

THE MAD WORLD OF WILLIAM M. GAINES PART II

(Continued from page 19)

He had bought a fine new home in White Plains, and the family spent its summers at the house on Lake Placid. Bill had survived his three years in the Army and, despite the fact that he would never amount to anything, was piling up almost a straight A average while studying to be a teacher at New York University. The only pressing family problem was Bill's marriage to Hazel, which was crumbling fast.

In mid-August, 1947, Bill made a painful phone call to his parents, vacationing at Lake Placid. Hazel had left him to get a divorce. Jessie became hysterical. "How could they do this to me?" she wailed. She appealed to Max, "Do something!" Max invited up old friends Sam and Helen Irwin to keep his wife company. The Irwins were good for Jessie and would help take her mind off Bill's divorce.

On the afternoon of August 20, Bill and his friend, Sy Koonen, after running some errands, returned to Bill's apartment and were met by the landlord. Bill was told to call his Uncle Will in the Bronx.

"What's up Will?" Bill asked, on reaching his uncle.

"There's been an accident at the lake," Will said.

"Is it my mother?" Bill asked, assuming that she had attempted suicide because of his broken marriage.

"No, it's your father," Will said. "He's dead."



The accident had come with practically no warning. Elaine and a girlfriend had decided to swim across Lake Placid, and Max, Sam

Irwin, and the Irwins' son, Billy, were in Max's Chris-Craft, following the girls. Halfway across,

another boat came charging through the water and plowed into the front of the Gaines boat, instantly killing Max and Sam Irwin. Billy escaped unscathed; it is believed that in the brief moment before impact, Max grabbed the boy and threw him into the rear of the boat, thereby saving his life.

Koonen drove Bill to the lake. Bill tried to make jokes on the way up, but arriving at the summer home he went to pieces. The next day he wandered off by himself. Elaine went out looking for him and found him in the boathouse, sobbing uncontrollably.

The funeral was held in White Plains and was well-attended. Many of the mourners driving up from New York City were met near the parkway by a highway patrolman, who personally escorted them to the Gaines's house. The patrolman was the man whose son's hospital bills had been paid for by Max Gaines.

CHAPTER 4

IT'S YOUR BUSINESS, BILL

Bill Gaines sat in his father's chair behind his father's desk and marveled at the parade of bosomy, leggy females that cavorted before his eyes. The luscious beauties interested him as did the young artist who had drawn them.

It was March, 1948, and Bill was into his seventh month as titular head of his father's business. He had been dead set against it, but his mother, on the advice of various people, had decided to keep Educational Comics going.

So he came down to the office to sit behind the desk, sign checks, and wonder what the hell he was doing there.

"It was remarkable that he had the confidence to walk in the door, considering that his father had treated him like the local cretin," says novelist William Woolfolk, who had



observed the father-son relationship while packaging comics for Max.

Bill felt, or at least hoped, that his stint as so-called head of the firm would be temporary. He was, after all, completing his final year at New York University, after which he would begin his life's work as a teacher.

"How the hell can I run a business when I couldn't even make it as the old man's stockroom boy?" he asked his friend, Sy Koonen.

"You can do it, you really can," Koonen said over and over.

Bill wasn't so sure. The business was moping along, \$100,000 in the red, turning out his father's weak line of kiddie comics. And if his father, who knew the business, had failed, what chance did Bill have? He didn't have the first idea of what a publisher, which he was now imper-

"How the hell can I run a business when I couldn't even make it as the old man's stockroom boy?"



sonating, was supposed to do. He spent his office hours playing gin rummy with his cousin, Buddy Rogin, and Rogin beat him every time. Then there was old curmudgeon Frank Lee, Max's long-time business manager, who welcomed

taking over, but you never would have known it," remembers Dorothy Woolfolk, then an EC freelance editor. "He was always curious, always asking questions, but never in the steamroller manner of his father. Gradually, he got to know his magazines, got to know what he wanted."

One thing he wanted was to make use of Feldstein's luscious females, and together he and Feldstein started *Modern Love*, a romance comic featuring such attractions as "Dime-a-Dance Hostess" and "I Had Two Husbands!" Bill showed the first issue to Lee, who responded true to form.

"It's your business, Bill," he said, shaking his head and returning to his ledgers.

Modern Love was followed by *A Moon, A Girl...Romance* and then by *Saddle Romances*. Bill and Feldstein particularly enjoyed writing replies to the queries that filled the magazines' lovelom pages. In "Advice from Adrienne," the advice was



Gaines evolved the title *Moon Girl* into *Weird Fantasy* slowly to avoid paying the post office extra money.

Bill as one accepts the common cold — after a short spell it would hopefully go away. Worst of all was the recurring dream that disturbed Bill's sleep, a quasi-nightmare in which Max would appear and tell his son that he wanted his business back.

But now, as he looked at the array of busty beauties spread out before him, he was stirred into action. He chatted with the artist, whose name was Al Feldstein, about the possibilities of turning out a teen-age love magazine. The project never got off the ground, but Bill, in what seemed to him then a major decision, hired Feldstein to draw western and crime stories.

Until then, most of the decisions in the office were made by Sol Cohen, who had been Max's circulation manager, and Frank Lee. But Bill was feeling his way into the business. "He was

partly Bill's, despite the fact that he knew next to nothing about romance. The Post Office required a deposit of two thousand dollars to obtain a second-class mailing permit for any new magazine. To counter this, a publisher would reword an old title and try to sneak it through on the original deposit. Thus, *Moon Girl And The Prince* (space adventure) became *Moon Girl* (more of the same), which became *Moon Girl Fights Crime* (space and crime), which became *A Moon, A Girl...Romance*

(love). When Bill tried to change this last title into *Weird Fantasy* (science fiction), it was all too much for the Post Office, which stopped the shenanigans and made EC pay a new deposit.

But he enjoyed working up new titles with Feldstein and with another up-and-coming artist, Johnny Craig, and by the end of 1949 was publishing six love, crime, and western comics, all of which were of his own making. But his father continued to invade his sleep and he required constant reassurance from Koones. Occasionally, when he was convinced some task was beyond him, he ran to his father's old editor, Sheldon Mayer.

One night Mayer was startled out of his slumber by the door bell ringing. he looked at the clock. It was 3 A.M. He wandered down to the front door, and there was Bill, unable to sleep and requiring advice about some office crisis.

The two talked through the night, well past dawn. It was one of many talks they would have, with Mayer generally telling Bill that he couldn't become successful until he stopped regarding EC as a great toy.

"I got the feeling that Bill went into the business as a joke, to see if he could screw up things, change them for his private amusement, and still manage to make money doing it," Mayer remembers. "I suggested



ILLUSTRATION BY SERGIO ARAGONES

that he see a psychiatrist, but it took me years to get him to do it."

Maybe Mayer's theory is right. Maybe Bill did have a lot of rebellion to get out of his system. Years earlier, when he worked as Max's editor, Mayer had set down a list of taboos to be observed to the letter

reader response was enthusiastic. The office reaction was less so. Frank Lee looked at the new stuff, shook his head, and said, "It's your business, Bill." Sol Cohen was convinced that EC was on a collision course with disaster. "The ship is sinking," he told Bill and resigned. Bill and Feldstein smiled. They were convinced they were on to something.

spectacular art that today is regarded by aficionados as the dawning of a new age in comic-book illustration. Gaines not only was building an empire, he was laying the foundation for what would become the most fanatic cult in the history of the industry.

He didn't know this at the time, of course, but he did know that he could smell success and that every-



by all of Max's writers and artists. Among them:

Never show anybody stabbed or shot.
Show no torture scenes.
Never show a hypodermic needle.
Don't chop the limbs off anybody.
Never show a coffin,
especially with anybody in it.

Less than four years after taking over his father's business, Bill would have punctured every taboo on the list.

The name of the new game was horror. Bill and Feldstein were dabbling with a revolutionary kind of comic, designed to shake up readers with tales of terror and suspense. They had concocted three or four of these stories and inserted them as single features in their crime magazines. The

They were. The old titles were phased out and in early 1950 the first two magazines in a brand-new line made their premiere — *The Crypt of Terror* and *The Vault of Horror*. These were the eerie vanguard of what was being promoted as "Entertaining Comics — A New trend in Comic Books" ("Educational Comics" seemed inappropriate), and they became successful in about as short a time as a line of new comics can. Even the wholesalers, who at first took a dim view of such sensational fare, showed grudging interest as they saw the EC sales figures zoom.

Other new titles emerged — *The Haunt of Fear*, *Shock Suspense Stories*, *Crime Suspense Stories*, *Weird Science*, and *Weird Fantasy* — and each seethed with wild, twisting tales brought to life by

Gaines's and Feldstein's 1950s horror titles began a new (and some would say disturbing) trend in comic books.

one in the office was bursting with enthusiasm — well, almost everyone. There was still Frank Lee. Gaines took infinite pains to avoid discussing anything new with him. Not so Feldstein, who could not control his fervor. Every time he finished a cover, he would show it to Lee and ask, "How do you like it?" and every time Lee would answer, "I don't like it."

But horror had taken hold. The new magazines brought in so much money that within a year EC's financial problems were wiped out. A short time later, Gaines dreamt again of his father, who extended his hand and said, "You're doing a great job."

And that particular problem was wiped out, too.



Gaines has a compulsion for neatness and orderliness that is unworldly. This crotchety led to the memorable tale, "Neat Job," in which a wife is driven to desperate ends by her excessively tidy husband. Gaines puckishly had Feldstein name the leading characters Arthur and Eleanor, which happened to be the names of old chum Dreeben and his bride. The following excerpts reveal how villains often were treated in EC's horror tales:

Arthur comes home from work and immediately inspects his wardrobe.

ARTHUR: Eleanor, the laundry came back today, didn't it?

ELEANOR: Yes, Arthur.

ARTHUR: How many times have I told you my shirts go on the left, folded in half, buttons up!

ELEANOR: Yes, Arthur.

Arthur checks the state of the kitchen.

ARTHUR: Eleanor, you used a can of tomato soup and didn't check it off the list! And you didn't fill in the empty place with one from the back!

ELEANOR: I...forgot, Arthur.

ARTHUR: You forgot? That's no excuse! You mustn't forget! Don't let it happen again!

ELEANOR: Yes, Arthur.

The denouement occurs when Arthur finds that Eleanor has dropped one of the many jars of nails that he has arranged in precise order in his basement workshop.

ARTHUR: You wanted to hang a picture so you came down for a nail, eh? Only you broke a jar, eh? Sloppy...sloppy Eleanor... broke the jar! Can't you do anything neat? Can't you? Can't you?

Eleanor can take it no longer. "I backed away and my hand closed on something, a handle of one of Arthur's tools! I pulled it from its place as everything went black!"

In the final panels, she confesses to two detectives.

ELEANOR: I remember wanting to show him I could be neat! I wanted it to be a neat job! I cleaned up everything when I finished!

DETECTIVE: Yeah, lady, you certainly did a neat job!

In the jars the reader sees the result of Eleanor's handiwork. Each is labeled with the particular part of Arthur's body it contains—"Kneecaps(2); "Pancreas(1); "Toes(10); "Heart(1); "Teeth(32)." And so on.

CHAPTER 5

YOU SHARPEN THE PENCILS, THE PENCILS SHARPEN YOUR HEAD

The horror schedule was exhausting. Each day a complete script had to be written and gotten ready for one of the freelance artists. The labor began around 9:30 in the morning, with Gaines tossing out springboards for plots to Feldstein. Gaines read furiously in those days, searching for any idea, any gimmick that might turn Feldstein on.

"Al and I would sit there," he recalls, "and I'd try to sell him on a springboard. After he had rejected the first thirty-three on general principles, he might show a little interest in number thirty-four. Then I'd give him the hard sell and he'd run into the next room and start breaking down the plot into story form. He'd normally write a story in three hours, but during those three hours I'd have a nervous stomach, wondering if Al was going to come in screaming, 'I can't write that G**damn plot!' When that happened, it would be early afternoon, and we'd have to start all over again because we simply had to have a complete story by five o'clock."

Most of the stories were terrorizing vignettes of foul play and retribution. In a tale titled, appropriately, "Foul Play," a baseball player murders an opponent through the use of poisoned spikes. Revenge takes place when the victim's teammates dismember the villain and play an eerie midnight ballgame, using his limbs as bats and his vital organs as bases. In another story, "Taint the

Meat...It's the Humanity," a butcher is chopped into small pieces by his wife after the tainted horsemeat he'd been selling kills their son.

Gaines often based plots on his own obsessions and phobias. His deep-seated distrust of women led to what he called the Don't-Ever-Trust-Your-Wife-As-Far-As-You-Can-Throw-Her premise. ("We got a lot of mileage out of scheming wives and vengeful husbands"). His belief that man is inherently evil and animals are inherently good also proved a good source ("man meets animal, man mistreats animal, animal takes revenge on man"). His hatred of vivisection led to a story called "The Probers," in which a scientist who takes fiendish delight in cutting up guinea pigs is captured by creatures from another planet, who put him in a cage and, yes, cut him up.

Gaines looked for springboards everywhere. After watching live lobsters being broiled, he plotted "Half-Baked," in which a sadist who enjoys cooking lobsters end up getting split down the middle and broiled alive.

This was formula, of course, but the readers ate it up. Youngsters began sending in plots. One canny youth suggested a story in which a man with a mania for sharpening pencils winds up with his head being sharpened to a point.

"We can't use it," Gaines told Feldstein, "but the kid has the right formula — you



sharpen the pencils, the pencils sharpen your head."

As the months flew by, Gaines found it harder and harder to come up with the appropriate plots, especially for his science fiction comics. He and Feldstein turned to a new source — the short stories of Ray Bradbury. Seeing his stories adapted into comic form, Bradbury, who had not been consulted, wrote Gaines, "You have inadvertently omitted my royalty on the two stories of mine you used in a recent issue." However, he was delighted with Feldstein's treatment and allowed EC to use his stories in return for a modest royalty. As Gaines explains it, "We swiped his stories and he caught us."

Late in the game, Gaines appealed in *Writer's Digest* for horror plots. The plea did not bring in many usable springboards, but it did sum up Gaines's ideas as to what a proper tale of terror should be:

You should know about our horror books.
We have no ghosts, devils, goblins or the like.
We tolerate vampires and werewolves, if they follow tradition and behave the way respectable vampires and werewolves should.
We love walking corpse stories.
We'll accept an occasional zombie or mummy. And we relish the *contes cruels* (tales of sadism).
Virtue doesn't always have to triumph.

Essential as they were, the plots and scripts played second fiddle to the artwork — at least to the eyes of many EC fans. Feldstein, unlike most comic-book editors of the day, encouraged the artists to develop individual styles. Gaines made stars out of his illustrators, spotlighting them in full-page biographies in various issues. Virtually unknown when they came to EC, they emerged as celebrities, their youthful admirers deluging them with fan mail and requests for auto-

graphs. A special favorite was Graham Ingels, whose cadaverous inkings endeared him to the hearts of the readers, and who signed his work with the nickname, "Ghastly." More than anyone, Ingels personifies the horror era, partly because of his ghoulish craft, partly because he vanished in the late 1950's. At the 1972 EC Fan Addict Convention, several devotees sported large buttons reading "Ghastly Lives!" During the conclave, Gaines revealed that Ingels had been traced to Florida, but that "Ghastly" preferred not to disclose the exact location. Comic historian Bob Stewart has likened Ingels to Ambrose Bierce: "He simply disappeared, whereabouts unknown, and has not been found yet."



A month or so before the horror period began, a thin, owl-faced artist presented himself in Gaines's office. He was Harvey Kurtzman and he thought that Educational Comics, which was Gaines's listing in the Yellow Pages, was an outfit where he might draw educational comics. Gaines steered Kurtzman to an uncle, David Gaines, who occasionally brought in commercial jobs for EC to produce. Yes, David Gaines did have need of an artist for an educational pamphlet, and so it happened that Harvey Kurtzman, who would later begin *MAD*, got his first EC job illustrating *Lucky Luke*, a comic book about venereal disease.

Kurtzman later joined Gaines's stable of horror artists, then edited and wrote two war comics, *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales* during the years of the Korean War.



Editor Al Feldstein would write a story a day for Gaines's horror comics.

The new entries brought EC's number of New Trend titles to nine, with seven produced by Feldstein and two by Kurtzman.

The working methods of the two young men differed, to say the least. Feldstein was a dynamo, writing a story a day for more than four years, never missing a deadline, churning out more material than any editor-writer in the business. His horror and suspense magazines became EC's perennial money-makers. The stories, if not always inspired, were slick and highly readable. His science-fiction comics, on the other hand, rarely made a profit. Gaines kept them going because "everyone at EC loved them," especially Feldstein, who poured the cream of his talent into them.

Kurtzman played tortoise to Feldstein's hare, but at EC slow and steady did not win the race. He couldn't stand the distraction of an office, so he worked out of his home, where he plotted each panel of his war comics with painstaking precision. He buried himself in research. If he were recreating, say, the Battle of Gettysburg, every uniform, every rifle, sometimes every hillock had to look authentic. In a story on the Korean War, Kurtzman had the native troops speak Korean, double-checking the dialogue with an official at the Korean Consulate to make sure that the speech was accurate.

"Harvey knew the research rooms at the New York Public Library inside out," recalls Jerry DeFuccio, who served as Kurtzman's legman. While writing



the story, "The Silent Service," Kurtzman sent DeFuccio to the United States submarine base in New London, Connecticut. "I want you to bring back the scream of the klaxon, the sound of the diving alarm, the chime of the dinner bell," Kurtzman ordered, "and let me know when you get there." De Fuccio not only visited the base, he went down in a submarine, after which he wired Kurtzman, "MANY BRAVE HEARTS ARE BURIED IN THE DEEP. GLUB GLUB."

Kurtzman himself went up in a Grumman seaplane, not finding out until he was airborne and fitted out with a parachute that the plane was making a test flight. When he wrote a story on Army medics, he procured an official medical kit and told artist Jack Davis to reproduce it faithfully. "No, Jack," Kurtzman complained when he was brought the artwork, "the gauze pad goes to the right of the sulphur."

For all his nit-picking, Kurtzman turned out marvelous material, probably the best war comics ever

to see print. Unlike other combat books, his were semi-documentaries, unadorned with false sentiment and propaganda and ringing with authenticity. Kurtzman's wars

some, outlandish terror.

There was Marie Severin, Gaines's colorist, and a very moral Catholic, who made her feelings known by coloring dark blue any

Gaines made stars out of his illustrators, spotlighting them in full-page biographies in various issues.

were not events to be romanticized.

"I became obsessed with the idea of communicating real events," he recalls. "When I wrote about Iwo Jima, I avoided the usual glamorous stuff of the big, good-looking G.I. beating up the ugly little yellow man."



Recently, Gaines was asked which he enjoyed more — the horror years or the MAD years. His response was immediate: the horror years were the most rewarding period in his life. For one thing, he was proving he could make money doing something he liked. For another, he was getting his initial glimpse of the zany world of the creative artist.

There was Wally Wood, outwardly a quiet chap, who liked to sneak the unexpected into his panels, such as making an arch-criminal look like Pope Pius XII and a victimized hero resemble Stalin.

There was Jack Davis, a modest country boy from Georgia who could be sold the Brooklyn Bridge, yet amazed the EC crew with his matchless scenes of grue-

panel she thought was in bad taste. Feldstein has called her "the conscience of EC." Nevertheless, it was Marie who stretched out Gaines on a stockroom table and created his "death mask" out of plaster of paris. Her dream was to see the office walls lined with the masks of the horror comics crew.

There was Feldstein, who couldn't pass up a bargain. Gaines had inherited from his father a diamond



Jerry DeFuccio, left, with Lenny Brenner. As Harvey Kurtzman's researcher, DeFuccio once submerged in a Navy sub.

ring worth \$3,500. He wore it always. One day he paid a jeweler thirty-five dollars to make an exact duplicate out of zircon. Gaines began to mistreat the phony ring, throwing it across the room and kicking it. Feldstein was shocked. After all, the ring was worth \$3,500. In a final fit, Gaines



THANKS FOR YOUR NOTE — THE E.C. GANG



Over the years, fans who wrote to EC Comics received a souvenir print. This one is by Bill Elder.

pulled the ring off his finger and shouted, "I'm sick of wearing this lousy thing! I'll sell it for a hundred dollars." "Sold!" said Feldstein, faster than a speeding bullet. Gaines didn't have the heart to take the money.

There was Kurtzman, who wrote about war the way it was but could not overcome his own timidity. Gaines remembers waiting an hour for Kurtzman to arrive at the office for an important meeting. Finally, Gaines phoned him.

"Harvey, where are you?"

"I'm home," Kurtzman said.

"What happened?" Gaines asked.

"I drove down and parked near the office, and when I got out of the car a gang of children attacked me, so I got back in my car and drove home."

And there was Will Elder, he of the

macabre whimsy, who once sent his wife a valentine on which was attached the heart of a chicken with an arrow through it. Elder's talents developed early. When he was ten, he cut out small paper figures of a woman being chased by a man wielding a huge knife. he placed the fig-

day, the students and teacher went to an adjoining room to collect their coats. There they found Elder, his face whitened with chalk dust, hanging from a coat hook. A year or so later, Elder ripped his clothes, smeared himself with red paint and walked into

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ures on the turntable of a phonograph, then projected the revolving figures onto the window shade of his living room. While passersby gawked at the scene, Elder screamed "Help! Help!" in a high voice from inside the house.

Elder was irrepressible. One day in school he failed to appear for a class taught by an especially nervous teacher. At the end of the

his house, where his mother was entertaining. The sight upset his mother to the point of calling an ambulance. This time Elder had gone too far. He was too frightened to reveal his hoax and allowed himself to be rushed to a hospital. The doctor on emergency duty examined him and, of course, found nothing wrong. It was fortu-

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