thrust of her right heel to his midriff. He staggered back and fell to the floor, gasping for breath. She moved toward him, poised for a finishing effort.

Before she could close in, however, he managed to pull an automatic pistol from under his vest and level it at her chest. She stopped and glared. "Hold it, chick!" he wheezed, gradually catching his breath and regaining his feet. "You're fast as hell, but you ain't fast as a *bullet!*"

Pixie's blazing eyes challenged him despite his advantage. "You wouldn't *dare* shoot that gun. Not *here!*" She took a step



forward. He cautiously retreated a step.

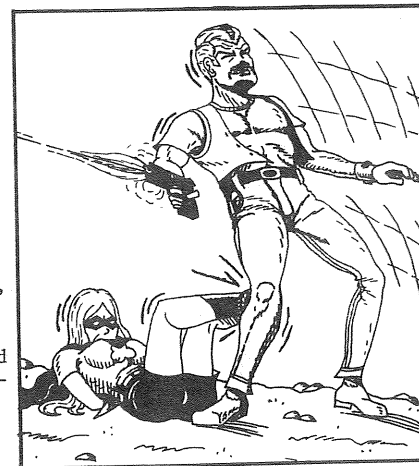
"You think so?" he growled. "Just try me."

Her hands circling in readiness to strike, Pixie slid forward again. "If you kill me, a lot of people are going to hear the sound of that forty-five," she said pointedly.

He raised his automatic threateningly, and as he did, he took another two steps backward. Those steps brought him unknowingly within the range of Shamrock, whose legs straightened violently with the force of two suddenly-released springs. The heels of her boots struck the back of Gus's right leg just below the knee, toppling him over backward. He instinctively pulled the trigger once, and a bullet drilled a gaping hole in the wall.

As he landed on his back, Shamrock rolled her body onto his right arm, and her weight held it pinned momentarily to the floor. "A pellet!" she called. "With my hands tied, I can't reach them, Pixie!"

Her sister, moving almost before the words had been uttered, dove forward and pulled a pellet from its hidden holder in Shamrock's belt. Immediately Shamrock rolled away to a safe spot beyond the effective range of the invisible gas. Pixie darted to join her and then threw the pellet. Her aim was true: it struck the floor next to the still-dazed Gus and expelled its contents upon contact. Gus had time to swing his automatic almost around to her before he slid into oblivion.



They had removed their masks and gloves and were sitting on Bonnie's bed finishing off a late-night snack. "You even had *me* fooled," Heather said, "and Gus was positive that Eddie had tied your hands and feet."

"It was easy enough to do," Bonnie said. "The hard part was to make that dumb rope stay up in the light fixture. At first it kept falling out. So finally I stuck it in with..."

"Don't tell me," laughed Heather. "Bubble gum!"

"Sure. I had a few pieces in my pockets."

"The fantastic part was the way you got Eddie to untie you from the bed. I never thought he'd do that."

Bonnie produced a wailing sound from deep in her throat which sounded remarkably like a slightly off-pitch siren, and they both giggled in amusement. "He thought sure he'd see a police car out front," she said. "After I fooled him about that, there was no way he was going to believe me when I told him nobody knew where we were."

"I know what you mean. When a liar tells the truth, nobody ever believes it. And then when you made him think you didn't want him to untie you to use the telephone! That was mighty smart, Brer Rabbit."

"Brer *who?*" Bonnie was puzzled.

"Don't you know that story about the briar patch?" smiled Heather.

This brought an impatient frown. "Oh, you and your Irish fairy stories!" exclaimed Bonnie.

"No, this wasn't exactly an...Well, never mind. I'm sorry you had to get him to hurt you though in order to convince him you weren't trying to trick him."

"I was lucky that Eddie's the kind of guy he is, or it might have been a lot worse."

"What do you mean?" Heather asked.



"Well, he's not exactly like those others. I don't think he really wanted to hurt me. He just thought he had to."

"Is your leg all right now?"

"Yes. It's my other knee that's still sore, the one I caught him on the jaw with when he untied me. I'm sorry I had to do that."

"That fake hanging setup was a real inspiration, Bonnie. When you fell right to the floor, Gus was too shocked to know *what* to do."

"Well, he won't be doing *anything* for the next few years, right?"

"Right-o!" Heather laughed.

"With that hot money the police found in the trunk of Gus's car, it's an iron-clad case. It is too bad that Eddie woke up and slipped away though."

"Yes, and Lasso Lass and the rest of them got away too."

"Not for long, I hope. Not if your ESP is right in what it told you about where they're all planning to meet. That's a meeting we'll attend without invitations!"

"Good! I can't wait! And remember, I'm going to make some changes in this Pixie costume."

"Yes, I know. Your new white skirt."

"That's one thing. And *this*." Bonnie pulled off her black hair band. "I had it on when I was playing basketball yesterday, and that ninth grader Billy Jones said it looked *cute*."

"Did he really?" smiled Heather.

"Yes! I'm never going to wear this again!" With an angry gesture, she sent the band flying into the corner.

Her sister smiled knowingly. "I think I'd keep it around if I were you, Bonnie. Sooner or later you just might change your mind about..." She stopped abruptly at the sound of footsteps coming quietly down the hall.

"Goodnight, Grandmother," she called.

Mrs. Donovan paused at the doorway. "Are you children still up? What time is it, anyway?"

Heather looked that the alarm clock on her table, which denoted seventeen minutes after one. "Well, it *is* after midnight," she understated.

"That's what I thought. You should have been asleep long ago, Bonnie. As active as you are - in sports and everything - you need your rest," the widow proclaimed.

"Well, she was lying down for a while tonight," Heather informed her. She winked broadly at Bonnie, who almost choked in an effort to muffle her giggling.

Their grandmother's unseeing eyes blinked in satisfaction. "Well, that's nice," she smiled sweetly. "What were you doing while Victor and I were at the concert this evening, dear?"

Bonnie shrugged her shoulders in an elaborately casual gesture, and her wide eyes gazed innocently into her sister's. "Oh, just...hanging around."

- The End -



# Alix and Illesone

OR

Who Was That Lady...

Illesone watched carefully as Duke Bralin unlocked his safe. He turned around and presented the young woman a necklace.

"Ooh, it's lovely," she breathed.

The duke brushed her long, dark hair aside as he fastened the jewelry around her neck. Its pale gold nestled against her deep-tan skin, and its rubies flashed in vain to compete with her shining green eyes, the color of spring leaves.

Bralin smiled as he removed the necklace, leaned down, and replaced it in the safe. He did not notice Illesone run a quick, penetrating check of the room as he turned.

It was large and comfortable, with sofas, a few chairs, table, rugs, and hearth. No servants lingered; their master required privacy for his meeting today.

Illesone turned quickly back to the duke as he closed the safe.

"It is as beautiful as you are," he smiled as he stood up. "Perhaps you would like to wear it for the Fairs Day celebration tomorrow, Lady Illesone?"

"An honor," the woman curtsied, "but your wife?"

The duke growled. "Her! Yes. Ridas will be there, won't she?" He sighed. "I think you'd best not wear it then, dear Illesone. But later."



story &  
art by *strick*

his mouth twitched into a smile. "I could arrange to have it - uh - stolen, perhaps?"

Illesone ran her hand up the duke's arm. "That would be perfect," she smiled seductively. "Would you?"

"Of course." The duke pulled her closer to him. Illesone put her lips to his ear.

"I think my servant will be waiting for me now," she whispered.

Bralin dropped his arms and moved away angrily. "That old witch--" he started; Illesone pouted.

"Alix is a sweet old lady!"

"She looks like death itself, with that old, ragged cloak...And the way her hair scraggles from under her hood --"

"Hush, my darling." Illesone took his arm and guided Bralin towards the townhouse's back door. "She may be old, but her hearing is still sharp as ever. Look - there she is now." She gave the duke a daughterly kiss and ran out to meet the disapproving servant.

"Harumff! Are you through, Lady Illesone?" the hag called out loudly.

"For pete's sake, Gentlefem, quiet her down! What if my wife should --"

Illesone gave the duke a reassuring wave and laugh, urging her servant out into the street.

"Well?" the crone croaked as soon as they were a safe distance from the house.

"The necklace won't be in circulation tomorrow night; it's kept in his study."

"Guards?"

"None that I could see, but then, the safe's pretty tight. Maybe he doesn't need guards."

"Could be, Sony. Then again, he might have a sorcery lock." Alix pondered the problem. "No sweat."

"Let's grab a carriage somewhere. A gentlefem like you shouldn't be seen walking the streets like a commoner."

Illesone laughed. "Back hurting you again, huh Al?" She patted Alix' humped shoulders. "Let's see if there's a coach around with room for a lady and her poor old, sick maidservant."

A myriad of ships and boats bobbed in the harbor of Ji Reish. Flags of red and yellow flashed in the midday sun as deckhands hauled cargo onto the waiting docks. It was fair time; merchants from hundreds of miles around were sending their goods to Ji Reish.

A hired cab pulled to a stop before the docks. Illesone, skirts in hand,

was navigating her way out of the taxi when Alix touched her arm and pointed to a small trading ship.

"The Averia! Wait here, Sony; I want to talk to the captain!" The old crone jogged toward the ship with an energy belying her age.

A blonde, well-muscled man struggled to move a large crate, his dark tan gleaming in the steaming heat.

"Hey boy, where'd you get that yellow hair?" the hag shouted hoarsely.

"What--" the young man looked around to see who had yelled. He spotted the cloaked crone. "Why you old-" he muttered, stomping angrily down the plank to his critic. His crew hastily made way for their captain.

The man stopped before Alix, his green eyes flashing from the insult. He brought his hand back, then snapped it forward to encircle the vielle in a bear hug.

"Alix, you crazy idiot! What are you doing -" He amended himself quickly. "I take it you're in Ji Reish for a reason - illegal of course?"

She was insulted. "Nedif! How can you say that?"

"Very easily. Where's Sony?"

"Guilty!" The gentlefem ran forward and hugged Nedif.

"I hate to break this up, Cousin, but we have business to discuss."

"I don't think I want to hear it...But when could I ever resist you, dear old Alix?"

The day dawned hot, clear and crowded; it was the first day of the fair, and people were flocking from all over the country to Ji Reish and its markets.

A small, unadorned carriage pulled up to the back of Duke Bralin's town-house. Bralin was there to lift Illesone out of the coach, her dark skin in sharp contrast to a billowing snow-white gown.

"A fine day for a walk in the garden, don't you think?"

"What about - um - your wife?"

"She's at the fair. Don't worry; she probably won't be home for hours."

A lone figure watched the two, arm in arm, slip into the recesses of a hedged garden. She slipped out of the deep morning shadows into the back of the duke's house. Creeping cautiously, she avoided the few servants who were in the house and not at the fair, yet kept her hand near the sword strapped to her hip.

A high-ceilinged room with fireplace opened before her: the duke's study. Looking about, she noticed the comfortable furniture, ornaments, then the spot where the safe was hidden. No guards. Just an unnatural stillness.

She moved toward the safe, her long, dark hair swirling about as she con-

tinually checked for guards at each doorway. Her brown hand reached out for the safe door and

A screech from behind and above! She whirled and fell to the floor as a giant claw ripped at her cape. Rolling to relative safety under a table she studied her opponent. It was a bird - on a gigantic scale, fully thrice her size, and ebony black. Yellow eyes gleamed as the beak pounded and pecked at the table. Just before her oaken shield caved in, the femme leaped up, heaving the table and a barrage of splintered boards upwards at the bird.

Sword in hand, she slashed at the confusing flurry of wings, ducked as the bird attacked, swung, and gouged the creature's belly.

The roc screamed in pain and groped for the woman, knocking the sword from her hand. A claw grabbed for her head; it tangled and caught in her hair, dragging her around the room. With a dagger she reached around and chopped off the tangled locks, then grabbed a claw and struck. The creature flung her across the room in rage. She got up and jumped back toward the bird, stabbing.

Attack; counterattack! Fail and try again - The two clashed in mid-air and fell...

The lady eased herself up, checking for any sign of life in the creature next to her. Nothing. Slowly she transferred a dangling lock of hair behind her ear.

"I think that was a sorcery lock."

Movement at the door. A wide-eyed manservant witnessed the wrecked room, dead monster, and exhausted woman in horror. Suddenly he roused from his trance.

"Thief! A thief! Call the Duke!" He ran out, half in service for his master, and half in fear that this she-demon would turn on him.

Other servants directed him into the garden where they had seen their master and someone else go just minutes past.

"Master!" he called, looking frantically about. He was gesturing wildly at the house to no one in particular.

The duke appeared from behind a hedged side-path, quite miffed. "What is it!" he demanded.

"A-a thief, Master! She's still i-in -" The servant's mouth dropped open as he saw a very unruffled Illesone joining the duke. Her white dress was not torn, not even stained with the roc's blood. She patted a stray hair down and gazed questioningly at the servant with innocent eyes.

His hand moved from the house to Sony. "That's h-her! She did it...b-but her clothes..."

"Impossible! She was--"

"Where, Bralin?" The duke and his companion whirled to face the duchess Ridas. "Where was she, Husband?" she repeated sweetly.

Sony turned towards the duke. Would he stand up to his wife or give in?



Tell the truth or lie? Be a man or a mouse?

"She was just in the house," he squeaked nervously. "I caught her in the garden as she ran out. This man must have scared her when he cried for help."

"Hey, now wait a minute, Bralin. I was -"

"Silence her!" the duke ordered the servant. Sony knocked the man down before he could obey, but the duke struck her harshly from behind; she fell to the ground with a groan.

The duchess examined the scene with mock regret. She tsk-tsked. "Such a pret-ty thief don't you think? A true shame she committed a capital crime." She walked toward the house. "Do try to have the hanging before noon, will you, dear?"

"Illesone," he pleaded to the bound lady, "please, listen to me!"

"Get out of my sight, you cowardly -"

"Time, milord," the black-hooded per announced. Le grabbed hold of Illesone and dragged her out of her jail room, into a central city square, up to a scaffold.

"Not many spectators," the hangper mused casually, eyeing the small crowd below hir. "I guess they're all at the fair. Wish I was."

"Great! Let's you and I go there and see the sights -" Illesone started to descend the stairs, but was jerked back by the hangper.

A hastily-summoned judge stood next to them. In a booming voice she intoned, "The gentlefem Illesone, having been caught at the crime of theft, is hereby sentenced to hang by the neck until dead!" The crowd cheered.

She turned to the hangper. "Hurry it up, will you? My beer's getting stale."

"Righto."

"The hangper adjusted the noose - and jumped back when an arrow suddenly zipped through it to embed itself in the scaffold's back support.

"Hey, judge!" a light voice laughed from atop a building near them. "What makes you think it wasn't me in the good duke's safe?" The voice laughed again.

Duke Bralin looked to the speaker and made an anti-hex sign. It was Illesone, or at least another Illesone, dressed in slightly tattered cape and leggings.

The duke's manservant pulled at Bralin's sleeve. "S-sir, that's her! That's the one!"

The apparition grinned and dangled something that sparkled red against the sun.

Illesone breathed a sigh of relief. "Gentlepers, meet my twin sister, Alix.



Since everyone's agreed that she's guilty, can I go now?" The hangper dazedly nodded as the duke and his pers ran across the square to apprehend the thief; unfortunately, Alix wasn't waiting for them.

"Twin sister? (No hard feelings; I was only doing my job.) I haven't seen twins since I was five." the hangper said as he undid Sony. Together they descended the scaffold.

"They aren't at all that rare in my country," Sony commented as she watched the howling group of pers trail her sister across the roofs of Ji Reish. She laughed. "I'm afraid they'll find Alix as hard to catch as a merper. Taxi!"

No one noticed the cloaked hag that entered the gentlefem's rented coach. No one noticed as they got out at the docks and boarded the Averia. No one even noticed when the Averia set sail - against the tide - set on an eastward course.

Safely out to sea, Alix removed cloak. "humped" back, mask, and wig while her sister and Capt. Nedif watched. Already, the cuts and gashes she had received from the roc were nearly healed.

"Cousin," Sony wondered as she toyed with her hair, "do Al and I really look that much alike?"

"That duchess would have had your head -- maybe heads -- if you didn't. There is a sisterly resemblance, though," he laughed as he looked at the identicals.

"Al's eyes are bluer than mine..."

"And she brings great treasures while her dear sister barely escapes with her life," Alix grinned as she tossed Nedif the ruby necklace. He held it to the midday sun and whistled when he examined it.

"Some necklace."

"You mean some cousin," Alix laughed as she crossed to Nedif. "Say, do you feel something strange?"

All three looked across the afternoon waves to the south.

"They're calling..."

"Trouble--"

"In Mor Groden!"

"Lenna!" Nedif turned and called to his first mate.

"Aye, Captain?" she answered from the rigging above them.

"Clear the solar screens - engines on full! Change course; we're heading for home port!"

"Aye, Captain." Lenna scurried to her duties, shouting orders to those around her while the three cousins searched the southern horizon anxiously. Trouble in Mor Groden... But what was it?

to be continued

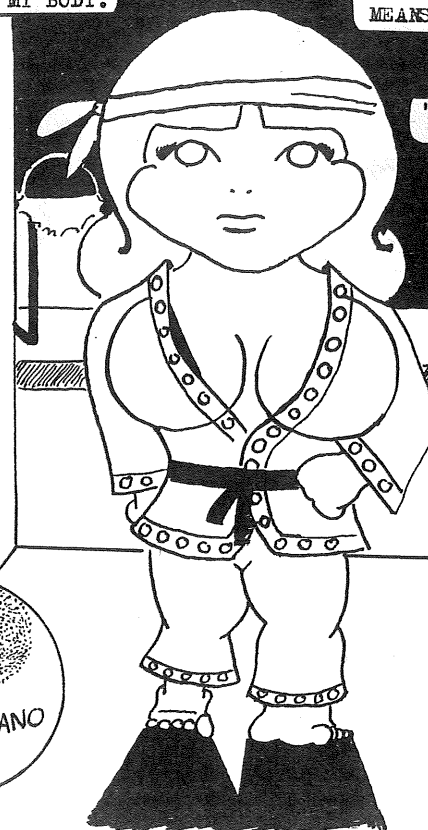
# THE HANDS OF SHANG-CHICK MISTRESS OF KUNG-FU

"CALL ME SHANG-CHICK,  
AS MY FATHER DID, WHEN  
HE RAISED ME AND MOLDED  
MY MIND....

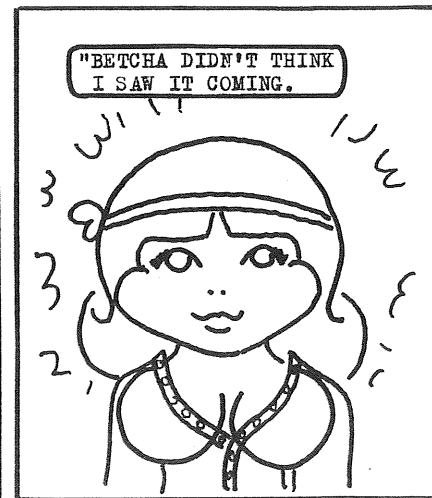
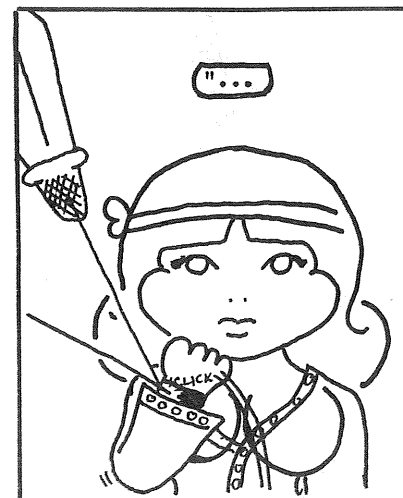
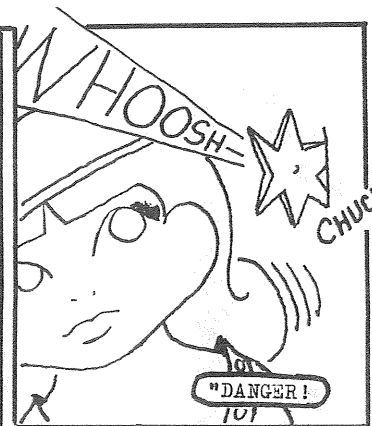
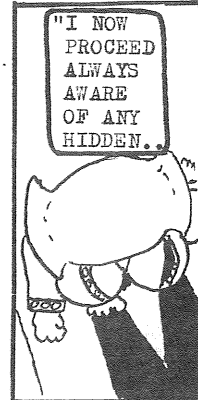
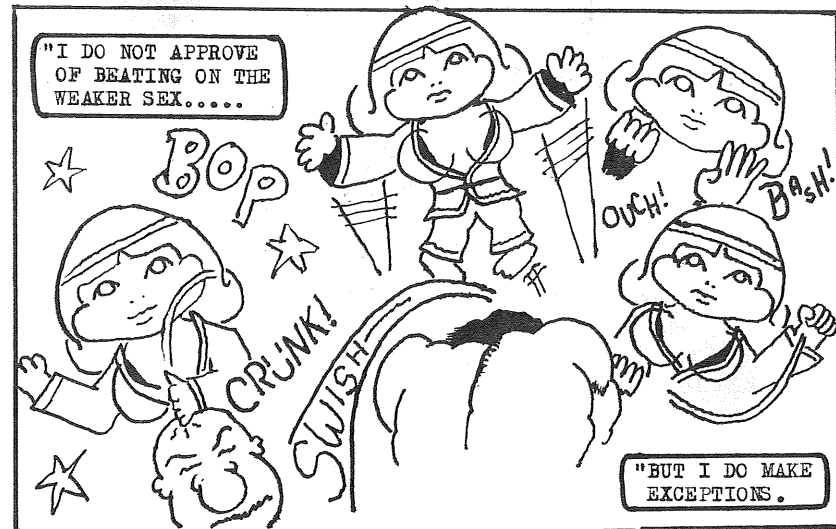
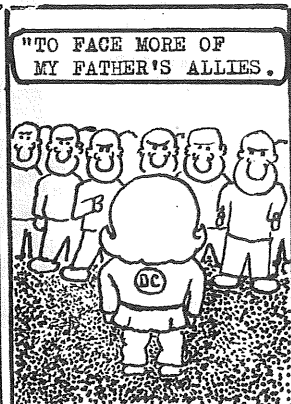
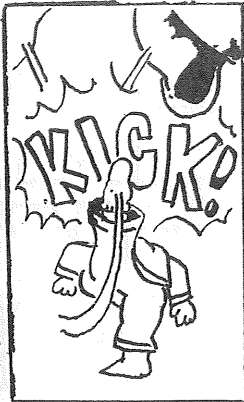
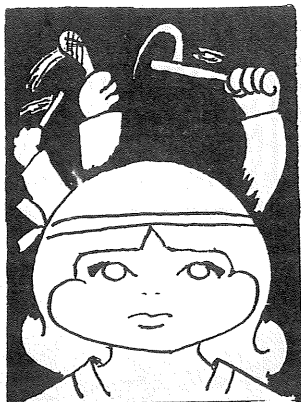
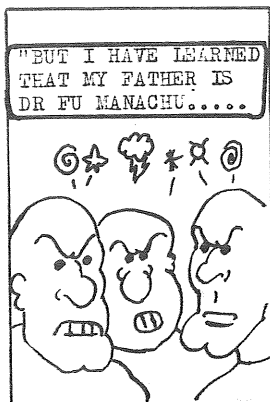
"AND MY BODY."

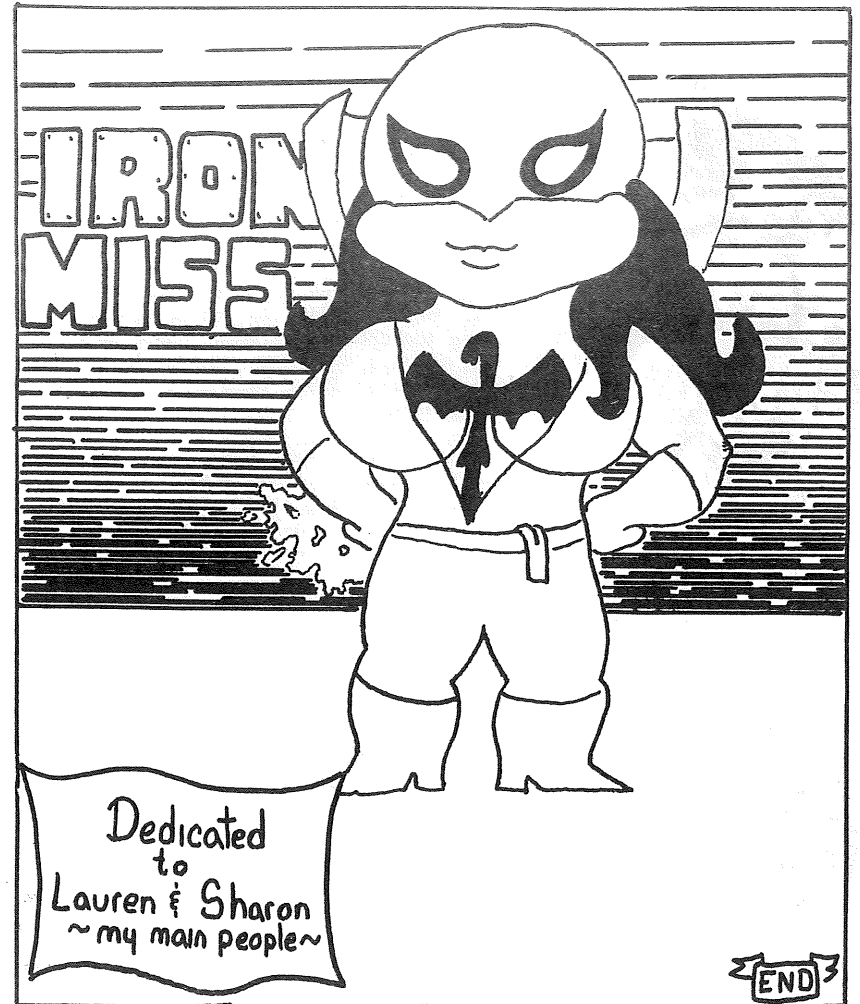
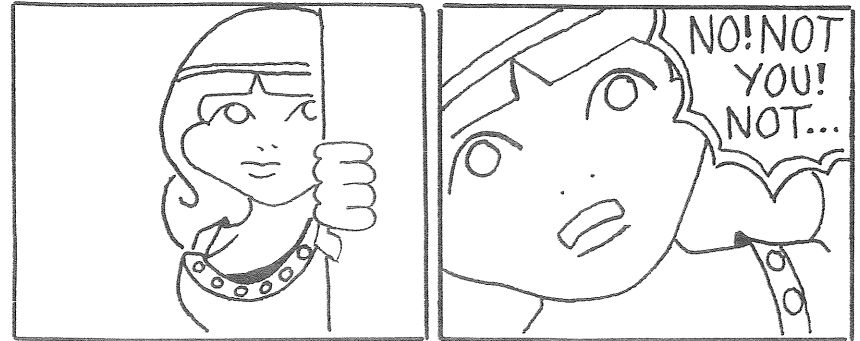
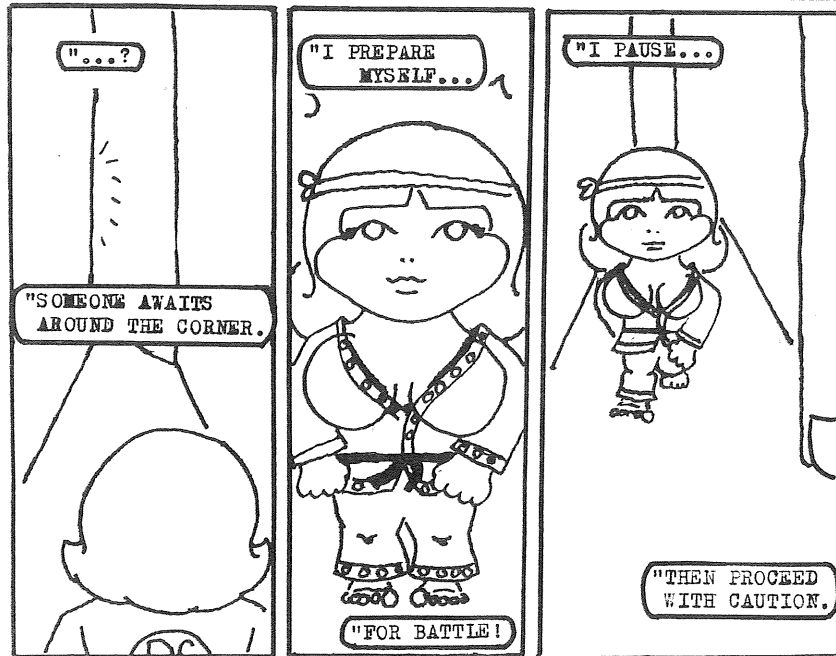
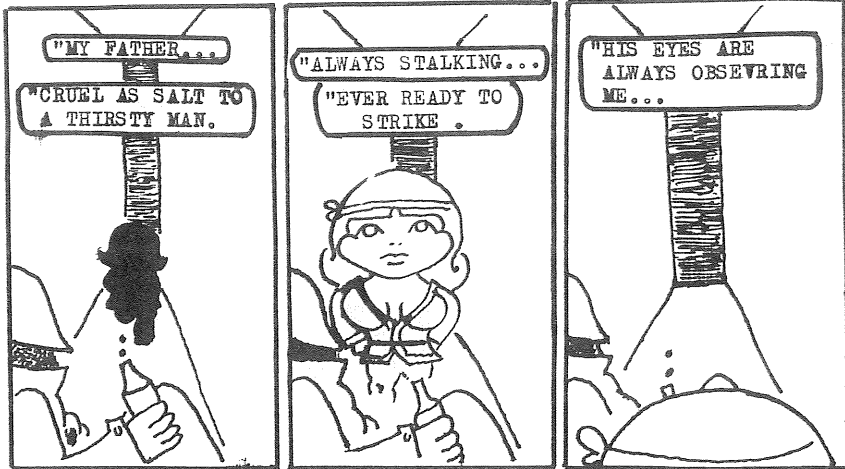
"I LEARNED MANY THINGS  
FROM MY FATHER; THAT MY  
NAME MEANS "THE RISING  
OF A MOVIE STAR", THAT  
MY BODY CAN BE MADE IN-  
TO A LIVING WEAPON BY  
MEANS OF KUNG FU....

"HOW TO TALK WITHOUT  
MOVING MY LIPS..."



By  
CHRIS  
PADOVANO

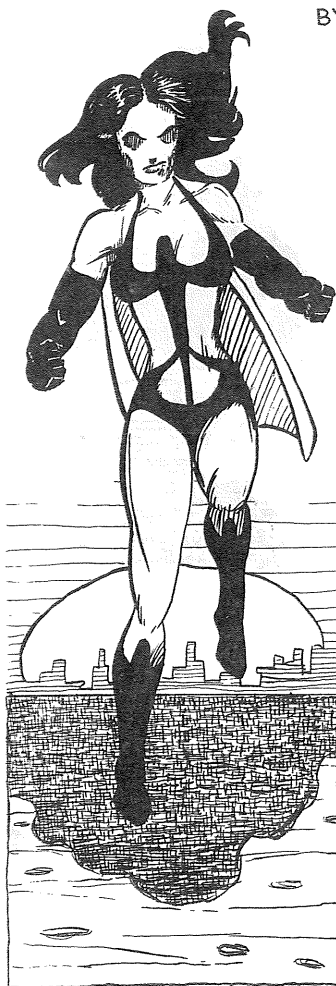




# Skull Goddess



BY JEFF THOMPSON AND TOM LUTH



The city lay sprawled before her like a never-ending study in cubes and angles. She peered through the glass of the ascending elevator to the street, nineteen stories down. The spurring cars. People dashing in and out of buildings and across the chaotic streets. Streetlights with red, glaring eyes. Two men with guns bursting into the first-floor bank in the skyscraper across the street.

The alert, sunken eyes of Skull Goddess registered those two figures in her brain. Her grotesque countenance simulating a rueful smile, she said to herself in her sensually purring voice, "Mark will have to wait on me again. Just like his doctor friend, Jerry Marlowe, I never know when crime will rear its ugly head." She flinched at her strange choice of words, as if she had been struck.

She noticed the button console in the bubble elevator running outside of the fifty-story Martin Building. The button she had pressed, 46, had lit up; by the time that elevator's doors opened onto the interior of her lawyer-fiance's floor, she would not still be behind them.

Behind the forty-sixth story door designated "Mark Owens, Attorney," the handsome young lawyer was conferring with Mitch Owens, his younger brother whose accounting office was located one floor below Mark's office in the Martin skyscraper. Mitch tossed some folders onto his brother's cluttered desk. "Here are the estimates concerning your client's idea of—"

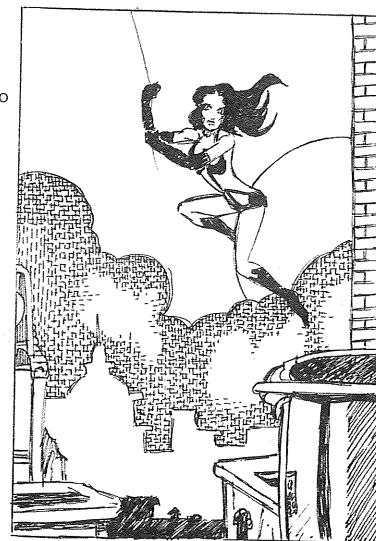
"I'm sorry, Mitch," Mark interrupted him. "I'm just not in the mood for any more facts and figures today. I'm expecting Skull Goddess any minute now."

Mitch eyed Mark thoughtfully. "It's weird, your relationship with that lady crimefighter. Doesn't Skull Goddess have any other name besides that title which strikes terror into the hearts of men?"

Mark bolted from his swivel chair. "Don't hassle me about my relationship with Skull Goddess! I know her face is distorted into a semblance of a skull, but I love her for her personality and intellect. Besides, I'm sure you've noticed that the rest of her body is gorgeous."

"Yeay," Mitch replied. "That skimpy jumpsuit of hers sure shows it off."

Skull Goddess opened the small hatch on the top of the glass elevator. She gingerly climbed out onto the outside of the moving capsule. Finding a dubious toehold, she withdrew from her glove a bolo and a lengthy cord. The elevator was passing the twenty-eight story by now, she guessed. She spied a ledge of the skyscraper across from her where her rope could hold. She had to get down to the first floor of that apartment-office building before the gunmen escaped. The strong wind wailed a melancholy tune in her ears and attempted to hurl her from ascending perch. The rope connected and held. Skull Goddess felt her booted feet leave the comparative safety of the elevator while Marilyn Leonard watched nervously from her apartment window on the thirty-third story of the skyscraper in question. That ugly woman must be insane to pull a theatrical stunt like that, Marilyn thought; utterly mad.



Marilyn followed Skull Goddess' amazing trajectory and saw through the corner of her eye the two criminals sprinting from the robbed bank. Marilyn Leonard knew that the gunmen, too, saw Skull Goddess swooping toward them, because one of the men raised his gun and aimed at the defenseless heroine several yards above him.

The muffled gunshot came to Marilyn's ears beneath her flowing hair as she frantically dialed the number of her boyfriend. Dr. Jerry Marlowe answered immediately.





"Jerry!" Marilyn gasped. "It's I!"

"Hi, baby," Mark Owens' physician-friend greeted his lover. "You sound upset."

"I am. That weird super-heroine, Skull Goddess, just got shot in front of my building!"

"Mark Owens' lady friend?"

"Yes. Please hurry over here. That crook shot her at pretty close range."

"Okay," Dr. Jerry Marlowe said. "I'll be right over to your apartment complex."



A few minutes later Marilyn watched Jerry place the limp form of Skull Goddess into the ambulance. Mark Owens had arrived on the scene and climbed into the white automobile with Jerry and the heroine. The ambulance screamed away as the bubble elevator on the building across the street slowly journeyed back to earth.

Skull Goddess caught a blurred glimpse of Mark's worried face before the anesthesia took effect and the surgeons prepared themselves for another wrestling match with death. Suddenly Mark's face was replaced in Skull Goddess' drugged mind by a grim tableau from the slightly distant past.

"Don't leave me here, mother! Please! It's starting to happen again!" Her mother, a haggard woman with dark eyes seemingly devoid of love, strode swiftly across the grounds to her car, past several patients either laughing or staring. The teenager watched her parent drive away and was led toward the sprawling mansion by a young woman in white.

Suddenly the dark-haired girl gasped and crumpled into the moist grass. She perceived vague forms hovering above her. The white-clad woman. A similarly-garbed man. The aging director of the institution.

"I shouldn't be here! I shouldn't!" the girl cried as she felt her mind drift off again into that bizarre world she had dubbed Ethera. The institution's staff was astonished when all conventional signs of life in her seemingly vanished.

The girl floated through the ethereal Ethera until a magnificent, towering metropolis came into view. The city contained strange, angular buildings which gleamed their superiority. The jutting points and bends of the silver structures beckoned to each other. No living, visible being was strolling along the massive corkscrews which suggested sidewalks. The only person evident besides the girl was a very ancient woman. Clothes which seemed to generate light hung loosely from her hunched frame. A multi-colored headdress partially concealed her emaciated countenance. The crone wagged a bony, jewel-laden finger at her.

"You are a freak!" The gnomish female's words crackled through the air and burned into the girl.

"No!" she cried, covering her ears.

"Yes! Only a freak of nature would possess unstable enough cellular

and atomic structures to be able to coexist within two separate planes!"

Suddenly a brutish man appeared on one of the corkscrews. His bulging musculature amply filled his shining garb of green light.

The crone spoke again. "What a lovely name you have, Aphrodite. 'Dot' for short, isn't it? Did your mother actually think that when she named you that that your name would describe the kind of goddess you were to become? A skull goddess?"

Aphrodite screamed as the savage on the walk rose from it and glided to the platform suspended in mid-air which had materialized beneath her and the witch. "Shall I battle the girl, Hesbolo?" the figure clad in light asked the crone.

"Not yet, Dakiak," Hesbolo replied. "We must wait until Aphrodite is released from Pleasant Haven in her world—after the electric-shock treatment she will undergo destroys the freakish cells of her pretty head."

"No!" Aphrodite wailed. "Those doctors won't do that to me! I'm not insane!"



"But they think you are, dear. How else will they explain away someone who sees visions of our world?"

Hesbolo's laughter filled her ears as she cried out to some benevolent inhabitant of Ethera for help. "Why are you doing this to me? Please!" A nurse restrained her.

Aphrodite screamed as the volts of destructive electricity sizzled through her head from the wires attached there. The doctors looked on grimly. "Stop!" she cried. "You'll make my face look like a sk—"

The staff's collective gasp halted her speech. They stared wide-eyed at her and one nurse fainted. Aphrodite gingerly placed her hand on her countenance. She felt her pale flesh, which had melted into an outline of her skull. She felt her gaunt cheeks and attempted to fill her sunken eye sockets with her hands.

Aphrodite shrieked for one hour.

Marilyn Leonard sympathetically embraced Mark Owens while Mitch Owens hovered nervously in a corner of the hospital waiting room. "I'm sorry,

Mark," Marilyn whispered.

"Thanks, honey. With your boyfriend wielding the surgical knife Skull Goddess has a chance." Mark released her and he began pacing again.

Mitch laid a hand on his brother's stooped shoulder. "Mark, I want you to know how sorry I really am about your...uh...lady friend being shot."

Mark spun around and glared at Mitch. "Talk is cheap, brother," Mark shouted, "and you are a hypocrite. You've never liked Skull Goddess. You tried to fix me up before I met her with Crystal Samson, someone you approved of— you, my younger brother! But I dropped her when I found out that she was nothing more than a tramp!"

"You're so damned quick to judge, Mark."

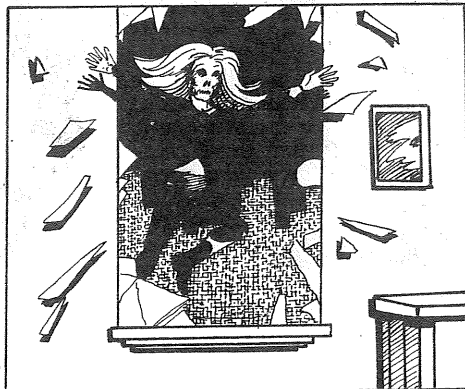
"What about you? You've hated Skull Goddess ever since you got a look at her face!"

"Mark, it's more than that," Mitch explained. "I have reason to believe that your heroic lady is mentally unbalanced."

"Insane?" Mark Owens roared. "How dare you say that!" Mark's fist found his sibling's jaw. Mitch Owens toppled to the floor.

"Oh, my God," Mark whispered as Marilyn Leonard approached him.

Suddenly a bizarre figure shredded the glass window. She was an attractive woman in a skin-tight costume. She had a shapely figure and flowing brown hair. Mark and Marilyn gasped as the woman's hair parted and revealed a grinning skull!



"Skull Goddess!" Mark cried. "Is that you?"

"How dare you mistake me for that inept imposter!" the woman cried and hurled Mark to the floor.

"Who are you?" Marilyn cried. "Why did you come here?"

Then the woman removed the skull mask and revealed her countenance to be very beautiful indeed. "I have come to vanquish Skull Goddess. I, Countess Cranium, am the true skull-faced crimefighter."



"I've never heard of you," Marilyn said blankly.

"I am a citizen of another country. One more powerful than yours!"

"I doubt that, dearie."

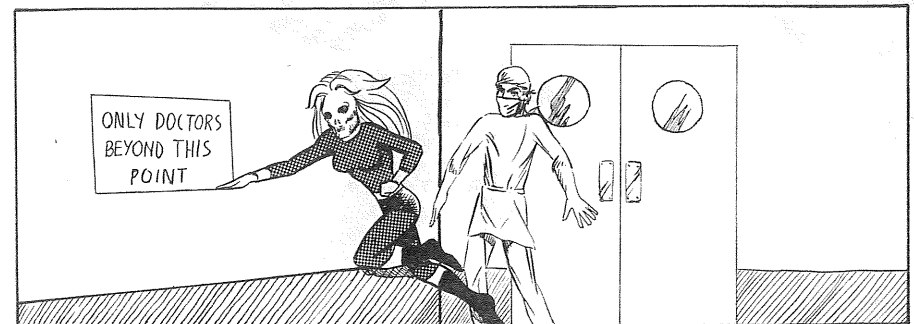
"You'll see, woman," Countess Cranium replied. "In order to remain unique and frightening to evildoers, I must deal with this imposter."

Dr. Jerry Marlowe, still in his surgical garb, appeared in the hallway. "What the hell has happened out here?"

Marilyn ran to him. "Jerry, is Skull Goddess all right?"

Jerry stared at Countess Cranium, then replied, "Yes, thank God. They have taken her to the recovery room."

"Then that is my destination," Countess Cranium cried, donning her mask. She pushed past Marilyn and Jerry and dashed down the sterile corridor in the direction of the recovery room.



TO BE CONTINUED

ON THE DRAWING BOARD



Well, there's your first sampling of the work of some of our AHPA staff writers and artists. As we've said, we have others coming up, including more in the comic-strip format. I'm only sorry there wasn't space to show them to you here.

Now that you know THE ADVENTRESS is for real, it's time for you readers to start playing your role by telling us what you like in all areas of this field. Frankly, I hope none of you will pass up the chance to register your opinions and ideas.

Do you like realism or fantasy? Strips or illustrated prose? Humanly-skilled heroines or super-powered ones? Do you prefer to see the emphasis placed on action, characterization, suspense, humor, surprising plot twists, or some combination of these? We plan to publish a wide variety of material of course, but we want to take your views into account. - A.T.