

Night-time in the City

Written by Alex Walker

A look at Marvel UK's pulp inspired hero, the Night Raven.

Where brooding darkness spreads its evil wings the Night Raven stings!

Night Raven was a pulp inspired comic book character created by Marvel Comics (UK) and was produced as a backup strip in *Hulk Weekly* in the late 1970s.

This three page black and white strip was aimed at a British market even though the character was American and set in an America of the 1930s.

The Night Raven strips were written by Steve Parkhouse and drawn by David Lloyd whose previous work included *Halls of Horror*, *TV Comic* and *Tales of Terror* in the US. Parkhouse wrote the scripts at 'nightmarish pace and Lloyd responded with appropriately moody graphics. His workmanlike linear style and plentiful blacks lent weight and authority to the Night Raven saga, creating an atmosphere of darkness and death'.

The character they created was a masked vigilante very much in the Shadow mold. He wore modified streetclothes – a belted trenchcoat and a snap-brim hat – and sported a sinister full-face mask with vaguely bird-like characteristics. Like an earlier pulp character, the Spider, Night Raven would leave a mark on his victims. However, he left no mere ink mark, Night Raven would brand his victims!

(The branding device was hidden in the palm of his glove. The mind boggles as how this would have worked!).

Night Raven worked alone and operated outside the law. He had no teenage sidekick, faithful butler or crusty old police commissioner to confide in. Both his origin and the question of his true identity were shrouded in mystery, thus making him

Below: Night Raven leaving his 'mark' on an enemy.



seem rather remote and enigmatic. This was further underlined with the fact that his full-face mask concealed the important element of facial expression, making reader identification even more difficult. Even so, his exploits had 'a compelling one-note style that kept the readers coming back for more.'

After a while David Lloyd left and was replaced by artist John Bolton. John Bolton is now best known as the artist involved in comics such as *Classic X-Men* and *The Black Dragon*. This new artist envisioned Night Raven's adventures in a shadowy style that was perfect for the subject matter. With a new artist on board the stories also seemed to move into new territory. In

the last of these stories, Night Raven matched his wits against a bloodthirsty Chinese Tong leader, a beautiful women named Yi Yang, who thought nothing of killing her followers if they displeased her. [Sharp eyed readers will spot a copy of the *Shadow* magazine in a dustbin in one of the panels in Night Raven's final battle with Yi Yang]

The Night Raven starred in his own strip for less than a year. The series was popular and readers requested more but Marvel UK thought otherwise. Other projects (notably *Doctor Who* monthly) took precedence and Night Raven strip was reluctantly dropped. These original comic book stories were later collected in the graphic novel, *Night Raven: the*

Below: 'The Phantom of Walpole Towers' from the first issue of *Savage Action* (November 1980). This is the first Night Raven text story.





Above and below: Alan Davis artwork from the Night Raven text stories.

Collected Stories. Looking back at these original stories they seem a 'little slight' compared to what comes later. However, if you remember the British and American comics of the same period and the 'editorial conservatism' at Marvel UK, you can see that Parkhouse and Lloyd were trying to do something special. Also three-page stories* are very hard to accomplish satisfactorily, as they need to be 'short, tightly plotted and sharply written incidents', which leaves little room for character development.

Eventually, Marvel saw the error in their ways and brought the Night Raven back — but with a difference. In the first issue of a new monthly magazine *Savage Action* Night Raven returned in a text format with only a few illustrations. The first couple of stories were weakened by the transition from strip to

text format. However, once the writers, Paul Neary and later, Alan Moore, got into their stride the stories were much better than the original comic strip. When *Savage Action* folded Night Raven was 'moved around' many Marvel (UK) titles such as *Daredevils*.

Night Raven's character also changed in this transition from the comic strip. He was still depicted as 'a night-prowling agent of retribution,' but Neary's version of the Night Raven was a much more bizarre than the original prototype. Night Raven was now described as being 'a spectral figure with a face of bone'. There were also times when Night Raven seemed positively inhuman, as in this sequence from *Death's Divide*: 'By the glow of an ancient oil lamp the hunched figure read, his clawlike hands smoothing the tattered paper into place...' or 'Alternatively lurching and ducking from shadow to shadow he gyrated about the



*British comic books have traditionally been made many one to three page stories. Marvel UK usually had a longer main strip and shorter back-up stories.

rooms. His movements bore more resemblance to those of a crippled raven than a human being'. Add to this his sinister voice and the 'strange hissing and clucking sounds' that emanated from his mouth and you have a very weird character indeed.

However, Night Raven was in for even more bizarre changes in the hands of Alan Moore. For a start he was described as looking like he had been 'through a Mixmaster with blunt blades'. His body was also described as being 'little more than a shapeless mass of exposed ganglia and nerve endings'. His clothes are now grubby and crumpled; his hands are 'twisted parodies of hands, clad in soiled and torn gloves'. He is now portrayed as both a frightening and a pathetic figure.

Alan Moore left the Night Raven stories to pursue other projects. One of these projects was the highly regarded *V for Vendetta* series which was drawn by none other than David Lloyd (who admitted that the Night Raven was a considerable influence on the character V).

Next to leave his mark on the Night Raven was Jamie Delano. After writing a few text stories Jamie was let loose on a graphic novel *House of Cards*. David Lloyd returned to illustrate the novel to great effect creating a very cinematic look. Although written in 1990, *House of Cards* was a very early adventure set before or around the original stories (Yi Yang makes a brief appearance in the story).

In *House of Cards* we also find out some information about Night Raven's background. We learn about his Native

American (or Canadian) heritage and that he fought in the trenches of WWI.

He has an alter-ego of sorts as a janitor at the morgue — although his face is always in shadow.

The Night Raven of this period also lacks his later confidence. In this story, he falls in love (from afar) with a woman called Inez. However, he fails to save her when she is kidnapped and he goes on a rampage, maiming and killing in his search for her. He finds her dead and for the remainder of the story, Night Raven's character becomes even more sinister, finally culminating in him drugging a crooked politician (who is the cause of Inez's death) and puts him in his bed next to Inez's body. The next morning newspaper reporters (tipped off by Night Raven) find the politician in this very compromising position!

During the rest of the 1990s Night Raven crossed over into the mainstream 'Marvel Universe' when he 'teamed-up' with Black Widow in *Death Duty*. This story is worth tracking down as it clears up a lot of loose ends in the Night Raven saga.

Night Raven returns (sort of) in the more traditional costumed superhero comic, *Nocturne*. I haven't read any of the *Nocturne* stories yet, but the reviews I have read have not been favourable.

No doubt Night Raven will continue to make appearances in the 'Marvel Universe' but whether his full potential is to be realised remains to be seen.