

***THRILLING* DETECTIVE HEROES**

Thrilling Detective Heroes features a whole new study on the “Thrilling Group” as well as an excellent selection of fiction from these long forgotten masters of pulp detective yarns. Within these pages roam characters rarely found today. Large, oversized, rough and tumble characters not backing down from a fight. Purple prose at some of its best. Come and renew your acquaintance or get to know them for the first time these....**THRILLING DETECTIVE HEROES.**

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INTRODUCTION

Permit, if you will, a childhood memory from John Wooley:

I must've been 11 or 12, the prime age for a kid to become a raging fan of comic books. I was also fortunate enough to be that particular age at exactly the time the superhero boom of the early-Sixties began.

My family was visiting St. Paul, Minnesota, that summer, staying in a household that included a dotty old maiden aunt who doted on my brother and I. She would take us downtown on the bus to various dime stores and secondhand shops, but during this particular summer she had a real treat in store. One fine day, she led us to the train depot, where she booked us on a short excursion. We may have only made a circle from St. Paul to Minneapolis and back, but she made sure we sat up at the top of one of the passenger cars, gazing out at the passing landscape through a big cockpit-like glass enclosure that, if memory serves, was called a Vistadome.

It was a fine trip, but I was hardly prepared for what happened when we debarked the train and walked up the big concrete steps inside the cavernous depot. Always on the lookout for comics, I spied a rack in a shop just off the stairs, and beelined for it. But as I got closer, the whole thing took on the qualities of a dream—one I'd been dreaming, with variations, for some time. The titles were all freshly minted, their covers full of action heroes. But every one of them was new to me! These were characters I'd never seen before, a whole wall full of them, an exotic tableau that made the heart of a young comics fan beat with the ferocity of a Gene Krupa drum solo.

I later found out that these little jewels were what comics fans came to know as IW reprints, done on the cheap by an opportunistic New York publisher using recycled material from the Forties and Fifties, gussied up with new covers and sold wherever the distributor could find an opening. That, of course, made absolutely no difference to me. I was a preteen, my sense of wonder would never be richer nor more powerful, and I had yet to discover the arcane thrills of Golden Age comics. All I knew, standing there in front of scores of garishly colored covers that offered entree to strange new worlds, was the joy of discovery and the promise of new excitements to come.

Almost half a century later, John Locke and I offer *Thrilling Detective Heroes* in the same spirit. The two of us, and most of you who are reading this, are far older than 11 or 12, and all of our senses of wonder have been batted around quite a bit over the decades. Still, it's possible to recapture that ineffable, beautiful feeling from time to time, and some of us find that it's sparked at pulp conventions, where that old wonder can suddenly emerge in such a powerful way that you find yourself grinning as you study the cover of an *Operator #5* or *Spicy Detective* and think about how much fun you'll have reading it.

Those who attend these get-togethers are a pretty small bunch. As the freelance philosopher J. Buck Millaway—himself a pulp aficionado—has noted, there are probably more post-op transsexuals in America than there are pulp fans. But at least a few hundred of us look forward to the Windy City Pulp & Paperback Convention in Chicago and the venerable Pulpcon in

Dayton, Ohio, like young kids look forward to Christmas.

It was at one of these gatherings that this book was born. During Pulpcon 34, held on a July weekend in 2005, Locke, John Gunnison, and I ended up rooming together. Gunnison is, of course, the high muckamuck at Adventure House, the premiere publisher of pulp-related books in the world, and no stranger to a sense of wonder himself. Locke and I, on the other hand, spend a good part of our lives writing or editing things. And for a writer or editor, having a publisher staying in the same room with you is a little like winning a date with Milla Jovovich at a charity auction. It's something you didn't expect, but now that it's happened, you've got to figure out how to make the most of the opportunity without going out of bounds.

I guess that sounds awfully calculated. Actually, the three of us have been friends for years, initially brought together by our love of pulps, and Gunnison has seen fit to publish books from both of us. Locke collaborated with Gunnison and Doug Ellis on the indispensable *Adventure House Guide to the Pulps*, and put together his own Adventure House title *Pulp Fictioneers*, a fascinating collection of writers'-mag pieces from pulp scribes. Gunnison has also published a couple of my own pulp-story collections: *At the Stroke of Midnight*, collecting John K. Butler's *Dime Detective* tales of Southern California cabbie Steven Middleton Knight, and *Roscoes in the Night*, featuring Robert Leslie Bellem's incomparably wacky Dan Turner, Hollywood Detective.

So, we knew each other pretty well going in, and while we didn't have any agenda, we did have a room together, and a couple of three-liter boxes of wine. Come to think of it, the wine may have had more to do with the birth of this book than anything else. After the convention shut down for the day, the three of us would usually repair to our quarters, draw motel-room glasses of Merlot from the handy push-button box, and talk about pulps and other topics well into the night.

At some point during one of these evenings, the talk got around to the Thrilling group, and the wide-ranging group of series characters published in its detective and mystery titles. I'd always harbored an idea of Thrilling as a second-string outfit, neither as consistently top-notch as Popular Publications nor as oddly captivating as the Culture/Trojan lineup. But as we talked, it began to dawn on us that a collection featuring some of the best adventures of Thrilling's most intriguing characters would be a mighty fine idea. Well before we tapped the second box of wine, we had both a book and a publishing deal for it.

The next few months were spent going through Thrilling pulps—ours and others'—chasing down characters, reading stories, and coming up with the best stuff we could find. We gave a little extra credit to oddball heroes like Mister Finis and Dr. Coffin, and sort of grandfathered in the first real hardboiled-detective series character, Race Williams, who'd lost some of his luster by the time Thrilling got him, but was still stubbornly hanging in there old-school, just as tough and unpolished as ever.

In early November, Locke flew from California to my home in Oklahoma, where we finalized the lineup and divided up the writing chores. By the time John got back on the plane to Monterey, after a very pleasant visit, we had everything nailed down and were, ourselves, fired up.

So, that's how and why *Thrilling Detective Heroes* came about. And now, it's out of our hands and into yours. We hope that you'll find these stories as fresh and engaging as we did, and that, reading them, you'll feel the same sense of discovery—and maybe, if only for a moment or two, that soaring sense of wonder you might have felt as a kid, standing in an unfamiliar store in a strange city gazing at an array of garishly covered ten-cent magazines stuffed with the adventures of heroes you've never seen or heard of before, knowing you've got a dollar in your pocket.

[*Thrilling Detective*, April 1933]

SKULLFACE

featuring Doctor Coffin
By Perley Poore Sheehan

I

Just seventeen hours after the big tri-motored plane took off from the Los Angeles airport, on the West Coast, and with the blue Pacific fading out of sight, she'd drummed high over New York—with her red and green lights shining among the stars—and made a perfect landing within sight and smell of the misty Atlantic. Seventeen hours from coast to coast, and there'd been some lively dodging of storms at that.

The A-2-X looked merely heavy and powerful as she squatted there on the runway of her eastern airport, but she'd showed herself nimble enough as well as speedy in the air.

There was something to suggest that same combination of speed and power about the first passenger who left the ship.

He was a man who may have been something over the average both as to height and weight. But as he came down the steps from the door of the fuselage his movements were as light and agile as a cat's. He also seemed to squat slightly—like the big ship—as he touched the ground. His knees remained a little bent, his shoulders stooped. But his feet were well apart, and his whole attitude was rather that of a man who, as if unconsciously, makes ready for a spring.

Early night, but the place was lit up like day.

For a moment the passenger had paused as if regretting his haste in leaving the ship. He was dressed in black. A black slouch hat was pulled low over his face. He might have been young or he might have been old, but his agility had indicated youth. He cast a look about him, and for a moment a glare of white light played strongly over his face.

It was a striking face—broad but lean; and handsome enough, yet with some suggestion of a skull about it, both as to color and conformation. There was too much pallor where the light struck. The shadows were too dark in the hollows of the eyes and the hollows of the cheeks. Under the brim of the soft black hat the eyes could be seen, deep-set and wide apart, shining and alert like those of a watchful dog.

There were a couple of detectives, Headquarters men, who mingled with the crowd that had gathered at the airport to meet the ship. There was nothing about either of the detectives to indicate his trade. The old days of the cigar-chewing, sullen-eyed and heavy-jowled cop of any sort was just about past. These lads might have been not very long out of college—successful young business men of the golf-playing sort.

But they were keen enough. The attention of them both had been riveted—without seeming to be—on the man in black from the instant of his first appearance.

“Get him?” one breathed.

“Sure!”

“Skullface!”

“Nobody could alibi a map like that.”

“What'll we do? Make a pinch?”

“Nix! Tail him! He’ll give us a lead on the Dover case.”

As the man they’d called “Skullface” received a suitcase from a steward and started toward a row of waiting taxis the two detectives strolled in pursuit.

There were others who were staring at this apparition of the man. There was no mistaking this face, even to eyes less trained than those of the detectives. There were others who were mentioning the Dover case. And this was that Skullface whose picture had been printed in the tabloids—even in some of the more dignified rotogravures.

There’d been flashes of him in the newsreel theatres. He was the man of mystery. No one knew who he was. But he was supposed to be a famous criminal. Yet he’d declared war on the underworld—a wolf turning against wolves.

The man with the face of the skull seemed undecided, at first, just which way to turn. He appeared to be waiting for something. He was as if expectant of something about to happen.

But when a reporter spoke to him, he merely stared and turned his back. Manifestly, it wasn’t publicity that he was after.

A porter came up and offered to carry his suitcase. The stranger waved him aside.

There was a shifting of cars over in the direction of the taxicabs, and for a spell longer he stood and gazed in this direction with a sort of animal watchfulness.

“This bird’s wise,” one of the detectives murmured, as he pretended to look at the A-2-X. “He’s wise to something that we’re not wise to.”

“I think we ought to make a pinch,” said his partner looking at the moon.

“What charge?”

“Sullivan law. I bet he’s got a gun.”

“If he has, you’ll find he’s got a license.”

They mingled with the crowd. Some of the crowd were leaving.

The man with the face like a skull had again turned toward the taxi-cabs, the detectives once more in pursuit.

It was a pursuit that promised to be both troubled and long.

Suddenly, from one of the waiting taxis, there was a burst of fire and a ripping series of explosions.

And, right then, everything seemed to be happening at once.

The shots had evidently been fired at the man in black. For a second or so it looked as if he must have been hit. He’d jerked to one side, almost doubled to the ground. But it was remembered afterward that the suitcase he’d carried had, in the same speck of time, come up between himself and the line of fire.

At the same time, even before the last of those spluttering explosions had spat out its message of death, the taxi had jumped from its place and was beginning to speed away.

No ordinary taxi could have shown such suppleness and speed. This was a special car—a death-car, designed and engined for purposes of murder.

The two young detectives from Headquarters were not overlooking that detail even while they were taking note of many other things. Manifestly, the passenger they’d called Skullface had been expected—and he himself had been expecting to be met in some such manner as this. A reception committee had been on hand. This was their manner of reception.

Even before these thoughts had fully flashed through the minds of the two detectives, each had drawn his gun and was on the run, ready to fire.

To their amazement they saw the man they thought had fallen under the fusillade come to his feet and make a beastlike spring.