

10¢ MARCH

# SECRET AGENT X

## DETECTIVE MYSTERIES



THE FEAR  
MERCHANTS  
"SECRET AGENT X"  
NOVEL

MURDER  
SHRINE  
NOVELETTE BY  
FREDERICK C.  
DAVIS



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Vol. 8  
No. 2

# SECRET AGENT X

DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

MAR.  
1936

Rose Wyn, Editor

## THE FEAR MERCHANTS

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*The baffling mystery of those hideously bloated dead came to baffle the untiring efforts and uncanny shrewdness of Secret Agent X. For flame demons were sweeping the city, leaving behind them this new corpse-gutted horror.*

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*Cover by W. F. Soare*

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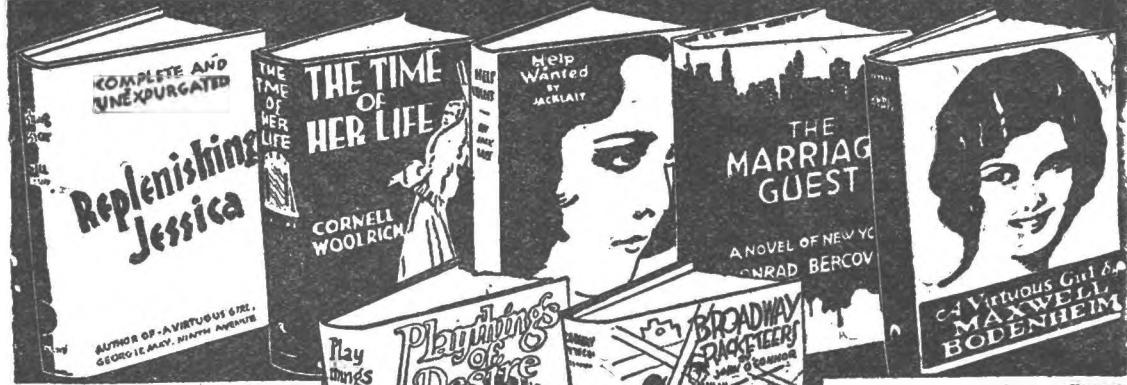


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# The Fear Merchants

*"Secret Agent X" Novel*

*One of the reporters shouted: "That's Betty Dale! She started the fire!"*



## CHAPTER I - THE CRUCIBLE OF CRIME

**H**IGH UP, on the fourteenth floor of the big warehouse that faced the river, four men stole forward with the swift, silent steps of stalking ghouls. A wide corridor stretched before them, murky with night shadows, dank with the dampness of neglect. The certainty of their movements as they passed along it was grim proof that what they did had been carefully rehearsed.

At the corridor's farther end a high window rose. The leader of the

quartette stopped abruptly when he came to this. He was a big man, ruggedly built, with features that suggested cubist art. His head was almost square. His mouth was a straight line across a square-cut jaw. His eyebrows formed a higher line set at right angles to the jutting down-sweep of his nose.

The others saw his profile outlined dimly against the faint glow that crept up from the street. They watched as he softly raised the sash. They saw him poke his head cautiously into the chill night air and stare down three stories to the roof of the

## By Brant House

Author of "Dividends of Doom," etc.

*Flame demons swept across the city. And in their scorching wake came a new horror. The firemen fighting the vast inferno suddenly toppled from their ladders, their shrieks piercing the blazing roar. For when those firefighters struck the pavement they were distorted, bloated husks . . . . Secret Agent X was at that fire. But his manhunt was blocked by a barrier of the bloated dead.*



factory building that lay dark and still below.

For seconds he peered at this, eyes squinted up, face stonily intent. Then he pulled himself in and turned. There was a faint click as his electric flash went on. Holding the light cupped deftly in the palm of his big hand, he let its beam fall on the features of his companions, studying each

as he had studied the roof below.

Two were young, hard-bitten like himself; men with the steely eyes and the grim mouths of fighters; men picked for physical courage and mental poise—operatives of the Bates Detective Agency, one of the most efficient private crime-fighting organizations in the city.

The third man looked strange by

contrast. Trampish, elderly, unkempt, his gray hair wisped down over a seamed old face. Rumpled and faded clothing hung on a body that seemed to have lost the limberness of youth. He stood with drooping shoulders, staring listlessly at the floor.

The holder of the flashlight scowled. "You'd better wait here, Peaselee."

The shabby man shook his head. "No, Mr. Bates, I will make it. Mr. Martin asked me to help. You lead the way."

The square-faced leader, Harvey Bates, looked doubtfully. He nodded, said a gruff, "okay," then spoke suddenly to his own operatives, addressing them in clipped sentences, his voice harsh as the rasp of steel on ice. "Street's full of cops. Tough going if they catch us—hell to explain. They'll shoot. We can't shoot back. But we've got to do the job right!"

He handed his flash to one of his men, took a bundle from beneath his arm, unwrapped it. It was a long section of rope ladder tightly coiled. There were strong metal fasteners spliced to the ends. He looped these over the steam pipe, snapped them shut. He let the end of the rope ladder out the window, paying it carefully down along the building's face. There were no other windows on this side. The warehouse wall was a sheer unbroken drop of sixty feet, steep and dangerous as a cliff.

THE ROPE ladder finally lay swaying in the darkness like a giant snake. Bates nodded grimly, swung a leg over the window sill and groped for the first rung with his foot. "When I get down I'll jerk," he snapped. "Scallot, you come next."

In a moment he was gone, descending into the darkness, till he stood on the tarred surface of the factory roof.

The others followed. Peaselee came last of all. Yet, in spite of his awkward, trampish and feeble look, he didn't falter. Bates eyed him a mo-

ment, angular jaw thrust out. Then he gave final instructions to his men.

"You men know what's up. We're here to search every foot of this building and see if those firebugs who're holding up the insurance companies have been at work. It's a sure tip that the place will go up in smoke before midnight. The Great Eastern people wouldn't come across. And this dump's on the spot. The cops have searched already. Maybe we'll have better luck."

Bates angled his big body to the roof edge and peered down into the street. On both corners of the block alert figures were visible. Others prowled in the shadows across the way. There was a police cordon around the factory tonight. The way down the warehouse wall was the only means of entrance. This the police had overlooked.

Bates crossed silently to a skylight in the center of the roof. It was hooked on the inside where iron stairs led up, but the agency detective took a small jimmy from his coat and prepared to force the fastenings.

He had no more than thrust the jimmy's head under the crack of the skylight cover when the stranger, Peaselee, spoke quietly. "I know a better way."

Bates straightened, scowling, a sharp reply on his square-cut lips. Before he could utter it, Peaselee set to work. He produced a rubber suction thimble from somewhere in his coat, pressed this to the glass. In his right hand was a small glass cutter, hardly larger than a match. He drew this deftly around the edge of a skylight pane. He grasped the suction thimble, pulled. There was a single, barely audible snap. The pane came loose. Peaselee laid it carefully down, reached through the opening, and unsnapped the skylight hooks. In a moment the cover was lifted and the men were ready to descend.

Bates was scowling, keenly eying Peaselee. Then he clipped: "We'll go

straight down. Begin at bottom, work up. Easy with those lights."

His operatives nodded. They'd been provided with electric flashes no bigger round than pencils. These threw a straight beam, converging in a disc of light the size of a ten-cent piece.

They passed quietly down through the floors of the empty factory, rubber-soled feet soundless on the steel-shod stairs. Not till they'd reached the engine-room below street level did Bates pause.

"No mistakes," he warned. "We're dealing with rats. Killers. We don't know how they get their fires going. Tonight we'll find out. Get busy." He gestured with his light for the men to spread and begin their search.

PEASELEE moved away from the others toward a cluttered corner of the room. His stabbing, tiny beam systematically covered every foot of wall space, every brace and pipe. His strange, dark eyes followed the shifting ray with the questing eagerness of a hawk. Minutes passed. Suddenly he tensed and knelt.

A test outlet of the factory's sprinkler system led down close to the floor. There were indications on the brass nozzle that it had been recently turned. But this wasn't what held the gray-haired man. It was the faint sheen of a greasy substance on the metal. Oil, perhaps, to make the nozzle screw thread limber.

He stooped and sniffed, and the muscles along his back seemed to bulk larger like the rising hackles of a dog. A faint, disturbing odor reached his nostrils. Calcium carbide, it seemed to be—the gray stuff that gives the white-hot heat to burning acetylene vapor.

Peaselee stared at the nozzle a moment, then jerked to his feet. His light arced upward. His quick eye followed the sprinkler pipe to the automatic vent above. There were dozens of those vents in every room of the building. If some substance containing calcium carbide had been

put into the sprinkler system itself, if this were ignited, what would be the result?

As though in answer, there was a sudden sound somewhere in the building. The faint, insect buzz of a tiny metal ratchet quivered in the air. Peaselee heard Bates give a snort, heard one of the detectives whisper hoarsely: "What's that?"

Another vibration sounded, like a katydid giving voice in a night-darkened forest. A chorus of buzzings came from several parts of the factory at once. A watchman, prowling on the floor above, cried out. Then louder, closer than any yet, a ghostly, metallic buzzing began in the very room they were in. It was over near the wall, hidden it seemed behind the plaster, close to the spot where Peaselee had sniffed at the sprinkler nozzle.

He started toward it, suddenly stepped back. For a tongue of flame had spurted against the pipe. It came from the wall, lancing outward through a break that had opened. Hot and straight as a torch, it played against the pipe.

There was a sizzling sound, a boiling. The pipe appeared to swell before their eyes. A crack opened in it, greasy liquid gushed out. In an instant it glowed with lambent life, became a luminous, snakelike mass of writhing flame. The heat mounted, increasing internal pressure in the pipe. A melting, devouring fury of flame shot like a swift sword across the room. It struck the side of a great boiler, bit with the force of a gnawing canker into the steel.

The light of its seething, hissing sparks showed up the white faces of Harvey Bates and his men. The whole room was bathed in shimmering, ghostly light. The place had become a chamber of horror and swift destruction.

The detectives made a dash toward the stairs. They mounted the steel steps in sudden panic, climbed while the jet of torchlight flame snarled below them.

But the room above was hardly better. Pipes in all parts of the building were bursting, hissing. Gouts of flame shot across space in a roaring inferno. Steel walls buckled and melted. Plaster crumbled into a red-hot dust.

The watchman they had heard came running to them, sweat streaming from his face. His eyes were bulging, fists clenched. A column of flame like a malicious living thing caught his body close to the middle. It seemed for a moment to wrap writhing arms around him. A piercing, frenzied scream came from his throat. The sound echoed through the high vaults of the factory above the fire's roar. The man lurched and staggered, then collapsed, literally cut in two by the crucible heat. He lay, a horrible blackened thing that had once been a man.

Bates' square-cut face was bathed in sweat. Cords in his bull neck stood out. He made a dash for the steel stairs down which they had come from the floor above. But Peaselee saw him and followed, clutching his arm before the detective had taken a half dozen steps. He had noticed what Bates in his hurry had overlooked. Molten metal in lavalike streams was already trickling down the treads. The stairs were melting high above. They were no longer safe. All of them were trapped in a seething inferno of flame.

## CHAPTER II

### FIEND OF FIRE

**B**ATES spoke hoarsely, bloodless lips close to Peaselee's ear. "Can't leave by the door or windows. Cops would get us."

Peaselee abruptly drew the detective toward the north side of the room. Another chamber led off here. There was no glow of bursting sprinkler pipes in evidence as yet. But to reach it, he and the others had to run a gauntlet of savage flame. It singed

their clothing as they swept by, reached curling fingers at their flesh. They plunged on into the unlighted chamber, stopped.

Peaselee's light swung up. There was no sprinkler outlet visible. The room was a storage chamber for heavy machinery. There was no window either, only a blank brick wall straight ahead. This lay against the side of the warehouse they had left ten minutes ago.

No window, and the heat of the flames behind them was increasing every second. Escape by the exits was cut off. They were imprisoned by a flaming barrier, sealed in this ventless chamber till more flame entered and snuffed out their lives in a torrent of molten steel.

Bates began swearing, hoarsely, monotonously, his red-rimmed eyes darting about. One of the detectives with him turned back toward the flames. Peaselee stopped him with a quiet command.

Uncomprehending, but startled into submission by this clear order in the face of raging tumult, Bates and his men stood still.

Peaselee ran straight forward toward the blank brick wall. When he neared it, he took something from an inner pocket. It was a small object, shaped like a packet of cigarettes. There was a tiny lever at one end, a sharp metal point set solidly in the black case.

He placed the case against the bricks three feet from the floor. He jabbed the metal point into a crack in the plaster. It stayed there firmly. Then Peaselee pressed the lever down.

A faint sputtering like an electric spark came from within the box. Peaselee turned and dashed back toward the spot where he had left the others. He pulled them down behind a piece of heavy machinery. Their blank faces showed that they did not understand.

Before they could even question him, a tremendous explosion shook the room. The floor seemed to rise and

quiver. Plaster and bits of bricks whistled above their heads. Dust filled the air in stifling clouds. Deafening echoes sounded.

Peaselee leaped up as quickly as he had crouched. His flash, spraying forward through the murk, played over a jagged hole in the wall. He had set a bomb, and it had blown straight through the bricks and plaster with the force of a giant battering-ram.

Bates suddenly turned and stared at the man called Peaselee. There was respect and awe on the big detective's square-cut face. His belligerent manner had entirely left him. His voice came hoarsely. "Get it now. Only one man I know of could have pulled a stunt like that. Only one man! You're him! You're—Secret Agent X."

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the hiss of the flames outside, and the men's deep breathing. Then "Peaselee" nodded. He pointed to the hole in the wall. "Follow me!"\*

They did so, obeying silently, quickly, like well-trained automata. They knew they were in the presence of a master manhunter whose slightest word was a command. They realized that the shabby, gray-haired figure ahead of them had saved their lives. They slipped through the wall like shadows. They left the scorching, seething death of the flames behind. Then suddenly they paused.

Shouts and footsteps sounded down the long corridor directly in front. The police had entered the warehouse. The threat of discovery and capture was imminent again.

Secret Agent X spoke a swift command. "Head toward the back of the building. Leave by a window. Quick!"

"And you, chief," Harvey Bates said firmly.

"I'll hold off the cops."

\*AUTHOR'S NOTE: Followers of the Secret Agent's published chronicles knew that the Man of a Thousand Faces assumes many strange disguises. In his grim work as an undercover battler of crime, his genius at impersonation is his ace in the hole. Even his few closest intimates never know how he may appear. And even they do not know his true identity, for his real face has never been revealed. He is a man of mystery, and a daring adventurer along the dark and bloody trails of crime.

THE flashing, compelling light of authority gleamed in the Agent's dark eyes.

Bates grunted a word of agreement. Then they sped off at right angles, away from the menace of the oncoming police.

When they had left, the Secret Agent leaped to a high pile of old boxes at the hallway's side. He climbed them agilely, reached a steel bracing girder over the floor. He walked along this, stood poised above the direct center of the corridor where the police must pass.

They came on, guns gleaming, flashlights bobbing in their hands. There were only two of them he saw, but they had apparently glimpsed Harvey Bates and his men and had heard their voices. One of the bluecoats crashed three quick shots along the hall. Bullets ricocheted, whined. The pungent smell of cordite rose to the Agent's nostrils. He waited, crouching, every muscle tense. They were only ten feet away, five feet. They were directly under him now.

He dropped like a panther plummeting from a limb on unsuspecting quarry. Yet he was careful not to injure the blue-coated men. He merely knocked them off their feet, sent their guns spinning, made their flashlights crash.

Cursing, clawing, they went down in a heap beneath his outstretched arms and body. They struck with furious fists at this human whirlwind who had dropped apparently from the sky.

X untangled himself in an instant, backed away. He turned and raced forward along the way the police had come. He heard them behind him, searching frantically for their guns.

One located his weapon when the Agent had taken fifty strides. But the cop's flashlight was broken and the corridor was dark. The bullets that the policeman sent after X screamed harmlessly by. He ran on, reached the

open door of the warehouse, plunged quickly through it—and he knew that Bates and his operatives were also safe.

But he made no attempt to join them. Instead, he crossed a rear yard running, vaulted a fence. For a moment he crouched in utter darkness. And his hands, lifting, did strange things to his face.

He drew off the gray toupee of "Peaselee," revealing a sandy one beneath it. He made deft changes in the plastic material covering his skin. He erased the lines of age, rounded the features. He touched pigment, taken from a tiny vial, here and there to his flesh. Lastly he peeled off the ragged garments that clothed him, exposing a trim business suit below.

He whipped a cloth cap over his head, stepped cautiously into a side street, a different person. Even if Bates should meet him face to face there would be no chance of recognition. The Man of a Thousand Faces had assumed another role.

Outside, along the wide avenue at the end of the street, sirens rose in a screaming tumult. Already a half dozen alarms had been turned in. Fire engines and police radio cruisers were converging on this festering spot of incendiary crime.

**T**HE AGENT legged it for the avenue, turned right and saw the light of the burning factory lifting evilly into the sky. The windows had become oblongs of shimmering light. Some had burst outward, shattering glass into the street. Bright tongues of flame were shooting up. The whole great building was like a roaring furnace with every draft turned on.

The police cordon around it still held, and reserves were hastily coming up. They were stringing fire lines across the entire block. The curious crowds, increasing in size every instant, were being held at bay. Only the uniformed men, police and fire-fighters in their helmets and long black coats, were allowed inside.

X saw the first streams of water pumped on the factory. He saw the hissing drops disappear in dense clouds of steam, seeming only to add to the heat of the flames. He saw the futility of such a method of battle. Evidently the firemen saw it, too.

They made way suddenly for a huge red truck that came thundering up. It was packed, not with hose, but with gleaming tanks of chemicals under pressure. The Agent recognized some of the latest fire-fighting equipment. Great metal flasks of carbon dioxide, the gas that can smother flames in ships' holds and in blazing cellars.

Firemen, daring the terrific heat, ran pipes from the truck to the lower windows of the factory. An engine throbbed into life. Pumps sucked the gas from the tanks, forced it in screaming jets into the building. Under its spreading blanket even the chemical-fed fury of the flames within began to abate. One chemical was battling another in this startling war of science.

As the heat in the lower floors began to show signs of subsiding, firemen thrust ladders against the factory's walls. They inserted new pipes of the stifling gas into the windows of the floors above. These seeming pygmies in their helmet hats were slowly conquering the mighty giant of flame. The Agent knew the reason. The arsonist terror in the past few days had spread. There had been other purposely set fires. The truck had been held ready, its equipment augmented, waiting for another emergency call. Now it was proving its usefulness.

He started suddenly, turning his gaze upward as a sound drifted down from the sky. Mist, red as the flame below it, swirled above the burning factory. Out of this mist, eerie and sinister, came the hum of an airplane's motor. It throbbed like the drone of a giant bee, poised above hell's chimney. And in an instant the Agent saw the plane itself.

A darting will-o-the-wisp of black and yellow swooped down out of the night. A small, fast ship with bands around its fuselage, looking for all the world like a curious wasp drawn by the fire below, circled close in the heat that seemed to reach for its wings. The pilot appeared mad to risk such perilous currents. The small plane bucked and quivered in the eddying drafts. It banked, turned, and came lower still—and the Agent sensed something sinister in its strange maneuvers. It was a winged wasp of death bound on some evil mission.

Police and firemen on the pavement saw it. Eyes in the dense crowd outside the fire lines watched its actions in straining silence. It banked once more, and came down till its black wings almost touched the house-tops—till a puff of heat made its striped fuselage roll like a cask at sea. And in that instant the gloved arm of the lone pilot moved out from the small plane's side.

X caught a quick glimpse of something dropping, small objects round and hard as walnuts. They fell toward the side of the factory where the firemen were fighting the blaze with their chemical gas. And where they fell men screamed and staggered. Above the roar of the flames, above the drone of the plane's motor and the hissing gas, came a shrill sound of human torment.

The Agent saw firemen clutch at their faces wildly. He saw two tumble from a high ladder and pitch headlong into the street to their deaths. He saw others run away from their posts like men gone suddenly mad.

Chilled with horror, he burst forward through the stunned and gaping crowd. He tore through the fire lines beyond. No one tried to stop him. The police stood frozen with wonder at their posts. Firemen outside the radius of the nutlike missiles were running toward their comrades.

X caught sight of the features of one of the wildly clawing forms. The

man had fallen to his knees. He had torn his coat and helmet off. His face was a bloated mass of tortured flesh, swollen to twice its normal size. His arms and legs looked as though he'd been stricken suddenly with elephantiasis. His lips and throat had swelled till his anguished screams had been choked off. As the Agent neared him he fell backwards writhing, then lay unmoving, a puffed and ghastly corpse.

### CHAPTER III DEATH'S HIGH CARNIVAL

ABOVE the screams of the victims of the strange bloating death there sounded the sinister hum-ming of the murder plane. The Agent raised his eyes. The striped ship was just disappearing in the swirling, crimson mist.

He looked around him. The scene in front of the burning factory was like a glimpse into some hideous torture chamber at the mouth of hell. Men were stumbling, falling, crying out in anguish. Men were pulling their bloated, pain-wracked bodies over the pavement where the light of the flames shimmered in a weird devil's dance of doom. Men with livid skins and features puffed beyond all human semblance lay gasping out their lives.

The Agent stood with clenched hands, eyes dark with horror. This was something he had not reckoned on. He had come on the trail of mysterious, undercover crime. He had come to investigate the activities of an arson ring which he knew was active in the city. Now he was faced with the fact that the arsonists were also murderers, killers as fiendish, as merciless as any he had ever known. Death was holding high carnival around him. The firemen who had dared to interfere with the incendiaries' work had themselves become targets for destruction.

And the flames, like fiends rejoicing in new-found freedom, were leaping higher. Their livid light was reaching

out across the street. The factory was doomed.

An ambulance clanged noisily down the block. It came nosing through the tense crowd and whirled up to the fire. Internes, their white suits turned red as blood by the light of the burn-

ing building, bent over the dead and dying and lifted them on stretchers. A half dozen of the hideously bloated bodies were borne away. Other ambulances joined the first. Following them came a long car filled with police detectives.

A big man with a pale, aquiline face and black eyebrows jutting menacingly above cold, piercing eyes was the first to alight. His features were familiar to the Agent. He was Inspector John Burks of the city homicide squad. Murder as well as arson had taken place. Burks, grim dealer in murder mysteries, was on hand.\*



Four men rushed into the room.

He was followed by a group of experts from headquarters. Fingerprint

\*AUTHOR'S NOTE: Though they both work for justice, against the underworld, Inspector Burks has always regarded Secret Agent X as a particularly desperate criminal. This is because no public recognition has ever been accorded the Agent's battle against crime. He has the secret sanction of a high official in Washington, who prefers to be known only as K9. But even this representative of the government cannot publicly recognize the Secret Agent's work. For X's methods are daring and unconventional, often outside the law. Aware of the constant danger of his position, he is ready at all times to accept the consequences of his acts.

men, official photographers, an assistant medical examiner.

In long, jerky strides, Burks walked to one of the bloated corpses. X saw his face grow tense, saw his hands twitch as he stared down. The Agent drew closer and watched the medical examiner begin his gruesome work.

But his attention was distracted in a moment by the arrival of two more cars. A limousine and a yellow taxi pulled up simultaneously close to the fire zone. From the taxi a small man with a sharp-featured, wrinkled face and snapping eyes alighted. His mouth was working, his gaze riveted on the factory fire. The Agent heard his shrill voice even before he could distinguish what the man was saying. The stranger came closer, talking vehemently, gesturing passionately with his skinny arms.

"I own that building!" he shouted. "I'm Herron—Jason Herron! Why isn't something being done to stop the fire? What are the engines here for? What are these men doing? I pay taxes! Why don't I get protection?"

No one paid any attention to the man's shrill tirade. He stopped suddenly as he glimpsed the police gathered about the bloated corpse. But their legs and shadows prevented him from getting a detailed view. He continued angrily in a moment:

"I don't care what's happened, or whether men have been injured. It's their job to see that property owners aren't ruined. That's my building—burning up!"

The passengers from the limousine were approaching. One was a tall, middle-aged man with glasses, a brick-red face and a commanding bearing. His companion was younger, efficient looking, alert. The man with glasses spoke to Herron.

"Your property's covered, isn't it, Mr. Herron? You're all right. It's we insurance people who should do the worrying. This is the third incendiary fire in a week."

**H**ERRON turned on the newcomer with angry violence. "Mathew Monkford!" he snarled. "You've got a nerve to show your face here! If you'd done what those criminals asked you this wouldn't have happened. My building's covered, but that won't make up for what I'm going to lose in business. It'll take months to build another factory. Meanwhile I'll lose orders. As president of the Great Eastern Insurance Company it was your place to protect your policy holders' interests first and foremost—even if you had to give in to the incendiaries."

The tall insurance man frowned. "Do you expect me to encourage crime by surrendering to criminals? This city has its police force, hasn't it?"

"The police!" Herron snorted. "They were posted here to guard this building. And what happened? See for yourself! It's burning—burning to the ground. And neither the police nor the firemen are doing a thing about it. I have contracts out calling for merchandise. I can't fill them. I'll be ruined."

Again Mathew Monkford shrugged. "A few more losses like this," he said slowly, "and Great Eastern will be ruined, too."

Herron turned away with a furious gesture. He stalked toward Inspector Burks. His high-pitched voice lashed out. "I know you, sir! I've seen your picture in the papers. You hold down a soft job with the police. We taxpayers hand you your salary. What have you got to say at the disgraceful failure of your men to do their duty?"

Burks lifted a hard gray face and stared at Herron. His cold eyes seemed to bore through the factory owner. His answer was rasping. "Get out! I'm not interested in you or your building. Men have been murdered tonight. That's all that interests me! Take a look at this corpse and stop your yelling. Be glad you aren't in this man's shoes! And if you've complaints to make, make them to the commis-

sioner. I'm here to run down killers."

Herron gave a startled look at the corpse at Inspector Burks' feet. He gasped. Then he shrank away from the inspector's angry eyes. Hands shoved in pockets, he moved off by himself and stared fixedly at the fire.

The man who had come with Monkford spoke quietly, but the Secret Agent's keen ears caught his comment. "Herron's the type who would set a blaze himself in order to collect. Our records show that he served a jail sentence on a stock fraud charge. Probably he shouldn't have been given any policy. Before the company pays this premium, Mr. Monkford, there should be a thorough investigation."

Monkford frowned and nodded, but his cautious answer was pitched so low that X didn't get it.

Internes from another ambulance moved up with a stretcher to the bloated body sprawled at the inspector's feet. Burks halted them. "We'll take charge of this man," he said. "He's dead. We're going to hold him for an autopsy."

Through the lines which the police were again maintaining a group of excited reporters pushed. The Agent's eyes turned toward them and gleamed with sudden interest. Among the keen-featured young men who had hurried to the scene of the fire was the slim figure of a girl.

The torchlight of the burning building played over her eager face. It tinged with copper the gleaming coils of golden hair that showed below the close-fitting brim of her stylish hat. It outlined the supple shapeliness of her body.

The Agent knew her. She was a girl reporter from the *Herald*. Betty Dale, who took her job so seriously that she was usually among the first to arrive where news was hottest. More than that—she was one of the few people in all the world who knew of the Agent's daring, secret work. She was one of the few who had gone with him into the shadow of death during

more than one grim battle with crime.\*

She and the young men with her crowded close to Burks. She did not wince at sight of the sprawling body. Her blue eyes darkened with horror, but held steady. Often before she had been a witness to the grisly aftermath of crime.

**B**URKS maintained a stony silence in the face of the questions the reporters fired at him. Even Betty Dale was unable to make him talk. She caught sight of Mathew Monkford, turned and ran toward him. And the other reporters, knowing that she had an unfailing "nose for news," followed.

The Secret Agent, a faked press card in his own wallet, edged closer. He didn't make himself known to Betty Dale. Even she had never seen his real face, did not know his name. He had appeared to her in a hundred different guises, identifying himself when he chose by signals with which she had grown familiar.

He listened as she spoke to Monkford, heard her questioning him about the messages he had received from the arson ring. The insurance man gave vehement answer.

"I co-operated with the police," he said. "I gave them all the information I had. They knew in advance about the threat to this building. But even they were unable to stop the fire. If this keeps up my company will be bankrupt."

"Do you think the criminals will get in touch with you again?" asked one of the reporters.

Monkford nodded. "They'll call me up and gloat as they did before. They'll make new demands, and name another property to be destroyed if I

\* AUTHOR'S NOTE: There is a close bond between Betty Dale and the Secret Agent. Because of her contact with the press and her cleverness and courage, she has often given him valuable aid. She comes naturally by her liking for action. Her father was a police captain, beloved of the force, until flaming underworld guns ended his life. She played around the precinct stations as a little girl. And it is the memory of her father's death that has given her a hatred of criminals as keen as the Agent's own.

don't pay up. They'll be sure now that I'll agree."

"Will you?" put in Betty Dale.

Monkford passed a distracted hand across his face. He spoke hoarsely, nervously. "Perhaps. I've tried holding out against them. It hasn't worked. If they don't ask too much, perhaps I'll pay—but only on condition that they promise thereafter to leave my company alone."

"Can you trust their promise?"

"I don't know! I don't know!" said Monkford bitterly.

Jason Herron, who had been edging up, intruded himself into the conversation. "You'd better pay—whether you can trust them or not. You'll lose every policy holder you've got, if you don't. The men behind this thing are desperate criminals. It wouldn't surprise me if the racketeer, Santos, was in on it."

"What makes you say that?" Monkford snapped.

Herron's eyes wavered a moment. Fear crossed his face. His answer was husky. "Because Santos gave me trouble a couple of times when I was building this factory. Labor trouble. He was the head of a racket. He made threats, and I had to meet his demands."

A hand reached out and clutched Herron's arm so sharply that he gave a gasp. He whirled around. Inspector Burks' hard face was thrust forward close to his own. Burks had apparently overheard the conversation.

"If you think Santos is back of these fires why didn't you mention it to the police?"

**H**ERRON quailed. "I shouldn't have said it. I don't know that he is. I only know—"

Burks shook him off as fiercely as a terrier letting go of a rat. He turned to one of his men, snapped a quick order. "Send out word to bring in Boss Santos. Have it put on the air. See that every cop and every cruiser in town is on the job."

A police ambulance drew up and

men from it lifted the body over which the assistant medical examiner had been bending. Burks and his squad of detectives moved away. Jason Herron slunk off by himself with fear in his eyes. He got back into the yellow taxi which had been waiting and was whirled out of sight. Monkford ended the interview with the reporters and drew aside with the man who had come with him, evidently an adjuster. Even X could not hear what passed between them.

The Agent reached down under his coat to the left side of his body. Fastened to his belt there, close against his side, was a fine-grained leather case not much larger than a small-size camera. But it contained delicate, complex radio apparatus and chemical batteries with a voltage as high as any in the world in units of the same size. There was a tiny receiver in the Secret Agent's vest pocket with a flexible insulated wire not much bigger than a thread. He plugged this into a terminal in the leather case.

Stepping back a little into the shadows, the first finger of his right hand moved. It pressed a button key at the top of the radio case. He sent out short-wave signals that had a range of twenty miles, signals that Harvey Bates would pick up on another instrument similar to his own. Wherever Bates might be those signals would reach him.

In a moment the receiver in the Secret Agent's pocket reeled off a faint series of dots and dashes. That was Bates' ready call. The Agent's expert finger tapped out a message.

*"Get all information possible on racketeer Santos. Have other operatives shadow Jason Herron, owner of burned factory. Get data on him. Report immediately."*

The Agent's second finger flicked a small control lever in the side of the radio case. It pitched the instrument to an entirely different wavelength. Bates could no longer hear him. The Agent got in touch with another

crime-fighting organization which he maintained.\*

He repeated his request for information on Herron and Santos in staccato dots and dashes. These two detective agencies were the backbone of the Secret Agent's investigation activities.

And while his finger sent off instructions to his operatives, his brain was busy planning his own actions. In a moment he had chosen a course for himself that was filled with danger.

He lingered at the scene of the fire, watching Mathew Monkford. There was a strange expression in the Secret Agent's eyes. He noted every gesture that Monkford made. He edged close enough to listen again to Monkford's accents. He carefully stored these impressions in his memory.

The adjuster left Monkford's side in a moment and went off to begin the routine questioning of many witnesses. The Great Eastern Company would obviously not pay Herron until all facts were known. Monkford turned back toward his limousine, and the Secret Agent followed.

This was what he had been waiting for. He edged through the tense crowd ahead of Monkford. He passed the insurance man's limousine, noted the uniformed chauffeur up front, and moved on almost to the end of the block. Here he stood close to the curb and casually lighted a cigarette. In a moment Monkford's big limousine came nosing along. It was just beginning to gather speed after the congestion in the street.

The Agent moved so quickly, so deftly, that neither Monkford nor his chauffeur guessed what he was about. He stepped to the car's runningboard, jerked the door open and plunged inside. While Monkford gasped and stiffened the Agent crouched. He lifted the blue-steel muzzle of a gun and pointed it at Monkford's chest.

\*AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is the private detective agency run by the redheaded Jim Hobart, working unknown to, and independently of, Bates. It is financed by the Secret Agent's money, a fund for his special use subscribed at the outset of his career by ten public-spirited citizens.

## CHAPTER IV

### DOOM'S DISGUISE

THE SECRET AGENT'S disguised face looked impassive, but his voice had the brittle staccato of a crackling whip. "Keep quiet, Monkford. Look pleasant. Have your man drive on!"

In spite of the implied threat in the Agent's voice and gun, Mathew Monkford opened his mouth to yell. He never made it. The Agent's forefinger tensed in the trigger guard. He raised the gun muzzle slightly and a jet of vapor spurted out. It passed between Monkford's open lips.

With a shuddering gasp, the insurance company head fought for breath. But the battle lasted only a second. His indrawn breath had sucked the vapor deep in his lungs. His eyes began to glaze. His head fell forward. In a moment he was swaying inertly as a sack of grain.\*

The Agent turned his attention to the chauffeur up front. With a quick movement he shoved back the sliding window that separated the driving compartment from the rear. The chauffeur had turned his head and had glimpsed what had happened to his master. His mouth hung slack, his eyes were bulging and his hands began to wobble on the wheel. The big car gave a dangerous lurch toward the curb.

X steadied the man's trembling with the whiplash of fear. "Keep going! Straight ahead! Pretend you haven't noticed anything or—" The Agent brought his gun around till its black muzzle centered on the chauffeur's temple. The chauffeur froze into rigidity and the car rolled on. X knew the man guessed that he had shot Monkford with a silenced gun. The chauffeur believed that his own

\*AUTHOR'S NOTE: The gun that fires a dense anesthetizing vapor is one of the Secret Agent's scientific weapons. It is loaded with cartridges of a harmless chemical gas under pressure. The Agent never takes human life if he can help it. He battles with wits and science in his warfare on criminals.

murder impended if he didn't obey. This was what X wanted.

Keeping his gun hand thrust through the partition window he opened another at the limousine's side to let the gas escape. He had held his breath to keep from being overcome himself. The air inside was stifling. Night wind flicked the vapor out.

He breathed deeply, held Monkford's swaying body with his arm. His quick mind had counted on psychology to help him. The people who passed would be interested in the fire, not in a speeding limousine. No one along the street had witnessed the drama that had taken place.

Four blocks went by before the Agent said: "Turn right." The chauffeur obeyed and the big car slid down a side street where the lights were dimmer. The Agent waited until they were in the center of the block where shadows were heavy. He spoke again. "Stop here."

As the car stopped, X pressed the trigger of his gas gun a second time. He slammed the partition window shut, saw the chauffeur choke and fall forward over the wheel. X leaped to the running-board. When he opened the driver's door the chauffeur also was inert.

X pulled him over to the vacant side of the seat. He grabbed the man's hat, set it on his own head, and climbed in under the wheel. He thrust the man's body down out of sight, then threw in the clutch and sent the car forward.

The limousine gathered speed. In five minutes the scene of the fire and ruthless murders was far behind. X threaded his way through the darkest streets. He crossed a wide avenue, turned left, and drove till he had almost reached the city limits. Suddenly he slowed the big car and turned it into a drive. He stopped when the doors of a garage barred the way. A small, round lens like a single eye gleamed in their center. The Agent flashed the car's headlights on and off four times in measured, but uneven

timing. The doors rolled back as a selenium cell, acting on automatic mechanism, operated their hinges. They closed again as X drove the big car inside.

**H**E shut off the motor, climbed out. As easily as though they were sleeping children, he carried the two unconscious men, one after another, through a long, covered passage at the back of the garage and into a shuttered house. There was a chamber here in which no light from the street ever entered. The Agent had used it many times before in his daring work.

He laid the chauffeur on a sofa, propped Monkford up in a comfortable chair. But there was a head brace on the back of it like that in a dentist's office. X clamped this on the insurance man, studied his face. He switched on a mercury vapor lamp, focused its rays on Monkford's still features. He had already noted that Monkford was close to his own size and build. The man's clothes, X believed, would fit him. Quickly, deftly, the Agent set to work.

First he stripped his own disguise off, removing the plastic material that he had worn at the scene of the fire. Now for a minute or two he appeared as he really was—as not even his few closest friends had ever seen him. And the face exposed in the weird glow of the mercury vapor lamp was remarkably youthful for a man who had been through so many strange experiences. It held character, understanding, power.

The wide-set eyes had the clarity and brilliance of a forceful, penetrating mind. Hawklike strength dwelt in the curving line of the nose, fighting ruggedness in the chin. And there was a combination of kindness, humor and unflinching determination in the mobile lips.

When the Agent turned to lift a tube of make-up from a table, light struck his face at a slant, and he looked suddenly older. Faint lines were revealed across his glowing skin.

These were the etched and indelible markings of his many odd adventures. It was a young-old, strangely dynamic face, a face that once seen could never be forgotten.

The Agent squeezed fresh volatile plastic substance from a tube. He spread the stuff out with the tips of his powerful fingers that had the strength and delicacy of a sculptor's. He began creating Monkford's features on his own.\*

He transformed himself quickly, as though his hands had the uncanny power of a magician's. He made every smallest movement tell. He added coloring pigment under the last plastic layer, until his *complexion* matched the brick-red of Monkford's. He selected a gray toupe, the exact shade of Monkford's, and slipped it over his head. He did not stop until he had duplicated every blemish and wrinkle of the older man's.

When he ceased his work finally he was Monkford's double. And now, in the silence of the shuttered room, he practised for a few moments the characteristic accents of Monkford, as he remembered them. The effect was uncanny. The newly-created Monkford seemed to be talking in Monkford's own voice.

X changed clothes with the insurance man next, taking all his pocket belongings. Thoroughness when possible was one of the Agent's undeviating principles. When all was ready he gave both Monkford and his chauffeur a subcutaneous injection of another anæsthetic that would keep them unconscious for at least five hours. They must not wake until he returned. The secrets of this room must never be discovered.

The Agent left Monkford's limousine in the secret garage. No key would open its doors. Their mechanism would only move when the one set of flashing signals was given.

\*AUGHOR'S NOTE: The Agent has never revealed the exact chemical nature of his make-up material to any one. It undoubtedly has a pyroxylene base. The softening element is more quickly volatile than naphtha. It forms the very foundation of his art of impersonation.

He followed dark side streets, walking swiftly for many blocks before he finally hailed a taxi. He gave the address of Monkford's office and told the driver to hurry.

The building that housed the Great Eastern Insurance Company was a massive affair. One of several new downtown office buildings, it towered above the block. But, with the exception of two uniformed guards, the great vestibule was deserted. The offices had long since closed for the day. The huge edifice was dark.

The guards nodded respectfully to the man they thought was Monkford. A single elevator was still running, and this took the Agent up to the fifteenth floor. He saw the lights of the Great Eastern Insurance Company down a long hall, and paused. There was a glow behind the frosted windows. Some one was inside.

THE AGENT had looked over Monkford's wallet and papers found in his pocket in the cab. He knew that the company which Monkford headed had a secretary and a treasurer as well as a president. Either one of the other two might be inside. And there was risk in meeting them—risk always in any disguise the Agent might assume—the risk of discovery. Yet in a moment he strode resolutely toward the lighted office.

He had assumed Monkford's disguise for one main purpose—to hear a member of the arsonist group speak on the telephone, to make personal contact with the criminals. They would call up Monkford surely, to gloat, as he had said, and to make new demands. And besides hearing one of the incendiaries speak, X hoped to have a chance to look through Monkford's private papers, and see what other big properties the Great Eastern Company had insured. By doing so, getting a line on where the arson ring might strike next, there was a possibility he could forestall them.

He opened the front door of the

office and stepped inside. A light was burning here, but no one was in evidence. Behind the frosted glass of a door marked, *Secretary*, a restless shadow moved. In small letters were the words: *Wm. Purcell*. The Agent stared toward this door, then toward the door of Monkford's own office straight ahead. That door was dark. His heart increased its beat. He was inwardly tense as always when he was about to test a new disguise. There had not been time to get a complete line-up on Monkford. He would have to be careful of his speech. He would cover up any slips by acting as if the fire had unnerved him.

He trod heavily, and the door of Purcell's office flew open. The company's treasurer stood in the threshold wild-eyed.

"Great heavens, Monkford, I just got the report! I'm glad you came here so we can talk."

The Agent looked at Purcell closely. The man showed no signs of doubting his disguise. He was broad-shouldered, red-haired. His gray eyes were not even looking at the Agent. The Agent spoke carefully in Monkford's voice, weighing each word.

"I've just come from the fire. Heron, the owner was there, cursing us." He sat on the edge of a desk toying with a pencil.

Purcell ran a hand through his stiff red hair. He cursed harshly under his breath. "I'm going to get Joe up here. Let's talk the thing over and decide what we ought to do."

"Right!" The Agent nodded. "Joe" meant Joe Reiss, the company's treasurer. The name was printed on one of the letterheads in Monkford's pocket. Purcell had accepted him as Monkford, and now he was going to call the company's third official.

**P**URCELL dived into a telephone booth and made his call. The Agent opened the door of Monkford's office and turned on the light. He peeled off his coat and gloves. He looked about him. It was a hand-

some office as befitted the president of a company. A huge, flat-topped desk, a comfortable chair, a safe, a set of files. But the Agent did not attempt to go through the files just now. He was content to wait here until the arson ring called.

Purcell was back in a moment. "Joe's coming right up," he said.

They talked for ten minutes about the company's finances, until Reiss, the treasurer entered. He was a tall dark man with a gloomy face. He sat down and lighted up a cigar.

X started to speak, but stopped and whirled. A faint, disturbing sound had reached his ears. He took two quick steps forward, paused. For the door of Monkford's office flew open. Like actors in a sinister play, four masked men leaped into the room.

They spread, two on one side, two on the other. One of them held a sub-machine gun, its barrel pointed straight at Purcell, Reiss and the Agent. The other three had automatics. More arresting still, two of the masked invaders grasped small round objects in their left-hand fingers. The Agent recognized these, and caught his breath. They were the walnut missiles that had been dropped at the fire, causing the horrible bloating death.

## CHAPTER V

### CAR OF DEATH

**C**OLD DREAD pressed at the Agent's heart. The man with the machine gun spoke harshly from behind his mask. "None of you guys move! Here—take a look at this!"

Holding the deadly weapon in his right hand, its butt braced against his shoulder, the machine-gunner raised his left and opened the fingers. Clutched between them was a nutlike ball. His slitted eyes swiveled toward the Agent.

"You saw what these things can do a little while back, Mr. Monkford. Start anything, any of you—and we'll use 'em. You haven't paid up. We'd just as leave knock you off as not."

These pills would make those mugs of yours look pretty."

Horror tingled the Secret Agent's spine. He recalled the bloated, hideous face of the dead fireman he had seen. In all his contact with vicious criminals he had never heard of a terrorist weapon more ghastly. The masked gunman seemed to sense the impression he was creating. A gloating laugh came from his lips.

"Tell 'em about those guys at the fire, Monkford! Tell 'em how they squalled and how their faces swelled up big as pumpkins. Tell 'em how they died, eatin' the dirt. If we throw one of these you'll all be beggin' for bullets. Lead would be a cinch—after this!"

He shook the tiny, sinister missile, and some of the horrible meaning of his words reached to Purcell and Reiss. Both men turned deathly white. Reiss gasped: "What—what do you want us to do?"

"Get goin'," said the man with the machine gun. "Scram out that door all of you. You're leavin' by the back way along with us."

X measured the chances for a quick attack. He had won his way out of many desperate situations, won by sheer grit in the face of obstacles, a gambler's courage. But he saw that at the moment any attempt to break free would spell suicide. Three automatics were pointed toward him. The machine gun's snout was ready to spread a hail of death in the space of a split second. And the man behind it was holding the sinister missile poised to throw.

X broke the spell of tenseness by nodding and heading for the office's rear door. Reiss and Purcell followed. They were like men dazed by a nightmare of fear. The stalking masked figures came close behind them, so close that once the machine gun's barrel prodded X in the back.

The gunman had commandeered another elevator. It was the one in the rear of the building, used for freight and supplies. While Reiss and Pur-

cell and the Agent crowded in a corner, one of the masked men operated it. The car sank slowly down the shaft.

At the main floor a harsh whisper spoken by the masked leader ordered them out. Gesturing, menacing guns pointed the way. They obeyed in silence, but close to the building's rear exit Purcell gave a smothered cry. The Agent saw the cause of it and his jaw tensed in fury.

A guard and the building's watchman lay on the floor. Under the glow of the single bulb that burned overhead their faces looked inhuman. They had the grayish pallor of death and they were hideously bloated; grotesque monsters that had once been men, their features almost obliterated by the swelling. The man with the machine gun laughed.

"We bumped them that way because it didn't make no noise. It's what you mugs will get if you make any trouble."

Purcell, trembling with fear, spoke in a stricken voice. "This is horrible! What—where are we going?"

"You'll find out!" growled the masked leader. "You kept a tight hold on your pocketbooks. You wouldn't pay. But with you gone maybe the stockholders will think different."

"You mean you're going to keep us prisoners?"

A mocking laugh was his only answer. The Agent's brain seemed to be on fire. He got the drift of things now. They were being kidnaped. They would be held somewhere, or perhaps slaughtered later in some secret place. Neither of these things must happen. The real Monkford would come to in a few hours. He would escape from the house where the Agent held him. The criminals would learn that they had the wrong man, that Agent X wasn't Monkford. And this would spell certain, horrible death for the Agent. They would destroy him ruthlessly for a meddler, as they had the firemen at the burning factory.

Again the Agent weighed his chances, and again remained quiet. He was a hopeless prisoner at the moment. An attempted break now would only jeopardize the lives of Purcell and Reiss.

They were conducted along a rear court and through a side alley that led to another street. Here a closed seven-passenger car was waiting. It was long and low, blackly sinister as a hearse. It might well become a death car for all of them. The masked leader motioned them in with a jerk of his gun, and all three entered.

THE machine-gunner and another man with an automatic lowered the two folding seats in the rear. They seated themselves, facing their prisoners. The other two armed men got up front. With a low purr of gears the big car moved forward.

Purcell and Reiss had lapsed into frozen silence. X sat at the end of the seat silent also. No one of the masked criminals spoke. But there was deadly precision in all their actions. Whatever plan they had in mind had been prearranged. The car drove as X had driven previously that evening. It followed dark streets, rolling at an unhurried pace, almost without noise. Somewhere ahead in the night a prison chamber or a torture chamber awaited them.

Muscles in the Secret Agent's face knotted beneath his make-up. His disguise of Monkford had brought results that he had not reckoned with. It threatened to take him entirely out of the fight.

His eyes, sharp as a questing hawk's, took note of everything in the car's interior. His mind once again grappled with the idea of escape. He still had his gas gun with him. But any attempt to reach inside his coat would be stopped with a stream of bullets. Any quick movement now would bring instant death.

He made none, but the fingers of his left hand reached slowly out. Inches away a cigarette lighter dangled on

a flexible cord. It was a small thing upon which to pin hope of life in the presence of death. A small thing, but the Agent was a gambler.

His face betrayed no hint that he was making a play with doom. His eyes were still now, staring straight before him, staring almost into the wicked muzzle of the masked leader's gun. But his fingers still inched forward, slowly as the uncoiling tentacles of a jungle plant. They touched the lighter, caressed it, closed around it. They came back with the same measured caution.

A jounce of the car covered the soft click that came when the Agent pressed the lighter on. He thrust it far down between the seat cushion and the padded side of the car. His hand came up. He waited.

Seconds passed, and from the corner of his eye he caught the first faint plume of smoke. A moment more and his nostrils detected a rank burning odor. Criss-cross shadows, passing the windows, made the interior of the car confusing. The masks, covering the noses of the killers, deadened their sense of smell. All this the Agent had taken into account.

It wasn't till they passed a corner light that the head of one of the masked men turned. He gave a startled gasp. Smoke was pouring up from the limousine's cushion. His gasp attracted the attention of the leader. The Agent had been waiting for this.

In the fraction of a second that the masked machine-gunner's head moved sidewise, the Agent made his play. His hand flashed out like a striking snake. He caught the barrel of the gun and pulled it forward, twisting his body sidewise as he did so. The gun exploded with a clattering, shattering roar, lashing bullets into the back of the seat. The machine-gunner, keeping a clutch on his weapon, was jerked forward with it. The Agent crashed a hard-knuckled fist straight into his face. He swept his right hand

He tried to bring the muzzle of his weapon down on the Agent's head. Instead it struck the head of the masked leader whom X shoved forcibly back. Smoke from the burning cushion and the gun muzzles filled the whole interior of the car. In the blinding, thundering confusion X struck right and left. He was choking himself, eyes smarting and streaming with the fumes. His fist glanced off the back of the driver's



out and forward and caught the man who held the automatic on the chin. The stream of bullets that his contracting finger fired hissed in a hot swath of death close to the Agent's temple.

**P**URCELL and Reiss were screaming, swearing. One of the men up front swung in his seat with a shout.

head and the man jerked the wheel.

The limousine slewed toward the curb. Brakes halted it with a piercing squeal, but its front fender struck a hydrant and made a tinny crash.

As it stopped X turned the handle of the door and lashed out with his foot. Glass broke as the door flew open. Cold night air swept in. X clutched two human bodies, Purcell

and Reiss, and dragged them with him. They hit the pavement together, went down in a heap, bounced up. Behind them an automatic cracked savagely and bullets slapped and screamed at their feet.

X, running low, led the way into the shadows. He ducked toward a doorway, yanking the two men after him while the guns of the killers in the car sought them out. He broke for more distant cover as soon as the fusillade had lessened. Purcell and Reiss ran with streaming faces and whistling breaths. When he finally turned a corner they were close to collapse.

But the Agent didn't let them rest. Not till he'd led them deep into a driveway between two empty houses did he pause. Then the siren of a police radio cruiser was screaming a dozen blocks away. The shots had aroused the whole neighborhood and some one had sent in a call.

Purcell spoke in a shaking voice. "We owe our lives to you, Monk. That—that was the closest shave—"

"You had your nerve with you!" put in Reiss heavily. "We'd have been murdered if it hadn't been for you."

X spoke hoarsely, playing the role of Monkford. His actions in the past few minutes had hardly been those of a staid insurance man. He must make up for it now. "I lost my head," he said. "I—it drove me crazy to sit there and have them take us away. You fellows didn't see those murders at the fire. I did. They'd have made bloated corpses of us all."

Purcell clutched his arm. "We've got to do something. We'd better notify the police. Did either of you get the license number of that car?"

"No," growled Reiss savagely. "There wasn't a chance to see it. And we can't depend on the police now. Our lives won't be safe a minute till those criminals are caught. They may try to kidnap us again."

"Let's go to my place and talk it over," said Purcell hoarsely. "We all

need a drink. I do, anyway. And I've got guns there. We won't take any chances from now on."

THE Secret Agent's thoughts were racing. He could slip away into the darkness. He had lines of investigation to pursue. But it would be better not to stir up the suspicions of these men now. The arson ring might try to get in touch with one of them. "Good," he said. "We'll try to figure some way out."

They walked to a lighted avenue, where Purcell hailed a passing taxi, and they were driven to his apartment. It was a bachelor set-up, X saw at once. No signs of anything feminine were in evidence. A bowing Japanese servant ushered them in.

"Get us some brandy, Shima," Purcell snapped. While the yellow-skinned man hurried off for the liquor, Purcell went to a cabinet and pulled out a box. He raised the cover, displaying a dozen automatics and revolvers of various types. There were also rifles, shotguns and shooting trophies in the cabinet.

Purcell selected three automatics, snapped them open and loaded each with a clip of shells. Then he passed the weapons around. "Never mind if you haven't got permits," he said grimly. "Keep these—and shoot to kill if those fiends come back. I'd rather die by bullets than—" He left the sentence unfinished, shuddered. Agent X pocketed Purcell's weapon, a sardonic gleam in his eye.\*

The Japanese returned with glasses, a siphon of soda and a decanter. He put them on a table.

"See that all the doors and windows are locked, Shima," said Purcell warningly. "Don't let anybody in. And here—you'd better take one of

\*AUTHOR'S NOTE: Secret Agent X is a deadly shot with a revolver, automatic or rifle. He has practiced hours on end in a sound-proof underground range. On occasion he has exchanged shots with some of the underworld's most deadly gunmen. His draw is lightning fast. But X never kills unless he is driven to it. He is a hunter of criminals, not a judge or executioner. Random slaying he leaves to cruder, less skillful investigators.

these." He handed the servant a small revolver, which the yellow man took with a frightened grimace. "We might have visitors," Purcell added.

Shima bobbed his sleek, black head. "Shima understands," he said. "The devil men who set big fires may try to harm the honorable master."

The Japanese poured brandy in the glasses, passed one to each man and lifted the siphon. Then suddenly he stood stock still. X saw that he was being stared at. Shima was looking not at his face, but at his hand.

X did not tense or look startled, but a quick awareness of danger filled him. He held the glass of brandy in his right hand. This seemed for some reason to excite Shima. The yellow man's eyes were bright as he pushed the siphon forward. "You will take soda, Mr. Monkford?"

The Agent nodded, and for a moment his gaze clashed with the slant-eyed servant's. Shima's fingers were taut as claws around the siphon. He was trembling violently. When he had finished distributing the soda, he quietly left the room. Moments later he returned, and said:

"Shima would like to speak to honorable master."

"What is it, Shima?" Purcell asked.

"Shima would prefer to talk in private."

Purcell shrugged. He set his glass down and rose. He and the Japanese withdrew to another chamber. Reiss looked uneasy. "What the devil!" he said.

The Agent made no comment. His pulses hammered and the skin along his neck felt tight. The inner voice, warning of desperate danger was inconsistent. He could hear Shima's whispers faintly in the other room.

Purcell returned in a moment, his lips tightly set. Holding one hand behind him, he fixed a burning gaze on the Secret Agent. "I—I can't believe it!" he gasped. "But Shima says you aren't Monkford!" He licked his lips, peered downward. "Monkford's left-

handed. He never holds a glass like that!"

"What!" Reiss leaped to his feet, spilling his brandy.

"I didn't notice it myself," said Purcell, "but Shima—" He stopped, and the Agent could plainly hear both men's quick breathing.

"You're nervous tonight," X said easily. "I'm left-handed certainly, but my right hand isn't crippled. Once in awhile I change over. I bruised my left a little in that scrap."

He still saw doubt in their eyes. Purcell said thickly: "Of course—maybe you're right. But after what happened I'm not taking any chances. I'm afraid to. You won't mind giving me the numbers of those policies you put in the safe this afternoon. You know the ones I mean—on the Bulkley and Sessions properties. You asked me not to forget them. And I know you never let numbers slip your mind."

The Agent was silent, blood pounding like a hammer in his temples. He was trapped. Each second he remained silent counted against him. He fixed his eyes on Purcell, tried bluffing. "Get hold of yourself, Bill! You must be wrought up to suspect any such thing. Can't you see I'm Monkford?"

"The numbers!" persisted Purcell.

X drew a hand across his face. "All this excitement!" he said. "I'm only human. I can't remember!"

"It's true then!" screamed Purcell suddenly. "You're an imposter. You're not Monkford! You're—" His right hand whipped from behind his back. He swung it toward X. The black automatic gripped tightly in his fingers pointed straight at the Agent's chest.

Reiss lifted his voice.

"He isn't Monkford. He's in with those murderers! I thought there was something funny about that business in the car—and now I understand. That rescue was a put-up job! This man's a criminal!"

## CHAPTER VI

### X UNDER FIRE!

**D**ON'T MOVE!" warned Purcell. "Don't move—or I'll shoot! You must have murdered Monkford. I won't hesitate to kill!"

The Agent looked from one glaring, contorted face to the other and knew his danger. Reiss, too, had drawn his gun. X made no attempt to stir. He sat deathly still, the brandy glass still balanced in his hand.

"Shima has telephoned the police," said Purcell. "They'll be here any minute now. And they'll know how to make you confess what you've done with Monkford. They'll find out who you are!"

"It's incredible!" gasped Reiss. "I'd swear it was Monkford. If we're wrong, it's going to be embarrassing."

"We're not wrong, Joe! This man couldn't give me those numbers. If it was Monkford he surely would."

The Agent screwed his face into a patient smile. "It is going to be embarrassing. You're right. But I'll do my best to explain things to the police. You've both of you been through enough tonight to shake any man."

The eyes of Joe Reiss seemed to waver in doubt, but Purcell's were steady. "Bluffing won't help you!" he snarled. "I've been associated with Monkford for more than ten years. He always uses his left hand for everything. And he's got a memory like a hawk. He could give me the number of every policy in the office if I asked him."

Shima spoke up. "The honorable police will be here quickly. They promised most faithfully to hurry." His slanted eyes, bright with fear, were fixed intently on the Agent. "This I would say is very extraordinary person, sir. It is Shima's humble opinion that he is Man of a Thousand Faces."

Purcell gasped. "Agent X! By heavens, you may be right! I've heard

of him. One of the most dangerous criminals in the country."

Shima nodded. "Exceedingly wicked. Can assume any disguise like evil spirit. Wanted by police everywhere."

A hush fell over the room. The air was charged with tension. All eyes were fixed on Agent X. Minutes dragged by. Down in the street a siren suddenly sounded. Purcell spoke with abrupt relief. "The police! Open the door for them, Shima."

The Japanese backed away, hardly able to take his beady, fascinated eyes off Agent X. Inwardly, the Agent tensed. He had waited, hoping for some opportunity to make a break for freedom. None had come. Now it was apparent that he must make one quickly. The police, aroused by the wave of crime in the city, would shoot first and question afterwards. They would be here any moment.

Risking quick death X made a lightning play. His heels rested hard against the floor. He still held the glass of brandy. He pushed down and forward with his feet, shoving the chair straight backward. At the same instant he flung the liquor with a sweeping motion in the faces of the two men. The stream only touched Purcell, but caught Reiss full in the eyes.

Reiss gasped and fired. Bullets tore into the carpet at the spot where Agent X had been. Purcell fired. But X had tumbled over in the chair. As the chair struck, he twisted desperately. Purcell changed the angle of his automatic, shooting straight at the chair. Bullets slapped against it. Purcell, swearing, again swung his gun muzzle to change his aim.

But X had grasped the edge of the rug on which Purcell stood. He gave it a violent yank at the moment that Purcell pumped the trigger. Death missed the Agent by bare fractions of inches. Purcell flailed his left arm wildly, trying to keep his balance. He lost it, toppled and fell.

Instantly the Agent was upon him. He pinned Purcell down, crashed a fist into his body and disarmed him. Reiss had wiped the brandy from his eyes. He leaped forward to bring his gun muzzle thudding on the Agent's skull. X saw him from the corner of his eye and kicked out viciously, making Reiss stagger back. But a shrieking, hissing cyclone of human energy leaped across the room. Shima flung himself on the Secret Agent's back, twined yellow fingers around his neck. The Jap had dropped his gun. In his desperate excitement he was resorting to primitive methods of battle.

Purcell was disarmed, almost senseless, but Reiss was still in the fight and the yellow man's attack had been unexpected. The Agent fought with the quick-witted courage that had carried him through a hundred frays. He fought with the knowledge that this time his fate hung in the balance. For Shima's fingers had the muscular wiriness of his race. Shima was ready to kill to protect his master.

**X** DID the one thing possible. There was no time for nicety of action. He toppled backwards on the yellow man, plunging with all his weight to crush the steeliness out of those strangling fingers. Shima gave a gasp and his hands relaxed. In that split second the Agent twisted and shook him off as a terrier might a rat.

Reiss was running toward him, raising his gun to fire. X ducked as a bullet whined past him. Cordite fumes plumed in his very nostrils. He closed in viciously, locking arms around Reiss' body. The next instant he stiffened, for there had come a sound of trampling in the hall outside.

He swiveled his head, caught sight of blue uniforms and visored caps charging through the door. The grim faces of cops showed underneath the visors. There were two of them, occupants of the fast radio cruiser that

had drawn up below. In their fingers police positives gleamed.

"This is the man!" screamed Reiss. "Help me. He's killing—"

X cut the words off with a savage short-arm punch that the police didn't see. As Reiss swayed away from it, X pointed to Shima with his other hand. "That Jap," he shouted. "He's trying to murder us!"

The cops stood confused a moment. They had come in answer to a telephoned message that a desperate criminal was in Purcell's apartment being held prisoner. But Purcell, Monkford and Reiss had become familiar to the police since the arson outrages had started. They didn't know whom to arrest. The Jap looked as likely as any. They started toward him.

"No!" screamed Reiss, getting back his breath. "It's this man who's posing as Monkford." The police stopped again. Their uncertainty gave X his chance. He ran straight toward them in long flying leaps. He struck right and left with hammering fists, knocking them both to their knees. He reached the door and slammed it behind him plunging quickly along the apartment hall.

The elevator that had brought the two cops up was still at the landing. Its uniformed operator was waiting, glued to the spot with curiosity, anxious to know what the trouble was.

"Mr. Monkford!" he gasped. "What—what's all the shooting?"

"Down!" said the Agent. "We've got to get more help!"

The boy jabbed his controls and the car shot downward. It reached the bottom floor, the grille clicked open and X plunged out. A man in an immaculate frock coat came running up, ringing his white hands distractedly. "Mr. Monkford!" he said. "I don't understand any of it. Some one just telephoned down from Mr. Purcell's apartment and said to hold you. You'll excuse me, I hope."

"Certainly!" The Agent's arm flashed out. His open hand caught the

frock-coated man in the chest, pushed him back forcibly into a potted palm. The palm toppled off its pedestal with a crash of crockery, and the apartment manager sprawled on top of it screaming. X bolted for the door.

Other police cruisers were moaning down the block. Those in them did not see the darting, running figure of the Agent as he raced along the face of the building, slipping into a tradesmen's alley. He ran to the end of it, climbed a fence, and was soon lost in the shadowy courtyard beyond.

There, crouching in darkness, he changed his disguise quickly. There was no time for careful work. His long fingers moved with seeming magic over his features, remodeling them to one of the stock impersonations he sometimes wore. This was necessary. There would be a police broadcast out for the man who looked like Monkford. Every cop on the beat, every detective would be watching for him.

In his new role, sure that he wouldn't be recognized, he chartered a cab, raced back to the vicinity of his hideout where he had left Monkford. He walked the rest of the way on foot, entered the shuttered house with a special key, came to a pause in the mysterious room whose silence was disturbed only by the breathing of the two sleeping men.

**T**HE AGENT worked quickly, putting Monkford's clothes back on him, returning everything that had been in the pockets. Then he took the two unconscious men back to Monkford's car. He laid them on the floor of the rear compartment, spread a dark robe over them. But, before he drove the car out, he put on another set of plates, one of several he had made himself for just such occasions.\*

\*AUTHOR'S NOTE: In his battle with the most vicious, hideous forms of crime there is no limit to the daring methods the Secret Agent uses. The arts of the counterfeiter, the forger, the safe breaker are known to X. He turns the criminal's own skill against the underworld. But he acts always in the interests of society against crookdom.

If he had left Monkford's own on he would have run the risk of being waylaid in the first few blocks. Sharp-eyed police, with machinelike memories for license numbers, would be on the lookout for Monkford's car.

Even with the new faked plates the Agent drove swiftly, carefully. He was glad when he finally felt free to abandon Monkford's car on a side street far from his hideout. Both men would regain consciousness in about an hour, and could then tell whatever story they chose to the police.

The Agent paused in a dark doorway and his fingers went again to the tiny radio instrument at his belt. He engaged the cord of the receiver, tapped out the secret signals that would be heard by Bates. Almost immediately an answering series of dots and dashes buzzed in the receiver. The Agent's fingers pressed the button key again. "Waiting for report!"

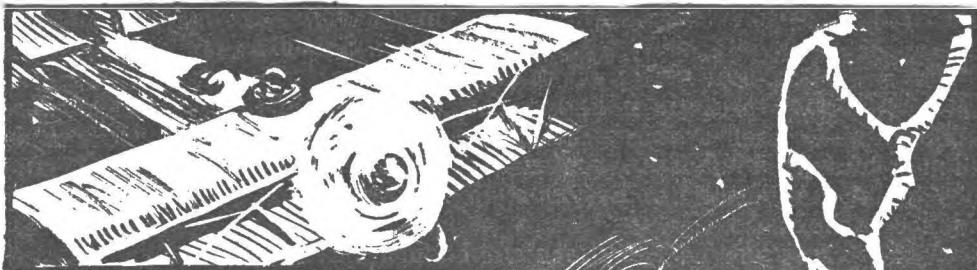
"No trace of Boss Santos. Scouring entire city. Santos dropped out of sight three months back. His racket men not seen recently in underworld haunts. Police also stumped."

The Agent tapped a reply. "Get in touch with operatives in all key cities. Check up on jails and prisons. Don't stop till light is thrown on Santos' disappearance and whereabouts of mob. What of Herron?"

"He seems frightened. Has hired private detectives to guard home. One of our operatives has taken room across street. H being shadowed."

"Good!" tapped X. "Have further plan of action. Arson ring can be expected to threaten other big insurance companies. Immediate installation of midget automatic dictographs in offices of all executives necessary. Meet man named Sculley carrying tan suitcase at corner of Jay and Crosby Streets in half an hour. He will provide equipment."

The Agent changed his radio to Jim Hobart's wave length. The red-headed operative who worked for the man he knew only as A. J. Martin



corroborated Bates' report on Herron and Santos. To him X issued a different order.

"Executive heads of Great Eastern Insurance Company, Purcell, Reiss and Monkford, fear possible attack from members of arson ring. Have homes of each carefully shadowed. Report trouble instantly. Police may be watching. Proceed with extreme caution."

X left his temporary station and strode grimly off into the darkness. He himself would play the role of "Sculley" and distribute midget dictographs to Harvey Bates and his operatives. He would then be in a position to learn any extortion threats the arson ring might send.

**E**IGHTEEN HOURS later Agent X paced the floor of a secret hideout. The light of battle shone brightly in his eyes. A sardonic, humorless smile twitched the corners of his mouth. The day's papers were spread out on a table beside him. Their front pages were taken up with the arson menace and the details of the shocking murders. The headlines of several read:

MAN OF MYSTERY, SECRET AGENT X,  
BEHIND THREAT TO CITY

The story of his attack on the two policemen in Purcell's apartment followed. Shima's suspicion that the man posing as Monkford was Agent X had been corroborated by the words of Monkford himself. The president of Great Eastern Insurance told how he and his chauffeur had been kidnaped.

They remembered nothing of what had taken place during the time they



*The helmeted figure gave an inhuman screech.*

had been unconscious. They didn't know where they had been taken. But it was obvious that a master of disguise had impersonated Monkford. That man, the police believed, could only be one person—Secret Agent X.

At this moment, eagle-eyed detectives were combing the city for him. Anyone suspected of being X was in danger of being shot on sight. Dozens of suspects were being rounded up and taken to headquarters.

But the danger of police capture wasn't what excited X. He had faced that danger many times before. It was part of his daily life. What made him nervous was the knowledge that he would soon learn whether the arson ring had made any threats during the past eight hours.

The dictographs had been successfully distributed in the darkest, bleakest period of the early morning. Time had elapsed. It was after five o'clock. The offices of the big insurance companies must be almost emptied of employees and officials. In a short time now Bates and his operatives with their special skeleton pass keys would collect the tiny cylinder records that the automatic dictographs contained. In a short time Secret Agent X would *know*.

At five thirty his radio buzzed into life like a vibrant-winged insect. The dots and dashes formed the letters of Bates' secret call. There was quickness, excitement in their hasty repetition. X stopped in his restless pacings, gave the signal that he was listening.

The message tapped out by Bates' impatient finger came so swiftly that only a man, trained like X in government radiography, could have understood it. Dots and dashes seemed to tumble over themselves.

"Norton King, head of Universal Insurance Company, contacted by arson ring this afternoon. Under threat of ten properties being destroyed, aggregating four million dollars in policies, has agreed to pay over two hundred thousand in cash for

immunity. King will charter plane and pilot at City Airport, then fly due west at eight this evening with cash in suitcase. No other instructions. Plane equipped with radio may receive second message in air."

The Agent clenched his fist as Bates stopped calling. He had expected something like this—a fool-proof method of delivering the extortion money when the arson ring contacted a victim sufficiently scared to yield.

The Agent gave Bates swift instructions not to attempt to shadow King. He had obtained the information he desired. The rest was up to him.

## CHAPTER VII

### SKY MENACE

**N**ORTON KING stirred in his bed chamber with the quick, jerky strides of a person gripped by fear. He was a big man, big in stature, big in fortune, big in the influence he wielded as chairman of the board of Universal Insurance. But for all his power and prestige he couldn't hold terror entirely at bay.

Moisture flecked the skin of his smoothly ruddy face. His hands were trembling. His full lips were unnaturally bloodless. He was forcing himself to go through with the plan he had agreed to secretly that afternoon. He was about to pay the arson ring two hundred thousand dollars.

King was a business man, practical, hard-headed, facing life with a grim sort of realism that bred quick decisions. He'd read all details of the incendiary fires. He knew these criminals, whoever they were, weren't bluffing. They were ready to destroy property, ready to commit murder to gain their ends. The police seemed no match for them.

Even before the arson ring had called him up, King had made his decision. If immunity could be bought he would buy it, however big the price. A two-hundred-thousand-dollar payment was better than having mil-

lions in property go up in smoke. The good name of his company with it.

He had taken no one into his confidence, not even the police. The criminals had stressed the folly of police protection. He had therefore made his arrangements quietly. To the bank, which had agreed to supply cash on the strength of company securities, he had merely explained that he needed the money for an unusual advertising campaign in the middle west. He'd made the same explanation to his family when he had chartered the private plane.

No one guessed his plans, but King, alone in his room, was battling terror. He sensed the hideous danger of any contact with such a criminal group. He did not know yet exactly how the money was to be turned over. Perhaps his life would be forfeited along with it.

He dressed with particular care, putting on a tweed traveling suit, trying to steady his jumping nerves with small routine activities. He paused at the door of his closet, frowning over which pair of low tan shoes he would wear—as though it mattered.

He did not notice the faint, stealthy sound on the lawn below his window. Thick vines grew up the side of his old family house. They had been rustling in the wind all evening. He bent over the problem of his shoes.

Outside in the darkness, a huge shadow, black and agile as a spider, dexterously mounted toward him. The shadow was a man in a warm but loose-hanging coat. A man with powerful muscles rippling and tightening like cords across his shoulders. A man with a flashing, penetrating gaze. Secret Agent X.

The Agent had been waiting in the chill darkness for twenty minutes. Before that he had taken a stealthy tour of the entire lawn. He had familiarized himself with King's mansionlike house. He had laid his perilous plans carefully.

The strong wisteria vines held his weight. He reached King's window in a moment. One glance through the crack under the shade told him, as he had figured, that this was the right room.

Holding himself firmly with braced feet, he drew a small fountain pen from his top coat pocket. He twisted the point, held it easily, and appeared to write around the edge of the big pane close to the frame. Behind the sliding pen point a faint vapor rose and a white line formed. It hit deep into the glass. The pen was filled with an acid, corrosive on silica, such as glass engravers use.

He let the stuff smoke a minute while he carefully repocketed his pen. By that time the acid had eaten almost through the pane. The Agent drew out his thimble suction cap and pressed it delicately against the glass. He pushed the pane inward with a quick thrust, holding the thimble so it wouldn't drop, and swung a leg dexterously over the sill. He was in the room, standing upright before the window when King turned in horror. The Agent silenced him with a commanding gesture of his quickly drawn gun.

The insurance man's eyes bulged. X had appeared as swiftly, as miraculously as some apparition out of the night itself. X spoke softly, with a steely, compelling note in his low-pitched voice.

"Don't move, King. I'm going to save you the trouble of meeting the criminals tonight. I'm going to save you from possible death."

Before King could answer, the spurt of vapor from the Agent's gas gun sent him staggering to his knees. From that position he swayed and toppled silently to the floor.

Though the air was heavy, X did not wait for the fumes to clear. There wasn't a moment to be lost. He worked with a giddiness in his head while the anesthetizing vapor of his own weapon drifted slowly out the severed pane.

He locked the door, made up his face as King's, kneeling by the closet, with a small mirror propped on a chair. Not till he'd slipped on a thin toupee the same shade as King's and duplicated the insurance man's features did he think about King's clothes.

**K**ING'S frame was slightly bigger than his own. The clothes were slightly larger. He put them over the suit and trousers he was wearing, and the garments beneath took up the slack. He appeared to be Norton King in the flesh as he straightened.

His face was tense. Any moment there might be an interruption. He was working against desperate odds being so close to King's family. He quickly put on an overcoat, selected a hat, and lifted King's inert body through the closet door. He made the man comfortable with pillows. Then he closed the door and locked it, keeping the key.

He looked at King's watch, saw that it was seven fifteen, and strode to the hall. Steps sounded below as he descended the stairs. King's wife, a pretty, gray-haired woman, came toward him worriedly.

"I hate to have you take a plane, Norton, at night like this. Couldn't you possibly wait until tomorrow?"

Those few words told X that Mrs. King had no inkling of her husband's mission. He patted her arm, spoke in the voice that he had carefully memorized from the dictograph cylinder he had picked up in Bates' office. "Don't you worry. There's nothing to flying these days. I'll be safer than I would in a taxi. This deal can't be put off; but you'll hear from me in the morning."

There was a vaguely troubled, uneasy look in the woman's eyes. X kissed her on the cheek and strode to the door with a cheery: "Good bye." He took a deep breath of relief when he was outside.

A taxi bore him to the downtown bank where he had learned previous-

ly that the suitcase of cash was ready. The bank employees, waiting overtime for his arrival, accepted him as King. He took the suitcase and was driven in twenty minutes to the City Airport.

His pulses stirred faster at sight of the trim monoplane drawn up on the cement apron before him. The engine was already ticking over, warming. The pilot was sitting ready at the controls. It was a swift, two-seater, open-cockpit job, with the pilot riding forward.

A man from the operations office came toward X, holding a big coon-skin coat, helmet and goggles.

"I think you made a mistake chartering an open ship tonight, Mr. King. We've plenty of cabin planes. You'd have been warmer in one of them."

"I like fresh air," X muttered grimly.

"Take these then," said the airport attendant. He helped the Agent into the big coat and handed him the helmet. "Good luck to you, Mr. King. Pleasant landing!" The man touched his cap, and the Agent strode away. It wasn't the first time he had started on a perilous night flight; but seldom had he felt more strongly that he was heading into the unknown.

The pilot jumped down from his cockpit to help X in. He grinned, said: "You've got your nerve with you, Mr. King. Most kiwis wouldn't take an open ship at night." He paused as X adjusted his goggles, added a little anxiously: "Due west was what you said, I think?"

"Yes, and don't forget to keep your wing lights on."

"Where will you be wanting to land?"

"You've got your radio. You'll get instructions later on. Follow them."

**T**HE pilot still looked anxious. "It's pretty indefinite, sir. What altitude would you like?"

"Two thousand will do, and—" the Agent lowered his voice grimly—

"don't be surprised or lose your nerve whatever happens. If you handle the plane nicely there'll be a hundred dollar bonus."

Again the pilot saluted, and the grin came back to his face. "Count on me, sir. You've got a good man at the stick. I grew my wings at Kelly."

The Secret Agent, experienced veteran of the air, saw at once that his pilot knew his job.\*

The monoplane taxied down the field, turned gracefully into the wind and sped forward. It took off without the slightest jar of air-cushioned wheels, nosed upward with the smooth, swift motion of an elevator. The plane seemed still. The ground appeared to drop behind and fall backward. The pilot banked, leveled out and straightened, and the plane roared toward the west with the lights of the city glowing far below.

Night wind, keen as a tonic, whipped at the Agent's face. He thrilled as always to the swift, effortless pace of flying, but it did not distract him from the grim mission that lay ahead. The rhythmic hum of the big radial engine told that every cylinder was functioning. He only wished he could be as sure of his destiny as he was of the pilot and this plane.

Miles fled behind. The city gave way to a long stretch of black country with faint lights showing here and there, as though the sky had been inverted and these were dim stars poking through the clouds. Up overhead gray mist lay in a solid, curtaining wall, with the moon shining somewhere far above it.

The Agent looked at the radium figures of his wrist-watch. Eight thirty. An uneasy sense of waiting filled him. When would the sinister criminals send out their unseen instructions? X did not know. The plane droned steadily westward. In a half

hour they had gone almost a hundred miles. He held the suitcase of cash gripped firmly between his knees.

Then he started. His goggles eyes, with the true airman's sense, roved over ground and sky alike in continuous restless scrutiny. And ahead of them, close to the ragged edge of the gray mist he saw dimly a drifting shadow. It was no more than that. But the pale light of the moon above, made it discernible to one who had studied endless miles of sky hours on end. The Agent's fingers tautened. He watched with breathless interest, conscious of the dull beat of his own heart.

The shadow of the other plane was moving crosswise to the course they were taking. But, as they passed under it, it straightened, followed. It was at least a thousand feet above. The young pilot up front, bent over his controls, waiting for a radio message, hadn't seen it. That was evident, for he hadn't turned.

The plane came down like a gray specter of the clouds, its superior altitude giving it added speed as it dived.

For a moment X thought its purpose was to crash them. He had a picture of a flaming, spinning wreck dropping toward earth. His hand reached out instinctively to take the controls. But there were none in his cockpit; and his quick brain told him that gold-greedy criminals would take no chances with two hundred thousand dollars in cash. They must have some other plan.

He saw what it was in a moment. As the unlighted plane came directly above, speed synchronized with theirs, a black something dangled below it.

The pilot of X's plane heard the roar of the other motor and lifted his head. His sudden awareness of this ghostly sky presence was reflected in a lurch of the ship. He started to nose downward. But X tapped his shoulder, and, when the young pilot turned, he shook his head.

\*AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Secret Agent learned to fly in the World War during his Intelligence service on the Western Front. He has several ships of his own in secret hangars and is an expert pilot, familiar with all details of commercial flying as well as wartime combat.

The pilot leveled and held his course grimly.

X waited grimly, too. The black object had resolved itself into a man. He was hanging on the end of a rope ladder as the gray plane settled lower. Already one arm was reaching out. Under the glow of the cockpit light something glinted in it. The man held a gun. This was how the criminals intended to make their contact. This was their fool-proof scheme to pick up the cash. It was simple as well as daring, but the Secret Agent's mouth set in a hard, straight line.

The man on the rope ladder was only twelve feet above him now. He was making gestures with his gun, beckoning. X could dimly see the gleam of his goggled eyes like those of some huge crustacean.

X raised the suitcase, shook it. The man above him nodded. The belly of the other ship slid farther down. X didn't rise. He made the swinging, goggled figure drop to within a few feet. He waited till the man's arm had almost touched the suitcase handle. Then he made a desperate upward lunge, dropping the suitcase back into the cockpit, locking his arms around the goggled figure. The man screamed and let his weapon fall. He struggled fiercely, struck at the Agent's ribs with savage blows. Then, while they battled, the two ships drew apart. X was drawn bodily out of the cockpit, pulled across the padded coaming, lifted into black and dizzy space.

## CHAPTER VIII

### WEBS OF CRIME

**H**E had made no attempt to save himself before it was too late by letting go. He knew his desperate danger. But the blazing light of battle was in his eyes. The Agent was a gambler, staking everything now.

Wind clutched and tore at him with giant fingers. The man he grasped was a human pendulum swinging in

a sickening arc, a plunging weight of dynamic fury, seeking to break his hold and send him hurtling into the black void below. The man's fist beat a tattoo against his body. The man's breath fanned against his face. The gleaming, goggled eyes glared deadly hate.

In those first few seconds the Agent realized that one of them must die. Death yawned beneath them, waiting. Death howled a paean of frenzy in the biting lash of the wind. Death could not be a put off. And this man was a killer, one of a pack of killers, pledged to plunder and terrorize society. The Agent with his own eyes had seen the horror of the bloating death.

The man's leg was twisted firmly in the squares of the rope ladder. He was braced, secure, while the Agent still depended on his arms. All the demonic forces of destruction seemed to hold him at a disadvantage.

The fingers of his left hand clutched a rope strand behind the man's straining body. He risked freeing his right, clamped his legs around the other, and struck with piston blows. Under the force of them the man screamed again. Then his arms flew up, he crooked both hands around the Agent's throat. He pressed with the merciless ferocity of a killer.

Stars that had no existence streamed for a moment before the Agent's eyes. Pain speared his windpipe. His spinal cord seemed breaking. He stiffened the hard muscles of his neck against those jabbing thumbs. He struck blindly, steadily, and the man's grip did not weaken.

The heavy leather flying coat that the other wore was padded like a quilt. Fists against his body had little effect.

The Agent jerked back, risking a loosening of his hold, forcing the man before him to straighten his arms. The strangling thumbs still held, biting deep into the Agent's glottis, shutting off his wind. The Agent struck up between them in a rocketlike jab that brought his knuckles against the

man's bony chin. The man quivered, and his thumb hold lessened slightly. He butted his head forward savagely against the Agent's face. His helmeted skull pressed in the Agent's goggles, almost broke them against his eyes. Pain racked his forehead.

Again his fist flew up, striking at a more acute angle, meeting the hard flesh of the other's jaw. The man sagged forward. The Agent twisted away. The hands at his throat broke loose, seeming to tear flesh with them.

The man freed one leg from the ladder and lashed out with his doubled-up knee. It caught the Agent in the side. For an instant pain almost catapulted him to his death. The man's knee struck close to an old scar on the Agent's body; a scar made long ago by shrapnel, shaped like a crude X. It was a vulnerable spot. Under the weight of the blow the Agent's heart seemed nearly to stop and blackness pressed at his brain.

He twisted again, swinging side-wise out into space, sensing dimly that the man's knee would strike again. It did, but this time glanced off the Agent's coat. X put all his ebbing strength into his arm. His fist connected again with the man's bony jaw. The man doubled up. His body jack-knifed forward. A shriek tore from his slobbering lips as he plunged downward. His trailing hands clutched desperately at the Agent's coat, almost taking X with him. In a moment he was gone, swallowed by the night.

Weakly, dizzily, the Agent gripped the dancing ladder. Then his eyes jerked up to the roaring ship above. He tried to climb toward it. For an instant, silhouetted against the moon-blanching clouds, he saw the monster-like fuselage of the plane, with wings outspread. He caught a glimpse of the helmeted head of the pilot.

Then a light winked on. A dazzling, lancing beam fell on the Agent's upturned face, blinding him utterly. He swung backwards with all his might,

under the belly of the ship, avoiding the beam. Momentum brought him back in a moment, the light caught him again, and a sinister cough above the roar of the skycraft's motor told X that the pilot was shooting. The leaden lash of a bullet brushed his arm.

**H**E clawed at his heavy coat. His hand plunged down to a pocket beneath it. His fingers came back grasping the butt of an automatic. With deadly, desperate aim he fired upward. His first shot missed. His second sent the light spinning into space. He did not know whether he'd struck the pilot, or merely hit the flash. His eyes were still blinded by its beam.

In a moment they cleared, and the winking flame above him told that the man overhead was still firing. The Agent pumped the trigger and the firing ceased.

For a second his heart stood still. He started to climb desperately. What if he had killed the pilot?

He had no time to think. Inhuman force seemed to strike him. The wind became a substance, rock-hard against his body. The rope ladder tautened like steel as the ship dived, jerking it back. The roaring of the motor above him became a piercing howl. The plane was plunging earthward.

He waited, teeth clenched, hands like talons, his body straightening out like a fish drawn behind a speedboat. The plane, which had been above, was now almost ahead of him. Its speed mounted till the wind in its wings was a scream.

At first he thought the pilot had been shot and had lost control. Then he sensed that the man was alive and filled with deadly purpose. He was power diving deliberately, trying to whip the Agent off. Somewhere below the black ground was rushing up. The mad dive continued through seconds that were eternities. Only the Agent's steely muscles prevented him from losing his hold. There could be

no question of climbing now. If he hung on he would be lucky.

Breath came from his mouth in a choking gasp. He had turned his head slightly, into the teeth of the wind. He was staring down. The black earth had taken form and shape. There were lights showing, the lights of a broad highway. The pilot was plunging toward this. The man above had devised a sure way of killing him. In a matter of seconds now his body would strike; either against the trees that lined the highway, or against the wires strung along it. The pilot was taking a chance to destroy him, counting that the frail rope would break, that X would be torn from his hold or battered into jelly.

The plane began flattening slightly as the man above lifted its nose. He was pulling out of his dive, to save his own life as he neared the ground. The plane heeled over like a ship in a storm. It was almost level. The pilot brought it around in a screaming bank. He headed straight for the glistening telephone wires that edged the road. With lessening speed, the Agent's body trailed lower.

He saw the wires rushing toward him. They would cut him in two, shread his body like meat across a chopper. He saw wires—and in front of them he saw something else. There was a glint of reflected light on water—a pond or lake lay beside the highway!

With teeth clenched, knowing that certain death awaited him if he held on an instant longer, the Agent let go his hold and dropped. His body turned over and over in the air under the thrust of his battering momentum. He could see nothing, hear nothing, save the roar of the wind in his ears. An instant, without his knowing it, his life hung by a slender thread. For the arc of his fall carried him almost beyond the pond, up to its very edge.

He struck in six feet of icy water with a mighty splash. Half on his back, half on his shoulders, the air

was knocked from his lungs. The pond's surface seemed as unyielding as cement, so great was his speed. Only his thick coat saved him from broken bones. He ploughed through the water, choking, gasping, finally coming to a stop, feet jammed among slimy reeds.

His coat weighted him like a mantle of lead. He lay for a minute too dazed to move, then pulled himself weakly upright.

Something moved above the string of roadway lights. A gray shadow flattened, turned. The plane was coming back!

X sensed what this would mean. He tried to move and his knees sank into thick black mud. He fell forward on his face and reached for the reed stems. A roaring monster swept down upon him.

The plane's landing lights and a spotlight mounted on the motor cowlings were on. It skimmed down so low that its airwheels almost brushed the back of the Agent. The pilot had seen him, realized the X wasn't dead. The man was shooting insanely.

Bullets spattered in the mud close to X making miniature craters, sending black viscid jets against his face. One plucked at his shoulder, ripped the coat sleeve open. The plane swept on, and darkness closed in again. The Agent drew himself slowly into the reeds.

Later that night, three mysterious figures sat in a darkened room. Masks concealed their faces. The glint of their eyes through slitted holes in the thick material was sinister, covetous, determined. They crouched like grim vultures around a wide-topped table. There was tension, a miasmal, unwholesome quality in the very air of the room as though the members of the strange trio were carrion creatures gathered there for some horrible, secret feast.

They appeared to be hardly breathing. Their postures were frozen. Their glittering gazes were fixedly intent.

No sound penetrated the chamber till one of them gave a short harsh laugh, coming almost as an explosion in the silence. The words which followed, low and muffled by the fabric across his mouth, were like whispering echoes in the hideous twilight of a tomb.

"We've been fools!" he grated. "Fools to run the risk of letting this man live when we might have killed him. Fools!"

Another of the masked figures nodded in bitter agreement. "Two hundred thousand gone! Our first payment snatched from under our noses just because—"

The third masked figure held up his hand and broke angrily into the conversation. "Wait! You both know as well as I that collection is the stumbling block of all such schemes. We discussed that in the beginning. Look at the kidnapper that the G-men have jailed! Look at the number of extortionists who've been caught. It's no game for children—or cowards."

He glared around imperiously for a moment. When no one answered he continued in an undertone of contempt. "Why get hysterical? Two hundred thousand is nothing to what we'll make later on! Our plan has unlimited scope, unlimited possibilities. This setback tonight needn't worry us. It's proof that our idea is fundamentally sound. People are becoming frightened. Frightened people will pay."

"What good will it do if we can't collect?"

"We can collect! We will! The police didn't bother us, did they? The interference came from one man only—a man we knew at the start we would have to look out for. Now we've had definite proof of his daring. Now we know where we stand."

"With Secret Agent X!"

"Yes—with Secret Agent X. And I'm glad you didn't succeed in killing him tonight after he'd taken the money."

"What!" The man who had first mentioned X's name growled a savage curse behind his mask. "Are you mad? Do you mean that?"

"Yes. He showed up the weakness of our method of collection. No one else would have dared attempt what he did, but the next time our contacting plane might easily be shot down. Suppose there had been a million waiting instead of two hundred thousand! We would have lost that, too. We've got to find some better method."

"I agree. But we can't afford to trifle with X. What made you suggest in the first place that we study his habits instead of killing him outright? It was a mistake. He must die!"

"He will die, when we've finished with him. But I've thought of him in connection with a certain plan from the beginning."

"I don't get you!"

"I'm going to ask you a question. What sets X apart from all other criminals? How has he managed to escape the police for so many months?"

"You know as well as I. It's his skill at disguise."

"Exactly. And we've had convincing proof of it. Even though we were unfamiliar with his habits we didn't suspect that he'd play the part of Norton King—not till the incident happened in the plane. He fooled us. Has it occurred to either of you that such a man, can go anywhere, appear as anybody he pleases through his ability at impersonation, would make the ideal collector for our own undertaking?"

The bodies of the two other black-masked figures tensed. "You're being absurd, theatrical!"

"No, I'm in dead earnest. X spoiled our play tonight, prevented us from cashing in. Now I propose that we make him our collector."

"It can't be done!" shouted the man at the speaker's right. "You ought to know it. If that's what you've had on your mind all along, you're insane!"

X is a lone wolf, a crook who has no friends in the underworld and no allies. He plays for high stakes, but he always plays alone. We've nothing to offer that would make him join in with us. And if we had, we wouldn't trust him."

The man who had proposed X as a collector laughed. There was harshness, wickedness in his mirth. "Everyone," he said softly, "has a price."

"Not X. He has power, position, money. He's independent. You'd be playing with fire."

The answer came in a tone that held arch cunning, gloating cruelty. "Fire is our specialty. I have in mind a very unusual method of bargaining."

## CHAPTER IX

### MURDERERS' TRAP

**T**WILIGHT was the hour that Betty Dale loved best. It spread a lavender mantle across the bare branches of the trees outside her apartment window. It softened the outlines of the other buildings on the opposite side of the street, made the whole city seem magical, enchanted, like a setting for an Arabian Nights play. Twilight always made Betty Dale feel alive, vital, tender, no matter how hard a day she had at the *Herald* office.

She sat at her window now, face dreamy, the soft glow of the fading sky touching her spun-gold hair, the salmon tint of the far-off sunset brightening and turning to turquoise the deep flawless blue of her eyes. She sat quietly, thinking of Secret Agent X. For this strange man of a Thousand Faces, this man of mystery and destiny was often in her thought. They had passed through the valley of the shadow together. There was a bond between them, deep, unspoken, encompassing as life itself.

The tinkle of the telephone startled her from her reverie. She got up, crossed the floor buoyantly in grace-

ful, swinging strides, alert as always. For the sound of the phone often meant hot news. And, besides being a lovely, high-spirited girl, Betty Dale had built up a reputation for herself as a reporter. There were many gentlemen of the press who envied her her ability at piecing together a story from the most slender leads.

A woman's voice sounded in the receiver that Betty held to her ear. "I want Miss Dale of the *Herald*."

"This is Miss Dale speaking."

"Oh!" The voice sank lower, became huskily confidential. "Listen, dearie, you don't know me, and I've never seen you. But they say you're a fast worker. If so I've got a hot tip for you."

"What about?"

"About the mugs that have been setting those fires! You know, the incendiaries, they call 'em."

"All right, I'm listening."

"I can't talk good here, dearie! Get me? There may be some guys listening. I'm not taking any chances. This is dynamite, TNT, dearie."

"Then why do you want to tell me about it?"

The husky voice at the other end of the wire became harshly sullen. "Did you ever hear of a guy throwing a girl down? I got a chip on my shoulder, dearie. I got a chip as big as a log of wood. I'm a nice, quiet girl, but when a mug gets tough I get tough, too. I'm going to spill something that will tear this town wide open. And when I get through there's going to be a certain mug who'll wish he'd been nicer to his sweetie. Now, I guess you get me?"

"Yes!" said Betty breathlessly. "Yes, I think I do." She was trembling with excitement. Half the tips that put crooks behind bars and sent them to the chair came from disgruntled molls. Underworld women were poison when they weren't treated right. She'd learned that from long contact with the police. And if she could get a line-up on the arson ring that was terrorizing the city it would

constitute the biggest scoop of her life. Outside of that, the thought occurred that she would be able to help the Secret Agent. If she got some valuable information she would turn it over to him first.

She said tensely: "I'd like to hear what you have to say. Where can we get together?"

The answer came back quickly. "I'll take a jaunt down Avenue A in about fifteen minutes. I'll begin at the top and walk downtown on the west side looking in the store windows. Nobody'll get wise if I meet a frail like you. I'll just make out you're an old college pal, dearie. We can go somewhere and gab."

"How will I know you when I see you?"

"Watch out for a nifty dresser in a green coat and a red hat. And I'll be carrying a load of silver foxes. Just to make things sure I'll pin a pink tulip up front. Come up and say, 'hello, dearie,' when you see me."

"All right," said Betty. "I'm a blonde. I'll be wearing a gray squirrel coat and a small gray hat."

She hung up and began dressing quickly, slipping out of her lounging pajamas, and into her tweed business suit. She got into her hat and coat and put a small notebook in her bag. As an after thought she went to a desk drawer and drew out a .32 automatic that the Secret Agent had given her. It was flat and easily carried. She tucked it under her notebook. It might come in handy. Anything connected with the arson ring spelled danger.

In a moment she was on the street. Ten minutes later a taxi had whirled her to the vicinity of Avenue A. She walked to it, headed uptown on the west side, and kept her eyes open for the "nifty dresser."

So intent was she scanning the sidewalk ahead that she didn't notice the brown sedan nosing slowly along beside her. The light was dim now. The men in it, and the car itself, were hardly more than confused shadows. Betty did not turn until the car pulled

in to the curb directly beside her. Then the cry of amazement and terror that rose in her throat froze in silence on her lips.

For death leered at her out of the brown car's opened door. Death seemed poised for instant action on the end of the machine gun that was thrust toward her. "Don't move, girlie!" a harsh voice said. "Don't make a sound or you'll get it! Just act natural and come here."

Betty did so, stilling the frantic thumping of her heart, moving her high-heeled slippers that seemed suddenly filled with lead. A hand caught her arm roughly, jerked her in. She was pulled down on the seat beside the gunman. The door slammed shut. The brown car sped away.

The interior was dark. Betty got a glimpse of the ugly head of the driver. But when she turned fearfully to see the face of the man beside her, she saw only a pair of glaring eyes. Then she gave a scream and tried to shrink from him. For something, a descending shadow in his hand, came down over her head.

Betty struggled fiercely, desperately, with the stifling, sweetish fumes of chloroform in her nose. She kicked and writhed as the dizzying vapor invaded her straining lungs. But her struggles became steadily weaker. At the end of a minute she lay still.

**S**ECRET AGENT X was worried. For the first time in several hours his mind was not occupied with the arson-ring menace. He was thinking of his loyal friend and secret ally, blonde Betty Dale.

He stood in the shadows across from her apartment, back braced against an iron fence. He was staring up at her windows. A moment before he had given his strange, identifying whistle.\*

\*AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is a peculiar birdlike note. It is at the same time eerie and musical, with a ventriloquial quality that makes it difficult to locate. It is been suggested that the Agent makes it with some sort of mechanical plate in his mouth, but it is my belief that he does it with his lips and tongue alone.

The echoes of the weird flutelike sound whispered along the dark street. Pedestrians paused, puzzled by it, unable to discover its source. But no light showed in the windows of Betty Dale's apartment. The Agent knew that if Betty were there she would come to the sill and look down.

He turned away. Then something, a strange uneasiness that he couldn't shake off, made him cross the street and enter the apartment building. The telephone operator was bending over her switchboard. She didn't see him. He slipped past her, silently as a shadow, and dodged into the cavern formed by the bottom of the stairs. The grilled door of the elevator was opening, but X avoided it. He ascended the stairs swiftly and turned down the corridor on the floor that Betty Dale's apartment was on.

There was no answer to his soft knock, and the Agent drew out his ring of skeleton keys. Few locks in the world could resist his expert fingers. Betty's didn't, and in a moment he had the door open and had stepped inside.

He turned his flash around the familiar room, eyes alert for anything suspicious; but there was nothing. The attractive chamber with its cozy feminine touches was as neat as always. It seemed to reflect the sunny, straight-forward personality that was Betty Dale's.

The Agent crossed quickly to a small desk and opened a drawer. His pencil flash sprayed over its contents and abruptly he frowned. The automatic he had given her wasn't there. His nerve fibers tensed. Among many secret understandings he had with Betty was one concerning this gun. She left it in the drawer except when danger threatened. Its disappearance now meant that Betty feared something. What?

The Agent's thoughts raced swiftly. Too often in the past the black cloud of crime had menaced her fearfully because of her association with him. He tried always to keep her from

danger; but her courage, her loyalty made her an active worker for his cause. The Agent searched her apartment, hoping to find some message from her, some note or clue, and found none.

He left with his sense of uneasiness heightened. Betty had gone and had taken her automatic with her. There might not be anything serious in it, but he wouldn't rest until he knew where she was.

He moved up to the girl switchboard operator in the vestibule. He had seen her often, talked to her many times, but she didn't know him in his present disguise. He was made up as a black-haired, sharp-featured youngish man. He displayed a press card, said: "Where's Miss Dale?"

"She left about dusk after getting a telephone call. She didn't say where she was going. She seemed in a hurry."

"A call. From whom?"

"Some woman. She didn't give her name."

"Did you hear what they said?"

"No, mister! I plugged in and let 'em talk. I'm no eavedropper."

The Agent tipped his hat and hurried out.

He drifted around to various haunts that Betty frequented, made inquiries about her, and learned that she had not been seen all evening. He called her apartment six times in the next two hours, and was told each time that she hadn't returned. He settled in one of his hideouts that had a phone, and gave an order to the girl at Betty's apartment to call him as soon as Miss Dale returned.

**M**IDLIGHT came. One o'clock, two—and there was no news of Betty. Abruptly the Agent's finger dropped to the button key of his radio set. His face was bleak. All evening, routine reports had come in from Hobart and Bates; messages that they were still trying to locate the racketeer, Boss Santos. Operatives who worked for X without knowing it in

a score of American cities had searched for Boss Santos in vain.

Now X gave a new order to Harvey Bates; short and crisp and emphatic. "Betty Dale, *Herald* reporter missing. Spread men over entire city. Check up on her. Find her." He rattled off a list of every possible place that Betty might have gone, knowing that Bates' pigeon-hole memory would retain them. He started a vast under-cover organization on the missing Betty's trail. But still the Agent was unsatisfied, uneasy.

Twenty-four hours later X was frantic. Betty had not returned to her apartment. She had not showed up at the *Herald* office. No one had seen her. Bates' expert operatives had managed to unearth only one meager fact. A taxicab driver had picked her up at her apartment and driven her to the vicinity of Avenue A. There her trail ended in utter blackness, as though the earth itself had opened and swallowed her.

The police knew nothing about Betty Dale's disappearance. Neither did the public. Both knew, however, about another dramatic development of the day. The afternoon papers carried screaming headlines:

ARSON RING THREATENS TO STRIKE AGAIN TONIGHT  
INSURANCE HEAD REFUSES TO PAY EXTORTIONISTS  
POLICE TO GUARD DOOMED PROPERTY

Details of the sinister story followed:

L. L. Slater, head of the Mercantile Bonding & Indemnity Corporation of this city, received an extortion threat from the criminal arson ring this afternoon. The telephone was used. The message came from a dial pay station which the police were unable to trace.

Slater was told that if he did not pay five hundred thousand dollars for protection, the great department store of Jacoby & Sons, insured by his company, would be burned to the ground. Though Slater would not state the amount of the policy it is believed that the store is covered by a ten-million dollar premium.

Slater bluntly refused to accede to the criminals' demand and sought police protection. The threat was then made that the store would be destroyed this evening. Reserves have been called out, and the entire fire department is waiting. Commissioner Foster has issued a statement to the press that in this instance the criminals cannot possibly make good their threat.

Agent X barely scanned the papers. He had known of the extortionists' threat hours in advance of the public. Scallot, a secret member of the Bates' organization, and also a police detective, had heard of Slater's trouble at headquarters. He had told Bates, and Bates had faithfully relayed the message to the Agent.

X knew something of L. L. Slater. He was a stiff-necked, high-principled executive. To anyone familiar with his character it was a foregone conclusion that he would not traffic with criminals. So from the first it seemed to X that the store of Jacoby & Sons was doomed.

**D**ISTURBED as he was about Betty Dale, he made it a point to be at the scene of the impending crime that evening. If her disappearance had anything to do with the criminal menace he was fighting, he must learn every fact he could.

Face set beneath his disguise of A. J. Martin, he pushed through the police cordon that guarded the doomed building. Detectives tried to bar his way. His press card, his ready tongue, and sheer nerve got him by. He attached himself to Inspector John Burks' party. The presence of the homicide squad head held gruesome significance. Men had died horribly at the last big fire. Burks was there seeking information about the killers, and to be on hand in case of other murders.

A few of the city's nerviest police reporters had wormed their way close to him along with Agent X. Their faces showed excitement. One of them touched the inspector's arm. "Do you think there'll be any more killings

tonight, chief—those bombs I mean—”

Inspector Burks' gray face broke into a sour, humorless grin. He jerked his thumb toward the sky. The pressman blanched suddenly, and started. The sound of airplane motors droned down out of the darkness. Their mounting roar was getting steadily closer. Police and waiting firemen heard it. Bodies tautened with dread as faces lifted.

“An idea of the commissioner's,” explained Burks. “Those are government ships up there. There's going to be an air patrol over this whole section tonight. Let those murdering devils try any airplane stunt and they'll get their bellies filled with lead.”

“What about the department store, inspector? Do you think it will be fired?”

Burks only grunted and turned away. Doubt was in his eyes. He did not tell the reporters that Detective Scallot had suggested that they examine the sprinkler system. The tip had come secretly from Agent X. But, though firemen and police had inspected the sprinklers carefully, nothing wrong had been found. The criminals apparently did not use the same method twice.

The tension increased as the evening deepened. It did not seem possible that danger threatened in that great lighted building. Every bulb in the Jacoby Department Store had been left on. That was another idea of Commissioner Foster's. Prowling incendiaries would be seen if by any chance they slipped into the store.

The group of reporters whom X had joined moved restlessly about. They kept making notes, diving into a corner telephone booth to report back to their papers. They asked endless questions of firemen and uniformed cops. They made themselves such a nuisance that Burks threatened to have the lot of them run out, behind the fire lines where a curious, tense crowd already waited. At this

the reporters quieted. X went with them around to the north side of the menaced building.

There was an annex here. A balcony ran the full width of this on the second floor with a white blank wall behind it. Two fire inspectors walked across it in plain view of the crowd and disappeared through a door. For a minute or two the balcony was deserted. Then suddenly one of the reporters close to X gave a strident cry. The Agent's head jerked up. His whole body stiffened with amazement. He was more startled, more stunned with surprise, than he had ever been in his life.

For a girl's figure moved on the balcony. She had on a gray hat, a gray squirrel coat. She walked furtively, with something in her hand. Where she had come from no one knew. It was as though she had materialized like a ghostly apparition. But this was not what made the Agent's heart stand still. It was the clear view he had of her face, of her yellow hair.

The reporter beside X who had first seen her spoke hoarsely now. “I know that dame. She's on the *Herald*. Betty Dale's her name. What's she doing up there?”

As though in answer the gray-coated figure on the balcony raised her hand. She seemed to throw something through the door that the fire inspectors had entered. Instantly there was a bright streak, a flash of lurid light on the other side of the door. Flame rose on that corner of the building close to a window just around the angle. It mushroomed out. There was a tinkle of glass, a wavering, ghastly arm of dancing luminescence. Other flames showed, streaking out from the walls across the whole second floor of the building, as though the thing that the girl in gray had thrown had ignited them.

A harsh, horrified cry arose from the men straining around X.

“That girl—Betty Dale—she started the fire! I saw her!”

## CHAPTER X

## BETTY DALE CONDEMNED

**A**GENT X was stunned. Moisture spread a clammy film over his whole body. He had seen Betty's face and figure with his own keen eyes. There was appalling truth in the accusations of the men around him. Betty Dale *had* set the fire. Betty Dale had started those evil flames that were spreading their devil's light across the block.

He fought the idea as a man fights the clutch of some monstrous nightmare. It couldn't be! It didn't make sense! There was some horrible mistake—some ghastly trick.

He ran forward with a choking, desperate cry. He forgot himself for once. Emotion carried him away. Betty was up there. Betty was in danger. Betty must be saved.

Another shout sounded as he leaped ahead. "Look. She's gone!"

The Agent stared with haggard eyes. It was true. As mysteriously, as suddenly as Betty Dale had appeared, she had also vanished. The balcony was deserted now. Yet cold dread still clutched the Agent's heart in a grip of iron. The weird light of the mounting flames was increasing. If Betty was up there, she couldn't survive.

He ran on, not stopping to wonder how the thing had happened, knowing only that Betty must be there somewhere, still in unthinkable peril. For the fire was spreading with satanic speed. Watchmen on the lower floor were running out. Heat reached after them in a blistering wave.

A burly fireman tried to bar the Agent's way.

"That girl up there!" X shouted. "We've got to get to her!"

The fireman clutched him and shook his head. "You should worry about her, buddy! She must have left the same way she got there! Save the hero stuff for somebody that needs it. That dame's poison—one of the fire-bug mob."

Agent X jerked free. The fireman swore and made a grab at him, but X was already close to one of the department store doors.

A fire inspector, white faced, came staggering out, striking at burning places on his clothes. His bloodless lips were moving, he was muttering hoarsely: "I couldn't save him! He roasted alive!" The man hardly saw X. His eyes were glazed with horror.

With constricted throat, X plunged into the building, still hoping to reach Betty.

But a wave of heat in a solid wall struck at his face. Heat choked his lungs, pressed at his eyeballs like a searing brand. Heat singed his clothing. He surged on in spite of it till his coat began to burn. He retreated slowly with clenched hands and hissing breath, knowing that no living thing could survive in that crucible heat. If Betty was somewhere in the building she was already dead.

He got a brief glimpse of a man's body ahead of him at the foot of the main stairs. It was the other inspector—his head and shoulders burned off. He saw something else that made his smarting eyes widen in amazement. A steam radiator burst with a roaring explosion, spraying flaming liquid all about. Wherever the drops fell new fires sprang up. He had learned too late what method the arson ring had used this time.

He ran gasping into the street. No one noticed him. Pandemonium had broken loose. Firemen were yelling, cursing, dragging their apparatus up. News of the girl on the balcony had passed like wild-fire from mouth to mouth. The crowd was roaring. There was the discordant, sinister note of mob fury in it. It was known that some of the watchmen had been trapped in the burning building; known also that a fire inspector had died.

"I hope she roasted!" a cop close to X spat savagely. "If she didn't we'll get her and she'll fry in the chair."

The Agent moved up to Inspector Burks. He heard Burks issue orders to two of his men. "I don't get it," Burks was saying. "I don't understand at all—but I saw her. She must have gone crazy to do a thing like that. But it won't help her any. If she's still alive and we catch her she'll have to be put away. It'll be jail or an asylum for that kid for the rest of her life. Get going, boys—and find her."

Jail or an asylum! The words fell like a hateful death knell on the Agent's ears. Jail or an asylum for Betty Dale! Even if she had somehow, by some miracle, survived the fire, what faced her? She would be captured surely. Her ways of life were well-known to the police.

Scores of her fellow reporters would treacherously run her down, thinking only of themselves, anxious to make a scoop. And then—long years behind steel bars till the spun gold of her hair lost its lustre and turned gray. Long years in which her beauty would fade, her face grow wrinkled, her life wither. If Betty Dale had helped to set the fire even Secret Agent X couldn't aid her much. He knew it. Her very beauty would betray her. Or, if she tried concealment, her days would be spent in furtively skulking from the law.

**D**ULLED by the horror of it, shocked as no threat to his own existence could have done, the Agent stood by while the firemen battled with the flames.

The thing was hopeless from the start. Though no bombs of the bloating death rained from the sky this time to halt the firemen's labors, the conflagration was too furious to be stopped. The bombs weren't needed. The patrolling planes overheard could only circle over a scene of devastation. The store had somehow been honeycombed with inflammable substance. The fireman this time couldn't even get near enough to pump in the smothering gas. The most they could do was to save other adjacent build-

ings. The inferno in Jacoby & Sons store was a hideous demonstration of the arson ring's power.

But to X the appearance of Betty Dale on the balcony was a greater one still. Through his dazed mind came the clear realization that some fiendish criminal influence had been exerted here. He felt like shouting from the housetops: "She isn't guilty! She can't be! She would never do a think like that!"

He knew it would be useless. The harm was already done. Guilty or not, Betty Dale was already branded. He had heard the reporters talking, seen them running for the telephone booth in the store on the corner. In a dozen newspaper offices pencils and typewriters were racing as listening ears before telephones learned the news. Great rotary presses would soon be roaring. Special editions would be brought out. Wires were carrying the news to press bureaus all over the country. *Betty Dale, golden-haired beauty, sets ten-million dollar fire!*

And down in police headquarters teletype machines were clinking; excited men were bawling commands over wires and through the ether. Here was a commercial lead at last. *Girl reporter in with arson ring!*

The Agent left the scene of the fire as melted, twisted steel collapsed with a crash. Sparks lifted into the air like escaping demons. The whole great building was sagging inward, falling, like a dry barn made of wood.

He pushed through the crowds of staring, glassy-eyed people. His mind was still battling with the mystery of Betty's appearance. He was building up a theory. Of all people in the city, Betty Dale would be the last to throw in her lot with criminals. Others might not sense that—he did. And, sensing it, he realized that her presence at the fire could only mean one thing.

The murderous members of the arson ring were striking a blow at *him*. They had ferreted out the fact that

Betty Dale was closer to him than any one in the world. He was being punished for his interference. Punished—or was there something deeper?

Bleak-eyed, cold and hot by turns with dread and fury, the Secret Agent moved toward a spot where he could switch in his radio. If the criminals had murdered Betty they had brought upon their heads the vengeance of one of the most relentless manhunters in the world. Agent X would track them to the ends of the earth if need be, learn who they were if it took a lifetime, fight them as long as there was a breath in his body.

He paused in a shadowed doorway, tapped Harvey Bates' signal. The insectlike answer came back quickly. "No more leads yet on Betty Dale. Operatives contacting every acquaintance she has in the city. House-to-house canvas being made on Avenue A. Hope for more favorable report later."

Scowling, the Agent sent back a swift rejoinder. "Betty Dale seen at burning department store of Jacoby. Appears to have started fire. Disappeared. May have perished. Recall any men still working on Santos lead and rush them with others to vicinity of fire. Comb entire district. Hunt for Betty Dale takes precedence over all other missions."

THE Agent changed the wavelength of his radio, and tapped a like message to Jim Hobart. He was disappointed in the negative results of his two crime-fighting organizations. Yet he doubted that they were at fault. Theirs was a routine task. Their failure to learn anything of the whereabouts of Boss Santos or Betty Dale was more proof of the criminals' uncanny cunning.

He suddenly turned and strode away from the doorway. He hailed a cab and had himself driven to one of the worst sections of the city. He got out, paid his fare, and moved along

a quiet street, bordered with ancient rooming houses.

Halfway down it he stopped and slipped into an areaway opening. He stood in the semi-darkness, still as a statue. A faint sound had reached his ears, the brittle *tap-tapping* of a cane.

He waited as a shabby, frail-looking figure came along the block. The figure was a man, a beggar, with a tray of chewing-gum tied around his middle. He had been on his evening rounds of lighted corners and subway exits. Though his face was pale, wrinkled, there was a strangely peaceful expression on it. A pair of dark glasses, covered his eyes, and he looked neither to right nor left. The man was blind, forever denied a glimpse of daylight; but the calmness, the composure of his features indicated that he enjoyed some sort of inner vision.

He drew abreast of the Agent, seemed about to pass by, then stopped. The cane was held rigid before him. He raised his head slightly, stood as though listening. Suddenly he spoke. "Good evening, friend, whoever you are! A blind man greets you!"

The Agent did not answer. But he left his hiding place, walked slowly across the areaway and up on the sidewalk, his footsteps sounding faintly. The blind beggar's voice held instant, excited welcome. "Mr. Robbins! I couldn't quite tell from your breathing, but your steps I'd know anywhere!"

"Thaddeus Penny," said the Agent. A faint, grim smile twitched his lips. He never ceased to marvel at the blind beggar's amazing acuteness. Months before, made up as a man named "Robbins," X had done Thaddeus Penny a great service, and Penny had become his friend for life. Several times he had helped X identify men by their steps and by his faculty of never forgetting a human voice. And, because he moved ceaselessly and unnoticed through many shady sections of the city listening and keeping his own counsel, his mind

was like an encyclopedia of underworld information.\*

X gripped the blind man's hand. "You tried to fool an old friend," said Penny smiling. "But friendship is such a blessed thing that sight is not needed to see it."

X was used to Penny's quaint way of talking. The blind man often spoke in parables. But the smile suddenly left Penny's face, and his voice grew serious. "You are in trouble, friend. Your hand is cold. I can even feel you trembling: What is it? What is wrong?"

"I am worried about another friend," said X softly. "It's a long story, I won't go into the details. But some one, this friend, is in deadly danger."

"And you don't know where she is!" said Penny suddenly.

"She?"

"Yes. Men of good heart use one voice when speaking of men, another when speaking of women. This friend is a woman—perhaps a girl."

"Right," said the Agent. "A girl. But what I want of you is information that may help me to find her—and that information concerns a man. Have you ever heard of Boss Santos?"

Thaddeus Penny bobbed his head. "Surely. The fame of the wicked spreads more rapidly than that of the virtuous. But this man you speak of, Boss Santos, has disappeared. The police are searching the city for him at this moment."

"I know it," said X grimly. "But you have ways of picking up information that the police have not. Don't put yourself in any danger. But go to some of the places where Santos was known, and listen to what you hear. I'll meet you again, later." The Agent dropped a dollar bill in the

blind beggar's tray, but Penny heard the soft fall of the bill and shook his head violently.

"Friendship never asks reward, and, because my wants are few, I live in luxury."

"Keep it then," said the Agent, "and give it to some of the poor people you know." He pressed the blind beggar's hand and strode quickly away.

**L**EAVING Penny, X drove in a cab to one of the city's branch post offices. He looked through the glass of box No. 2020, saw that it was empty and scowled. This was one of several boxes he rented under various names. Betty Dale knew the numbers of them all. He had a wild hope that there might be some message from her.

Grimly he went the rounds. At the last box, hired under the name of Gregory Marsedon, he saw a white piece of paper and his heart gave a leap. He opened the box, grasped the paper, a small envelope, and suddenly went cold.

It was typed, but not in the blue ink that Betty Dale had agreed always to use. This meant she had not done it herself. It gave rise to dreaded, sinister possibilities.

The Agent's fingers were tense as talons as he opened it. There was a short, unsigned note inside.

**MARSEDON:** If you receive this in time go to the drug store at the corner of Stillwell Avenue and Twenty-third Street. Be there at eleven sharp. A phone will ring in one of the booths. There will be a call for Marsedon. Answer it.

The Agent looked at his watch. It was fifteen minutes of eleven now. This note had come in a late mail, timed as though he were meant to receive it just after the fire. He had visited the box a dozen times through the day and there had been nothing.

With dread still clutching his heart in a grip of ice the Agent dashed outside and hailed a taxi. He pressed a handful of bills into the driver's hand. "Stillwell Avenue and Twenty-third

\*AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Secret Agent has many friends among poor, humble people. Though crooks regard him as a dangerous rival, or a human scourge to be feared, and though the police hound him as a desperate criminal, he has been a staunch benefactor to the despised and needy. Scores of friendless, impoverished men and women have had cause to bless his name.

street as quick as you can. Step on it! Don't mind the lights."

The driver took long chances rushing across town. Once a policeman shrilled at them, but the cabby didn't stop. He drew up at the designated corner with a squeal of tires. He stared wonderingly after the Agent's retreating figure.

The Agent plunged into the drug store just as eleven struck. A telephone in a booth was ringing. A dapper clerk came out from behind the counter and lifted the receiver. He appeared in a moment, glanced around the store. "Is there a Mr. Marsedon here?"

The Agent nodded, slid by the drug-store clerk and into the booth. He closed the door tightly, pressed the receiver to his ear, and was conscious of the trip-hammer beating of his heart.

A voice came over the wire, solemn, sinister. "Have I the pleasure of addressing Secret Agent X?"

The Agent answered with a studied effort at calmness. "Gregory Marsedon speaking. Who is this?"

A laugh sounded. It was harshly derisive, chill as the scrape of steel on ice. "Good evening, Marsedon! That question I can't answer. Is there any other you would like to ask?"

The Agent caught the gloating, taunting quality in the words. Cords in his neck swelled out. His fingers clenched the receiver till the knuckles whitened. Yet still his voice was calm. "Have you one to suggest?" he purred.

"There is a girl, I believe—a certain *Herald* reporter, Miss Betty Dale. She took part in a rather sensational crime tonight. The police are searching for her now. It is barely possible that news of her would interest you."

X could not smother the gasp that rose to his lips. It brought another chuckle. Unsuppressed fury caught at the Agent's speech for a moment. "If you've killed her—" he started.

"If I have, what then? What could you do about it? It happens, though that I haven't. She's very much alive."

There was a second's silence, while relief flooded the Agent's heart. He felt weak, almost dizzy, proof of the strain he had been under. The taunting voice went on:

"So far as her future goes she might as well be dead. Life holds nothing for her, except disgrace, prison, a psychopathic ward. Society is not kindly to those who commit arson and murder—even if they happen to be beautiful young girls."

"She isn't guilty!" rasped the Agent. "Do you think I don't know it?"

"Your faith in Miss Dale is touching," said the voice mockingly. "You say she isn't guilty, and let us suppose for argument's sake that she isn't. That doesn't change things—for her. She was seen by police and reporters. Detectives are hunting for her now. Her guilt is being blazoned across the country. If she were caught, no matter what fantastic alibi she gave, no jury would clear her. The public is keyed up and wants a victim. A wolf in sheep's clothing—an attractive young woman—would serve as well as any. You are enough of a psychologist to realize that!"

The Secret Agent inwardly agreed. This sinister, unknown criminal was framing his own thoughts, hurling them in his teeth. Betty Dale might as well be guilty. She was doomed already. The hungry voice of public opinion had condemned her.

"Why are you telling me this?" asked the Agent.

"Because you're one of the few people in the world who can save her, clear her. Because I'm willing to bargain with you. I ask certain services you can render in return for Miss Dale's freedom and good name."

X was silent, and the voice at the other end of the wire asked coldly: "Do you agree?"

The words came in a tortured whisper from X's lips. "I agree!"

"Right. I thought so. You're not a fool. Go at once to the empty house at number forty-two Stillwell Avenue. You'll find the basement door open. Walk through the kitchen to the large empty closet in the rear. Close the door behind you and press the electric button under the shelf in the center of the wall."

## CHAPTER XI

### FIENDS' BARGAIN

THE house, inside, was falling to pieces, filled with a smothering, tomblike silence that inspired dread. The Agent's flash spread a wan light across the uncarpeted, sagging floor. He walked cautiously, warily, but at every step a loose board under his feet emitted a snap or a groan.

When he neared the closet at the end of the kitchen, glowing eyes, pinpoints of greenish fire, glared at him a moment from a corner. A gray rat, evil-looking as the house itself, turned and fled through the wall.

The closet door, like the door at the front of the house, was open. The Agent stooped to examine the boards at his feet. The only suspicious thing he had discovered, the only sign that there had recently been human beings here, was the absence of dust on the floor. He touched the boards, and his suspicion was upheld. The floor had been swept clean.

For that reason there were no footprints showing. The closet had been dusted recently also. Peer as he would he could find no marks of foot or fingers.

At first he could see no electric button. There was a shelf ahead of him, but nothing on it, and nothing on the wall above. He knelt, turned his light upward—and found the signal disc.

It had been cunningly fastened to the underside of the shelf. A slender wire led from it, straight into the old wall beyond. A person who hadn't been told of its presence would never guess it was there.

For almost a minute the Agent continued his investigations. He ran his light along the walls of the closet, looked at the plaster in the corners. It was cracked in spots, but there were no signs of a hidden door. He turned his light upward, saw that the closet's ceiling was made of grooved, matched boards.

For seconds he studied these, filled with a sense that there the secret of the closet lay. But the ceiling was far above his head. He had come here, not to tamper, not to pry too deeply into what he was not supposed to know, but to fulfill a bargain. A grim thought possessed him. Perhaps he had come here to die.

There was no saying what would happen when he touched that electric disc. A bomb might explode. The whole building might fall down upon him. Yet it did not seem likely that the criminals would take such pains to destroy him now. It could be done more simply. Already they had him in their power through their grip on Betty Dale.

Mindful that hidden eyes might somewhere be watching, the Agent obeyed instructions to the letter. He closed the closet door behind him. Shut in the gravelike, stuffy silence of its interior his fingers slipped under the shelf and touched the button. He paused a moment with throbbing pulses, gave it a forceful punch.

For a brief second nothing happened. Then a smothering, soft cloud seemed to descend on the Agent's shoulders. Something cold and sweet and cloying entered his mouth and nostrils, touched his face. He gasped, choked, turned in instinctive panic.

Gas. That soft cloud was some kind of dense bromine vapor. He was being smothered alive like a rat in a lethal cage. He found the door handle, gripped it, cried out. The door was locked. A catch had sprung behind him.

His fingers flew to his pockets for his kit of chromium tools. But his

knees gave way. With a roaring in his brain, a tightness along his scalp, an increasing pressure in his lungs, he slipped to the floor. Another moment and he had lost consciousness in a black, sweetish void.

**H**E awoke, he did not know how long after, manacled hand and foot. He could tell he was a prisoner by the instant, sensory response of his muscles and flesh. Metal links, tight, but not uncomfortable, held his legs and wrists. There was a whiff of something in his nostrils that he identified as an ammonia restorative. But all about him was impenetrable gloom.

He stirred, and one of the links that held him gave off a faint rattle. A voice instantly spoke in the darkness close at hand. "Welcome to our meeting, Secret Agent X."

The Agent struggled mentally, clearing the gas fumes from his brain. He was deadly, calculatingly calm. It wasn't the first time hideous criminals had won a point by making him prisoner. He had expected something like this when he had answered the arson-ring's call. He said quietly: "Good evening."

The same harsh chuckle that he had heard in the phone booth sounded.

Somewhere in the room a tiny light went on. Beneath its eerie, candle-dim glow three figures appeared like pictures developing out of the blackness of a film. They sat facing him in a semi-circle. All three were masked. Black garments draped from their shoulders, covering their bodies. He could get no faint impression of size or build. Black, bulky caps covered the hair of their heads. Only their eyes were visible, glittering coals of fire behind their masks.

If the stage had been set to impress him, the Agent was not impressed. Only two things concerned him—the capture of these criminals and the fate of Betty Dale. He made his voice slightly scornful. "I have come. Just exactly what is it you want?"

"You have come!" one of the masked men mocked him. "You have come because we had you brought here unconscious. You have come only because we chose to let you live."

"This isn't getting down to business."

"No, Agent X." The speaker paused a moment. He seemed to crouch forward in the posture of a feasting vulture. "You've heard of poetic justice—you've heard of irony. We're going to give you nice examples of both now. You spoiled our collection the other night from Norton King. By doing so you spoiled our entire plan. We have brought you here to suggest another—and to put it into practice. You, Agent X, are to be our new collector."

The Agent breathed a moment quickly. "The girl!" he said. "Where's Betty Dale?"

"Where you can't find her. But she is safe—safe so long as you do what we tell you?"

"How did you get her out of the fire?"

"Silence! You're not here to ask questions. You're here to obey."

"I'll do nothing till I know the girl's alive."

"Of course. We expected that. Look beside you."

**T**HE Agent turned his head. A panel in the black wall was opening. Behind it a girl in a tweed suit was standing. Her face was pale, troubled, but tinged with the glow of life. Gold gleams touched her yellow hair. Her arms were bound to the slim lines of her figure. Betty Dale!

"Speak!" said one of the black figures. "We have your friend here, the Secret Agent!"

Her eyes fastened on X. "You!" she breathed. Her voice was tremulous, throbbing like the note of a muted violin.

The Agent spoke to the foremost black figure. "If you want me to help you, I must have a few words with Betty Dale—alone."

"Must?" asked the black figure. He chuckled. "Your choice of words is amusing, Mr. X."

The Secret Agent shrugged. "You have everything to gain by my services. And everything to lose, without them. Do you find that amusing, too?"

Turning to his cohorts, the first black figure stared at them in silent consultation. Then he faced back to X. "You know, of course, that we can kill both you and the girl."

"Still," said X, "you need a collector—or you wouldn't have brought me here."

Tense, anxious moments dragged by. Finally, the spokesman in black nodded. "All right. Talk to the girl. No harm can come from it." He waved to the others, and drifted from the room like a sinister black cloud.

X moved swiftly to Betty's side, pressed his lips to her ear, whispered: "Have you been to the Jacoby Department store?"

Betty shook her head slowly. "I—I don't think so."

"You are not certain, Betty. Were you drugged?"

"Yes—when I was first brought here. I don't remember it very well. They made me keep my coat on. And—I think—I threw something—"

The girl's words were cut short by X's hand over her mouth, for a solitary black figure had noiselessly slipped into the room. The voice behind the ebon mask said:

"You have been allowed to talk to Betty Dale, Mr. X. Now, stand clear." And as X moved, the panel shot back into place. Betty Dale had disappeared again.

X asked: "If I keep my part of the bargain, what explanation can you give that will clear her from implication in the fire?"

"It will be for you to clear her, Agent X. You were told that on the phone."

"You have forgotten," said X, "that Betty Dale was seen by a hundred people. The police are after her now.

I know she isn't guilty. But who would believe it, unless I have proof?"

"We'll give you proof—when your task is done."

"The nature of it? You must put your cards on the table if you expect me to work with you."

The black-masked figure chuckled.

"You will have to take our word. You have no other choice."

"All right," said X harshly. "I'm ready to work for the price you offer." He had no intention of submitting meekly, becoming a slave of this devil's trio. He had learned what he wanted to know. Betty Dale was still alive. But he doubted that these men would keep their word—any longer than it served their purposes to do so. He listened tensely as the man who had first addressed him went on speaking.

"Tomorrow we are going to contact L. L. Slater again. A protection fee of five hundred thousand dollars will be asked. After the incident of Jacoby & Sons department store, we feel certain he will see the light—and pay. In the event that he does, have you any suggestions to offer as to the best means of collection?"

THE Agent was thoughtful for a moment. Then: "There're dozens of ways that it could be arranged. I could approach Slater in any one of a score of different impersonations. If necessary, I could visit him and pick up the money as a city official—say the commissioner of police."

There was silence in the room for a moment, then the masked speaker went on grimly: "We have faith in you, Agent X. When the time comes to collect the money, you will put into operation whatever scheme seems most practical. Until then, you will be our prisoner."

The Agent spoke with deliberate scathing fury. "Fool! I'm not a magician! You ask me to do what few men in the world would dare attempt. And you expect me to succeed without studying the ground beforehand. I

must have full opportunity to make appraisals and plans, or I can't undertake the work. Slater isn't like Norton. He may pay, but he will use every power at his command to set a trap. Without my help there is little possibility that you would collect."

The masked man stared at X. "You think too highly of your abilities. But there's something in what you say. Slater has proved himself to be stubborn. He'll probably ask the cooperation of the police. We must positively collect his payment. For that reason we'll give you full freedom to make your plans. Find out everything you can about him. See how the ground lies. If he agrees to our next demand, you'll receive another note in Mardon's box with full details. You'll be instructed what to do with the money."

The Agent nodded. "That's much better," he said.

The masked figure leaned toward him with shoulders hunched like a roosting buzzard. A grating, sinister laugh stirred echoes in the room. "Naturally we shall take steps to protect ourselves amply from you. If you make any attempt to double-cross us or try to steal the money—"

"You have Betty Dale to turn over to the police," said X quietly.

"More than that! We have the girl right here with us, to act as hostage for your conduct. If it doesn't please us—she will die! One of our grenades, with its formic acid crystals, will make an amusing burlesque of the girl's beauty—before it kills her. She will not be so pretty with her face and body swollen up as though a million bees had stung her. So, consider carefully—before you try a double-cross!"

Ice seemed to press along the Agent's spine. Dread too deep for fury filled him. He knew the masked man wasn't joking. He said quietly, huskily: "I understand."

The black figures reached out and touched something on the wall. The Agent heard a faint sound of move-

ment directly above him. He lifted his head. A dark, cone-shaped object like a monstrous bell was descending from the ceiling on cable pulleys. It came down over his head and shoulders, covered him like a mantle. Again he smelled the sweetish fumes of bromine gas. In less than a minute, his head fell forward on his chest.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE DEATH FLOWER

**T**HE *tap-tap* of Thaddeus Penny's cane came slowly nearer. The Agent leaned against a lamp post, hiding the tense expectation that he felt. It was day again. He was free for a while to carry on his desperate undercover battle with crime. Free, after being left in another vacant house, and coming to with no one around and no notion of where he'd been taken.

Betty Dale's peril lay like a chill weight across his brain. He must act quickly if he hoped to save her. She was a pawn being used in a vast game of crime, a pawn to be snatched from the board at his opponents' slightest whim. The heads of the arson ring would destroy her as mercilessly as they had those others.

The Agent had formulated several desperate plans. None gave assured promise of success. Before putting any of them into operation he wanted to hear what Thaddeus Penny had to say.

As the blind man came close the Agent spoke in a casual tone. "I'll take a package of that gum."

Except for a faint brightening of his face Thaddeus Penny betrayed no sign of recognition. He walked up to the post where X was standing and pushed out his tray of wares. The Agent dropped a nickel into the cigar-box tray and selected a package. Thaddeus Penny spoke softly so that no one passing might hear. "Rumors only reach a blind man's ears. Of Santos there is no word. It is said that he has not been seen for months. But there

is a woman, a moll, he once fancied, and of her there are whispers spoken."

"Blossom O'Shean," said the Agent tensely.

Penny's head bobbed. "That was her name. She dropped out of sight at the same time Santos vanished. It was thought they'd skipped the country together. But catty female tongues are saying that Blossom is still in the city, that she has gone high-hat, and is living uptown under the name of Madam Colemont. She was seen and recognized in a beautician parlour by a former underworld friend. This friend told a hat-check girl. The hat-check girl whispered it to an acquaintance. And a blind man's ears overheard."

X clasped Penny's hand for a brief moment. "You have done well," he said.

"One thing more," said Penny softly. "Madam Colemont is said to be basking in riches; a limousine with a chauffeur, a fine apartment, servants. And where sudden riches are there often evil dwells."

"Right," said the Agent. "You may have helped me, Thaddeus, more than you know." He thanked Penny earnestly, promised to look him up soon, and moved off along the street.

In one of his hideouts, he tapped a swift order to Bates. "Get information on wealthy Madam Colemont living in uptown area. Pose as credit investigator and question tradespeople in her neighborhood. Get all data possible. Report back at once."

The Agent studied again some photographs he had of Boss Santos. They had been taken by a press cameraman and they were not entirely satisfactory. A daring thought had occurred to X; but he shook his head. These pictures would never do.

A message from Bates came in just an hour over the radio in the Agent's hideout. "Madam Colemont located. Rich divorcee. Lives alone except for servants. Nineteen Morningside Square. Credit unlimited. Extrava-

gant spender, but no social contacts. Friends few. Only men. Await further orders."

The Agent thought a moment tensely, then tapped another command. "Believe newsreel films were taken of Santos at time of political graft trial two years ago. Visit film distributors and obtain film giving clear pictures of Santos. Signal immediately if successful."

Shortly before noon Bates reported that he had been able to secure the desired films. The Agent picked them up at Bates' office. He returned to his hideout and set up a movie projector facing a clear white wall with a chemically treated surface. For nearly an hour he studied the Santos films and listened to his voice as recorded in the talkie. The racketeer was a big man with a hard, brutal face. His speech was a purring drawl.

The Agent, with his masterly command of phonetics, imitated each syllable. In a few minutes, Santos seemed to be talking in the room. X stopped the motor of his projector and left on the wall-screen a full-face "still" of the mobman. He took out his make-up kit. Swiftly, carefully, he built up Santos' features on his own. The question of pigment bothered him, but, judging by the darkness of Santos' skin, he was deep complexioned. There was no doubt that he had jet-black hair.

The Agent turned on other stills, giving profiles and three quarter views, till he had duplicated every plane of Santos' face. He straightened, satisfied—the living image of Boss Santos.

He had noticed the elaborate sportiness of the racketman's clothes. From a hidden wardrobe that contained almost a hundred suits, he selected one that would do. It was made of reddish-brown material with loud, blue checks. He chose a pair of tan shoes, a fedora hat. Yellow gloves with black inseams and a straight cane completed his costume.

**H**E passed through a passage at the rear of his hideout, down to a basement garage. Four cars were stored here.\*

He got into a glistening coupe, with a low-slung body and special, tinted sun-glass windows. These gave good protection against prying eyes. He didn't forget that the police everywhere were searching for Boss Santos. He was risking instant capture to go abroad in such a disguise.

He drove out into the street, turned the powerful coupe's nose toward Morningside Square. He knew the locality. It was one of the exclusive residential sections of the wealthy. This might help him in his plan. Few people would recognize Santos there.

It was past noon when he reached the square. He circled it, braked slowly before the huge, ornate apartment house numbered nineteen. Suddenly he stopped. For a limousine with a uniformed chauffeur was standing at the curb, and a woman with a dazzlingly made-up face was stepping toward it under the wide marquee.

Her features were a mask of synthetic beauty, giving no indications of her age. But the Agent, past master at analyzing facial contours, saw the hard planes that cosmetics couldn't conceal. He saw more—mascaraed eyes that held guile and ruthless cunning. He knew he was looking at Blossom O'Shean.

She got into the car with swaggering grace. A fawning vestibule attendant closed the door behind her and the limousine drove away. The Secret Agent followed. He had no definite plan, but he wanted to meet her. Her appearance, her changed name, her way of living, bespoke sudden riches. How had she got them, and how would she respond to him as Santos? The answer to these questions might hold the secret of many others. Time was too precious for painstaking investi-

gation. He must strike quickly, boldly, even at tremendous risk.

The limousine went only a few blocks and stopped before a fashionable tearoom. Blossom O'Shean got out. With swaying furs and swaggering hips she entered the building with the air of a queen.

Stifling the trip-hammer beating of his heart, the Agent followed. He marched into the eating place with the greatest composure, said to the headwaiter who bobbed in front of him: "I'm a friend of Madam Colemont's and would like to join her." He was taken to her table through aisles of well-dressed people.

She was already seated, fortunately alone. When her face lifted and her eyes fell on Agent X she seemed to freeze. Her skin, beneath her cosmetics, visibly paled. Her bosom swelled with a sudden gasping breath.

The Agent smilingly sat down in the chair that the headwaiter drew out and waved the man away. He leaned across the table, gazing at Blossom O'Shean, and said "Take it easy. Don't look so surprised."

"Jeez!" she said huskily. "When did you get back, Boss? Why didn't you call me? You—you must have gone off your nut to come in here!"

"Ain't you glad to see me, honey?" the Agent purred.

"Sure, you know I am! But—when I first lamped you I thought it was a ghost! What made you scram like that—and why did you stop writing? Where you been?"

**H**ER questions were pitfalls that the Agent avoided dexterously, feeling his way.

"Never mind 'about me. I had to scram. Business. But tell me about yourself. You look like you were doing well for yourself, kid!"

The woman's eyes darted nervously around the room. They returned to the Agent's face and brightened. "Gee, it gave me a shock to see you! But about me doin' well—you said it! I'm in on a gold mine, Boss! I'm helpin' along a

\*AUTHOR'S NOTE: To aid him in his strange work, the Agent has invested many thousands of his secret fund in cars, planes and boats. They are kept in different parts of the city and surrounding suburbs, always ready for instant use.

racket that makes the old days look cheap!"

"Yeah? What is it—and what about the gang?"

"Most of the boys are workin' for me. I'm holdin' the mob together. You ought to thank me!"

"Swell, Blossom! How you doin' it, kid?"

Her foot under the table pressed down on his. "I got backers, big ones. I'll try to swing you in on it. But you shoulda had more sense than to come here. We can't talk. It ain't safe. Don't you know, Boss, that all the dicks are hot after you?"

The Agent shrugged and grinned, and the woman's voice suddenly got hard. "O.K. Maybe it's good for your blood pressure to play hide and seek with the coppers, but it ain't good for me. If any of the old crowd saw you at my table it would gum the works. If the dicks spotted you, it would be just too bad. I'm not takin' chances. I told you I might steer you into something big. I won't if you act nutty!"

"You win, sweetheart. What would you like me to do?"

"Scram outta here the way you came. Don't let anybody see you. Lie low. Then drop around to my joint this evening. I'll give you an earful and show you how a lady lives."

The Agent winked, and rose. "I'll be seein' you, Madam Colemont," he purred.

Twice in the next hour he visited his sub-post office box. Both times it was empty. On the third visit he found a note addressed to Gregory Marsedon that made his fingers tremble.

**MARSEDON:** Slater contacted. Has agreed to pay. He will get money in bills from bank sometime before five and hold same for our instructions. He will be at home with cash all evening. You know what to do.

When you have picked up money, proceed at once to Hotel Hadley, where room on third floor, facing south, is being held for Marsedon. Claim room, go to it, and as soon as you are alone pull up shade and blink lights six times. Go at once to drug store across street and take call in booth for Marsedon.

The Agent smiled grimly at the simple ingenuity of the arrangement. It left no loophole through which he might trace the arsonist ring. It left him to take all the risks in the collection of the money.

He began making plans at once. He would go to Slater's home with forged credentials and in the disguise of a police official. He might, as he had suggested, even impersonate the commissioner. There was no doubt in his mind that he could collect the money. With proper make-up it would be a simple task, even though the house was ringed with detectives. What excited him more was the thought of the strange revelations Blossom O'Shean might make that evening.

**T**HE Agent's visit had left "Madam Colemont" too nervous to eat her lunch. In her hard, calculating way she was in love with Boss Santos. She had visions of what dashing figures the pair of them would cut, swaggering through the capitals of Europe. His sudden return opened up glamorous possibilities. They would have a yacht, larger than any now afloat. They would have cars, houses, princely suites in London, Paris, Berlin. They would hobnob with royalty—after they had made their pile. She would steer Boss Santos into the stream of lawless gold that was carrying her to undreamed-of riches.

She left the restaurant and returned to her apartment. She went to a small chamber at the rear of her boudoir and carefully locked the door. The room was ostensibly an intimate lounge. There was a couch in it, a couple of easy chairs and a small, locked desk.

She opened this with a special key. There were no writing materials in the desk. Instead, there was a compact but elaborate mechanism of dials and boxed-in tubes. She reached forward and pulled out a microphone on a movable arm. She slipped a pair of disc receivers over her head. She threw a switch that turned on an

electric current, drawn from a cleverly concealed connection made where the desk's leg fitted into a floor plug. The desk held a two-way wireless telephone, operating on a super-short wave.

A box mounted behind the telephone itself held a device known as a "scrambler." This distorted the syllables spoken into the microphone before they were sent on the air. No one accidentally stumbling on the wavelength would be able to make head or tail of any messages sent over it. Both her instrument and the one miles away which received her call had counteracting mechanisms which "un-scrambled" messages received.

She hadn't bought the telephone or had it built herself. It had been installed by the "backers" for whom she worked. Its mechanism was a closed book to her. She had merely been told to do certain things to get her messages through.

She did them now, and presently a harsh voice sounded in her ears. "Station Zero. What do you want?"

"Madam Colemont speaking. I've got some big news."

"Go ahead. What is it?"

"The Boss has come back! My old pal, Santos! He's a great guy, on the up-and-up when he likes you, and I'd like to get him into our racket. Him and me make a sure-fire team. I want your O.K."

"What!" The single word, coming over the air, snapped in the receiver like a curse.

"You heard me—Boss Santos! You must know the guy I mean. He did a disappearing act a while ago. Business, he said. But now he's come back!"

There was a moment's silence before the harsh voice answered. Then the words had a strange measured quality that made Blossom O'Shean feel cold. "I'm going to give you some news, too—Madam Colemont—something I haven't told you, because it didn't seem wise. Something that I'm afraid will be a shock."

"Go ahead, spill it!"

"Boss Santos hasn't returned. Boss Santos is dead!"

Blossom O'Shean broke into strident laughter. "Quit your kiddin'," she said.

"I'm not kidding," the measured voice stated. "I'm telling you a fact. Boss Santos is dead—murdered. He died months ago. The man you say is the Boss is an impostor."

"I wasn't born yesterday," said Blossom O'Shean coolly. "I played around with that guy for years. I guess I know him. He sat at my table at lunch. I talked to him just like I'm talking to you. He's coming here tonight. If you think he was murdered, you've got the wrong dope."

"Foolish woman!" There was rasping annoyance in the unseen speaker's tone. "You have let an impostor, a criminal, trick you, fool you. You have played into the hands of Secret Agent X."

"Yeah! I'm a right dame, and I take my orders from you because you hand out the dough. But I ain't gonna say black is white. I tell you Boss Santos is back, and I wanna get him into this racket."

A grating laugh sounded. "If you don't believe me, you shall have proof! A gentleman will visit you shortly, a Mr. DeLeon. Go with him to a certain house. What you see will, I think, convince you."

Blossom O'Shean was nervous when she put the telephone away. She was biting her lip. The "backers" who gave her orders had ways she couldn't understand. The voice that spoke from "Station Zero" sometimes gave her the creeps. She paced the floor of her luxurious apartment and puffed cigarettes, till a ring sounded at her door.

Her immaculate maid admitted a tall man with a black, carefully trimmed beard. She had never seen him before. His manner was courtly. "I am Mr. DeLeon," he said. "I will be honored if you will come with me."

**B**LOSSOM O'SHEAN got her wraps and followed the bearded stranger. A car was waiting below. Its chauffeur drove them to a street of run-down houses, where Mr. DeLeon helped her to alight. He guided her up a flight of old steps. A key admitted them to a musty hall.

Mr. DeLeon moved with the air of one who knows what he is about. He led her to an attic room. He suddenly gripped her arm and threw open another door. "Steady," he said. "But take careful notice of what you see."

DeLeon drew back some dusty draperies, and Blossom O'Shean let out a terrified cry. There was a table in the center of the room. A man was slumped in a chair before it. She got a look at the man's head, saw only fleshless bones. The man was a skeleton, and there was a knife sticking in his bony back.

More than that, Blossom O'Shean recognized the suit as one she had seen Boss Santos once wear. And there was something horribly, gruesomely familiar in the set of those slumped shoulders. She took two fearful steps into the room and screamed again. For a familiar heavy gold ring gleamed on a bony finger of one of the skeleton's hands. It was the lucky ring that Santos had always worn and prized.

"It's him!" she gasped. "The Boss! That bag of bones is him!"

"Right," said the voice of DeLeon. "I'm sorry it took such unpleasant proof to convince you. But it's better that you know the truth."

"He was knifed!" Blossom panted. "Some rat sneaked up and shoved that toad-sticker in his back." She was silent an instant, face working, hands clenched. "Who did it?" she screamed. "Who gave the works to the Boss?"

DeLeon's eyes wavered a moment under the fierce lash of hers. He licked his lips, then said slowly: "I'll give it to you straight. The man who killed him is the same one who came to you today. The murderer of Santos is Secret Agent X."

Blossom O'Shean laughed suddenly in a sound like the scream of a frenzied panther. Her lips were red as blood. Her teeth were white fangs. Her hands crooked into claws. "Swell!" she said harshly. "Swell—he's coming to me tonight."

DeLeon read her meaning, saw the fierce light in her eyes. His hand clenched her arm in a grip of iron. His voice came in a snarl.

"You mustn't touch him! You must stall, do you hear? You must play up to him, let him think you still take him for Santos. You must confuse him all you can."

"Why should I?" demanded the woman. "He got the Boss. I'm going to get him."

"I order you not to! Do it, and you'll land in jail or the gutter. Do it—and you may die yourself by the swelling death."

The woman stiffened slightly, cringed away. "Why—why shouldn't I kill him?" she gasped.

"Because he is needed! Because he is working for the men at Station Zero. Later you can do as you please with him. But you must not touch him—tonight."

Blossom O'Shean was silent, and DeLeon led her away. She did not speak as they drove back to Morning-side Square. Once she turned and saw that DeLeon's face was rigid with fury. It occurred to her then that his black beard was false. She sensed that this man was one of her employers. She nodded when he growled at her outside her apartment: "See that you obey!"

But, when he left her, fear gave way to rage once more. It mounted against the man who had killed "the Boss" until veins stood out in her neck. It mounted until she was like a wild animal, a panther, thirsting for blood. Trembling, she went to a bureau in her apartment and opened a drawer. She took out a flat automatic and snapped in a clip of shells. She walked to the telephone next and called up three men. She told each to come that

evening for a "job" she wanted done. She paced the floor, hissing between clenched teeth: "I'm gonna smoke that rat! I'm gonna give the works to Secret Agent X!"

### CHAPTER XIII THE TRAP

**A** TALL man who looked like Police Commissioner Foster left L. L. Slater's home at eight that night. Armed detectives were posted in the vestibule, but none tried to stop him. Others stationed along the street made deferential salutes to the department's supreme head.

The man's bulky overcoat concealed the canvas pouches strapped around his waist. His face gave no hint that L. L. Slater lay unconscious in his study upstairs. The "commissioner" was apparently just emerging from a conference. He walked down the street, entered a car and drove away unmolested.

The collection of the money had been simple for Agent X. So far, he had kept his promise to the extortionist group. But his face under the disguise of Commissioner Foster was tense. He was preparing to make desperate plays, still uncertain of his game.

He did not change his disguise and drive to the Hotel Hadley to claim "Marsdon's" room. Instead he went to his nearest hideout and made up once more as Boss Santos. He left the canvas pouches of money in a secret vault under the floor. As Santos he sped in his low-slung coupe toward Morningside Square.

When he drew up before No. 19 the doorman gave him a curious glance. But X's manner was impressive. He stalked into the apartment's vestibule swinging his gold-headed cane. The girl clerk at the reception desk gave him a brief, admiring glance. The Agent carried off his sporty suit with the air of a cavalier.

"Just tell Madam Colemont an old friend's calling," he said.

A luxurious elevator whisked him up to the tenth floor. The operator pointed with a white-gloved hand. "Third door on the right, sir."

The Agent moved forward with no inkling of what lay ahead. Blossom O'Shean had obviously taken him for Boss Santos when he'd seen her at noon. He hoped to get valuable secrets from her tonight.

The first hint of danger came when Blossom O'Shean opened the door for him herself. There was a strange expression in the woman's eyes. X had looked into the face of death so often that he had come to know its signs. A chill crept along his back. Under his disguised face the muscles stiffened.

Blossom O'Shean said huskily: "Boss, it's you! Come in!" She smiled, but the glint of her white teeth behind crimson lips was like the leer of a Gorgon's head. X saw that she was deathly white beneath her makeup.

Every nerve in the Agent's body warned him of peril. But he followed the woman into her apartment with a grin on his face.

"Nice dump you've got here, Blossom!"

"Yeah, I like it." The woman's eyes swiveled back at him over her white, snaky shoulder. The fingers of her left hand were clenched.

"Nothing wrong is there, Blossom? You seem kinda nervous, kid!"

"Do I!" Blossom O'Shean laughed, and the sound was as glassy, as brittle as the tinkle of breaking ice. "Come into the front room and have a drink. There's nothing wrong. I'm just excited at seeing an old pal!"

She pushed heavy draperies aside and entered a luxuriously furnished room. Wealth had been lavished here in rococo taste. The oriental rugs, Akbar, Sarouk and Anatolian, were as deep-napped as grass on a lawn. The furniture was upholstered in tapestry silk. The Agent's eyes swung to the rich curtains that covered the windows and two other doors. One of the curtains over a window seemed to him

to bulge slightly. His vision, trained to detect the most microscopic movements, caught a breathlike stir. There was no maid visible in the apartment. That, too, was significant.

Blossom O'Shean walked to a table and poured him a drink herself. She came back sinuously, said: "This will tickle your tonsils, Boss." He noticed that her hand was trembling so that some of the liquor spilled. "Sit down, Boss, and rest your dogs."

The Agent took the liquor, but ignored the offer of a chair. Instead, he turned slowly, nonchalantly till his back was to the wall. There was a moment's silence in the room, a silence that seemed to portend doom. Blossom O'Shean was watching him closely, eyes aglow behind the synthetic curve of her lashes. She said suddenly:

"I gotta have a smoke."

Not waiting to see whether he had any cigarettes to offer, she moved with swaggering grace toward a square box on the mantle opposite where he stood. The Agent had flung his hat, coat and cane over a chair near by. His eye measured the distance to them in a furtive, sidewise glance.

Blossom O'Shean lifted the lid of the box and thrust her white hand in. She turned for a moment facing him with a mirthless smile on her lips. "Drink," she said, "and enjoy it! It's the last one you'll ever get!" Her hand came out of the box with a glimmer of metal in it. Her voice rose till it was a hoarse scream like a hacksaw going over steel. "Drink—an take this, you rat!"

**H**E saw her arm move forward with the speed of a striking snake. He dropped his glass and plunged sidewise as her automatic spouted flame. Bullets slapped behind him. In the same instant he saw three figures step into the room.

One from the curtain over the window. Two from the curtains across the doors. Flat-chested, pale-faced men with glittering eyes. Men who held

big automatics clamped in their talon-like fists. Men who had been waiting there to kill him, slaughter him in cold blood.

The Agent ignored them for a split second. He moved with the lightning suddenness of a tempered, uncoiling spring. He flung his overcoat at the frenzied woman. It dropped over her white shoulders like a net. His left hand swept up his cane. He plunged straight toward her.

She was still pumping bullets at him through the fabric with the mechanical energy of a machine. The shots were going wild. The Agent snatched at the pistol through the coat. His fingers closed around it. He pulled coat and gun way with a savage jerk.

He doubled up, did a backwards somersault on the floor as other guns roared in a murderous crossfire. He got Blossom O'Shean's gun untangled from the coat and crashed a shot at the figure by the window. The man fell forward with a choking scream. He slapped another shot at the big bowl light below the ceiling and the room went dark.

Light from the bulb in the hallway made a ghostly glow in the chamber. The Agent knew he was still visible against the pattern of the rug. He jumped again, escaping by fractions of inches the bullets that snarled around. He felt the hot lash of a slug across the skin of his leg. He fired with desperate quickness at a pinpoint of flame by the door. There was only a metallic click in his hand. The gun was empty.

The Agent jerked at the gold head of his cane, and a gleaming ribbon of steel came free in his hand. He flung the hidden sword across the room with a sound like a plucked cello string. A shaft of fire quivered for a moment in the air as the sword's point found a mark and the upright blade caught the light. Another man cried out in pain. A second gun was silenced.

The third gunman fired two wild shots and fled. The thud of his reced-

ing footsteps sounded in the room behind the curtain. A window opened and banged shut. The Agent found a bridge lamp and snapped it on.

His eyes had the bright glitter of polished steel. They roved around the room.

The man he had shot lay moaning on the floor. The other, with the sword point in his body, had sunk to his knees and was clawing dazedly at the blade. Blossom O'Shean leaned against the mantel, hands pressed to her breast, face white as plaster.

As the light went on she made a pantherish leap for the stabbed man's gun; but the Agent beat her to it. He snatched up the weapon, menaced her with its muzzle. "Quick," he said, "tell me about those men you work for."

Fear of death eclipsed her trembling fury. She shrank away.

"Speak!" said the Agent. "Three seconds is all you got!"

**H**E had never shot a woman, never would, but terror was the only language Blossom O'Shean knew. She seemed to wilt before it. Her eyes were fixed on the gun muzzle as though it were a snake. She moved back against the wall, hands spread beside her.

"No!" she gasped. "No—you wouldn't do it. Don't kill me like you did the Boss! I'm a right dame. Don't!" The Agent's gun moved closer and words came in a frenzied rush from the woman's lips. "I get it! You want to double-cross the guys I work for. I—I'd help you if I could— But listen! I don't know nothing about them, see? Honest, it's the truth. I'm giving you the straight dope. I don't want to die."

"Prove it!"

"I will! Give me a chance. I'll do it. Look—come here!"

Watching his face fearfully she slid away. She beckoned with a hand that seemed almost frozen. The Agent followed, suspicious of some trick. She moved with the steps of a person

in the grip of a nightmare horror into another room. It was her boudoir, and she led him through it. She opened a top bureau drawer while the Agent watched tensely. She thrust a queer-shaped key in the lock of a door. Beyond was a smaller chamber, and the woman pointed to a desk.

"I don't know 'em!" she husked. "I never saw 'em. I don't know who they are. They contacted me first by telephone. They send me my dough by mail. When I want to talk to any of 'em I just use that." Her trembling fingers unlocked the desk with a rattle of metal. "See," she said feverishly, "it's a radio telephone. I never seen any of 'em. I'm a right dame, givin' you all the dope—and—don't smoke me."

The Agent's eyes measured hers. He seemed to deliberate. He ignored her frantic pleadings. But he saw that terror had made her speak the truth. He saw that she dared not lie with that gun pointing straight at her heart. He saw that she knew no more about her mysterious "backers" than he did himself. A leaden weight of disappointment filled him. He spoke suddenly, his voice toneless.

"I didn't kill Boss Santos. I'm not going to kill you. Santos was murdered by the men you work for. You've been a dupe in a devil's game."

His eyes left her twitching face, went back to the desk. His brain worked swiftly. The fate of Betty Dale hung by a slender thread. If the heads of the arson ring learned that he had come here, wounded two of their hirelings and tried to plumb their secrets, Betty Dale might meet a horrible end. They must not know. There was one last desperate gamble still to be played.

The Agent's hand flashed out. He brought the hard muzzle of the gun down on the delicate apparatus. He smashed tubes, broke dials, wrecked the mechanism completely. Blossom O'Shean hissed suddenly: "Somebody's knocking. They musta heard the shots. The cops'll be coming!"

X heard the insistent ringing of the bell with thudding blows behind it. The management of the apartment was demanding to know what was going on. The wail of a siren suddenly lifted from the street outside. Some one in the house had called the police already.

X moved past the woman, darted through the hallway into the room where death had so nearly caught him. He bent quickly over both wounded men, saw that they would live. The man by the window had a shattered shoulder. The other had caught the sword blade close to his heart. He was bleeding internally probably, but still had a fighting chance. The Agent drew out the sword and shoved it in his cane.

He leaped to the window as other sirens sounded in the street like hounds giving tongue. Let Blossom O'Shean give the police any explanation she cared to. He couldn't stop her.

HE opened the window, stepped out, and moved swiftly down the fire escape. He paused in the shadowed courtyard for a moment to make deft changes in his face. Then he slipped through an ally into the street and hailed a taxi.

It carried him almost to his hideout. He left it, went the rest of the way on foot. He was tense-faced, panting when he reached his secret chamber. He changed his clothes, made up as Marsedon, with all the speed at his command. When the disguise was finished, he strapped the canvas pouches of money around his waist. Then he went to a small cabinet in the chamber's corner.

There were assorted chemicals here, liquids, gases and powders. The cabinet was a compact laboratory. It held some of the equipment he used when he employed science to aid him. He selected a small flask of compressed oxygen, a length of rubber tubing, and a wooden clip. He slipped them in his pocket, and hurried to the street.

On his way to the Hadley Hotel in another taxi he stopped at a delicatessen store and made a small purchase. He came back to the taxi carrying a paper bag. In the cab he transferred some of the bag's contents to his pocket, leaving the remainder on the seat.

A clerk behind the hotel counter nodded when he gave his name.

"Your room is waiting, Mr. Marsedon. A boy will show you up."

The clerk frowned at his lack of luggage, but X tossed a five dollar bill on the desk and paid for the room in advance. He followed a bellhop grimly up to the third floor and along a corridor to the section that faced south.

He tipped the boy at the door, said: "That's all, sonny," and turned the key in the lock. The room was dark and X walked to the window. It opened on a wide, traffic-filled street. Somewhere along this block, or the next, or in one of the thousands of windows that bordered it, eyes were watching. His signal would be seen by one of the arsonist heads.

The Agent grasped the shade and let it snap to the top. He walked back to the door, found the light switch, and winked the overhead bulbs in and out six times. They flashed their message to criminal eyes that half a million dollars in cash had been collected.

The Agent left his room leisurely, descended to the hotel's lobby and drifted out into the street. He passed, strolling, happy-faced people who did not guess at the deadly drama near them. He dodged flying taxis and limousines carrying men and women home from picture shows and theaters. He crossed the pavement and entered the drug store opposite to keep his rendezvous with crime.

The call did not come for nearly fifteen minutes. The Agent sipped a cup of coffee at the soda fountain, waiting tensely, conscious of the canvas pouches under his coat. He jumped when a telephone bell tinkled. In a

moment a clerk answered it and said: "Call for Mr. Marsedon."

The Agent entered the booth and heard again the harsh voice of the unknown criminal.

"You were successful, Marsedon?"

"Yes."

"Go to the house on Stillwell Avenue. Press the button."

There was no uncertainty in the order, no betrayal of nervousness or doubt. The man who gave it was sure of his mastery over X, sure that the Agent would follow orders—because of Betty Dale.

The Agent left the drug store quickly. A taxi bore him to the house of mystery where he had been the previous night. He entered the dark kitchen, crossed to the closet with grimly resolute steps. He stepped inside and closed the door without an instant's hesitation.

But before he pressed the hidden button his hands worked deftly, swiftly. He brought the flask of oxygen from his pocket, attached the coiled rubber tube to a valve at its top. He thrust the tube in his mouth, gave the valve a twist, and pressed the wooden clamp over his nostrils. He breathed the sweet, life-giving vapor, and gave the button under the shelf a jab.

In a moment he felt the heavy bromine gas descending in an eerie, smothering cloud. He waited in utter darkness, knowing that he had made a gambler's play with death.

## CHAPTER XIV

### MURDER BAIT

**N**ONE of the bromine vapor entered the Agent's lungs. He kept the valve in his flask half open, let the oxygen stream into his mouth. But he sank to the floor in a position of utter laxness.

Endless minutes seemed to pass before steps sounded. The flask of compressed gas was almost empty when they paused outside the door. The

Agent took a deep breath of oxygen, filling his lungs, then swiftly, cautiously put his flask and tube and clamp away. He lay like a man unconscious while the door opened softly.

A light flicked on. Through closed eyelids he could see the redness of it playing over his face. A harsh voice spoke a whispered order, and two men picked him up. He was lifted, carried to a square box like a Chinese coffin, and dumped inside it. With his knees drawn up to his chin his body just fit. The lid that was instantly clamped down pressed against his head.

He felt the box lifted, knew that he was being carried again to an accompaniment of stealthily shuffling feet. They crossed the kitchen, climbed the basement stairs, moved into the street. The box was raised higher and deposited in a car. Another whispered order which he couldn't catch, and the mysterious car rolled away.

Fully fifteen minutes passed, with only the rumble of the car wheels and confused traffic noises. Once a policeman's whistle shrilled, and X knew he was being taken through the heart of town. A million dollars was passing under the officer's nose and he didn't know it. Crime was making one of its biggest plays while the Law looked on.

The car stopped at last and the box was lifted from it. Like a package of laundry or merchandise, X was carried through some sort of alley. He heard shoes scrape down stone steps and was borne across a floor. The box was set down a moment, and a door clicked open. It was lifted and placed on what seemed to be a wobbly shelf. Then the door catch clicked again.

In a moment X heard the slapping ropes of a dumb waiter. The shelf he was on jerked and quivered. He had a distinct sensation of ascent. It kept up for many seconds before the dumb waiter stopped. The Agent's temples hammered.

Muffled steps sounded somewhere not far off. A second door clicked and the box that the Agent was in was jerked roughly forward. It was car-

ried about twenty feet, set down.

The Agent tensed as the clamps above him grated. Deft hands above him slowly raised the lid. The Agent's eyes, smothered in darkness for the past twenty minutes, saw plainly. He got a glimpse of a sinister, black-masked figure. He was in the secret meeting place of the arson ring's heads.

Four pairs of hands reached in and lifted him cautiously. Through half-open eyelids he caught sight of a third masked figure holding a gun. The weapon was pointed toward him. These vulturelike men seemed ready for any trick. They laid cunning plans and added evil caution.

The Agent came to life at the instant his feet touched the floor, risking everything in this final, desperate play. He swung both arms like flails and shoved back with all the force in his legs. He went down in a tangle of cursing, tumbling bodies. Fists struck at him with battering-ram blows. Arms tried to hold him like twining snakes.

He got a swirling glimpse of masked faces and glittering, murderous eyes. He saw the man with the gun trying to find a spot to shoot, saw him crouching, hand poised to fire. He gave the killer no chance to aim. In that lightning-fast, tumbling battle a bullet would menace the lives of his masked assailants. He was counting on this, risking a shot in those first mad seconds.

He fought with the fury of desperation, fought with the knowledge that this was his last and only chance. But he didn't lose his head.

Twisting, turning, writhing like a wrestler, he clutched wildly at heaving arms and legs. He struck with tight-knuckled fists, delivering blows that brought a gasping grunt. A man's voice close beside him screamed an order. "The gun! Over here—let me have it—quick!" The masked figure with the weapon moved closer.

Another voice snarled: "Shoot—damn it, shoot!"

There was a jab of metal across the Agent's shoulder. A muffled report came, so close that powder flame singed the Agent's neck. The gun had a silencer on it. The bullet had missed him by a fraction only. The next one might strike home, for the masked men were becoming desperate. The man they had thought was unconscious had become a human tornado in the room.

The Agent sensed his increasing peril. He landed a blow against a masked face, driving his knuckles into teeth. He heaved up with his left arm, got a second masked figure almost on his shoulder, and jerked himself erect. Head down, half stumbling, he flung his human missile at the man with the gun. The armed man sidestepped and the Agent leaped away.

HE plunged across the box that had held him, as bullets probed for his life. He lifted the box and threw it at the masked killer with all his might. The man cried out and went down with clawing arms, the box on top of him. His gun spun away. Another vulturelike figure tried to snatch it up, and the Agent's fist cracked behind his ear. The man fell sprawling, while the Agent caught up the gun.

He turned and saw that the third masked criminal had got a silenced weapon from somewhere. Their arms swung up together. The Agent's was a fraction of a second more swift. Flames spurted from the sound-deadening tubes at the guns' ends simultaneously. Lead plucked at the Agent's arm, but struck the man before him in the dead center of the chest. The man spun on his feet, black coat swirling away from his body like membranous wings. He pitched forward with a gurgling scream and lay on his face.

The figure beneath the box was just getting up. X thrust the gun toward him, menaced him with a harsh command. "Back up! Raise your hands. You, too—or you'll get what your friend here just got!" He included

the second masked figure in the deadly arc of his gun.

Both men raised their arms above their shoulders, glaring hate through slitted eyes. The Agent spoke again.

"Release Betty Dale at once."

The masked figure debated a moment, then reached for the telephone. He husked: "Bill, I've changed my mind. Let the girl go. Have her call back as soon as she is free." Replacing the phone, he chuckled. "Betty Dale is now walking into the streets, a free woman. She will be free about fifteen minutes—before the police will pick her up. Then she will burn in the electric chair. It was a very clever move on your part, Mr. Secret Agent X." The black figure shook with mirthless glee.

X said a bleak nothing. In ten minutes time, the phone rang. He scooped it up and made a soft, melodious whistle that sounded strangely in that room.

"It's—you!" came the breathless answer. "I don't understand it, but they've let me go."

"Yes," said X quietly. "I persuaded certain gentlemen to let you go. Now listen closely. Get in touch with headquarters. Tell Inspector Burks how you were taken prisoner—"

"Isn't it dangerous?" asked Betty. "The police—"

"You trust me, don't you?" said the Agent.

"Yes," came Betty's soft answer. "You know I do." Then she added quickly: "Wait! The number I was given was Matthew Monkford's apartment. I remember it, because I called him and tried to get a story."

X smiled strangely. "I know that, Betty. And you can tell that to Inspector Burks. The police will find the heads of the arson ring here—and Slater's money. Good by, Betty."

One of the black-masked figures leaned forward pointing toward X. "And now, Mr. X, you have strapped the girl into the death chair."

"That is merely your opinion, Mat-

thew Monkford," said X quietly. "You can take off your mask."

The fingers of one masked figure plucked at his face. The mask came away revealing features that the Agent had seen before—the shrewd, austere features of Matthew Monkford. He stood like a statue, while his companion also unmasked. Joe Reiss glared at the Agent. X knew without looking that the third was Purcell, the man who was now a corpse.

The Agent said: "When you walk into the death house, Monkford, you can blame only yourself for going there. And it's ironical that the thing that first trapped me is the one thing that started me thinking in your direction. Your phenomenal memory for figures and dates. You had policy figures of other companies than your own right at your fingertips."

Monkford's eyes did not flicker. They held the Agent's with glittering contempt. "Let's start at the very beginning, Mr. X. From the first you've been outwitted. You were fooled by the little drama in my office. Purcell knew you were an impostor when you toyed with a pencil—in your right hand. You 'rescued' us from our own men. Shima spoiled our plans by phoning for the police. We're giving you credit for daring from the beginning. It's only in the field of sheer intellect that you've failed. We let you live because we hoped to use you. If you've got Slater's money hand it over and we'll see what can be arranged. Purcell's death is unfortunate, but will cause no stir in police circles, since it is known we are being victimized by criminals. You have gained nothing by setting Betty Dale free. She will die by the law."

"You are forgetting the films, Monkford," said X.

"What films?" demanded Monkford, and his voice showed the first tinge of fear.

"THE films of Betty Dale," replied the Agent. "The ones you took when you first brought her here

and drugged her—which took place before the fire at Jacoby's store. Betty Dale was not at Jacoby's store. Her image appeared on the blank wall of the balcony because you threw a colored telephoto picture from a movie projector. Possibly, one of your men was hidden about a block away to do the job. Double films made the image stereoscopic. With these films in my possession, Betty Dale will be cleared of starting the store fire . . . . Get them!"

Monkford tensed. Reiss gulped: "Better to take a chance on his bullets, Monk. Those films will—"

The Agent backed away suddenly and unbuttoned his coat. His left hand plunged inside. His voice came tonelessly like a prophecy of doom. "All right, Monkford! I see you've chosen death—but let me choose the way you'll die." His hand came into sight grasping a nutlike missile. "One of your bombs which didn't explode at the fire! I've saved it carefully for just such use as this."

Monkford's face went rigid. Breath came like a sigh between his teeth. The Agent's voice droned on. "You'll go out knowing the bitter taste of your own medicine." X raised his hand, poised to throw the object forward—and Matthew Monkford screamed. He went down on his knees suddenly, slobbering insanely.

"I'm wrong. I give up! You've outplayed us! I—don't throw it in heaven's name! I'll get the films!"

Monkford walked stiffly to a desk against the wall. While X watched him eagle-eyed, ready for any treacherous move, Monkford lifted a round package.

"Put them there on the table," said X, "Then go back and stand by the wall."

Monkford obeyed, and the Agent backed toward the films. For a moment he put the round thing in his

hand on the table, stripped the canvas pouches from around his waist.

"Five hundred thousand dollars," he said coolly. "The police will find them here beside the films. The cops have the number of every bill, of course. Slater, as you said yourself, was stubborn. The district attorney will enjoy finding them for his case against you. And now, Monkford, I'm going to say good bye."

In the Agent's hand was the round object that had made Monkford weak with fear. Monkford's eyes widened. He screamed horribly as X suddenly hurled the thing at his feet. He staggered back, clutching at the wall. The Agent's taunting voice cut through his panic. "Steady, my friend. Look at it carefully. See what it is!"

Monkford's eyes rolled wildly to the thing at his feet. It had cracked open when it struck the floor. But, instead of shooting formic acid crystals that would cause the bloating death, only yellow kernels showed.

"Just a walnut!" said X softly. "I stopped at a store and bought some on my way here tonight. The size of your pet bombs gave me the idea. A bluff took the last trick against criminal master minds!"

The snarling cry of anger in Monkford's throat was cut short by the spurt of vapor from a gun the Agent whipped into view. The gas that would keep him quiet till the police arrived sent Monkford to his knees, then to the floor. Another spurt made Joe Reiss follow.

The Agent slipped through the apartment like a shadow. A door opened and closed behind him. He walked leisurely down a hall. For a second time his strange, eerie whistle sounded. Its echo hovered like an all-knowing presence in the chamber with the three silent men. It grew more distant slowly, faded—and was gone.

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Watch for

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# The M-P News Flash

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MARCH, 1936

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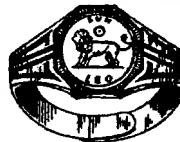
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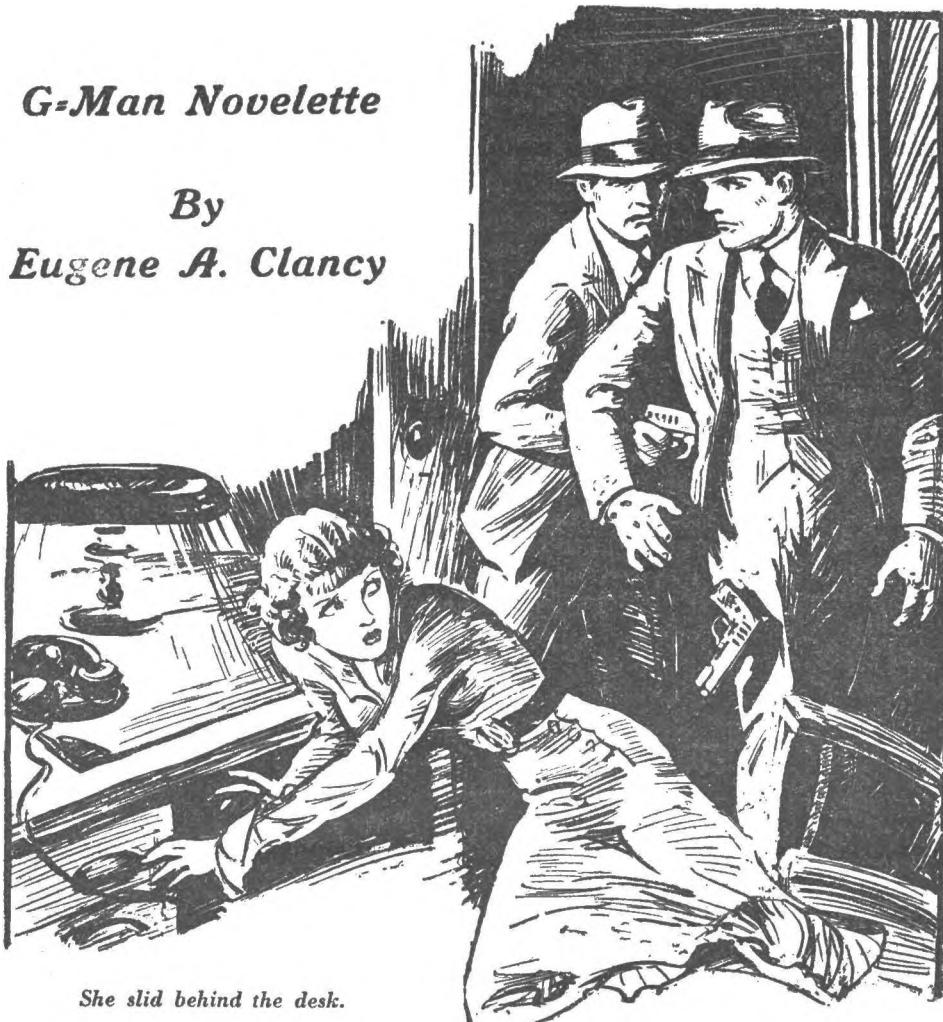
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# “G”-Proof

*G-Man Novelette*

By  
*Eugene A. Clancy*



*She slid behind the desk.*

Marty Blaine was on the trail of the Corvanni mob whose G-proof alibis had Washington up a tree. Yet he risked the reputation of the Department of Justice on magic and psychology against a concrete Gibraltar for seven killers.

**S**LOWLY and carefully Marty Blaine turned the door knob of Joe Corvanni's ornate private office on the top floor of Number Sixty-nine Broadway. The light was on. Someone was in there. With the skill of thorough training in the methods of crooks, it was the matter of a moment for him to insert his pass key and hold the lock back while he pushed the door open and stepped in with the stealth of a cat. He found himself in a little foyer. In three silent strides

he was at the open door of the office beyond, his automatic in his hand.

"Don't move—" But then Marty Blaine checked the rest of his sharp command and stared in genuine astonishment. For the person sitting in the desk chair, calmly smoking a cigarette and looking through a sheaf of papers was a girl! A slim, immaculate little blonde, delicate of feature, blue-eyed. This was the very last thing Blaine had expected.

A quite natural gasp of fear and amazement came from the girl's red lips as she looked up, dropped the papers, and sat stark-eyed, her cigarette between her fingers. She was the picture of innocence—the efficient, high-powered secretary coming back to the office to work at night on an unexpected rush job. Her counterpart was to be found that very night, no doubt, in a dozen Wall Street offices.

But Marty Blaine was not fooled. She had made one little mistake in staging her set-up. It was a hot July night—and she was working with every window shut tight! If she had come in merely to get some papers and gone right out again, this would be natural; but she was trying to give the impression of being settled there for an hour or so of work. Marty saw, too, as he looked at her more closely, that the baby-blue eyes were not quite so babyish; a hardness lurked in them, a dangerous intelligence.

A sudden conviction flashed into Marty's brain, and he almost laughed at the amazing simplicity of the thing that had baffled the government men for months. This being his first visit to the Corvanni offices, he had never himself seen the girl, but he knew her description backwards. She was Angie Sherwood, Corvanni's quite bona fide secretary who worked here every day. According to the department records she was absolutely okay. She had been checked and rechecked, here, at home—her association and background.

But Marty's sudden conviction only

grew the stronger as he stood staring at the girl. Despite all the checking and rechecking, something had been missed. There was, *there had to be*, a blind spot somewhere in the checking. And now this blind spot that had fooled the government men for so long was becoming a great glare of revealing light.

Laughing up his sleeve, Joe Corvanni was doing the very last thing that might be expected of him in these days when all the big crooks were eliminating women from their schemes, except as play toys on the side. Even the man in the street knew that now the modern master crook's slogan is: "Don't mix a woman in it."

But Joe Corvanni, shrewdly taking advantage of this accepted slogan, was deliberately using a woman, this girl, as his direct cover. Despite all the rechecked evidence against it, Marty Blaine's conviction grew stronger, became a certainty this bona fide and innocent-looking little office worker was the hitherto invisible and mysterious point of contact for which he had been searching. The government men knew that Joe Corvanni was the man they wanted, but so far they had been unable to find any clue, any trail that led to him.

"Oh, please!" the girl was saying, her lips trembling. "Who are you? I swear there is no money in the safe—we never carry any here! And I have only a few dollars in my bag. Oh, please—!"

In a flash she ducked, flung herself under the desk. At the same instant, Marty felt something hard thrust into the small of his back. Behind him a man's voice grated: "Drop that gat, wise guy! Stick 'em up and don't move an eyelash! Nice work, Angie. Come up and finish your smoke."

The girl came to her feet calmly smoking her cigarette. Despite his chagrin, Marty Blaine felt a quiver of admiration. For she hadn't even dropped her cigarette!

"Move over to that davenport, turn slowly, and sit down," the man be-

hind him directed. Marty, obeying, found himself looking up at a neatly dressed youth, an intelligent-looking Italian-American.

The youth stood back, keeping him covered with his automatic. The girl, having put the papers back in the desk drawer, locked it and sat inspecting Marty with a scornful smile in her eyes.

**M**ARTY BLAINE found a lot to worry about. This pair obviously were aces at the game, first-rate specimens of the brand new type of crook, supremely intelligent, who were superseding the crude gangster of the prohibition era. They had been wise to him. He had not been so clever as he thought in covering his moves. This youth must have been on the watch; if he had not been following him all evening; at least he must have seen him enter the building. And he was worried about the phone. He had timed everything, so that Tom Draper or one of the other men might be phoning him here any minute now. Not that it mattered greatly, but it would complicate things . . . .

"Shall I phone for the car, Vincent?" the girl asked, lighting a fresh cigarette.

"Yes, honey," the youth replied quietly, keeping his keen dark eyes on Marty. "Nothing more to do here."

The businesslike calmness of the pair registered deeply on Marty's brain; it told him plainly that he would have to exert all his ingenuity, such as it was, to turn the tables on them. He must do it, no matter what the cost, for another conviction flashed on him: he was certain now that his hunch to come to this office had brought him here at the psychological moment. This girl was the contact point between Corvanni and the gang who worked for him, sticking up banks throughout the country—with never a trail leading to Joe Corvanni.

But there was more to it than that. Somehow, through arrangements

made by this girl, two hundred thousand dollars cash, taken in the last stick-up, that of the Weston National in Ohio, was to come into Corvanni's hands to-night—and there would be no trace of evidence. The whole government case was now in his, Marty Blaine's hands—and it looked as if Marty was about to disappear into the great unknown . . . .

The girl called a number, directed that a car be sent to the corner of Nassau and Cortland, convenient to the rear of the building. "And you needn't bother memorizing that number," she said to Marty as she dropped the instrument. "It's just a pay station in a cigar store where a friend was waiting to pick up my call."

"So you're the new G-man, Marty Blaine," said the youth. "Well, you needn't try to memorize my face, Blaine. It won't get you anywhere. If you *should* out-slick us and make a getaway, just remember that there are no witnesses. Our word is as good as yours. I came to take the girl friend home, and found you sticking up the place."

"I don't have to memorize your face," said Marty, though he knew he might as well shut up. "I've seen you around. You're Vincent Palino, presumably a salesman."

The youth's lips twitched, but he merely grinned. "And *that* won't get you anywhere, either, Blaine."

Marty returned his captor's grin. "Pretty sure of yourselves, eh?" he said. "You admit, then, that I made no mistake in coming here; that either Miss Sherwood, or you, or both, are the hot numbers for which I'm looking?"

"There's no call to admit anything, Blaine," said Palino. "You're a pretty hot number yourself—a little too hot. But you're going to have plenty of time to cool down and figure out for yourself just where you made your wrong move. Get your cigarettes from your pocket and have a smoke—but watch yourself!"

"Thanks," said Blaine, taking out his cigarettes and lighting one. He grinned again. "Is this to be my last smoke? I presume we're going for a little ride?"

"Yes," Palino cut in. "But cheer up—and learn something that may help you on your next job, Blaine. We've junked that old fashioned custom. It's just an ordinary ride. A long one, but at the end you can find yourself entirely comfortable; it will be up to you. You can get beautifully drunk, if you feel that way—and have your pick of some mighty pretty girls. But to cut the comedy, we're just taking a too-smart and dangerous G-man out of circulation for a week or two, maybe less, if you'll go into conference and sign a sporting agreement. We can show you some swell times—and plenty of jack."

"Sticking up five banks, killing innocent bystanders and a federal agent who tried to save the bank's cash," said Marty Blaine steadily, "doesn't come under the head of sport. You've got me, Palino, but it won't help you. My pals will get your big boss, Joe Corvanni, soon enough if I fail—and Joe Corvanni isn't going to get that two hundred thousand the gang took from the Weston National. You can do what you like with me, but sooner or later Joe Corvanni will be trapped. Then the public will know that this importing business here is only a clever front, and that the flashy Broadway playboy is really an underworld boss, ruthless and—"

The grin left the youth's face. "I wouldn't talk like that, Blaine."

"And don't *you* be stupid, either, Vincent," said the girl, opening her bag and running the powder puff over her face. "The G-men, you must remember, have got into the movies—and it's gone to their heads." She glanced at her wrist watch. "Let's get some air. The car should be down there now." She put the powder puff back in her bag and took out a small automatic, which she dropped into the large right-hand pocket of the smart

and trim white linen sports jacket she wore. "Don't put too much faith in my girlish inhibitions, Mr. Blaine," she said. "If the heat should overcome Vincent, I can shoot fast and straight!"

Marty got to his feet without being told to do so. But he was looking at the girl with a new interest. She was hard, now, but he had seen her start when he had told of innocent bystanders and a federal man being killed. A thought had flashed across his mind. Perhaps this girl was not quite all that she seemed. Perhaps they did not tell her—

She was standing close to him. There was no softness in her eyes now. "Give me your bracelets," she ordered.

Marty complied, and she snapped them on his wrists.

"Okay," said Palino. "You lead the way, Angie. And you be mighty careful, Blaine. Don't force us to resort to that oldfashioned custom. It would only result in the oldfashioned truth: Dead men tell no tales."

**T**HHEY took him down one of the rear fire escapes, and Marty realized that they had investigated their ground, for all the windows they passed were dark, as were nearly all the windows opposite. He realized that there was little chance of rescue here. He would have to wait.

The fire escape ended in an alleyway, that in turn led to a narrow passageway beside an old building, where the girl pulled open a wooden door. "Okay," she said, after a glance out, and then the three of them stood on Nassau Street, which, like most of the district at that hour, was practically deserted. A sedan stood directly at the curb with a man sitting at the wheel. He reached back, opened the door.

Marty found himself sitting on the rear seat, between his two captors. The driver, without a word, sent the car leisurely up the street. Heading into the Bowery, they stopped for a

moment and another man, his hat pulled down over his face, got in beside the driver.

There was little doubt in the G-man's mind now that he had butted into a gathering of the five men who had stuck up the Weston bank. The remaining two couldn't be far away. The whole mess was running together, beginning to boil, and here he was with these damned bracelets on! Still, with a little luck . . . .

"I think," said Angie Sherwood, pressing the muzzle of her small but deadly automatic into his side, "that we'd better change our plans. Mr. G-man is being altogether too good—and he's thinking too hard. Fix him up, Vincent, while we look for a nice, quiet street."

Marty Blaine tensed. Damn this girl's razor-sharp brain! Perhaps he could knock her gun aside, make a break for it. But now the third man, turning in his seat, was covering him. Palino went to work with the speed and efficiency of an expert. In two minutes Marty found himself gagged and blindfolded. The handcuffs were removed, but his hands were bound tightly behind his back. The car was turning in the search for a deserted street; then finally it stopped. In response to an order and the prod of a gun, he stumbled out.

"Just an oldfashioned custom, Mr. Blaine," the girl called to him as the car door slammed mockingly. "Blind man's buff. Go ahead and try to tag us—if you think you can!"

He heard the car speed away.

"What the hell!" came in a man's voice; and then, fumbling inexpertly, the man removed blindfold and gag. Marty found himself looking into the face of a startled youth.

"Gee, mister, what happened?"

"Work fast, kid," said Marty. "Untie my hands. Cut the damned cord. There's a knife in my right-hand pocket."

Something in Marty's manner made the young fellow work fast and ask no questions. In a moment Marty was

free. He gave the youth a flash of his badge, which he took from a vest pocket. "You look like a regular guy," he said. "Some crooks I'm after just put one over on me. You can help by keeping your mouth shut."

"A G-man!" exclaimed the youth. "I get you. You can trust—"

But Marty Blaine already was yards away, running for the corner drug store he had spotted. He called police headquarters, and in the space of five minutes a precinct car raced up to the store. Marty was still in the phone booth, calling the Oyster Bay number Tom Draper had given him. Draper answered at once.

"Yes, he's still out here," he said. "But there's something stirring at last! Clint just drove by to report. Our bird is acting as if he's sure got some bad news. He suddenly chased the dames and college boys—busted up the party in three minutes. He's put out all the lights and is sitting there in the living room, waiting for a phone call, I guess, or something to break. There's only two servants, the jap butler and the coon cook, and they're lying low in the kitchen. He drives his car himself, you know. It's parked out front as usual. Say, I've been calling you down at that office for—"

"Listen!" said Marty sharply. In as few words as possible he told what had happened to him. "Get set for trouble," he warned. I'll be there as fast as a car can take me. If he tries to leave, stop him. You've got to keep him there until I come. And if that bunch get there before I do, hold them, too. They may not show—but you've got to be ready for anything. You'd better tip off the local police to stand by."

"Okay, Marty," Draper promised.

ONE of the men in the police car gave place to Marty, and they sped back for the Queensboro Bridge. At the Queensboro Plaza a private car, with another G-man at the wheel, met the police auto, and Marty

switched over. This car, too, sped along with a total disregard of red lights and other traffic rules, and roared into Oyster Bay in record time. They pulled up near the big drug store in the village. Tom Draper was standing in the doorway of the store. He caught a sign from Marty, and in a moment climbed into the car.

"I don't get it, Marty," he said quickly. "That Sherwood girl that you said took you for a ride within the last hour, drove into his place in a roadster not ten minutes ago—and alone."

"The Sherwood girl!" Marty exclaimed. "And—alone?"

"Yes," said Draper. "Drove up as large as life, all by her lonesome. Parked the car in the drive, lit a cigarette and then walked up the porch carrying a suitcase. She rang the bell and was let in at once. But no lights have been turned on. Better drive on out there now, Marty. I'll show you a wooded by-road where we can park this car. We've been using it for our car."

"Step on it, Hammond!" said Marty to the man at the wheel. "You sure they're not watching *us*, Tom?" he asked as the car moved on. "I mean, since I put in that phone call to the house. What happened then?"

"Just nothing—so far as we could make out," Tom Draper replied. "And we could see most everything that went on. He sure stages himself boldly. Not a shade drawn—not until just now when he kicked out his guests. The phone is in his study, back of the living room. We saw him go in there a couple of times, but the party went right on. No one came out to search the grounds, or even have a look around. If he fell for that message of yours—well, he's taking his time. Park in among those trees right here to the left, Hammond. You'll see our car farther in. The grounds of his place are twenty yards ahead, Marty, and so full of flower beds and fancy bushes that we can crawl within ten

yards of the house, provided all is still clear."

Leaving Hammond in the car, they walked cautiously to the high, thick hedge that surrounded Corvanni's showy little "estate." Pushing through the hedge, they dropped to hands and knees and crawled to a big flower bed. Draper made a slight hissing sound, which was answered from the flowers, where two of his companions were concealed. The fourth man, he whispered to Marty, was around at the other side of the house. The two in the flower bed showed themselves.

"No change," said one of them briefly.

"This business doesn't smell good," said Marty, peering toward the dark and silent house. "You three stay here. I'm going into the house. Make no move unless you hear fireworks start."

He broke off, and all four flattened themselves against the cover of the flower bed; for suddenly lights had flashed on in the living room, then in the kitchen. At the same moment the radio blared forth, and Marty Blaine saw the girl who had given him the laugh standing beside the cabinet, idly turning the knobs and smoking a cigarette.

The Jap butler came into the room with a drink on a tray. He put the drink on a stand, and Angie Sherwood idly dropped into a chair beside the stand and took a sip of the drink. She wore no hat now, and seemed to be very much at home. There was no sign of Joe Corvanni.

A minute passed, and still Corvanni did not appear. Marty Blaine noted that the Jap had brought in only one drink. His eyes became hard.

"They put it over on me in New York, Tom, and now it looks as if they've put a fast one over on you out here. I make no excuses for myself, but why the hell you four men couldn't be trusted just to watch a house—"

"What you mean?" Draper demanded, while his two less privileged companions experienced a sinking sensation. "Why, a mouse couldn't get out of there without our seeing it."

"You were told to watch men, not mice," Marty grated. "You're the mice—four blind ones! Joe Corvanni's gone!"

"Gone?" Draper echoed bewilderedly.

"Yes," said Marty, grimly. "Now we've got to find out how and where, damn quick—or that girl wins another bet with herself. Don't you see that her coming was just a plant to distract the attention of you half-wits? She's been here twenty minutes, which means that Corvanni has been on his way at least fifteen minutes. But the lid's off now. They're wise to us. They might just as well be let in on the whole works. Stay here. I'm going right in. If I need any blind mice, I'll call you."

**S**OMETHING told the three discomfited men that their boss had hit on the truth, that Joe Corvanni somehow had given them the slip, right under their noses. Silently they crouched by the flower bed as Marty Blaine rose to his feet, walked boldly to the house, tramped up on the porch and pushed the bell vigorously.

The Jap butler came and opened it at once, with polite, smiling inquiry; but Marty brushed past him and stood before the girl. He reached down and tapped her shoulder, and then stepped back.

"I'm still playing that oldfashioned game, you see," he said, grinning, but keeping his eyes on her hands and on the disappearing butler, who was walking quietly away. "Consider yourself tagged."

"And I suppose that makes me It, in your estimation," said Angie Sherwood, a smile hiding the hard glint in her blue eyes. "I suppose it is I who must now submit to being blindfolded and—"

"I wouldn't say that—not just now, anyway," Marty cut her off, the grin leaving his face. "I'm a little fed up with playing games. Watch yourself and keep your hand away from that pocket. You might force me to be a little rough if you pull that gun on me."

He turned off the radio and stepped to the window. "Come in, boys," he called.

"What's the big idea?" the girl asked, yawning and lighting a fresh cigarette as Draper and his three companions came in, automatics in their hands. "I didn't know they were shooting a picture around here. I think, Mr. Director, that you and your Jim Cagneys have mistaken the house for—"

"That's enough of that, Miss Sherwood!" said Marty. "Where's Corvanni?"

The girl frowned. "I'm not quite sure that it's any of your business, but Ito told me that Mr. Corvanni was not feeling well and went to bed some time ago. Besides, I don't think you are very polite."

"Search the house, boys," Marty snapped. "Nab that Jap and the colored boy. Make them talk."

"Say, listen here!" cried the girl, with well-simulated indignation, springing to her feet. "One good scream from me, and a dozen neighbors will be in here."

"You listen to me, Miss Sherwood," said Marty, as the others hurried from the room. "You're in pretty deep, and you know it. But now is the time for a bright little girl to see a great light. The government could use a girl with your brains."

"That's a swell speech, bright boy," the girl cut in, blowing a cloud of smoke to the ceiling. "But the point of it is about as clear as mud. I begin to think you are neither a movie man nor a bandit, but a plain lunatic."

"You needn't talk so loud, nor overwork the innocent play," said Marty. "My men are not listening. Tell me at once where Corvanni has

gone, and I give you my word to get you off light—maybe even free and clear."

Angie Sherwood sat down again, leaned back lazily and smiled up at him mockingly. "Don't be stupid, Mr. G-man," she said. "Before you get me off, you have to catch me, and to catch me, you must have some evidence—and make it stick. But so far as I can see, Mr. Blaine, you couldn't make even a postage stamp stick."

"That gun in your pocket," he said, "puts you under the Sullivan Law."

The girl laughed. "A gun? Heavens! Here—search me."

Marty bit his lip. He might have known that she would get rid of the gun.

Tom Draper came in, a baffled expression on his face. "There's something damned funny about this house. Corvanni's gone, all right, but so are the Jap and the colored guy."

Marty caught the mocking gleam in the girl's eyes. He knew what Draper meant, that there was a trick card in the pack somewhere. The house, though ornate and costly, was absurdly small, just a tiny bungalow that an expert could search thoroughly in five minutes, and Marty Blaine's men could be counted on in such a simple matter. He was quite certain now that neither Corvanni, the Jap, nor the colored cook could have gotten out in any ordinary way without being spotted. But they were gone—and time was passing. He couldn't help flushing as he met the girl's eyes again. A hell of a swell situation this was! Five husky G-men with nothing to show for a night's work but the doubtful capture of some lone girl—a mocking, brainy girl on whom they could pin just nothing.

The other men had come trailing in.

"I don't blame poor Ito and Sam," said the girl, taking a sip of her drink. "But it's a little funny about Mr. Corvanni. Why should he get out of bed and sneak out of his own house? I'm worried! You men seem to be policemen or something, though why

you come here is a mystery. But you must help me to find Mr. Corvanni. He had a party here. Perhaps he had too much to drink. He may get into trouble, or get run over."

**S**HE stood up and looked from one to another with the most natural expression of genuine concern. So long as there were witnesses, she was going to stick to the play of knowing nothing, of never having seen Marty Blaine previously.

It was all Marty could do to restrain the impulse to take her by her dainty throat and throttle out of her the information he so desperately needed. But he had a code; never yet had he harmed a woman, not even the most vicious of female crooks; nor would he permit any of his men to get rough with one. He hated even to arrest a woman. He preferred to give vent to his feelings by going after the rats who hid behind the women they used.

He looked at this girl keenly as she stood there, and suddenly a possibility flashed to him. There was no doubt in his mind now that she, and she alone, was the hidden link between Joe Corvanni and the new mob through which he operated. As he studied her, with the eyes of a trained psychologist, he began to wonder—to doubt his first impression of her. She was lovely and finely intelligent. Perhaps the hard light in her otherwise honest eyes, and the cruelty that lurked around her mouth, were merely the result of circumstance and environment, not indications of character.

"You're a swell actress, Miss Sherwood," he said, "but why waste your talents? You've more than enough brains to know that whether we get Corvanni or not, he'll have no further use for you after tonight."

Suddenly he stepped close to her and smiled down into her eyes.

"Be yourself, Angie," he said. "You're kidding yourself. Let me tell you something—you're a born G-girl. How about it? Just put us on to Corvanni, and I'll send you to Washing-

ton by plane right now. You'll have the protection and cooperation of the United States Government."

She stared up at him. Something in her eyes, in her manner, told Marty Blaine that at last he had scored, got under her guard. The hard light was gone. Her eyes were frankly troubled.

"You've been riding high," said Marty quickly. "Evidently you don't know the other side of it; that when Corvanni drops you, you'll be up against it badly. But don't take my word for it. Figure it out for yourself."

The girl lit another cigarette, and Marty noted that her hands were not steady. But her chin came up as she said:

"I'll make an admission. I have an intuition that—that someone has broken his word with me, left me in the ditch. I can find out by going to the phone and calling a number. If I get an answer, I may decide to go on acting. But if I don't get an answer, I may do some acting that's not in the play. How about it, Mr. Blaine?" she added with a smile. You can come and listen."

"Okay," agreed Marty. "I'll take a chance on your figuring it out for yourself."

She stepped quickly into the study and dialed a number. Tom Draper and his companions watched their boss curiously. It was the first time they had worked directly with him on a case. They were lapping up first hand knowledge of the odd and apparently crazy methods for which Marty Blaine was becoming famous in the department.

For what seemed like an eternity to the five waiting men, the girl stood with the phone to her ear. She was getting no answer, and Marty Blaine, reading her eyes as she stood there, motionless, quietly smoking her cigarette, felt his pulse begin to race. Then she dropped the instrument on its stand, with a gesture of decision denoting finality.

She faced the five G-men. Her steady eyes met Marty's, and held.

"My intuition was correct," she said quietly enough, though all five men saw the gleam of contempt and anger in the blue depths of her eyes. "I've been ditched, left to hold the empty bag and face the music! I'll take that plane to Washington, Marty Blaine—but not until I've proved to Joe Corvanni and his rats that they can't make a fool of Angie Sherwood! I'm under your command, Mr. G-man. If you have any doubts—"

She was walking quickly back into the living room, Marty and the others following her, when a gun roared. A sharp cry came from the girl, who spun around, reeling. Marty Blaine caught her in his arms as she fell, blood staining her white jacket.

"That window there—put out the lights," Marty snapped, as he carried the girl to the davenport and gently put her down. He whirled, crouching, gun in hand. Anticipating his orders, one of the men had snapped off the lights, while another plunged out through the window on the heels of Tom Draper, who had smashed out the screen with a sweep of his automatic. A third man had darted to the porch.

Shots crashed out on the grounds followed by a man's cry of pain. Then Tom Draper's sharp commands cut through a series of yells and oaths.

"Okay, Marty—coming in," Draper called.

Marty crossed the room and snapped on the lights. Draper and Clint came in, dragging a cursing man with blood dripping from a thigh wound. Marty's eyes flickered. It was Vincent Palino.

"Seems to be alone," said Draper, snapping handcuffs on the captive, "but Jackson and Clark are making sure. Sit down there, you, and shut up—or I'll let you bleed to death."

**M**ARTY BLAINE was on his knees beside the girl, his heart pounding. Then his face cleared as he

saw that the shot intended to kill her had missed, inflicting only a slight flesh wound in the upper right arm. Already the bleeding had stopped. It was shock and terror that had got the better of her. Soon she sat up shakily, then tried to get to her feet as she saw Palino. Marty gently thrust her back on the davenport.

"You'll be all right, Angie," he said. "We'll have a doctor fix that arm—it's little more than a scratch. And don't be afraid. That's the first and last chance they'll have to get you. Go find her a drink, Clint. Quick—Angie, where do we find Corvanni?"

The girl started to reply, but suddenly Palino, despite his wound and the handcuffs, made a berserk lunge across the room, hurling Tom Draper against the wall. He was so quick that he reached the davenport and had raised his manacled hands to bring them down on the girl's head in a smashing blow.

Shifting his gun, Marty leaped, sent his right into the youth's contorted face, splitting his mouth and sending him to the floor in a crashing heap.

"Damn you!" Palino snarled. "Damn you all. And *you*, you dirty, double-crossing little—"

He did not finish the epithet—for there was something deadly in Marty Blaine's eyes—but his words continued to shoot at the girl from his bloody mouth. "I warn you, Angie. You say just one word more, and you won't live to see daylight. What's the matter with you, anyway? Falling for a bunch of college-boy dicks—"

"Take him in the kitchen," snapped Marty, taking a whiskey bottle and a glass from Clint and pouring the girl a drink. Draper and Clint promptly dragged Palino to his feet and bundled out of the room.

"Don't let that rat scare you," said Marty, making the girl down the stiff drink.

A slight shudder passed through her. "I won't," she said. "It's just that I've never seen that side of them. I'll

tell you something—that boy's madly in love with me, and has been watching me like a cat because I turned him down. He's been haunting me—and I had a battle with him this evening. He wanted to kill you right there in Corvanni's office, and because I told him I would blow the works if he did, he told me then that he suspected me of doing just what I am doing now. He must have told Corvanni and convinced him; that's why I'm ditched. They're all to meet here, but Palino, coming on ahead to spy on me, found his suspicions more than verified."

"They're all to meet here!" exclaimed Marty, his eyes flashing. "Quick—Angie, tell me—"

"Yes," she said, dragging on the cigarette he had placed between her fingers. "There's time yet. The four others may not get here for an hour. Between one and two o'clock is the time."

"But—Corvanni!" cut in Marty. "He's coming back here, then? I don't get it. How did he—and the Jap and the cook get out of here?"

"They never left here," said the girl quickly. "They're right here, almost under us."

"We searched the cellar," said Marty.

"There's a sub-cellars," said Angie Sherwood. "Rather, it's an extra cellar, built out alongside the actual cellar. It's under the grounds at the rear of the house. The wall of the actual cellar, behind the coal bin, is a secret door into the extra cellar, which contains three large rooms. There's a regular arsenal down there, and a month's food supplies—everything! But that's not all. From the rear of it there runs a big, long tunnel, passing under the back road and leading to the garage of another house back there—a house secretly owned by Corvanni. The floor of the garage is apparently solid concrete, but there's a secret trap in it. A car can be driven into that garage from the back road without being either seen or heard from here. You see?"

"Yes," said Marty Blaine. "One of those clever layouts that you'd never get wise to without a tip-off—unless you stumbled on it. We've found many of them, but I admit I wouldn't think of looking for one in Oyster Bay."

"In fact, Angie," he said, "I don't believe a word of it!"

The girl sprang to her feet, stared up at him. "You don't believe—?"

"You heard me," said Marty grimly. "It doesn't fit together. That phone call just now was to Corvanni."

"Of course!"

"And you say you got no answer. That means he's ditched you and left you to face the music. Yet in the next breath you tell me that Corvanni's right here."

THE girl's eyes did not waver. "I see—you mean it doesn't check," she said. "I'll make it check. The number I dialed is an unlisted phone—and it's right down there in that cellar."

"So what?" Marty questioned dryly.

"So this!" she returned. "He took it for granted that I'd be able to stall you and get rid of you. My phoning was to be the signal that I had done so. He was to tell me what further to do."

"And so his not answering means that he took a run-out powder on you. He's gone, all right, but I'll tell you just what you did, Miss Sherwood. You dialed the place where Corvanni went. Your call was a prearranged signal; he didn't have to answer. The call meant that we weren't falling for your stall; that we were camping out here—and it wouldn't be safe for him to come back. I guess I'll have to turn you over to the local police while I get after Corvanni myself."

"I tell you I'm not lying, Marty Blaine," the girl pleaded. "You don't know Corvanni's suspicious, tricky mind like I do. Palino must have phoned him from somewhere just before I got here. He told him about my

threatening to blow the works wide open if you were killed. I did put up a stiff fight for you, Marty Blaine! He convinced Corvanni"—she flushed, but went on rapidly—"that I had fallen for you and might talk. I know their minds, and I'm certain I'm right. Corvanni ordered him to hustle out here and kill me before I had a chance to weaken and talk. I'm sure you'll find his car over in that garage. He didn't waste time going down to the cellar first; he crawled right over here. He was just in time to hear you call your men in, and he took advantage of the lucky break and came boldly to the window. He heard what I was saying, and shot—"

"And still—how about Corvanni?" demanded Marty, his eyes searching hers.

"I tell you he's right down there in that secret cellar," the girl replied, her eyes never wavering. "Don't you see? He didn't answer because now it didn't matter. Palino was taking care of me in a few minutes, and Palino is famous for pulling such stunts right under the noses of the police. Corvanni is down there waiting for Palino to report. He isn't worrying about you G-men. He figures there isn't a chance in a hundred that you will get wise to the cellar hide-out."

"You win, Angie," said Marty Blaine. "Your story checks. It checks with what we know of Corvanni, a crook and a killer. Now—come upstairs. In five minutes I'll have a temporary dressing on that wound."

"It can wait," said the girl. "We must get busy. When Palino fails to show down there in a reasonable time, Corvanni is going to get suspicious and make a real getaway through that garage."

"We'll cover that at once," said Marty. He called Tom Draper, and explained matters to him in a few words. "Truss up that rat in the kitchen and gag him," he added. "You and Clark cover the garage. Send Clint and Jackson to hang around here in the

house. We're going down into that cellar—but not just yet. Palino, and those who are coming—they're the Weston bandits, Angie?"

"Yes," she replied, "there are four coming with the money. The loot is always brought here. They'll drive into that garage and go directly down."

"Get out there and check their arrival, Tom," said Marty. "I'll be here in this room, or Miss Sherwood will be here. Move like a shadow, Tom. Corvanni might send the Jap up to snoop, though I don't think it likely—not yet. I suppose you know the secret of opening those doors down there, Angie?"

"No, I don't," said the girl reluctantly. "I hope it won't make you mistrust me again. I've been down there, but Corvanni always was careful to have the door open. I didn't think until now that he must have done that purposely."

"It doesn't matter," said Marty, snapping off the lights as Draper hurried out of the room. "I have a way of getting around that. But I want to know something you might explain. If Corvanni got away with this stunt tonight—if we didn't know about the hide-out down there—how did he propose to face this nasty business up here? I mean, supposing Palino had killed you and got safely down to the cellar?"

"Easy!" the girl replied, sitting down on the floor and cautiously lighting a cigarette. "He has a simple little scheme all ready for any such emergency. Tomorrow morning a man, bound and gagged and with a realistic scalp wound, staggering into some Westchester or Jersey village, would be identified as the missing Joseph Corvanni—and with a perfectly G-proof story."

"I see, I see," said Marty. "And he'll get away with it, too, if we fail to catch him red-handed tonight. Here's Palino's gun. Put it in your left-hand pocket. I'm going to snoop around."

**A** FAMILIAR hiss came from the direction of the kitchen, and Draper came hurrying in.

"They're here," he said. "Four of them in a big limousine. Unlocked the door of the garage, drove in, and locked the door behind them. But that garage and door are tight—not a crack to look through, and the windows are too high. They put no light on and it's a cinch they're not just sitting there."

"They've gone down, all right," said Marty. "Here's where we open a two-hundred-thousand-dollar can, without a can opener. We're going into action, Tom. Get our two cars back there with the lights off, but place them so that the lights will flood the garage door when snapped on. Break out the two machine guns. I'll take one here. You, Clint, and Jackson cover the garage. If they come up that way, they'll come in a rush—and shooting to kill. If they do, don't give them a chance. Spray them down cold. I want Hammond and Clark here with me. If the play is to be changed, one of us, or Angie, will hustle out there to tell you. Okay?"

"Okay," answered Draper, but he hesitated. "Listen, Marty, they'll be coming up through that garage anyway, sooner or later. Why not wait until they do, and just nab them cold as they come."

"It's essential that we get them right down there, red-handed," said Marty. "Hell, man, don't you know their racket? That two hundred thousand cash wouldn't come up with them. It stays right down there, perhaps for several months, until bank tellers get forgetful and careless about noting serial numbers. The secret door would be closed and locked behind them—and we don't know how to open those damned doors. We'd just be making a pinch of suspects. With Joe Corvanni's brains on the job, we'd have a hell of a lot of proving to do."

"Aw, dry up, you big mug!" said Tom Draper with the privilege of an

old classmate, and grinning. "You don't have to draw a map. I'm off."

He disappeared, and in a few moments was replaced by the shadowy figures of Hammond and Clark, the latter carrying a light machine gun which Marty took from his hands.

"Give me your flash, Hammond," he said, taking it. He sat down for a moment, with the machine gun and the flashlight on his knees. In the darkness, to which her eyes were now accustomed, Angie Sherwood stared at him, her heart suddenly thumping, for she saw the odd smile on Marty Blaine's face, the savage smile of the fighter about to go into action.

"Now," he said quickly, lighting a cigarette and dragging on it, "there's more than one way of opening a can. We're going to try something—magic. I have an idea that our ratty friend Palino, though remaining trussed up in the kitchen, is our Open Sesame, our magic can opener."

"Palino!" the girl exclaimed, while Clark and Hammond exchanged startled glances.

"Yes," Marty Blaine went on. "But it's a tricky play—magic and psychology against solid concrete walls, with seven killers and an arsenal behind them. And you're in the act, Angie. If we fail, then we'll have to accept half a victory—the plain pinch Draper suggested. The play is this: Palino should have shown up down there fifteen or twenty minutes ago. Corvanni must be getting a bit worried, if only in the back of his mind. Now, I want you to dial that phone down there, Angie."

"He won't answer it," she said promptly. "Only a few of us have that number, and we're under the strictest orders never to call it except in a dire emergency, or, of course, when he tells one of us to call it at a certain time."

"Palino is one of those who knows it, isn't he?" Marty asked, a certain tenseness in his question.

"Yes," said Angie quickly. "But if you force him to call it—"

"I said this is magic," returned Marty. "You are going to call it."

"But I tell you it doesn't matter who calls—he won't answer," the girl insisted. "He gave orders tonight that nobody but myself was to call that number under any circumstances. I'm supposed to be dead. If that phone down there rings now, he'll suspect a trick; that you've caught Palino and forced him to—"

"Which brings us to the psychology," said Marty Blaine. "He may suspect a trick. But he may figure that Palino got away but stopped a bullet, managed to hide out in the grounds until we beat it, then was just able to drag himself into the house and reach the phone, was not quite able to speak—just able to move the dial. If Corvanni *does* answer, you say nothing—just keep on dialing that number over and over again. Few people can resist a thing like that. It's been tested out."

"But what's it get us, Marty?" asked Clark, unable to hide the impatience in his voice. "I'm worrying that those birds may be coming up through that garage any minute now."

"Not yet," said Marty. "I'm watching the minutes. There'll be quite a powwow down there tonight, with lots to arrange."

"Marty's right," Angie agreed. "I know. But I don't see about ringing that phone—"

"While you're ringing it," explained Marty, tossing away his cigarette and getting to his feet, "I'll be stuck down there, right at that door. You will be a little behind me, Clark; and I want you, Hammond, to be on the cellar stairs, ready to pass a word up to Angie—or to come down and help. That brings us to the final combination of magic and psychology," said Marty Blaine, with his odd faculty of saying things like that in the middle of a life-and-death crisis. "If I'm right, the persistent ringing of that phone is going to work on Joe Corvanni's nerves until finally it drives him to opening that door down there to in-

vestigate, even at the risk of smashing up his whole clever structure."

The other two G-men and girl caught their breath as the possibilities of Marty Blaine's reasoning flashed on them.

"All set?" he asked. "Let's get busy. Start dialing the number in two minutes, Angie. Come on down, men!"

But Angie Sherwood caught his arm, dragged him into the study with her. "You be careful, Marty Blaine," she said earnestly. Then she summoned a fighting smile. "I just wanted to tell you something—in case you get killed. What Palino said about me is true—I'm falling for you!"

Marty grinned at her, "That wound is making you dizzy. Don't dial the wrong number."

"I couldn't," said the girl, as he turned and headed for the cellar.

**M**ARTY BLAINE stood in the empty coal bin, carefully going over the apparently solid concrete wall at the rear of the bin with his flashlight. He had put down the machine gun at his feet. Clark stood just outside the bin, peering around the wooden doorway. Hammond was just visible, halfway down the stairs. The only light in the cellar came from one tiny bulb at the foot of the stairs. The other bulbs had been turned off.

But Marty knew that searching for the hidden button, or whatever the mechanism might be, was a waste of time. He could tell that a masterly and cunning job had been done here. Silently he snapped off the flash and handed it out to Clark, who thrust it into his pocket. Both he and Hammond had an automatic in their hands, and each had an extra gun on him.

All three G-men knew that they were facing a clash with born killers, with no quarter given—if Marty Blaine's "magic" worked and the clash came. And if it did come, it would come without a sound, without an instant's warning.

As a juggler of weapons, there was no better G-man in the country than

Marty Blaine. With the machine gun in his left hand, he stood back in the shadows of the bin, an automatic ready in his right hand.

They had been down there three minutes; now four—now five. There was not a sound, and this seemed to be about the only thing in their favor. The hide-out cellar had been made absolutely soundproof, which worked both ways. The three G-men understood that they could shout at the top of their voices and fire their guns without being heard by the gang of killers gathered at the other side of that secret door. Still, they spoke no word. That door would open so silently that they might be caught before they realized it, but by keeping his eyes steadily trained on that wall, the faint light was just enough to obviate surprise. Though he was not sure just where the door was, or how it would open, Marty was confident that he could spot the slightest movement.

Now, oddly enough, in the intense silence one sound reached his ears, the whirring of the dial up in the study as Angie Sherwood kept ringing, hanging up, ringing. Hope rose in Marty as he actually experienced the force of his own reasoning. Just the constant whirring of the dial was getting *him*. Joe Corvanni was known to be high-strung. If only that constant ringing would get on *his* nerves . . . .

Suddenly Marty tensed, literally held his breath. He heard the jangle of the phone bell! Inch by inch, that half of the wall diagonally opposite to him was moving out toward him, evidently swinging from hinges in the center of the wall. It was a straight, full-length door, not a small trap, as he had feared it might be.

The phone bell pealed. The door opened wider, wide enough for a man to come through, but still the man opening it did not show himself. Marty noted that the door seemed to swing out easily, indicating that there was no spring to snap it shut automatically the instant human pressure was removed. He knew that a little thing

like that might be of the utmost importance now as he crouched, ready to strike like a rattler. Another thing, sinister, registered on his mind: the significant silence in the room back of the open door—only the ringing of the phone.

The gang, guns ready, were waiting for a signal from the man stealthily opening that door. He could drop to the floor, and death would come shrieking over his head, to blast the G-men from the cellar.

Marty Blaine's lips set. He knew that he was facing the most murderous situation of his hazardous life. But it was no time to think of that now, for he was having his chance to get Joe Corvanni, the man who had baffled the Italian government and was now laughing at that of the United States. Marty had calculated each move. The automatic in his hand was clubbed. He would smash the man down, leap over him, and get the drop on the room with the machine gun before the gang could realize what had happened.

But then, even as he stood with his clubbed automatic raised, a gun roared and flamed from the half-open doorway. There was a choking cry, a crash on the cellar stairs—and Hammond toppled through the broken rail. His big body thudded to the floor.

Marty sensing rather than seeing this, cursed himself for the oversight in his careful set-up. He had overlooked the fact that anyone coming through that door would have a direct line of vision to the stairs. The man had seen Hammond standing there . . . .

All this flashed through Marty Blaine's mind in a split second of thought. Almost simultaneously with the roar of the shot, he flung himself recklessly around the edge of the half-open door and jammed the muzzle of his automatic into the killer's throat.

"Drop the smoker—or your head blows off!" He fairly spat the words

into the man's face, not two inches from his own.

Marty Blaine's eyes flamed with savage triumph, for the man was Joe Corvanni himself. Corvanni had not trusted anyone but himself to open the door.

Corvanni let his automatic drop to the floor. His full red lips were drawn back in a snarl, as much a snarl of genuine amazement as of rage. Marty was quick to understand this and take advantage of it. Corvanni himself had been guilty of an oversight. He had allowed his entire attention to center on the man on the stairs.

"Tell your gang: One move, one shot—and your head blows anyway!" Marty whipped at him.

Corvanni's brown eyes became red with blood, his face a wicked livid, but he saw the cold, instant death in Marty Blaine's eyes. "Hold it, boys!" he called. "I'm covered with a machine gun. The Blaine skunk's got the cards—for now."

Marty's brain clicked the real meaning of the words. They'd watch for the slightest false move; but something else clicked, too—he was seeing the real Corvanni, so carefully hidden from the world.

**W**HILE holding Corvanni's eyes, he was able to look beyond him, and size up the hide-out. He had feared that they would plunge the place into darkness, but one dim light was on. They needed that for their own convenience, he realized. He saw that he was standing in a fifteen-foot long passageway, no wider than the secret door, which led into the big, square room. He realized the cunning, practical purpose of this narrow passageway. There had been no response to Corvanni's orders, for not one of his men was in sight. Marty knew why; they were crouching close to the wall at either side of the passageway, where it gave out into the room.

If he backed Corvanni into the room, and Corvanni got safely past

the end of the passageway, the instant he, Marty, appeared, he would be blasted down before he could press the trigger of his machine gun. At another time, and in some lesser mix, Marty Blaine might have fallen for that simple trick, but not now—not when he knew that his life hung by a thread—and when getting Joe Corvanni was the stake in the vicious game.

Clark, his eyes like ice, was at Marty's elbow, an automatic in each hand. Without taking his eyes from Corvanni, Marty shot words at him.

"Tell Angie to get the local police down here on the run. Then she's to run to Draper and tell him to stick there and be ready to blast hell into them if they try a getaway through the garage. Then jump back here." Without a word, Clark raced for the stairs.

"Angie—!" Something like an animal convulsion shook Joe Corvanni. His blood-fused eyes shot flames of hell. For a second Marty thought the man had gone stark mad, and would fling himself on the deadly machine gun.

"Yes — Angie Sherwood," said Marty savagely. "She's giving you a lesson in American manners. Who the hell did you think you were, anyway —Napoleon or Julius Caesar or something? Keep your hands up and your face straight, you dirty, common rat! And stop trying to sneak back far enough to get around the wall."

Suddenly he raised his voice. "Come out where we can see you, you lousy rats!" he commanded. "Line up in the center of the room—in front of that big table. Come with your arms high and your hands empty. All of you—and the Jap, and the cook."

"What if we don't, you dirty fed?" a hard voice jeered. "You want Corvanni alive. Don't let him kid you, Joe; he won't shoot. Tell him to go to hell!"

That jeer stirred something in Marty Blaine. They thought they had him checkmated, and it certainly looked

that way. They could hold out for some time, even if he brought an army of police and G-men to help him. A rush would wipe them out, but it would be a bloody battle, with as many G-men and police going to their death as mobmen.

Marty shrank from the thought of sending honest, decent men to their death just to round up a bunch of crooks and killers, dangerous to society as these latter were.

But they had him in a bad spot. He guessed that even if he shot down Corvanni where he stood, they wouldn't come out. They knew that Corvanni was through, even if he escaped. It was every man for himself. Their only chance was to try to fight their way out though few might make it. But the whole purpose of Marty Blaine's plan would be frustrated. He wanted to see Joe Corvanni publicly lined up with his mob.

There was only one thing to do, and in the split second that passed since the mobman's jeer, Marty determined to take the daring chance that meant all or nothing. The gleam of vicious hope he saw in Corvanni's eyes hastened his decision. He was staking something on the fact that Corvanni wasn't so sure that the G-man would not blast him down. The deadly machine gun was covering him, not the jeering man out of range.

"All right," Marty called. "I'm coming in. But Corvanni comes first. You can blast me—but he gets it!"

**T**HE dim light went out, plunging the room into blackness. Marty barely had a glimpse of Corvanni dropping to the floor—and then all hell broke loose.

Corvanni was yanking the G-man's legs, but Marty had guessed the mob leader's intent. He braced himself, at the same instant pressing the trigger of the machine gun and sending a hail of hot lead into the wall of human bodies that came charging for him in the charnel blackness. Screams and curses filled the passageway. Marty

could not free his feet, but he threw his body forward and down, still pressing the trigger and sweeping the blackness with his hail of death.

Hands clawed at him. A blow, savage enough to split his head open, had it fallen true, glanced from his temple. A bullet stabbed through his left arm; but now, imbued with the berserk strength of a madman—which Marty Blaine had become for the moment—he wrenched his feet from Corvanni's grip. Hands still clawed at him and a bullet seared his back, but he shot his body forward, broke clear and streaked for the center of the room, the machine gun still clutched in his hands.

Berserk as he was, his brain was clicking to the fact that Corvanni's men had made a fatal mistake—and he had been praying that he could take advantage of it before one of those head-splitting blows or a lucky bullet got him. They had rushed him too quickly, and in a solid mass, jamming themselves into the narrow passageway, forgetting that in such close quarters, and with an ounce of luck to favor him, they were giving him a fighting chance, with the darkness heightening that chance.

Screams and curses and the roar of automatics filled the air as Marty struck the table in the center of the room, hurled it over and flung himself behind it. A blast of bullets from a machine gun in a mobman's hands raked it. Then the gun stopped, and for a few seconds a deathly silence fell in the room, a silence broken only by the groans of wounded men. Marty thrust his own gun over the tabletop.

But he did not fire. His brain had become one consuming desire—Corvanni alive! A man screamed a curse, and Marty Blaine's eyes flashed in the darkness. He must have got three or four of them with that first blast, perhaps more.

Then a wild fear gripped him. Clark and others were coming. That was them now, racing down the stairs. But

there had been seconds in which that door had been left unguarded.

"Clark!" he yelled, leaping to his feet and darting recklessly for the passageway. "Get Corvanni. Get him alive!"

"Okay," he heard Clark reply, as guns roared out there in the real cellar. Flashlights stabbed the darkness. One rayed into the passageway as a man rose from the floor directly in Marty's path. The automatic in the killer's hand flamed. Marty felt hot lead stab into his side, but even bullets were not stopping Marty Blaine now. He hurled the machine gun squarely into the snarling, animal face, saw the face disappear in a bloody mass. He raced into the passageway, his eyes gleaming. Joe Corvanni was in the act of pulling the door shut.

Marty lunged into him, jamming the muzzle of his automatic into the cursing man's side. The G-man's furious lunge carried both of them through the door, into a glare of flashlights.

"I've got you, Corvanni!" Marty whipped at him. "Stick 'em up—not a move!"

Joe Corvanni's arms went up. A ring of G-men and local police closed around him; but not until then did Marty Blaine step back.

"Call in Draper," he said thickly, his breath coming in gasps.

As he made for the stairs and went up, he feared for a moment that he would pass out. He knew the wound in his side was not fatal, but it had been a tough battle. Angie ran to him, her eyes stark with anxiety.

"All fine, Angie," he assured her, summoning a smile as he sat down on the davenport. "Phone the medical squad. Get me a drink—two drinks. Corvanni's on his way to the hoosegow."

CLARK came running up from the cellar. "The whole two hundred thousand is down there, Marty," he

reported. "And there's a lot of other evidence."

"Okay. Hold everything until I get my breath," Marty said. Then he added quickly: "How about Hammond?"

"Hurt pretty bad, but he'll pull through," said Clark.

"Call the medical squad—and get Washington on the phone," Marty directed; and then he found himself looking down into Angie's blue eyes—soft, shining eyes, with some new, rare light in them.

"I'm taking up that offer of yours, Marty," she said. "I've decided to be a G-woman."

"You're going to be nothing of the kind," Marty Blaine snapped, while something in his eager, smiling eyes

made her heart beat wildly. "One G-guy in a family is enough. You're going to Washington, all right—but on a honeymoon!" His arms went around her slim shoulders as he leaned down, drawing her close. "How about it, honey?"

For a moment Angie Sherwood's long lashes veiled her eyes. They were filled with a rare happiness when she looked up at him again, but there was also a twinkle in them now. Neither Angie nor Marty seemed aware that the room was filled with grinning men.

"Well, Marty dear," she said softly. "it's a nice, oldfashioned custom, and—"

She raised her head and kissed him.

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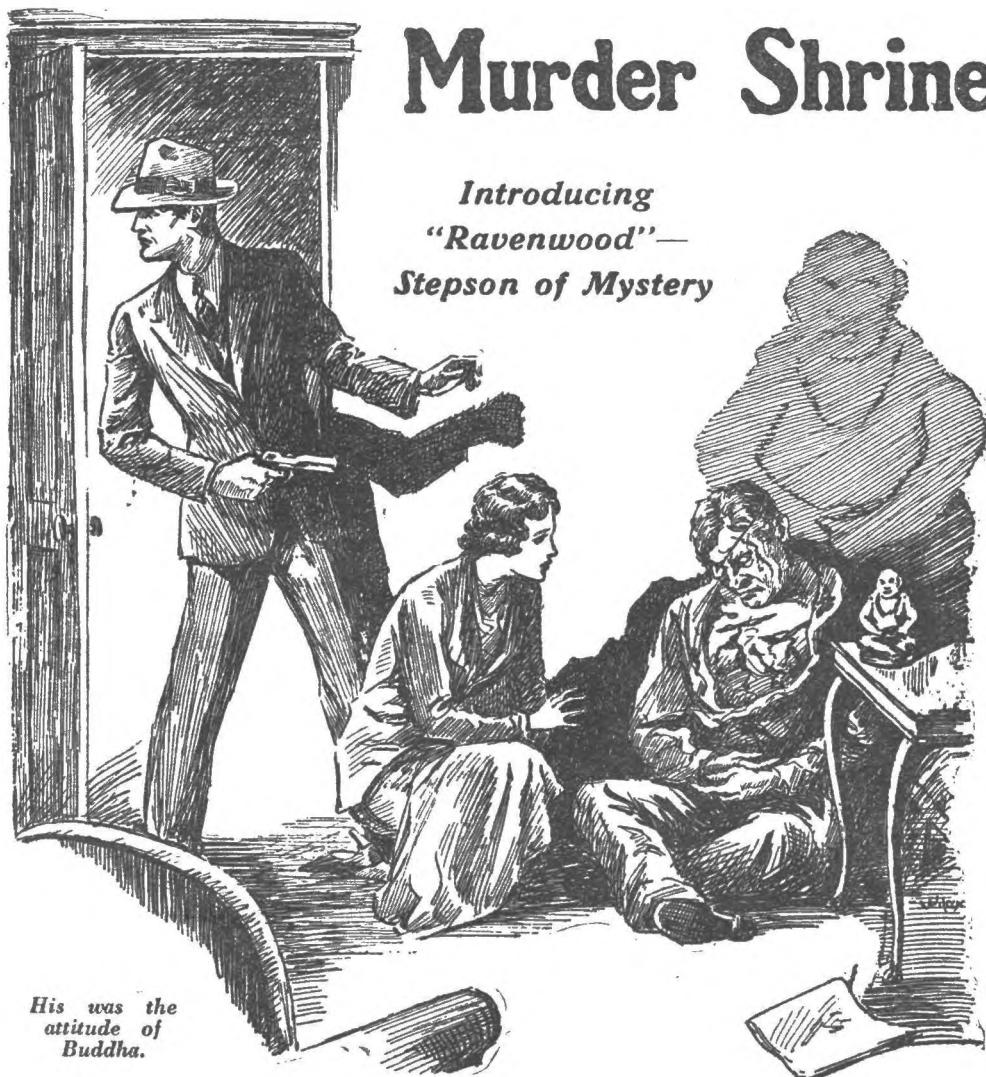


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## CHAPTER I

### BUDDHA'S BLOOD

**R**AVENWOOD strode briskly along the musty underground corridor with Lionel Dunham, curator of the Memorial Museum. The

passage lay deep beneath the vast open chambers where the public viewed rare treasures of art and antiquity. It led to storerooms seldom entered even by officials of the world-famed institution. Until the firm, quick footfalls of Ravenwood had disturbed it, silence

had pervaded this remote recess for days and nights on end.

He paused with Dunham at a massive, dusty door. The curator, sliding a key into the lock, observed curiously: "It's years since anyone has asked to see the Sealed Buddha, Mr. Ravenwood. Not a word has been printed in the newspapers about it for half a decade, since it was salvaged from the sea. It was never placed on public display, you know. I'd almost forgotten its existence. Strange that I should find myself thinking about it tonight—stranger still that within a few minutes you should step into my office and ask to see it."

Ravenwood's clear gaze was directed at the closed door. An extraordinary young man—clean cut, in radiant health, poised, his air of modest confidence enhanced by meticulous grooming and perfect tailoring—a young man who might have been an eminently successful executive. Yet it was his eyes that marked him apart even in distinguished circles.

The color of his eyes was indeterminate—green or blue or grey, changing from moment to moment—but they possessed a quality of steadfast penetration. As he gazed at the closed door he seemed to be seeing something beyond it—something of which ordinary eyes could catch no hint.

"We have kept the Sealed Buddha stored here," Dunham went on, "because we did not wish to tempt misfortune. I would be the last, Mr. Ravenwood, to credit a mere superstition, yet the Sealed Buddha is an evil thing which has bred disaster upon disaster. All who have disturbed its rest have met strange and horrible deaths. That is why we have kept it in this room for years, out of sight, untouched."

"In this room now," Ravenwood said quietly, "there is death."

His eyes remained directed at the door, filled with the light of an uncanny wisdom, yet frankly puzzled by the unseeable thing he saw. A moment of hush passed while the curator

stared, startled. Then the bolt clicked back.

They stepped together into a cavernous room filled with the must of disuse—a room where, after the rustle of their movements vanished, utter silence enwrapped them.

Their eyes moved in slow search—past Grecian statuary standing like frozen, time-eaten ghosts—past suits of mail poised in guarded postures, tarnished by the years—past mummy cases which had held the secret of their dead for century after century. Their eyes probed, because Ravenwood had said: "In this room now there is death." But there was only silence and the dusty flavor of antiquity.

Slowly Ravenwood went with Dunham toward a tarpaulin-shrouded display case standing in the far corner—a case high as their heads, a perfect cube. The curator pulled the covering away. Gold glittered in the dim light, and a sparkle of colored fire shot from an encrustation of jewels. Before them sat an image that had wrought an accursed death over those who had violated its sanctity—the Sealed Buddha.

**R**AVENWOOD studied it in silence. During his years in India he had seen countless Buddhas, but none to compare with the exquisite artisanship of the figure sitting within the glass case. The burnish of its precious overlay, the twinkle of its turquoise ornamentation, shone brilliantly through the dust of its panes. The image of the Enlightened One, the extoller of the eternal, ruthless law of cause and effect called Karma, was almost a living being. Yet it was inscrutable as the ages, mute as the Sphinx.

Ravenwood read the printed card framed at its golden base:

This statue of Buddha, in appearance not unlike countless other figures of the deity, is not only the one Sealed Buddha in the United States, but the largest ever found. The 1929 Stuyvesant Expedition discovered it in an unknown, half-buried temple near Darjeeling, India.

For centuries it has been a custom in the Far East for donors of Buddhas to the temples to seal within the statues some gift appropriate to their wealth. The poor devout often seal within the seated figure nothing more valuable than a handful of rice or a prayer paper, but the rich often fill their gifts with golden coins or precious jewels. In some cases the hidden offerings to Buddha are worth fortunes.

This figure has not been opened, since the process of breaking into it would destroy much of its archeological value, but its size and its obvious worth lead one to conclude it was the gift of a devout of great wealth and therefore it may contain a priceless offering. The Directors of the Memorial Museum have unanimously resolved that it will never be opened.

The Stuyvesant Expedition ship, returning to the United States in 1930 with many relics of high interest to scholars of Oriental antiquities, sank mysteriously in the bay. Among other treasures, this figure remained in the sunken vessel until later the same year, when it was salvaged.

Ravenwood's chameleon eyes raised to the golden visage of the deity. The very silence seemed to become a communion between him and the gleaming figure. When he spoke at last, in a gentle, far-away tone, he said:

"Blood . . . there is blood on the Buddha."

The curator stirred. He moved about the case slowly, scanning the exquisite etching of the collar, the firm modelling of the oval base with its lotus design, and returned to Ravenwood's side mystified. He answered softly:

"Blood? But it was cleaned and polished after we raised it from the bay, and even then the sea water had washed it for most of a year . . . I think I see, Mr. Ravenwood. You're speaking figuratively. Blood, yes—death, misfortune. The curse of the Sealed Buddha has touched my own family. My younger brother vanished the day the image was salvaged, five years ago, and not the slightest trace of him has ever been found."

Ravenwood's manner subtly changed. He straightened from his scrutiny of the figure, his shoulders squaring. A smile played across his lips.

"You see," he said graciously, "I'd never read of this Sealed Buddha, or even heard anyone mention it. It was already in this room, forgotten, three years ago when I returned to the United States from India. However, I knew it was here and felt that tonight I must see it. Thank you very much for the privilege, Mr. Durham."

The curator's eyes widened incredulously as he followed Ravenwood to the door. They were stepping out when a sound disturbed the dusty hush. It was a rattle, a quick, metallic reverberation, that became vanishing echoes in the cavernous store-room. Dunham stood stock still, staring. Ravenwood's warm smile faded. Together they looked at the shining Buddha in the case. They did not speak, but the same certainty gripped them both as the door quietly closed.

The sound had come from the golden figure—the whisper of a secret sealed by the centuries.

**W**HEN Ravenwood walked briskly into the curator's office, the telephone was ringing. Dunham, gazing at Ravenwood intently, lifted the instrument. Overpowering puzzlement forced him to ask:

"You had never read of the Sealed Buddha, or even heard of it, yet you knew it was here? Mr. Ravenwood, your reputation as a student of Oriental lore, and as an investigator of mysteries, is well known to me, but I cannot understand—"

"It is what we do not understand, Mr. Dunham," Ravenwood answered softly, "which makes all creation so fascinating. The realities of Oriental mysticism are incredible to the modern Occidental mind, but fortunately I am of both worlds. I devote myself to investigating strange crimes because the unknown ways of Siva—Siva, the attribute of destruction in the system of Yoga—is a challenge I must meet . . . I am not expecting a phone call, but I believe this one is for me."

The curator started. He pressed the instrument to his ear, then extended it, eyes even wider. "Yes," he said in a whisper, "for you."

Ravenwood spoke briskly into the transmitter before the person on the far end of the wire had an opportunity to utter a single word:

"Ask the young lady to wait, Sterling. Tell her I'm delighted she decided to consult me. She is not to worry about my fee, because there will be none, and she's quite right in fearing her father is in danger. I'll see her in ten minutes."

Ravenwood immediately disconnected, bowed to Dunham: "You've been most kind. Good night."

He was the last to leave the tremendous marble building, as the closing hour of the museum had passed. Once at the wheel of his sleek coupé he drove with rapid dexterity across the city to the rearing apartment house called Sussex Towers, the most fashionable in the metropolis. An elevator whisked him without a stop to the penthouse, and his touch on a pearl button brought his stolid, mundane manservant to the door.

"You neglected to inform me, sir," Sterling said in mild reproof, "that you were expecting a caller."

"But I wasn't," Ravenwood answered as he slipped out of his topcoat. "I have never seen the young lady. She knows me only by reputation. She decided to consult me only a few moments before she telephoned. Still, Sterling, perhaps you're right after all. I knew *someone* was coming."

He strode at once into the library, a modernistic room decorated in brilliant taste. His caller was waiting at his desk—a strikingly beautiful girl, her color rich, her ripe lips tense with anxiety, her limpid eyes pleading for help. She was silent while Ravenwood reassuringly took her hand. He seated himself to face her. Then he said gently, in almost a whisper:

"I have already seen the Sealed Buddha."

ONE full minute the girl was wordless. Fear flashed in her eyes, then faded—because Ravenwood was smiling. Her anxiety subtly became hope. She said at last: "You *can* help me."

"I will."

"But how did you know I came to see you about the Sealed Buddha? How did you know I'm so frightfully worried about my father, Captain Brooks? I thought I was the only one, the only one in all the world who—"

"Saw the connection between the deaths?"

"Yes!" She started from her chair, then sank back, her cheeks whitening. "Then you've been working on the case. You know of the curse that has killed so many, horribly. My father and the mate, Conklin, are the only two officers of the salvage ship who escaped it so far. Most of the crew are dead. The police don't realize what it means, but you—you have been investigating the case and—"

"No," Ravenwood said. "I knew nothing of the Sealed Buddha until tonight, when the certainty somehow struck me that you would come."

She studied Ravenwood's changing eyes. Her anxiety suppressed her questions, poured out her story. "From the very beginning the Sealed Buddha has meant death and destruction. Every member of the expedition that found it fell prey to the curse. Some never lived to return home, others died aboard the expedition ship, the—"

"The *Treasure Seeker*?"

"Yes . . . The rest were drowned like trapped rats when the *Treasure Seeker* sank in the bay, from no apparent cause. My father captained the salvage ship engaged by the Memorial Museum to recover the cargo. The evil spell began to be felt again. Divers died while working on the wreck. The man on board representing the museum—Arthur Dunham—melted into thin air with never a trace to reveal what became of him. That was five years ago—and after the Sealed Buddha was stored away, the curse

seemed to relent. But it's striking again. It has struck, four times within the past several weeks. Now I am afraid it will claim my father."

Ravenwood observed: "Captain Brooks is not aware that the evil curse has somehow become revived."

"No. I thought no one knew but me. I'm sure no one dreams it even now, except you and I. You see, I am a secretary of the Stuyvesant Institution. Part of my work is clipping newspapers. Two weeks ago I found an item telling of the death of a man who had worked with my father on the salvage ship. I put it away, but said nothing. I waited. It came—the news of the deaths—three more, each in the same horrible way. There are the clippings, Mr. Ravenwood. They prove the curse of the Sealed Buddha is at work again."

Ravenwood placed aside the items which the girl jerked from her purse. He was looking at her intently, yet his gaze went beyond her, into an unknown realm. He sat perfectly still, a living image, as the girl rushed out a plea:

"Captain Brooks doesn't deserve such a ghastly death. Can't you—somehow, can't you stop it?"

Ravenwood was tensely rising. He said: "Yes—yes, we can try to stop it. But we must hurry. I see him—your father—a man with one eye lost, in pain, in torture. Blood—his blood—and a little Buddha sitting on the table, staring at him, while he suffers. It promised him death when it came, and death is there, waiting . . . . Hurry!"

He seized the startled girl's hand. He hastened with her to the elevator while she gazed at him in speechless wonder. During the swift descent of the cab he made sure of his arm-pitted automatic. He rushed the girl to his waiting car. As the tires whirred and the wind ripped past, she realized Ravenwood was driving unerringly by the shortest route to a house whose address she had not told him.

## CHAPTER II

### THE NAMELESS ONE

RAVENWOOD slipped the car to the curb in front of a modest brownstone house marked by the red and green gleam of a ship's running-lights. Lieta Brooks ran breathlessly up the steps at his side. As her trembling hand worked the key at the lock, he listened intently. A series of sounds affirmed his premonition that the evil curse of the Sealed Buddha was at work.

A moan, prolonged, expressing racking pain. Running footfalls, receding into a hush. The slam of a door, followed by a moment of silence. Then, again, an anguished groan.

The bolt clicked back. Ravenwood's long strides took him to a wide-open door, from which light was streaming. He stopped short, the girl shrinking at his side, gazing upon a scene he had already envisioned. The little Buddha—the blood—the tortured man.

The bronze image, four inches high, was sitting on a table, staring implacably across a carpet blotted with red, upon the man leaning in a sitting posture against the wall. His encarmadined clothing glistened. His one visible eye was closed, the other covered by a black patch. He was squatting on folded legs, his hands resting entwined. His was the attitude of Buddha!

The girl broke past Ravenwood, dropped to her knees beside the still figure. Ravenwood's chameleon eyes searched the room. In a rear corner a desk had been rifled. On the table a cardboard carton sat, packed with crumpled tissue paper marked by a cavity which revealed that it had contained the little Buddha. While the girl sobbed, Ravenwood went quietly toward the seated man and said:

"He is not dead."

He lifted Captain Brooks as easily as though the hulking ex-seaman were a sleeping child. In the next room, he lowered Brooks to a bed. The captain's face and chest were slashed, as if by

a razor, and the wounds were still oozing. Ravenwood's crisp orders sent the girl scurrying to a linen closet for towels. As he packed them over the cuts, Brooks' lips worked.

"I don't know!" It was a strained scream. "I don't know!" A shudder shook the man on the bed and his quavering voice dropped to a whisper. "Mask . . . Buddha . . . living Buddha . . . I don't know . . . don't know . . . Why the living Buddah—now—with Buddha's mask . . . ? Drive the curse deeper . . . "

Ravenwood turned to the telephone. He dialled the number of the nearest hospital, demanded an ambulance. Breaking the connection, he spun off the number of police headquarters and asked: "Inspector Stagg . . . Ravenwood speaking, inspector." He gave the address, the essential facts in terse syllables. "He was tortured by someone trying to get information from him. My arrival interrupted the attempt. It may be repeated. For that reason, I suggest you guard him closely."

Stagg had no chance to answer before Ravenwood broke the connection and turned to the desk. Among the scattered papers he found an opened letter addressed to Captain Brooks and signed with the single name, Conklin. He read one sentence before he slipped it into his pocket: *This is the first time I've been home in more than a year.* He turned to the bedroom door, bowed, and said:

"He'll be quite all right, Miss Brooks. An ambulance and the police are on their way. Good night."

She started up. "But—you promised to help me!"

"I intend to keep my promise," Ravenwood answered, "but my presence here isn't necessary. May I clear up one point? It is not the curse of the Sealed Buddha you need fear. It is a man who wears a Buddhistic mask—a ruthless, diabolical murderer. He wears that mask for a reason—to further terrorize his victims, on account of something in the past. He will soon

strike again, without warning. Again, Miss Brooks, good night."

The girl stared after him speechless as he went with quick, firm stride from the torture room.

**T**HE scrupulous Sterling admitted Ravenwood to his penthouse apartment. Seated at his desk in the library, he intently read the newspaper clippings which Lieta Brooks had given him. The items were terse but routine minor reporting, apparently unconnected.

In Cleveland a man named Dyer, the owner of the Ship's Grill, had been found dead of loss of blood in his home, stabbed, apparently by a burglar he had discovered at work. In Jersey City a retired, married seaman named Elgee, who ran a real estate business, had been found in one of his empty houses, dead as a result of numerous cuts. In a small town in Connecticut, a young teacher of mathematics named Finch, missing two days from his classes, was discovered dead in a crimsoned bed, his body horribly slashed. A drink-sodden corpse, evidently a tramp felled in a knife fight, and identified as one Lane, found in a gutter not far from Ravenwood's apartment, had been taken to the morgue.

All of them, Lieta Brooks had said, had shared the work of salvaging the Sealed Buddha—and all of them, Ravenwood knew, had been tortured.

The girl had included with her clippings several yellow articles concerning the salvaging of the *Treasure Seeker*. Ravenwood found deep fascination in the accounts of the deaths and misfortunes which had struck among those handling the Sealed Buddha. Climaxing a series of disastrous accidents, the representative of the Memorial Museum had completely, mysteriously vanished.

It was certain that Arthur Dunham had boarded the salvage ship in his capacity of supervisor of the recovered cargo. He had personally directed the raising of the Sealed Buddha from the

sea. During the return voyage of the salvage ship he had apparently melted into nothingness. Prolonged questioning of Captain Brooks by the police had had no result. Many believed Arthur Dunham had been destroyed by the wrath of a vengeful deity.

Ravenwood rose quietly from his desk while reading the letter written Captain Brooks a few days previous by Mate Conklin. Its news of a year's unbroken seafaring ended with the expression of hope that they might see each other soon. Ravenwood saw in it only one line which drew his interest—Conklin's home address. His mind dwelt upon it as he left the library and sought a room far in the rear.

When he passed through the door, the bustling atmosphere of the modern world vanished, and in its place came a pervading serenity, a soul-easing peace that seemed to flood out of the unknown ages and enwrap him in the breath of mysterious India . . . .

**R**AVENWOOD had known India as a boy and as a young man, with a deeper intimacy than usually rewarded the sympathy of a white native. Born of an American father, who had plunged into the bottomless sea of Oriental philosophies, and of a British mother, he had absorbed its every mood. He recalled, as he stepped into this hushed room, the working of the strange forces which had shaped his life.

A scene still clear after fifteen years—the mountainous crags of Burmah, near the border of forbidden Tibet, and his father's hunting camp. A stealthy watch because prowling tigers were near. A sound on the trail—lifted guns, then fascinated bewilderment. No beast had appeared but a man. Bewilderment because there was no settlement within miles, yet this hoary being was walking with slow majesty, empty handed—a man who seemed old as the mountains rearing behind him, white-bearded, with the all-understanding of a sage.

Then a tawny flash at the trail's side.

A husky warning: "Tiger!" The lithe, leaping beast streaking toward the snowy-bearded man. Ravenwood's father had fired with lightning swiftness. The extended claws of the tiger had dropped within an inch of the venerable pilgrim. Paws which would have torn the old native to shreds fell limp. The ancient one had not moved, save for a lifting of his luminous eyes. In his native tongue he had said:

"Always the Nameless One will guard you and your flesh."

He had vanished along the trail as mysteriously as he had appeared in a jutted land where there was neither food nor shelter. The boy, Ravenwood, did not forget him. Years later, when the plague was sweeping Burmese villages, he had seen both his mother and father die in tortured fever the same night, and then he had felt the first flash of the weird power which had remained with him since an intuitive voice, speaking within his mind, first said: "I am coming, my son."

That night the Nameless One had come. From nowhere, informed by some intelligence beyond the grasp of the boy's mind, with a dispatch that no known means could explain, the savant had returned to fulfill his promise.

Year after year, under the oracular guidance of the Nameless One, whose every glance and every word were suffused with the wisdom of untold ages, Ravenwood had striven to absorb the teachings of Yoga. His impatient, active, Western temperament, incompatible with the apathetic abstraction of the Oriental, barred him forever from complete success, but he had won himself strange powers rarely granted to any but the native faithful. His ability to call upon forces inconceivable to his fellowmen marked Ravenwood as a man apart.

Upon his return to the United States, the old Yogi had accompanied him. Here, midway between earth and sky, shut away from the hustle of the modern metropolis, he continued to fulfill his pledge of faith. Here, in a room never entered by anyone but

Ravenwood, steeped in the savor of India, he practised the self-mortification of his mystic faith. Before Ravenwood now sat the Nameless One.

**I**T was dark in the room, and the atmosphere was rich with a peaceful warmth. The Nameless One sat almost invisible in the gloom, his hoary head bowed, his snowy beard drifting across his thin shoulders, immobile except for the living light in his omniscient eyes. They turned an absorbing understanding upon Ravenwood as he stood inside the closed door.

"Venerable seer," Ravenwood said quietly in the native tongue of the Nameless One, "tonight I am striving to pierce the veil of the unknown, to find vision farther than my eyes can see. I have seen a little, but not enough. I beg you to bestow your enlightened wisdom upon me."

The voice of the Nameless One was scarcely a breath. "My son, in the practise of archery there is something resembling the principle in a man's spiritual life. When the archer misses the center of the target he seeks the cause of his failure within himself."

Ravenwood felt a flow of understanding from the old man, whose untold years had been spent in diverting the senses from the external world, and in concentrating the thought within. He gazed at the *yantra* hanging beside the Nameless One—a diagram for worship, aiding the worshipper to achieve an identity in consciousness with the deity—and felt the scope of his super-senses increasing.

"Esteemed savant," he asked quietly, "what do you see?"

The Nameless One whispered: "Death . . . He is a man who walks haltingly, sometimes with pain. He is walking now, in darkness, while water surrounds him. Yet he is dead even as he walks, for an outraged god has marked him for prey. He lies now in his blood . . . and around him there is a brighter red . . . sparkling and precious . . . the crystallized life-blood of the earth . . .

"My son, men all say 'We are wise', but when driven into a trap, a net or a pitfall, he is rare who knows how to find a way of escape."

Ravenwood observed: "I know of no man who walks with a limp, reverenced master. Perhaps the glittering red solids you see are rubies—a secret treasure?"

The Nameless One continued as though he had not heard: "Another . . . now a man who looks upon the world through only a single eye . . . The water surrounds him as it surrounds the man who was destroyed . . . and he has, in his hands, this man with the single eye, a heavy weapon on which there is blood . . . the blood of the other."

"Is he not a sage, my son, who neither anticipates deceit nor suspects bad faith in others, yet is prompt to detect them when they appear?"

Ravenwood exclaimed: "Captain Brooks—he is a man with a single eye! Blood on a weapon in his hand! Do you mean he is guilty of murder, sire—that his daughter has sought my help only in the hope of protecting him by deluding me?"

"And I see—" the Nameless One's voice became an even fainter whisper—"and I see a grave . . . an empty grave . . . waiting . . . Is it for the man who walks haltingly, my son? It is not for the man with the single eye—that I reveal. It is not yet . . . not yet . . . but it is waiting for the dead . . .

"He whose boldness leads him to venture, my son, will be slain. He who is brave enough not to venture will live. This is why the sage hesitates and finds it difficult to act—but who is it that knows the real cause of Heaven's hatred?"

Ravenwood stood chilled. *An empty grave waiting. He whose boldness leads him to venture will be slain.* He heard it from the bearded lips of the Nameless One, whose every word was ordained truth, like a pronouncement of doom upon himself.

THE Nameless One sat with hoary head bowed, absorbed in an alert passivity, as though listening to inaudible music. Quietly Ravenwood withdrew. Chilled with apprehension, he went at once to yellowed clippings on his desk. In the account of the disappearance of Arthur Dunham he found a line which widened his eyes: *The missing man walks with a pronounced limp.* The Nameless One had looked into both the future and the past and his vision had revealed two unknown deaths—one that of the man who had disappeared, the other that of a waiting tomb . . . .

Death, and sparkling red crystals, the life-blood of the earth. The thought of rubies persisted in Ravenwood's mind—a pious offering appropriate to the wealthy donor of the Sealed Buddha. Rubies—the secret treasure of the golden image? And a man with a single eye, a bloody weapon in his hand—Captain Brooks, his name now darkened by the hint of his being a murderer—yet tonight he had suffered torture at the hands of a masked man who had left him dying in the posture of the vengeful Buddha.

Ravenwood glanced up anxiously as Sterling glided close. "An officer from headquarters to see you, sir—Inspector Stagg." Ravenwood nodded, absorbed in the puzzle of the Nameless One's vision. When he looked up again Stagg was at his side, glaring—a short, chunky man whose innate skepticism shone in the coldness of his deep-set eyes.

"Ravenwood," Stagg said bluntly, "you've got some high-class explaining to do."

Ravenwood, gazing at the letter written by Mate Conklin to Captain Brooks, answered at once: "You want to know how I knew Captain Brooks was being tortured. I've tried to explain these matters to you before, inspector—but it's hopeless. I knew it was happening while it was happening—that's all the explanation I can give you."

Stagg scowled. "I don't believe your cock-and-bull stuff about occult wisdom. I'm a practical, level-headed man. I admire the way you've cracked a lot of tough cases, Ravenwood, but to be perfectly frank, I don't trust you. How could you know what was happening to Brooks if you weren't tipped off ahead of time—or if you didn't have a hand in it?"

Ravenwood was self-absorbed. "You're inferring I'm implicated, inspector. That's absurd. Suppose I told you it's going to happen again—suppose I told you when, and where, and to whom? You'd consider that guilty knowledge, wouldn't you?"

"Damn right I would!"

Ravenwood, nerves tightening, started toward the door. "In that case, inspector, I'll be prudent and keep it to myself, and try to prevent it without your help. It's coming—coming soon. I can't talk to you now." He stiffened as Stagg's hand closed forbiddingly on his arm. "Don't hold me back, inspector. If you do, you'll be responsible for a man's death!"

He tore away from the suspicious police officer, chilled and bewildered by Stagg's searching gaze. His mind was groping, groping toward an image as fleeting as a restless dream, a kaleidoscopic warning which somehow he could not force to coalesce. He felt the nearness of death—felt that much surely—but the rest was a torment of confusion. While Stagg stared after him, he hurried from the library, to the remote room where the omniscience of an oracle might aid him to outwit a murderer.

He stepped again into the presence of the Nameless One.

"**R**EVERED sire," Ravenwood besought tensely, "aid me to see! I feel the approach of doom for one who does not suspect it, but my grasp can not reach the certainty. A human life may depend upon it. I must know in order to help him."

The old man's kindly eyes were dim lights in the gloom. "My son, man has

ten thousand plans for himself, the Master has but one for him. Man cries 'Now, now!' The Master says 'Not yet, not yet.' I see only a tomb . . . a waiting tomb . . . for him whose boldness leads him to venture."

Again a sharp chill struck at Ravenwood's heart. The very impatience for which the Nameless One had chided him forced him to turn away. He jerked open the door and stepped out, but a sudden, subtle tug of forces stopped him. He looked back instantly, and the breath left his lungs.

There had been no movement, no sound, but now the gloom was empty. The Nameless One was gone.

Ravenwood stood stock still, gazing into the darkness, and before him he saw the dread thing which was not yet, which the Nameless One had seen before him—a tomb . . . It was a cavity in a crypt, and its bronze door was standing open, inviting death. *For him whose boldness leads him to venture.*

The cold breath of the grave swept over Ravenwood while the image hung in the air. Then, suddenly, it was gone, as the Nameless One himself had vanished, and the rich, mysterious gloom was empty.

Ravenwood jerked away. Stagg was not in the library when he passed through. He hurried into his coat, turned to the entrance. He found the hall blocked by the stolid Sterling. Sterling was extending a small box toward Ravenwood.

"This was delivered a moment ago, sir," the manservant said, "by messenger."

Gazing at it in dismay, Ravenwood exclaimed: "The Buddha!"

"You were expecting it, sir?" Sterling asked. "Perhaps you ordered it?"

Ravenwood smiled wryly. "No, Sterling, I didn't order it, but somehow I was expecting it—yes."

He ripped the cord from the box. Flipping the cover off, he fingered into crumpled tissue paper. It lay nestled in soft white—the little bronze diety. Ravenwood lifted it out carefully, and

placed it on the table. It turned upon him the same implacable stare its duplicate had directed at the tortured Captain Brooks.

"A tomb waiting," Ravenwood murmured. "A tomb—somewhere—waiting."

Sterling asked: "Beg pardon, sir?"

Ravenwood turned misty eyes upon the manservant. Mundane, literal-minded, Sterling felt none of the strange forces playing around Ravenwood now. He could not feel the cold breath, promising doom, flowing out of the nether-world. But images were swirling about Ravenwood, invisible, intense—a confusion in which there was only one certainty. Death—the waiting tomb . . .

### CHAPTER III

#### FLAMING LOOT

**R**AVENWOOD hurried out. In his car, he felt he was being watched. Stagg, he sensed, was keeping a wary eye on him. He drove rapidly, his destination the home of Mate Conklin, but he was forced to lose precious minutes by circling through the city. The inspector's dogged skepticism was a threat Ravenwood strove to evade. He traced a confusing course through dark streets until, abruptly, he felt he had shaken his pursuer.

He swung at once to the home of the mate. It was a small house near the outskirts of the city, its blinded windows chinked with light. Ravenwood went quietly to the entrance, found it unbolted. He stepped through and stood in a gloomy hall, listening. In one of the rear rooms he sensed presences.

Suddenly the hush was broken by a scream of pain. It changed to babbled, incoherent protests. A second voice mingled with it, ringing with an urgent demand, yet muffled. A hysterical turmoil of words, changing again into a wailing cry of agony.

Ravenwood took long strides along the hall. He gripped the knob of an-

other door. The muffled, commanding voice was speaking in the closed room behind it—words made unintelligible by the hysterical protests of the second man. A bolt stopped Ravenwood.

His fists hammered the panels. Instantly the muffled voice ceased—but another scream rang out. The second man slavered out meaningless syllables in a delirium of torture. Ravenwood's knuckles pounded again, but his hand poised when he caught a few clear words. They came again, an exhausted gasp:

"In the Buddha!"

Now quick movements rattled in the closed room. Ravenwood sensed that the torturer was seeking an escape. He knew that if he left this door he could not, single-handed, block every way out of the house. He drew back, calling upon his super-senses to reveal to him the scene behind the bolted door, but in his anxiety he found only confusion. The secret floated beyond the grasp of his excited Western mind. But through the turmoil a message flashed.

"Halt, my son!"

The voice of the Nameless One—a warning. It chilled Ravenwood, but his impatience would not let him heed it. He crashed his shoulder against the door. Beyond it there still sounded quick movements. He drew back, poised to fling himself again.

A hand gripped his wrist. He looked up instantly. In the gloom eyes were gazing at him—eyes alight with profound wisdom. A peaceful face, white-bearded, was close to his. Lips rich with the wisdom of the ages spoke in a whisper. Again the warning:

"Halt, my son."

The Nameless One was standing between Ravenwood and the bolted door. A sound stirred the hush. Something invisible jarred against the panels. The man inside the room was not beating the wood. No visible thing was touching it, yet a force was striking. Instantly, inside the room, a gun blasted.

Bullets drilled through the panels—two, three. Ravenwood saw the holes appear, spraying light. He knew the slugs would have hit him if he had persisted in his attempt to break down the door. Now he remained untouched. The flying lead struck the back of the hoary oracle. While the reports still reverberated in the closed room, Ravenwood found himself gazing into empty air.

The Nameless One had vanished.

**S**ILENCE beyond the bolted door. Ravenwood turned, went to the rear of the house. The small yard was quiet. No movement stirred the shadows. Ravenwood circled the dwelling, finding no sign of the torturer he knew had escaped. At the rear corner he tried a window and found it unlatched.

He thrust it up, shouldered through the heavy curtains, straightened gazing at an appalling scene. The room was a shambles. Furniture was overturned, lamps crashed down, the carpet kicked up—and spattered blood marked everything. It was the blood of a man who was slumped against the wall. In front of him a little bronze Buddha was sitting.

Ravenwood stooped over Mate Conklin. The seaman's face, chest and arms were horribly slashed. The cuts were discolored and bubbling faintly. A pungent odor told Ravenwood that acid had been thrown into the wounds; that Conklin was suffering unendurable pain. He lifted the man, carried him to a couch, tried to shake a response from Conklin—vainly.

He found baking soda in the kitchen, hurriedly made a paste of it, salved it into Conklin's manifold wounds. It fumed as though it were cooking, then quieted. Conklin began to breathe more easily. His eyelids fluttered. He stared at Ravenwood, shrinking back with terror. Ravenwood said quietly:

"You are dying."

The seaman kept staring. His slavering lips twisted in agony. Ravenwood went on evenly:

"The Buddha came first. It filled you with fear. You suspected what it meant. Then the man came—the man in the bronze mask. He was desperate to learn something from you. What did he want to know?"

Conklin shuddered in silence.

"You have kept a secret these five years," Ravenwood continued, "carrying it around the world with you. The secret of a murder. The secret of the rubies. Have you any of them now—your share of the Sealed Buddha's treasure?"

Conklin quavered: "They're gone—all gone—squandered."

"Was it fear that drove him here—the man in the bronze mask—fear that it would become known he was an accomplice in the murder? Was he desperate to silence everyone who might reveal the secret—desperate to remove every possible chance of going to the chair? Or did he want the rubies he thought you still had?"

Conklin whispered: "The rubies are gone—all gone."

Ravenwood's eyes were a command. "Holding it back now will gain you nothing. You are dying. The minutes of your life are numbered. You have a story to tell, and already I know part of it. You robbed the Sealed Buddha."

Conklin strained up. "How can you know that? Who talked?"

"You and the others robbed the Sealed Buddha. You found a king's ransom inside it—rubies. You had it all planned—how you could seal the image again so that no one would know it had ever been opened. But what is inside the Buddha now, Conklin? What is its secret?"

Conklin's eyes protruded with terror of the death he knew was coming. "How could you know? The others are dead. We pledged each other never to speak of it. We scattered, after the salvage job was done—scattered all over the world. Each of us took a share of the rubies . . . Yes—we robbed the Sealed Buddha."

CONKLIN spoke swiftly, with failing breath. "It was dark in the hold. We went down one by one. We worked fast, with everything planned. We cut a hole in the bottom of the Sealed Buddha, and the rubies poured out—a fortune. We were dividing them when—he saw us."

"The man who limped—Arthur Dunham, sent by the museum to check the salvage."

"Yes. We—we killed him! We had to kill him to save ourselves. His blood was on my hands—on the hands of all of us. Red—like the rubies. 'Throw him overboard,' I said. 'Tie chains around him and heave him over the rail.' We argued, down there in the dark hold—murderers, all of us."

"Dyer and Elgee and Finch—he was a kid in college, working on the salvage job just during the summer—and the others—"

Ravenwood urged: "Name them all, Conklin! Remember, one of them may be left—so desperately afraid that he has silenced all the others. Can you hear me, Conklin? Tell me their names!"

Conklin was sinking back, his breath beating spasmodically, his eyes glazing. Ravenwood shook him and his jaw wagged.

"Conklin! Their names! What's in the Sealed Buddha now?"

A last, rattling breath broke past Conklin's loose lips. Ravenwood sat motionless, staring at the slashed face of a corpse. Death had robbed him of the truth at the very moment it had come within his grasp. He rose, went slowly toward the bolted door. Overwhelmed with hopelessness, he paused, hearing a voice speaking within his mind:

*"The tree which needs two arms to span its girth sprang from the tiniest shoot. The tallest tower rises from a little mound of earth. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."*

The reassurance of the Nameless One, flashing from nowhere, vanishing as mysteriously as it came . . .

Ravenwood hurried from the house of the dead. He sent his super-charged car past corners on whining tires. The special elevator of Sussex Towers lifted him to his penthouse, with a slowness intolerable to his anxiety. He rushed past the matter-of-fact Sterling, strode swiftly to the door in the far, quiet corner.

The rich atmosphere of the gloomy room was hushed. All-knowing eyes turned upon Ravenwood. The venerable seer was seated exactly as Ravenwood had seen him before, maintaining a protracted rigidity of posture. The Nameless One, unharmed, his voice as gentle as the sigh of the wind, said sagely to his disciple:

"In every affair, my son, retire a step and you shall achieve an advantage."

Ravenwood withdrew from the haven of the Nameless One. He returned quietly to the library, distressed by the feeling that his impatient activity had robbed him of the keenness of his super-senses. Yet, when Sterling trod toward him he said, before the manservant could speak:

"Show Inspector Stagg in."

Sterling asked in surprise: "You were expecting him to return, sir?"

"Not until this moment, Sterling."

**L**OOKING bewildered and doubtful, Sterling retired. Ravenwood gazed again at the clippings Lieta Brooks had brought him. They pieced together now like jig-saw fragments, yet key parts of the picture were missing. The sound of quick steps drew Ravenwood's misty eyes. Inspector Stagg, striding toward him, was scowling.

"What's the idea, Ravenwood? What are you up to? You took a lot of pains to throw me off your trail tonight."

Ravenwood answered: "Only to save myself from your stubborn misunderstanding, inspector. You're too willing to believe. I'm implicated in these crimes. You delayed me tonight and—"

Stagg growled: "If you're not right in the middle of this case, what's that thing doing on your desk?"

He pointed a blunt forefinger at a bronze image. It was the one which had been delivered to Ravenwood earlier in the evening. Sterling had placed it on the desk with scrupulous disregard of its portent. It was staring at Ravenwood inscrutably—the little Buddha.

Ravenwood turned squarely upon Stagg. "It's a warning of death, from the man we're both seeking. It was sent to me for the same reason it was sent to the others—because someone is afraid I know too much. Listen to me, inspector. I'm able to give you information only one other man in the world knows, and that man is a murderer. It will mean nothing to you because I haven't any material evidence to back it up. But, all the same, it's true."

Stagg challenged: "Let's have it, Ravenwood."

Ravenwood smiled. "You don't trust me, but you're willing to listen and use whatever facts I give you, aren't you, inspector? All right—I accept that, because when your routine investigation is finished, you'll realize I've told the truth."

The inspector demanded: "Know who tortured Captain Brooks tonight?"

"No," Ravenwood admitted. "And I'm not sure of what lies behind it, but I am certain of what has happened. Follow me through, inspector . . . Five years ago, the representative of the Memorial Museum vanished off the salvage ship working in the bay. You never came near the answer to the mystery. You've never been able to find Arthur Dunham, because he was murdered that night."

Stagg started. "What makes you so sure of that?"

"I am sure of it—that's enough. He was killed by a group of men guilty of stealing the salvage. I don't know how many there were, but most of them have since died, or been murdered—

all, possibly, except one. One of the murderers of Arthur Dunham was himself murdered tonight. His name was Conklin, and you will find him lying dead now in his home on Stream Street."

"What's that?" Stagg tightened. "How do you know? What hand did you have in it?"

"If you want proof that I didn't kill him myself, inspector," Ravenwood said tightly, "I can't give it to you. I'm telling you of it, in spite of the risk, for just one reason. You're the police; it's your job to fight crime. Instead of trying to pin something on me, inspector, I'm giving you this chance to nail a murderer before he kills again."

**S**TAGG stared. "Is that straight?" he demanded. "If I go to the Conklin place on Stream Street I'll find him there—murdered?" A nod of Ravenwood's head was his answer. He straddled, leveling hard eyes into Ravenwood's.

"You mean Captain Brooks was one of the men who killed Arthur Dunham? Now one of the killers is doing away with the others to hush 'em up—is that it?"

"Possibly, inspector. Do you want the names of the others killed by the same man for the same reason, whatever it is? You'll find them all in these clippings. For weeks the murderer has been tracking them down, man after man, and wiping them out. Conklin was the last because he just returned from a year at sea. The man who killed him got his address from a letter he wrote to Brooks. Our man is wasting no time—he's driven by some mad purpose—and I promise you, he'll strike again."

Stagg snarled: "You know too damned much, Ravenwood! This might be some cock-and-bull story you're using to cover yourself. That Buddha on your desk might be a plant. You're making it pretty damned tough to account for yourself. I'm an old-

timer in this game; I know how to use my eyes and ears!"

Ravenwood quoted grimly: "The venerable Mencius once said: 'The senses of hearing and seeing do not think, and are obscured by external things. To the mind belongs the office of thinking.' Goodnight, inspector."

Stagg snarled and strode out. The telephone began ringing when the door slammed. Ravenwood gestured Sterling away from it, murmuring: "It's the girl—she's afraid." His visionary expectation became real when the voice of Lieta Brooks rang over the wire.

"Mr. Ravenwood, I've received a warning—exactly the way the Captain did tonight! A little Buddha—I found it lying on the doorstep when I came back from the hospital! I've begged you to help me, and you've turned away from me, but now—"

"I am helping you," Ravenwood answered. "I know you are in danger. It is coming closer all the time, because someone is afraid you know too much—afraid you learned too much from your father. It's getting nearer and nearer to you, but—not yet. I'll do my best, but you must trust me. Good-night."

His misty eyes lifted as he lowered the telephone. Modern science had brought him a message, and now the mystic forces of the Far East were flashing him another as real. He saw it again, a fantasma before him—the premonition of the waiting tomb.

He saw it as before—dark, its bronze door open in welcome—the black depths of a crypt. But it was a disembodied image, unrelated to anything else in all creation. Out of the mist came two luminous words, *Eternal Rest*, which faded into invisible embers. A grave, ready to receive its dead—somewhere . . .

The girl had said: "I have received a warning!"

The Nameless One had observed: "He whose boldness leads him to venture will be slain."

The image melted into nothingness, leaving Ravenwood's nerves lines of ice in his chilled body.

## CHAPTER IV

### CAVERN OF THE IDOL

**R**AVENWOOD followed a white-garbed nurse along a tile corridor filled with medicinal odors. He entered a hospital room streaming with afternoon sunshine. A girl rose hastily from a chair beside the bed on which a man was lying inert. Lieta Brooks' eyes shone with an imploring light, yet Ravenwood sensed something hidden in them. He said quietly:

"You still believe it's the curse of the Sealed Buddha at work."

The girl gazed at him silently. He turned to the man on the bed. Captain Brooks was swathed in bandages. His one eye was blinded by the black patch, the other open but clouded with pain. It drifted after Ravenwood blankly as he went closer to the girl. His nearness aroused a strange agitation in her.

"It's not the curse of the Sealed Buddha," he continued. "That's ended, because the image is hidden away, and being left undisturbed. To fear an ancient figure is pointless. We're facing the danger of a living man—a ruthless killer. He's used the curse of the Buddha to hide his real purpose. Won't you believe that, Miss Brooks?"

The girl blurted: "Somehow I've got to find out for myself—or I'll go mad!"

She hurried past Ravenwood, through the swinging door. He sensed a brooding anxiety driving her toward some reckless act—a determination to unveil or escape an obscured threat. Her heels clicked away rapidly. Ravenwood turned again to the man on the bed. The single bleary eye of Captain Brooks was upon him.

He sat on the side of the bed. "Can you speak?"

"A little."

"Do you remember, five years ago, the salvage of the *Treasure Seeker*?"

"Yes."

"Did you fear the Sealed Buddha?"

"No."

"Were you one of the number whose hands became red with blood?"

Captain Brooks' eyes widened. "No!" he blurted. "I know nothing about it! I told him so—the man in the mask—but he wouldn't believe me. He kept torturing me . . . I tell you—no!"

Ravenwood was silent. He knew that the terror graven on the drawn face of the old seaman was real. But while he sought to distill the truth from Brooks' wild protest, he recalled the visionary revelation of the Nameless One.

*"Another man . . . who looks upon the world through only a single eye . . . and he has in his hands a heavy weapon on which there is blood . . . the blood of the other . . . who walked haltingly."*

**R**AVENWOOD looked intently at the one-eyed man. Captain Brooks was panting, shivering with fear. Slowly, while minutes passed, he eased. Ravenwood waited to ask:

"You swear you took no part in the murder of Arthur Dunham?"

"Before Heaven, I did not know he was dead!"

Ravenwood leaned forward. "Then how did you come to have in your hand the weapon that was used to kill him?"

Brooks' single eye glared. Tightening muscles drew him up. His face faded to a ghastly white. In a husky whisper he blurted: "How do you know that? I was alone when I found it! No one knew—no one. I have never spoken of it. I threw it overboard because I was afraid—and nobody saw even that! No one could have told you! You—you don't belong in this world!"

Ravenwood pressed his questions: "You were alone? What was it?"

"Yes—alone! It was in the hold, lying near the Sealed Buddha, but I didn't see it until I picked up a piece of tarp to cover the image. It was a marlinspike—blood all over it."

"Why were you afraid, if you were innocent?"

"I didn't know what had happened, but I hated that idol. I was afraid it meant more trouble, serious enough to ruin me."

"Then you threw the spike into the water, and told no one—not knowing it had been used to kill?"

"That's Heaven's truth!"

Ravenwood leaned closer. "If it's true—if you had no dangerous knowledge—why did the man in the mask leave you for dead last night?"

Brooks' one eye bulged with horror.

"Why," Ravenwood persisted, "did he torture you if not as a warning to the others to be silent—the others he can't reach now, who know the truth about the murder of Arthur Dunham, and might talk?"

Brooks' lips worked.

"You know who he is," Ravenwood declared flatly. "Your daughter has received a warning from him exactly as you did. She'll be tortured too—horribly disfigured—unless you help me trap him."

The old captain's single eye shifted fearfully. "He'll come again—he'll come if I talk. He'll come with the knife—the knife!" Brooks screamed the word, flinging himself across the bed as if to escape an invisible terror.

Ravenwood gripped him. Two nurses ran in. The three fought to restrain Brooks until he sank exhausted to the bed. Ravenwood turned away, chagrined, chided by the eyes of the nurses. He found a stocky, hard-eyed man straddling in the doorway—Inspector Stagg.

"I guess there are some things your mysterious powers haven't told you, Ravenwood," Stagg growled. "Brooks hasn't a cut on him he couldn't have given himself. It might be a tricky way of making himself look like one of the victims instead of the man who pulled the other killings. I'm not saying he did it, and I'm not saying you're not mixed up in it, Ravenwood, but Brooks was loose last night when Conklin got it."

Ravenwood exclaimed: "What?"

"Loose and delirious," Stagg went on. "He broke away from his daughter right after you left the place, before the ambulance arrived. Where he went nobody knows—he says he can't remember—but it was two hours before he showed up, still out of his head, apparently. He had plenty of time to get to Conklin's place and back. I don't need a crystal ball to make that add up to something."

Again the wisdom of the Nameless One echoed in Ravenwood's mind: *"Is he not a sage who neither anticipates deceit nor suspects bad faith in others, yet is prompt to detect them when they appear?"*

**R**AVENWOOD mounted the broad stone steps of the Memorial Museum, troubled and at a loss because he felt his diligently acquired supersensitivity had failed him. Turning to the suite of executive offices, he reached the desk of the curator. Lionel Dunham greeted him with respectful affability.

"I have an unusual request, Mr. Dunham," Ravenwood said. "I'd like to view the Sealed Buddha again—this time alone."

"Of course," the curator agreed. He opened a drawer of his desk in which scores of keys were arranged on hooks. "There was a directors meeting this afternoon, and the Sealed Buddha came up for discussion. We're going to put it on display soon. We think perhaps exposing the idol to the light will dispel the curse. There's a practical reason too, Mr. Ravenwood. The Stuyvesant Institution is planning a new expedition, and it may help raise funds."

Ravenwood smiled, accepting the proffered key, but his smile faded. "I have news for you, Mr. Dunham, concerning your brother. I am afraid you will never find him. He is dead."

Dunham's face grew solemn. "I know," he said. Seeing Ravenwood's eyes light with surprise, he explained: "I've known for several months now.

It's a private matter I've preferred to say nothing about. Yes, he lost his life the night the Sealed Buddha was raised from the sea. He was murdered."

Ravenwood demanded: "You know that, too? Don't you wish his murderers punished? A murder charge is never outlawed, you know. Why haven't you told the police?"

"The police?" Dunham smiled wanly. "They did their utmost on the case at the time, and accomplished nothing. Why should I reopen old wounds, now that I'm sure he's dead? When the news of his death came, it was a terrific blow—I haven't yet recovered from it. I spent years searching for Arthur, Mr. Ravenwood—years and a fortune—and it led to nothing, even when I believed he was alive."

"You are sure he's dead?" Ravenwood asked.

Dunham opened another drawer of his desk and removed a leather folder. Slipping a dog-eared letter from it he continued:

"I had no idea what had happened to Arthur, and I had no faith in the police. I swore I'd never stop searching until I learned the truth. I kept at it year after year, running down thousands of clues and rumors, all of them worthless. I went around the world twice, thinking perhaps he had been shanghied, but it led nowhere. Arthur meant the world to me, and I never gave up—until word came, about two months ago. This."

Ravenwood took the letter. It was scrawled laboriously on cheap, soiled paper. The message was cryptic, yet a definite answer to Lionel Dunham's search:

DEAR SIR,

I know what happened to your brother five years ago. He was murdered. I know who did it, and what was done with him. If the information is worth anything to you, I am ready to sell it. I need money. Think it over until you get my next letter. It will tell you how to get in touch with me. Doing this is turning on my shipmates, but I am in good faith to you because I need money bad.

LANE

"Lane," Ravenwood read. "The name of a member of the salvage crew—a drink-soaked tramp found dead in a gutter and taken to the morgue."

Dunham asked: "Yes? . . . Then that is why I never received the second letter—never heard from him again. But this was enough. It revealed the truth. I am satisfied. Let the dead past bury its dead, I say."

RAVENWOOD lowered the letter R to Dunham's blotter—a message of death written by a man now dead. The curator's face was solemn, his eyes shining with an intense grief. Murmuring: "I will return the key soon," Ravenwood turned away. He walked along marble halls, descended marble steps, seeking the underground recess where the Sealed Buddha was stored.

Entering the farthest corridor, he was surprised to hear chorussing voices and echoing footfalls. Eight well-dressed men and women were walking from the closed door of the store-room, talking among themselves. Ravenwood recognized several prominent business executives, several socially distinguished women. As he passed them, he gestured to one of the guards. The uniformed man stepped to his side.

"They have been looking at the Sealed Buddha?"

"Yes, sir. They're patrons of the Stuyvesant Institution. It's raising funds for a new expedition and naturally the patrons want to see what was brought back last time."

"You know Miss Brooks? She's a secretary."

"Yes, sir. She came down with these ladies and gentlemen, but I think she went back."

Ravenwood pressed a banknote into the guard's hand and went on. He opened the massive door and stepped into darkness. A click of the switch he found near the frame filled the huge store-room with a ghostly yellow glow. He stood quietly, gazing at the glittering golden figure in the glass

case. Enigmatically the Sealed Buddha stared back.

Ravenwood went slowly toward it. Studying the burnished, impassive face, he recalled the intuitive flash he had felt when first viewing it—the impression which had urged him to say: "Blood . . . blood on the Buddha." He had learned since that, in truth, blood had been spilled before the image. Some of the mystery of the idol had vanished, yet much still remained. Ravenwood felt it now as he had even before entering this repository the first time.

"In this room now there is death."

Ravenwood's scrutiny of the Sealed Buddha was prolonged, intense. He sought his utmost to pierce the veil of antiquity shrouding it. Silence flooded around him while long minutes passed. Silence until he heard a voice speaking out of empty space—the tones of the Nameless One bringing him a message that tightened his nerves:

*"My son, you are not alone."*

**R**AVENWOOD scarcely breathed as he looked around. His chameleon eyes searched the shadows of the age-old objects of art which filled the room. He heard not the slightest sound, sensed not the slightest movement, but the voice of the omniscient oracle was echoing in his mind:

*"My son, you are not alone."*

Ravenwood turned his back to the Sealed Buddha. He walked quietly along narrow lanes which reached into a cluttered maze. He touched hanging sheets which seemed to stir with an unworldly wind, but behind them there was only emptiness. Slowly he made a complete circuit of the huge room, without finding a hint of the presence. When he paused he was again near the Sealed Buddha.

Then, without warning, as before, a noise—a quick metallic rattle that spun Ravenwood. His misty gaze shot at the figure in the closed glass case. Echoes mingled around him while he stood motionless, chilled with the cer-

tainty, as before, that the sound had come from inside the ancient image—an inarticulate whisper out of the past.

For a long time Ravenwood did not move. The unfathomable features of the Buddha yielded him no secret. At last his shoulders drew firmly square. He turned away, the mistiness gone from his eyes.

From his vest pocket he drew a small object the size of a penny matchbox. He peeled waxed paper from its surface. Placing the key of the store-room against the little block of modelling clay, he worked it in to make a clean-cut impression. He carefully re-wrapped the wax, tucked it back into his pocket, and went to the door.

Ravenwood snapped the switch and stood on the sill, looking back into the gloom. He closed the door quietly. The latch clicked. His heels rhythmically beat along the corridor. Oppressive silence again filled the store-room.

Silence for a long time—then a faint rustle of movement. It stirred the darkness in a far corner. It was a mere flutter of sound that drifted slowly through the dark. At last it reached the door. A brushing sound followed, as of fingers sliding across the wall—a slow noise mingling with quick breathing—then a metallic snap. Light flooded the store-room.

A girl stood pressed against the door—Lieta Brooks. Inevitably, magnetically, her widened eyes were drawn to the Sealed Buddha. She gazed at it in terror, yet she stood her ground, fighting down the fear that urged her to flee. She steadied herself, forced herself to approach the image. She stood in front of it a long time, until she ceased trembling—but all her dread was not gone.

She went around the room slowly. She had accompanied the patrons of the Stuyvesant Institution when they had entered. Seizing an opportunity while they had stood absorbed in front of the Sealed Buddha, listening to the guard's account of the curse, she had stolen along one of the dark aisles. She had remained hidden inside a

musty Florentine chest during Ravenwood's visit. Now, assured that she was alone, she returned to the door.

Another click of the switch plunged the great room into darkness. The girl went blindly into the corner where the Florentine chest rested. She sat on it, surrounded by silence and Stygian blackness. She looked toward the Sealed Buddha and listened while minute adding to minute became hour adding to hour . . . .

**R**AVENWOOD fingered the new key. Bright with fresh file-cuts, it was a duplicate of the one Lionel Dunham had given him to open the museum store-room. It was the product of a strange impulse, yet when he strove to grasp the secret of its usefulness, his super-mind yielded nothing. Disturbed, he rose at last from his desk and went quietly along the hall to the haven of the Nameless One.

He stepped through the door that separated the modern world from one of boundless antiquity. In the dim glow he gazed silently at the bowed, white head of his venerable master. Slowly the limpid eyes rose to meet his. He asked quietly:

"I was not alone, esteemed sire?"

The Nameless One answered: "She is good. She is conquering her fear by steadfastly facing the cause of it. She has sought a place of refuge in the temple of danger. In the dark she looks at the fearsome Buddha."

Ravenwood exclaimed: "The girl! In the store-room? Is she still there, master?"

"She waits, my son."

"How can I see her, venerable savant? I try, but it hovers beyond me. I beg you to lend me the sight of your wisdom."

The Nameless One said: "In the management of affairs, my son, people constantly break down just as they are nearing a successful issue. Use the light that is within you to revert to your natural clearness of sight. She waits . . . . you may see her . . . . but now she is not alone."

Ravenwood asked urgently: "What do you see?"

"There is a small light far from her . . . . she shrinks from it. It is guided by one whose face is hidden. He is at work . . . . a work his soul demands of him . . . . work he must complete or he will never rest. The Buddha is before him . . . . the barrier of glass no longer bars him . . . . he lays his hands upon the image . . . . and the girl, far back in the darkness, watches."

Ravenwood's senses reached for the vision of the Nameless One while the old man's voice whispered on:

"His face is hidden and he is at work . . . . the sweat beads his brow as he labors . . . . his tool pries into an age-old secret . . . . the breath of past centuries flows into his lungs and fills him with its musty coldness . . . . but he works . . . . he takes the secret of the Buddha into his hands with tender care . . . . Fulfilling a mission he must not shirk, he carries his burden through the dark . . . . Now he is gone . . . . now again she is alone."

The oracle's words had droned while Ravenwood stood spellbound. The Nameless One sat silent, his hoary head bowed. Ravenwood turned away, the impatience of his Western temperament driving him out of the old-world retreat. He left the hushed room hurriedly, shouting for Sterling.

The manservant came at a trot. Arming into his topcoat, Ravenwood crackled out orders: "Get police headquarters on the phone—Inspector Stagg. Tell him to meet me at the entrance of the Memorial Museum in ten minutes—urgent. Get hold of Lionel Dunham—same message. If you don't reach Dunham at once, get the assistant curator, John Ladenham. Don't waste a second, Sterling. Get at that phone!"

In the dark, silent room the Nameless One sat absorbed in impassive meditation. But Ravenwood sped out into a world of stark reality—and death.

## CHAPTER V

### THE OPEN CRYPT

THE streamlined coupé Ravenwood drove slid to a swift stop at the base of the broad steps. Bounding up, he saw two men waiting in a glow of light from the museum entrance—Inspector Stagg and John Ladenham. Stagg was frowning cynically, the assistant curator was blinking like a puzzled owl. Ravenwood told him urgently:

"You're in for an unpleasant surprise, Mr. Ladenham. It's waiting for you in the store-room. The Sealed Buddha has been broken open. Whatever was in it has been taken out and carried away. We'd best look into it at once. Please use your key."

Ladenham's blinking abruptly ceased. "Are you quite sure? How do you know? When did it happen?"

"Only a few minutes ago. The man who did it is already out of the museum, but not far. I don't know where he's going, but if you'll open the entrance—"

Ladenham gasped: "Only a few minutes ago? You mean one of the guards discovered it? Then why wasn't I informed, instead of being asked to rush here?"

Stagg growled: "What the devil are you up to, Ravenwood? You couldn't know all that without actually seeing it. If you'd seen it, you wouldn't have been able to get out of the museum. What's the idea of the bluff? You can't make me believe—"

Ravenwood, peering in through the series of three doors of the entrance, broke in sharply: "They've seen her!"

The two men at his side turned sharply to stare through the glass, along the broad, high-vaulted corridor which stretched to the rear of the museum. Marble stairways rose and descended to its level, connecting with the rambling wings. At the head of one of the flights that led downward, clearly visible, a girl was standing.

Her face was white with terror. She held one hand clenched at her throat.

An armed guard, drawn from his nocturnal rounds at sight of her, was running forward. The girl whirled, flinging herself toward the entrance. Her flying heels brought her near Ravenwood. Balked by the locked entrances, he gripped Ladenham's arm.

"Open the door!"

The assistant curator fumbled with the key. Ravenwood watched the girl. Wavering to a stop near the information desk, she sagged against it, trying to support herself as her eyelids fluttered. She was crumpling to the floor when the entrance bolt snapped back. Ravenwood thrust through at a run.

He gripped the girl's arms, raised her. She was trembling on the verge of collapse. Her one hand was still clenched, pressed hard against her body. "You're all right!" Ravenwood snapped. He ordered the blinking Ladenham: "Bring her water—watch her!"

Hurrying along the underground corridor with Stagg at his side, Ravenwood saw the door of the store-room standing open. He paused on the sill, eyes flashing. Out of nothingness a voice lightninged. Words uttered by an age-old voice echoed within his mind. The resonant tone of the Nameless One warned:

*"My son, the crypt waits . . . ."*

One glass side of the display case in the corner had been removed. The pane was leaning at an angle against the wall. The spot where the Sealed Buddha had sat for years was now empty. The golden image had been removed, was lying on its side on the cement floor. Ravenwood strode to it.

A RAGGED hole had been cut in the base of the idol. A heavy, sharp-edged tool lay beside, nearby—the implement which had been used to open it. The gaping hole looked into a black shell. Ravenwood struck a paper match, thrust the flame inside. Nauseating odors gushed out. Inside the opened Buddha there was nothing. Again the idol had been rifled.

Ravenwood murmured: "Conklin told him. He forced Conklin to tell. 'In the Buddha!'—I heard it."

Stagg growled: "You're not going to find it easy explaining this!"

Ravenwood looked around swiftly, saying half aloud: "He took it away—he's gone." A quick search, of corner where the violated idol sat, and the lane leading to the door, revealed no clue to the Buddha's secret. Suddenly, with Stagg protesting loudly, Ravenwood hurried out.

He wound through long corridors, up a series of stairs, the police inspector dogging him. Bewildered guards were gathered under the great rotunda of the museum. The far wings were echoing with unwonted noises. Ladenham had taken Lieta Brooks into a rest room near the entrance. She was sitting on a couch, face still white. Ravenwood went to her quietly.

"Did you see his face?"

"No."

"Did you see what it was he took from the Buddha—what he took away with him?"

"No."

"And you didn't see his face?"

"No—no—"

Stagg was staring. "Ravenwood, look here!" he said abruptly. "There's something new about this case you don't know. Captain Brooks disappeared from the hospital tonight, about an hour ago. He's still missing."

The girl sprang up, chilled with alarm, speechless. Stagg continued grimly: "He got down the fire-stairs somehow, and out—fully dressed. Damned if I know how he got past my cops, but he did. That was before the museum closed for the night. Five years ago he helped store the salvage here. He had plenty of chance to steal a key. What do you think of that, Ravenwood?"

The girl protested wildly: "He slipped away because he was afraid—afraid of being killed. I know that's the reason!"

Ravenwood scarcely heard. Uncanny echoes were sounding within

his brain. He felt his super-senses coming into tune with an occult communication. The voice of the Nameless One, first sounding far away, then speaking clearly, reached him again:

*"My son, the crypt waits . . . ."*

**R**AVENWOOD saw it—the haunting image—in a brief flash. The bronze door of the crypt yielding access to a black cavity. The dark depths waiting to receive the dead. Silence, gloomy nothingness surrounding it, until the flaming words appeared—the two which Ravenwood had already glimpsed: *Eternal Rest*. Then, like smoke in a wind, the vision was gone.

Ravenwood turned sharply to Stagg. "Eternal Rest," he said. "What does it mean to you, inspector? Think, man! Every second is precious! Eternal Rest . . . ."

Stagg growled: "How do I know what you're talking about? There's a cemetery by that name out on Ridge Road. That doesn't mean anything. I'm thinking about how Brooks skipped and—"

"A cemetery!" Ravenwood's eyes danced with fire. He took the girl's arm quickly. "Don't be afraid. If it's your father, he can't escape it now. He's gone there—I'm sure of it. Inspector—"

Ravenwood hurried the girl with him. Startled, Stagg followed. They thrust out the entrance, ran down the broad steps. The girl and the inspector crowded into the coupé beside Ravenwood, who shot the car into the avenue, pressing it urgently.

He wove past intersections skilfully, zigzagging into the drive that followed the river. His speed increased. The tall towers of the city faded behind him. His headlamps probed through thickening darkness. The car was a wheeled whirlwind in the night. Not once did Ravenwood speak.

He swung into a narrow, paved road. With the lights out, he slowed. The car rolled along a stone fence. In a faint glow a high, wrought-iron gate appeared. Above it, black letters

were etched against the black sky: Eternal Rest Cemetery.

Ravenwood braked near the wall. He listened to a rustling of leaves and the soughing of a slow wind beyond it. He climbed up, gripping Lieta Brooks' hand. Stagg scrambled to his side. They dropped into the graveyard, stood still, listened again. Ravenwood brought his automatic into his hand.

Within his mind the voice of the Nameless One spoke: *The violent die not a natural death, my son.*"

Ravenwood whispered: "He's still here. We've got to find him. Look carefully."

They went across grassy plots, the girl between Ravenwood and Stagg. Their alert advance took them deep into the shadows of the cemetery. Leaves fluttered overhead; unseen things stirred among the branches. They went farther, silent step after silent step. At last they paused. A faint noise had come from nearby.

Ravenwood said under his breath: "He's in there."

They looked at a low stone structure, shrouded in deepest black, windowed with colored glass. It was a dwelling of the dead. Inside it there was a presence. Ravenwood glided toward it.

**R**USTY hinges creaked. The door of the sepulcher was opening. A man made invisible by the darkness was coming out. A gritting step sounded—only one. Again metal rasped on metal. A heavy thud sounded. The door had closed—but no one was standing in the shadow of the portico. The unseen man had gone back.

Stagg growled: "He spotted us!"

He started forward. Ravenwood snapped: "Come back!" The inspector tore free of Ravenwood's restraining hand, tramped toward the stone building. Ravenwood kept at his side, one hand firm on the trembling girl's arm. The latch clacked under Stagg's blunt thumb. The inspector began to open the door.

A shot blasted. Flame flashed inside the sepulcher. A bullet spanged against stone near Stagg's head. The inspector leaped back, thumping the door shut. He retreated with Ravenwood to the step of the portico. He snarled: "Come out of there! You're trapped!" His command brought a fusillade of bullets.

Shattered colored glass flew from the windows. Slugs screamed out into the night. Eight reports boomed within the heavy stone walls. The girl cringed at Ravenwood's side. Stagg huddled behind a stone column, but Ravenwood did not move out of the open. He faced the closed metal door. Silence returned within the sepulcher.

A second of silence—another thundering shot—then silence again.

Stagg shouldered away from the post. "Ten all together. He's through shooting unless he has another clip for his automatic. We've got him now."

Ravenwood was at the door first. He loosened the latch, opened it slowly. Pungent air gusted out. He held the girl out of range against the wall until he was sure she would not be met by a bullet. His outstretched arm held Stagg back. He went in slowly, bringing a folder of paper matches from his pocket. A yellow flame flared.

A man lay huddled against the stone wall, face turned away. An automatic, wisping smoke into the smoky air, lay beside him, freed of his limp fingers. A line of red was trickling over the floor from a black hole in his temple. The match in Ravenwood's fingers flickered out. He said quietly in the dark:

"He's dead. 'The violent die not a natural death.'"

Two flames grew. Ravenwood, with a second match lighted, Stagg with another, separated. The girl stood in the open doorway, watching them in horror. Ravenwood turned to a black case lying on its side. He raised its lid slowly. The yellow flame showed him an array of yellowed bones, en-

crusted, matted with hair, covered with the tatters of rotted clothing.

"The noise inside the Sealed Buddha," he murmured. "A human skeleton disintegrating."

He peered intently at a long, brownish bone swelling to bulbous joints at each end—a femur. Its normal straightness was marred by an irregular twist. During the lifetime of the man, whose bones these were, he had suffered a fractured leg. It had knitted badly, at an angle. Among the skeletal remains was a rotted shoe with a double-thick heel.

"The man who walked with a limp."

**R**AVENWOOD rose, still gazing at the ghastly contents of the case.

"He did receive the second letter." Ravenwood's voice was a low whisper. "He received it and learned the names of those who were guilty. He destroyed the man who told him—the first at hand among those who had committed the murder of the man with the limp. His purpose was not to silence them. It was vengeance—long awaited vengeance."

Ravenwood looked at the girl. She was gazing terrified at the dead man on the floor. He said softly:

"Your father? Yes, tonight he was afraid—afraid the man who tortured him would come back. He slipped away because he feared death. They have been searching for him—but now he is found. I see him clearly—the man with the single eye—surrounded by others in white. He had not dared leave the building. He was hiding in a room in the basement. Now they are taking him back."

The girl was staring at Ravenwood strangely. "My father—he's all right?"

"Quite safe," Ravenwood answered. "And you are safe too. The promise of the little Buddha will never be kept. The evil spell is broken because, for you, it never existed. It was a living

man, as I said, hiding his hatred behind the curse of the Sealed Buddha."

Lieta Brooks came to Ravenwood quickly. She seized his hands, searched the depths of his eyes. He had not turned to look at the corpse on the floor. The case of human bones lay open before him. He was seeing things beyond the sight of Western eyes, and his voice was like the sigh of unworldly winds.

"Not silence, but vengeance . . . . Then one last, mad desire—to grant eternal rest to the dead, here where others of his family lie. Rest for one he loved—where he will himself now rest."

From behind Ravenwood came a growl: "I hand to you!" Stagg exclaimed. "I'm beginning to get this thing. I still don't understand how you can know so much that nobody else knows—but it'll all come out. He finished himself because he knew we had him."

Stagg had turned the dead man. Ravenwood's gaze went to the white, red-streaked face of Lionel Dunham. He turned, then, to look at the crypt.

The wall was a pattern of bronze doors closing the cavities built for the dead. Some were occupied, and these bore plates inscribed with names. Others were waiting. One was open, exposing the hollow into which Lionel Dunham had been about to place the skeleton of his brother. It existed in reality, now, exactly as Ravenwood's unworldly vision had seen it.

"He whose boldness leads him to venture," he said quietly, "will be slain"—even by his own hand."

Out of emptiness the voice of the Nameless One spoke, with omniscient reassurance that Ravenwood's inner quest was not lost:

*"Shall I tell you, my son, what true knowledge is? When you know, to know that you know, and when you do not know, to know that you know not—that is true knowledge."*

*Detective Tom Kelso uses guts and psychology to discover the secret of . . . .*

# Lucifer's Lamp



**By James Perley Hughes**

Author of "The Case of the Hollywood Homicide," etc.

**T**OM KELSO stared at the note that had been surreptitiously put in his pocket. His cool blue eyes did not change expression as he read:

*Welcome to Titanic, smart guy. Just to show what a cluck you are, I'm going to kill her on the open stage, right before your eyes. Then you'll get yours.*

**LUCIFER.**

Kelso smiled thinly. This was the first break of luck he had had since

coming to the Titanic Studios at the request of Montague Howard, the famous cinema magnate. Bernice Richmond, blondly beautiful and beloved around the world, had been receiving warnings in her fan mail. At first, both the star and her managers laughed at them. But the warnings had persisted and an ominous note was sounded when she began to get messages by telegraph, radio and

telephone. The star no longer smiled. Fear had begun to show in her expressive gray eyes, a fear the cameras registered, even when she was going through love scenes with Nelson Cathcart in their new super-feature, "Heart's Desire."

With his huge production menaced, Montague Howard took swift, decisive steps. Through his friendship with some of the leading officials of the detective department, he had enlisted the aid of Tom Kelso, ace of the Los Angeles plainclothes men. The next day the detective appeared, attired as a stage hand, to watch the beautiful star from the time she reached the studio until she departed.

Kelso read the note again. It was typewritten and had been placed in the pocket of his overall jacket so that he would get it when he first arrived. Not only had the murderer identified him, but had known in which locker his clothes were kept. The killer was about to strike and was taunting him, laughing at his impotence.

The "Heart's Desire" company was assembling on the stage and Kelso slipped the note back into his pocket. Bernice Richmond would soon be where her mysterious enemy had said he would murder her. The detective's stride quickened, his mind ablaze. Through it raced a dozen questions, but the first always returned to haunt him. Who would want to kill this beautiful woman—and why?

The sleuth's tension increased as he watched the principals take chairs bearing their names at one side of the stage. He recognized Bernice Richmond as she bowed and smiled to Nelson Cathcart, her leading man, and then to DuBois Hunter, the director.

THE cameramen set up their hooded machines and directed their assistants to mark the angles at which they would shoot. Then one of them whispered to DuBois Hunter. The director nodded.

"Okay, Miss Nichols," Hunter yelled. "Up stage there—beside that

marble bench. Hey, Miss Nichols—Gracie!"

His voice was raised when no one appeared. "Call Gracie Nichols," he yelled to his assistant.

The girl's name echoed through the vast building. Bernice Richmond arose and started to cross the stage.

"I don't mind," she said, smiling in Hunter's direction.

Tom Kelso followed her with eyes that were tight lidded by taut expectancy. The girl was beautiful, charming, utterly unspoiled. Although provided with a "stand in" woman by the studio, she was ready to endure the long waits and tedious posings while the camera men focussed their instruments and tested the various lighting effects.

"Wait. Gracie is around here. I just saw her—a minute ago." Hunter called the girl's name once more.

"Coming," a voice sounded from the dim recesses on the other side of the set.

"Never mind, Miss Richmond. Miss Nichols is coming. That's just the same."

Another smile and the star returned to her chair.

Tom Kelso saw a girl come running across the stage. His eyes widened a trifle. For a moment, he thought it was a reflection of the star. Then he recognized her as Bernice Richmond's "stand-in woman."

"I'm sorry," the girl said breathlessly. "I was—er—delayed."

"Hunter growled: "Over there by the bench, Miss Nichols."

The girl took her place. Her dress, her hair, her make-up were exact replicas of those worn by Bernice Richmond. She could have taken the star's place and none would have been the wiser, for a time at least.

"Okay?" Hunter yelled to the cameramen.

"Waiting."

"All right—hit 'em," the director shouted.

A flood of light poured down upon the stage, flooding it with a brilliance

that dazzled. Tom Kelso's eyes blinked as he looked across the court set. The lamps concentrated on Grace Nichols as she stood by the marble bench, assuming a pose characteristic of her principal, Bernice Richmond.

Kelso studied her face. It was pretty, but not beautiful. Away from the famous star, she would have attracted attention, but only the rarest blooms could register in the star's presence. Grace, however, expected no attention. She was an automaton, a lay figure, used to save Miss Richmond's strength for action when the cameras were working and the microphones drinking in her golden voice.

As the detective's gaze was fixed upon the girl's face, he saw it redden, as though a tide of blood were sweeping into her cheeks. She wavered slightly. Her gray eyes seemed suddenly glazed and her hand reached for her throat.

The detective started forward. The color had ebbed from Grace Nichols' face as swiftly as it had come. Her hand clutched harder at her throat. Then she plunged forward to fall upon her face.

"Good gosh—she's fainted," Du-Bois Hunter shouted, leaping from his chair.

"Fainted! She's dead," Tom Kelso heard himself say in a harsh, unnatural voice.

He was beside the girl before any of the others. He dropped to his knees and looked down into her eyes.

"Poor thing—what—what—"

**K**ELSO looked across the girl's body to meet Bernice Richmond's misty eyes. The star's beautiful face was lined with worry, her lips twisted into a strange, mirthless grimace.

"Get away," the detective told her, lowering his voice so the others would not hear. "This—this was intended for you."

Bernice Richmond nodded, but did not move. "I know it, but—who are you?"

"Get away!"

"But—who—"

Tom Kelso sprang to his feet and caught her arm. Her gray eyes looked into his questioningly, but she said nothing as he led her away from the blazing lights. The crowd of extras, principals, stage hands and technicians were too gripped with the sudden tragedy to notice anything. But as he directed her into the shadow of two huge "prop" trees, Kelso saw a slender man running toward the stage.

"Who's that?" he asked Bernice Richmond.

"His name is Belamy—George Belamy. He's in the scenario department."

Kelso cast a second glance at the man, and then hurried on. He wanted to get Bernice Richmond away from the crowd and talk to her before the shock of Grace Nichols' death had passed.

"Who'd want to kill you?" he demanded, stopping suddenly.

The gray eyes looked up into his and then dropped. "I don't know."

"You'd better tell me," he warned. "Maybe it won't be your stand-in woman—next time."

"But he wouldn't—he couldn't. Why, he wasn't even—"

"Who?" Tom Kelso demanded.

A wave of color crossed the star's beautiful face. It ebbed as swiftly as it had come and she laid her hand beseechingly upon his arm. The gray eyes looked into his and for all his experience and pose as hard boiled, the detective felt his heart skip a beat.

"You won't let him kill me, will you?" she pleaded.

"Not if I can help it."

"I knew you wouldn't. And—I know you're not a property man. He knows it, too. You must look out for him. He's clever. He's so clever that—I don't even know who he is."

Tom Kelso's jaw dropped. Her words did not make sense. His mind flashed back to the girl who had died

before his eyes, untouched by knife or bullet, yet struck down within the sight of almost a hundred persons.

He looked back to see that the studio surgeon and stretcher bearers had arrived. They were taking the body away. Then he glimpsed Montague Howard, the *Titanic*'s president, hurrying toward the stage. The man veered when he recognized Miss Richmond and Tom Kelso.

"What happened?"

"Grace Nichols—my stand-in woman—" Bernice Richmond began.

"Dead?"

"Y-y-y-yes—I think so."

Howard's eyes shifted to Kelso's. The detective nodded. The muscles on the producer's dark jaws hardened.

"We got to get him before—"

"Yes, but it's not going to be easy. That was clever stuff he pulled—damn clever. The lights—"

Kelso turned as he felt the blond star's grip on his arm tighten. He looked into her face. It was almost livid in spite of the make-up she wore.

"What's the matter?" Montague Howard demanded.

"I just remembered—a telephone call I got last week. I told you about it. He said, 'the spot would be the death of me.'"

THE detective's brows drew together. He looked into Howard's worried eyes and then glanced at the girl. The fear, which had recently appeared in her face, had turned to terror. The shock of her stand-in woman's death had worn off partially and she had begun to realize that but for a trick of fate, she would have been dead and Grace Nichols living.

"Keep her away from the lights," Kelso told Montague Howard, "and have guards around her."

Kelso hurried across the stage and ascended the spiral iron ladder leading to the light loft. The lamps had been switched off, leaving the galleries shrouded in shadows. The detective was looking for something he

only suspected vaguely. He was following a hunch.

Stealing through the shadows of the light loft, he sensed the presence of some one else, some one he could not see, yet who was following his movements. The creak of insecurely nailed boards sounded off to the left. He caught a glimpse of a figure, but it disappeared before he could definitely discern its identifying outlines.

Sliding his hand beneath his jacket, he took out his automatic pistol. Instead of holding it in his hand, he dropped it into his right pocket and stole along the catwalk leading to a group of spot and color floodlamps. Even in the dim light, one of these attracted his attention. He had seen something like it once in a physician's office, although this was much larger and was equipped with focusing lenses.

His steps quickened as he neared the lights. Then he stopped suddenly. A small box attracted his eye. It was an ordinary container for face powder, such as appeared upon every make-up table in Hollywood. A glance identified it as a popular brand used to dust over the layers of grease paints used when using a make-up before the camera.

"And now your turn has come," a voice spoke out of the darkness.

KELSO half spun, his automatic flicking out, but he could see nothing.

"Put that away," the voice commanded, "If you don't, you're not going to be living very long."

The detective did not move, but stood holding the box of powder in one hand, his automatic in the other.

"I told you to put that gun away," the unseen man rapped.

Kelso lunged in the direction from which the voice came.

"Stop or—"

"Do your stuff, tough baby!"

The dazzling glare of light struck him full in the face, blinding him for the moment. He stopped, unable to

fellow the winding catwalk. Then he edged to one side, trying to avoid the overly brilliant beams. He could see nothing behind those sun-bright lamps. He raised his automatic and fired at them in an effort to shoot them out.

"No use, flat foot," the voice taunted, "in another moment you'll be dead."

A strange odor came to Kelso's nostrils, an odor that brought a terror he had never known before. He glanced at the box of powder he still held in his hand. It was fiery red in the brilliant path of the floodlights. A faint smoke seemed to be coming from him. He hurled it away as his head began to spin. He felt himself choking, as if some powerful fist had grasped him by the throat.

His heart was struggling desperately to keep its beat. The catwalk was swaying. The thought flashed through his mind that Grace Nichols must have had those same sensations before she fell forward upon her face and remained forever still. He strained to hold his mind clear, to work the trigger of his automatic. Another crashing shot, but the bullet went wild. A convulsion went through him. His finger constricted on his weapon. The remainder of the shots in the magazine burst out, zooming undirected among the bridging girders of the stage roof. Then Tom Kelso slithered to the floor of the narrow cat-walk. His glazing eyes looked down to see that he was over the two huge prop trees beneath which he and Bernie Bosworth had been talking. Their enemy must have watched them as he laid in wait.

"Well—don't tell the devil I didn't warn you," the rasping words came dimly to his ears.

The detective looked up. His failing vision distorted the figure standing over him. Kelso strained, trying to see and recognize, but his dimming eyes made everything unreal. He struggled weakly, but could not clear his vision.

The wraithlike figure looked down and kicked him in the side, throwing him half off the narrow catwalk. The headquarters man grasped one of the railing supports, but his fingers had no strength.

Another kick and he felt himself sliding over the edge. The concrete floor of the stage was more than a hundred feet below. To fall such a distance could have but one result, death.

"Get going, wise guy. Your day's work is done."

The voice came more like a whisper than the spoken word. Another kick that sent him over the side and the next moment he was falling, weakly grabbing at the air in an effort to find something that would support him.

Next he was crashing through the branches of the prop trees beneath which he and Bernice Richmond had discussed the death of her stand-in woman. They broke his fall and he ricochetted down through them, cracking off branches as he fell. Finally, he struck a pile of artificial grass that had been taken off a setting representing a garden.

The fall jarred Kelso's dimming senses back to partial consciousness. He saw a number of stage hands bending over him and he whispered a few words.

"Get doctor—" was all they could understand.

Next he was in the studio hospital. Dr. Marsh, the surgeon in charge, looked at the man's livid face and noted the barely moving pulse. His first move was to administer adrenaline. The powerful drug's stimulus gave him power to speak.

"Touch of cyanide, doctor," he managed to murmur. "You might try that—"

"This is better," the surgeon broke in, "I'll give you another shot, then put you to bed."

The detective smiled thinly.

"Gimme two shots, and skip the bed," he answered.

A fresh injection of the drug and then inhalations of oxygen to clear his lungs. Kelso's strength gradually returned, but his call with death had been close. When he was able to sit up, he beckoned the surgeon to him.

"Get Mr. Howard. Then post notice that I'm dead. Have the wicker basket carried out, if you have to load it with brick."

"But—"

"Mr. Howard can make any explanations he sees fit."

Realization that he must work at high speed made him stir his lagging nerves and muscles. The murderer would complete his program with Bernice Richmond's death. Kelso had not the slightest clue to the motives prompting the man's murderous designs, nor had he the least idea what he looked like, but he was sure now he would find him and convict him of Grace Nichols' murder.

FRESH inhalations of oxygen, a stiff shot of brandy and Kelso was ready for action. Montague Howard arrived, his dark eyes filled with surprise.

"What's the joke?" he demanded, "the bulletin board says you are dead."

"The assistant property man who fell from the light loft is Mr. Howard," the detective answered.

The frown between the cinema chieftain's brows deepened.

"What's the gag?" he wanted to know.

"To catch the man who killed that poor stand-in girl and save Miss Richmond's life. Here's what to do. First, get me a sample of every typewriter on the lot. Say you're replacing worn machines. But I want samples of every one."

"I'll have them ready for you when you come in tomorrow morning," Howard promised.

"You'll have them in half an hour if you want to save Miss Richmond's life."

"Okay. We'll have them in fifteen minutes." The film producer stepped to an interoffice telephone and snapped an order over the wire. "And what next?"

"The loan of your best barber, a suit of clothes that'll fit, a sun-tan lamp like that on the Maytime set and the use of an office with an automatic lock, whose inside catch has been removed."

Montague Howard made notes of these requests.

"Sounds nuts to me," he said, "but we're used to nutty things on this lot."

Rene DuPuy, the Titanic's barber in chief, had not half finished his task when samples of the work of the Titanic typewriters began to pour in. Kelso threw most of them away. Occasionally he kept one for further study. The floor was littered with rejections, but he held three sheets of paper in his hand when he began putting on the suit of clothes sent over by the wardrobe department.

"Anything more, monsieur?" the master barber asked when he had cut his hair and shaved him.

"A touch of gray at the temples will turn the trick," Kelso told him.

A telephone call informed him his office was ready and the studio locksmith had so fixed the door that no one could get in or out. A final request for a pair of pince-nez whose lenses were plain glass, and Tom Kelso went to his freshly acquired office. Instead of being a grime-covered, perspiration-streaked property man, he had been transformed into a sleek professional type, a successful physician or a scientist who had made science pay.

He still retained three sheets of typewriter paper. He studied them as he walked to his office. Then he summoned three members of the scenario department for interviews. Their names were Charles Munyon, Henry Savage and George Belamy.

Tom Kelso surveyed the three

young men who came to him. He then spoke quietly:

"Mr. Howard, your distinguished employer, is planning something out of the ordinary. He wishes to approach it in a rather out-of-the-ordinary manner. I am Professor Artemus Brown of the University, and he has asked me to make certain tests. I hope you agree."

"We get used to the out-of-the-ordinary on this lot," Savage answered.

"Sure. We're squirrels. We live on nuts," said Savage.

"Yeah—only some nuts are nuttier than others," Belamy finished for the three.

**T**OM KELSO beamed through his pince-nez in the manner of a professor who has several aces up his sleeve.

"Splendid, gentlemen. Now the first test is one of those simple and, you might say, nutty things that we psychologists indulge in. It's that old favorite, the mental reaction routine. I shall give you sheets of paper and you will write the words that occur to you in relation to the ones I propose."

The three exchanged smiles and nodded. A moment later, they were scribbling industriously as the detective barked a congeries of words that had no relative meaning. The young men took the test as a joke, but Kelso's tension increased as one word followed another. He snapped them out, his speed increasing as he paced up and down the room. Then he stopped suddenly and took the papers from the trio's hands.

A swift glance over the answers, and he touched a button hidden by the top of his desk, sounding a call in a nearby office. A moment later, the telephone on his desk rang.

"You're wanted in Mr. Howard's office," Kelso told Henry Savage, after answering the call. "You needn't come back until I send for you."

"Okay." And the young man hurried away.

Once more the detective pressed the button, and a uniformed messenger appeared to call Charles Munyon to the stage of the Maytime company, whose scenario he had prepared.

As the door closed behind him, Tom Kelso took up the paper upon which George Belamy had his answers to the G-man's words. A short pause, and the pseudo professor took off his glasses; and cold blue eyes looked into Belamy's. The scenario writer met the gaze unflinchingly.

"Why do you want to kill Bernice Richmond?" was the startling question spoken in measured voice.

"Nuts," answered George Belamy, unruffled by this surprise attack.

"Okay, Mr. Lucifer." The suave voice of the professor was gone, and in its place came the clipped tones of the detective. "Then perhaps you'll tell me why you tried to kill me."

"Nuts again. I never saw you in my life," the man shot in reply.

"No? Not even in the light loft when you worked that infra-red lamp on me?"

"Nuttier and nuttier," the scenario man growled. "Say, professor, instead of giving other people the works, you ought to be out with the daffodils, playing with feathers and glue."

Tom Kelso smiled and nodded. George Belamy was no soft boiled egg easily trapped into damaging admissions. He had worked out a plan, but the plan did not work. He took up another.

"You write Richmond—in answer to my 'Grant,'" he pointed out.

"Naturally—Grant took Richmond, didn't he?"

"But Munyon and Savage both wrote U. S."

"Yeah? So what?"

"And in answer to Switzerland, you wrote 'Berne'."

"It's the capital, isn't it?"

"Yes, but they wrote 'Alps'—the normal reply. Berne, however, is very close to Bernice and—"

"Go lay an egg," scoffed the scenario man, "you're goofy."

KELSO smiled and bowed, mockingly. Then he took a box of face powder from his desk and placed it in front of the hard-faced young man whose *sang froid* had remained unbroken.

On it was a label which read: "Miss Richmond's dusting powder—Exhibit B 2." Belamy looked at it and lighted a cigarette. Kelso's blue eyes had turned to ice. He had dealt with sullen racketeers who demanded the services of their lawyers. He had questioned criminals of various types who defied him to make them talk, but George Belamy was ready to talk, and each word was a jeer.

"'Nother little sideshow, professor?" he asked.

"Yeah—a good one."

Kelso pushed aside a screen, revealing the surgical lamp he had ordered brought to the office. Belamy's tired eyes brightened at sight of it. Then he yawned ostentatiously.

"Going to give me a treatment, doc?" he asked.

"Yeah. A little infra-red might help, don't you think?"

"That machine generates ultraviolet," Belamy rejoined.

"It used to, but it's infra-red now."

Kelso's hand threw on the switch.

Belamy's spring caught him off guard. He had no time to snap his automatic into action. In another moment, he was struggling with a desperate man, fighting for his life. Next they were on the floor, each seeking the other's throat. The detective broke his adversary's hold. He looked down into his grimacing face as he pinned him to the floor.

"Former chemist turns scenario writer and falls in love with film star," he jibed. "Girl scorns romantic lover and he gets rough and threatens. Uses tricks of film writers to frighten her, but she laughs at him. Then plots dramatic revenge. How do you like my scenario?"

"Nuttier than ever," Belamy rasped.

"Chemist knows that strontium tetracyanide breaks up under infra-red rays," Kelso went on, "so he mixes it in film star's face powder. He manages to get stand-in girl away and expects film star to register cameras. Plot fails and stand-in girl returns. She has used some of her principal's powder, and when infra-red light goes on, she dies of hydrocyanic poisoning."

No answer, but George Belamy's struggles increased.

"Then the detective finds powder in fly loft. Lucifer is up there getting back his infra-red lamp. He turns rays on detective who tumbles to doom. But sleuth hits tree, breaks fall and goes to hospital. After being pronounced dead, he comes out in character of professor of psychology and traps—"

"Like hell he does," the man beneath Tom Kelso yelled.

HE had jerked one hand free, and reached beneath his coat, to pull out a snub-nosed automatic pistol. Hardly more than a toy in size, it was deadly at that range.

Kelso grasped the man's wrist and twisted. The weapon fell to the floor. Next they had their hands on each other's throats. Their fingers dug deep, each trying to strangle the other.

Tom looked down into his adversary's face. It was deeply lined, desperate, but showed no trace of fear. He was the type of man who would never surrender. George Belamy was not destined to feel the noose around his neck for the murder of Grace Nichols. He would kill or be killed. Two men were fighting in a room, whose door was locked. Only one would leave it alive. Clever, resourceful and audacious, Belamy would be a menace until he was dead.

Kelso tightened his grip on the other's throat. In turn he felt Bel-

amy's fingers dig deeper. The detective's lungs were already bursting for want of air. The room was swaying. He would have to win soon, or not at all. The scenario writer was powerful, young, and still filled with strength. Kelso gripped with all his power, straining until the veins stood out on his forehead.

He heard yells outside and looked around to see frightened faces peering in the window. Then thunderous knocks sounded on the door. He could not call. Belamy's grip was strangling him.

Next the knocks turned to hammering, and those outside tried to break in. The detective looked around again. The faces at the window were swelling into balloon-like objects, vague and distorted. He was losing consciousness. In another moment, Belamy would win the struggle. Only Kelso knew the secret of the love-mad writer's crime. If he were killed, Belamy would escape.

"No you don't."

The headquarters man's lips moved, although no sound came forth. Then suddenly he reared back and lunged. His foe's head struck the floor with a crash. His hold loosened

slightly, but still he tried to burrow deeper.

"No—this—"

Releasing his grip on Belamy's throat, Kelso twined his fingers in the writer's hair. Again he crashed his head against the floor. A berserk fury seized him. This clever, heartless murderer must not escape. He would kill again, if he ever got the chance. He was trying to kill now, despite his waning strength. Again and again the man's head was dashed against the hard oaken floor.

A rending of timbers, and the door fell under the blows of axes from outside. Montague Howard dashed into the room to find Kelso still straddling his victim, fighting more viciously than ever. A madman was grappling with what had been an adversary. Montague Howard grasped the detective's arms and dragged him away.

"No use," he murmured. "He's dead, anyway."

"Good thing—it saves the hangman a job. He's your man."

And Lucifer's lamp glowed darkly red as it shed its beams upon a box of powder that had never been in Bernice Richmond's dressing room.



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# Boomerang Blade

*By Norman A. Daniels*

**J**ASON McGEE was a fighting Irishman. He fought his way to the bantam crown, fought his way to a first grade detective's post—and fought his way out of it. He socked a lieutenant on the nose. But now he faced a double-barreled frame that called for more than fists.

**J**ASON McGEE swore softly under his breath as he looked at the rear left tire of his taxi.

"A flat," he muttered, "and way out here in the sticks with my spare flat, too. What a sap I am."

He turned slowly, looking for an all night lunch cart or any place where he might find a telephone. He was far up-town and only one beckoning light met his eye. It came from the second floor of a two-story wooden building. Jason McGee knew this section. Six months of pounding a beat along its quiet streets gave him an excellent familiarity with the locality. That was four years ago, before he became a first grade detective only to be later dropped from the force.

"That's the Four Leaf Clover Club," Jason muttered. "I wonder who's running that dump now. There used to be a phone there. I'll take a chance."

He headed toward the place swinging along with the strides of an athlete and the graceful rhythm of a body trained in the prize ring. He turned into the doorway and mounted narrow, dark stairs. The Four Leaf Clover was no suave night spot. It was, rather a hangout for organized crime masquerading under the guise of an athletic club. Anything could happen here and Jason knew it, but Jason McGee did not seem to know the meaning of fear.

He tapped briskly on the panels. Muffled voices within were suddenly stilled. Some one moved toward the door. It opened in a flash and Jason had a glimpse of a man muffled in the

high collar of a heavy coat. A dark hat was pulled far down over his eyes. There was no penetrating his identity.

"Can I use the phone?" Jason asked. "My—"

"No. Beat it," came the prompt reply.

Jason continued smoothly. "My cab has a flat and I haven't got a spare. I want to call the office and have them send up a tire."

The man was all attention. "You got a cab, huh? Okay. Fix that tire yourself. You guys carry road repair kits. I got a fare for you."

"Sure," Jason agreed. "Just let me use the phone—"

"I said fix that tire yourself," the man put in angrily. "Go on—get started. I'll give you fifteen minutes."

Jason sighed and turned wearily away. He was in no mood to repair that tire for the sake of a two-bit tip. Suddenly a hand grabbed him by the collar and whirled him around. His eyes narrowed and instinctively Jason's fists came up. Years in the ring made him do that, but he had no time to get in a blow. The man in the doorway slashed down a punch that raked Jason's forehead, cracked against his nose, bounced off and rapped him hard on the chin. It was a savage, little used blow, but this man seemed to know how to administer it.

JASON pulled himself free. He lashed out, but he was standing a step lower than his opponent and was at a decided disadvantage. His blow landed on a well-padded chest.

"Hey—wait!" the man warned. One hand was deep in his overcoat pocket and Jason was positive a gun rested there. "Listen, I didn't mean to smack you, buddy, but I need a cab badly. Fix that tire, get ready for a trip to Greenwich Village and I'll slip you a sawbuck besides the fare. Is that okay?"

Jason dropped his hands and grinned. For ten dollars he'd fix a dozen tires.

"Okay, mister," he agreed. "Give me fifteen minutes. And listen—don't be so damned quick with your dukes. I almost flattened your mug."

"A shrimp like you?" The stranger laughed, but not for an instant did he show his face. He surveyed Jason's five feet six inches of slender, wiry grace. There was nothing about Jason McGee to indicate that he had been a bantamweight champion until he had outgrown the class. No cauliflower ears or battered nasal bones remained as scars. Jason McGee had always been too fast for a telling blow to land.

"Go on. Get your hack ready before I change my mind."

Jason saluted briskly, hurried back down to his cab and went to work. In thirteen minutes he had a patch on the tire, had pumped it up fairly well and was rolling to the curb in front of the Club entrance.

Three men came out. One was the belligerent stranger, another Jason recognized instantly for Joe Franconi, burly overlord of the underworld. Jason pulled his chauffeur's cap far down over his eyes. He didn't want Franconi to recognize him.

Between them the two men half carried, half dragged another man who was muttering drunkenly to himself as he lurched along. They put him in the cab. The muffled stranger climbed in after him, shoved him into a corner and propped him against the cushions. Franconi grabbed Jason by the lapels of his coat.

"Take good care of that guy," he warned.

The stranger got out, slammed the door and turned to Jason with a ten and a five dollar bill in his hand.

"Take him to eleven sixty-four Whately Avenue," he ordered. "And remember, I got the number of your hack. If you roll him, Franconi here will rip you apart."

"Yeah," Franconi said heavily, moving away from Jason. He seemed unduly nervous. "Yeah. He's a friend o' mine. See?"

Jason snorted, got behind the wheel and pulled away. In the mirror he could see both men heading back for the club. Glancing around, Jason saw his lone passenger slumped in the seat, lurching heavily with each twist of the car.

The trip took almost an hour and Jason didn't hurry. Drunks were bad fares at the most, but when they had to be carried into their homes, it was far worse. Sometimes a slow ride sobered them up.

The night also had brought back to Jason vivid memories. He remembered the prize ring, the cheers of the crowds and the slash of an opponent's glove. The muffled stranger made him think of that. Franconi brought back memories of his two years as a patrolman and one more as a detective until that fatal night when he had smashed Lieutenant Birkett's ruby-colored nose because of a difference of opinion.

Jason laughed softly, hunched closer over the wheel and began to spot the house numbers along Whately Avenue. Eleven sixty-four had been the order. Jason saw it suddenly and his jaw dropped. There were two green lights framing the number. Jason's destination was the Fifth Precinct police station.

"A swell trick," Jason snorted. "Just like that rat Franconi to send one of his plastered pals to a precinct station. Now I'll have to see if I can wake him up enough to talk. Something tells me I'm going to earn my ten-buck tip."

He pulled to the curb in front of the police station, got out and opened the door of the cab.

"Hey, mister," he called softly. "Mister, where do you live?"

**J**ASON received no answer. He stepped inside the cab and shook the man roughly. Then Jason's eyes widened in horror. Across the white shirt front of his passenger was a crimson stain and on the floor of the cab a pool of blood had already formed.

His passenger was dead. Stabbed through the heart.

"What's the matter here?" An all too familiar voice grated on Jason's nerves. He turned quickly and looked into the broad countenance of Lieutenant Birkett.

Birkett recognized Jason instantly. "So it's you, McGee. And I'm betting my right arm you're rolling your fare. He looks drunk. Who is he?"

"He's nobody now, you beefy-faced baboon," Jason snapped. "I picked him up at the Four Leaf Clover Club. Right now he's dead—stabbed or shot through the heart."

"The hell you say," Birkett ejaculated. He took a flashlight from his pocket and sprayed the dead man with light. "I'll be damned," he muttered. "That's Nichols, reporter for the *News*. And he's dead in your cab, huh? Okay, McGee. You're pinched. I always had a notion you'd be mixed up in something like this sooner or later."

Birkett's big hand gripped Jason's collar and yanked him from the cab. Jason knocked away the heavy fist and looked up at the bigger man.

"A jackass has more brains in one ear than you got between both of yours," he snapped. "What kind of a sap do you take me for? Do you think I bumped a guy—or helped kill him—and then drove him to a police station? Use your head, Birkett. It's meant for more than to keep your hat on."

"Yah!" Birkett scowled. "I said you're pinched. Make a break for it

and I'll plant lead in your back. Get movin', you hack driver, before I start shovin' you. You bumped Nichols because he gave you a ride when I had you busted and dropped from the force. I'll bet you were gonna tackle me next."

"You listen to me," Jason implored as his temper began to mount. "I'll give you the low down on this, but if I'm jugged, I'll lose my job and I need it. I picked up this guy at the Four Leaf Clover—just like I told you. He was plastered drunk when he got in the cab—anyway he looked like he was."

"Sure," Birkett said derisively. "And I'll bet there ain't a penny in his jeans either. Stick 'em up, McGee. I'm gonna frisk you. If you got more than ten bucks—"

Jason's fingers were curling into fists of steel. He had fiery red hair and his temper matched it. He gave Birkett one more chance.

"Use some sense," he told him. "I picked that guy up just like I told you. Two men lugged him out of the club and put him in the cab. One of the guys was Franconi. They went back into the club. Send a radio car up there. Maybe he's still around and for the lovamike get the coroner and a morgue wagon. This dead guy is messing up the whole seat and I'll have to clean it up."

Birkett took a firmer grip on Jason's arm. "You're coming into the office with me," he rasped. "I'll send up to the club and prove what a liar you are."

**J**ASON shrugged. After all, he was a material witness and Birkett had a right to hold him temporarily. To resist would only create more trouble. Jason walked into Birkett's small office at the rear of the station house and dropped into a chair. Birkett put an order over the wire and radio cars were dispatched to the Four Leaf Clover. Birkett curled his lip as he faced Jason again.

"You can open up with the truth,

McGee," he said. "I'll do what I can for you. You were a cop—once."

"Yeah," Jason snapped, "and I'm a better cop right now than you'll ever be, even if I don't wear a badge. You know why I took the rap and why I popped you on the button. Try making me confess like you did to that poor devil a year ago and I'll pop you again. Now shut up. You've got nothing on me. I've told my story and it's the truth."

Birkett started to say something, but thought better of it. His eyes had dropped to Jason's lap and watched the fists that rested there. Birkett had tasted that swift right once. He had no desire to sample it again.

Ten minutes went by. The phone on Birkett's desk buzzed. Jason watched the detective lieutenant narrowly.

"Yeah, this is Birkett. What did you find? Huh? Franconi bumped? Yeah—uh huh—I get it. Well, you don't have to look any further. A real dick is workin' on this case. I got the bird that done it without even movin out of my office. Report back after the coroner gets there."

A triumphant leer crossed his face when he turned to face Jason again.

"So Franconi helped to lug the dead guy out, huh? And another man you didn't recognize, helped him. A swell story, McGee, but it won't stick. The radio cars found Franconi all right. He was dead—shot through the head. The gun was in his hand to make it look like suicide. But you're not smart enough. You killed both of them. You bumped Nichols because you saw a chance to roll him and at the same time get revenge on him for smearing your mug all over his paper when I had you on the carpet. You killed Franconi so you could throw the blame on him for this job. But it's no soap, wise guy. This time you're licked and it's the chair for you."

Jason sighed heavily. Birkett was assuming too much. There was no case against him and Jason knew it. Birkett was only trying to make things tough.

"I'm through talking to you," Jason told him. "You can call in the D.A. He'll have sense enough to know I'm telling the truth."

"So Franconi and Mister Mystery told you to take this guy to a precinct station, huh?" Birkett leered. "They bump a guy and have you drive the body right here, nice and handy for the cops. A nice yarn. By the way, what happened to your hack badge? It ain't on your coat."

Jason glanced down. Birkett was right. The metal license badge was missing. Probably, he reasoned, he had lost it when he changed the tire.

"I lost it," he told Birkett.

"What's the number on it?" Birkett demanded.

Jason frowned. There was something behind Birkett's attitude. He seemed bubbling over with confidence.

"Nine-seven-two-o-three," he replied. "Why?"

"Because, you lousy killer, Franconi had that badge gripped in his fist when the radio patrol found him. You tried to make it look like Franconi killed Nichols and then committed suicide. Talk that off, wise guy."

**J**ASON McGEE didn't try to talk it off. A snap decision formed in his mind. So far Birkett had sewed him up. A dumb jury might believe the evidence. The stranger who had given Jason the ten-dollar tip was the only solution and Birkett wouldn't even look for him—not when he had a suitable candidate for the chair already.

Jason lunged out of his seat, both fists flying. His right smashed Birkett full on the mouth and silenced the yell that welled from his throat. His left hammered a hard stomach blow and his right crashed squarely against the protruding chin of the wobbly detective. Birkett went down like an ox.

Jason listened a moment and a slow smile crept over his face. He was living again. Excitement and danger were vital to Jason McGee. No one had heard the fight. He buttoned his coat, pursed his lips and whistled a merry

tune as he walked blithely out of the precinct station, waving a greeting to the desk sergeant whom he knew well.

On the street Jason paused. His own cab was at the curb, but police were clustered around it waiting for the coroner. Jason darted down the alley beside the precinct station and broke into a light run. As he passed by the window of Birkett's office, he heard an irate roar from the detective. Every cop in town would be on the lookout for him in two minutes. Jason began to feel the might of the law. For the first time in his life, he knew exactly how a fugitive felt.

He came out on the avenue parallel to the one that was now swarming with police. An owl cab stood at the curb. Jason got in.

"Listen, buddy," he explained, "my bus is way uptown. Take me up, will you?"

He showed the edge of the five dollar bill the murderer had slipped him. The driver nodded and the cab rolled away. Jason crouched low in it, ready to jump at a sign of the first blue uniform.

The cab rolled along smoothly for a dozen blocks, turned east and passed a subway station. Jason left the five dollar bill on the seat, opened the cab door softly and clung to the running board while he closed it again.

No one was in sight. Jason dropped from the cab, dashed madly across the dangerous cleared space of sidewalk and vanished down the subway steps. A train came in, he boarded it and rode downtown again. He got out at a station half a block from his boarding house. Now he used every ounce of skill he possessed.

Birkett would quickly ascertain the address of his rooming house and have men guard it. Jason wanted a change of clothing with which to disguise himself. His cab driver's uniform was a dead give-away.

Two men lurked in the shadows of the front hallway. Jason ran down a side street, cut through a yard and came out in the alley behind his room-

ing house. He slipped into the cellar, climbed the stairs until he reached the kitchen of the first floor. He sneaked through this, crept up two flights of stairs without making a sound and reached his room. He listened carefully. No one was inside. Evidently Birkett's detectives figured they could spot him from the front door easily enough.

Inside his room Jason worked without turning on a light. The whole place had been carelessly searched. Jason removed his uniform, climbed into a neat blue suit and pulled a cap far down over his flaming locks. He stuffed his uniform into a suitcase and threw it under the bed. As he headed for the front door, he heard heavy footsteps. The detectives were coming up to his room.

He went to the window and peered out. A story and a half below there was a shed with a flat roof. The intervening space wasn't too great. He opened the window, crouched a moment and leaped. He hit the roof, rolled over once and was up instantly as a gun cracked and lead smacked into the roof near his feet. He slid off the further edge, hung a second by his finger-tips and dropped. He was away like a flash, the night swallowing him up completely.

**D**OWNTOWN movie theatres concealed him from the daylight and the detectives who would be roaming about looking for him. It wasn't until almost midnight that Jason McGee ventured to the largest of the night clubs that had been owned by Franconi.

Jason's brain hadn't been idle and something more than a hunch was firmly implanted on his mind and his career—even his life depended on himself alone.

The night club was going full blast. McGee walked around to the side door, stepped in and found himself standing at the end of a long mahogany bar.

"Scotch," he told the bartender and while he waited for his drink, he

looked the place over carefully. It was unusually crowded and hard-faced crooks pressed close to the bar. There was some kind of celebration going on and Jason McGee had a good idea as to the basic cause of this.

He knew he couldn't pick out the man who had hired him to transport the body of Nichols, the reporter, to a police precinct. The killer had been far too careful for that. And McGee knew also that he, himself, might be recognized by the killer although the change of clothing did make McGee look far different than a taxi cab driver.

His plans were well developed. McGee sidled out of the side entrance, saw a uniformed patrolman at a call box on the corner and walked toward him. The cop glanced in his direction, but as McGee passed beneath a street lamp, the officer drew himself up stiffly. McGee whirled and ran down the street. As he turned into the night club again, he saw the patrolman phone headquarters.

Back at the bar McGee sipped his drink a moment before he motioned the bartender closer.

"Who's the boss of this joint?" he asked the bartender. "I'm looking for a guy named Franconi."

"Then you got a trip to hell ahead of you, mister," the bartender replied with a grin. "Franconi is croaked. Somebody bumped him early this morning."

"Yeah?" Jason betrayed interest. "Then who takes his place? I'm from outa town and I gotta see the big shot."

"Better not ask too many questions," the bartender warned ominously. "Franconi's dead and there ain't many guys who are sorry. I don't know who is taking over the mob or this club, but if you were a friend of Franconi's, I'd beat it if I were you."

"I was a friend of Franconi's," Jason said in a loud voice. "He was put away because somebody wanted to take over his rule. Who is the guy who took his place?"

The bartender paled a little and walked hurriedly to the further end of the bar. Jason saw two men with hard, expressionless faces striding toward him. One had his right hand plunged deep in his coat pocket. The other was carefully massaging his right fist. The little smile that spelled danger for those who knew, was stealing over McGee's face.

The armed man stepped very close to Jason and his voice was only a barely discernible whisper.

"You talk too much, buddy," he snarled. "Get out!"

"Take your hand out of your pocket and make me." Jason grinned.

THINGS were going to suit his fancy. This armed man might be the mysterious killer. But an instant later, Jason knew he wasn't. Both thugs suddenly hurled themselves upon him, fists flying and sadistic smiles on their faces. Jason wiped them off so fast that neither man knew what had happened for many minutes. Jason ducked with the speed of light. His right fist lashed out, connected in a haymaker and sent the armed crook toppling to the floor. The second man cursed and charged. His wild blows met only air, but his face met a fist that cracked it scientifically. His head was jolted back and his chin raised to present a perfect target. Jason let him have it and he didn't pull his punch.

"Anybody else?" Jason faced the astounded crowd.

There was a soft step behind Jason. A gun jabbed hard into the small of his back and a terse command was snarled in his ear.

"Lift 'em and walk toward the door to the right of the bar. Make one phony play and I'll let you digest lead without swallowing it. Move!"

Jason raised his arms shoulder high. He went to the door, opened it and stepped into a well lighted hallway. Two other men were waiting. He was quickly searched and his arms firmly pinioned by his guards. With-

out further word he was hustled down a flight of steps into a cellar. A door opened and Jason stepped into what had been the hidden, elaborate quarters of Franconi.

There was a burly man seated behind the dead crook's desk. Jason knew him for Nick Havek, an underling of the dead gang leader.

"So you're a pal of Franconi's, huh?" he sneered. "Well—we don't like any of Franconi's crowd that refuses to join us. What's your game and where are you from?"

"None of your damned business," Jason retorted. "I'm looking for the mug who took over Franconi's rackets. I'll talk to him and nobody else."

"Then talk," came the order. "I'm headin' this outfit now. Either you dish out a damned good story or it's the wall in the cellar for you. The boys need target practice anyhow."

Jason groaned inwardly. This hulk of a man couldn't have been the muffled stranger. He didn't have the slim, wiry build nor the venomous voice of the killer. If this was the man who had replaced Franconi, Jason was on the wrong lead and his plans were dashed to earth. He let his gaze wander over the other men in the room. Two of them, he decided mentally, could be the killer. Jason resolved to put a supreme test into action.

He turned suddenly and smashed a blow to the face of his guard. The man had grown negligent. His gun was loosely held and he had no chance to use it before Jason acted.

The other thugs drew swiftly. Four guns menaced Jason and he stared death directly in the face. Jason could feel tiny beads of perspiration forming like dew on his forehead. He had one more card to play.

"You guys are rats," he accused. "As long as you have guns, you're not afraid of anything. But take 'em away and what have you got? A bunch of sniveling cowards. Not one of you birds could stand up in a real fight."

A slender, sneering thug who stood beside the leader, dropped his gun to

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the desk top and an amused light came into his cold, slitted eyes. Jason held his breath.

"You little sawed-off runt," this man said, "I'm going to smash your face to a pulp. I've seen you some place before, but when I finish, nobody will recognize you again."

"Haw, haw!" Havek laughed. "Sock him, Bowen. Knock his head from between his ears and—"

"Shut up!" Bowen whirled on the leader. "I'm handling this party. I thought all of Franconi's pals were checked on. How did this bird ever get in here and how come the boys haven't taken care of him?"

"Gosh, boss—"

Bowen slapped the pudgy-faced man across the mouth and cursed a command for silence. He was half mad with rage when he came for Jason. He feinted with his right and Jason ducked neatly. Again Bowen swung and missed. He raised his fist and brought it down in a blow calculated to smash Jason's face to a pulp.

Jason grinned happily. This was the overhand blow the killer had tried to use. This man, then, was the one who had murdered Nichols, the reporter, and later on killed Franconi. He was also the real leader of Franconi's old crowd and the man behind the desk was but a figurehead. Jason clamped his jaw down tight. He was in a tough spot. If he succeeded in downing this murderer, there were three other armed men who could shoot him instantly.

He dodged another savage assault, stepped close and began to use his fists. The killer snorted in rage as two painful blows struck him in the face. He got in a telling punch that rocked Jason and sent his senses spinning. The killer tried to follow up his advantage and ran full tilt into a round-house punch that sent him careening back against the wall. With a curse he whipped out a slender knife. Jason's eyes widened. This might be the knife that killed Nichols.

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Bowen brought it down in a wide arc and the keen blade ripped through cloth to carve a nasty wound on Jason's left shoulder.

"You're a coward," Jason grated. "When you can't connect with that raking punch, you use a knife. That's okay with me. Now I can really smack you."

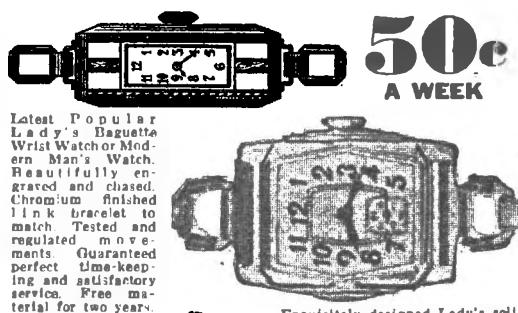
Bowen tried to raise the knife again, but Jason was fighting bitterly now with all the accumulated skill of five years in the ring. His fists flashed dizzily and almost every time connected. Not knockout blows, but painful, body-racking punches. Bowen's face was smeared with blood, but he fought on, seeking to use the deadly knife.

The other crooks held their fire, but guns were ready for the moment when Jason would be fully exposed without endangering Bowen. Jason knew that and despite the menace of the knife, he stayed in close. He was battling for time now, trying to listen above shouts and curses of Bowen and his men.

Faintly he heard the wail of a siren. A minute later he detected scores of heavy feet tramping the floor above. Jason took his life in his hands for one fleeting instant. He turned suddenly and lunged for one of the armed thugs. He closed with him, his right hand forcing the gunman's finger against the trigger of the automatic he held. There was a roar as the gun exploded.

Jason gave the man a rap on the chin, flooring him. Bowen was circling Jason, the knife upraised and a murderous leer across his face. The blade came down, swishing through the air. Jason crouched. He launched his entire body at the killer and all his strength was behind the blow he administered. Bowen's head snapped back and there was a crunching of bone and muscle. His eyes glazed and he slumped weakly to the floor.

Havek, the pudgy man behind the desk, fired a shot. It caught Jason in his already wounded shoulder. Without a word Jason leaped over the desk and threw himself upon the cowardly crook. Both men went down in a heap.



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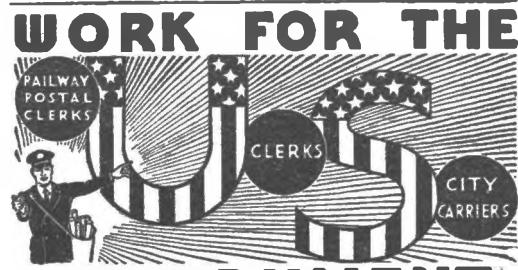
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of tangled arms and legs. Jason hammered punishing blows to Havek's midriff, eliciting groans of agony.

"Don't," Havek yelled. "Don't! I ain't got a grudge against you. It's Bowen that bumped Franconi—not me!"

SOME ONE crashed through the door behind Jason. A heavy hand grabbed him by the collar and yanked him to his feet. Lieutenant Birkett grunted in satisfaction.

"So we finally got you, huh? Stick out your mitts, McGee. It's the bracelets for you now."

"Wait a minute," Jason was gasping for breath. "Talk to Havek. He knows who killed Franconi and why. Speak up, Havek—or shall I persuade you a little?"

Jason waved his fist in front of the coward's nose. Havek shuddered and slumped back in his chair.

"Bowen killed him," he admitted. "He wanted to take over Franconi's bunch, but he was gonna be in the background. I was gonna be the face, but I didn't have anythin' to do with it. Honest I didn't—"

Havek suddenly gasped in terror. Bowen was conscious and he gripped a small automatic in his fist. It spoke flatly and Havek's body lurched back as the slug caught him between the eyes.

Jason leaped. He knocked aside the spitting gun, sat astride Bowen and carefully gauged the final blow. It started somewhere near Bowen's ankles and ended against his jaw. Bowen shuddered and went limp.

"What's this all about?" Birkett cried. He turned to his men. "Cuff that guy on the floor. We got him for bumping Havek, anyway. And you, McGee, are still under arrest. Maybe Bowen killed Franconi, but how do we know he bumped Nichols, the reporter?"

"Because nobody else could have done it. Nichols was killed partly as an excuse to make it seem as though Franconi killed himself. Maybe

Nichols knew something and Bowen didn't dare let him live. Anyway Bowen and Franconi got Nichols drunk. They hired my cab to take him downtown. Franconi had his own ideas about Bowen. He didn't trust him. That's why he picked that hack license off my coat. He knew that if he was killed, I might recognize Bowen. Well, I wouldn't have been able to do that."

"How come you're so sure of all this?" Birkett demanded, but there was less belligerency in his voice.

"Because Franconi certainly didn't know Nichols was to be killed. He didn't care if I recognized him. But Bowen wanted to be sure I knew Franconi so he even called him by name and to top it off, he had me drive the body to a police precinct station. Then he killed Franconi and tried to make the job look like suicide, only Franconi still held my hack license in his hand."

Birkett rubbed his nose roughly. His face was a dull crimson. McGee's reasoning was perfect and was backed up by every detail of the case.

"Bowen used a peculiar punch on me up at the Four Leaf Clover," Jason went on. "That's how I spotted him tonight. I knew Franconi was killed so his rackets could be taken over and I knew that this joint right here would be headquarters for the new mob so I came down. I let one of your cops spot me so he'd call you and have a squad sent—just in case there were more guys than I could handle. There's a knife near Bowen, too. I'll bet my Sunday hat it is the one that killed Nichols."

"All right," Birkett said slowly. "You can go, McGee, but next time something like this happens, keep your nose out of it. Come to me. I'm paid to do this kind of work. You're no cop—and don't forget it."

Jason grinned. "How could I—when I think of you? But when you pull boners, I can't help butting in. The old job, you know. Any time you need a man with brains, you'll find me in my cab. So long."

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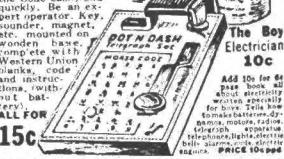


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