



by Sean McQuaid

For reasons perhaps known only to comics publishers, comics fans generally tend to slobber in anticipation of issues whose numbers are divisible by twenty-five; anniversary spectaculars as they're often called, twenty-fifth and fiftieth and seventy-fifth and hundredth issues of a comic, and so on. Usually touted as milestones, these phenomena can often be decidedly less than impressive. Recent flops that spring to mind include *Avengers* #350 and *Fantastic Four* #300, both best forgotten, and both products of the heavyweight champions of hyperbole, Marvel Comics; however, Marvel's latest anniversary offering is at least pretty good comic book fare, and does actually mark a turning point for the character, with events that will soon spin off into a new comic book series. The anniversary spectacular in question? The fiftieth issue of Marvel's current *Dr. Strange, Sorcerer Supreme* series.

For those unfamiliar with the good doctor, he's actually one of Marvel's oldest standbys who never quite made it really big, debuting in the sixties alongside better-known fellows like Spider-Man and the Hulk. Once a wealthy and arrogant surgeon, Dr. Stephen Strange was taken down a peg or two after a tragic car accident left his formerly unerring hands with the shakes, so that he'd never operate again. Seeking a miracle cure, the Doc goes to the Himalayas (where else?) and seeks the aid of a sorcerer called the Ancient One. The old boy brushes off Strange since the Doc's motives were selfish; however, when Strange learns that the codger's disciple, Baron Mordo, is planning to kill his master and supplant him, Steve finds a kernel of conscience and tries to learn enough magic to foil Mordo. Having found nobility, Strange is now regarded as a worthy disciple of the Ancient One, and after years of training he returns to New York and sets up shop as "Master of Mystic Arts" (Who ya gonna call?).

Since then, Doc's had a moderately successful career, starting out in *Strange Tales* (which was later retitled *Dr. Strange*) and plugging away for years both by himself and as a member of the late, lamented Defenders. The years have not always been kind to the Doc, as both his own book and the *Defenders* were cancelled at various points, but you can't keep a good Master of the Mystic Arts down. Having recently returned in his own series (which has now turned fifty), Strange is enjoying a modest resurgence of popularity which may escalate with the return

in this issue of his old buddies, the Defenders. Actually, you could say that the Defenders never left. Their whole schtick, what set them apart from the Avengers and the other folks, was that they were a self-proclaimed "non-team". They had no official membership, no charter, no headquarters, just an informal alliance between the various individuals and an understanding that they'd get together whenever a world-shattering menace reared its ugly head or something.

Just such a menace pops up in *Doctor Strange* #50, wherein the dread Dormammu (say that five times fast) reconquers his beloved Dark Dimension and gets drunk with heaping gobs of god-like mystic power, kidnapping his arch-enemy Doc Strange's mate, Clea, for good measure. As Dormammu hopes, that leads Doc into his clutches, a rather lopsided confrontation in that Doc is (as detailed in another ongoing storyline) currently not on speaking terms with a lot of the mystical entities who help him perform a lot of his hocus pocus. So, Doc uses his head (and astral projection) and assembles a new Defenders team, including his old friends and Defenders veterans Hulk and Silver Surfer, with somewhat more recent acquaintance Ghost Rider thrown in for good measure. Together, the foursome liberate the Dark Dimension and,

at the end, Doc contemplates calling the Defenders together on a more regular basis. Therein lies the premise for the upcoming *Secret Defenders* series, in which Doc will draft various heroes each issue into facing the menace-of-the-month. With the potential for a steady stream of popular guest stars, the *Defenders* and *Doc Strange* may last a bit longer this time, and the new series has a lot of potential.

As for *Doctor Strange* #50 itself, the book is sharply written by Len Kaminski (whose touch for crisp dialogue and one-liners is especially delightful in characterizing the Hulk) with a well-paced plot and lots of action, while still giving us some peeks at the characters' personalities (an interesting point is when Doc literally goes inside Dormammu's head to try to reason with him). Geoff Isherwood supplies solid figures and compositions while still capturing the darkness and ambience of the supernatural elements, and also draws the rather striking cover, which is enhanced by "holograf" foil that swirls about Doc's mystically gesturing hands (I know, yet another sales gimmick, but the holographic effect is really quite striking). All in all a good read, though perhaps somewhat pricey at \$3.50 Canadian.

