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Vol. 12
No. 3

SECRET AGENT X

OCT.
1937

G-MAN ACTION X ADVENTURES

..... *Rose Wyn, Editor*

THE ASSASSINS' LEAGUE ("Secret Agent X" Novel) . Brant House 10

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SQUARE-SLUG RETRIBUTION ("Ex-Marine Kennedy" Yarn) . . . William Benton Johnston 72

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HE DIED 100,000 YEARS AGO H. M. Appel 82

A famous scientist was found dead, mutilated, and the frozen cave man had escaped from the laboratory—though he had died 100,000 years ago.

PISTOL PARDON (Action Novelette) Don Cameron 92

In the slayer's power were the governor of the state and the second richest man in America . . . And Private Detective Anthony Frost thought he saw a solution in a pistol pardon for one good murder that deserved another.

REPLY TO SATAN Ralph Franklin 117

Detective Doug Weldon wanted a personal interview with the devil when he faced those flaming hell-guns.

Cover by Rafael M. de Soto

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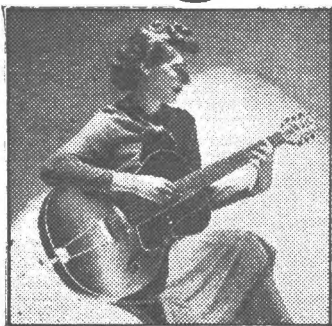
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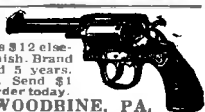
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Change the face from inside first. Put cotton plugs inside the nostrils to fill them out. Put pads of cotton inside the cheeks between the teeth and the skin, and in the front around the mouth, use chewing gum after drying the gums well with a handkerchief first.

Non-flexible collodion makes excellent scars when tinted with a little rouge; while iodine, well diluted with rubbing alcohol, makes a good face stain in a pinch, although somewhat difficult to remove. Try ordinary white shoe polish for greying the hair or whitening it. Black mascara makes an excellent stain for the hair and eyebrows.

The teeth can be changed by dental rubber, which your dentist will probably sell you for about thirty-five cents a sheet. Warm it carefully, then press it to the inside of your mouth and over your teeth. Other pieces can be carved to resemble teeth, after being painted with white enamel. Bend a small piece of hairpin around the teeth in such a way that the protruding end distorts the lip on one side by holding it up.

A hairpin attached to a piece of adhesive tape and bent properly will make the ears stick out when applied behind.

Remember the importance of costuming, posture, and change of habits. All the makeup in the world will not disguise you if you do not practice acting until proficient.

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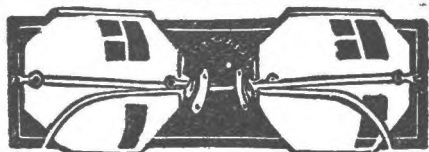
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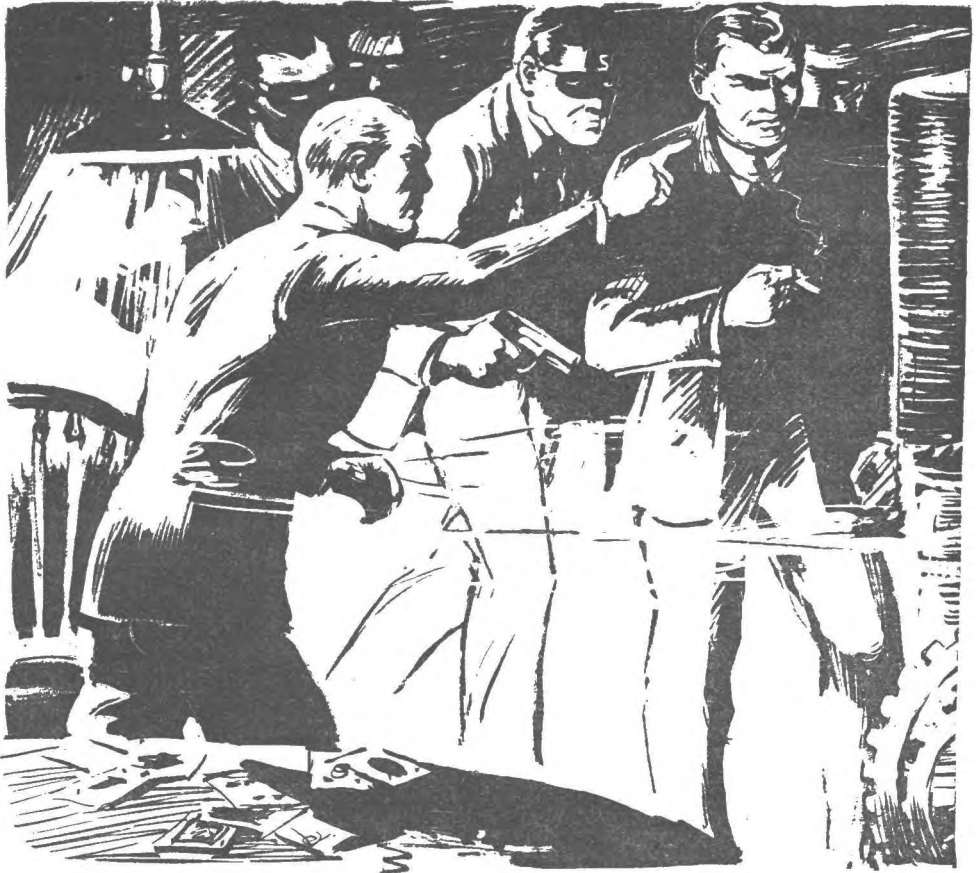
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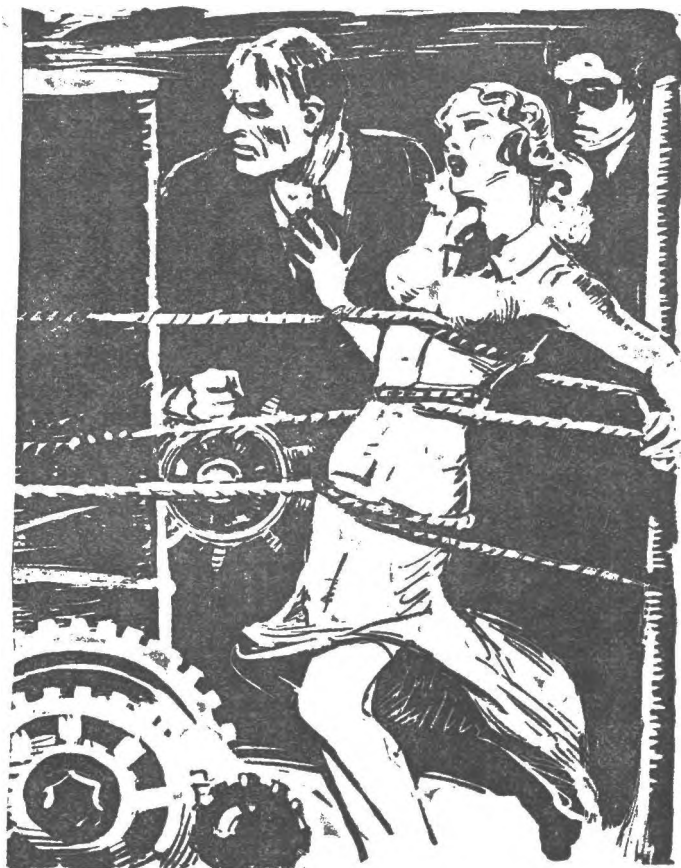


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CHAPTER I

KILLER'S HOMECOMING

THE reputation for quiet dignity for which Chicago's Ayreshire Hotel was famous had become somewhat defiled by the presence of twelve men who had come to meet a murderer. They were mostly young men, armed with cameras, pencils, photo flash-lamps, notebooks, wads of chewing gum, jeers, cigarettes, stories, wisecracks about

passing women and press cards that served them as open-sesames to most of the doors in town.

They were reporters, their habitual nervous tension somewhat loosened for a few minutes. They were about to polish off a long story of legal and illegal warfare with a few photos and a final interview. Then most of them were going out to get drunk. A few anticipated their moments of relaxation by frequent visits to the Ayreshire bar.

The murdered was Steve Hackman. Whether it was because of smart work on the part of Hackman's mouthpiece, Hackman's money, the

inexperience of the prosecutor, or jury intimidation, was a matter of considerable debate; but anyway the law said that Hackman wasn't a murderer.

These reporters knew differently. If he hadn't killed this time, he had a time or so before. So Hackman was a murderer—he was news.

A dour-faced reporter came out of the bar with a glass in his hand. He leaned against the door-frame and allowed his lacklustre eyes to rove across the thickly carpeted lounge. Then his eyes brightened perceptibly. He beckoned with his glass to a near-by colleague. "Hey, 'Red'," he called softly.

"Red" broke away from a window and came toward the dour-faced man. Red was all that the name implied. He was perhaps the youngest man in the group. He had a turned-up nose, a laughing mouth, countless freckles and a shock of unruly red hair. He was lean-waisted and broad-shouldered. The pocket of his coat was sagged by the weight of his flash-lamp. He had a camera and a tripod over one shoulder. An otherwise sad hat was given an air of jauntiness by the way it was tilted on the back of his head.

The dour-faced reporter stuck out his glass and squinted over its rim at the stairway that curved artistically around the side of an immense, stone-faced fireplace in the lounge and climbed on up behind the huge chimney. He said:

"Red, how would you like to have *that* phone number? These old eyes have piped them from the Rialto to the Palmer House and never seen such a Juliet as the one about to do a balcony with Gee-Gee Janes."

The "Juliet" was wearing a low-cut evening gown of flame-colored material that hugged her tall, svelte figure. She was blond. The wave of her straw-gold hair was unusual. Her eyes were so deep a blue that, in the parchment-shaded lights of the lounge, they appeared almost black.

"Ummm," breathed Red. "That nose and chin—a lot of hauteur, if I may say so."

"Oh, quite," said Dour-face. "And that mouth! Would you say luscious? I think I would. Who the hell is she? And what does a room in the Ayre-shire cost, my boy?"

Red shook his carrotty mop. His ignorance of the woman was a neat bit of deception. His very face was clever deceit. His hair was a toupee. And if the dour-faced reporter had paid any attention to Red's eyes, he would have noticed that they were steel-gray instead of blue.

They were remarkable eyes, now lighter with ironical laughter, now grave with the responsibility that rested upon their owner, and again fired with tremendous will-power that was almost hypnotic. Had the reporters but known, here was a man whose adventures would have made greater news than the acquittal of a crimster-murderer like Steve Hackman.

For their redheaded colleague was Secret Agent X, whose life was devoted to leading men like Hackman to inevitable justice that lay along strange paths that wound in and out between law and lawlessness. Secretly sponsored by the federal government, Agent X could well afford to overlook the narrow boundaries between the world and the underworld; could ignore the orthodox routine that paralyzes an ordinary investigator.

AGENT X knew the woman in the flame-colored frock. He had followed her for days, ever since her boat had docked at New York. But he had averted every chance of her knowing that she was being followed, by his masterly disguises. On previous days he had entered the Ayre-shire, but always in different clothes and behind a different face. A great portion of his success as a investigator depended upon his uncanny skill to impersonate, both in appear-

ance and in voice, almost any man.

The woman had almost as many aliases as the Agent. For the moment, she was Sheila Landi. Yet always, for some reason unknown to Agent X, she was known as the "Mole." And she was always involved in high crime, political intrigue or espionage. When secret police of Europe smelled scandal in high places, or learned of smoldering revolt, they sought the woman. When she was found, inevitably she was the "Mole."

She was standing on the artistic stairway, an appropriate setting for her gemlike beauty. She had her slender, tapering hand on the arm of a man whose coat was the least bit too tight about the waist and across the shoulders.

"Wonder," said Agent X, "why she's turned her thousand candle-power charm on a guy like Gee-Gee?"

"Me too," the reporter groaned. "Wonder if she don't know any better. Apt to get herself a set of scorched fingers messing around with Gee-Gee. What's he got that I haven't?"

X chuckled. "A smile, for one thing."

Gee-Gee Janes had a smile that spread all over his dark, round face.

"And dough," sighed the reporter.

Gee-Gee had some of the best dough in Chicago, though it was frequently scorched around the edges. Gee-Gee Janes was "in the racket." He generated one of the most powerful gangs in the town. He took off his hat to no one save Steve Hackman, and only to Hackman because it made him richer. Also, if you were in the rackets, you took off your hat to Hackman because you lived longer by doing so.

Janes and the woman continued up the stairway. They reached the balcony. They walked—or rather the woman walked—while Janes swash-buckled the length of the balcony. In the shadow of the great chimney, Janes became more presumptuous. He got one arm around Sheila Landi's

waist. His large, dark eyes met hers in an intimate glance. Then they were out of sight behind the great chimney.

"Hell!" said the dour-faced reporter, and turned away.

The Agent's eyes studied the shadows along the balcony. Queer business—Sheila Landi playing up to a swaggering racketeer. He certainly wasn't her usual game, nor was she the sort for Gee-Gee Janes.

A reporter flew off tangent from the revolving door of the Ayreshire, cupped his hands over his mouth and yelled: "Here's Steve!"

Thus heralded, Steve Hackman came home. Just inside the door he stood, dwarfed by two strong-arm men who accompanied him, for Hackman wasn't a big man physically. He had sleek, white hair. His eyebrows were bushy and never on the same level with each other. His eyes were expressionless, nor had his clean-shaven-face changed from the stoical mask it had always been in the court rooms.

THE REPORTERS circled Hackman, yelled questions, asked him to "hold it" for a photo. Steve Hackman silenced them with a gesture as perhaps no other man in the city could have done. Then, for the first time in a long while, Steve Hackman smiled.

"Quite a little reception, boys," he said in a quiet, inflexible voice.

Then he saw Gee-Gee Janes coming in from the lounge. Janes had the woman in the flame-colored gown on his arm. She hung back, and Gee-Gee went forward to elbow his way between Agent X and the dour-faced reporter.

Closely, the Agent studied Janes' face, its plump cheeks, slightly hooked nose, wide mouth, and that white, horizontal scar that creased Gee-Gee's chin. He studied Janes' walk and the curious twist he gave his shoulder after the manner of a fighter coming out of his corner of the ring.

"Howyah, Steve?" Janes grinned and stuck out his hand at Steve Hackman. Hackman took the hand. With the knuckles of his left hand he rapped Janes' barrel of a chest. Then Hackman looked past the reporters and saw Sheila Landi.

"Doing plenty for yourself — eh, Gee-Gee?" Hackman grinned.

"How about a story, Mr. Hackman?" asked the dour-faced reporter.

Hackman nodded. "Guess you boys treated me all right in the papers, didn't you? There isn't much in the way of a story, but come on upstairs and we'll have a drink. How about it?"

Reporters and crimesters started for the elevator. X saw Janes turn his head and beckon to Sheila Landi. She moved quickly across the sheen of floor and was beside Janes by the time the crowd reached the elevator.

"Want you to meet Sheila Landi, boss," announced Gee-Gee. "Sheila, this is my pal. Guess I don't have to tell you his name."

"Guess you don't," purred Sheila Landi. She extended her hand to Hackman. "How are you, Mr. Hackman?"

There was little that was continental in the way Sheila spoke and acted now, X noted. She had her part down well; knew exactly what she was after. X only wished that he knew as much.

"It's a pleasure," said Hackman, but he scarcely more than touched her hand.

Hackman leased the penthouse on top of the Ayreshire. Night breezes off the lake swept through French windows of the living room and brought along the perfume of flowers from Hackman's roof garden. Hackman waved toward the walnut-paneled bar at one end of the room. "Help yourselves, boys. Get what you want. Take your time about it."

"How about a picture, first?" said

Agent X. "A little home stuff for the public."

Hackman nodded, rested his hand on the back of a chair, and stared at the various cameras set up about him. Janes tried to crowd into the picture, but Hackman kept him at a distance with a gesture.

"When they mug you, Gee-Gee," he laughed, "you'll have a number on your chest. . . . Get started, boys."

Flash bulbs flared. Expert fingers manipulated plates. Hackman sighed after it was over, dropped into a chair. "Shoot!" he said to the reporters, but he was looking at Sheila Landi where she leaned on the back of a chair and kept admiring eyes on Gee-Gee Janes.

"Well, how do you feel, Mr. Hackman?" began one of the reporters.

"A little tired," said Hackman. "I don't want to rush you boys off, but as soon as you're through, I'll go to bed and relax. Don't think I won't relax."

"Got nothing to worry about, eh?"

"Not a thing. Got the world by the tail."

"And what's on the ticket, next, Mr. Hackman?"

Hackman chuckled. "Wouldn't a lot of people like to know? But—" he held up his hand—"don't print that. Tell 'em I'm going to take a jaunt to Europe. Going to see the Louvre. Art and history, see?"

"And when you get back?" a reporter prompted.

"Well, it's hard to keep a good horse out of harness," Hackman admitted. "I've got business to attend to. Quite a bit of it."

"Yeah?" The reporters waited breathlessly, for Hackman seemed in deadly earnest.

"What kind of business?" X asked.

Hackman eyed the Agent's red hair keenly. "Tell you what you can say, Red. Tell Johnny Q. for me that when I get back from the Louvre I'm going to raise chickens."

Gee-Gee Janes' roar of laughter was a welcome applause. Janes got a

wink from his gray-faced chief. Then Hackman stood up. "And anything else Johnny Q. wants to know, tell him to go to hell. That's all, boys." Hackman glanced toward the bar where the dour-faced reporter was caught with a tall bottle in his hand. Hackman frowned. "You like that stuff, Long Pan?"

The reporter started to put the bottle down, but Hackman checked him. "Take it with you. Just save me enough rye for a nightcap. And get going, boys. Like to be alone for a change."

NEWSHAWKS took what bottles they could get their hands on, thanked Hackman enthusiastically, and trooped out of the penthouse. Agent X was the last to go. Looking back, he saw Hackman saying good-night to Sheila Landi, Janes, and the two strong-arm boys.

X said to his long-faced companion: "Guess he really means he's going to do a Garbo."

The reporter nodded. "And all along I thought he'd go for Gee-Gee's girl friend. You know I've a crazy sort of a hunch that Steve Hackman will be back in print in a little while. Something's in the air."

"Love in bloom," said the Agent as he and his companion stepped into the elevator.

Just as they passed the sixth floor, the Agent's companion elbowed the elevator operator. "Back up to the sixth. That's where we get off."

"What's the idea?" demanded the Agent.

"Wait." The reporter had hold of the Agent's arm, and as the car backed to the sixth floor, he shoved X into the hall hardly before the safety gate had slid all the way back. He was at X's side, pointing down the hall in another second.

"See it, Red? It's a story, if we're smart."

Down the hall, fumbling with a key in the lock of a door, was a tall, spare man with startled, pale eyes,

a mustache that resembled a worn toothbrush, and close-clipped, yellow-gray hair.

"Mr. Madvig," the reporter hailed the man.

The tall man whipped around. Suspiciously, his pop-eyes rolled from X to the reporter.

"Mr. Leo Madvig, isn't it?" The reporter nudged X. "Do your duty with the camera, Red. This is a scoop."

"Eh?" said Madvig. "What is all this?"

X planted his camera, focused it on the startled Madvig, set off a flash-lamp.

Madvig jumped, cursed softly, cried: "No, no, no! I don't want publicity. How many times have you got to be told I'm not for the papers?"

"You're a little late, now," X said as he slid the camera plate. "And we can't print your picture without a story." Aside to the reporter he asked: "Who is the guy?"

"Inventor," whispered the reporter. Aloud he said: "Look here, Mr. Madvig, I've got just the spot for you on the science and invention sheet of the Sunday paper. You know the sort of stuff — what the future holds and so on."

Madvig stamped his foot. "I tell you I'm not a soothsayer."

The reporter buttonholed Madvig. "Listen, I saw you talking with a couple of big shots in the munitions business the other day. You hinted at a revolutionary weapon, something that would insure the victory of any nation possessing it in case of war. Now come across, Mr. Madvig. Everything's confidential, see? If you don't—well, I could just turn my imagination loose. Just give me an idea of what sort of a future hell a battlefield in 1950 will be, can't you?"

Madvig smiled shyly. "Well," he dragged out, "this much I can tell you. And don't come asking for more. I have invented a weapon, the nature of which I refuse to reveal. To

my own mother I wouldn't reveal it, if I had a mother. But let me tell you this—my weapon will give an entirely new conception of death. It is so deadly that whole nations might be wiped out, and, as the saying goes, wouldn't know what struck them. So you know why I guard my secret with my life. To me it is like a Frankenstein monster. I have created it, yet I fear it."

"As bad as all that, eh?" X chimed in.

Madvig shook his long head. "Worse. My weapon is destruction—noiseless, certain destruction."

"And you're going to market it?" demanded the reporter.

"I do not know," replied Madvig sadly. Then his prominent eyes fell to jerking up and down the hall, glancing from door to door. "I—I should not have spoken," he said huskily. "Good-night."

"Hey, wait!"

But Leo Madvig had his door open. He backed into the room. The door slammed; the lock snicked.

"Ummm," sighed Agent X. "What have you got now? Picture of a queer fish and pessimistic words concerning the destruction of the universe. Too bad Jules Verne is dead. Let's get moving."

THEY went downstairs and into the taproom. There the reporter started his celebration as soon as he had phoned his story and dispatched the picture X had taken of Steve Hackman.

X sat at the bar and allowed his long-faced companion's pessimistic monologue to go through one ear and out the other. All the time, he was thinking of Sheila Landi and, curiously enough, Leo Madvig. Madvig had an invention that its creator feared; that he claimed would revolutionize warfare. Perhaps it was because of Madvig, rather than Janes, that Sheila Landi was at the Ayreshire Hotel. And he wondered what foreign power the Mole represented;

if she expected to attain her secret purpose through underworld channels.

The reporter was becoming maudlin, for he was following each cocktail with a chaser from the bottle he had taken from Steve Hackman's bar. He was garbling about the next war, about women and children slaughtered in the streets by Frankenstein monsters created by Leo Madvig. When he looked around for a shoulder to cry on, his cameraman was gone.

Agent X, ever on the alert, had glimpsed Sheila Landi on the arm of the swaggering Gee-Gee Janes as the pair had crossed the lobby going toward the door. As X walked nonchalantly into the lobby, he passed the hotel desk. A pale-faced clerk behind the desk was excitedly jiggling the hook of a telephone receiver. X heard the clerk's tense whisper:

"Call police headquarters at once."

X whirled. His right arm shot over the desk and ripped the clerk's shoulder. "What's that? Police headquarters?"

"The penthouse," the clerk worked out of quivering lips. "Something's happened. A boy went up with a case of liquor— Oh, for hell's sake keep this quiet. Don't get it in the papers."

Not any more was he a reporter. He was Secret Agent X, one jump ahead of the law, his lean legs clipping off the distance between the desk and the elevator. The laughter had gone out of his gray eyes, and when their glances lashed across the face of the elevator operator, the man moved to obey the crisp command:

"Penthouse!"

In that cool, luxurious house on the roof was a thick and heavy silence. The Agent's shoes scarcely whispered across the thick oriental rugs as he moved across the living room to the bedroom. He opened the door on darkness; needled the darkness with his tiny electric torch. The bed had not been touched. He went

SAX

into the black-marble bathroom. Still no sign of any one. No one in the kitchen. No one in the library, where Steve Hackman had liked to pose as an intellectual.

He opened the French windows of the living room and stepped out onto the roof garden. Breeze off the lake that had been refreshingly cool, was now definitely chill—the ominous chill of death.

In the light of the amber-glazed lantern that swung out from the penthouse wall, he saw the narrow terrace, the chrome-and-leather furniture, the chaise longue where were two men—the house detective and a white-faced bell-hop.

Quietly, X came around the chaise longue, saw Steve Hackman's spare, gray-haired body stretched out at full length, eyes wide open, pupils contracted to the merest pin-points. Beside the chaise longue was a cocktail table and on it a tall, empty glass. Beside the glass was a squat little vial with a red death's-head grinning from its label.

The house detective swung around. "Who are you?" jumped from his mouth.

X flashed his press card.

The house dick seemed relieved, and said: "Have they called the police yet? Steve Hackman's taken a highball of prussic acid."

X bent over the table, looked at the label on the bottle, sniffed at the glass. Then he stooped over the corpse, sniffed again. The lean, pale lips were speckled with blood flecks. The gray face was stone cold, the muscles rigid.

Prussic acid—the house dick was right. But those eyes of Steve Hackman, glassy, pupil-less, yet eloquent. . . .

Suicide? The eyes said murder. And in their glazed surface, X seemed to see the reflection of a swaggering, dark-featured man and a svelte, graceful female form swathed in cloth made of flames.

The Agent's head nodded almost imperceptibly. Sheila Landi openly cultivated Gee-Gee Janes who became, on the death of Steve Hackman, the uncrowned king of crime. But what was Sheila Landi up to? There was one way of finding out. Agent X was determined to fill Janes' shoes, and from the impersonation of Janes, discover exactly how the Mole was involved in the murder of Steve Hackman—what new and more terrible crime that murder was to lead to.

CHAPTER II

"NO END BUT DEATH"



FAR down on the street below, a police siren wailed its chill alarm. The Agent dragged his living, burning eyes from those glassy ones of the dead man. He straightened, stepped

around the chaise longue, crossed the terrace and went into the penthouse. The hotel detective followed him with a shouted warning to touch nothing.

X hurried to the elevator, where the car and operator still waited, and demanded: "Did you bring any one up to the penthouse within the last half hour?"

The operator shook his head. "Swear I didn't. No one but the bell-hop with the case of liquor. I waited for him, and he wasn't gone ten seconds before he was back saying that Steve Hackman had drained his last glass. I said to him: 'Jonesy, you're off your nut. A guy with all the money that Hackman's got don't bump himself right after fighting to stay out of the chair.' And Jonesy said maybe it was woman trouble. And I said maybe Hackman was asleep. And Jonesy—"

"And maybe Jonesy was right," X cut in.

Woman trouble — Sheila Landi

trouble—was probably what had ailed Steve Hackman. But quickly X bridled his imagination. He had never been a man to jump at conclusions. It was simply that he exerted his every mental effort to fit Sheila Landi into the picture—a picture of Chicago rackets. And there was nowhere that an adventuress of the Mole's type could be fitted in. She just didn't mix with men of Janes' and Hackman's type.

As he descended in the elevator, bent on singling out Gee-Gee Janes, those dead eyes of Steve Hackman haunted him, screamed of murder. It was inconceivable that a man in Hackman's apparent good spirits, having everything to live for, could have killed himself. It was equally inconceivable that some one had entered the penthouse, ordered Hackman to drink prussic acid, and triumphantly watched Hackman carry out the order.

Had there been any sign of a struggle, X might have believed that the poison was forced upon Hackman. But what kind of murder monster could have crept up the fire escape, for there was no other access to the roof except the elevator, and forced an alert and agile man into drinking poison?

When he reached the lobby, the Agent saw Gee-Gee Janes back away from the front door. Gee-Gee was hatless, and the breeze from the revolving door ruffled his dark hair. As he backed away from the door, he retreated from a man in plain clothes who headed a detail of blue-coated cops.

The plainclothes man fingered Janes. "Talk to you in a couple of shakes, Gee-Gee. I don't like the smell of this place. What with a king-pin like Hackman knockin' himself off, there's an odor of putrescent fish."

Gee-Gee Janes lost none of his swagger. His smile, however, was discreetly concealed. "Listen, lieutenant, you aren't tellin' yourself I'd

bump my boss, are you? Did I know he was dead until this lobby began to buzz with the news? I didn't. I can prove—"

The lieutenant pushed Janes out of his path. "Sure, sure. But later, Gee-Gee. Let's see what Steve looks like as a corpse . . . You, Clancy, hold Gee-Gee somewhere."

The lieutenant ran to the elevator, two of his men following. Clancy led Janes into a little writing room at one side of the lounge.

Agent X went into the bar from where he could keep one eye on the room that held Janes. He sat down on a stool and ordered a drink. He was wondering how best he might corner Janes, in order to study him for impersonation, when he happened to glance into a pillar of mirrors that centered a circular bar. There he glimpsed the graceful form of Sheila Landi.

He pretended to take no notice of the woman who slipped into the room and took the stool next to the one occupied by the Agent, drew out a cigarette from her handbag, lighted it, and gave an order. The Agent drank slowly, now and again stealing a glance at the reflection of the woman in the mirror. She was perfectly used to being looked at, and the room deprived her of none of her poise.

As she lifted a fragile cocktail glass in her slim, delicate fingers, she stared directly at the crooked pillar of cigarette smoke that coiled toward the ceiling. And glass all but touching her lips, she spoke. It was the softest of whispers, but every word she uttered was clearly audible to the Agent. And he was slightly startled for he knew that they were for his ears alone:

"Stay out. This does not concern you in the least. You have been following me all the way from New York. It is a perilous path. Turn back before it is too late. If you persist in this mad investigation, there is no end but death."



*X sprang through the door,
flash-lamp held high.*

When she had drained her glass, she turned to leave. The Agent's steel-gray eyes met her blue ones. But she seemed to look straight through him, as though she had not spoken. And then she was gone. .

Sheila Landi knew that Agent X had followed her, though he had changed his disguise sometimes twice a day.

THE AGENT studied himself critically in the mirror. His make-up was perfect. She could not have penetrated that layer of plastic vola-

tile material that covered his real features. And even if she had, there was but one living person that knew the Agent's real face; and she was quite a different person than Sheila Landi.

More and more the cloud of mystery deepened around the woman in the flame-colored dress. And her warning—"No end but death." Many times had X been warned, but never had he felt the warning to be more pregnant. He was in danger, but he felt that his chief danger lay in the beautiful, X-ray eyes of Sheila Landi.

But in spite of this premonition of danger, X turned from the bar, his self-assurance un-



shaken. In the hotel lobby, a man had just come out of the elevator. He was Leo Madvig. His yellow-gray hair hung down over his bulging eyes. His long head jerked first one way, then another. He took three quick, short steps toward the clerk's desk turned quickly, his loose-jointed arms dangling like thick ropes from his shoulders, and saw the Agent.

"Trouble, Mr. Madvig?" asked X politely.

Madvig's fingers clenched into quivering claws. "Trouble?" he said huskily. "Do you know what's happened? Have you any conception of what is still to happen? Where *are* the police?"

"The hotel's full of them. There's been a—a suicide. What's the matter with you? Can't I help?"

Madvig's clenched fists trembled under the Agent's nose. "Y-y-y-you!" he stuttered in his fury. "Perhaps you know what has become of it. But you're too damned dull-witted to know anything. Why did I ever listen to a reporter?"

There was a policeman standing outside the little writing room where Gee-Gee was being held for questioning. Madvig sighted him, ran toward him, bumping into people, until he had the officer by the belt. Then his tense, husky voice told every one in the lobby what had happened.

"It's gone—gone. It will take years for me to duplicate those calculations. The plans, the model, everything gone."

"What's gone?" asked the officer.

Madvig slapped his forehead. "My invention, don't you understand? It was stolen from my room. Oh, you don't understand. Nobody will understand until it's too late." He wheeled, his pop-eyes darting from one to another of the people who crowded around. "Listen," he said slowly and pleadingly. "You poor fools don't seem to grasp the situation. My invention has been taken from my room. But I'm not thinking

of myself alone. I'm thinking of you and you and *you!*"

"What was this invention?" asked the cop. "A new kind of can opener?"

"Ugh!" Madvig looked as though he were about to faint. "My invention is safe only when it is in my hands. I alone know how to handle it. In other hands, guided by ignorance, or by a trial-and-error method of finding out its uses, it means destruction. Not death as you know death, but destruction. Not a man, woman or child is safe until I recover it. I—"

He stopped, dabbed at his dewy brow with a handkerchief. As he returned the handkerchief to his pocket, he caught sight of some one in the crowd. "There!" he shouted, his quivering fingers indicating a big, heavy-set man with a smudgy nose and a receding chin that was peppered with beard stubble.

The smudgy-nosed man elbowed his way forward. "What's wrong with this nut, officer?" He indicated Madvig. "I wouldn't steal his can opener. You know me. I'm Fred Poole. And if it's anything to you, I'm employed at present by Mr. Albert Loeb's."

The officer may not have known Fred Poole, but every one knew Al Loeb's, big boss of the Loeb's Munition and Arms Works. Agent X knew Fred Poole, who had a reputation that was not of the best. Poole was a shady private investigator, who frequently twisted the duties of his profession to include blackmail and confidence games. Perhaps Poole felt his association with the Loeb's money was a sort of ink remover for the blot on his personal escutcheon.

"Now, now," the big cop soothed Madvig. "You'd better take this up with the hotel—though valuables should be placed in the hotel safe."

A mirthless laugh hacked from Madvig's mouth. "You couldn't put *that*, in a safe, you fool."

"What is it?" asked Poole.

Madvig quivered with rage. "Wouldn't you like to know! You damned spy, you're working for Al Loeb's. You stole it. You—"

Poole crowded in, fist clenched and right arm back. "Let me bop that guy, officer."

"Keep out of this, Poole," the officer warned. "Listen, you—" to Madvig—"we can't find your gadget if you won't tell us what it is."

"I—I can't," Madvig breathed. "It—it's death, that's what. Certain death!"

A number of bystanders laughed with relief. It was pretty obvious to all of them that Leo Madvig was mad.

AS THE POLICEMAN led Madvig to the lounge, speaking to him as though the eminent scientist was a child, the door of the writing room opened and Gee-Gee Janes and the lieutenant of detectives came out. Gee-Gee was grinning and flicking imaginary dust from the tightly stretched shoulder of his black coat.

"Told you you had nothing on me, big stuff," Janes said triumphantly.

The lieutenant scowled. "Well, if this wasn't a clear case of suicide, I'd put something on you, Gee-Gee. Don't

think you're going to take a powder even now. Where you going now?"

Gee-Gee struck a Fifth Avenue attitude. "Home, James. My car and chauffeur awaits me lord in the alley. Pip-pip, big stuff."

While the lieutenant was taking down Janes' address and telephone number, Agent X slipped through the lounge and into the coffee shop. From there he hastened into the kitchen. If Gee-Gee's car was in the alley, and Janes' chauffeur was behind the wheel, X was determined that Janes would have a new chauffeur by the time he was ready to go to his apartment.

Here was a welcome opportunity to slide into Gee-Gee's mirror-finished shoes, strut before the mysterious Sheila and obtain all available information about that woman's connection—a connection, he felt that linked her to the odd death of Steve Hackman and, possibly, to the disappearance of Madvig's Frankenstein invention.

Agent X saw very little of Janes' chauffeur except shiny puttees and whipcord breeches, as he reached the alley. The man had the hood of a bright yellow Packard sedan up and was bending over the motor. X drew

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from his pocket an ordinary-looking cigarette lighter that concealed a tiny cartridge of anæsthetizing gas—a non-lethal weapon which would knock a man out the instant the gas was inhaled.

Quietly, he approached the chauffeur, intending to release the gas under the man's nose. But as his arm extended toward the driver, the latter straightened suddenly and jerked back his right arm. His elbow struck the Agent's arm, knocking his hand against a sharp piece of metal protruding from under the under-surface of the cowl. The metal lighter was knocked from X's fingers.

"What the hell?" the man roared. He pivoted, caught the Agent's short left jab on his forearm. Men who worked for Gee-Gee Janes were naturally apprehensive, and this man had undoubtedly served time as a hell-driver in one of the bank robberies Janes was suspected of engineering. He was very much on his toes, so much so that he had the wrench in his hand and up and down again in a split second.

X took the hacking blow from the wrench on his shoulder. It would have been a knockout blow except that the lean, leathery muscles that tightened across the Agent's shoulders took most of the kill out of it. X ducked back, but the chauffeur's right foot shot out, tangled in X's ankles, tripped him backwards. He was down with the wrench-wielding chauffeur on top of him.

But there were more punches in the Agent's jabbing arms than this Chicago hood knew were in the books. One to the middle sent the breath exploding from the chauffeur and left him limp. Another crashed to the side of the head and pitched him over on his side, out for the count.

X sprang to his feet, heard close at hand a jaunty, whistled tune that could come only from Gee-Gee Janes' lips. The Agent got the chauffeur under the armpits and all but flung him into a shadowy corner behind

some garbage cans. He pulled off the man's cap and removed his own fiery-red toupee at the same time. The toupee went into his pocket; the cap on his head, covering his dark-brown hair.

X jumped to the car, saw Gee-Gee swinging up the alley. He dropped the hood of the yellow sedan, got around to the front door and was under the wheel by the time Janes reached the car. His only hope was that the gloom of the alley would hide the face that lack of time had not permitted him to hide with makeup.

Gee-Gee got into the back seat and flopped down on the cushions. He shook a cigarette from a pack, still whistling inaccurately the tune from a recent motion picture.

"Home," he ordered. The red dot of an electric cigarette lighter illuminated a portion of his dusky face for a moment. He was still smiling.

"Old Steve turnin' off his own light!" Gee-Gee mused. Then he laughed and shrugged as X got the car under way.

FORTUNATELY, X had followed Sheila Landi to Gee-Gee's apartment on the day before, so he knew its location on Twenty-second Street near the Chinese quarter where Gee-Gee had business interests. Thirty minutes later, X brought the yellow car to a smooth stop in front of a shabby building that concealed the luxury of Gee-Gee's apartment.

There was a garage attached to the side of the building and Janes ordered him to drive in. The garage was lighted, and now there was no longer the friendly dark between Agent X and his exposure as an imposter.

But Gee-Gee was evidently oblivious of everything except the light of his lady's eyes, for he got out of the car swinging and swaggered up a flight of steps that led to the floor above.

Quietly, the Agent followed him. The shabby stairway led into a thick-

ly carpeted hall. He saw Gee-Gee's broad-shouldered silhouette swing through a lighted doorway at the end. X followed.

"Hello, Klinker," Janes greeted some one on the other side of the door.

X flattened himself against the door frame, peeked into Janes' magnificently furnished living room. Janes was at a table, picking up a glass and a decanter, his back toward the door. Behind Janes was a stocky man, chubby-featured and partially bald, in spite of other evidence of youth.

"How are you, boss?" the chubby-featured man asked, softly.

"Oh, I'm doin' myself a lot of good," Janes chuckled as he swizzled soda water into his whiskey. "What's under your scalp, Klinker? D'yah know I'm feelin' swell to-night, Klink. Never thought I was the guy to go for a gal, did you? And you was right—up to now. But this one's different. Ever know a gal that gave you a kick like a shot of juice from the chair, Klinker? That's her. A lady—the looks, the frame, the clothes. Lady all the way up and down. And boy has she flopped for Gee-Gee!"

"Yes," said the man called Klinker.

Janes swung around, thin lips grinning widely. "Yes, what?"

Klinker smiled slowly. "Like you just said—a girl. Mine's like that, too. She's the daughter of Beckardt, the grocer."

Janes guffawed. "Man, you had me worried! Thought it was the same as my dame. Listen, Klink, you don't know what's what. There's only one like her I'm speakin' about."

Klinker smiled good-naturedly. "Sure. That's the way we all feel, I guess. That's what I wanted to see you about. I want to get married."

"The hell you do?" Janes waved his glass. "Well, it's nothin' to me if you want her for a steady diet. Feel

like I could go for Sheila the same way."

"So I'm resigning, boss," Klinker said.

The smile of Gee-Gee Janes drew into a tight, thin line. His brown eyes became slots. Gone was everything that was jovial about him. The nail-hardness, the eternal suspicion that is part of those who live outside the law, rose to the surface.

"Yeah?" he breathed. "You're what?" He edged a little closer to Klinker. "Say it in English."

"I'm quittin'," said Klinker. "Shovin' out of the racket for good. You've heard that before, but I'm in earnest. I've got to go straight on account of my girl. She's decent. I ain't good enough for her when I'm on the square, let alone when I'm prowling around casing banks for you."

JANES took a long, swaggering step that brought him within a foot of Klinker. "Listen, greeny, who the hell you think you are? Duck out of the racket, eh? Leave the gang flat? Knowin' what you know and then talkin' of duckin' out? Hell, I thought that a sap like that run up the trees in the spring! Listen, Klinker, when you're in, you're in."

Klinker nodded. "I know how you feel. I know plenty about you and Steve. But you know I keep my mouth shut. I'll clear out of town if you'll sleep better."

Janes made a flat-handed gesture and swung his back on Klinker. "Nuts! You know damned well there's only one way out after you're in. That's surrounded by silver handles, with a wreath on your belly readin' 'From the Boys.' Sure, you're clean, now. But you won't stay that way. If that jane loves you enough to disappoint the other guys for the rest of her life, she'll take you as is. You don't have to wear a halo to aisle it with a dame."

Klinker's jaw muscles worked in and out. He took a threatening step toward Janes. "You can go to hell,

Gee-Gee. I'm through. On the straight from now on. I'm no squealer, but if you want to lose sleep over thinking I am, you can, and to hell with you!"

Janes faced Klinker. Shrugged his shoulders, spread his hands. His voice was softer, deadlier, X thought. "It isn't like you was a rat, Klinker. But I know how stuff is. I been around. No, you ain't goin' to squeal, not now. But wait till you're feedin' the wife on twenty a week of clean money. And then the wife says she's goin' to have a kid. Hell, it happens. And on twenty a week you can't afford a kid. It's pretty damned easy to sell out to the cops—sell every damned thing you know about your old pals, just so that kid can come squallin' through and grow up to be a nice big yellow punk like his old man!"

Klinker's fists clenched. Probably before he knew it, his right arm flung out and his big, capable fist had met Gee-Gee's jaw. Gee-Gee went back on his heels and into a crouch. His right hand went behind him and opened a drawer. Gee-Gee straightened. He was breathing hard. The scar across his chin might have been drawn with chalk. He had an automatic in his fist.

"Quit, eh? Okeh, you'll quit. Like I said, you'll quit. You're takin' it in the belly now!"

Klinker took a step backwards. "Okeh," he said hoarsely. "You aren't throwin' a scare into me. I don't want to go to my girl if I don't go clean. Shoot, you rotten, yellow killer!"

To Agent X, there was nothing more admirable than the killer with the courage to quit, to face the silence created by the gun-thunder of gang law. And though he jeopardized his own plans, reduced the value of his own life to the fraction of a cent, he vowed that Klinker would have his chance.

The boyish lips that were a part of the Agent's disguise, curved into a merry grin. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his photographer's flash-lamp.

CHAPTER III

BLOODY ALLIANCE



"HOLD that pose, Gee-Gee, for a front page spread!"

As he said that, Agent X sprang through the door, the flash-lamp held high above his head.

A startled snarl from Janes. Undoubtedly he fancied himself already pictured in the papers, gun in hand, brown eyes tempered to killer's hardness. He swung his gun slightly to cover Agent X, but before he could pull the trigger the flash-lamp had blown.

Under cover of intense light that momentarily blinded Janes, X dropped his lamp and sprang straight at Gee-Gee. He grabbed at Janes' gun, but got him by the wrist, forced the gun up toward the ceiling. His right arm lashed around Janes' hard waist. He gripped the man so close that Janes' left-handed blows to the body were too short to do any damage.

The Agent's head ducked, came up against Janes' chin. He bent his opponent backward as they reeled across the floor, legs tangling, each trying to throw the other. Out the tail of his eye, X saw another man bound into the room, gun in hand. X tried to swing Gee-Gee around as a shield against Janes' henchman's gun. But before he could do so, the gun had blasted.

But the bullet was not for Agent X. Klinker, a little stunned at first by the Agent's surprise entrance, had launched himself at the newcomer, striking the man waist high in a flying tackle that sent both sprawling to the floor, fighting for the gun.

As he struggled with Janes, there was a grim smile on the Agent's lips. Klinker had been worth saving.

He was a capable fighter and evidently not without gratitude for the risk X had taken in his behalf.

Unexpectedly, Gee-Gee lurched to bring X back against the wall. X straightened. For a moment the terrific pressure he had applied to Janes' backbone relaxed. In that moment Janes again tried to bring his gun into play, only to have his right arm whipped down straight to his side where X forced it in beside him and bent it slowly, surely, up toward the small of Gee-Gee's back.

Janes' round face was streaming the sweat of agony. The strength of the Agent's arm was nothing like anything he had ever encountered. He dropped the gun, crying out in pain. Desperately he broke away, only to put himself within range of the Agent's flying right fist, which connected in a blow to the jaw that rammed Janes clear across the room to crash backwards into the wall and slide to the floor.

X followed his advantage. He was fighting desperately against time. The racket was bound to bring police, in spite of the modern sound-proofing of the apartment. And X had not yet given up hope of carrying out his original plan of impersonating Janes.

Gee-Gee rallied, came up from the floor like a Jack-in-the-box. His hasty left jab fell short, and the spent force of the blow only served to fling him into a pile-driver blow to the heart that sent him backwards with such force that the back of his head cracked into the wall.

Somewhere, there was a pistol shot. As Gee-Gee went down unconscious, X flashed a look to his left and saw the tangle of arms and legs that was Klinker and his opponent, relax partially.

Klinker scrambled away from his opponent, stared in horror at the writhing man on the floor. X grasped the situation in a moment. Klinker's opponent had regained his gun, only to have it go off unexpectedly with its muzzle turned toward its owner.

The gunman's shirt already was stained with blood.

Klinker was like a wooden image, he was that frightened.

X stepped to Klinker's side, dropped on one knee, took a quick look at the wound in the man's chest. "Not a chance," he whispered. "Take it easy, Klinker. It was self-defense."

Klinker, his chubby face white, could not take his eyes off the dying man. "Never killed a guy before," he kept saying.

"And didn't now," X cut in. "Get a grip on yourself. Shut that door."

NOTHING but the tremendous will power of Agent X could have galvanized Klinker into action at that moment. But as he heard the authoritative ring of X's voice and felt the thrust of those steely eyes, he realized that his entire future depended upon obeying his rescuer's slightest command. He slammed the door of the living room.

"Quiet now," X cautioned, then went to the table where stood the phone and picked it up.

Klinker witnessed a miracle, or rather heard one. From the boyish lips of this man who had saved him from Janes' gun, came the voice of Gee-Gee Janes! X hadn't listened to Gee-Gee speak, without memorizing his every vocal inflection. The impersonation was perfect.

"Yeah?" he snarled into the transmitter. Then his voice softened slightly. "Oh, Sheila. How're yah, angel . . . What's that? . . . Well, what's the game?"

X listened a moment, frowning. Somewhere in the street below, a police whistle was screaming. Every second counted, yet he had to listen patiently to what Sheila Landi was saying, and keep every trace of excitement out of his voice.

"Wait," he said to the girl. He pressed the transmitter against his chest, said to Klinker: "Can you bust a safe? I mean, did you ever crack

one before you decided to go straight?"

"Yes, but—"

X rapped into the phone transmitter: "Sure, Sheila. Got what you want right here. Meet you in an hour. With those eyes of yours shootin' at my ticker, I could crack the U. S. mint like a tin-can bank."

X hung up. Snapped his fingers, pointed at the stunned Klinker. "I said, come out of it. Those footsteps on the stairs aren't butterflies'. They're bulls'. Pick up Gee-Gee. Follow me."

Klinker shook his head. "I'm stayin'. I'm takin' the rap. Maybe I can get off on a self-defense. I gotta come clean for the girl. I'm kickin' out. I'm goin' straight."

X seized Klinker's shoulder. His eyes needled the man's brain. "I am a secret agent of the federal government. You want to go straight, so do as I say. I'm giving you a chance. Bring Gee-Gee over here."

Klinker moved to obey. X dropped beside the dead man on the floor, pulled the gun that had killed him from the limp fingers, hastily polished its butt with his handkerchief. Then, as Klinker dragged the unconscious Janes to X, the Agent pressed the butt of the newly cleaned gun into Janes' hand.

Certain that he had established a nice set of fingerprints that would tell the law that Janes was a murderer in unrefutable terms, X removed the gun from Janes' hand and tossed it to the floor. Janes' own gun. X put into his pocket. Then he tiptoed to the door and looked out into the hall.

Somebody was running up the front steps—a cop. X sprang into the hall, beckoned a Klinker to follow. "And," he whispered, "bring Janes."

In the hall, they kept close to the wall, moved cautiously toward the back steps, by means of which X had entered the building. X had Janes' gun in his hand. His body was cover-

ing Klinker and Klinker's dead-weight burden. His eyes were on the front stairway. He saw the flash of the shield on the cop's cap as it bobbed over the top of the steps. He swung around, shoved Klinker through the open door and into a bedroom, which must have adjoined Janes' living room.

Klinker was breathing noisily. "Another cop comin' up back," his whisper panted. "Sure this is on the up-and-up?"

"No questions," X snapped.

They were hemmed in, one cop coming up the front and another up the back. X glanced around the room. There was one door, opening into Janes' living room, and two windows. Neither window was accessible from the outside by fire escape. On the other side of the door opening into the hall was an open electric-light socket.

X slipped to the other side of the door, held Janes' gun lightly by pressing thumb and fingers against the hard rubber grips, and thrust the barrel into the open socket so that it contacted both elements at once. There was a blue-white flash of light, then instant darkness throughout the house.

KLINKER breathed an oath, and a police flashlight lanced the darkness and fingered along the hall. X slipped to the doorway, waited, Janes' gun still in his hand. As the cop, who had approached from the rear, came abreast of the door, Agent X stepped quickly into the hall and lashed up with the barrel of the automatic to the cop's temple. The cop dropped his flashlight to the floor and fell limply into X's arms.

The Agent let the cop slide to the floor, saying to Klinker as he did so: "Make for the back stair with Gee-Gee. I'll cover."

Klinker was on his way. The cop who had entered the building by the front way had turned his light into the living room. He would spot the

body, lose a moment in so doing, give X and his companion a chance to run for it. But as Klinker gained the back steps, the cop came out of Janes' living room and turned his light down the hall. The beam struck the Agent as he backed toward the steps.

X sent a gunshot high over the cop's head. That leaden warning was enough to compel the policeman to turn out his light. But the cop retaliated with a shot that came dangerously close to the Agent's head.

X jumped down onto the stairs, slammed the door at the top of the steps and legged down after Klinker, who had already gained the garage. X opened the back door of the sedan, motioned Klinker to get Janes into the car.

"Get in with him," the Agent ordered. "Keep an eye on Gee-Gee, for there's no calculating the thickness of his skull. Might come to."

He got into the front seat and kicked the starter. As the motor thrummed, the cop was on the stairway. X had the car in reverse. It shot backward with a neck-breaking jerk, just as the cop gained the garage.

The cop shot. His slug spider-webbed the shatter-proof windshield, sang over X's ducked head and drilled through the top of the car. Before the sedan had stopped moving backwards, X forced the grinding transmission into low, spun the wheel, gave the car the gun. The sedan missed the drive incline entirely, headed along the sidewalk, to bounce from the curb into the street.

Police slugs traced them down the street, spanged from the fenders and top. But, miraculously, gas tank and tires escaped. Given a break like that, a bat out of hell could not have followed a car driven by Agent X.

Klinker leaned over the back of the front seat as soon as they were comparatively out of danger. "Say, mister, don't get it I'm not thankful for how you pulled me out of a hole tonight, but what is this? You say you're a Fed, then you have a

gun battle with the bulls. I gotta know what's what."

"No," said X shortly. "If you're in this with me, the first thing you learn is not to ask questions, no matter how just they may seem. But I realize how you feel. You want to go straight. I heard your conversation with Janes. That's the only reason I moved to help you out. But think a little. If I were a crook, would I ask a guy like you, who wants to quit crime, to help me out?"

"Nope."

"Naturally I wouldn't. But if it will soothe your conscience, I'll tell you this much: I'm going to get in on the inside of something bigger and blacker than any racket Steve Hackman or Gee-Gee Janes ever hatched. I don't know what that is, but I want you in with me. You'll understand why, a little later. We'll work like criminals, as though we were part of a gang."

"I got it," said Klinker. "And in the end turn the Feds loose on the gang. Say, mister, you're regular, I got that all right. I owe you my life. I'm with you, but I know you aren't takin' me into the Feds. They don't work that way. You've got to train and pass examinations and—"

"Stop worrying," X interrupted. "You help me with this job, and I'll see that you are jake with the law. You just killed a man in self-defense. Didn't I fix it so there's not a shred of evidence against you? It looked queer, maybe. If they ever catch Janes and give him a murder rap, it's just what Janes has coming to him. He'd have killed you tonight and done an expert job because he's had plenty of practice. A lot of things we'll do may look queer. But remember, we're fighting crime with its own weapons. We've just got to think quicker, draw sooner, create more clever deceptions than crime does. Inevitably, we'll bring about justice."

"Tonight you may have to help me crack a safe. I don't know why, but you've got to do it just as you would

if I were Gee-Gee Janes telling you to do it. I assure you that anything of value stolen will be returned to the proper owner."

And that was really all that X knew of the adventure ahead. Sheila Landi had called Janes' apartment to ask Janes to meet her in his car and bring a safe expert along. And X, impersonating Janes, intended to comply with Sheila's demand for the sole purpose of worming his way into the confidence of Sheila or whoever was heading the mob with which she was associated.

It was doubly dangerous. Sheila had penetrated X's disguises, apparently. Perhaps even after he had disguised himself as Gee-Gee Janes, she would still be able to see through his makeup. Furthermore, to insure Klinker's safety, X had framed Janes for murder, which made an impersonation of Janes even more perilous. But danger was the spice that made living enjoyable to X. He welcomed it. Could he, however, rely on Klinker?

CHAPTER IV

BEAUTY'S X-RAY EYES



ALWAYS before he attempted an investigation in a city, outside New York, Agent X established a number of hideouts, renting rooms in out-of-the-way places, fitting doors

and windows with special locks to insure secrecy, and stocking closets with clothes, makeup materials and scientific defensive weapons.

He had such a hideout above a drug store on Halstead Street. It was a two-room apartment, cheap and dirty, and the only living quarters in the tiny corner building.

He brought the yellow car to a halt in front of this building. The drug

store had long since closed, and there were no loafers in sight.

X got out, hoisted Janes on his shoulders, and told Klinker to follow him. They went up a stairway of sunken treads into that smelly little hole that was to be the birthplace of another makeup miracle.

"You'll wait here in the front room until I call you," he informed Klinker. "When I call, come into the back room—and don't be surprised at anything."

His first action, once he was out of Klinker's sight, was to stretch out Gee-Gee Janes on the bed. Janes was showing signs of reviving, but X soon put an end to that with a shot of a powerful narcotic in Janes' arm. Then he turned a small dressing table around, so that he could keep an eye on Janes and on the triple mirror set up on the table.

He opened an elaborate kit of makeup material on the dressing table. Next he removed a portion of the plastic material which covered his face, added more to the cheek and chin, rounding it out until the contours were similar to the cheeks of Janes. Quickly the turned-up nose, which had been a part of his disguise, was shaped into an exact replica of Janes' nose. Then he began adding brown pigment to the plastic on his face, shading it delicately with his fingers until it resembled Janes' dark complexion. The scar on the chin was easy to duplicate, for he had only to crease the plastic and whiten the crease with special pigment.

The addition of a toupee of fine, black hair, pressed on over his head after his own hair had been slicked back, completed the picture.

From a closet he selected a black, double-breasted coat that was just a little too tight across the shoulders. He tightened the buttons of the coat at the waist.

X then leaned over the bed, studied the man's face closely. Next the Agent gave his lips an elongated line with a stick of coloring matter making them

similar to Janes. A single drop of some chemical of his own compounding in each eye, gave X's gray irises a darker cast, so that they resembled the eyes of his prisoner. A final touch to the eyebrows, a glance in the mirror, and he was all ready. Secret Agent X had become Gee-Gee Janes, racketeer.

X swaggered to the door, for even movements were studied imitations of those of Janes'. He opened the door and called to Klinker, using the voice that had been associated with his disguise as the reporter.

Klinker came in, turned white, looked as though he were about to land his fist in the center of X's face. But he checked that impulse when X spoke:

*They were held together
by the frame.*



"I think I've passed the test. I look so much like Janes that you had an uncontrollable desire to give me a poke. Well—" and instantly his voice assumed the characteristic inflections of the voice of Janes—"take a gander at the guy on the bed, pal. I got a wad of dough that says you can't tell one of us from the other!"

Klinker sagged limply into a chair. For fully twenty seconds he stared at Agent X. Then he stammered: "You—you're the guy that—that—"

X nodded. "I'm the guy."

"I mean, you're the guy with a thousand faces."

"Never counted them, but I've been called that among other names not so complimentary."

"Say!" Klinker gasped. "You're Mr. X, the guy nobody knows, the guy no mobster wants to know. You mean I'm goin' to work for you? Hell, you give me the creeps."

X laughed shortly. "You'll get over it. We haven't a whole lot of time. We've got to help a lady crack a safe. That's where you come in. You ought to make pretty good atmosphere for the impersonation of Mr. Gee-Gee Janes. So as soon as you get out of your trance, we'll get started."

Agent X busied himself making sure that his pockets contained none of the special devices he usually employed. If he was going to impersonate Janes he must use no weapon that Janes would not use. Much as he disliked lethal weapons, there were few that could handle an automatic better than he. So it was Janes' heavy gat he slipped into the gun clip under his arm.

IT was near the edge of Morgan Park that X had agreed to meet Sheila Landi. The woman was waiting in a small coupé and waved at them.

X stopped. In the illumination from the street lamp he wondered if his disguise would stand the test of her scrutiny. He motioned to Klinker to get over into the back seat. He leaned out of the car, smiled widely. "Say, angel-eyes, you waitin' for a boy friend?"

Sheila Landi gave him a dazzling smile as she stepped quickly into the car. "Yes—and I've found him. You're right on time, Gee-Gee. And the man in the back—"

"Best can opener in town, Sheila. Why the first thing a prospective bank depositor asks is, can Klinker push in the vault. Now, what's the job, Sheila? I'm goin' into this blind. Don't know how come, unless it's the brilliance of those eyes of yours that's got me in a daze."

Sheila laughed a little. Then her deep-blue eyes became serious. "You're perfectly certain you want to go into this? There's no getting out, you know."

"Who'd want to get out as long as you're mixed up in it, baby? You just say where to, and if it's to hell, it's okeh by me."

"Turn right at the next corner," she directed. "Do you know where the Albert Loeb's house is?"

"Loeb's! Say, angel this is a fancy job. That where we're goin'? Why didn't you let me know, and I'd worn a soup-and-fish." X glanced back at Klinker. "Can you feature that? It'll be like openin' a trunk, won't it, Klink?"

"I'd have liked to case the joint first," said Klinker.

"Don't worry," Sheila said, "because that's all attended to. Loeb's is away. There are only a few servants, and I imagine they have been taken care of."

"Who's doin' the care-takin'?" X asked.

"Sabin," Sheila told him. "You haven't met him yet."

X was very glad she told him. He asked. "Who's Sabin?"

"Your boss," she told him, "if you go into this thing."

"And what are we goin' in after?" X persisted.

Sheila shook her head. "Sabin knows. There's something in that safe that Sabin needs for his cause But here we are. That old English place on the hill—turn right in the drive. It circles the house, so we'll be headed for a quick getaway."

X squinted up at the tall stone peaks of the great Loeb's mansion. Every window was dark. He wondered if perhaps Leo Madvig wasn't right when he had accused Detective Fred Poole of stealing his invention for Al Loeb's. Perhaps this invention was housed in Loeb's safe. If it was all that Madvig claimed it to be, it was probably worth a small fortune

to any one interested in the manufacture of munitions.

But was this Sabin an ordinary criminal? Or was he the director of some political society bent on revolution? Sheila Landi was hardly the sort to associate with ordinary criminals.

X brought the car to a stop in front of the big house. Sheila got out. X slid across the seat and followed her to the cement terrace extending in front of the door. Klinker, burdened with burglar's tools, got out more slowly. Then, as they approached the door, Klinker stopped, grasped X's arm.

"Matter?" X whispered.

"Funny sound. Somebody moving through the bushes."

SHEILA, her arm linked with the Agent's, urged him forward. X's eyes were fastened on the door. On either side were tall, shadowy figures.

"Say, Sheila, what is this?" X asked. "A masquerade? Those guys up there by the door—they got black masks on."

"Don't be alarmed," she whispered. "They're Sabin's guards."

She approached the motionless, masked figures boldly. In the dim light, X could see that the guard's arms were crossed; that each held a revolver in his right hand.

Sheila addressed one of the motionless figures. "Has Sabin arrived?"

The masked head nodded. "He's behind you."

X, Klinker and the woman turned. The white ray of a flashlight was turned directly on their faces. Behind the light, X was conscious of the close scrutiny of a pair of cruel, keen eyes.

"So," came a sibilant whisper. "It is Mr. Janes. Look on my face, Janes. I want you to know me. Once you have met me, you will find me hard to forget."

The flashlight turned, speared upwards, and fell across the face of the man called Sabin.

Klinker gasped, and even Agent X could scarcely suppress an exclamation of surprise. Never had he seen

such a face. Strings of greasy, black hair fringed from beneath the brim of a wide, black hat. Cruel, thick lips snarled back from set, sharp teeth. The jaw muscles were exaggerated lumps of power; the chin was a sharp, determined prow. From one high cheekbone a pink scar jagged down into a sunken cheek. Sabin's nose was large, crooked. His eyes were as white as china, save for extremely small irises of jet black.

"Yeah," said X softly. "How're yah?"

Laughter hissed from between Sabin's wolfish teeth. "To work, then. Here is the key, obtained from Mr. Loeb's chauffeur."

He handed the key to X, who fitted it into the lock, turned it, opened the door. Then X, Klinker, the two guards, and Sheila stepped over the threshold. Sabin followed and boldly turned on the light.

Inside the house, Sheila took the lead, moving with swift, fearless steps along the hall. In her short-skirted, tailored suit of gray, she was very like some business woman approaching her office. Absolutely sure, perfectly confident, she walked directly to a polished oak door. There she paused, seemed to be listening to the footsteps of the men as their heels clicked across the bare floor. Hand on the knob of the door, she turned quickly, gasped.

The woman's deep-blue eyes flickered from face to face. It seemed to X that some of the color had drained from her smooth cheeks.

"Something the matter, Sheila?" Sabin asked.

Sheila said nothing, turned, opened the door. Beyond was a library walled with books and centered by a large desk. In one corner of the room stood a large, old-fashioned safe. On the wall beside it hung a heavily framed portrait of the founder of the Loeb's business. Sheila went to the safe, turned, waited, her eyes fixed on those of Agent X.

"Well," said Sabin, "you know why you are here, Janes. This man with you I presume, can manage the safe?"

X turned to Klinker. "How about it? Looks like a cheese box to me."

Klinker nodded. "Sure, boss."

The Agent said: "Klinker was openin' that sort of a crib when most guys his age were bustin' their china-pig banks to get pennies."

He took hold of Klinker's arm and steered him toward the safe, and together they knelt in front of the steel door. Sheila knelt beside X, resting her hand gently on his arm. Sabin and his two bodyguards came closer.

Klinker twirled the combination dial. Then he turned, grinned at X. "You was right, boss. Cheese box. So old I can feel it out."

KLINKER slowly rotated the knob, "feeling" for the click of the tumblers with his thick, capable fingers that seemed too coarse for such delicate work. Five minutes clicked by. Then Klinker uttered a sigh of satisfaction and swung back the door. "The papers," Sabin said eagerly. "Give them to me."

"What papers?" asked Klinker.

"All of them, fool. Hurry!"

Sabin leaned forward eagerly while Klinker scooped long, official-looking envelopes from the pigeon-holes in the safe. Perhaps, thought X, Sabin searched for the plans of Leo Madvig's stolen weapon.

Sabin took the papers, and was hastily looking through them, when Sheila's tapering fingers squeezed X's arm. The Agent turned. His eyes met the lovely, wise ones of Sheila Landi—those beautiful X-ray eyes. Her red lips were scarcely moving. She was whispering very low as she had in the bar of the Ayreshire Hotel that night:

"I warned you, remember? There is no end but death. You are not Gee-Gee Janes."

X jerked a quick breath. Again, the mystery woman had penetrated his disguise. He was trapped. If those lovely red lips spoke to Sabin, they

spoke of death for Agent X. But they must not speak.

The Agent's right hand slipped up the front of his coat. His fingers crept inside, closed on the butt on Janes' gun. He withdrew it swiftly, and under cover of the outswung safe door, thrust the barrel of the gun in under Sheila's left arm.

X's eyes answered the girl's whisper, and if ever there was murder in the Agent's eyes, it was there now. He was hoping that his silent threat would keep her quiet, for nothing in the world could have compelled him to pull that trigger.

"Sabin," said Sheila softly, her eyes fixed on the Agent's face, her breast rising and falling rapidly.

"Ah, this is it," Sabin muttered as he singled out an envelope and thrust it into his pocket. The rest of the papers he flung back into the safe.

"Sabin," Sheila repeated.

X pressed his gun closer into the girl's soft flesh.

"Yes?" Sabin smiled at Sheila.

"Sabin, you must be extremely careful in choosing your associates. You never can tell when Secret Agent X will turn up disguised as one of your confederates."

Sabin nodded. "But as long as I have you, pretty lady, I have no fear of Agent X. Can you identify him?"

Sheila looked straight at Agent X. She nodded. "I can identify him anywhere and at any time, regardless of what disguise he might assume."

CHAPTER V

THE SOCIETY OF ASSASSINS



A GENT X could not have been more uncomfortable mentally, had he been seated on the top of a volcano. Sheila's uncanny sense had penetrated his disguise, and she was about to make his identity known to Sabin. Furthermore, she was taunting him with her

SAX

blue eyes, knowing full well that he would not shoot her; knowing, too, that she held the power of life and death over him.

However, Sabin seemed utterly unaware of what the girl was driving at as he patted the inner pocket of his coat, where the stolen paper rested, and said: "Close the safe, Janes."

X closed, locked the safe. He stood up, the automatic resting in the palm of his right hand, which was flat against his side. His eyes were on those of the lovely blonde who seemed about to betray him.

"We'll go," announced Sabin. "A very profitable evening, gentlemen. Janes, I am quite pleased with you and your assistant. Sheila tells me that you are interested in our society." He opened the hall door as though he owned the house and bowed them all out. Then he followed and closed the door.

"Boss," said Klinker huskily, "didn't we turn this light on when we came in?"

The hall was dark; yet, as Klinker had said, the light had been turned on when they entered.

Sabin cursed. A switch clicked, and spreading across the hall, appeared a line of four men, each with a gun in his hand. And one of these men was Private Detective Fred Poole, as unwashed and unshaven as ever.

"Drop the guns!" rapped Poole. "Gotcha covered."

One of Sabin's guards dropped his gun. The other tried to bring his up to shooting position, but it was immediately shot from his hand by one of Poole's men. The Agent simply slipped the gun he carried into his right-trouser pocket and raised his empty hands above his head.

Sabin glared. If looks could have killed, that look from Sabin's china eyes would have disintegrated Fred Poole. Nevertheless, Sabin, too, feared guns, and raised his hands.

"Fools!" Sabin hushed at his guards. "Why didn't you shoot? My instructions have always been—"

"You're not givin' instructions," said Poole. "When Al Loebs hires Fred Poole to keep one eye open, Fred Poole keeps both eyes open. You birds just backstep where you came from. Let's see what you were up to, before we call the cops. You look like a crowd of nuts to me. A she-burglar, a couple of Ku-Klux, and—Well, I'm a dirty whatcha-call-it, if it isn't Gee-Gee Janes and his prize can opener. How're yah, Gee-Gee? Cops have been waitin' a long time to catch you. We'll see what Al's safe looks like."

They were backed into the library, Poole's men knotting tighter and tighter around them. Agent X retreated a little faster than the others, much to Poole's delight. For he had always claimed that Gee-Gee Janes was yellow. X did not stop backing until he was against the wall.

The Agent was in a tight squeeze. Though he had no reason to love Poole, he didn't care to start a gun battle. He hated killing of any sort, and if Poole and his tough operatives opened up with those gats, some one would get killed. His disguise had forbidden him to carry any of his special non-lethal weapons. If he did not assist Sabin to escape, there was the chance that Sabin would escape without assistance, to carry on the work he had begun, whatever that work might be. And X was pretty certain that a man of Sabin's appearance could not have any very beautiful thought for any one's future. If he could, however, help Sabin out, he stood a chance of getting in on the workings of Sabin's society in spite of what Sheila Landi might threaten to do.

THE KNUCKLES of X's upraised hands touched the heavy frame of the portrait of the founder of the Loebs fortune. At almost the same time, Poole and one of his men stepped forward, ahead of the other two, undoubtedly with the idea of searching their captives. To take immediate advantage of the breaks fate

offered, had long been a motto of Secret Agent X. Instantly, his up-raised hands grasped the portrait at the bottom, lifted it from its hook, swung the heavy picture over his head and down.

It was probably the last thing Poole expected the man he supposed to be Gee-Gee Janes to do. He shot, yes, but his shot drilled into the floor as the picture frame struck his extended gun arm a brain-stunning blow. The old canvas of the picture split over the heads of both Poole and his assistant. They were hooped by the heavy frame, half blinded by dust and lint from the riddled canvas. Their arms were helpless at their sides, held by the heavy frame.

But Agent X did not release his hold on the frame. No sooner had he flung it over the two men's heads, than he charged forward with every ounce of driving power in his lithe body. The two detectives, rimmed tightly together, stumbling over each other, were rammed into the two detectives behind them. One of the men behind them hit the floor. The other, twisting aside, was in a position to shoot.

"Nail that guy, Klink!" X roared.

Klinker swung his bag of burglar tools above his head and let it fly. The bag struck the man in the throat, all but knocking him down, and completely spoiling his aim. X gave the picture frame a final shove, which sent Poole and his aide tumbling over a chair. X's right hand whipped out the gat in his pocket, and a single, well-placed slug knocked out the library light.

Sabin, Sheila and the two masked men were already racing down the front hall. X pushed Klinker ahead of him, gained the hall, snapped out the light.

"Get to the car, Klinker!" he snapped. "I'll hold 'em!"

Then, standing at one side of the door, he kept a flying curtain of lead crashing in a straight line in front of the library door. Any one in the

room who risked passing through that door, was a potential suicide.

When the others were clear of the house, X managed his own retreat. He zigzagged down the hall, running ahead of flying lead from the library. One slug all but dislodged his toupee. He straightened it with one hand as he sprang through the front door. He slammed the door behind him, found that the key Sabin had used was still in the lock, paused long enough to give it a twist before dashing for the car.

Klinker was behind the wheel, with Sheila beside him. Sabin and his two men were in the back. X jumped on the running board as Klinker let the clutch slap in, and then he crowded next to Sheila.

No one said anything until the Loeb's house was many blocks behind. Then Sabin said very softly:

"Turn back toward town. Go to the twenty-three hundred block on Wentworth. You, Mr. Janes, deserve the thanks of the society. Tonight you saved Sabin's life."

"Hell," X said, allowing Janes' characteristic air of bravado to creep into his voice, "I'd do the same for any pal."

Agent X glanced down at Sheila. Her blue eyes met his, and like deep pools, they seemed to ripple with silent laughter. Still, she did not speak the words that X feared.

NOTHING more was said until they reached Wentworth Avenue. There, in the heart of Chinatown, Sabin ordered Klinker to stop the car in front of a darkened Chinese gift shop.

"We shall leave the car," Sabin told them. "It will be taken care of so that there is no chance of its being traced. You will follow me to the council chambers of the Society of Assassins."

"Cripes," whispered Klinker to X as they got to the sidewalk, "the guy's nuts!"

X said nothing, but he had an idea that Klinker was not far wrong. There was something of the madman in Sabin; something, too, of genius—sinister and thoroughly unscrupulous genius.

They entered an alley. Sabin paused in front of a shabby doorway and took a key from his pocket.

"Understand," he said in his soft, sibilant voice, "we are not Orientals. We represent quite different interests. However, we do appreciate the traditional ability of the Oriental to hold his tongue. So we have leased this hiding place from the honorable Fung Ho. Few know of its existence, though old police records give it much attention. Years ago it was a secret place of black smoke, where Fung Ho's ancestors dispensed opium. But those days have gone by. Now this hidden house is our sanctuary.

"Janes, you and your man have pleased me. Enter, if you will, the House of Assassins."

Sabin opened the door and entered, waiting for the others to follow. Agent X looked down at Sheila Landi. She was very close to his side, so close that he was conscious, even in the gloom, of the contours of her svelte body.

"I warned you," she said, very softly, then stepped ahead to join Sabin.

X found himself in a small, dirty pantry, where Chinese sausages hung from the low ceiling. Across the room, Sabin was pulling out a large cupboard mounted on rollers. Behind the cupboard was a door that yielded to Sabin's key, revealing a long, black shaft and narrow stairway. X followed Sheila boldly into the stairwell, with Klinker behind him, clinging to the Agent's coat tails and muttering under his breath.

At the bottom of the steps was a narrow passage some forty feet beneath the surface of the street. Its walls were lined with blocks of stone, lichen-covered and sparkling with moisture in the light of Sabin's torch.

At the end of the passage was an-

other door, guarded by two black-clad, masked men. The guards gave Sabin a flat-handed salute as he and his party were allowed to pass.

Then they were in a long, low chamber lighted dimly by electric bulbs. At one end was a modern office desk; at the other, a low platform supported a heavy, thronelike chair. Behind the chair a curtain of flame-colored velvet was spread across the width of the room.

There were less impressive chairs ranged along the walls. Some of these were occupied by black-clad, black-masked figures. Behind the heavy office desk sat a man busily at work with pen and ledger. A silver "S" mounted on the brow of his mask designated him as secretary.

All in the room were talking in hushed tones, but these whisperings diminished into silence as Sabin strode the length of the room, mounted the platform, and sat down in the chair. Sabin had hid some of the hell in his hideous face by a white mask of celluloid that fitted his facial contours closely. He rapped with a gavel upon a small table at the side of his chair. The secretary arose.

"Honorable Sabin," came the secretary's muffled voice, "has your expedition been a success?"

"It has," said Sabin, "thanks to the work of our new brother, Mr. Janes. You will find a mask for Mr. Janes and for his assistant, Klinker, while I give them instructions. Sheila, you may go, if you wish. Accept our thanks."

Sheila Landi gave X a sharp, almost frightened look, then quietly left the room as Sabin leaned forward and addressed Agent X and Klinker.

"JANES, you have tonight passed a door from which you may never wholly depart. For wherever you go, your soul shall be eternally devoted to our cause. We are not criminals. We do not fear the law. We stoop to murder only in extreme emergencies, either to attain our ends or to silence one who would betray us.

And I may say that our members dare not think of treachery, as you will see."

"Sure, Sabin," X spoke boldly, "you know I ain't a squealer. But what's this all about? What's the racket?"

"Certain of your countrymen, Janes," Sabin went on, "are vitally interested in the cause I represent. Though you may not know it, certain of our South American republics are ready for the Great Change. The seeds of revolt are planted, yet the weeds of poverty may choke them before they are fully germinated. It is because of the Great Change that I live. Thousands in the other America are ready to strike, if they but be given the tools. It is to give them the tools that we, their sympathizers, have organized. Later, this new and greater form of government may displace this country's present democracy, but the United States is not yet ready. And since it is not ready, it is folly to suppose it would assist its brother republics to accomplish the Change.

"The blessings of peace are overrated in the United States. Your government has passed laws to place armaments under embargo. It is with the idea of furnishing our South American brothers with arms from your country that we have organized. Sympathizers are tithed for the cause. We are rich. Were it not for the laws of this country, we could supply the Army of the Great Change with splendid arms. And this we are determined to do, in spite of these laws.

"The best and most modern equipment," Sabin continued, "is manufactured in this city. We intend to force those manufacturers to comply with our wishes. That is all I have to say, except to impress you with the fact that here loyalty is exacted."

Sabin arose, turned so that he faced the flame-colored curtain. "Behind this curtain, Janes, is death—the Death. Nothing like it has ever before come from the brain of man. It is oblivion, it is complete destruction. It is the discontinuance of all mental and bodily

function, all accomplished in the flicker of an eyelid. A Gorgonlike death of which great scientists have dreamed for years."

Sabin faced the Agent once more. "Because of this death, *the Death*, no one in this room dares think of treason. Be warned. *There is no escape!*"

Majestically, Sabin stalked from the room.

To X, Klinker whispered: "He gives me the creeps. What kind of a racket is this—Black Legion stuff?"

X warned Klinker into silence. The secretary of the society was approaching. X struck a swaggering attitude typical of Gee-Gee Janes. "Say, brother secretary, what the hell is there in this for me? I thought you had a neat little racket here, jerking the suckers for a tenth of their income. All I get is a lot of Mumbo Jumbo about the Death. Hell, dyin' is dyin', hot seat or slug; what's the difference?"

"Do not joke about what hides behind that curtain," the secretary said in his muffled voice. "But," he added as he grasped X's hand, "there is money in this for you—and for you, too." He shook hands with Klinker. "Plenty of easy shekels. Wait."

THE secretary left them, and across the room, X saw Sheila standing in a doorway. Her blue eyes beckoned. The Agent left Klinker for the moment and hurried over to join the girl. In silence, she led him down a short, dark hall and into a tiny room, simply furnished. She faced him, placed both hands on his shoulders and eyed him steadily.

"Why did you persist in doing this thing, Agent X?" she whispered. "Why wouldn't you listen to my warning? Don't answer. No one better knows the courage and determination within you. But I tell you it is of no avail. You are lost, hopelessly lost. You voluntarily ended that career of service so well begun. There is no escape from Sabin's clutches—I know. Agent X, eventually, I will be forced to reveal your identity. Sabin knows tor-

tures which have been lost to civilized minds. I could not bear up against them. He will force me to point you out. And then for you there is only death; for me, eternal pain."

Smilingly, X took her hands in his. "Why, if you knew me, have you not betrayed me?"

Her eyelids veiled those deep-blue pools for a moment. "Because," she whispered, "I am a fool. But," she hurried on, "no less fool than you."

X shook his head. "Sabin may be a devil, but he's mad. This talk about death lurking behind that curtain—it's mostly talk. If there was such a death, he would not seek modern armaments for his revolutionary army."

"I have never heard Sabin make an idle threat," the girl said.

"Then, granting there is such a death, I promise you that I will not only engineer our escape, but also pull down the walls of Sabin's mad temple."

"No," Sheila contradicted. "For you will be apprehended. Understand that I alone, among millions, can identify you always."

"How?" he demanded.

Again the deep-blue eyes of Sheila became cryptic with a mysterious knowingness. Her only answer to the Agent's question was an inscrutable smile.

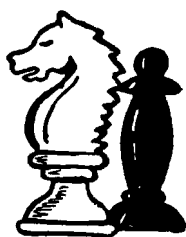
"Tell me, Sheila, what did Sabin take from Loeb's safe tonight?" the Agent asked, shifting his method of probing the girl.

"It was a written order," she explained, "for a new-type machine gun especially manufactured for the federal agents by the Loeb's plant. That order, signed by Al Loeb, will compel the men at the munitions plant to deliver these guns into the hands of the bearer of the note. You see, Sabin may be mad; but he is dangerous. Before morning, he will have those new and deadly weapons."

X shook his head, smiled. "No, my dear Sheila. Because Sabin or no Sabin, death or no death, I'm going to stop that order from going through."

CHAPTER VI

CHECKMATE CORPSE



AGENT X found Sabin awaiting him in the council chamber. Klinker and X were each handed a mask by one of the society members. Then Sabin put his strong, cruel fingers

on X's arm and led him to one corner of the room. So steadily were those china-hard eyes fixed on the Agent, that he feared for a moment that his secret was known. Then Sabin smiled, or at least bared his pointed teeth.

"You are perfectly free to leave at any time, Janes," he said softly. "I might warn you that your footsteps will be dogged. Some of my men have peculiar nervous systems, so do nothing that would arouse their suspicion, and thus avoid a knife in the back."

X laughed. "Don't worry about me. I like to live. But say, I got to thinking what if Loeb discovered we ripped his can? He'll take a look, won't he? If he found that gun order missing, all he's got to do is phone his plant to toss a monkey wrench in your machinery."

The jagged scar on Sabin's cheek twisted as he curled his lips into a sneer. "Do not try to think for Sabin. When Loeb arrives at his house tonight, he will not live to phone his plant."

"A knife in the back?" Agent X shook his head. "No go, chief. A knife is too mussy. It isn't sure. Listen, I'm a right guy. You don't trust me much farther than you can kick a brick with your bare foot. Let me prove my stuff by snuffin' out this Loeb the right way."

Sabin shook his head. "There are more subtle ways. Go. When you are needed again, I shall communicate with you through my men. Remember, you will be followed."

"That's okeh by me," X shrugged, and swaggered across the council

chamber, the dark eyes of masked assassins following him closely.

He opened the door, closed it behind him. The two masked guards silently took him by each arm. He looked from one to the other of the men. Neither spoke. Except for the scraping sound of their feet on the stone floor, they might have been shadows that accompanied him to the street. There they released him and melted back into the doorway of the Chinese gift shop that fronted the secret underground house.

But while the two guards had left him, X was certain that other members of the society followed. As he walked toward Twenty-second Street on Wentworth, he heard the whisper of padded feet behind him. But he ignored such sounds and continued to swagger along until he sighted a late taxi bouncing along the street.

X stopped, whistled it to the curb and flopped into the back seat. He gave the driver the address of the Loeb's house, which he had left so hurriedly two hours before. There were no other taxi cabs on the street, and little chance of his shadowers keeping up with him now.

The cab had rolled only a little way, however, before X saw the gleam of yellow lights, like the eyes of a watchful cat, through the rear window of the cab. He shrugged his shoulders, settled back and lighted a cigarette. Sabin had long arms. The Secret Agent was not yet beyond their reach.

Half a block away from the Loeb's house, he ordered the cab to stop. He got out, and walked boldly on until he reached Loeb's gate. He paused there, the car that had tailed his cab rolled slowly by. X tossed away his cigarette and walked briskly toward the house.

He found the front door unlocked. He turned the knob as quietly as possible and walked in. Somewhere in the house a clock chimed half-past three. Yet in spite of the hour, Agent X knew Al Loeb's had visitors.

At the end of the hall, the living-room door was open. X went directly into it instead of turning into the library. There were three men in the living room: Leo Madvig, the startled-looking inventor; Fred Poole, Loeb's disheveled private detective, and a stout man whose sparse hair was white, whose mouth and sagging chops gave him something of the melancholy expression of a spaniel pup.

X recognized the melancholy man at once, and wondered at his being in Al Loeb's house; for he was Thomas Reedan, chief executive of a chemical manufacturing firm that rivaled Loeb's.

X remained in the hall, listening and watching. All three men were highly nervous. Madvig, with his two hands clasped in front of him, paced back and forth in front of the fireplace. His worn toothbrush of a mustache twitched. His prominent eyes rolled this way and that as though he was fearfully anxious about what might be lurking behind him.

Poole's unshaven, receding chin worked up and down as his teeth rabbit-nibbled tiny morsels from the end of a cigar. Then he growled at Thomas Reedan: "Can't sit here all night!"

"Absolutely not!" snapped Madvig, pointing at Poole. "I say I'm going to call the police. When they come, you're going to answer questions."

"Listen, pop-eyes," Poole worked out of one side of his mouth, "get that hallucination out of your head. I ain't denyin' that Loeb's hired me to keep an eye on you and get a load of what that new invention of yours is like. But I didn't steal it, and I never seen the damned thing. So go cut yourself a piece of cake."

"Cake?" Madvig asked dully. Then he raked his fingers through his gray-yellow hair. "Bah! Why don't people speak English!" He started suddenly toward the telephone on the living-room table.

Thomas Reedan, heavy and helpless-looking in a huge chair, turned pleading eyes on Madvig. "No," he said.

"Don't call the police. That would be murder. That would mean *my* murder. *They* will think that I called the police. They will kill me."

"Listen, Mr. Reedan," Poole said, "I tell you you can't just sit here with a corpse in the house. It ain't done. He's bumped himself. You've got to inform the police. You didn't have anything to do with it, and neither did Madvig. So what the hell? Somebody's been threatening you, I suppose. But a threat don't mean a thing. I'm out of a job now. So why not just hire me as a watchdog? I won't let anybody harm you."

Reedan uttered a puffing sound through bulbous lips that was something like a refined Bronx cheer. "You? A fine bodyguard you are!"

Poole gestured helplessly. "I tell you he bumped himself. Is it my fault if a client chews on the wrong end of a gun?"

Poole's client? Did he mean Loeb's? X turned away from the living-room door and walked back to the library. He opened the door, stepped into the room and closed the portal behind him. Sitting at the desk, directly in front of a telephone, was a man. Dark, glassy eyes stared from beneath heavy, carefully-brushed eyebrows. His large, sharp nose was clotted with blood that had seeped from large, flaring nostrils. His mouth was a wide, raw-looking cavity that had spilled blood over chin, jaws, collar and shirt in a veritable beard of gore. His right hand, lying limply in his lap, was clasped on the butt of a revolver.

Al Loeb's lay dead. A man who had fought by fair means and foul, to keep Loeb's Munitions the leading arms manufacturers of the Middle West, had apparently put the muzzle of a gun in his own mouth and pulled the trigger.

Sabin had promised that Loeb's would die. What sort of hellish fiend was Sabin that he could influence men who stood in his way, to commit suicide without even approaching them?

AGENT X glanced toward the safe. It was standing open. Loeb's had discovered the missing order. Fearing that the guns prepared for federal men would fall into other hands, he had gone to the phone possibly to cancel the order. He had canceled the order and then committed suicide.

X bent over the corpse, stared into the glassy eyes. A whispered exclamation escaped his lips. The pupils of the eyes were constricted to the tiniest pin points. And he had found exactly the same condition in the eyes of Steve Hackman. What possible connection was there between the two men that both should apparently kill themselves in the same evening; that both should be marked by the same inexplicable constriction of the pupils?

There was but one answer: both Hackman and Loeb's had stood in some one's way.

The phone book was open on Loeb's desk. A telephone number was underlined—a number that X recognized immediately as that of the local office of the F. B. I. Had Loeb's been in time to cancel that machine-gun order? Had he phoned the Feds in hope of enabling them to trap Sabin's men who had acted on that order?

Agent X straightened. Thomas Reedan was terrified. He had been threatened. X had to have that man's confidence. He must know all the facts, if he was to check this weird assassin who held men's fate in the hollow of his hand. But as Gee-Gee Janes, he could hardly hope to gain the confidence of a man of Reedan's caliber.

He dropped into a chair, stooped over and twisted the heel from his left shoe. The heel was hollow, and within that little compartment was a tube of makeup material. Small though it was, it was sufficient for an artist like X to effect a complete change of features. Fortunately, Loeb's complexion was very similar to that of Gee-Gee Janes.

His lean, graceful fingers worked quickly, reshaping the contours of his face, pinching the broad nose that was a part of the disguise as Janes, into

the narrow beak that was like that of Al Loeb's. When he had finished, his face was a living replica of that of the dead man in the chair. For the rest of his impersonation he had to call on his memory for the exact tone of the well-known voice of Al Loeb's. His impersonation would not be perfect by any means, but it would be sufficiently so for his purpose.

He then went into the hall and walked with firm, quick steps into the Loeb's living room.

"Gentlemen!" the voice of the dead man rang from the lips of Agent X.

Madvig, Poole, Reedan, turned like puppets operated by the same string. Color drained from their faces. There was a marked unsteadiness about their legs. Then Fred Poole took a step forward.

"No," he said huskily, dashing a hand over his eyes. "No, I ain't goin' to believe it."

"And I'm not, either!" chimed in Madvig. "It's a twin brother!"

"No!" Reedan rocked his big body out of the chair. "It's Al Loeb's—Loeb's never had a brother."

X smiled slightly. "Do not be alarmed, gentlemen. If Loeb's is dead, I could not possibly be Loeb's. If he had a brother, I could not be his brother. Therefore—"

"Secret Agent X!" exploded Poole. His right hand crawled toward his pocket. His awed eyes were on the face of the man who confronted them.

X shook his head slightly. "Never mind the gun, Poole. I've come to help you. I must apologize for eaves-dropping a while ago. Mr. Reedan, I understand that some one has threatened you. I am not of the police. So confide in me."

Reedan swallowed lumpily. "I—I—Oh, I've got to speak. I've harbored this fear long enough. I came here tonight to tell Mr. Loeb's of the threats that hung above my head. I wanted to see if he had been approached in the same way. Some one, some one whose identity I do not

know, threatens my life if I do not immediately hand over about fifty thousand dollars' worth of arms and munitions from our plant.

"I am to die tomorrow night at ten o'clock if I do not comply with that request. I am to die if I communicate with the police. And if I do comply with the request, I'll be violating the law. Secret Agent X, can't you help me?" Reedan pleaded earnestly.

"I can only try," replied the Agent. His voice changed to the utter amazement of the three men. It became soft, low, musical—the natural speaking voice of Agent X. "I shall communicate with you again. Prepare to do exactly what this extortionist demands. And remember this voice. You will hear it again."

HE turned quickly, strode from the room, swung the living-room door shut and locked it. Because of Sabin's watchers, he dared not leave the house in any other identity than that of Gee-Gee Janes. He entered the library where was the corpse of Al Loeb's. There, in front of a small mirror, he hastily regained the features of the gang boss, Gee-Gee Janes. For once he had attempted a disguise, it was a simple matter for him to duplicate it.

Lights from a car in the drive cut across the front window of the library. X turned out the light, went to the window and looked out. Across the lawn, two men scuttled into the shadows of the shrubbery—Sabin's watchers—and from the car that had just driven up, stepped two men. They were federal agents, come, no doubt, in answer to Loeb's call.

X had never been more completely trapped. If he faced the Feds as Gee-Gee Janes, he risked being arrested for murder—the murder of Janes' henchman. For when he had saved Klinker from Janes' gun, X had framed evidence against Janes for the accidental killing of Janes' henchman by Klinker. This he had done for Klinker's protection.

If he left the house in any other disguise than that of Janes, X would show his hand to Sabin's watchers. And he knew he could expect far less mercy at their hands than at the hands of the federal agents.

A desperate plan flashed into his brain—a plan which might end in the arrest of Sabin and those associated with him in the powerful murderers' society. He tore a piece of paper from a small pad on the desk, picked up a pencil and scribbled something across the face of the paper. Then his lean, skillful fingers rolled that paper into a small cylinder, which he thrust into the muzzle of the gun he carried—the gun belonging to Gee-Gee Janes.

CHAPTER VII

THE TORTURE FEST



THE gun in his pocket, X stepped swiftly into the hall. Behind him he could hear the pounding of clenched fists on the living-room door, which he had locked on Madvig, Poole and Reedan, in order that they might not observe his change of disguises.

He went to the front door, opened it and swaggered down the approach walk. Two men were coming toward him—the Feds. The Agent puckered his lips and began to whistle Gee-Gee Janes' favorite love song. He paused, seemed to notice the two Feds for the first time. He reached for a cigarette, stuck it into his mouth, flamed it.

Match flame illuminated the moon face, the scarred chin, the unmistakable features of Gee-Gee Janes.

One of the Feds whispered, "That's Janes!" and immediately sprang forward.

X whipped out Janes' gun. He was purposely a split second late in getting the gun out. He had no chance to level it before the G-man was grappling with him.

"Cops want you for murder, Gee-Gee!" snapped the Fed. At the same time he gave X's gun wrist a twist that disarmed the Agent without much trouble. X wanted the G-man to get hold of that gun, yet he wanted the struggle to look as genuine as possible because of the eyes of Sabin's watchers that were peering at him from the shadows.

The second G-man had drawn his gun and was coming to the assistance of the first. X had no desire that his body should be labeled with a ticket reading: "Died resisting arrest." He seized his capable opponent around the middle, lifted him bodily, swung him around so that he was between X and the second G-man. The man with whom he struggled was trying to get in a gun-barrel blow to the Agent's head, but for some reason he found this much more difficult than disarming X.

Again, X swung the man around as the second Fed approached from another angle. Then, as the second man brushed against a clump of shrubbery, a black-masked figure sprang from the shadows, an upraised gun in his hand. The second G-man turned halfway round, sensing danger, only to drop with a groan as the masked man landed his clubbed gun on the G-man's head.

X suddenly released his struggling opponent, ducked under a blow to the head, and shot a short left to the man's middle. The Fed backed, stumbled, hit the ground. X hurdled him, joined the masked man.

"Quick, boss, this way!"

It was Klinker's voice coming from behind the black mask. Sabin must have sent Klinker as one of those to trail the man he supposed to be Janes.

They scrambled through the bushes. Gun-lead traced them, slapping branches, rattling through leaves, whistling over their heads. They gained the open, raced toward the street. Through the gate, they turned to the right, ran perhaps two hundred feet when a swift, silent car glided up

beside them. The rear door sprang open.

"Get in, fools!" Sabin's sibilant whisper ordered.

X shoved Klinker ahead of him into the back seat of the car. Two bodyguards with drawn automatics were beside the hideous leader of the assassins. Klinker and X were crowded together upon the floor of the sedan.

"Janes," harshed Sabin, "whatever prompted you to go to Loeb's house? Klinker, you should be scourged with scorpions for assisting Janes to escape the federal men. Such a born fool does not deserve Sabin's protection."

"Now, listen, chief," said X to Sabin, "I was only doin' what I thought best. You'd 'a' been in a sweet kettle of herring if Loeb hadn't knocked himself off, now wouldn't you? I thought some of your knifers would mess things up, so I just went along to make sure Loeb couldn't spoil that gun heist of yours."

"Idiot!" whispered Sabin. "You think to teach me my business? Do you suppose it was an accident that Loeb chose to kill himself before he could cancel that gun order? I'll have you to understand that he killed himself because I *willed* him to!"

"Cripes!" Klinker breathed.

THE AGENT, however, himself an accomplished hypnotist, did not suppose for a moment that Sabin had accomplished Loeb's death through sheer strength of will. Sabin was mad.

"Get this, chief," he said, resolved to humor Sabin, "I got your cause deep down in the old liver. When I get thinking how badly those poor devils down in South America need your help, I'd just about do anything. I was thinking about them when I started out to fix Loeb."

"Surely," said Sabin less harshly, "if it were not for the fact that your actions were prompted by true zeal, you would have tasted torture, pos-

sibly death. But beware of being over-zealous!"

"Well, I'm sure glad to know that the gun heist came off all right."

"Yes," said Sabin slowly, "but that is what it did not do—the guns were delivered into my men's hand upon presentation of the order. But less than a block from the plant, my men were held up by criminals and robbed. Do you see what that means, Janes?"

"Hijacked! I'll be damned!"

"Of course, you fool. But do you not see? It could not have happened, had it not been for the fact that there is a traitor in our society. How else would the thieves have known when we were to take the guns? And those blunderers who were sent for the weapons, what colossal idiots! They fired three shots, none of which drew blood. Then they were put into retreat. Ah, but some one is to pay for this!"

Sabin lapsed into moody silence until the car stopped at the hideout on Wentworth Avenue.

As they went again down the long stairway into the underworld house, Klinker whispered to Agent X: "These guys ain't crimesters, boss. They're all of them hipped on this cause that Creepy Eyes keeps blabbing about. I got a look at some of them when you were gone. They're tough ones sure enough, but they aren't out after dough."

"Think you're right, Klinker," X whispered back. "I'd be sure you were, if it wasn't for the death of Steve Hackman. It fits in here somewhere. Hackman was a crime lord. What would he have to do with the society if there wasn't money in it somewhere? But even if they are just political fanatics, they're murderers."

When they had reached the council rooms below, X took Klinker to a secluded corner and sat down at a small card table. He picked up a deck of cards and pretended to interest his aide in a game. As he dealt cards, he talked very quietly.

"The blow-up is coming, Klinker. We don't know how the cards are going to fall. I've laid a web to snare Sabin and his companions, but Sabin may be strong and smart enough to break through. We've got to look ahead. Sheila told me that sooner or later she would be forced to identify me. Sabin is an adept at torture, I understand. I'd believe anything of him after getting a squint at that face."

"Me too, boss."

"Then keep your eyes open. There's a traitor in his crowd somewhere. The blame may fall on me. He may try to force Sheila to point me out. Now if the worst comes and he turns the heat on Sheila, you are to betray me before he can harm the girl."

Klinker paled from chubby chin to that narrow rim of hair about his head. "Cripes, I can't do that, boss! Rat on you? Hell no!"

The Agent's eyes snapped. "Orders, Klinker. While you're working for me, remember that in cases of emergency no harm comes to any woman if we can prevent it. If I betray myself, I would only be making things more difficult for Sheila, for it would be an admission that she and I are acquainted. If you expose me, and do it cleverly as though you had only discovered my identity, Sheila will be spared as much as possible; also you will remain in Sabin's good graces—still be a spy in the enemy camp."

"But, boss, you— Why, he'll kill you!"

The wide lips that were so like those of Gee-Gee Janes smiled slightly. "Let me worry about that, my friend."

A DOOR at the end of the room opened, and Sabin's two bodyguards were dragging a curious machine into the room. At the appearance of the device, a hush fell over the score or more of masked men in the room. The machine was awe-inspiring for one could only speculate as to its use.

It consisted of two cylindrical rollers, six feet in height and mounted on metal gears attached to the base. The rollers were about five feet apart. Three ropes were attached to three different points of each of the rollers, so that there was considerable slack in the ropes. A large hand wheel mounted on the base of the machine evidently operated the rollers so they could be turned in opposite directions.

Near the machine, Sabin was engaged in earnest conversation with his secretary, who had entered the room a moment before. Agent X tossed down his cards on the table, and wandered toward Sabin. As he walked, he nonchalantly lighted a cigarette.

"But, Sabin," he heard the secretary explain, "you can't rack every man in the organization to find the traitor. Besides, I can't see the necessity. There is only one man who might be your hidden enemy, and who might have found his way into this place. That man is Secret Agent X, known as the Man of a Thousand Faces. He might fool even so sagacious a person as yourself."

"I have heard of this man. Perhaps yours is a good suggestion." Sabin stepped to the secretary's desk, pressed a button. Somewhere in the underground house, an electric buzzer sounded.

The Agent walked over and boldly examined the machine, which seemed to hold every one else in awe. He thought he divined its purpose, and he grew chill with a cold hatred of Sabin, satanic madman.

Sheila Landi entered the room. She was still wearing that simple gray suit which she had worn to Loebs's house. She was apparently unconscious of every one in the room except Sabin. His ruthless, china-hard eyes followed her perfect figure as she approached him placidly.

"Yes, Sabin?"

"My Sheila, you have boasted that you could identify the man called Agent X, regardless of disguise."

Sheila bowed her head, and the electric light of the room awakened gold in the waves of her hair.

"There is a traitor in our midst, Sheila," Sabin continued, "and—"

"I know," she interrupted, "but he is not Agent X. I would have pointed out Agent X the moment I saw him."

"Would you, Sheila?" Sabin asked doubtfully. "You are very beautiful. You are as cool as snow. But this man called X, is he not glamorous?"

Color heightened in Sheila's cheeks. She did not answer.

Sabin snapped his fingers. Instantly, his two masked bodyguards stepped to flank the girl.

"I have often wondered if you were human, my Sheila," said Sabin. "Now I shall see if you scream when you are squeezed. You may save yourself the torment of the three ropes by speaking—now."

Sheila glanced at the strange machine at the end of the room. She paled. "I have nothing to say, Sabin, except that for your own sake, I ask you not to do this thing."

The two men conducted the girl to the machine without a struggle. The three ropes were passed around her body in single loops at breast, abdomen and hips. Sabin stepped to the hand wheel and gave it a spin. The vertical cylinder revolved. The three ropes grew taut. No boa-constrictor of the jungle could crush a human body more effectively than Sabin's torture machine.

The Agent's eyes flickered from Sheila's pale face to the face of Klinker. Sweat gleamed on the high forehead of the Agent's ally. Suddenly Klinker stood up and threw the deck of cards to the table, yelling:

"Wait a minute, chief."

Sabin paused, his hand on the wheel of the machine. "Yes?"

"That bird over there smokin' the cig. Looks like Gee-Gee Janes—a helluva lot like him. I been talkin' to him, and I didn't notice anything. But as long as I been with Gee-Gee, I ain't

never seen him blow smoke through his nose. The dame doesn't know her onions. That guy ain't Gee-Gee Janes. I'll lay a dollar he's the X guy you've been lookin' for."

CHAPTER VIII

DEATH MONSTER



SABIN strode across the room to where Agent X was standing. For a few seconds the two men eyed each other, Sabin's hateful, china-hard eyes against those odd, compelling eyes of Agent X. Then the fingers of Sabin's right hand became cruel claws that slashed across the Agent's cheek and left their mark in the plastic makeup material.

Immediately, X was surrounded by masked men, armed with revolvers and automatics. Foremost in this group that guarded him was Klinker. The man played his part well, apparently ready to tear the Agent apart.

Sabin crossed to the torture machine, ordered Sheila's release, "Why did you not call my attention to this man in the first place?"

"I had not noticed him walking," Sheila said calmly.

"You saw him walking when you brought him to Loeb's house," Sabin insisted.

"No she didn't," Agent X spoke up. "I've never been to Loeb's house. Janes has, but I haven't." Agent X now had a partial inkling of how Sheila had been able to identify him.

"Anyway," said Sabin, "we know you are Agent X; that you have been spying on us."

X shrugged. "Well, why not admit it? My job is done."

"What do you mean?"

X flipped cigarette ash airily. "Oh, you'll find out."

"Honorable Sabin," came the muffled voice of the secretary, "I advise that before you dispose of this spy,

you compel him to tell what he has done with Gee-Gee Janes, the man we need. His criminals will be necessary to complete the work we have undertaken. And Janes is a capable man. I suggest torturing Mr. X until he is compelled to inform us what he has done with Janes."

X held up his hand. "Oh, no, I have no great desire to sample your artistic torture, Sabin. If you will look in the lodging rooms above Shemplar's drug store you will find Mr. Janes, safe and sound, though possibly a bit sleepy. You will find him if you live that long."

Sabin crossed the floor of the room slowly, his fingers clenching, his prominent jaw muscles pulsing as though he were grinding his enemy between his keen, pointed teeth. "What do you mean?"

The Agent glanced at his wrist watch. "Simply that my work is done. I have informed the federal agents of your plot to obtain arms, and also I have given them the location of this hideout. They should arrive—"

The distant roar of gun thunder muffled the rest of the Agent's words. Sabin stiffened. For a moment his strange eyes flickered about the room, as though seeking some outlet of escape.

"Into the hall, every man of you," he snapped. "No, one of you stay to guard Agent X. We shall attend to his execution as soon as these meddling fools have been taught a lesson. Move, men! We strike the first blow for the Cause!"

One of Sabin's bodyguards confronted the Agent and plunged the muzzle of a gun into his ribs. All others in the room except the secretary, Sabin and Sheila, ran pell-mell from the room.

Sabin snapped at his secretary: "Get the Death!"

The masked secretary nodded, hurried to the end of the room, where the flame-colored curtain was suspended. Sabin turned on Sheila. His powerful arms slapped around her body. He

swung her from her feet and started across the room. In those mad eyes of his was a hellish, hungry gleam. Because of the crash and the rolling echoes of G-guns, as the Feds strove to break their way into the hideout, all other sounds were muffled.

As Sabin stepped through the door at the other side of the room, Agent X lurched forward so that his face was but a few inches from that of the masked guard. At the same time, he blew forcefully on the cigarette in his lips. Smoke and sparks dimmed the guard's sight. The man blinked, and at that moment, X took a quick step to the side. The guard tried to turn. His nervous fingers jerked the trigger of the gun. But at the same time, X started a long, fast, left-handed blow, which, by the time it reached the guard's jaw, had picked up tremendous power.

The guard's slug tore through the Agent's sleeve, but probably the man never knew anything about that. He was out before he hit the floor. X stooped, swept up the man's automatic, and raced across the room toward the door through which Sabin had disappeared. Now was his chance. Sabin was alone except for Sheila. It was man to man now.

The Agent's plan had worked to perfection. He had slipped orders to the Feds, written on that scrap paper he had stuffed into the muzzle of the automatic he had permitted the G-man to wrest from him in the struggle outside Loebs's house. The G-men would round up Sabin's men, and X would capture Sabin, dead or alive.

THE Agent came through the door, into a short hall. The door of the same room in which he had spoken privately to Sheila, was open. X ran into the room, but it was empty. He was about to turn and try another door, when he saw a small opening half hidden by the only chair in the room. This opening was formed by the removal of one of the blocks of stone of which the walls were built.

The stone, evidently, opened on the other side of the wall.

Cautiously, but quickly, X approached the opening, automatic in hand. Beyond was a small, gloomy chamber. It was so dark that he could scarcely make out the zigzag outline of a flight of stairs extending upwards. Head and shoulders through the opening, he paused. On the stair above he could make out a shadowy figure—Sabin, carrying the girl in his arms. Agent X dared not shoot in such uncertain light for fear of hitting Sheila. Furthermore, he wanted Sabin alive if possible.

But there was something else that disturbed him, a strange, foreboding sound that he could just make out in spite of the intermittent crashes of gun-fire. It was a rasping sound, like that of a knife or saw cutting into something with short, jerky strokes. Some sixth sense prompted him to look up. Above his head, was that block of stone which was used to conceal the secret opening. It was suspended in some fashion by a rope. The bottom of the block was studded with long spikes of steel, keen and gleaming as knife blades.

Somewhere up that stairway, Sabin was watching. And he was sawing through the rope that operated the secret door, sawing as quietly as possible in an effort to drop that heavy block on Agent X. Once he had cut the rope, the mechanism that lifted the stone would be thrown out of gear and Sabin's escape insured.

X wriggled through the opening. But before he was perfectly clear of the opening, there was a snap like that of a broken banjo string. He jerked his legs up close to his body. Too late. The spiked block had fallen, one spike tearing through a trouser leg, grazing his flesh, sending daggers of pain up his leg.

Something flashed like a ray of light through the gloom—Sabin's knife. Pinned to the floor as he was, X could not have ducked. The knife struck his left shoulder, point first, and was

buried nearly to the hilt in his flesh. To the Agent's dilated nostrils came the flat, warm smell of new-let blood. Sabin hurried up the steps.

Here was pain enough to drive the average man into unconsciousness. But as he worked in desperation to free himself, X had scarcely time to consider his two, freely bleeding wounds. He jerked and pulled until the stout cloth of his trouser leg gave way from the spike. He got to his knees. A wave of nausea passed over him as he pulled out Sabin's knife and flung it to the floor. Then he gained his feet and lurched on up the steps.

But at the top of the narrow flight, he encountered a solid trapdoor, locked on the other side. All his Herculean efforts to move it were in vain. Sabin had escaped.

X turned, went down the steps more rapidly than he had climbed them. The pain in his shoulder came in fierce stabs with every beat of his heart.

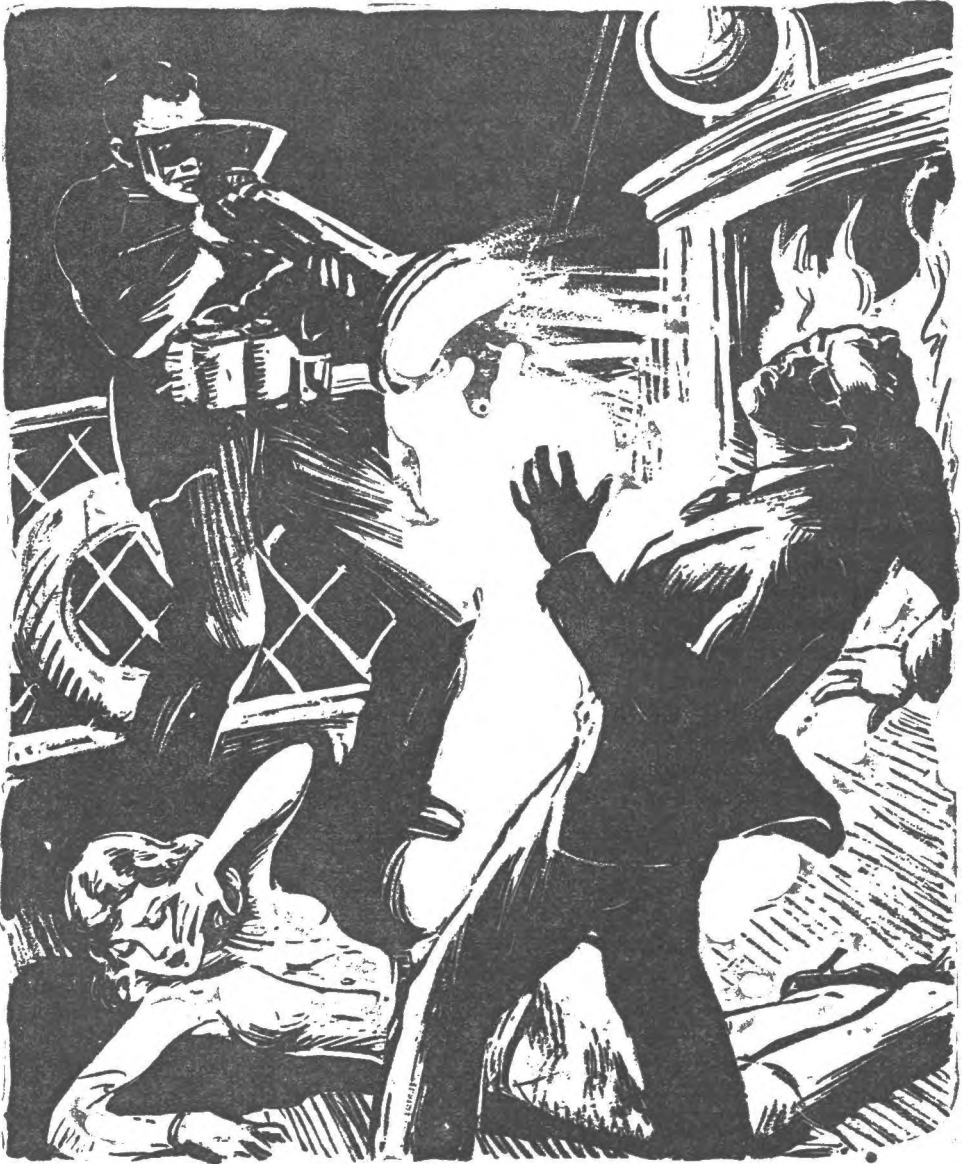
He re-entered the small room, crossed the hall and then came to the large council room. Bodies of men were strewn across the floor. The entire underground house was as silent as a tomb. But these men on the floor—they were federal agents, lying side by side, sprawled out, not a hint of motion in their bodies, not a drop of blood on the floor. It was *the Death*.

HEAVY-HEARTED, X dropped to his knees beside one of the federal men. He pressed his hand against the man's chest and detected the steady pulse of a heart. No mark was on the man's body, yet except for that steady heartbeat, he would have been mistaken for dead. The man was merely stunned. Perhaps every man in the room had been similarly dealt with. But how?

With his fingers, X gently raised the eyelid of the federal agent. The eyeball stared out at him glassily. Its muscles seemed paralyzed so that the eye didn't roll back, as is the case when a man is truly unconscious. The pupil of the eye was constricted to a

mere pin point, just as the pupils of Al Loebs and Steve Hackman had been constricted. Yet Loebs and Hackman had been dead; apparently, they had killed themselves.

nese gift shop. There were three excited Chinese who were babbling in their native tongue. Outside the shop were police, who had gathered quickly when the gun battle had broken



X got to his feet, ran across the council chamber and into the hall outside. In the hall and on the stairway were strewn bodies of Sabin's men, mowed down by G-guns in their effort to resist arrest.

X ran up the steps and into the Chi-

loose. But in the gray dim light of the early morning, X ran past them unnoticed.

He gained a police car parked at the curb, motor running. He sprang in under the wheel, yanked on the gear shift, and spurted down the street.

Behind him a few scattered shots sounded as the police attempted to stop him.

He drove straight to that hideout above the drug store, where he had imprisoned and drugged Gee-Gee Janes. Sabin's ranks had been considerably weakened by the attack of the Feds. If he was to go on with his mad scheme, he would need the assistance of Gee-Gee Janes badly. Furthermore, X had begun to see something in all this madness that was terrifyingly sane—something that was not typically Sabin. The more he thought about it, the more certain he became that there was a definite reason for the death of Steve Hackman.

When he arrived at his hideout, he went into the bedroom where Gee-Gee Janes stirred restlessly on the bed. It was only a short time before the crimster would come out from under the influence of the narcotic X had employed.

X went to a closet and brought out two small, leather-covered cases. One of these held material for first-aid. He removed coat and shirt and hastily administered iodine to his shoulder wound, then applied a bandage. He closed the first-aid kit and opened the second case. In it were all sorts of odds and ends that he had found useful in undertaking various impersonations.

There he found a piece of black velvet and a pair of shears. From the velvet he cut two identical eye patches and attached these to cords by means of cement. One of these he carried to the bed and attached over the eye of the unresisting Janes. The other he tied over his own left eye, but in such a manner that the black patch could be flipped up and down in a moment.

The black patch pushed up from his eye, he returned to his leather case. From a small, cotton-lined compartment, he took out one of two convex pieces of clear, fine glass about an inch in diameter. With black paint and brush, he coated the center of this

bit of glass. The black stuff dried in a few seconds with the aid of a tiny hand air-pump. About this black center, he painted a brown circle. This required more time and extreme artistic skill, for the brown circle had to resemble the brown iris of a human eye.

When the brown paint was dry, he put the piece of glass in a cotton-lined envelope together with a small rubber device, similar in size and appearance to the rubber bulb of a medicine dropper. Then he repacked his leather case and hid it, along with the first-aid kit, in the closet.

On the bed, Gee-Gee Janes groaned. X stepped over to the bed, took Janes by the shoulder and shook him awake. Janes stared at this man who so closely resembled him. His two fists went up to dig at his eyes.

"Don't rub that patch off your eye, Gee-Gee," X said softly.

"By hell!" groaned Janes. "Looks like me and talks like me. He must be me!"

X smiled grimly and drew an automatic from his pocket. "And shoots like you, so don't try anything smart, Gee-Gee. Get up."

TOO stunned to do otherwise, Janes got from the bed to unsteady feet, but X kicked a straight chair to the door of the bedroom and told Gee-Gee to sit down. Numbly, the man obeyed; X then took a length of strong, light cord from the closet and lashed Janes to the chair. By that time, Janes had recovered his senses, for the narcotic X had employed left no bad effects.

"I gotta know what this is all about. I gotta know who the hell you are."

Merriment twinkled in X's eyes. "I'm Gee-Gee Janes. It doesn't matter who you are."

Janes groaned: "Now *that* didn't sound like me speaking."

"Possibly not . . . Now, listen, Gee-Gee. You can expect callers—a guy with a scar on the side of his face and eyes like Satan's may come any

SAX

time. You're to yes him. Agree with every thing he says. If he asks you about that patch on your eye, you got it because I gave you a poke. Tell him that Secret Agent X knocked you out for the count."

"Did he?" Janes asked. "I sure as hell will make his belly look like a sieve when I see him."

X chuckled. "You're not big stuff any more, Janes."

"But you—you—" Janes' jaw sagged dumbly. "Hell, you *must* be Agent X."

"That would account for a number of things, wouldn't it, Gee-Gee? But understand that the reason you're going to do just as I say is that I am going to be right around the corner of the door. Furthermore, I'm going to blast daylight into you if you don't answer just as I told you to."

X then went to the door, made certain that it was locked. Then he pulled down all the blinds in both of the rooms, so that the place was perfectly dark. Next he switched on the electric light in the first room and took his place beside the door in the bedroom. In his left hand he held a forked instrument with a handle of hard rubber that he could plug into an electrical outlet beside the door, shorting all the lights in the building. His right hand held the automatic that threatened Janes.

He had not long to wait before there were sounds outside the door. The doorknob rattled, but because of the Agent's special lock, the door did not yield. A murmur of voices. Then a grinding sound. Some one was drilling the lock.

It took all of ten minutes to break that lock. Then the door swung open, and into the room walked Klinker. Behind him, guns in their hands, were three dark-faced men who looked like Latins. They stood in the doorway on guard while Sabin entered the room. The Agent's hunch was right. Sabin needed Janes' assistance.

Without a word, Sabin approached Janes. His cruel talons crooked, he

scratched Janes' cheek until Janes howled. "This is the real Gee-Gee Janes," muttered Sabin. "What happened to your eye, Janes?"

"I—I—er, Agent X gave me a sock," replied Gee-Gee, remembering the threatening gun Agent X held on him in the next room.

"Then," Sabin said, "you'll welcome the opportunity for striking back at Mr. X. Unfortunately, he escaped. Janes, I need your help now more than ever. Are you with me and the Cause?"

"Sure," said Janes, wondering, no doubt, what Sabin was talking about.

Sabin hastily cut the ropes that bound Janes to the chair, and at that moment, Agent X rammed home the forked instrument that shorted the lights.

Darkness, and in the darkness X moved swifter than he had ever moved before. He brought the automatic in his hand crashing down on the top of Janes' skull. Janes uttered a prolonged groan and sagged over against the Agent. X seized him by the collar, dragged him out of the chair, and dropped him behind the door where he lay limp and unconscious.

SABIN got out his flashlight and turned it on. The spot of white light caught Agent X, automatic in hand, just as the Agent appeared in the doorway.

"What was that noise?" demanded Sabin, of Agent X, who, undoubtedly, he supposed to be Gee-Gee Janes.

"S all right, chief," X assured him. "A fuse must have gone haywire. It gave me a start, that's all. Since Mr. X sapped me I get the jitters. Let's get out of this place."

"Yes," said Sabin. "We have work to do. You, especially, have work to do. You will be sent to the home of Thomas Reedan, I have threatened him, but I have chosen you to carry out the threat if necessary. However, I believe your American gangster methods will make it unnecessary to kill him. You have put on the pres-

sure, as you call it, many times, have you not?"

"Don't get what you mean," said X. He was walking toward the door, anxious to get Sabin and his men out of the room as soon as possible.

"I mean that I have offered Reedan his life in exchange for much-needed armaments for our cause. I want you to go to his place and threaten him once more. Gangster methods." The china-hard eyes leered. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Sure," X replied. "Nothin' to it. He comes across or he comes back dead. I'll handle it any time you say. I—"

From the doorway came the sound of a rapidly drawn breath. Sabin flashed his light on the door of the shabby apartment. There stood Sheila Landi. In her deep-blue eyes, Agent X saw recognition. She had heard his footsteps on the floor of the room.

"Sheila," Sabin whispered, "why did you not stay in the car?"

"You were so long, I feared something had happened to you," the girl replied.

Sabin grunted. "You show extreme interest in my welfare, my Sheila. Come, let us be on our way. Klinker, you will go ahead. We dare not venture forth with Janes in broad daylight if there be police about."

CHAPTER IX

DARKNESS MADE OF LIGHT



That evening a car pulled up to the side of the road in front of the tall iron fence that bound the country estate of Thomas Reedan. A man and a woman got out.

Even in the gathering gloom the trim, square shoulders of the Gee-Gee Janes who was Secret Agent X, were recognizable. And the woman—few boasted of as charming

a silhouette as that of Sheila Landi. Her hand on the Agent's arm, she walked along the shoulder of the road toward the wide-open gate of the forested estate.

"You should not have come, Sheila," said the Agent quietly.

"And I dared not stay," the girl said. "The moment I saw you this morning in that room above the drug store, I was certain of your identity. I never dreamed that you would attempt to fool Sabin again with the same disguise."

X laughed shortly. "But Sabin dreamed it. The first thing he did was to scratch the real Gee-Gee's face to make sure of the absence of makeup. I had to move fast to knock Janes out and get into his place before Sabin had that light on me."

The Agent paused, then asked: "Exactly how have you been able to penetrate my disguises? I have a good idea, but I think you should explain the matter to me in full."

The girl smiled softly and said: "These two eyes of mine were not always as they are now. I was born totally blind. Eight years ago, an operation gave me sight. Up to that time, I devoted my every effort to developing acute sense to take the place of my lost eyesight. That is one of the reasons I am so valuable in espionage. Sounds mean more to me than to others. Footsteps, for instance. You may change your face, Agent X, but you cannot long disguise your footsteps. It was by the sound of your footsteps that I recognized a man who looked like Gee-Gee Janes as the same red-headed reporter in the hotel tonight. And even before that, regardless of your disguise, I knew your footsteps. None but Agent X could have followed me so persistently, yet always as a different character."

"I see," replied the Agent slowly.

They were walking up the flagstone path. Sheila asked: "What do you expect to do?"

"Lay all the cards on the table. Urge Reedan to comply with Sabin's

request for munitions, tip off the federal men at exactly the right time to catch Sabin and his men red-handed. Klinker and you and I will be ready on the inside of the game to see that Sabin walks right into our trap; not only Sabin, but the other—who is more dangerous than Sabin."

"What do you mean?"

"The man who kills so cleverly," X said cryptically.

Beyond a grove of tall pines, the lighted windows of the Reedan house gleamed cheerfully. Yet Sheila shuddered slightly.

"What's the matter?" X asked.

"These shadows—they might hold any number of Sabin's spies."

"Still there is nothing to fear. We are doing exactly as Sabin told us to do."

"Nevertheless, I intend to wait outside, to warn you if any danger approaches."

"If you prefer, Sheila," X agreed.

He really felt that he could handle the business before him better if Sheila was not with him. There was an indefinable something in her deep-blue eyes that he found disconcerting.

THREE MINUTES later, X found himself alone with Thomas Reedan in a study situated at the rear of the house. Reedan was extremely morose, his mouth sagging distastefully around the end of a thick cigar, his sad eyes fixed on the face of the man who looked like Janes but whose soft voice was the same as that of the man who had introduced himself as Secret Agent X on the night before.

"And now," said Agent X, "that we know each other, for my own safety, it would be wise if I continued with my impersonation of Gee-Gee Janes. Walls, I've heard, may develop ears. Suppose we confine ourselves to whispers."

Reedan nodded. "What's your proposal, Mr. X?"

X smiled, "A little more softly, or else address me as Mr. Janes," he whispered. "There is but one solution.

You have the munitions ready, as I suggested?"

Reedan nodded. "Go on."

"Then call your plant and issue orders to have them turned over to any man who gives the countersign: 'The Great Change.' That is exactly as Sabin arranged it. Comply with his every wish, if you would live. I will see to it that justice is done."

Reedan reached for the phone, talked with his plant superintendent. Then he hung up. "Done, sir. Now this boggy man of yours, this mad Sabin; do you think that he killed Al Loebs?"

"At least," X replied, "he ordered the killing."

"But do you know how he was killed? Because if you don't, I have an idea. It couldn't have been suicide. I know Al too well. And did you notice Al's eyes; notice how the pupils were contracted? There was a very definite reason for that."

"Perhaps I can guess it," X said.

"And I," Reedan returned, "don't have to guess. You see—"

A draft ruffled papers on Reedan's desk. Both men turned toward the study door. Very slowly, it was opening as though by a spectral hand. Then something happened.

No pain, no shock, nothing similar to anything he had associated with danger before, passed over Agent X. Something seemed to snap within his head, as though a brain cell had suddenly burst under terrific pressure. There was blinding white light, followed by immediate darkness—a darkness akin to death, for there was a total and immediate loss of sensation. It was what Sabin called "*the Death*."

How long that interval of oblivion lasted, X had no way of knowing. But gradually it passed, and there was a world of gray about him that gradually dissipated. A man was bending over him, lifting him from the floor. A familiar voice was saying.

"He's coming to, thank heaven!"

Then X could distinguish features: narrow face, startled eyes, a brush

of yellow-gray hair, a small mustache that was like a well-worn tooth brush. The man was Leo Madvig. X turned his head slightly. Sheila Landi was holding one of the Agent's hands and rubbing it gently. Beyond the girl Thomas Reedan was stretched out on the floor, apparently dead.

It was a knockout such as the Agent never before had experienced. Nothing had touched him, yet he had not known when he had struck the floor. His muscles felt quite as though they were made of warm custard. Somewhere deep in each eyeball were lightninglike flashes of white fire.

Madvig pushed a pillow under the Agent's head. "Be very thankful," he said, "that things are as they are. They did not know how to use it. Otherwise, there would have been no awakening. It was my weapon they turned against you. My weapon—the darkness made of light. They have stolen it. Nothing can save the world if it is not recovered—*nothing*."

Madvig took a flat flask from his pocket, unscrewed the cupcap, and handed flask and cup to Sheila. "Give him some whisky."

Sheila poured some of the liquor into the cup and held it for X to drink. He drained the cup and lay back, and the fire of the liquor seemed to reach every cell of his body and give it new strength.

"And now, miss," said Madvig, "see if you can get Mr. Reedan to take some liquor. He seems to be a good bit worse than this other gentleman. But he will recover."

Madvig looked from X to Reedan and shook his yellow-gray head. "Had I only known the trouble it would cause, I would have destroyed my own brain-child. I was on my way out here to see if Mr. Reedan would advance some money for me to continue my experiments and attempt the construction of another model of my weapon, when I saw that flare of light. Like the sun, it was. I knew immediately that some one was employing my

weapon. At first, I am ashamed to say, I supposed it was some one working for Mr. Reedan who had employed it."

MADVIG went over and raised Reedan's head. Sheila emptied the flask into the little cup. The girl had lost some of her usual composure, and some of the liquor slopped over on her fingers as she extended the drink to Reedan's lips.

After the stuff had been poured into Reedan's mouth, the man gained a little color, groaned and moved his head restlessly.

Madvig jerked his tiny mustache and nodded his satisfaction. "He will come out of it, I am sure. Mr. Reedan's doctor lives next door. I'll just run over and see him a moment—some special instructions."

His eyes darted to Agent X. "You, my man, will shortly be quite yourself. Are you feeling better?"

"Sure." X sat up and managed, by holding to the back of a chair, to regain his feet. "I believe, Mr. Madvig, that Mr. Reedan knows something about your weapon."

Madvig nodded. "He has a theory that some criminal organization has stolen it."

X nodded. "It's in possession of a criminal all right. As to the criminal organization, it will be in the hands of the federal agents before morning."

Madvig frowned slightly. "Your face is familiar. So, for that matter, is the young lady's. Haven't I seen you two somewhere?"

"Possibly," X said. "We have both been in the Ayreshire Hotel, where you are staying."

"And you are a federal agent?" asked Madvig. "Perhaps it is that patch you have over your left eye, but there was something about your appearance that reminded me of a criminal character whose face I have seen somewhere. Hmm—becoming a little absent minded, I guess. I'll just run over to the doctor's and be right back."

X watched Madvig's lank form as the latter hurried from the room.

When the front door had slammed behind him, the Agent went over to Sheila. He thumbed toward the still unconscious Reedan.

"What was the idea?" he asked. "Reedan's death was scheduled tonight. But he came through with what Sabin wanted. Why this attempt to kill him?"

Sheila was twisting her fingers nervously. "I—I don't know. But Sabin's outside waiting for us. He—he's insane. Oh, I'm afraid—afraid of Sabin's eyes."

X stooped over Reedan, felt the man's pulse. It seemed very regular. He straightened. "There! Reedan's opening his eyes. It wouldn't be good for us to allow Sabin to see us here in friendly confab with Reedan. We'd better go."

As they left the house, they saw a man hurrying across the lawn with a physician's satchel in his hand. Confident of Reedan's safety, they returned to their car.

"Now," X whispered to Sheila, "to duck under Sabin's watchful eyes and contact the Feds. That will—" He stopped suddenly, for there were three figures in the back of the car. The central one bent forward eagerly, and faint light found the china-hard whites of Sabin's eyes. The other two men were of Sabin's bodyguard.

"Get in quickly, Janes," Sabin commanded.

Under his breath, the Agent cursed. Small chance of evading Sabin's eyes now. He crawled in under the wheel, and Sheila got in behind him.

"What luck, Janes?" demanded Sabin as the car started.

"Luck, chief?" X blustered in the voice of Gee-Gee Janes. "When I handle 'em, it ain't luck. Reedan came across like a Fin. I sat right in the room while he phoned his plant. You get the stuff you want tonight."

SABIN began to chuckle, a rippling madman's chuckle that was uninterrupted save for the direction he

gave to X. Eventually, he ordered the car to stop in an alley back of a building far out on South Wabash. There the two bodyguards took charge of X and Sheila, hurried them up a fire escape to a large suite of cheaply furnished rooms on the third floor.

The remnant of Sabin's gang had congregated there—perhaps a dozen men, all armed. There was still no possible chance for the Agent to contact the federal men.

"There's a phone in the hall," whispered Sheila. She was beside X, standing in front of a window. "But there are several members of the society standing around it. It seems to be our only means of contacting the authorities."

X took the girl's long, tapering hand in his. Grimly he shook his head. "We'll have to be much more subtle than that. Try to get to that phone, and somebody would nab us. We've—" A slight smile twisted his lips. "Say, you could attempt to reach that phone, permit Sabin to catch you in the act—"

The girl's hand quivered. X looked down at it, smoothed the white flesh. The long, oval nails were brilliantly tinted with red polish, fastidiously applied, except for strange blotches of white across the first two nails on the left hand. Odd, this defect in the makeup of an attractive woman so careful about her appearance.

Sheila frowned. "What do you mean?"

"If you were caught in the act by Sabin, he would want to dispose of you. We could arrange a fake murder, and in that way you would be free to take our message to the federal men. If we just knew what Sabin planned to do—"

"Klinker just came in," said the girl without turning around. "I heard his footsteps. Perhaps he knows."

"I'll ask him," X told her. "Are you sure you'd have the courage to go through with a plan like that?"

Her deep-blue eyes met his square-

ly. She said nothing, yet X had her answer: a woman who had lived her adventurous life would have long ago learned to master fear.

"We'll try it," X whispered. "Good luck. As soon as Sabin returns, make a try for the phone."

X left the girl, walked over to where Klinker was standing. The man's high forehead was furrowed with a puzzled frown as the Agent took him to one side of the room.

"Boss," he whispered, "why aren't we doin' something? Sabin's havin' the guns and munitions loaded onto a boat he's chartered. That boat sails into the lake to await two planes that're goin' to fly the stuff to South America. It's nuts, but he's gettin' by with it."

"He hasn't got by with it yet," declared X. "He must have shot his whole roll to charter the boat and planes."

Klinker nodded. "I guess every cent these revolution-hungry spigs kicked in with. And you don't know the half of it—you and I are scheduled to sail on that boat with Sabin."

"That," said X slowly, "has its advantages. Go tell all details to Sheila."

TWO hours passed without seeing the return of Sabin. Nor was there the slightest opportunity for X to communicate with the federal officers. When at last Sabin did appear, all the men crowded eagerly about their chief to hear news of his activities.

Sabin's ugly teeth were bared in a hellish smile. The jagged scar on his sunken cheek was a brilliant red. Swollen arteries on neck and temple throbbed with excitement.

"All is ready, comrades," he said. "The boat is loaded with enough guns to equip five thousand men in the most modern manner, and there are high explosives. Besides the crew of the boat, I will take eight men with me in two cars. Janes will drive one car to Navy Pier; Klinker, the other. As

soon as the planes have loaded from the boat, we shall return. And the great work goes on!"

The smile faded from Sabin's lips. His eyes seemed to take on a new degree of hardness. He held up his right hand. "Wait," he whispered.

Sabin tiptoed to the door of the room and glanced into the hall. X followed, stood behind Sabin, heard quite distinctly Sheila's whisper:

"Connect me with the local field office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Sabin sprang like a cat into the hall. Sheila was at the phone. She dropped the receiver, sprang back, genuine fear blanching her cheeks.

Sabin snarled: "So!" He strode over to the girl. One hand went out to seize her by the throat. The other clipped the receiver onto its hook. "So, my Sheila, you are the traitor!" He laughed harshly, pulled the girl to him until his hideous face was within inches of hers. "My Sheila," he said. "You are going to die. I am going to beat you to death."

X stepped forward, put a hand on Sabin's shoulder. "Nix," he said.

Sabin turned fiercely on the Agent. "I warn you not to interfere!"

"I'll interfere as I damned please when I see all the work you've accomplished going to hell because of your nut ideas. I've suspected that dame was behind your bad breaks for a long time. Now that we know it, you want to raise every cop in town with her screams. There's only one way to handle a rat, male or female—a slug in the back and dump 'em from the car. I've given more than one guy the one-way ride. You leave this to me. You handle the important stuff I can't do. Remember, the Cause comes first."

"You are right," said Sabin slowly. "We have work to do. How is this woman's silence to be managed?"

"Gag her," X directed. "You got a car with a radio in it?"

Sabin nodded.

"Then that's the car we take to the boat."

"Excellent!" snarled Sabin. "Get a gag, Corillo," he ordered one of his men.

Agent X was all ready for the desperate stroke he and Sheila had planned. The cartridge in the chamber of his automatic had its lead bullet removed, wadded-up paper substituted. When Sheila had been properly gagged, though not bound, Sabin, the Agent, and three of Sabin's men, took the girl down into the alley, where two cars were waiting. Klinker and four others were to man the second car.

Sabin got in under the wheel of the first. X sat in the back seat near the door, the struggling Sheila grasped in his left arm, the automatic in his right hand. The two others in the back seat also had guns in their hands.

AS they neared a viaduct, Sabin had the radio turned on to a noisy dance-band broadcast. X raised his automatic to Sheila's forehead. But at the instant he pulled the trigger, he tilted the muzzle so that the harmless charge of paper wads lodged in Sheila's thick straw-colored hair as the gun crashed.

Realistically, Sheila enacted the death throes, every muscle in her body quivering as the Agent held her tightly and kicked open the door of the car.

"Slow down, damnit!" X said harshly. "I don't want to land on my face when I give her the roll. Slow down!"

Sabin braked the car to almost a standstill, and X, crouching on the running board, lowered the girl's limp form to the street as gently as possible and still put on a good show for Sabin's benefit. Sheila rolled to the gutter and lay perfectly still as the car picked up speed.

Never had the Agent attempted anything that had made him more nervous. Sheila's acting had been all too realistic. What if something had

actually happened to her? What if she had been hurt in spite of X's precautions?

Suddenly, the music from the car radio was interrupted by the voice of an announcer:

"We interrupt the music from the Kettle Klub to give you a special news bulletin. Thomas J. Reedan, principle owner of the Majestic Chemical Company, took his own life in his home tonight less than thirty minutes ago."

Agent X leaned forward in his seat, a deep scowl on his face.

"Reedan, it is thought, was suffering from ill health. Earlier this evening, a friend had summoned Mr. Reedan's doctor who proclaimed that Mr. Reedan was suffering from a slight shock of unknown source. He apparently recovered under the doctor's care, only to be found dead in his bed a short time later. A half-empty bottle of prussic acid was found on his dresser, and the body showed every indication of prussic-acid poisoning.

"Reedan is the second prominent manufacturer of munitions to commit suicide in the past twenty-four hours. Yesterday, Albert Loeb, it will be remembered, shot himself to death. It is a curious coincidence that the death of Reedan duplicated the unwarranted suicide of Steve Hackman, Chicago racketeer, early yesterday evening. Is Chicago faced with a veritable epidemic of suicides? See your newspaper for further details."

X tapped Sabin on the shoulder. "What was the idea?" he demanded. "Did you kill Thomas Reedan?"

Sabin chuckled insanely. "I willed that he die!"

"Yes you did!" said Agent X under his breath. His mind flashed back to Sheila Landi, to the curious white blotches on her finger nails. His hopes of trapping Sabin and his gang began to dwindle, until they were all but obscured by a black cloud that gathered upon his own horizon.

CHAPTER X

THE HELL SHIP



TEN miles east of Chicago's skyline, the *Daughter of Deerborn*, a stern-wheeler that Sabin had chartered, rose and fell on the short, choppy waves of Lake Michigan. The ship was at anchor. Except for a white beam of light that flashed at regular intervals from the roof of the pilot house straight up into the black roof of the night, there was no light on board. In the distance, coming out of the west, was the throb of powerful engines, growing ever louder.

Under the decks of the ship rested Sabin's hell cargo, wrested by extortion from Thomas Reedan, only after X had recommended that Reedan comply with Sabin's demands. And Reedan was dead . . . Little wonder that the ship rode uneasily, with enough explosives in her hold to blow a skyscraper into the air.

Leaning over the stern rail, searching the darkness eagerly, was Secret Agent X. The patch that he had tied over his left eye, for reasons known only to himself, was turned back on his forehead so that both keen eyes might seek that slender ray of hope upon which hung his possible success in bringing Sabin and a clever killer to justice. Beside the Agent, Klinker paused in his anxious pacing of the deck.

Sabin says the planes are coming," Klinker whispered.

"Sabin," said the Agent cheerfully, "is screwy. Those are gas engines on cruisers—police cruisers, I hope." He pulled a long, powerful flashlight from inside his coat, held it so the rail hid it, and flashed it rapidly—a curt message in Morse.

"What was that light?" Sabin's sibilant voice sounded from the pilot house.

X nudged Klinker. "We'd better walk around the deck before he's wise. Watch out for trouble."

The two men separated and took a turn around the deck, returning to approximately the same spot. The night was soundless now save for the slap of water against the hull. The Agent strained his eyes against the gloom in an effort to sight the cruisers. Their motors were off now, and not far away sounded a splash that was like that made by a small boat lowered into the water.

"Klinker," X whispered, "go up into the pilot house and see if you can distract Sabin's attention. I'll stand by here to toss them a rope. Above everything else, see that Sabin keeps the lights out. The man's mad enough to fire those explosives, if he gets the idea that they are about to be taken over by Feds."

"Okeh, boss."

Klinker walked forward, and while he was climbing to the pilot house, Agent X was able to make out the outline of a small boat manned with a single pair of oars. Beyond the small boat, the ghostly shape of a cruiser could be seen as it drifted toward the ship. That Sabin didn't see it, could be credited to Klinker's skill at distracting attention.

X stooped, picked up a coil of rope, tossed it to the small boat. It was caught. The man in the prow pulled in rapidly. The small boat thumped the hull of the ship. Hand over hand, the man in the prow climbed the rope, found X's helping hand extended over the rail.

"Secret Agent X?" a voice whispered.

"Right."

"Federal agents . . . How many men on board?"

Then the powerful searchlight on the roof of the pilot house dipped. Its white blade cut a clean swath through darkness, fell directly upon Agent X and the man he had helped aboard.

Without a word of warning, the man from the cruiser sprang at X. A club, blackjack, something heavy and moving fast, struck the Agent on the side of the head. The blow rolled him

over, but he had ducked instinctively so that it had landed on a different spot from the intended one and he had not lost his senses. He was on his feet in an instant just as a second and a third man boarded the ship.

Sabin's searchlight beamed on the barrels of new machine guns in the hands of two men—guns of the latest type, such as those Sabin had attempted to steal from the Loeb's plant. One of those guns covered Agent X. The other swept the deck menacingly until some one in the pilot house tried a shot.

Then machine-gun fire was loosed, throwing a line of bullets that laced the wooden walls of the pilot house.

"Surrender, Sabin!" called a muffled voice familiar to X.

THE AGENT turned. Another man had gained the deck of the ship, and rays of the searchlight fell upon his face—a face that was masked, the mask centered by a silver letter "S."

"I see," said X softly, "the honorable secretary of the society, the clever murderer, the man who hijacked the machine guns Sabin managed to steal from Loeb's, the man who killed Steve Hackman, in order to take his place as underworld czar of the city; the man who killed Loeb's, to prevent him from canceling the order for the machine guns you intended to hijack; the man who killed Thomas Reedan, to keep Reedan's mouth shut—because Reedan had guessed your identity. Well, Mr. Murderer, I know your identity!"

"Shut up, Mr. X!" came from the secretary. "I'm dealing with Sabin. As far as you're concerned, you're just a red herring. Sabin, I'm taking over this ship. I radioed your planes not to come. I need these arms and this ammunition you have on board to equip the greatest criminal syndicate the world has ever known. It makes Capone's bunch look like pikers."

"And," X went on unperturbed, "you had such a plan in mind all the

time. You were simply using the funds of Sabin's society to make it easy for you to obtain your arms and equipment. No wonder you insisted upon the help of Gee-Gee Janes. His gang was badly needed in your army of crimesters. But you had to kill Gee-Gee's boss first. Hackman wouldn't step down and let you run things. And what's that in your hand, Honorable Secretary? Not Madvig's stolen invention?"

In the secretary's hands was a curious instrument, like a gun and yet not like a gun. Its muzzle flared out like the lamp of a motor car.

"Yes," sneered the secretary. "It is what Sabin liked to call 'the Death.' Want a sample? Keep your trap shut if you don't. Men! Round up those fellows in the cabin. Sabin, come down from that pilot house."

But Sabin wasn't in the pilot house. From somewhere in the cabin, X heard his snarled command: "Shoot, fools!"

Scattered automatic fire from the cabin portholes, then two shots from the pilot house—one that went wild and another that knocked a leg from beneath the machine-gunner who covered Agent X.

Instantly the Agent was in motion. He darted around the stern end of the cabin just as machine-gun fire swept the deck. On the other side of the cabin, X saw a stocky figure spring from the pilot house to the deck and come running toward him—Klinker.

"Boss!" whispered Klinker tensely. "The girl, Sheila—I've seen her!"

"Where?"

"Climbed over the rail on this side. Had a gun in her hand. She must be—"

"Right here," came a soft voice. The musical voice of Sheila Landi. She stepped from the shelter of a cuddy, her water-soaked garments claspings her body as close as her skin. She placed a cold hand on the Agent's arm. "There are only two criminals on the cruiser," she whispered, "two men and a score of Feds and police under

guard. The criminals took possession of the cruiser as it was leaving the pier. A good man could liberate those Feds."

"Can you swim, Klinker?" X demanded.

"Like a fish."

"Then make a try for the cruiser. Here's your chance to square yourself with the law. Sheila, better hit the water."

"But why?" the girl demanded. "I can use a gun. I'll be of use here."

"Why?" X said queerly. "Because I smell smoke—oil smoke!"

He turned swiftly and dived into a hatch. As he moved down the narrow steps, his fingers fished out the envelope which contained that convex bit of glass he had previously prepared so that it appeared like the front portion of a human eye. With the tiny rubber suction device he had included in the envelope, he gripped the bit of glass. Then he pulled down the lower lid of his eye and rocked the convex lens in over the front of his right eyeball. It was utterly impossible for him to see through the painted glass, but by raising the black patch over his other eye he was able to use it.

THE smell of oil smoke became more pronounced. Ahead of X the darkness was tinged with a ruddy glow. He hastened his steps, saw Sabin bending over a wad of oil-soaked waste that had burst into flames. X drew his automatic.

"Reach, Sabin!"

Sabin spun on his heels. With a snarl, he sent the flaming ball of fire straight at the Agent's head. X ducked. From a crouch, Sabin sprang. A knife flashed. Before X could bring his gun around, the knife had hacked across his knuckles. The gun dropped. Sabin fell upon him, all the fury of a madman unleashed. Sabin, who saw his plans and hopes crumbling was bent on destruction of enemies, friends, even himself. Over and over on the floor they rolled, the Agent just able

to prevent that knife from seeking a vital spot.

A short punch to the midsection flattened Sabin on top of the Agent's body. But Sabin wasn't licked. The Agent felt the keen points of the madman's teeth sink into the flesh of his throat, seeking his jugular. At the same time, Sabin sought to plunge his knife into the Agent's side.

But when the knife point pierced flesh, the Agent tore his left arm free from the madman's grasp. His hand slapped to Sabin's knife wrist, locked there. His thumb nail gouged between the second and third knuckles of Sabin's thin fist, touched a particularly sensitive nerve center. Sabin's fingers sprang apart. The knife tinkled on the limber boards.

X's grasping fingers clutched the knife by its hasp. His arm looped around Sabin's back, so that the madman felt the prick of the knife between shoulder blades.

"Surrender, Sabin," X worked out between teeth clenched in pain. "Surrender—or I'll kill you."

Sabin only redoubled his efforts. X rolled back his eyes, saw the advancing flames licking up the door behind which the cargo was stored. His body wriggled frantically in an effort to himself from the madman's grasp. But the insane Sabin possessed the beast-strength that was equal to that of a dozen men. Much as X hated to kill, he thrust the knife downward, felt the steel grit against bone.

Sabin's body stiffened. From his hideous mouth, where lips and teeth drooled blood from the Agent's throat, came a harsh, bestial cry of pain. He scrambled to his knees, tried to get to his feet, pitched over on his side.

X sprang up. The ruddy glow of the fire pointed out the brazen body of a fire extinguisher. On the deck above, he heard the sound of running feet and the staccato bark of automatics mingled with the incessant chatter of machine-gun fire. Through the open hatch a body fell down the steps, loose-

jointedly, like a broken toy. The face of the man was contorted with pain. Blood spurted from wounds in his chest.

"The Feds!" the hoarse scream ripped from his throat. "The Feds on the loose!"

CHAPTER XI

MADMAN'S INFERNO



AGENT X sprang to the fire extinguisher and yanked it from its rack. A twist on the hand wheel, and he had the smothering chemical spraying from the hose. But when the brass cyl-

inder was exhausted, the flames were still roaring with furnace fury. At any moment the cargo might be reached. Then fanatics, criminals, Feds—all would be blown sky high.

X dropped to his knees. His fingers ripped up the limber boards until he sighted the brass sea cock. He wondered if even sinking the boat would prevent that pending explosion. He opened the cock. Cold lake-water fountained into the hold in a steady stream that drenched Agent X. Then he was on his feet, racing to the stairs.

On deck, men were crouching behind hatchways and ventilators. Federal men fought with automatics and hand to hand with criminals and Sabin's fanatics—a three-cornered battle of grim slaughter. But below decks was a fiery demon that would end all that in a blast that would send mountainous waves from shore to shore.

"Clear the ship!" shouted Agent X. "The cargo is on fire. Munitions! Hit the water!"

From behind the Agent a gun cracked twice. A scuffling sound was followed by a piteous cry for help. X pivoted, saw Sheila in the arms of a man who was dragging her back into the cabin, into the flame-tinted in-

terior of the hell ship. Ruddy light fell across the man's face, illuminating the silvery "S" set in the top of his black mask.

Left hand raised to the patch above his eye, X followed. At the end of the largest cabin on the boat, Sheila Landi crouched before the threatening figure of Sabin's traitor-secretary—the man who would have built an empire of the underworld. In his hand was that gunlike thing X had seen before.

Its short, thick barrel was equipped with two handles. The muzzle flared out in a polished reflector like the head lamp of an automobile. Close to the butt of the weapon was a curved glass eye-shield that was made of special polarized glass, if X knew anything about it. Wires led down from the reflecting muzzle to a box of batteries and coils strapped to the man's waist. Glittering elements of metal crisscrossed the reflector.

"The Death!" gasped Sheila. "Back, Agent X!"

The Agent's left hand brushed the patch down over his eye. Because of the thick coating of paint on the contact lens covering the other eyeball, he was totally unable to see. But he had marked the location of everything in the room perfectly. Resolutely, in total darkness, he walked straight toward the tall, thin form of the secretary.

"Agent X," came the secretary's mask-muffled voice, "you are about to die. When the police find you, you will simply be the corpse of Gee-Gee Janes, a man who killed himself because his plans, to equip the underworld with the best armaments obtainable, failed."

"No one," thought X, will find the body. "Every one aboard will be blown to atoms."

"But my work," continued the secretary, "goes on."

"I see," said the Agent. "You were the power behind Sabin. You took advantage of his mental derangement to use the strength of the society to

obtain equipment for your own criminal organization. Sabin's will had nothing to do with the murders you executed. The motive behind the death of Loeb's happened to coincide with Sabin's plans. The other two murders, that of Hackman and Reedan, were all your own planning. Hackman out of the way, meant your dominance of the underworld. Reedan had to be removed because he had guessed your identity because of the weapon you employed. No doubt you tried to peddle the weapon to Reedan. Reedan knew it was impractical except for the purpose of murder, but he learned of its principle."

"As you now learn!" cried the secretary.

THEN, in the world of darkness which X had voluntarily created for himself, there was light like the sun. It penetrated the thick, painted covering on the lens over his right eye. It illuminated the entire cabin for an instant. The source of that intense light was the weapon in the killer's hand. In spite of the protection afforded by the painted lens and the patch, there was a sharp thrust of pain through the back of the Agent's brain. He crumpled to the floor to lie perfectly still.

The murderer chuckled. He stepped over Sheila Landi's unconscious form. From his belt, he pulled out an automatic, knelt beside the Agent and pressed the gun into X's limp fingers. Then he raised X's unresisting arm so that the muzzle of the gun pointed directly at X's head.

Suddenly, Agent X came to life. His two arms moved simultaneously, the left to rip the patch from his eye, the right to bring up that gun the secretary had handed him, to slap with terrific force into the killer's temple. There was no groan. The man's own weapon of light could not have scored a more complete knockout. The killer rolled over on his side and lay still.

On his feet, X ran to Sheila, lifted her limp body in his arms. He lurched

through the cabin door to a deck deserted by all except the dead—the dead and a lone, staggering figure that came toward Agent X, gasping: "Boss! Cripes, I've looked all over for you. They've all gone. The police boat is pulling away. We're stuck on this damned volcano!"

"Jump," X ordered. "We'll make a try for it. I'll handle Sheila. You look all in, Klinker."

X threw a leg over the rail, paused a moment, then stepped off into space.

The cold lake water closed over his head. He clung fiercely to Sheila's limp body, keeping her head above the water, while he struck out with long, powerful strokes toward the sound of the police cruiser's engines. Beside him, Klinker was swimming through the darkness, calling for help.

X swam on. Every stroke he thought to be his last. Still his stern will mastered fagged, numbed muscles and spurred them on. Then a searchlight cut across the water. The white ring of a life preserver arched across the beam to strike a few feet from him. The Agent and Klinker redoubled their efforts, caught the supporting ring of white, clung with unfeeling fingers to the rope.

The world rocked. A jet of blinding light flung up to meet the black canopy of the night. Waves engulfed them. Eardrums seemed to burst under the deafening roar of the explosion from the ship. Timbers, bodies, shot out of the water. Then cold, clammy darkness . . .

FEDERAL men, police and Secret Agent X were seated about a small table in the cabin of the police cruiser headed back toward Chicago. On bunks nearby, Sheila Landi and Klinker were under the skilled care of a police surgeon. Both, it was promised, would recover.

With that tiny rubber suction cup, X rocked the contact lens from his eye. Smiling, he rolled it across the table for the others to examine.

"You see," he explained, "Madvig's weapon was not deadly. Just as a tremendous explosion may stun even a totally deaf person, simply through the shock of the intense illumination to the eye and consequently to that lobe of the brain where the seat of sight is located, so Madvig's invention stunned. It was, I believe, a device for heating magnesium elements to

actively simple. Having stunned his victim, he simply either put a gun in the victim's hand and forced him to shoot himself in the head, or prepared a poison highball that he forced into the unconscious victim's mouth. But the method used on Reedan differed a little from that used on Hackman.

"The killer stunned both Reedan and myself with his magnesium gun.



immediate incandescence. This terrible light was multiplied by a parabolic reflector and a magnifying lens. That the murderer was striking his victims by means of intense light, I judged by the marked contraction of the pupils of the victim's eyes.

"So I protected my own eyes, knowing that sooner or later the weapon would be turned on me. How the killer accomplished his 'suicides' was rel-

Then, to bring us out of unconsciousness, he gave us liquor from his flask. He did not want to kill me, for up to that time he thought I was Gee-Gee Janes, and Janes' gang was to be an important unit of his underworld army. But while I drank liquor from the same flask as Reedan, I did not die. This was to serve as an alibi in case the coroner decided that Reedan's death, some time later, was murder in-

stead of suicide. I could have then testified in court that I drank from the same flask as Reedan, thus alibiing the murderer."

"I get it," said one of the cops. "There were a couple of compartments in the flask. One contained prussic acid; the other, whisky. You got the whisky; Reedan, the acid."

X shook his head. "If such had been the case, Reedan would never have regained consciousness. He would have died, as Hackman did, from the effects of the poison, before he awoke. What the killer's flask contained was nitrobenzene and whisky. The two do not mix. I got the liquor on top and Reedan got the poison. The beauty of the killer's plan is that symptoms of nitrobenzene poisoning are identical to those of prussic acid. Having planted a half-empty bottle of prussic acid on Reedan's bedside table, the logical conclusion to come to was that Reedan had taken prussic acid, when he died some time later, as a result of the nitrobenzene and its slower but just as deadly action."

X pointed toward Sheila Landi's lovely white hands. "Madvig made Sheila administer the liquor and the poison. The girl was nervous and slopped some of the nitrobenzene over on her finger tips. Notice how the nitrobenzene attacked the red lacquer polish on her nails. See those white splotches? I noticed that, but of course could not interpret the reason for those splotches until Reedan died.


Then, after a little thought, I discovered the truth. Whisky doesn't dissolve nail lacquer.

"Unwittingly, when, after Madvig's ministrations, I regained consciousness there in Reedan's house, I let out my plans to trap Sabin by notifying you men. That's how it happened that Madvig's criminals were on hand when you put out in the cruiser."


One of the federal agents shook his head. "So it was that seedy-looking inventor who had ringed together the criminal elements of the town. He would have equipped them with weapons far better than we now use. And all the time he was in and out of police headquarters, yelling about some one stealing his precious invention."

"More alibi," X said with a smile. "And he over-rated the ability of his weapon simply because he had convinced Sabin that it could produce instant death. Thus he must have wielded considerable power over Sabin, who was very much in awe of 'the Death.' Kept it behind a curtain in his council chamber, a constant threat to all his crack-brained companions who served him in his wild scheme to precipitate revolution in South America."

Agent X and Klinker went off together to get some well-earned rest, leaving Sheila to take up a new life free from crime that she had earned. But both men were to miss her beauty and loyalty.



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PROBAK JUNIOR

Postal Inspector Val Decker knew there was something phony about that roadside sign. But when he followed its directions, he didn't know he was taking a

Detour to Murder



By

Frank Gruber

Author of "The Devil's Checkroom," etc.

VAL DECKER shifted his foot from the gas throttle to the brake pedal. He brought his sedan to a complete stop and looked at the sign in the center of the paved road. A single word was painted on it in red—DETOUR—and a red arrow pointed to the left. The detour dirt road didn't look promising. It had rained heavily the night before, and there were probably mud holes in it.

Decker sighed, and shifting into gear, swung into the dirt road. It was worse than he'd expected. A half mile

farther it petered out entirely at the banks of a swollen creek. It was then that Decker became suspicious. In his job as postal inspector for the United States Post Office Department, he was always on the alert for things which didn't add up right. It didn't make sense that some one should mark a detour from a good paved road into a meandering, unused one that ended at a bridgeless creek.

He backed his car into the woods and managed with difficulty to turn around. His lips were tightly pressed

as he started back to the main highway. Because he was looking sharply at the road ahead, he noticed something he hadn't seen before; clear tire marks that came out of the woods and headed toward the highway.

His eyes became alert, and then he saw the two cars: one, a big touring car, parked squarely in the center of the little road, facing away from Decker; the other, a sleek sedan, facing Decker.

A man stood in front of the sedan, his hands raised over his head. Facing him, their backs turned toward Decker were four men. One was going through the pockets of the man with the raised hands.

Decker braked his car to a stop and reached into the door pocket for his gun, a Smith & Wesson .38.

He had stopped the car as quietly as he could, but his brakes squeaked a little and one of the men ahead turned around. He uttered a yell, and instantly, the four men scattered. Decker saw sunlight flashing on gun metal. Then the woods reverberated to gunfire.

DECKER leaned out of the sedan window and began firing carefully and methodically. It was a long range for him, more than seventy-five yards. His first shot kicked up dirt at the feet of one of the men, and his second shot staggered the man. Then a bullet smashed into Decker's windshield, and a splinter of glass struck his left cheekbone. He was dazed for a moment, but then his vision cleared and he leaned out of the sedan and fired again.

Three of the outlaws, including the one who had been wounded by Decker's bullet, were scrambling into their touring car. The fourth had dashed for the shelter of the sleek sedan.

Decker, suddenly divining the intent of the men in the touring car, threw his auto into reverse and began backing away.

He saw the snout of the machine gun then, and dropped flat on the seat

of the sedan. The machine gun chattered, and glass and splinters of wood and steel showered Decker. The killers emptied almost a complete drum of the Tommy-gun, then suddenly stopped shooting.

Decker risked a peek up and saw that the car was driving away. So was the sleek sedan, which had been turned around. A body lay huddled at the side of the road—the man the four had held up. Decker was sure that none of his own bullets had struck the man.

Decker's motor stalled. Desperately he stepped on the starter. The result was a cough or two and then silence. The machine-gun bullets had done things to the motor.

The touring car was disappearing around a turn in the narrow road. Evidently the killers didn't care if they had slain Decker or not; or perhaps they didn't care to remain in that vicinity. The terrific shooting could easily have been heard out on the concrete highway.

He sprang from his car and then ran toward the driver of the sleek sedan. He did not have to even stoop to see that the man was dead. A bullet had gone through his head and blown his brains out.

Decker grimaced in horror and turned away. He looked back at his sedan, shook his head and then started for the highway at a dog-trot. He reached it without a mishap. The first thing he saw was the "detour" sign, tossed to the side of the road.

Decker's forehead wrinkled. Part of the plot was clear enough: the killers had themselves put up the detour sign with the intention of detouring a car or cars. It must have been one car because Decker himself had taken the detour first, and the killers, whose car had been hidden among the trees down the side road—had let him pass.

They hadn't let the second car pass, however. Why? . . . Because they wanted to steal a car? No, Decker's sedan was as expensive as the other

SAX

they had taken. The killers must have known that this particular car was due along this highway.

Decker heard the whine of tires and saw an auto approaching. He stepped in the middle of the highway and waved his .38. Tires screeched on the pavement, and the car bumped to a stop within a dozen feet of Decker.

Decker saw a frightened face behind the windshield as he walked up to the car. "I'm a government man," he told the youth who was driving the car. "Something's just happened here in the woods and I want you to drive to the first farmhouse and put in a phone call there for the state police."

The youth sobbed in relief. "Sure, sure, Mister!" He meshed his gears and the car leaped ahead.

THREE HOURS later Val Decker made his report to the chief of the Chicago division. "The thing's a mystery to me; they laid that trap for the sole purpose of killing that man, I'm sure. They frisked him, but they didn't take his money. There was almost a hundred dollars on him."

"In a wallet?" asked Piper, the division chief.

"No, he didn't have a wallet. Well, he might have had one, but if so, the killers took it. There was no identification on him, except his initials, L. B., on his belt buckle; and that doesn't give the police much to go on."

"You didn't get the license numbers?"

"Of the killers' car, yes. Stolen plates. The other car was too far away for me to make out the numbers. Anyway, things happened too fast for me to get that."

The chief shook his head. "Well, that matter is in the hands of the state police. Let them worry. We've got our own troubles. That's why I sent for you. You're taking the crack Northwest Special at five this afternoon."

"How far—the Twin Cities?"

"I don't know. That depends. You see, the Federal Reserve bank is send-

ing out a very large quantity of currency to two or three banks in North Dakota and Montana. It's being sent by registered mail, and—well, frankly, I think there's going to be an attempt to take that money from the train."

"Tip?"

"No—not exactly. But two days ago a clerk of the Federal Reserve bank was found in an alley on the North Side. There were burns on the soles of his feet—cigarette burns. And his body looked as if it had been pretty well worked over with a rubber hose."

Decker's eyes narrowed. "Some one forced information out of him and then killed him?"

"That's about the size of it. Len Macy, Johnny Phillips' chief lieutenant, was seen in Chicago two days ago. That means Phillips is here, too. So Lobdell and Billingsly will be in the mail car, working as regular clerks. You're not known at this office, and if anyone has spotted our men, they won't know you. That's why I want you to ride on the train as a passenger. What I've told you is all that we know or suspect, but still—with more than a half million dollars at stake, we can't take a chance."

POSTAL INSPECTOR DECKER

Posted by the train gate, with a cow-skin bag at his feet, ten minutes before the gate opened. He smoked a huge cigar and studied a time-table. He continued to smoke and peruse the time-table after the gate opened. He scrutinized every person who passed through to the train, and he was the last one through the gate.

He made the observation platform when the train was already moving. He shook his head and grinned widely as he passed through the car.

"Almost missed her," he said affably to several men in the car.

Decker found the porter and had him carry his bag through to his Pullman compartment, where he asked: "How soon will the dining car be open?"

"Open now, sir. First call goin' through in a minute."

The postal inspector was the first person in the dining car, and took a place at the farthest table on the right side, a two-place table. He seated himself facing the car and came bluntly to the point with his waiter.

"Look, George," he said, "I like to take my time about eating, and I like to watch people. So don't try to rush me away from this table. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if I found a couple of dollars in my pocket if you leave me be."

"Yas, suh," beamed the daky.

Decker lingered an hour and a half over the dinner. He studied more than fifty diners during that time. It availed him nothing; everyone seemed to be just what he or she looked like, casual travelers.

Decker was sipping leisurely at his coffee when the train stopped. He looked out of the window and saw that they were in the middle of a rural section. There wasn't even a farmhouse in sight. He began wondering why the train had stopped so far from a town. He didn't have long to wonder, for the rattling of a machine gun suddenly split the evening air. Decker gasped and sprang from his chair. He rushed to the door of the dining car, knocking over a waiter in his haste.

He sprang to the vestibule. The side door of course was locked, and Decker did not know exactly how to manipulate the levers to open it.

"What's up?" asked a voice behind from a hatless man of about thirty-five.

"I don't know," Decker answered. "But I'll swear that was a machine gun."

Then the gun outside chattered again.

"How the hell do you open these doors?" exclaimed Decker.

The other reached past Decker and fumbled with a lever. The door remained closed. Fortunately a brakeman came along then. He was white-faced and scared.

"Holdup," he whispered. "Better not go outside."

"Oh, come," snorted the hatless passenger. "They don't have train holdups these days."

"The hell they don't!" said Decker. "Here, brakeman, open that door."

The brakeman recoiled. "Gosh, mister . . . !"

Decker lost his patience. He jerked out his gun and pointed it at the brakeman. "Open up that door, I said!"

The brakeman lifted up the floorboard covering the stairs, touched a lever and the door sprang open.

Decker leaped down to the ground and scurried in between the two cars. From there he peeked out toward the engine.

A half dozen men were standing beside the mail car, rifles and machine guns in their hands. A little farther beyond, were several more men: the engineer, the fireman and two armed members of the gang.

"Open up, or we'll dynamite!" roared one of the men by the mail car. The command was obviously intended for the mail clerks, who had barricaded themselves inside the car.

The answer came in the form of a spray of machine-gun bullets. The postal men inside the car—Lobdell and Billingsly—were not going to surrender. The bandits scattered to the engine, and the car behind the mail car, where they were safe from the machine gun in the mail car that could sweep only the side of the track.

Decker remained crouched between the two cars for a moment. His duty was clear, but the odds were overwhelming—at least a dozen men in the bandit gang, and they were far from a town.

Then the hatless passenger dropped down beside Decker. He held a .32 automatic in his fist.

"Let them have it," he said.

"Perhaps we'd better go around the other side and . . ." cautioned Decker.

The other man opened fire on the bandits. Standing clearly in the open,

he fired twice. Decker gasped at the audacity of the man, started to come out from the concealment of the protecting car. Then the passenger turned suddenly and thrust his automatic almost into Decker's face.

Decker fell back in horror. Wildly he stuck out his own gun. There was an explosion, and a thunderbolt seemed to explode on Decker's head.

VAL DECKER awoke and looked stupidly at a forest of trousered legs for a moment, and then when things penetrated his sluggish senses, raised his eyes. He saw a ring of faces, and everything came back to him with a rush.

"What happened?" he groaned and sat up.

A man in a gold-braided uniform shook his head sadly. "They dynamited the mail car."

The man who had shot Decker pushed through the fringe of men. Decker gasped: "You—you shot me!"

The other's face creased. "I know—I thought you were one of them. You pulled a gun and seemed so eager to get off the train to join them that I—Hell, how was I to know you were a postal inspector?"

Decker clasped an involuntary hand to his breast pocket.

The conductor coughed and held out Decker's wallet. "We, ah, went through your clothes and found your credentials. Mr. Benton made a perfectly natural mistake. You should have told him who you were."

Decker took his wallet and shoved it into his breast pocket. "Perhaps I should." He touched a finger to his throbbing temple and brought it away sticky with blood.

"Well, you saw my credentials," he said to the man called Benton. "Now, let's see yours."

Benton grinned wryly, took out a wallet and showed the identification card in it to Decker.

Decker pursed his lips. "Louis Benton, and you're a vice president of this road?"

Benton nodded. "That's why I was suspicious of you. I couldn't understand an ordinary passenger wanting to shoot things out with bandits!"

Decker grimaced. "They got away with the money, I suppose?"

Benton nodded. "A rather large sum, I'm told."

"More than a half million—" Decker broke off and a cold feather slithered up his spine. "The—the clerks?"

The conductor spread out his hands. "Killed—four of them. They never had a chance."

Decker swore roundly. "And the killers made a clean getaway?"

"Not clean." Benton shook his head. "A mail clerk got one of the bandits!"

"Where is he?"

The circle of men opened, and Decker was able to see the mail car. The door hung by a hinge near where several feet of one side of the car had been ripped by the explosion. On the ground close to it lay a huddled body.

Decker strode grimly toward it, the conductor and the train crew following. Decker drew in his breath softly as he looked down at the dead man. He had seen that face before—that same day, on a lonely detour south of Chicago. It was one of the four men who had held up the driver of the sedan, killed him and then riddled Decker's own sedan.

RETURNING to the city by a swift automobile that evening, Val Decker preceded by only a few minutes a special hearse that carried the bodies of the slain postal men and the killer, traveling side-by-side in death.

The bodies of the murdered postal heroes were taken to a funeral home, but the corpse of the killer was delivered to division headquarters, and there a staff of laboratory men and technicians got busy. They worked practically the entire night, and by six in the morning were ready for Decker and Piper who had remained in the office and kept awake with black coffee.

"What'd you find?" Chief Piper asked eagerly.

"That he lived for some time on or near the Mississippi River. His shoes had a large quantity of dried mud on them; black mud mixed with bits of red loam, such as is found in varying quantities anywhere between St. Paul and St. Louis. I hardly think he touched the Mississippi any farther down."

Decker groaned. "That's a distance of six or seven hundred miles. Can't you narrow it more?"

"Of course, that was only the beginning. Cedar and pine pollen in his clothes, a bit of poplar—that brings it up farther, probably above Dubuque."

"That's better," interposed Chief Piper, "but even that's too much. Anything that would indicate his occupation, for example?"

"I worried about that for some time," replied the technician. "The man's hands are very calloused, much more so than you'd expect of a criminal who probably hadn't done much physical labor recently. At first I thought he might have lived on a farm where he had chopped wood a great deal. But the calluses don't match because they run not only over the entire palms but down around the inner edge of the hands. Only one kind of work would callus hands like that—rowing a boat."

"Rowing!" ejaculated Decker. "You put the man near the Mississippi, and now you say he rowed a boat. I'll bet he lived on one of the islands."

"I was getting to that," smiled the technician. "The pollen and mud and everything showed more than ordinary traces of water. And now the best of all—I found more than a dozen hairs from Chinchilla rabbits on the clothing, not only in the trousers, but also in the man's socks, and even his shoes. There must be quite a few rabbits around where he's been living."

Decker and Piper looked at each other. "Rabbits," said Piper. "Why would a man like this killer raise rabbits?"

"Furs and food," Decker replied. "I was reading in a magazine of how prime Chinchilla rabbit furs brought two dollars and up. And there's quite a market for tame rabbit meat in some sections."

"Chicken feed," scoffed Piper. "The man's in on a half-million-dollar steal, and he raises rabbits!"

"I didn't say he raised them," replied Decker. "Look at it this way: Johnny Phillips has been hiding out for a long time, his last job was pulled six months ago, and he made a clean getaway—which means he has an ideal hideout. Why not an island in the Mississippi where some one raises rabbits? Rabbits of all things; that's kid stuff, and you'd never expect to find Johnny Phillips around a rabbit farm. At least no *clever* policeman would. I'm not clever, and I'm willing to believe what my eyes see. I say the money and most of the gang is on this rabbit island in the Mississippi right now."

"Between Dubuque and St. Paul—three hundred miles. You going to row a boat up and down the river?"

Decker looked at Piper in surprise. "Yes, I'll use a boat—a flying boat."

Piper said: "Good—you can cover that whole stretch in less than two hours." He caught up a phone. In two minutes he was talking to a hydroplane pilot. "You take off in a half hour, Decker," he snapped when he hung up.

"Fine, while I get some things ready call this number and ask this question." Decker shoved a slip of paper under the chief's eyes, on which he had penciled a few words.

Piper's eyes widened. "Hmmm," he said.

THE hydroplane taxied into Lake Michigan and took the air like a giant bird. The plane flew straight out into the lake until it had gained more than a thousand feet of altitude, then swung around and headed due west.

It was about a hundred and seventy miles by air to the Mississippi. The

plane made it in two minutes under an hour.

"Now the fun begins," shouted the pilot as he turned the plane along the river's course. He dropped down to five hundred feet.

"Don't circle any of the islands," Decker cautioned. "That would be a give-away. Just fly casually over them seeking out the buildings. If I see anything that looks like rabbit hutches, I'll tell you and we'll come down a mile or two beyond the island and give it a closer once-over."

They passed over the first islands around Prairie du Chien, a series of low, marshy islands. The plane soared over them, and Decker sighed. "No rabbit hutches there."

Ten minutes after leaving Prairie du Chien, the hydroplane crossed another island—a small one of about five acres, lying a third of a mile from the Wisconsin shore.

There was a large white frame house on this island. Decker studied the outbuildings, and exclaimed:

"There's a couple of long, narrow buildings down there that I'll bet are rabbit hutches!"

The pilot kept the plane straight up the river. Two miles past the island he began to settle down to the water; but Decker, seeing a village a half mile farther on directed him to continue to it. The pilot brought the plane down on the water with hardly a splash, then taxied up to a small dock.

Decker climbed out. "Fly over the island in half an hour. If I wave at you, you'll know it's a dud and can come down and pick me up. But if I don't wave, you'd better get some help—plenty of it."

The pilot nodded, and Decker turned to the village. A number of people had already seen the plane and were gathered at the dock.

"Can I rent a motor boat, here?" Decker asked of the crowd at large.

A middle-aged man with snuff on his chin stepped out of the crowd. "I got a boat here with one of them outboard motors," he volunteered.

Three minutes later, the boat, containing Decker and the snuff-user, was roaring down the river.

"Folks on that there island ain't so sociable," the boatman volunteered.

"No? How many people are on the island?"

"That I don't know. They don't seem to like visitors, so if you're gonna be on the island a bit, I'd just as lief come back for you, mister."

There was a tiny pier at the edge of the island. The boatman ran the small boat to the edge of the pier, and when Decker climbed out, he made off hastily.

Decker grinned and turned toward the big house about a hundred yards away. A lean, saturnine man was coming down to the pier from the house.

"Hello, there," said Decker. "I heard you had some rabbits and I thought I'd come to see them."

"See them?" grunted the saturnine one. "This ain't no zoo."

"What I mean," said Decker, "was that I'm looking for some healthy Chinchilla breeding stock."

"Chinchillas? I ain't got no Chinchillas," snorted the islander. "Nothin' but New Zealand Whites."

"New Zealand Whites!" exclaimed Decker. "Why, that's fine. I raise those, and I'm looking for a pair of breeding males."

"Sorry, but we ain't got any to sell," grunted the man.

"Let me look at them, anyway. If they're as good as I think they might be, I may be able to *persuade* you to sell me a couple."

The rabbit farmer scowled, but turned toward the house. Decker followed him to the two long rabbit hutches behind it. He looked at them and felt a keen sense of disappointment. They were New Zealand Whites, every one of them. But the longer he looked at the two hutches, the more puzzled he became.

The hutches were divided into series of compartments. If each compartment had contained only one rabbit, there should have been sixty or seven-

ty in the two hutches. There weren't; in fact, there were only six rabbits in one hutch and eight in the other. And the rabbits were all sizes and ages.

"You see," said the rabbit man, "I ain't got hardly enough for myself, let alone sell any. 'Tain't worth your while to stick around."

Val Decker stooped and touched the wire netting at his feet. He brought his fingers up and looked at the rabbit man. "If you have only New Zealand Whites, how come these Chinchilla hairs are all over the place?"

The rabbit raiser gasped and took a step back. "Who—what're you doing here?"

"I think you know," said Decker.

"All right, copper," said a loud voice from the house. "Just stand right where you're at."

Inspector Decker froze. The rabbit raiser made a half circle around him and began patting his pockets from behind. He lifted Decker's .38, then stepped back.

"Turn around now," ordered the man who had called him a cop.

"Hello, Benton," he said.

LOUIS BENTON, who had posed as the vice president of the railroad, smiled thinly at Decker.

"So you guessed I was Johnny Phillips?"

"Not much guessing," replied Decker. "I could have arrested you right after the train holdup, but that wouldn't have got back the half million—or the rest of the gang."

Johnny Phillips' eyes flashed. "And you think you'll do that now? We'll take that up in a minute . . . How did you know who I was?"

"You tried to cover up shooting me by claiming you didn't know I was a postal inspector. I might have believed you if you'd been able to open that train door a few minutes before. That struck me as a colossal piece of ignorance on the part of a railroad man. This morning I called up the railroad office and asked if their vice president had ever been a worker. They told me

he'd worked his way up from being a switchman."

Johnny Phillips shook his head. "A man can't think of everything. I—I anticipated you on the rabbits, though."

"Yes, you figured we'd find hairs on that man of yours who was killed, and you weren't sure just how far that clue would take us. So you tried to forestall us by disposing of the Chinchilla rabbits over-night and bringing in New Zealand Whites. You might have made that stick if you'd had time to tear down the old fences and hutches and put up new ones—ones that didn't have Chinchilla hairs stuck all over them."

Johnny Phillips sighed. "Decker, you're too smart. C'mon in the house."

Under the threat of the guns, Decker entered the house. Inside were a half dozen additional members of the mail-robbery gang, including two more who had killed the real Louis Benton on the detour the day before, in order to obtain his credentials.

The mail robbers were openly hostile to Decker. "Let's bump him and beat it out of here," one of them snarled.

"That plane worries me," said Phillips. "If I'd been pulling this stunt I'd have had it come back in a little while."

"Then what're we waiting for?" cried another of the men. "Give it to this copper and let's scam!"

Johnny Phillips looked thoughtfully at Decker. "We might," he said, slowly, "use this man as a hostage. I—"

He stopped and cocked his head to one side in a listening attitude. Decker heard it too—the droning of an airplane motor.

"What's your signal to him?" demanded Johnny Phillips.

Decker did not answer. His ears had heard another noise, an irregular thumping. It came from upstairs, the attic of the farmhouse. The noise was not loud, but it was continuous. His forehead creased. The missing rabbits, of course.

"What's your signal?" Johnny Phillips snarled.

Decker looked at the door of a stairway leading to the attic. "This," he said suddenly. His hand snaked out and tore his gun from the hand of the rabbit farmer who was standing nearest him.

The move surprised everyone in the room and gave Decker a moment's grace. He leaped for the door, tore it open with one hand and sprang up the flight of stairs. Guns exploded behind him.

Down below he heard some one yell in consternation. The yell was punctuated by a rabbit squeal. The animals hadn't liked the semi-dark of the attic, and the opening of the stair door showed them light and they began rushing to it.

A bullet plunked into the stairway at Decker's feet and inspired him to make a last frantic leap. He reached the top of the staircase, stepped on another squealing rabbit, and tripped to his knees.

Decker rolled over and away from the stairs. Down below he heard furious swearing. The rabbits were charging down the stairs in such large numbers now that they prevented the enraged bandits from coming up.

Johnny Phillips hadn't drowned all those rabbits in the river, for the bodies would have floated downstream. And the animals had unwittingly aided Decker. But the exodus of the rabbits was almost completed. The bandits came charging up the stairs.

A HEAD poked up, and Decker sent a bullet through it. The killer tumbled back into the arms of his pals.

No heads appeared for a moment, and then Johnny Phillips' voice came up to Decker: "You've only got four-five bullets left, Decker. You can't pick us all off."

"Maybe not," said Decker grimly. "But I can get most of you, one at a time. Will *you* come up next?"

"We'll burn the house down!"

"I'd just as soon be burned as shot," Decker replied.

A couple of bullets came up the staircase. Decker remained where he was. There was more arguing on the stairs; then suddenly Decker heard the sound of retreating footsteps. He heard, too, the heavy roar of the hydroplane motor, almost directly over the island now.

Men rushed about downstairs, and Decker heard doors opening. Then the house below became strangely quiet. Decker left his beam and tip-toed to a small window in the front of the attic. He looked out and saw the bandits rushing to the waterfront. There were two rowboats tied there.

He saw the men piling into the boats, saw them shove off. Decker swore under his breath. Johnny Phillips was standing up in one of the boats, gripping a big suitcase.

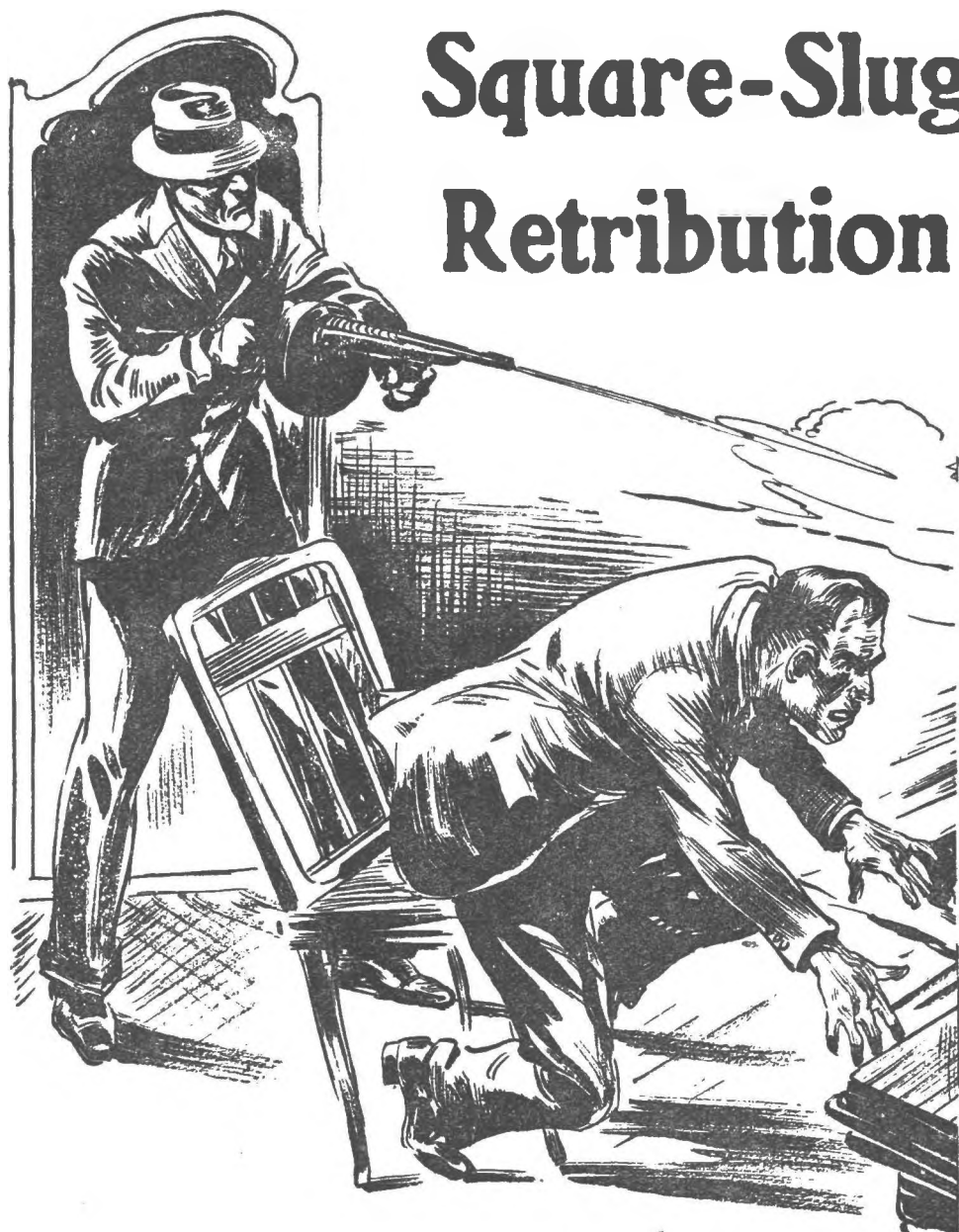
Then Decker saw a huge shadow skim over the ground. He looked up—and then the machine gun of the aviator burst out.

Decker saw bullets kicking up the water, saw the little spouts rush toward the rowboats, pass on Then one of the boats was filling with water and there were two or three men in the river. Decker poked his automatic through the glass window, leveled it at the second boat and took careful aim.

Two men were rowing frantically. Decker squeezed the trigger, and one of the men stood up and pitched sideways into the water. Decker fired again, but saw the bullet kick up water. He aimed a third time—and then the hydroplane came back. Water spouts kicked up again. The men pitched overboard.

That was all there was to it. Three minutes later, the hydroplane settled down on the water and taxied up to the little wharf. A wounded bandit had dragged himself there, but he was under the guard of Decker by then.

The rest of the bandits were gone, with the river. The suitcase full of money had fallen out of the boat, but was easily rescued. The money would be only water-soaked



Square-Slug Retribution

By William Benton Johnston

Author of "Freighted for Hell," etc.

"MARINE" KENNEDY, F. B. I. ace, went into a Negro café on Beale Street and called Room 1036 at the Peyton Hotel.

When Special Agent Bob Steele answered, Kennedy asked: "Got anything, Bob?"

"Yes, a real break at last. Frank Gianotti is coming in on MP train 104, and 'Swede' Lawson is driving down from Chicago. They're meeting at the Rialto Hotel tonight, then going to see this phantom big shot in person.

Ex-Marine Kennedy, ace G-man, had two good reasons why he had to succeed in that dangerous undertaking. One was his duty to his office; the other, his loyalty to a pal. Duty and loyalty were two things the G-man excelled in, but then, unarmed in the master criminal's den and surrounded by killers, it seemed that he would have no more chance to exercise them.

"They're strangers to Memphis mobs and don't know each other. You've got a description of both; the chief wants you to have local authorities take Gianotti off the train at Dover and come on, in his place, to meet Lawson—"

There was a sharp click, then silence.

Kennedy juggled the hook and finally an operator said: "Number, please."

"I was talking to—" Kennedy began, but Bob Steele's voice cut in.

"We were disconnected somehow," he explained, and Kennedy was startled at the change in his voice, at his sudden, heavy, labored breathing.

"Where are you, Kennedy?" he asked hoarsely.

The G-man hesitated, then told him.

"Stay where you are until I get there." Suddenly Steele's voice broke. "Oh, cripes, I can't—I won't—"

There was a gurgling sound, a loud crack of violently broken connections. Kennedy, bewildered, called back; the number did not answer. The G-man's eyes narrowed and hardened with quick suspicion. His mind seething over this strange development, he turned abruptly from the booth, his lean face grim and tight-lipped.

Brusquely he shoved through a door marked private and flashed his shield at the Negro cook.

"On with your work and keep quiet," the G-man snapped.

"Yas-suh," the frightened cook chattered.

Kennedy stood inside the window through which food was passed and watched the café entrance intently. Presently a gray sedan drew up to the curb. Four men got out, cast quick

glances up and down the street, then came inside.

They were tough, hard-faced mugs—two Negroes and two white men. One of the Negroes carried a suit-box, the other had a rolled newspaper under his arm; both white men kept their right hands sunk deep in sagging coat pockets.

They came directly to the telephone booth.

"Hell," one of the white men growled, "he got wise and scrambled. Damn him, we'll—"

Kennedy thrust his automatic through the window.

"Get 'em up," he rapped, "up high."

The Negro with the newspaper wheeled and ran, but both white men fired from their pockets. A bullet clipped through the beaver-board partition and whanged against a pan. Another brushed the G-man's shoulder and brought a scream of agony from the cook.

Kennedy's automatic blasted one of the white men down just as the big Negro ripped the suit-box to pieces with a single motion of his gigantic hand, caught the forestock of a Tommy-gun, which had been inside, and swung the weapon around. The gun chattered, and slugs came crashing into the kitchen, smashing dishes, ricocheting off the iron stove, ringing against tinware.

The second white man's automatic was hammering, and as Kennedy turned his own pistol toward him, the G-man glimpsed, standing in the front doorway, the Negro who had run. His hand was upraised, holding the rolled newspaper. Swiftly his arm came down in a swinging arc; something

shot out of the paper, hit the floor and rolled toward the kitchen.

"Pineapple!" Kennedy shouted and ducked behind an ice-box.

THE crash of the grenade rocked the café. Screams and curses rose; plaster rained downward. Kennedy, shocked, staggered up and plunged through the smoke and dust from the falling debris, toward the front.

He tripped over a body, crashed into an overturned table and lost his automatic. By the time he recovered it and reached the entrance, the surviving Negro and white man had leaped into the gray sedan and disappeared in the traffic of Beale Street.

The G-man looked back into the chaos of the wrecked café, thought of Bob Steele and the mysterious ending of their telephone conversation, and ran around the corner to Third Street. He dodged through a rapidly gathering crowd and sprinted toward the Peyton Hotel.

People in the lobby of the Peyton turned to stare at the dusty, disheveled man who rushed into a waiting elevator and shot upward.

So apprehensive was Kennedy that he knocked only once before crashing his big shoulder against the locked door of 1036. It yielded, and he plunged into the room.

Bob Steele slumped in a chair, his body sprawled across a table and his head the center of a crimson pool. His scalp was split with an ugly gash, and Kennedy, ripping back his coat, found two deep stab wounds beneath the left shoulder. Yet the tough, sturdy special agent was still breathing.

Kennedy picked up the wounded man, placed him gently on the bed and whirled to the telephone. Instantly he saw that the instrument was useless, and his trained eyes, running over the broken connections, saw wires that were not telephone wires. He kicked over the table and swore at the dictaphone fastened to the bottom of it. When the table turned over, a square of paper floated to the floor, and the

G-man scooped it up and read it as he ran toward the elevators.

Three sentences were printed on the paper, and the significance of the words flashed through his brain like a glaring white light. They were the exact text of Bob Steele's last words to Kennedy—those words spoken immediately after the broken telephone connection had been re-established, and after Steele's voice had so mysteriously changed.

Kennedy read the sentences and the bracketed instructions after each one:

We were somehow disconnected (Wait for his answer)

Where are you, Kennedy? (Wait for his answer)

Stay where you are until I get there. (Hang up)

As the elevator dropped to the first floor, Kennedy saw the whole thing in one instantaneous and perfectly clear picture.

"The dictaphone enabled these hoods to hear Bob talking to me," he summed up mentally. "They broke in—probably had a key—jumped him, held him away from the phone while they scribbled these instructions; then, with a gun jammed against his spine, tried to make him lure me into a trap. But good old Bob rebelled and they gave him the works, I want to keep this bright in my mind—bright for the day when I settle with these rats."

Eyes hard and frosty, he left the elevator and crossed the lobby.

"Call an ambulance," he snapped at the startled clerk. "Get a doctor. Shoot through a call to the police."

A tall, heavy man, immaculate in white flannels and brown sport coat, came quickly out of the private offices.

"I'm Charles Pelone," he announced authoritatively, "manager of this hotel. What's going on here?"

"A man's been hurt in 1036. May be dying. Get—"

"Hurt? You mean he is not—" Pelone whirled and raced across the lobby.

Kennedy watched him go, and suddenly his rapid and undignified rush toward the elevators aroused a quick suspicion in the G-man's mind, a suspicion that sent him sprinting after the hotel manager.

PELONE'S elevator had ascended; the indicator showed that it had reached the tenth floor. Kennedy leaped into another and shot upward. He ran along the corridor and shoved open the door to 1036. Pelone was walking away from the bed.

"The man is dead," Pelone snarled, "I'll have to hold you for murder."

"Don't be a sap," Kennedy snapped at him. "I'm a Federal Agent, and Bob was my buddy."

Quickly he stooped to examine the man on the bed. Bob Steele had ceased to breathe. The flesh of his throat was red with marks that Kennedy had not seen before. The G-man's eyes flew to Pelone's fingers; there was blood on one of his hands.

"I lifted his head," the hotel man explained, and the defensive way he said it narrowed Kennedy's eyes to angry points of distrust.

"Hmm," he growled. "Well, come on; I want to use your phone."

From the hotel office, he called his chief in St. Louis and reported concisely what had happened.

"Did Steele deliver my message to you?" the chief asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Then get Gianotti—you'll have to hurry to make that train. I'm coming down, myself, to handle Bob's murder."

Reluctantly Kennedy left the hotel and went to the garage where his big coupé was parked. Driving toward Union Station, a thought struck him broadside.

"I'm screwy," he muttered. "Those mugs heard Bob deliver the chief's message to me; they'll know I'm going to impersonate Gianotti."

Night had thrown a sable blanket over the Mississippi valley, and heavy rain had begun to fall. Kennedy pulled

the coupé to the curb and sat a moment thoughtfully, staring at the glistening street.

His mind clicked on a solution and exploded into instant action. He tooled the coupé away from the curb and sent it spinning out South Main toward the Chicago highway.

"Disobeying orders is not so hot," he told himself, "but here's where I throw a bomb into the big shot's plans for tonight."

Rain came down in a blinding deluge as Kennedy crossed the muddy Mississippi via the Harahan bridge and roared into Arkansas. Soon all signs of habitation disappeared. His headlights made silver beams against the sheets of rain, and his tires screamed along the wet concrete northward to meet Swede Lawson.

He ran past a highway tool-house, jammed on brakes and shot backwards in reverse. One blast from his automatic smashed the tool-house lock and the G-man lugged forth two signs which read: DANGER. DRIVE SLOW. Then he went back and got two lanterns, the globes of which were swathed in red cloth.

Five miles farther down the highway, he stopped where a gravel road intersected the inside of a sharp curve and where bushes grew close to the highway edge. He parked his car on the side-road and placed the signs, back to back, in the center of the concrete slab. Then he lit the lanterns and put them atop the signs, but the red glow was not sufficiently strong to suit him and he ripped the cloth off one of the globes. Gathering a handful of oil and mud, he smeared it across the face of the sign toward Chicago and retreated into the bushes.

Lightning flashed, there was the incessant rumble of thunder overhead, and descending sheets of rain soaked him to the skin. Yet the veteran G-man waited patiently.

The lights of a car zoomed up from toward Memphis and slowed at the sight of the red lantern. From that side, the sign was plainly legible, and

the driver came to only a momentary halt, then proceeded at a more moderate speed. Then lights from the north, and again a car stopped; but this time the driver had to get out and come close to read the smeared letters on that side of the sign. In the light of the unshaded lantern, Kennedy got a good look at his face. Wet and cold as he was, the G-man chuckled and settled back to his vigil.

CARS came from the south, from the north, though the stormy night made travel scarce and irregular. Finally a man stood in the lantern light who brought a quick thrill to Kennedy. Nimble the G-man's memory ran over the description of Swede Lawson: six feet tall, 195 pounds, blue eyes, fair complexion, light-blond hair. Deep scar from point of chin to base of left ear. Mole on . . .

Kennedy moved noiselessly to the edge of the bushes and thrust his automatic into the circle of lantern light.

"Get 'em up, Lawson," he commanded.

Swede Lawson spun around, his hand darting toward a shoulder holster.

"Don't do it," Kennedy rapped so sharply that the man's hands froze in mid-air, then relaxed and went above his head.

Kennedy stepped out into the light—and immediately became a target for whoever was in Lawson's parked sedan.

A slug jerked at the G-man's coat, one flipped against his ankle, another grazed his scalp. He staggered back into the brush and tried to raise his automatic, but it seemed to be weighted down by some invisible force too heavy for human hands to lift. Vaguely he was aware that the sedan was swooping down, that Lawson was grabbing the side of it and clambering in. With a mighty effort he shook the cobwebs out of his head and threw two futile shots at the rapidly disappearing sedan.

"Gone," he muttered thickly.

He had disobeyed orders, had lost Swede Lawson; too late now to contact Gianotti. Bitterly Kennedy realized that he had muffed his one chance to reach the elusive big shot of the Memphis rackets. Through his shocked, pain-racked brain burned the thought that he had lost touch with these men who could lead him to the gang responsible for Bob Steele's murder.

Mumbling an oath, he wiped the streaming blood from his face and sprinted to the coupé. He spun the car through the soft gravel of the side-road, skidded it to the highway and sent it southward, its motor roaring.

The sedan ahead had speed, but the desperate, angry man at the wheel of the coupé was not to be denied. The glow of headlights loomed against the darkness ahead, then the wink of red tail-lights. Kennedy wiped the blood from his face again and unholstered his automatic.

The sedan leaped ahead with renewed speed, but Kennedy continued to draw up inexorably. He saw Swede Lawson's face at a window as he drew alongside, lined the sights of his automatic and threw a slug at the snarling mobster. Glass smashed close to Swede's head, and he whipped back a bullet which *pinged* off the G-man's roof. Before Kennedy could fire again, the sedan was cutting in, was nosing over to the left. Desperately he let the motor drag, but there was a grinding smash of fenders.

Instinctively the G-man spun the wheel, veered off, plummeted from the road and down a sloping embankment. A jeering shout floated back as the sedan sped on.

Soft dirt broke the speed of the coupé. It swerved sickeningly, yet remained upright and crammed its wheels hard into the rows of a cotton-field parallel to the highway. Kennedy was stunned, but only for a moment. Impatiently, angrily, he wiped it away and jammed the gears into reverse.

The coupé lurched sharply, the spin-

ning wheels whined, then caught, and the coupe began to back slowly up the embankment. The flying tires flung a rain of mud and gravel, gripped the solid roadway and shot, in a mad curve, onto the highway.

THE highway was straight at this point; the sedan could not branch off, soon there was a glow of lights ahead. The G-man saw the sedan plunge shortly around a bend with a bad skid and disappear. Kennedy followed and was suddenly aware that the sedan had stopped some distance ahead. A man stood at the edge of the road where the highway curved, and in the same instant that Kennedy saw him, the man became framed in a halo of blue-red flashes from a hammering Tommy-gun.

Kennedy's first impulse was to duck beneath the cowl, but the terrific speed of the coupé gave him another idea. With a savage twist of the wheel, he flung the car at the gunman. The Tommy ceased to chatter as the hood lost his nerve and turned to run. Too late—the hurling coupé smashed out his life, careened crazily from the road and came to a halt in the soft dirt of a field.

Kennedy eased out, crawled to the highway edge just as the sedan backed to the spot. He could make out Swede Lawson clearly.

Like a blood-soaked and muddy apparition, Kennedy rose up from the highway shoulder.

"Keep your hands on the wheel," he growled, "and don't move a muscle."

"Like hell!" Lawson yelled and let out the clutch.

The car was away with a bound. Deliberately Kennedy raised the automatic in both hands, and the singing slug clipped through the sedan window and snuffed out the life of Swede Lawson. The sedan ran across the road and stopped in the mud of the highway shoulder.

Methodically Kennedy went through

Lawson's pockets. In the mobster's purse there was a thick wad of currency, a letter in code, a strip of paper on which was printed FRANK GIANOTTI, and a strange, square-shaped coin. Kennedy stared at the square coin thoughtfully and could attach no significance to it.

He appropriated the purse, two bunches of keys, and replaced his .38 with the hood's heavier .45. The G-man found a pint of corn whiskey in Lawson's hip pocket, took a shot of the cheap, fiery liquor and thrust the bottle into his own pocket. He then dumped the body unceremoniously into a ditch, turned on the dome light, applied a hasty first aid to his wounds and drove on toward Memphis

In the dingy lobby of the shabby Rialto Hotel, an old man apparently dozed behind the desk.

Kennedy said, "Wake up, mug," and shoved the slip of paper with Gianotti's name on it across the desk top.

The old man's hooded eyes ran over him briefly. He grunted, "Room 415," and went back to his chair.

The door to 415 was unlocked. Kennedy pushed it open and stood for a moment in darkness. Suddenly lights flashed on and a quiet, cold voice said: "Lift 'em."

The G-man obeyed, but took time to kick the door shut before he turned to face the swarthy, heavy-featured man who stood in the bathroom doorway.

"Okay, Gianotti," he said.

"Let's see your letter," Frank Gianotti hedged.

Kennedy, careful with his hands, took out Lawson's wallet and placed the coded letter on a table. Gianotti came over and compared it to one which he took from his own pocket.

"Okay, Lawson," he said. "Damn, you look like you been pushed around. What happened?"

"A lousy Fed tried to grab me off—he won't grab at nobody else."

"Rub him out?"

"Yeah."

"I don't like that," Gianotti said du-

biously. "Plenty heat after bumping one of them guys."

"Skip it," Kennedy growled. "What the hell, let's get going."

"You know how to get in touch with The Man?"

Kennedy was stumped, but did not hesitate.

"Thought you were supposed to know," he hazarded.

"Right," Gianotti nodded. "Come on."

They went down the dark stairs, crossed the dingy lobby where the old man apparently slept and descended to the men's washroom in the basement. Gianotti counted the toilet doors.

"Fifth," he said, stopping. "All right, do your stuff, Lawson."

IT was a moment of near panic for the G-man. He knew that he was supposed to do something, but he had no idea what—and the success of the whole scheme depended on his ability to figure it out.

Stalling for time, he reached into his pocket for a nickel and bent close to the slot in the lock. He saw that it was not round, but square, and that a nickel could not be inserted. His mind flashed back to the queer shaped coin in Swede Lawson's purse, and quick relief flooded through him.

"Where the hell did I put that square slug?" he muttered and Gianotti's sigh of satisfaction told him that his guess had been right.

"You're okay, pal," Gianotti said, when Kennedy had found the slug and opened the door.

Kennedy stepped to one side. "Your turn now, Gianotti."

Gianotti closed the door, took out his automatic and shorted two nails driven in the wall.

There was a barely perceptible hum of hidden machinery and the back wall swung outward. Kennedy and Gianotti went through the opening, closed the door and traveled along a narrow, dark passage to a heavy, iron-studded door. Kennedy rapped.

"Come on in," a gruff voice commanded and when they did, the door slammed shut and left them in a small, dirt-walled room, surrounded by grim, hard-faced torpedoes.

"Lift their rods," the gruff voice said, and before Kennedy or Gianotti could resist, they were seized and relieved of their automatics.

"Say, what the hell," Kennedy protested.

"Button your face, mug," the big man with the gruff voice growled, "and gimme those letters."

Kennedy and Gianotti surrendered the coded messages and the big man disappeared through a doorway.

"Gianotti and Lawson are here," they heard him say to some one in the next room. "Take a gander at their letters, boss."

A moment of silence, then a smooth, silky voice commanded: "Bring them in—the papers are in order."

Kennedy's blood suddenly ran cold, and the short hairs on his neck bristled. The smooth, silky tones were those of Charles Pelone.

One of the mobsters said, "G'wan in," and the whole gang followed Kennedy and Gianotti through the door.

The underground room was spacious and lighted by several oil lamps. Seated at an impromptu desk and wearing a red mask, was a tall, heavy man who was obviously their leader—the mysterious big shot of Memphis rackets.

"Well," he said jovially, "I see that you fellows made it okay."

Kennedy, unarmed and helpless, his mind working furiously, clung to the shadows as best he could, but Gianotti stepped forward.

"I didn't have no trouble; but Lawson here had a run-in with the G-rats and had to bump one of 'em."

"Isn't that just too bad?" the leader said sneeringly. "I don't suppose *you* had any trouble with the Feds, eh, Gianotti?"

"Me—naw, I didn't see none of the bright boys."

The man at the desk eyed him with contempt. He rose and placed one of

the lamps on a pile of dirt in the corner. The yellow rays disclosed a yawning black hole.

"Know what that is, Gianotti?" he purred venomously.

"Cripes," Gianotti whispered, "it looks like a grave."

"Exactly," the leader continued smoothly, "we dug it for a damn G-man. Do you think it would make a good resting place for a Fed?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Fine," the masked man told him suavely. "Then I'll bump the very next G-man I see and shove him into that hole. Okay by you?"

Gianotti stared at the man, puzzled by his questions. "Sure," he said, hesitantly.

THE leader sprang up and whipped out a long, slender knife. Gianotti recoiled before the fury in the man's eyes—and stepped back into the strong arms of two hoods who stood directly behind him.

"Get ready for the celebration, boys," the leader announced, "I'm going to cut out a G-rat's lousy heart and show it to you."

One of the mobsters put down a Tommy-gun directly in front of Kennedy and moved closer for a better view of the murder. The G-man gathered up the weapon and leaped into the shadows by the door.

"Hold it," he said in a cold, flat voice that filled the cellar. "You've got the wrong man. I changed places with Lawson instead of Gianotti. Take off that mask, Pelone, and—"

Charles Pelone began to laugh softly.

"So you found the dictaphone and figured that we overheard your pal's conversation, huh? After seeing the overturned table in 1036, that's exactly what I thought you'd do—and that's exactly why Mac put the Tommy down right in front of you. It's not loaded. But don't take my word—try it."

Kennedy swung the Thompson and

squeezed the trigger—there was a single click of firing pin against an empty chamber.

Pelone roared with laughter. "So you wanted to contact the big shot of Memphis, huh? Well, you're looking at him, wise guy, and at the hands that throttled the life out of your little pal, Bob Steele." He turned to the gang: "Get him, boys."

For a moment, which seemed like a life-long nightmare, Kennedy stood rooted to the spot, then he threw down the useless gun and whipped from his pocket the half-filled bottle of corn whiskey that he had taken off the body of Swede Lawson.

"Do you think I'm fool enough to run into a trap like this and not be ready for it?" he yelled, his eyes glaring insanely. "This is a bottle of nitroglycerine—soup to you guys—enough to blow up this end of the city. You've got me, but here goes your gang and here goes Mr. Charles Pelone, the big shot."

"Oh, yeah!" rang out all over the room, and Pelone continued to laugh. But sudden silence fell when Kennedy flung the bottle straight toward the iron-studded door.

Kennedy was aware that every man in the cellar knew that he was bluffing. He also knew enough psychology to be sure that every eye in the room would follow the flight of that bottle; that it would be humanly impossible not to, that something deep in the mind of these gangsters was whispering: "It might be soup."

He was right. Every eye centered, for a moment, on the silvered arc that the bottle made in the yellow lamp-light. And in that instant, the G-man sprang like a cornered panther.

His hard shoulder crashed against the big man with the gruff voice, his fist smashed full into the rat-like features of another mobster. The big man went spinning and dropped a Tommy-gun. Kennedy went down on top of it in a headlong dive and rolled over with it in his hands. Seated flat on the floor,

he raised the weapon and raked the cellar with a withering blast.

"Get him, boys," Pelone shrieked.

THEY tried, but it was a vain and costly effort. Lurid flame stabbed from the muzzle of the Thompson. Three men went down by the open grave, never left their tracks. Two tried to drop him from the shadows, and Kennedy had to kill them to save himself. Another plunged toward the door, but the G-man stopped him with a spurt of lead at his feet. When he swung the gun back, only Pelone remained standing.

The suave mob leader had reverted true to type now, and his face was a mask of flaming hatred as he raised, with steady hand, the shiny barrel of a revolver and lined the sights directly at the G-man. Kennedy's reaction was instantaneous. He sent a spray of bullets straight at Pelone's gun hand, and the clattering of the revolver on the hard floor came as a finale to the chattering of the Tommy-gun.

"I wanted you alive, Pelone," Kennedy said grimly. "It would have been too soft for you to finish you here. You'll do a lot more sweating waiting for the juice to burn your insides . . .

At that," he added, his lips tightening as he remembered Bob Steele, "you're getting off easy for a guy who strangled a wounded man."

He prodded the mob leader sharply in the ribs with the cold steel. "Move along sharp now," he ordered.

Out of the hell-hole and back to street level again, Kennedy took his prisoner to local police headquarters, called his chief and reported with the concise briefness which had earned him the name, "Marine."

"Big shot captured, identified, and laid out with a busted hand. Save yourself a trip, chief, I've also got Bob's murderer. The big shot and the murderer happen to be the same man."

The chief whistled. "Good work, Kennedy. Where did you get him?"

Kennedy stuck a cigarette in his mouth, lit it. "I got him in his hideout—and his men with him."

The G-man could hear his chief's gasp of surprise. "Even with the lead, how the devil did you manage to get in—and once in, how the devil did you ever get out?"

Kennedy grinned wryly. "It took a square slug to get in, chief," he said cryptically, "and several round slugs to get out."



In the September Issue of—

TEN DETECTIVE ACES

*The Great Variety
Detective Magazine*

PUZZLE OF THE PAINTED GIRLS

Sensational Novel

By S. J. Bailey

Down into Bordertown, where mystery and danger stalked together, Russ Mallard's mission led him. Mallard was used to mystery and death, but when he moved in on the movie-location company, he found them employed in ways strange even to him. The subterranean prison and the puzzle of the painted girls seemed to bear no connection—but Death needed no links in meting out his harsh punishment.



TAXI DANCE MURDER

Smashing Novelette

By Cornell Woolrich

Taxi dancehall—hotcha music—dim lights—swirling, gyrating couples . . . Suddenly pretty Blackie Moore felt faint. Death overtook her quickly—a strange death, horrible, mystifying. And Ex-Police Reporter Williams, unofficial sleuth, to save his own life and that of the dead girl's beautiful roommate, found himself hunted as wielder of the unknown death.

THE TOOTH WILL OUT

"Dizzy Duo" Yarn

By Joe Archibald

Snooty Piper reconstructs an hysterical murder brew with a hound's tooth and some snuff.

—and—

Eight Other Complete Detective Aces

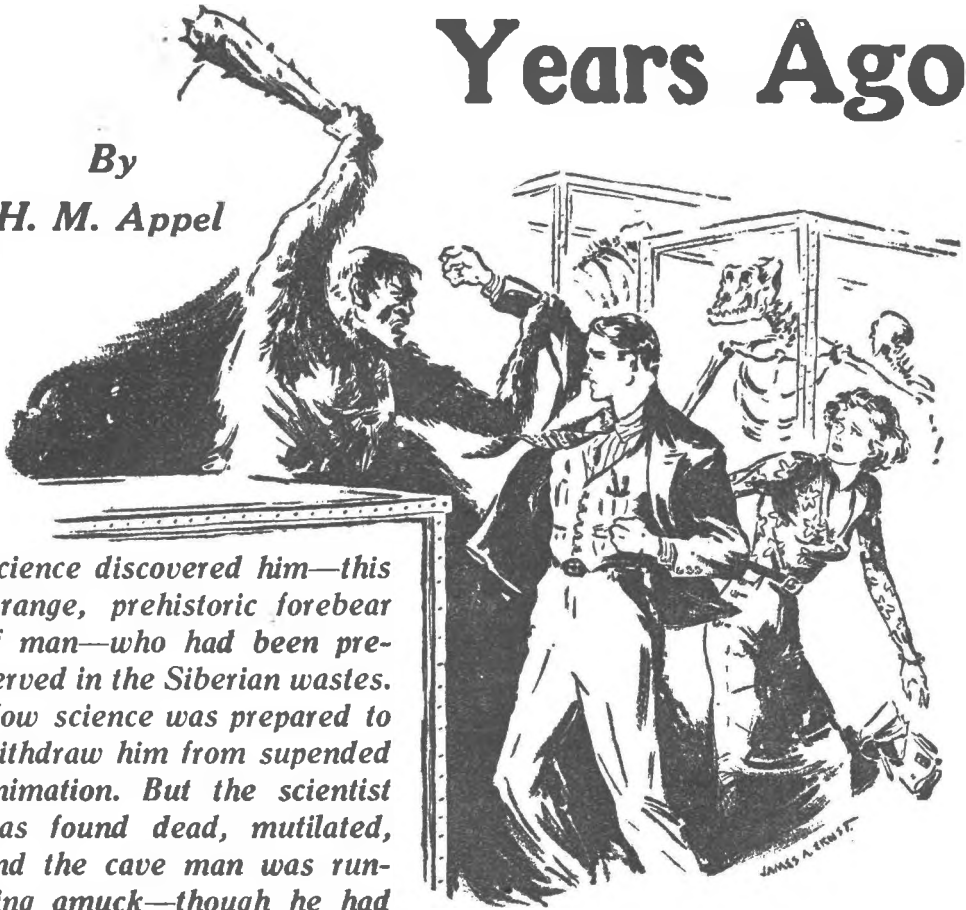


On All Newsstands

He Died 100,000 Years Ago

By
H. M. Appel

Science discovered him—this strange, prehistoric forebear of man—who had been preserved in the Siberian wastes. Now science was prepared to withdraw him from suspended animation. But the scientist was found dead, mutilated, and the cave man was running amuck—though he had died 100,000 years ago.



HOBBLING like a hunched, misshapen gargoyle in the gloom, electric torch swinging from side to side, their guide led them down a cavernous corridor. Hazel Holly's slim fingers tightened in a nervous grip on Carl Chapin's arm. Her piquant face, usually so vivacious beneath the mop of curly red hair, was tense with vague uneasiness.

Moistening her lips, she said faintly: "Ghostly old place at night, isn't it? Gives me the creeps—" Gasping, she pointed: "Look! It's horrible!"

"Where?" Chapin caught her close, fist balled protectively. "Oh, that."

He chuckled. "It's only a Cave Man Group." The swaying light had eerily illuminated a frightful visage peering from the nearest glass-walled case.

Sam Krause, crippled janitor of the City Museum, paused to laugh. His cackle of mirth raised hollow echoes in the vaulted marble room. "Handsome, ain't he? All hair and no forehead, with a jaw on him like a hog's. But a lady killer in his day, I betcha, a million years ago."

"What a lover!" Hazel shuddered, then managed a smile. "Some day I'm going to do a Sunday magazine article on the Wooing of Prehistoric Women."

I never believed that old stuff about cave men batting their sweeties over the heads with clubs."

"Once a sob sister," Chapin jeered, "always ready to find some good in every bad little boy. But it's a swell idea. When Doctor Ober called me, to-night, he was all hopped up over some specimen his expedition brought back from Siberia. He may have the makings of a Stone Age love story in which your *Chronicle* fans would revel."

Following the janitor, they descended dimly lighted basement stairs. Halting before a workroom door, Krause gestured. "Ober's in there, him and Monkton, waiting for you to come before they open the prize package." He clucked disparagingly. "Don't know what he found to get him so excited, unless it's a lot of old bones."

They entered. Doctor Richard Ober, a stocky man of middle age, iron gray hair and bearded, rushed forward exclaiming:

"My friend! For you the scoop of a lifetime! My debt to you and the *Daily Chronicle* shall be well repaid."

"It was nothing much," Carl Chapin demurred, wryly remembering a certain divorce action in which his beat on embarrassing developments was summarily hushed. "But I'm obliged to you. This is Miss Hazel Holly, one of our feature writers. Tell us what wonderful thing you have found. Something rare, no doubt?"

"Rare!" Explosively, bitterly, the word burst from the lips of Doctor Leo Monkton, a lean, bald skeleton of a man who shared the curatorship of the museum with Ober. "The most tremendous find in the history of science! I would give half my life to have been the excavator. And had I not fallen sick—" Envy edged his words. "It would have been my year to go abroad."

Doctor Ober clapped him on the back, exclaiming jovially: "Wait till you see! More fame in it for you than me, old comrade. For I have brought

proof of the marvelous accuracy displayed in your reconstructions from bones previously found." He smiled at Hazel and Chapin. "Even to him I would not show this epoch-making discovery until you were here to view it."

He turned to Krause, the janitor. "You prepared the truck? Fetch it into the next room. We shall open the refrigerator."

THEY filed into an adjoining chamber. Chapin eyed a curious arrangement of electric wires, transformers, and switches clustered about an insulated frame suspended from the ceiling. Doctor Monkton, also regarding it, muttered:

"Is it this upon which he has been working in secret? What new madness—"

Ober interrupted him with up-raised hand, fairly beaming in his excitement. "Wait! I haven't told you half—" To Krause, who came pushing a four-wheeled carrier he ordered: "Back it against the refrigerator door. We'll slide the case out upon it."

A solid wooden crate like an undertaker's rough box, bulky and ponderous, and dripping with moisture, was dragged into position upon the truck with a block and tackle. After shoving the affair into the center of the room beneath a brilliant light, Doctor Ober attacked it with an iron bar and ripped away pine sheathing to disclose a glistening mass.

"There!" he panted. "I found him preserved by nature in the frozen wastes of Atlantic Siberia. "In a great cake of ice I kept him frozen solid, immediately following excavation. I have brought him back in a perfect state of preservation.

"The Dawn Man! Ach!" He lapsed into the German of his boyhood. "It is beyond belief, yet it is true, for there we see him in the actual flesh just as he was at the beginning of Time."

A low cry of pure wonder burst from Hazel Holly's parted lips. "He

looks alive," she faltered. "As though asleep—"

Carl Chapin, fascinated, stared in silence. Through the clear ice one could almost count coarse and bristling hairs which covered the body of a beastlike thing resembling an ape, but little less than a man. It bore a striking resemblance to the lifelike reconstruction of a similar creature in the case upstairs. Doctor Monkton, leaning with palms pressed against the ice cake to study the corpse more closely, nodded.

"Just as I dreamed it. I knew the Dawn Man would look like that." Turning to Ober he demanded: "Tell me again—about how you discovered him. Why you preserved him so?"

"It was in that vast stretch of Siberian tundra," Doctor Ober said, "where have been found so many carcasses of the hairy mammoth. Ah, that gave me my great idea! Do you not remember"—he seized Carl Chapin's arm—"in your paper and many others it was published but a year back. A news story that told how the natives living in that region of eternal cold hacked great hunks of meat from one of the frozen bodies and found it fresh enough to eat when thawed. Caught in some devastating fall of temperature ages ago, the mammoth's flesh had remained in its original state for thousands of years. So has this hairy fellow's."

"Still," muttered Monkton, "why risk keeping your Dawn Man refrigerated? Why didn't you embalm him? I do not understand—"

"But you shall! *Ach!*" Ober's face reddened with a curious intensity of feeling. "If my plan succeeds it will make me almost like *Gott!* If I do it—" He broke off, ejaculating: "Where is that janitor? Krause! Go out and close the door. There are things I do not want you this night to hear."

HAZEL HOLLY edged close to Chapin and clung to his arm, raw fear glinting in her eyes. Doc-

tor Monkton was regarding Ober narrowly, his expression one of mingled doubt and suspicion. Casting a quick glance aloft at the electrical paraphernalia, he grumbled inarticulately. Chapin blurted:

"What do you mean—about a plan?"

Doctor Ober leaned forward, whispering: "This part you may not publish yet. But—suppose that man could be made to *live again*? Think of what it would mean if he possessed human intelligence and could be taught a simple language! If he could talk to us about life in the very dawn of evolution! Oh, I tell you it almost frightens me—"

"Madness!" Monkton shouted, violently. "The man is insane!"

"No, no, my friend." Ober's voice boomed heartily. "Such things have been done. There is a suspension of animation in freezing without destruction of tissue. The only difficulty lies in careful thawing. Animals have been frozen and restored to life. What matters the length of time?" He smiled at Carl Chapin. "Please do not make too much of the scoop I am giving you. An exclusive story of the Dawn Man you can tell in the morning, but not of my plan. That experiment shall be conducted tomorrow night before a group of scientists and representatives of other publishing houses. Now, let us put the ice cake back into the refrigerator."

Stunned by the enormous news possibilities of the proposal, Hazel Holly scarcely had caught her breath after they hailed a cab and started back to the *Chronicle* office. When she spoke, true to her reporter's instinct, she said:

"I wonder what the Dawn Man would think of a modern girl? That's my story. How he would like her, treat her, make love to her—"

"Crazy kid," Carl Chapin growled. "I hope you never find out." He was moved by a premonition of impending horror. "Suppose Ober succeeds

and that creature gets loose to prey upon the community? Of course, it's impossible. But only evil may come of trying to change the Almighty's plan."

A J A N G L I N G telephone bell roused Hazel Holly from six o'clock slumber. "That you, Carl?" she queried, drowsily, recognizing his voice, but misunderstanding his excited outburst. "Of course the story has stirred up talk, but why waken me— What's that?"

She sat erect, wide-eyed, listening to his broken sentences: "Murder at the museum! Something weird! A man just called the police, and the office 'phoned me."

"Maybe," Hazel hazarded, "some employee found the body of the Dawn Man. Perhaps the ice melted—"

"It's more than that! Jump into your clothes, and I'll pick you up in ten minutes."

They parked behind a squad car at the foot of the museum steps and joined a group of disgruntled newspaper men near the door. Two blue-coated figures denied entrance to one and all, explaining:

"The lieutenant's in there. Orders are to keep everybody out. 'You'll have to wait for him."

When that officer appeared a few moments later, accompanied by the crippled janitor, he shook his head.

"Nobody gets in yet. Nobody, do you hear? Until after the medical examiner has a chance to do his stuff. It's ghastly!"

Vociferously, the legmen clamored: "Who was murdered? How was he scragged? Where is the killer?"

Carl Chapin had caught the janitor's eye. Krause gestured meaningly. Chapin seized Hazel's arm and piloted her away from the noisy crowd. Making sure they were not followed, he led her round a corner and up an alley to the rear basement door. Soon it opened a crack, and Krause peered out.

"Seeing you were here last night," he whispered, "and Doctor Ober

wanted you to have the first story, I'm going to take a chance and let you in. He'd want it that way."

Heedless of their breathless questions, he led them through the furnace room into the workshop beyond. Hazel screamed. Chapin swore. Sickened, they stared at the awful thing upon the floor.

"It's Ober!" Chapin said, hoarsely. "Hacked and torn to pieces!"

Hazel whimpered: "Some—some of him is gone!"

The bare and bloody body was lacking an arm and strips of flesh were missing. The sodden floor was dotted with pools of water. Ober's electrical apparatus had been wrecked and was strewn all about.

"The police," muttered Krause, "claim it's the work of that moron who killed so many folks with an axe a couple of months ago and never was caught. They think he saw Ober working here alone and sneaked in to kill him. But, I know better. It wasn't no human!"

THERE came a rush of footsteps on the basement stairs. Doctor Leo Monkton burst into the room, followed by the lieutenant and two detectives. At sight of the corpse he loosed a sharp cry of consternation.

"Oh, my heavens! Ober! Who did this?"

One of the officers pointed to Chapin and Hazel, exclaiming angrily: "What are they doing in here?"

"The back door was unlocked and we just walked in," Chapin said soothingly. "No use making a fuss about it. Doctor Ober was a friend of mine."

Monkton strode up and down the floor, running tense fingers through his hair, mourning bitterly.

"I should have stayed with him last night! Oh, why didn't I stay? Why did he insist upon working? When my chauffeur came for me, I hauled Krause home—" The janitor nodded. "I tried to induce Ober to ride along, but he would not go. He wanted to

finish writing a paper before attempting the experiment planned for tonight—”

Abruptly, Monkton broke off, gazing aloft at the wrecked electrical arrangements. His burning glances swept toward the refrigerator, then to the mutilated body. He groaned:

“Not that! Oh, heavens—not that! It’s impossible!”

The police blurted questions. Carl Chapin sensed the gruesome thought in his mind, grasping the full portent of the murder. Doctor Monkton rushed to the refrigerator door, which hung slightly ajar, flung it open. The wheeled carrier stood empty, the ice had melted, a burning light disclosed nothing more. He cried:

“The Dawn Man is gone!”

Stunned by the possibilities, Chapin muttered: “Ober succeeded.”

“Yes,” Monkton groaned. “And it killed him. After he brought it back—”

Hysterically, Hazel Holly pointed: “Don’t you understand? Horrible! Its first thought on waking— Oh, it was hungry!” She hid her face against Chapin’s shoulder, revolting at the meaning of the missing shreds of flesh.

Leading her out of the grisly chamber Chapin hurried to his car and raced toward the office, hoping to be first on the street with an extra, envisioning headlines as he drove.

MUSEUM MONSTER AT LARGE BRUTE OF SIBERIAN BOGS REVIVED PRIMITIVE MURDERER MENACES CITY

Even now, over his short-wave set, he heard police headquarters sounding a general alarm. With a sidewise glance at Hazel, he muttered:

“You wondered how the Dawn Man would treat a girl. Maybe we’ll soon find out. I shudder at thought of the instincts which will drive him.”

“You mean—” she nodded. “The primal urges.”

“Hunger,” Chapin rasped. “He satisfied that.” And next . . .

THROUGHOUT a lurid day the city had shuddered over newspaper forecasts of the monster’s probable depredations. There were prophecies of terror, assault and murder to come when the Dawn Man prowled under cover of darkness. Police had combed every hole and corner of the town without discovering a clue to his hiding place. At nightfall Carl Chapin and Hazel Holly sat in the office of the *Chronicle* nervously awaiting some development. Chapin said:

“I suspected Krause, at first. Just because he looks queer. Even thought it might have been Monkton, moved by jealousy. But they both proved that they slept at home. Impossible as it seems, Ober must have brought the Dawn Man back to life. Now, I’ve a hunch something ghastly is about to break. When it does, you stay here and handle whatever I give you by phone.”

“Over your by-line? Like ducks!” She had recovered her impish grin. “Whither thou goest—”

“Hey, Chapin!” some one shouted from the adjoining room where a crap game was in progress. “Call for you on this wire. A guy with a spooky whisper. Maybe it’s the Dawn Man—”

It was Sam Krause. Stuttering with excitement, his voice shrilled in the receiver: “You oughta see what I found in the ashes. Only you gotta slip me fifty dollars. It’s worth it—ringing you up ahead of the police. For heaven’s sake, hurry.”

“Okay.” Heart pounding, Chapin hung up carelessly, lit a cigarette, strolled toward the door. To Hazel he said as he passed: “I’ll ease over to police headquarters and hang around for a while. You stick here.”

But she was almost treading on his heels when he reached the sidewalk, her perky hat over one ear and trench coat trailing.

“You’re not fooling me,” Hazel snapped. “I can tell by the look in your eye! Where was he seen? What happened?”

"It was Krause," he said, impatiently. "Something's up. I don't know what. But, for fifty bucks it'd better be good. If you had to come, why didn't you do it quietly. Those mugs upstairs will follow us."

"Nobody saw me leave. Here's a taxi. To the museum? Gosh! I wonder what the janitor found? Maybe the Dawn Man's hideaway—" She bubbled with speculations.

"The alley entrance," Chapin said to the driver. He helped Hazel out at the nearest corner. "Black as a tunnel back there. I wish I had a gun. Why the devil did you have to tag along?"

The furnace-room door was locked. No one answered in response to Chapin's continued hammering. "Queer," he grumbled. "Maybe the damned thing got him. And Krause hadn't called the police—"

A window opening on a coal chute creaked in the breeze. "Hold this up for me," Chapin snapped. "I'm going to have a look inside. Run for help if you hear me yell."

He slid down the metal incline, landed upon a rattling heap of fuel. Beyond the dusty bin, the cellar was dark, although a faint illumination from an open draft in the boiler broke the gloom. Softly, he called Krause's name, heard no reply. The place seemed deserted. Opening the outer door, he found Hazel trembling with expectancy.

"Listen," he whispered. "Just to please a guy who loves you, go back to the office. I'll poke around here a little, phone you if I find anything, then call the cops."

She pushed past him. "Go back—and leave you here to get your brains beaten out with a club? Nothing doing." She clung to his arm. "Dare we turn on a light?"

He fumbled for a switch and found it. The resulting flare brought a choking gasp to Hazel's lips.

"Another one! It did the same thing again—" She stared, mouth distended

with horror. "The creature *eats them!*"

"Poor Krause. Never had a chance," Chapin said hoarsely. "Skull crushed like an eggshell." He darted anxious glances toward dark corners beyond. "The cripple was trying to escape. See the keys in his hand."

HE approached the mutilated corpse upon the floor, stomach churning with revulsion. Retrieving the keys he gave them to Hazel, entreating:

"Take these, lock the door from outside, and hurry to the nearest telephone. There's a drug store at the corner. Call Jack Scott and tell him to get here in nothing flat. Then, you stay away from this morgue—"

"But"—she eyed him suspiciously—"don't you want me to call the police?"

"Not just yet. They'll give me hell, but we can't miss a chance like this. Got to get pix! Tell Scott to grab his camera and step on it."

"You're not going to stay." She seized his arm, pulling him toward the door. "That creature is hiding here—"

"Of course." Chapin picked up a heavy shovel. "That's our story. I won't let him get away."

"Are you crazy?" Hazel's whisper was sharp with alarm. "He'll kill you, too!"

"Not a chance. I'm going to hide over there in that dark corner and bop him on the head when he appears. The Dawn Man will come back when he thinks we've gone. I'll capture him, and we'll put over a real scoop on other sheets and the police! On second thought, you needn't lock the door. He wouldn't know enough to open one, and I might want out."

Hazel was whimpering with fright. Switching off the light, he led her to the alley entrance, urging: "Get hold of yourself. I'll be all right. Remember! Call Scott and build a fire under him. Then, go back and wait."

"You big lug!" she gasped, brokenly. "If I didn't love you so much, I'd hope he catches you. You're a reporter. Your job is to write the story, not to be the hero of it! Wait outside here in the alley, at least until Jack arrives. Then, there'll be two of you against him—"

She took his angry grunt for assent and hastened away. Carl Chapin hefted the shovel, cautiously re-entered the dark furnace room and closed the door. Ears straining, he listened for any sound that might disclose the Dawn Man's presence. Keeping well within the thicker shadows, avoiding the gory mess on the floor, he crossed over to a corner, where he could not be set upon from the rear and waited for the monster to appear. . . .

Hazel Holly ran down the alleyway, keys jangling, sick with worry over Chapin's folly. "He'll go back in there," she panted. "I know he will, darn him! And get killed. Maybe eaten—" Fear lent speed to her racing steps.

"Swell!" chortled Jack Scott, when she spoke to him on the drug-store phone. "I've photographed kings and queens and crooks galore, but never nothing like your bog brute, honey. I'm on my way!"

Hazel stood undecided, rebelling at Chapin's instructions. "Go to the office?" she exclaimed. "And leave him alone with that thing? I'm going back—"

To the front entrance, this time, she sped while a plan was forming in her mind. Creeping up the wide stone steps, she tried key after key until one fitted the big door. Opening it noiselessly, leaving it hanging wide, she peered about the shadowy interior, wondering if the monster would grasp the opportunity to escape should he be lurking near.

Sober second thought indicated that the creature would stay below stairs. Kicking off her pumps she started along the corridor in stocking feet, hugging close to one wall, heart hammering in her throat. At worst, she

could shout a warning to Chapin if the Dawn Man appeared, or render a little aid if the brute attacked him.

Hazel's tempestuous breathing sounded loud in her own ears. The rustle of skirts seemed enough to betray her presence to an alert, wild thing. Suppose it could see in the dark? Many beasts possessed that faculty, why not a 'primitive man? Flesh crawling with dread she tried to make herself small, crouching low and moving with great caution.

A HEAD, there! What was it? That dark shape against the square of a window! It moved! Hazel's nails dug into her palms. Wanting to scream, she dared not. Numb with fright, she watched the shadow disappear in the direction of the basement stairs and followed. It passed another window through which a distant street light shone.

Hazel tensed with horror, and a prickly feeling crossed her scalp at sight of a hairy animal form waddling with arms extended, one fist clenching a stone-headed club.

Familiar weapon! Found it upstairs, no doubt, in the cave-man exhibit. Sure to kill Carl— Thoughts snapped through her mind fearfully. Perhaps it had hidden throughout the day in the Cave Man Group, overlooked among similar figures!

Torn between a desire to run for help and the wish to warn Chapin, yet fearing to scream, Hazel moved on tiptoe in wake of the monster. She paused at the head of the stairway to listen.

Below loomed a black void. Had the Dawn Man made his way through the bottom doorway? It must be open. She could hear no sound. Step by step, shaking with terror, she stole downward. Groping hands told her the door hung ajar. She edged forward into the corridor and halted again, trying to control the chattering of her teeth.

On beyond, dimly, a faint red glow identified the furnace. A somber shape cut off the light. She recognized the

silhouette previously seen before the window. Where was Carl Chapin? Had he waited outside in the alley? Doubting it, she forced her leaden feet ahead, came to the last doorway, heard a hideous slaving and mumbling as the creature bent over the bloody corpse.

While she stifled the scream that gushed up to her lips, it moved toward the furnace, fumbled at the iron door, jerked it open. A low growl of rage emanated from the creature's throat when, as Hazel surmised, its fingers were scorched.

In the flare of ruddy light, she could see every detail of the tall but grotesquely hunched figure, bent half to the ground, arms swinging like an ape's. A coarse mane of hair reached up from its bowed neck. Hair as long as a bear's covered the body. The stone war club swung like a pendulum from its hairy fist. Waddling back to the gruesome remains of Krause again, it began picking and pawing at the mangled flesh, mouthing guttural sounds that made Hazel cringe.

Out of the shadows a second shape came stealing. Carl Chapin! He brandished the shovel. Hazel's lips opened wide to shriek a warning, but she dared utter no sound. Frantically she prayed that he might deal an effective blow. But, leaping sidewise like an agile beast, the Dawn Man dodged a flailing sweep of Chapin's weapon. Roaring, it crashed the stone club against the reporter.

Chapin's knees buckled, he fell to the floor. Paralyzed by the shock, Hazel stood rooted to the spot, no cry rising from her fear-constricted throat. The Dawn Man grasped Chapin by the collar and dragged him to the alley door. One heave sent the limp body rolling into outer darkness.

Then Hazel Holly's pent up emotions crystallized in a quavering shriek which she could not repress. The Dawn Man whirled toward her, head outthrust, teeth glinting in the firelight. Mad with terror, loosing scream after frenzied scream in her

flight, Hazel ran toward the stairs with the vicious thing in swift pursuit.

Thudding footsteps drew close as she climbed, slipping and stumbling in the darkness. Down the open stretch of the main floor she had no chance. The monstrous creature seemed but an arm's length behind; she could hear gaping breath. She dodged between great glass cases, blundered against an open door, darted inside as her pursuer lunged past. Casting an anguished glance about, Hazel shuddered. A hairy shape towered above her. In the group of Cave People she had found refuge. Where the Dawn Man had hidden! And he was sure to return—

A vague mass loomed at the doorway. A gaunt arm reached for her, strong fingers groping, clutching. With a strangled scream rasping across her dry lips, Hazel Holly fainted.

CARL CHAPIN, crumpled upon alley paving blocks, quickly regained consciousness. He marveled that he had not been crushed by the Dawn Man's blow. Struggling to a sitting position he heard a girl's far-away cry. Hazel! He was sure of it. But how on earth came she to be within the building?

Staggering erect, he fell against the door, found it locked. More screams, deadened by distance. He guessed the course of her flight, remembered the keys, knew in his heart that she would never reach the street.

Raising the coal chute window again, he wriggled through the narrow opening, slid down into the furnace room. Strength returning, he raced for the stairs, pausing only at the top to listen for sounds within the mammoth chamber.

Silence blanketed the marble halls. On noiseless feet he strode toward the front. Halfway to the door he saw a shadowy form emerge from one of the glass cases. Recklessly, he yelled at it and leaped forward to grapple with

the hairy monster. Drawing back a hairy arm, the Dawn Man hurled his stone club. The shaft grazed Chapin across the shins, with just enough force to send him sprawling, the weapon underneath. But he had no chance to rise. The plunging creature flung itself upon him.

Coarse, bristling hair clamped across his mouth and nostrils when the Dawn Man hooked a forearm about his throat and sought to choke him. Chapin drove blow after blow into the creature's middle, heard grunts of pain, felt the throttling grip relax.

Heaving himself to his feet, he procured the club and swung it, but his adversary ducked. Again they were locked in a lethal embrace, slipping and scuffling upon the polished floor. Chapin's foot smashed a glass case, and the next lunge of their straining bodies sent it toppling with a splintering crash that echoed like thunder in the room.

Chapin, catching the killer's arm in a hammerlock, cried exultantly: "You're not so damned tough! I'll take you yet."

The Dawn Man writhed out of the punishing grip. Chapin slashed at him with the stone bludgeon, felt a crunching of bone. The hairy form slumped and lay inert.

Chapin shouted Hazel's name, heard no answer. Running his hand along the nearest pillar he uttered a cry of thanks. There was an electric switch. Lights blazed. He saw the open door of the Cave Group and ran to peer inside.

Doctor Leo Monkton's reconstructed Dawn Man glared at him as viciously as its living counterpart. The bent figure of a Stone Age female knelt beside the mounted carcass of a slain deer. Beneath a rude hut of boughs slumbered the replica of an infant swathed in skins, and upon a pallet of furs lay a sleeping Dawn Woman, naked save for a natural growth of shaggy hair.

Helplessly, Chapin groaned: "Hazel! Where are you?"

A muffled moan made him jump with alarm. His eyes bulged, staring at the recumbent female figure. It moved! He stepped forward, hesitantly, doubting. Then hope lighted his countenance and he exclaimed:

"Hazel! Now I understand."

"Carl! Thank heavens, he didn't kill you."

The hairy form on the pallet sat up. Hazel Holly's pale face greeted him. Chapin sprang to her side, tearing away the rough skin covering which had been hastily wrapped around her. But he wheeled defensively when a harsh voice at the door commanded:

"Come out of that—with your hands up! Are you murdering another one?"

"Cassidy!" Relief quickened Chapin's cry at sight of a patrolman he knew. "I suppose the lights brought you, and the noise—"

"What is this craziness?" the officer rasped. "What would you be doing there, tearing the wax figures to bits, with a bloody one that looks alive lying here on the floor? Don't be telling me it's that Dawn Man fellow?"

"He's that and more," Chapin grunted, helping Hazel to her feet. "Look at this poor girl, throat blue with his finger marks. He thought he had killed her. Hid her body here temporarily, until safe from pursuit. Meant to burn it in the furnace, later. Now I know what poor Krause found in the ashes. Bones!"

HE bent over the fallen killer, pocked knife in hand, and began ripping at its hide. Patrolman Cassidy yelled a protest:

"Stop it! Are you mad? Don't cut the creature to pieces."

Chapin seized a strip of the hairy covering and tore it away. "There's your Dawn Man!" he grated. "And he's not quite dead." The thing squirmed and groaned.

"Doctor Monkton!" Surprise keened Hazel Holly's shocked outcry. "He committed those atrocities!"

"Yes, Monkton! And he meant to kill you." Chapin spurned the writhing shape with his foot. "I can almost see what happened. Insanely jealous of Doctor Ober's great discovery he sneaked back here, murdered him last night, tried to re-animate the Dawn Man and failed. Then, cleverly, he sought to surround the crime with great mystery by blaming it on Ober's hairy find. He burned the Dawn Man's body in the furnace and Krause found evidence in the ashes. Monkton heard him phoning me and killed him, then lay in wait to serve us a similar fate."

"No!" gasped the dying doctor. "I wanted you to see me. As proof that the Dawn Man was at large. That's why I didn't hit you hard enough to kill, threw you into the alley. If that foolhardy girl hadn't returned—" A last breath rattled in his throat. Hazel Holly wept in sheer relief.

Startling them with its unexpected-

ness, a flashlight flared incandescently. Recovering poise, Hazel stamped her foot and scolded:

"Jack Scott! Where have you been? After you promised to hurry—"

Grinning sheepishly, a bandage gleaming about his head, the photographer snapped shots from other angles, explaining as he worked:

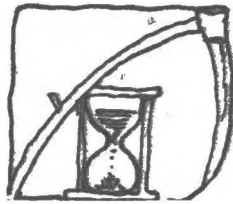
"Caught in a taxi smash. Knocked out for awhile. But"—he gathered his apparatus—"now, we've got the pix. Come on! We'll beat competition to the street if we step on it."

Leaving Cassidy to await the arrival of an ambulance they ran for a cab despite his half-hearted complaint.

"Tell 'em we'll come to headquarters as soon as the story's in," Carl Chapin called. To his companions: "We've an edge of only a few minutes, but there'll be headlines no other paper can copy."

Newsboys raised echoes with their shouts a little later, crying:

**DAWN MAN MYSTERY SOLVED BY
TIMES REPORTERS!**

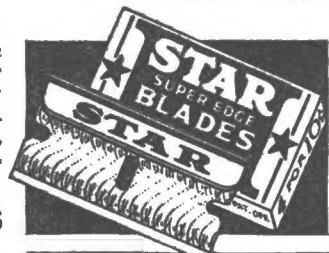


CAUGHT!

You've caught up with shaving comfort when you ask for a package of Star Single-edge Blades! Made since 1880 by the makers of the original safety razor, Star Blades have keener, longer-lasting, uniform edges! 4 for 10¢ everywhere. Star Blade Div., Brooklyn, N. Y.

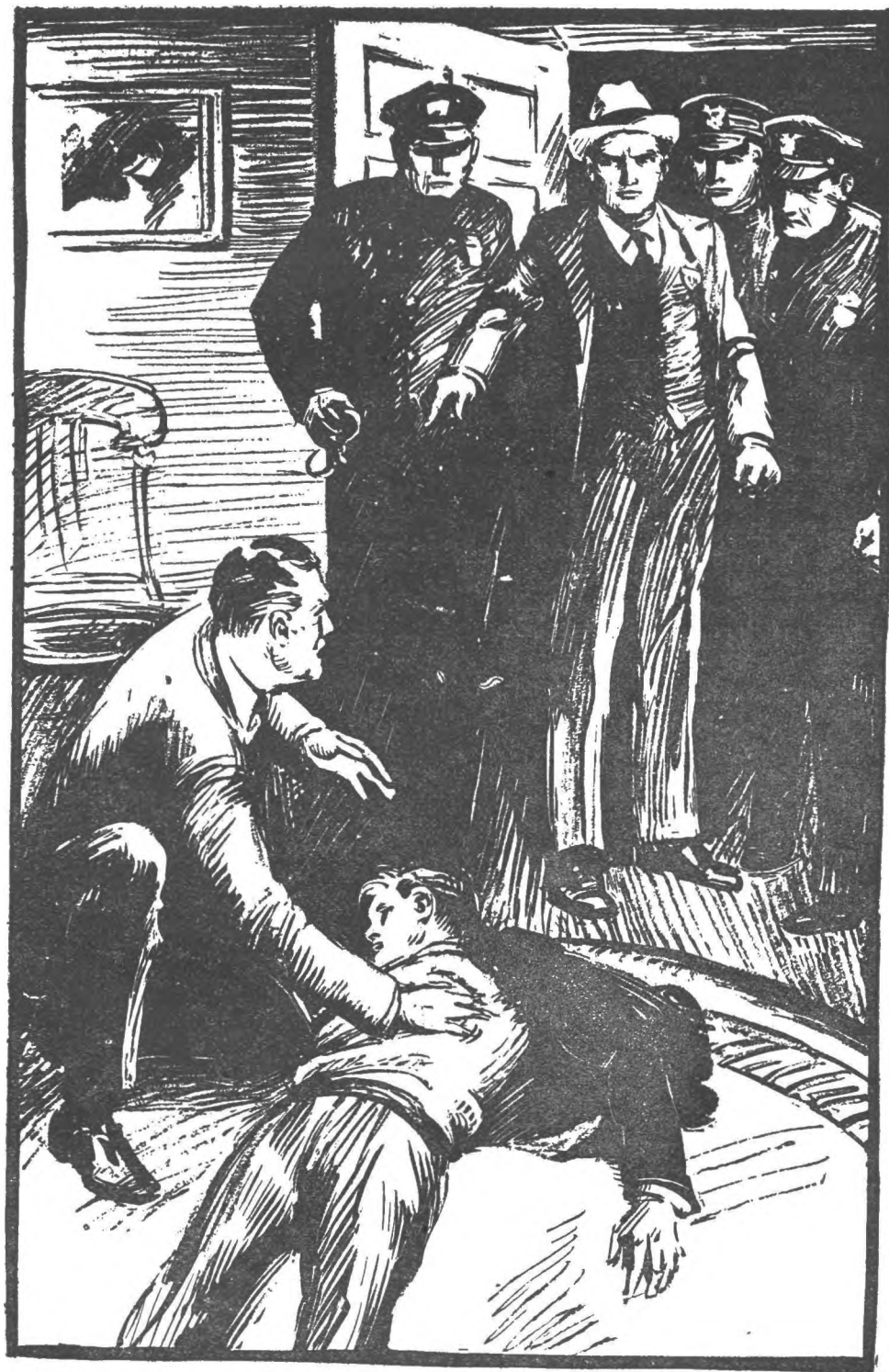
FOR GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

STAR Blades



4 FOR 10¢

Gripping Action Novelette



The body of the underworld scavenger lay on its back in the center of the floor.

Pistol Pardon

By Don Cameron



CHAPTER I

RAT'S RACKET

THE flawless notes of the "Jewel Song" from "Faust", sung by the most beautiful Marguerite of all time, filled Anthony Frost's appreciative ears at the moment, and his slate eyes were somewhat moodily regarding the neat bullet hole in the crown of his costly fedora. So it was that the famed private operative neither heard the buzzer announce Jason Cole's entrance into the outer office nor witnessed the unprecedented spectacle of Julia Rudow, that ultra-efficient guardian of his privacy, struck all at once speechless, breathless and helpless.

Julia's pretty blonde head came up from the magazine the instant the door opened, her sapphire eyes alert to welcome or wither the visitor, as the occasion might seem to require. She spied first a dapper little man of middle age with dark, scared features, walking rigidly, like a man on his way to the scaffold. She didn't like his looks and was about to let him know it when she caught sight of Jason Cole right behind him, and wilted. The shaggy gray head of the multi-millionaire boss of Cole Motors Corporation towered above the other man like a granite pillar of righteousness, and the blue eyes blazed with almost godly wrath.

Cole's gnarled right fist jerked and the little man leaped, a foot ahead of it, and Julia discovered the reason for his unnatural rigidity. The fellow was practically dangling from the muzzle of a huge and ancient revolver that pressed against his spine between the shoulder blades.

Without a word or glance for Julia, Cole thrust his hapless captive toward the door to Frost's private office and crooked his long left arm to turn the knob. The industrialist used his square-toed boot to catapult the dapper one through the doorway, and before the panel slammed, cutting off all sound, the girl's dumb-founded ears overheard the crisp command:

"Send out for some rat poison, Tony!"

Frost frowned, clicking off the radio, for it wasn't often he got the chance to tune in when Beatrice Storme's exquisite soprano was in the ether. He was not especially startled. He had known the unpredictable Cole much longer than Julia—ever since the War, when the intelligence service had put him in charge of anti-sabotage activities in Cole's gigantic factories—and nothing the hard-boiled, soft-hearted giant might do could surprise him.

He observed wearily: "That was your protégée whose singing you just interrupted." The detective was one of the few who knew that Beatrice Storme had been a penniless youngster with nothing but a driving ambition, and an even greater talent to

Dillon the ruthless slayer felt himself to be as safe as the President. For in his power were the governor of the state and the second richest man in America. And Anthony Frost, famous private detective, thought he saw a solution in a pistol pardon for one good murder deserving another.

pit against an unsympathetic world, when Cole became interested in her and financed her studies abroad and her debut. Now, since her first sensational appearance at the Metropolitan, she was one of the brightest stars in the operatic firmament.

"I know." Cole nodded absently, stuffing the tremendous revolver into the waistband of his trousers. "I met this punk in her dressing room just before the matinee started. I promised her I'd drown him, but poisoning will do as well."

Frost glared at the little man. "What have you been up to, Wingel?" he demanded. "Were you threatening Miss Storme with a dirty lawsuit?"

THE man cringed. He dug his hands into the pockets of his coat, pouted his lips and said nothing.

"You know him, eh?" said Cole. "Wingel's his name, is it? He told Beatrice to call him Mister Dollar."

Frost grinned thinly. "Some people might think that was funny. He's Davie Wingel. The bar association kicked him out last year for crooked dealing. He's been scavenging after gangsters all his life and dealing in blackmail on the side. He's—"

"He was trying to blackmail Beatrice," Cole interjected. "He wanted ten thousand dollars. She came to me for advice, and I took my artillery out of the mothballs and waited for him to show up. I marched him right over here at the end of my gun."

"Through the afternoon crowds?"

"Yeah," said Cole. "Some of the people we passed were pretty excited about it, but the cops all recognized me and grinned, as if they thought I was playing a joke."

Frost sighed. "If I was the second richest man in America, I suppose I could get away with murder, too."

"Go ahead and bump him off, Tony. I'll back you up."

"I'll do worse than that," said the detective. "Pete Macklin of the homicide squad is due here any minute. Killers are his specialty, but he

wouldn't mind tearing a blackmailer apart for practice. I'll turn Wingel over to him."

"No, Tony. That's strictly out. Beatrice is really in a jam, and the cops would only mess things up for three innocent people. It's up to you and me to see her through without letting anything out. I've got ex-jailbirds working on my assembly lines who would kill Davie for a week's vacation with pay, but I thought you might know a cleaner way."

"Is the jam a tough one, Cole?"

"It couldn't be tougher. It could be murder, Tony. Much as I hate to say it, it looks like this little squirt has got something that can stir up plenty of hell unless he's shut up—or unless a certain dirty mess is cleaned up."

Frost tilted back in his chair and turned the fedora, which he held in his hands, so that Cole could see the bullet hole. He said slowly: "I got that two hours ago from Jake Dillon. I had a tip he was holed up over a Chinese laundry on the West Side, and dropped around. Somebody spotted me, and he beat it with two of his torpedoes—Freddie Cross and Twist Corum. If my taxi driver hadn't got yellow when the shooting started, I could have grabbed them."

"Dillon and Chuck Fontaine engineered that stickup at the Third National. Fontaine, as you probably know, is going to the chair at midnight for killing those two bank guards, unless Governor Cottrell gives him a stay—and the governor says he won't. And Chuck has promised to involve Dillon, who missed going to trial because there wasn't enough evidence against him, unless Dillon manages to spring him. Dillon's hiding out meanwhile, because he knows that if Fontaine talks, he'll be picked up and sent to the hot seat, too."

"The Third National has hired me to grab Dillon and have him ready when and if the law wants him. There isn't much time, so I've asked Macklin to help me. I'd hate to drop that case

right at this time to get tangled up in Beatrice's blackmail troubles, Cole."

"But that's just a business matter," the industrialist protested. "Beatrice is like a daughter to me, and you know damned well you'd see every bank in the country looted before you'd let anything happen to her voice. Why, you're a regular sissy about music!"

"The Dillon thing is personal with me," Frost said, and his eyes were flinty and his jaw tight. "Joe Driscoll, who was one of the murdered guards, was with me in the Navy and later in the intelligence service. He used to help me out in a lot of cases after I went into business for myself. I got him the job that cost him his life. We were—friends."

"I'm sorry," Cole said. Then his face brightened. "But, hell—that hadn't ought to make any difference. What's the matter with just tying Wingel up and leaving him in my cellar till the deadline is passed and Fontaine gets the works? Or having one of our doctor friends keep him under an anesthetic in some hospital for a couple of days?"

"We could charge him with assault, or burglary, or almost anything on the books, and have him kept at police headquarters," Frost considered, while the disbarred lawyer shivered unhappily under his chill regard. "Macklin would slap him into a cell, and we wouldn't have to tell what it was all about. Later we could withdraw the charge, if we decided to poison or drown him."

Wingel found his voice at last. It was shrill and quavery. "For heaven's sake, let me go! I'll lay off her. All I wanted to do was help her. Forget about it, and I'll do anything you say!"

Frost's lips curled in disgust. He decided: "I'll find a way to take care of it. Just looking at this yellow shyster makes me sick. What's the dope, Cole?"

"It's about Beatrice's rotten husband, Boris Kampff. Remember how the papers said he died?"

THE detective remembered very well. Kampff was a run-down nobleman of uncertain authenticity, whom Beatrice met when she was studying in Berlin. She was an unsophisticated youngster, and his continental ardor swept her off her feet and they were married.

After the wedding he showed his true colors. He wasted all the money she earned and all Cole gave her. He drank and gambled, and his affairs with other women, when he returned to America with his disillusioned bride, were an open scandal. He was utterly worthless, and everybody who met him found it out and felt sincerely sorry for Beatrice.

She finally separated herself from him, with the approval of all her friends, and filed suit for a divorce. Then, just two weeks ago, death made a divorce unnecessary. They had met at a ball at the yacht club, where Boris Kampff had got drunk and made a scene. Boris disappeared before the evening was over, and next day his body was found in the water beside the yacht-club pier. He had been drowned.

Either he had staggered off the pier while drunk, the police said, or he had committed suicide. There was never any suggestion of foul play.

"I remember," said Frost. "It was the most cheerful piece of news that day."

"Well," Cole told him, his voice beginning to husk with anger, "this insignificant wart on the thumb of humanity wants to drag it all into the open again, unless Beatrice gives him ten thousand dollars—and if he gets that much, he'll be wanting more. He saw Boris fall off the pier. To put it plainer, he saw Boris knocked off."

The detective murmured: "That's bad."

"It's worse than that. Why in the devil should Wingel, of all people, have to be idling along the pier when Boris slapped Beatrice's face? And why—when any decent person who had seen it would have made a point

of forgetting it right away—did *he* have to be handy when Boris got what was coming to him?"

"You're not going to tell me Beatrice pushed him overboard!"

"Not Beatrice. The man who wants to marry her. One of the squarest young fellows in town. He followed her to the pier, saw Boris struggling with Beatrice, and clipped him on the chin. He—"

"Give him a name," Frost said impatiently. "Let's have facts."

"If you'd read the gossip columns," Cole rumbled, "you'd know the key-hole boys have been busy for the last month trying to find new ways of saying Beatrice Storme is being seen every day in the company of young Alex Cottrell, son of Bob Cottrell, the governor."

FROST directed: "Make yourselves comfortable. I'll be right back." He detached his compact, wiry frame from the swivel chair and strode lithely from the office. He leaned over Julia's desk and fixed her with a questioning glance.

"I'm sorry, chief," Julia said. "I knew you were listening to your favorite songbird, and I'm not afraid of Jason Cole or even of that howitzer he carries. But the way he came in, it just took my breath away. It was so—so—"

Frost grinned. "Cole's all right, any time," he told her. "I want you to get Steve Carmody on the phone. Tell him to be downstairs in five minutes and tail Davie Wingel when he leaves. Carmody knows him. I want a report every hour."

He patted her hand as she reached for the phone. He knew she was sore at herself. It was the first time she had ever let anybody pass her desk without first warning Frost by loudspeaker and light signals and getting his okay. But this time it didn't matter. As long as Jake Dillon didn't come in unannounced, everything would be all right.

Back in his own office, Frost asked

Cole: "Is that punch on the level, or did Wingel invent it?"

"It's on the level," Cole said glumly. "Beatrice saw it. She says Cottrell took her arm and they both turned away without even watching to see Boris fall. They didn't hear any splash, but Boris might not have fallen in right then; he might have got up a little later and staggered."

"Or Wingel might have shoved him over, just to make it easy for him to blackmail her."

Wingel's sallow face turned pasty. "Please!" he stammered. "I—I wouldn't ever do a thing like that. I never thought about it till I read in the papers next day that he was dead. Then I only offered to protect Miss Storme."

"What a protector you turned out to be!" Frost jeered. "I ought to go to work and frame you for murder. We could dig up witnesses whose word would be as good as yours."

"I thought of that," Cole said seriously. "The trouble is, before Cottrell took Beatrice home he told a couple of his friends he punched Boris. It wasn't a smart thing to do, but Cottrell was burning up, and he didn't know Boris was going to die. Of course, his friends haven't said anything, but they might speak up if another person was accused of doing it. Some people's consciences are funny things."

"Aren't you glad you haven't got one, Cole?"

THE rich man's face crinkled in a grin. "You should talk, Tony! We're on top of the heap in our respective lines just because we haven't been afraid to be ruthless when we had to. But that doesn't mean we can't afford to be ruthless on another person's account once in a while, when it seems the right thing." His big hands began to twist together in a way he had when he was excited, and he heaved himself out of his chair and began to pace the room. "Why, what better use can I make of my millions than squaring up accounts for Justice

SAX

in cases where the law would only blunder?

"Suppose we turned this cheap crook over to the law, Tony. There'd be a scandal that would stink to heaven, headlines in all the lousy newspapers, dirty talk on everybody's lips. That punk politician in the district attorney's office would scream murder and try to send everybody to the chair, just to grab publicity. Somebody who doesn't deserve it would have to go to jail, if not to the death house.

"And the result? That love affair between those two kids—and I happen to know it's the kind of love affair old fools like me get sentimental about—would be shot all to hell. Beatrice's heart would be broken, and her career would be smashed in the beginning. Cottrell's reputation would be spoiled, and it would mean the political ruin and probably the death of my old friend Bob Cottrell, the governor."

Frost said loudly: "Scram, Wingel!"

"Huh?" The dapper little man looked as though he mistrusted his ears.

"Beat it. Get out before I throw you out the window. And keep away from Miss Storme or I'll see that you rot in prison if it's the last thing I do."

"Sure, sure!" Wingel's dark face betrayed an immense relief. He headed toward the door with alacrity.

"Damn it, Tony!" Cole's accents were deeply troubled. "I promised Beatrice—"

"She'll be all right. I'll guarantee it."

"But think of the dynamite he's taking with him. He's not going to let loose of a proposition like that just because you gave him a scolding. He'll probably go right to the governor."

"Don't worry about him."

"What's the idea, Tony? I know you're not throwing me down, or throwing Beatrice and young Cottrell to the wolves, but I don't see the light."

"Sometimes," said Frost, "the best way to simplify a problem is to com-

plicate it first. It's like mixing two poisons, one to neutralize the other. Take my word for it, I'll see that no harm comes to Beatrice or either of the Cottrells."

The buzzer sounded, and Frost looked through the one-way glass and pressed the button which lighted the green "all clear" bulb on Julia's desk. "And now forget about it," he advised. "Here comes Macklin, and by the look of his fat face he's bringing more trouble."

CHAPTER II

CHOPPER DEATH



LIKE the elephant, Detective Pete Macklin, first class, of the homicide squad, was huge and rotund, with smooth curves that gave him a deceptive appearance of softness. Like the elephant, he moved with a grace and speed that did not seem in keeping with his bulk. His cherubic countenance was solemn, and his shrewd eyes grave as he came into the office.

"Tony," he began abruptly, "who told you Dillon was laying up in that chink place?"

"A friend of mine," Frost said. "A good kid who was outside the law till he learned better. He just got married, and I promised not to give him away."

Macklin nodded, confirming something that had been in his mind. "He married Florence Blaine, the little brunette dancer at the Clipper Club," he stated. "His name was Chet Carr. He doesn't need protection any longer, Tony."

"Good Lord!" Frost exclaimed. "Did they—"

"Dillon," Macklin said briefly. "Couldn't have been anybody else. He took a machine gun to Carr's apartment in West Thirtieth Street—shot 'em both while they were in bed. The slugs ripped Chet all to pieces."

"How about the girl?"

"It only happened an hour ago. She's in Receiving Hospital—I don't

know how badly hurt. I understand Chet shielded her and took nearly all the slugs."

"Carr told me about Dillon," said Frost. "With Chuck Fontaine in the death house, they were trying to get Chet back in the mob. He'd worked with them on some minor jobs, but walked out when he saw Dillon was a killer. He was going straight. I lent him some money and got him a job. He was all right, basically, and his wife was a sweet kid."

"I'm on my way to West Thirtieth," Macklin said. "Ride along with me, you two."

"Think you can stand a little blood, Cole?" Frost asked.

The millionaire tightened his jaw. "The more I see and hear of crooks," he growled, "the more I think I'd like to do a little killing on my own hook. Davie Wingel, for instance—and maybe this guy Dillon, if I should run into him. I'll take a look at Dillon's technique."

"Wingel!" Macklin said. "What has that louse been up to?"

"He's trying to do a lady a favor," Frost remarked, adjusting the damaged fedora over his crisp hair. "He won't tell on her if she pays him some dough."

Macklin frowned. "Who's the lady? I could stand to see that little shrimp do a stretch, myself."

"It's a secret, Pete. But keep your eyes and ears open in the next few hours, and maybe you can guess."

The three of them left Julia in charge of the office and took the elevator to the street. They rode in a taxi to West Thirtieth, and got out at a place where two prowl cars and a detective flyer were parked. A silent crowd, kept in order by three or four uniformed cops, stared at the yellow-brick front of a modest apartment house. One of the second-story windows was smashed.

FROST led the way up the stairs. A detective sergeant at the door of a front apartment recognized Macklin

and let them pass. The cheaply furnished living room of the apartment was neat and orderly. After it, the sight of the bedroom was a shock even to the private operative's tempered nerves.

He recognized the crimson-smeared body upon the crimson bed by the blond hair and the length of the muscular limbs and torso, clad only in pajama trousers. They were the only identifiable features that remained after the vicious blast of .45 caliber slugs that had ripped the flesh.

Where the corpse's face had been was a wet expanse of raw, red horror. At least twelve or fifteen chunks of lead had chopped into the head and face, and as many more had entered the left shoulder, nearly severing the arm. All up and down the white back, which had evidently been turned toward the blazing gun as Chet Carr shielded his bride, were bloody wounds the size of a quarter.

Frost swore under his breath. "Dum-dum bullets," he exclaimed. "They mushroom after they strike. That's what saved Florence's life—not many of them passed through him." His lips tightened as he added: "The rats! Dillon never gave anybody a chance. If Chet played ball with him, he'd wind up in the electric chair sooner or later; if he didn't, he was bound to get rubbed out. I told him he ought to get out of town."

The sergeant from the precinct station came to the bedroom doorway. "The neighbors say there was a blast of about fifty shots," he said. "The whole thing took less than a minute. It's funny—nobody saw the murderer. He got downstairs soon as he'd emptied a drum of cartridges, it looks like. Two or three people saw a big sedan tearing along the street right after."

"Is the girl hurt badly?" Frost asked, marveling that she was not killed outright.

"Don't know." The sergeant shrugged. "They'd taken her away in an ambulance before I got here. They

say she was covered with blood, though."

"The killer left her for dead—no doubt about that. If she lives, he'll probably make another try for her to keep her from testifying."

Frost stepped to the shattered window and looked down at the curious watchers. They were now becoming more eager and were keeping the uniformed cops busy. The black van from the morgue had just edged into the curb, and two men were carrying a long wicker basket into the apartment house. The spectators wanted a glimpse of the corpse when the men came out.

A movement in the window of a third-story apartment across the street caught Frost's eye. He saw sunlight glinting on metal. He yelled suddenly at the people beneath the window: "Run for your lives! Scatter! Get under cover or lie down!"

Chips of the brick facade of the building came through the window and stung his face. An ominous reverberation, like the deep roar of coal tumbling along a metal chute, filled the air. The private detective snatched his pistol from its shoulder harness and snapped two shots toward the opposite window before he dropped below the window ledge.

The precinct sergeant cried: "Another chopper!" The cry ended in a squeal of pain and he went down, wriggling. His left hand clutched at the right side of his chest, and blood oozed between the fingers.

Despite the roar of the machine gun, Frost could hear the thudding sound of bullets driving into the plaster and woodwork of the apartment, whanging from the metal frame of the bed and punching new holes in the riddled corpse.

Outside arose the startled shouts of men, the screams of terrified women, the thin shrieking of children.

As abruptly as it had begun, the furious barrage ended. Fifty more shots—a second drum—had been

loosed, Frost guessed. He sprang to his knees in time to see the curtains shaking across the street. He sent another bullet between them, though he knew it was futile.

The doors, the stairs, the men who would be dashing about in the corridors, would only hinder pursuit of the gunner, Frost knew. He gripped the windowsill, swung his body outside and hung at arms-length for a moment. His feet plunged downward a dozen feet and struck the soft turf of the tiny lawn. He went to his knees, but was up immediately, running across the street.

He passed a boy of nine or ten lying on the sidewalk, whimpering. One of the child's legs was bent grotesquely and there was blood beneath it.

THE main door of the other apartment building was open, and a hallway ran through to the rear. As he entered, the operative heard the grinding of automobile gears from the alley beyond. He dashed into the rear yard and through a garage. He reached the alley in time to see the rear of a large sedan swing into the next street in a swirl of dust and exhaust smoke, its tires screaming on the pavement.

He was back in the apartment building, phoning the radio division at police headquarters, before the detectives back across the street had definitely located the source of the bullets.

In a vacant front apartment on the third floor Frost found the submachine gun, its barrel still too hot to touch comfortably. A square of paper lay beneath it, bearing a message in neat block letters:

SORRY IF WE KILLED ANYBODY EXCEPT COPS. ANTHONY FROST WAS THE ONE WE WERE AFTER. IF WE MISSED HIM, WE'LL DO BETTER NEXT TIME.

There were cigarette stubs all over the floor of the apartment—two brands of them. At least one other man had been with Dillon, then, Frost reflected—either Freddie Cross or

Twist Corum. And the other had probably waited with the car in the rear.

It was a desperate chance they'd taken to get him—sneaking back to the scene of a killing while the police were still there, staking everything on making a second hairbreadth escape. Either Dillon was possessed of all the crazy arrogance in the world, or an awful fear was spurring him. . . .

Now there was another murder, for a doctor examined the precinct sergeant and found his lungs ripped to tatters by a dum-dum bullet that had burst inside the chest. The man was dying in agony, and when the physician administered an injection of morphine he did so with an air that made Frost suspect it was an overdose. The private detective hoped, for mercy's sake, it was.

Another bullet had shattered the knee of the small boy who had fallen on the sidewalk. He would be a cripple all his life, the doctor said.

Jason Cole made a third casualty. The multi-millionaire had been so excited he had remained erect all through the shooting, emptying his revolver toward the death-spitting muzzle of the machine gun. Bullets had clipped threads of his tweed suit, and one had grazed his cheek, ploughing a furrow a quarter-inch deep. Cole didn't even know it till he happened to look down and see blood on his coat.

"That settles it," Frost said grimly to the manufacturer. "You get back to your factory and stay there. I've got my hands full as it is, without playing wet-nurse to you. If that bullet had gone an inch to the right, they'd be carting you to the morgue. Then the stock market would go to hell, the United States would be in for another panic, and I'd get the blame for it all."

"You flatter me," Cole retorted. "I'll get back to the factory when I feel like it. Meanwhile, I'll go with you to Receiving Hospital. You'll want to see the girl who was wounded, and I might as well get a free dressing for this scratch."

FLORENCE BLAINE was not going to die. She was sitting up in bed, pleading with a doctor to be allowed to leave the hospital, when Frost and Cole arrived. A white bandage encircled her upper left arm, and a small dressing was taped over one temple. Her dark, anxious eyes brightened when she saw Frost, and she tossed her head to shake back the tumbled curls.

"Tony," she cried, "they won't tell me anything about Chet. Is something the matter with him? Why isn't he here?"

Frost managed a grin and hoped desperately it looked convincing. He said: "Not so fast, Flo. I'll take care of your curiosity, one point at a time, as soon as I get through with the doctor. You can be getting acquainted with Jason Cole while you're waiting; there isn't a night-club dancer in town that wouldn't give her right leg for a chance at him."

He drew the white-coated surgeon aside. "How bad is it?" he asked.

The doctor stared solemnly. "It isn't bad at all. The police say there were fifty or more shots fired at close range, but I can hardly believe it. She got only two nicks—a flesh wound in the arm and a sliver of lead in the forehead. She's as sound as I am."

Frost lowered his voice. "She doesn't know what happened?"

"No. Evidently she fainted as soon as the shooting started. I was leaving the telling for her friends. She won't want to stay here when she knows, and I'd like to be sure she's in good hands. She can't go back to that apartment, naturally."

The detective's face was troubled. Florence and Chet had been married less than a month, and they had been so much in love it had seemed almost funny. But it wasn't funny any more. . . .

Cole was telling her: "If schools and money and influence can do it, we'll make you the best dancer in the country. We'll take you away from the

night clubs and give you a couple of years of hard work and study, in New York and Europe, and then we'll try the theaters. Why, there hasn't been a really great dancer since Pavlowa."

"I've dreamed of that!" Florence exclaimed. "Chet will be so proud of me."

The quickest way is the most merciful way, Frost kept telling himself. Yet he couldn't be crude about it. He'd done a lot of nasty jobs in his life, but none nastier than this one of smashing the fragile air-castle rising before the girl's dreamy, shining eyes.

He bent over the bed and took one of her small hands. She laughed up at him. "Tony, Mr. Cole says—" Then she noticed the set of his mouth. For a long minute she was silent, and when she spoke all the joy had gone out of her. "What has happened?" she demanded.

He squeezed the thin fingers. Cole got up suddenly and walked away, clearing his throat. Frost wondered whether his voice would tremble. It didn't. He was amazed that he could sound so cold-blooded, and not feel that way at all, when he said: "You've got to learn to do without Chet now, Florence."

He saw her slender body stiffen as all the muscles went rigid. He waited for her tears, dreading the moment when he would have to try to comfort her, knowing he couldn't. But she did not cry. After a little while she began to speak softly, tonelessly.

"That's what they were keeping from me. I *did* hear shots when I woke up, and I *did* hear Chet call Jake Dillon's name. Chet put his arms around me just before I fainted, and when I came to I was here. The doctor said I'd just met with a slight accident and Chet was all right.

"Dillon killed him. And Chet saved my life by lying between me and the bullets. And now there's nothing left for me to live for—nothing, except to kill Dillon. Chet had told him he was

going straight. We could have been so happy. . . ."

Her voice trailed off, but she remained rigid and motionless. She sat that way, her face an expressionless mask, until Frost put his hands on her shoulders and forced her gently back against the pillow.

"We're going to get Dillon tonight," he whispered. "And you don't have to stay here. I want you to stay with my secretary, Julia Rudow. She'll take care of you, and you'll know everything that goes on. Only you must rest till the first shock is over."

She nodded wearily. "All right."

Frost beckoned Cole to her side and went into the hall to find a telephone. He got Julia on the line and told her briefly what he wanted her to do. "Take her to your apartment," he directed, "and don't let her out of your sight for a minute. Better lock up the office and start for here right away."

"Right away, chief," she replied. "Just a minute, till I take a call on the other phone."

He waited, tipping the receiver away from his ear, until her voice came through again. This time it was tingling with excitement. As he listened, Frost tensed.

"That was Macklin, chief," Julia informed him. "Headquarters just got word that Beatrice Storme and her boy friend, Alex Cottrell, were kidnaped as they left the Mall Restaurant. Three men pulled them into a sedan in plain view of about a hundred people."

"How about Carmody?" he asked hoarsely. "Has he made any report?"

"Twenty minutes ago. He was in a saloon on Sixth Avenue near President Street, watching a house."

"I'm going there," Frost decided. "You come down here as soon as you can and take charge of Florence—Cole, too, if you feel equal to it, because I'm going to give him the slip. Remember, I'm counting on you."

CHAPTER III

SCAVENGER'S REWARD



STEVE CARMODY

Steve was not one of the half-dozen men standing at the bar in the saloon nearest Sixth Avenue and President.

Anthony Frost ordered a stein of beer and gazed casually out of the front window, counting the houses that were visible.

There were five, tucked among larger business structures—two dingy brick walk-ups directly across the street and three brownstone fronts just around the corner on President. Two were closed and shuttered, two bore signs advertising rooms for rent, and the third had the painted legend in a window: GOTHAM EXTERMINATOR COMPANY.

When the bartender brought his change, Frost said: "I was supposed to meet a friend here. A big, stocky fellow, with gray hair and a flat nose and a cleft in his chin. Was he in?" The description was Carmody's.

"He was here." The bartender squinted at the clock. "Left about fifteen minutes ago, I guess. Had one drink and made a phone call."

Frost swore silently. He was counting on Carmody to lead him to Wingel, and Wingel to lead him to Dillon. Now there was no way of getting in touch with Carmody, since Julia would have closed the office—no way unless Frost went back there himself and waited for Carmody's next report, meanwhile twiddling his thumbs helplessly and leaving Beatrice and young Cottrell to the tender mercies of the kill-crazy gang boss.

Wingel had apparently lost no time in contacting Dillon. Frost had counted on that; had purposely let the little blackmailer see how he could turn his information to account by going to the desperado, whose hideaway he could learn without difficulty through underworld channels. But the operative could hardly have foreseen the

speed with which subsequent developments would come. Looking back, though, the way it had happened was plain enough.

Returning to his secret headquarters after the second machine-gunning of Chet Carr's apartment, Dillon had found Wingel waiting and had jumped at the opportunity offered. That would be about the time Beatrice Storme was ending her matinee concert. Risking the chance of being seen and recognized, Dillon and his two henchmen had trailed the singer and the governor's son to a restaurant and had snatched them as they emerged. Probably Governor Cottrell had already been notified that they would be released, safe and sound, if he pardoned Chuck Fontaine—and that they would be killed if he didn't.

One of the five houses Frost could see through the saloon window might be Dillon's hideout, or it might be Wingel's home or just a place where Wingel had stopped for a few minutes. The latter theory seemed plausible, in view of the fact that Carmody had moved on, presumably still on the trail of the shyster.

And even if Dillon were there, how could Frost make sure of it? Dillon wouldn't have his card tacked over the doorbell. The detective couldn't very well prowl five houses in broad daylight. It would have been an insane thing to do, anyway, for Dillon would have lookouts who would like nothing better than a clear shot at Frost.

He thought of calling Macklin and arranging to have all the houses raided simultaneously, on one pretext or another. But that would mean running too many risks. If Dillon were trapped, he would not hesitate for a second to kill his prisoners, realizing the electric chair was waiting for him, anyway. And even if the raid were successful, there was the possibility that Cottrell and Beatrice would be accused of murdering her worthless husband; and the resultant scandal would destroy the very people he was trying to protect.

Standing there, gripping the handle of the stein so tightly that his knuckles were white, Frost cursed his helplessness. Here was a murderous fiend whom not even the constituted authorities could try to touch without further harming his innocent victims. Here was a man who had killed time and again and gone free, and even after he was captured—as he most certainly would be, if Frost had to give his life to that end—there would be no way of undoing his ghastly crimes.

The private detective thought of the real victims of Dillon. The broken-hearted wife and daughter of Joe Driscoll, the slain guard at the Third National. The stunned little night-club dancer, who lost something far more precious than life when Chet Carr was murdered. The wife and kids of the precinct sergeant whose lungs had been shattered. The governor, as honest a man as ever was named to the highest office within the power of the people to grant, forced now to choose between honor and the lives of his son and the woman his son loved. Beatrice Storme, with life and love and immortality ahead of her but for the arrogant Dillon. . . .

Frost shook himself, taking a grip on his emotions. No good could come of losing his temper. He needed steady nerves and a cool head for the desperate task ahead of him.

He left the beer untasted and went out into the street. The hardest part of his job came first—returning to the office and sitting there idly, waiting for word from Steve Carmody and speculating on the hidden events that might be taking place.

A taxicab stood in front of the saloon. Frost opened the door and got in, waiting for the chauffeur to return from buying a paper at the newsstand on the corner. From where he sat, he could see that the banner headline had to do with the shootings in West Thirtieth Street, but he had no desire to read the police version of the affair just then.

THE door of the cab on the street side opened. A person who seemed in a headlong hurry sprang over the running board into the rear, then stopped with a sharply indrawn breath at the sight of Frost. He turned, startled, as the person began to scramble out again. His left hand darted, grasped a slender wrist.

"Now that you've come this far," Frost said softly, "you might as well stay."

"Please!" cried Beatrice Storme, and her gray eyes widened in amazement. She dropped helplessly into the seat beside him. "Why—Mr. Frost!"

"I was looking for you," he said. "We were pretty worried, Jason Cole and I."

"Worried?" He thought she seemed confused. "Oh—I'm all right, but I'm in a hurry. I didn't know anyone was in this taxi. I'll get another."

She started to get up, but he still held her wrist. She looked at him fearfully, her ash-blonde hair prettily disheveled under her broad summer hat, her breast rising and falling rapidly beneath the jacket of her linen suit. Frost leaned across her and pulled the door shut.

"It's all right," he said. "I'll take you where you want to go."

Beatrice shook her head. "I'd rather you wouldn't. If you don't mind letting me out—"

The driver was returning to his seat. Frost directed: "Just keep driving around the block till I decide where we're going." He smiled at her and released the wrist. "You can trust me," he said. "Cole came to me this morning, bringing that fellow who was trying to blackmail you. My job is to take care of him and keep you out of trouble."

"But I do trust you. That is, I don't trust anybody. I mean—"

"You were kidnaped," he said. "I know that—the police know it."

She shook her head violently. "It isn't true. I must call the police and tell them it was a mistake. It was just some of my friends, playing a joke."

"Nice friends you've got: Jake Dillon, Freddie Cross and Twist Corum—thieves and murderers, every one."

A shudder ran through her frame. "Please let me go!" she begged. "Let me go, and don't say you've seen me. I'll be all right."

He could guess what was in her mind. "They freed you and kept Cottrell a prisoner," he hazarded. "They're sending you to Cottrell's father to tell him he'll never see his son alive unless he prevents the execution of a certain criminal who is scheduled to go to the electric chair in the state penitentiary tonight. They want him to grant a full pardon to Chuck Fontaine, who killed a man in a bank holdup."

She shook her head again, but her eyes told him he was right.

"You're in love with Alex Cottrell, and you don't dare disobey Dillon," Frost continued. "You were warned not to go to the police. You're convinced they'll carry out their threat to kill him if you try to spoil their game."

She remained silent.

"And they will," he finished.

She looked at him, and he saw that her soft mouth was trembling and there was a hint of moisture in her eyes. "If you think that, why don't you let me go?" she asked. "Supposing they *had* kidnaped him—you wouldn't risk his life by interfering?"

"You can count on me not to interfere or tell the police. The only thing I want to do is get my hands on Dillon after it's certain Alex Cottrell is safe and no one else will be hurt. If you'll be frank with me, and tell me everything that happened, I can do that."

"Just why should I help?" she asked bitterly. "The first and only thing for me to consider is the safety of Alex. If I lose sight of that, it may cost him his life. Compared to that possibility, what does it matter if one criminal escapes arrest and another is pardoned from a death sentence?"

"It matters a lot, Beatrice. You'd understand if you had been with me

today. I saw a young man—a decent, straight young fellow—torn to bloody bits by machine-gun slugs. I had the job of telling the girl he married less than a month ago—a young, pretty girl, a dancer, who hopes some day to be as famous in her art as you are in yours. You can imagine how she felt, being in love yourself. Well—Dillon was responsible for that."

"I see what you mean. But suppose, in trying to punish him for that, you should only drive Dillon to another crime of the same sort?"

"My plan is to guard against that. I'll not only let things run smoothly until I'm certain Alex is out of danger—I'll see that his father is saved from disgrace."

"How could he be disgraced? Hasn't he the power to pardon anyone he chooses?"

"Within reason, yes. But what will the public think when, without explanation, he turns a convicted murderer loose—one of the most notorious outlaws in the history of the state? Will the people re-elect him to office? Will he continue to have the honor and respect of his friends?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"That isn't all. You know Bob Cottrell. He's as honest and fearless, where his own safety is concerned, as any man living. But the instant he knuckled down to a man like Dillon, he'd surrender all his self-respect. He'd do what Dillon said, probably, to save his son's life, but it would be his last official act. He'd retire immediately, and probably die of a broken heart."

"Do you think Alex would want it to end that way, if there was the slightest chance of preventing it?"

The taxi turned two corners while she was thinking it over. Her strained face reflected the inner struggle by which she arrived at her difficult decision. Finally she whispered:

"I'll die if it doesn't turn out all right—but I'll trust you. If you'll take me somewhere where we can talk, I'll tell you all about it."

FROST directed the chauffeur to a quiet café nearby. He led Beatrice Storme to a table in a corner, where they could not be overheard. She asked for a bacardi cocktail and seemed more composed when she had finished it.

"Dillon picked you up in front of the Mall Restaurant," Frost prompted. "Where did he take you after that?"

"To a house across the street from where I met you. There was an exterminator company's sign on the window, but the place was empty. The men had guns, which they kept out of sight in their pockets, and made us walk into the place as though we were going willingly. I'm sure nobody paid any attention to us."

"There were just the three of them?" he asked.

"At first. But the man who tried to blackmail me was waiting for them. His name was Dollar."

"Wingel," Frost corrected.

"He was there. He watched while the man who seemed to be the leader—I guess he was Dillon—held a knife to Alex's throat and made me write a note saying Alex and I had planned together to kill my husband, Boris. I did it to save Alex's life. I said Alex knocked him down and we both pushed him off the pier into the water."

"That was going Wingel one better!"

"And then Dillon put the knife against my throat, while Alex wrote a note. It sounded like a suicide note. It said: 'I am doing this because my conscience won't give me any peace. I killed Boris Kampff because I wanted Beatrice Storme, his wife. She helped me drown him. Now I realize my mistake.'"

"I see." Frost's eyes were stony. "They planned to make it look like suicide, if they had to kill him. The dirty rats!"

"Yes, that's what Dillon said. He pointed out that I'd be arrested when the note was found, and either sent to prison or ruined professionally.

"Then he told me what to say to Governor Cottrell. It was just as you guessed. If he would pardon somebody—Dillon didn't say who—they'd let Alex go. But they'd keep the two confessions, to be sure we wouldn't try to make trouble for Dillon afterward."

"Dillon is still in the house on Sixth Avenue?" Frost asked.

"No. They rolled Alex in blankets and tied him up and carried him into an alleyway. They said they were going to take him somewhere, and would get in touch with the governor later by telephone. The governor was to call on them, if he'd made up his mind to do as they asked, and phone the state prison in front of them, stopping the execution. Then he was to sign the pardon and give it to them to mail.

"They left me in the house, and told me to wait ten minutes before leaving. I waited fifteen, because I was afraid they might be watching. Then I ran out. I was so frightened I didn't even close the door behind me."

"Wingel went with them?"

She shook her head. "He had an argument with Dillon. He wanted some money. But Dillon said they didn't need him any more, now that they'd made Alex and me write confessions. Dillon went into the next room and called him, and Wingel went out and I didn't see him after that."

Frost's eyes narrowed. That could mean only one thing. Wingel was dead, because Dillon wouldn't let him go free, knowing what he knew. And Frost wouldn't shed any tears over the blackmailer's corpse—but he *would* like to know what had happened to Steve Carmody. It wasn't like the veteran operative to disappear of his own accord while on an assignment.

"You didn't see anything of another man?" he inquired. "A heavy-set, gray-haired fellow?"

"No. There were only the three men who kidnaped Alex and me, and Wingel."

"All right." Frost got up and patted her hand. "I've got to do some work. You go directly to the governor's home, and I'll be there within an hour. I'll have to be sure what he's going to do before I can act."

He put her in a taxi and walked back to Sixth Avenue. The door of the house with the exterminator sign was open. He walked in casually, as though he had legitimate business there—but he unbuttoned his coat, so that he could reach his shoulder holster in a hurry if the necessity should arise.

The shabby rooms were bleak and dusty and unfurnished, save for an unvarnished table and a single chair in one of them. Nothing else of interest took the detective's searching eye until he got to the kitchen. There he found Davie Wingel—or all his mortal remains.

The body of the underworld scavenger lay on its back in the center of the floor, arms and legs outflung grotesquely. Blood drenched the once flawless clothing and smeared the white face, and a pool of it had spread beyond the span of the shoulders. Wingel's throat had been slit so effectively that the head sagged sideways, nearly severed; making a spectacle over which Frost did not care to linger.

The ghastly humor of the "Gotham Exterminator Company" legend struck him, but he did not smile. He was wondering what could have happened to Carmody.

CHAPTER IV

SURRENDER



GOVERNOR BOB COTTRELL lived in a marble mansion in the center of a private park on Lakeside Drive. Frost's cab preceded a sleek

limousine into the curving driveway, and as he paid off his driver Frost

heard his name called. He turned to confront a highly indignant Jason Cole, across whose left cheek swooped a generous bandage.

"Hell of a note!" Cole rumbled. "The minute something happens that's important, you run out on me. What was the idea?"

"The idea," Frost said, "was that once was enough for you to get hit. It wouldn't matter if I got blasted out of circulation, but you're different."

"Yeah, I'm different. I'm tougher. If I'd known about the kidnaping when you did, I'd have arranged to have every house in the city searched and every car stopped."

"And probably got Beatrice killed." Frost didn't trouble to remind the industrialist of people's constitutional rights and such trivia, forgotten by Cole in his righteous zeal. "As it is, she's safe enough."

"I know. I talked to her on the phone. But how about Alex? And as long as Wingel's free, we're farther behind than we were when we started."

"Wingel's dead," said Frost. "He turned the information he had over to Dillon, and Dillon got Beatrice and Alex to put it in writing. Then he bumped Wingel off."

"It's the one worth-while thing Dillon ever did. But where does that leave us, Tony?"

"In a position to do two things at once. Dillon is slated for shooting or prison tonight. When we get him, we've got the most dangerous gunman in these parts, and we've got the Boris Kampff thing choked off."

"If we get him! Even so, that won't prove Alex *didn't* kill Boris."

"Nobody can ever prove that, Cole. Alex isn't sure about it, himself. But what do we need proof for? Boris was ripe for drowning. Alex's conscience doesn't hurt, because if his wallop led to Boris' death, it was entirely accidental. And it was a godsend to Beatrice. I think everybody will be

happy if Boris just stays quietly in his grave and people accept the incident as closed."

"You've got me there, Tony. Your logic is perfect. But how do we go about getting Dillon? Remember—I'm in this next scene. I've got brand-new bullets in my gun, and those practice shots this afternoon might have improved my aim."

"I'm going to raise my fees on you. You're getting too much fun out of taking justice into your own hands. We don't do a thing till we find out what the governor is going to do. If he'll fight—and I doubt if he will, when it would almost certainly mean his son's life—we go gunning. If he follows orders, which would be more sensible in a lot of ways, we try to arrange to land on Dillon as soon as the young fellow's out of danger. Maybe we can swing it alone, and maybe it will be necessary to call in the cops. Macklin will be a last resort, though; if those phoney confessions come to light, we can hardly ask him to overlook what is bound to seem like another murder."

"Bob Cottrell will follow orders," Cole said. "I've known him forty years, and that's his way. And he won't follow them because it will be easier; it will be because he figures his son's life is worth more than his own. He'll do what Dillon says, and then he'll quit and with a man like him, to quit is to die."

They walked up the broad stone steps to the arched door. A servant in quiet livery admitted them. The servant said to Cole: "The governor is expecting you."

At the end of a deeply carpeted hallway, lined with costly paintings, was the entrance to the library. Dusk was gathering outside, and shaded lamps cast a rich glow over green leather chairs and sofas, a mahogany desk and tiers of shelved volumes. A girl was weeping on one of the sofas, and a big man was pacing savagely back and forth over Persian rugs.

GOVERNOR COTTRELL stopped pacing when he saw the detective and the multi-millionaire. He nodded to Frost, and to Cole he said hoarsely: "If it was only something simple, like a choice between sitting here in safety and hunting them up and killing them with my bare hands!"

He was tall and bulky, but without excess weight. His features were pink and rugged and surmounted by a tangled mass of snowy hair. His dark eyes, overshadowed by tufted brows, blazed with a fire that belied his age.

Cole's face became surprisingly gentle, and there was gentleness in his voice. "It's the hardest kind of choice," he said.

"There's more to it than you think, Jason." In his bewildered anger, Cottrell was almost shouting. "My natural instinct is to save Alex at all costs, but that would be the last thing he'd want. He's got more guts than all of us put together. If I sacrificed myself for him—went back on the people who elected me—he'd want to punch me in the jaw."

"He's a kid, Bob. He'll get more sensible as he gets older."

Cottrell glared at him. He swung suddenly on Frost. "What do *you* think?" he challenged.

"I think they'll murder Alex the minute they hear you're going to fight."

Beatrice Storme, on the sofa, had been dabbing at her eyes, looking from one to another of the speakers. Frost's unvarnished opinion started the tears flowing again, and she covered her face with her hands. Cole sat down beside her and put his arm around her shoulders.

Cottrell lowered his shaggy head, and there was recognition of defeat in the gesture. "I've got to give in," he said wearily.

"Of course you have," Frost assured him. "If you didn't, your own stubbornness would be lengthening the list of Dillon's crimes."

"He'll be captured and sent to the electric chair later." The governor was attempting forlornly to justify his stand.

"He will," Frost echoed. "I'll dedicate the rest of my life to that job, if necessary."

"I'll resign, of course," Cottrell said. "It will be the only decent thing to do. But I won't quit work. I'll join your agency, Frost, if you'll let me. I'll devote all my time to this one case."

The ghost of a smile played over the detective's lips. "That won't be necessary. I've already got tentative plans laid for the campaign. It's possible I can wind up Dillon's career tonight."

The white-haired man looked at him keenly. He said: "You're counting on help from me?"

"Hoping for it," Frost corrected. "You'll get a telephone message before long, I believe."

"No." Cottrell's voice had regained its firmness. "I learned a long time ago there's only one way to play a game, and that's fairly. I'm going to tell Dillon, when he calls, that I'm willing to play ball with him—and I am. Whatever message I may get, it will be my secret till this is all over."

FROST shrugged. "If you think that's the best way . . ."

"I do. Moreover, I want to make sure I'm not followed if I have to leave the house tonight. I'll accept your promise, Frost."

The detective grinned wryly. "I *had* thought of trailing you," he confessed. "But I'd planned to be careful not to interfere with anything you did."

"You can give your word, and I'll consider it good. Otherwise, I'll have the state police hold you as long as necessary."

"All right." There was nothing in Frost's face to show how bitter was his disappointment. "I won't follow you. That's a promise."

"Fine!" the governor said. "I know you'll keep it, even if it was obtained

by a threat. Now, Jason, how about you?"

A certain crafty look that had been in Cole's eyes vanished at the challenge. "Now look here!" he began. "This will be our best chance to finish Dillon. What difference will it make if, after you and Alex get safely away from the gangsters, somebody who is waiting nearby walks in on them and polishes 'em off? It would save your job and your reputation."

"I'm not trying to save them. I've made my decision, and I intend to stand by it. Maybe it wouldn't make any difference if somebody did that, but then again, maybe it would. Just to make sure I get what I'm after, I'm going to take no chances at all."

Cole sighed. "I suppose it's a cell for me, too, if I don't promise?"

"It is. As long as I'm governor, I can order even the second richest man in the world held incommunicado. You could sue me for it afterward if you wanted."

"I won't sue. I'll promise—though I think it's crazy."

"Maybe not. Maybe I've got an idea or two of my own." Cottrell's eyes were glittering slits, and his hands clenched and unclenched restlessly. "I don't intend to let them get away with it completely. If their setup is favorable, I may bring 'em in myself."

Frost sensed something of the iron determination of this leader of men. It struck him that, though Dillon might now have the upper hand, the gangster was sealing his ultimate doom by choosing opponents he could never hope to defeat.

The telephone on the desk whirled, startling them all to attention. Cottrell glanced at the two men before he went to pick up the instrument. His hand and his voice were steady. He said:

"Cottrell speaking . . . Yes, it's Robert Cottrell . . . Oh, yes—I got the message . . . Yes, I'm ready to do as you say . . . You have my word everything will be on the level . . . What's that address again?"

The street? All right, I've got it Let me talk to him a minute Hello, Alex! Keep your chin up, boy. I'll get you out of it Hello! Hello!"

He put the phone back in its cradle. "Cut me off," he remarked. "It was Alex, though. He sounded worried."

The governor scribbled something on a piece of paper, and put the paper in his pocket. Cole had gone up to him, had gripped his shoulder. Cole said: "You're the one that needs to keep his chin up, Bob. I wish I could help you."

"I'll manage. I've got till ten o'clock. I wish it was sooner." He began to pace again, back and forth, back and forth

FROST and Cole were in the latter's limousine, leaving the governor's mansion. The foretaste of defeat was gall and wormwood to the detective, and he could not fathom the lighter mood of the industrialist, who had curled his lanky frame comfortably in a corner of the seat and was whistling cheerfully.

"You've got some screwy idea in your mind," Frost concluded. "Bring it out, so I can stick a pin in it."

Cole grinned with the spirit of a small boy tormenting his teacher. "Not this one," he said. "It's pure inspiration. You wouldn't have the imagination to appreciate it."

"I've got imagination enough to picture your heirs fighting over the division of Cole Motors stock, if you don't head for home and bed."

Cole sighed.

"You'll go home?"

"It depends. If you've got any plans afoot, I may stay around and watch the master work."

"My plans," said Frost grimly, "are stymied, it would seem, until young Cottrell is safe. After that, I start hunting Dillon in the usual way, listening in on the underworld grapevine until I get a notion where he's hiding out. It'll be ticklish, getting those fake confessions back without the help of the law. And I've lost one

of my men, Steve Carmody. He was tailing Wingel. Either he went off on a bad trail, or he bumped into the Dillon crowd."

Cole whistled softly. "One more reason for shooting Dillon on sight, eh?"

"I don't know. If he's safe, he's probably at home. Supposing you stop this crate long enough for me to phone."

The limousine slid to the curb, and Frost entered a drug store. From a phone booth, he called Carmody's number. Carmody had been with him a long time, and they were close friends. When his voice came back over the wire, Frost could have shouted with relief.

Instead, he challenged: "What the devil happened, Steve?"

Carmody's voice was sheepish. "I'm getting old, Tony. I tailed the guy to a house on Sixth Avenue, all right, but I got my wires crossed there. You see, I'd got the idea Wingel had spotted me, and I was afraid he'd try to give me the slip. Well, he stayed in the house so long I got restless and started strolling around, and I took a peek into an alley beside the joint. I saw some men carrying out a big roll of blankets, and quick as a flash it struck me Wingel might be hidden inside. It's been done before, you know, and it looked logical because I could see most of the house through the windows and it sure looked empty to me.

"The men—there were three of them, and I couldn't get a good look at them—put the blanket in a truck and started away. So I took a chance and followed in a taxi. It was a wrong steer, though. I tried to get you at the office, to see if you had a new lead, but nobody answered."

"Where did the truck go, Steve?" Frost asked, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice.

"Just to an ordinary private house, 'way out in the sticks. I drove past, slow, as the men were taking the blankets out of the truck, and I heard one of 'em say the exterminator business

was getting better all the time. I waited around, but nothing happened, and after a few minutes the truck drove away again and I decided it had been just an ordinary business call, after all. I guess lots of people in this town send blankets and stuff like that to exterminating companies to be fumigated."

"Sure," Frost said. "What did you say the address was?"

"Four-seventeen Evergreen Lane, out on the West Side. There's a lot of old houses on the street, close together, most of 'em empty. This house is between two empty ones."

"Thanks," Frost said. "That's the best shadowing you ever did, Carmody. Remind me, when I collect for this job, to give you a bonus."

He hung up on the astounded operative and called Julia at her apartment. "How's the kid?" he asked.

"Oh, chief, she's half crazy!" Julia said. "She keeps pacing the rooms. I never felt so sorry for anybody in my life."

"It's the rottenest break a girl like that could get," Frost declared. "Do what you can to quiet her. Call a doctor if she needs one. Maybe a little morphine is what she needs to make her sleep."

"I'll call one if she doesn't lie down soon. Will you be around tonight?"

He smiled at the hopeful note in her voice. Julia Rudow had never made any secret of the fact that her boss was the one man on earth she admired.

"Not tonight," he said. "Tomorrow, if I'm lucky. Take this address." He gave her the Evergreen Lane number, and listened to her repeat it. "If I don't show up, have the cops start looking there."

"Is it Dillon?" she asked, worried.

"Never mind. Just keep your eye on Florence. I'll take care of the outside work."

"Okay, chief—but be careful."

Julia was a good kid, he was thinking as he left the phone booth. She knew more about the detective busi-

ness than all the trained operatives he had on call. He wouldn't risk losing her if he had to marry her to prevent it—which wouldn't be a bad idea, either, if only he didn't have to dodge bullets every day . . .

On the sidewalk he stopped short and began to swear silently. Cole's glittering limousine was nowhere in sight, nor was the gray-haired master of millions. As neatly as he had given Cole the slip in the hospital, Cole had slipped away from him.

CHAPTER V

THE VEILED WOMAN



FROST hurried back to the telephone. Pete Macklin was not at police headquarters, but the private detective reached him at his home.

Macklin asked plaintively: "Isn't there any rest on this job? I've lost twenty pounds today, chasing around trying to get a lead on Dillon. I've put the fear of the devil in every stool pigeon in town. And now you want me to play guardian to a guy who's old enough to look after himself and rich enough to hire an army of bodyguards."

"He's taken this business to heart," Frost explained, curbing his impatience. "When he gets his mind made up to do a thing, he never thinks of the chances he may be running. I'm pretty sure he hasn't the least idea where to look for Dillon, but that doesn't mean he won't manage to get into trouble. Sometimes his enthusiasm runs away with him. All you've got to do is have the radio broadcast his car number and then stick close to him when he's spotted."

"Okay," Macklin sighed. "If you hadn't done me plenty of favors in the past, though—"

"I'm doing you one now, Pete. I'm going to have your murderer for you, tonight or tomorrow, if he doesn't

shoot first. You'll get all the credit for it."

"Why in hell didn't you say so in the first place? Hang up, so I can call the radio bureau."

As he left the drug store for the second time, Frost's thoughts were troubled. He was determined to take his next step alone, without risking the lives of either his own operatives or policemen, and by that very token he knew his chances of failure were great. If it came to shooting, there would be three against one. But it would be mad to gather a larger force and try such crude tactics as surrounding Dillon and his gangsters. That would almost certainly mean the death of innocent persons.

Well, there was no hurry. Although the streets were dark, it was not yet nine o'clock, and Governor Cottrell would not call on Dillon until ten. Cottrell would need time to carry out his end of things—to order a stay of execution for Chuck Fontaine by phone, sign a pardon and get away with his son—and any attack must wait until all that had been done.

So Frost took a street car. After dark, taxicabs were the most conspicuous of vehicles, particularly so in the shabby outskirts of the city where he was bound. He sat with his gray hat pulled low over his eyes, lost in thought. Other passengers stared curiously at the bullet hole in the fedora.

He left the car at the end of the line and walked unhastily for a mile or more, through streets of shabby residences, before he reached Evergreen Lane. A few stunted, dusty pine trees justified its name. But there was nothing fresh or invigorating about the rickety houses with yellow windows open to the warm night, sending out tinny caterwaulings of cheap radios.

Four-seventeen, the number Carmody had mentioned, would be two or three blocks farther along the street, on the opposite side. Frost started to stroll that way. He came to a block on which were no houses.

Trees and bushes made a dark wilderness of a broad field.

A car came along the street behind him, its springs creaking as the wheels negotiated the uneven ruts of the road. It slowed as it neared him. The operative moved into the shadow of trees in the field and unbuttoned his coat to give his hand access to his shoulder harness.

The dazzling beam of the car's spotlight stabbed into the shadow, blinding him. Frost leaped for the sheltering trunk of a tree, yanking his automatic from its sheath. He snapped off the safety catch of the weapon as the car jolted to a stop.

"Hold it!" a familiar voice called. "Don't start shooting up the best cop in town!"

The detective relaxed, returning the gun to its holster. He grinned, but his eyes were puzzled. "Turn off that light," he said. "What in the devil are you doing up here, Macklin?"

The fat homicide squad man leaned comfortably against the door of the prowler car. "Just what you asked me to do," he drawled. "We put Cole's limousine on the air, and a copper reported it up in this neighborhood. I'm looking for it."

Frost started. Had the manufacturer known the killers' hideout all along, and kept the knowledge to himself? But he couldn't have got it from Bob Cottrell

The uniformed driver of the prowler car said: "Maybe that's it." He had swerved the searchlight, and it was pointing at a dark, gleaming car standing in the shadows half a block ahead.

"It is," Macklin declared. "License 4X-21. Now what, Tony?"

"Now," Tony said, "to find out what's happened to old Jason!" He began to stride rapidly toward the limousine, apprehension mounting within him.

Frost's worst fears were realized. The limousine was empty. More than that, the cushions of the chauffeur's seat were damp and sticky with blood.

"You were right," Macklin said slowly. "He did manage to get into trouble. With Dillon, do you think?"

"I think so."

Hot-headed and reckless as he was, Jason Cole was one of the great men of the modern world and one of the finest friends another man could have. No rich man had ever done more good for humanity; none had ever looked with more sympathetic understanding upon the troubles of the unfortunate. If Cole had set himself up as a judge higher than the law, it was only to temper punishment with mercy and see that real justice was done.

If this fiend, Dillon, had killed him

"Here's something!" Macklin exclaimed. He had been trampling the shrubbery of the field, examining the ground with a flashlight. He was standing over the huddled shape of a man.

Frost bent over the shape. "It's Cole's chauffeur," he said, "slugged, bound, gagged—and alive!"

THE chauffeur, a young, husky, redheaded fellow, who had been Jason Cole's bodyguard as well, was not dead. But a deep, ugly gash extended from above his right ear around the back of his scalp, and blood had soaked his shoulder and back. The blood still flowed profusely, staining the grass beneath him. And the gag and ropes were superfluous; he was unconscious.

"Have your man take him to the nearest hospital," Frost snapped. "You stay here, Pete. There might be plenty of trouble before long."

"I'm aching for it," Macklin said.

They cut the ropes with which the driver was trussed, took the dirty handkerchief from his mouth and carried him to the prowler car. The uniformed cop turned the machine and headed back toward town.

Macklin inquired: "Where do we start looking?"

"You don't," Frost informed him. "You stay here with the limousine."

The homicide man shook his head. "Huh-uh, Tony. I've been wanting a sergeant's badge for a year. Cut me in on whatever glory is coming along."

"Glory!" Frost snorted. "You can have it all. I'm thinking of the lives of innocent people. We can save them by being careful, or lose them by blundering."

"Cole's life? You don't think Dillon's killed him?"

"Maybe not. Dillon wouldn't want to. Why, Jason would be worth millions alive! But he's a tough hombre—Cole, I mean—and he may have forced them to kill him. Once he gets mad, he won't listen to reason."

"I still don't know why you want to leave me out of it."

"I want to reconnoiter. I've got some hunches about this business. I can find out what's going on by myself better than if you were with me. That is, if Dillon and his crowd haven't already taken it on the lam."

Frost didn't think it necessary to mention that Governor Cottrell ought to be along soon, or that he believed Alex Cottrell was a prisoner in one of the houses down the street. For that reason, he didn't think it likely that Dillon would have fled from the neighborhood, frightened by Cole's discovery of his hiding place. Dillon, beyond a doubt, would consider his position impregnable because of the hostages he held.

Macklin said: "You're smart, Frost. You've always treated me fair. I'm the Law, but you've never gone against me yet; so go ahead. I'll take orders from you."

"Thanks. For the present, just stay here. You can sit in the car, where you'll be out of sight. I ought to be back in half an hour or less, but give me an hour if I need it. Get a mess of cops and come after me in that time. And if you hear guns, come on the run, shooting—and be careful who you aim at."

"I get you," Macklin said. "All the luck in the world, Tony. And don't

forget—a yell or a shot will bring me on the gallop.”

Frost left him, hurrying his footsteps. The luminous dial of his wrist watch showed five minutes to ten, and he wanted to get a general idea of the layout before Bob Cottrell showed up.

The houses at this end of the street were for the most part empty and dark. While he was nearly a block away, Frost picked out the house he guessed held Dillon and his henchmen. It stood between two shuttered dwellings. A thin sliver of light shone through a front window, which was covered with a curtain.

Street lamps were few and far between, and they seemed only to make the shadows blacker. Yet the pale glimmer from one of them served to show him a vague figure opposite the lighted house, on his side of the street. He halted and watched until he saw it was the figure of a woman. She turned her face briefly in his direction, and he discovered that she was veiled.

Was she a sentry? He wondered. He had not heard of any women traveling with Dillon lately, and yet that did not mean there wasn't one. Just to be safe, Frost crossed the street swiftly and vanished between two vacant houses, heading for the alley.

In the darkness he tripped over boards, blundered against a fence. It took him a long time to reach the alley, which was ankle-deep in mud from recent rains, come up to the rear of the house that was his objective. A four-foot space separated it from the nearest house, and a side window leaked feeble rays of light through an ancient blind.

Glancing across the street, he could see the veiled woman. The purr of a motor came near, and the beams of headlamps touched her briefly. She shrank back out of sight behind a tree. A taxi rolled past the house and came to a stop some yards farther on. Its door opened and slammed.

A tall, bulky man strolled back toward the house. Beside him walked a

slender girl in a white linen suit and a broad hat. Then Frost realized how careful Dillon had been to make sure there would be no double-cross.

He had ordered the governor to bring Beatrice Storme to the secret rendezvous. That in itself was a guarantee that Bob Cottrell would try no tricks.

Frost remembered the governor's words: "Maybe I've got an idea or two of my own If their setup is favorable, I may bring 'em in myself."

That was before Cottrell had received his telephoned instructions. He wouldn't bring them in now, with Beatrice to look after, as well as Alex.

The detective waited till he heard the footsteps of the man and woman on the porch and the sound of the door opening and closing. Then, setting each foot down with painful care, he crept along the side of the house, holding his pistol ready for instant action.

CHAPTER VI

SCORE FOR JUSTICE



THE side window was a happy choice. Frost had hardly crouched beneath it when he heard voices, only slightly muffled by the rotting walls of the house. They seemed to come from directly above him.

Bob Cottrell exclaimed: "Jason Cole! They've got you, too!"

Beatrice Storme cried: "Alex! Oh, they've hurt you, dear!"

There were other words, not clear, and then a harsh voice that the detective knew immediately was Dillon's: "All right, you two! Cut out the sob stuff. This is a business meeting, not old home week in Walla-Walla."

"Let's get it over with, then," Bob Cottrell's voice said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Grab that phone. Call the State Prison and tell 'em not to burn Chuck Fontaine tonight. Talk to nobody but the warden, and be damned careful what you say. I'll be listening in on the extension, and my pals, here, will have guns pointing right at your head."

There were sounds of movement. Frost could hear the governor asking the telephone operator for a connection with the prison upstate. Cottrell said, "Warden Williams, please," then there was a lengthy discourse pitched in tones too low to carry outside.

"That was all right," Dillon said finally. "Now the pardon—got it with you? Then let me see you put your name on the line, and gimme it. If it reads right, that's all I want from you."

There was silence for three or four minutes, before Dillon spoke again. "Congratulations, governor! You're a wise guy and you know what's good for you. I'll send this to the prison tomorrow with Chuck's lawyer, and they ought to turn him loose right away. Just in case they don't, though, you can write a letter to the warden explaining everything's on the level and you've slipped away for a little vacation."

"But I can call him," Bob Cottrell said. "I can verify the pardon by telephone or in person tomorrow. There won't be any difficulty about it."

Dillon chuckled. "I ain't as dumb as you think!" he declared. "You ain't going to get in touch with nobody tomorrow. You're going to be my guest for a few days, maybe for quite a little while."

"Nonsense! Part of our bargain was that you were to release my son to me as soon as I'd made arrangements to free Fontaine. I've done my part; now it's up to you to do yours."

"You seem to forget who's boss here, Cottrell. Did you really think I'd turn you loose to double-cross me? Alone, I'm on the spot—that sap, Tony Frost, and every cop in town, knows I killed some people today, and

they'd grab me and railroad me to the hot squat within twenty-four hours.

"But right now, I'm safe as the President. No cop or dick is going to lay a finger on me. Look who'd get bumped off if they did! The second richest man in America; the governor of the state; the classiest little opera singer in captivity; your own kid . . ."

"You can't get away with it, Dillon!" Cottrell's voice was quivering with fury. "You wouldn't dare try to pull a thing like that."

"Ho, ho!" the gangster roared. "Listen to that, Twist! Listen—I'm not only going to get away with it—I'm going to get rich out of it. I know I got to scram pretty quick. I got to get out of the country, as soon as Fontaine joins up with me, if I want to save my skin."

"Well, I'm going in my own yacht. You're going to buy it for me, you and Jason Cole. It will cost him a cool million dollars in cash to get back to his flivver factory, and it will cost you exactly half that much. You can arrange to get the cash tomorrow, or watch your kid and the dame die. And if they die, they'll die a little bit at a time, in front of your eyes."

There was a sudden scuffling and then a savage bellow. To his amazement, Frost heard Cole shouting: "You're going to die right now, Dillon!" The multi-millionaire followed his threat with an outburst of the most lurid profanity Frost had ever encountered.

"He's busted loose!" somebody screamed. "Give it to him!"

Dillon was yelling: "Don't shoot! Slug him, you idiot!"

A gun blasted. Slivers of glass from the window showered down over Frost.

The detective whirled and leaped at the house that had been behind him. He swung himself to the window sill, clinging to the rotten shutters. He turned, facing the window behind which the fighting was going on, and sprang powerfully.

His body struck the lighted window with a crash. Jagged glass sliced into his body as the ancient sash gave way. He landed inside a littered, tempestuous room, on his feet and shooting.

He crashed head-on into the skinny form of Twist Corum, who was just pointing a revolver at the back of Bob Cottrell's white head. Corum screeched in terror, as he recognized Frost, and made a desperate effort to bring his gun to bear. Before he could press the trigger, Frost had fired. His bullet punched out the gangster's staring right eye and drove into the warped brain.

Cole was on his feet, hopping grotesquely to keep his balance because his ankles were still bound. His hands gripped a chair, and his eyes were wild with a fierce joy as he shouted, "Get 'em, Tony!" and lifted the chair aloft, trying to bring it down on the head of the gigantic Dillon, who was grappling with Bob Cottrell.

Freddie Cross, squat and swarthy, was sprawled on the floor, crimson gushing from a cut in his cheek. He aimed a revolver at Cole and yanked the trigger. The industrialist looked mildly surprised. His hands dropped the chair, and he lost his balance and sat down. Blood streamed from his left shoulder, spreading over the gray tweed of his coat.

Frost's automatic belched lead again. The slug ripped into Freddie Cross' stomach. The squat killer grunted and put both hands to the wound. All at once he began to vomit blood, horribly.

Dillon sent Cottrell staggering back with a vicious kick. Frost could not fire at the murder czar for fear of hitting the governor, but Dillon had no such scruples. He bared his teeth in a snarl of hatred and loosed a bullet at the detective. Frost's left leg doubled beneath him, and he felt a searing pain in the thigh.

"See you in hell!" Dillon roared, and darted from the room.

Frost clung to a table to keep from

falling. His forehead was cut by glass, and a red curtain seemed to have descended over his eyes. He could not follow Dillon. He could only hope that Macklin, outside, would be in time to stop him.

BOB COTTRELL had his arm around Cole. He had unfastened the ropes at Cole's ankles and was helping him to rise. Cottrell kept saying over and over: "You damned old liar!" His tone was affectionate.

"I am not a liar!" Cole denied vehemently. "I only promised not to follow you. I didn't promise not to look over your shoulder and see what address you wrote down when you got that phone call. I came here on my own, and I wouldn't have got caught if I hadn't fallen down and made a lot of racket in the front yard."

Beatrice Storme knelt beside the governor's son. She had taken the gag from his mouth and was fumbling with the cords that bound his wrists and feet. Happy tears streaked her face. Alex Cottrell's eyes were glistening suspiciously, too, despite the fact that one of them was bloodshot and circled with blue; that his face was swollen from a beating at his captor's hands.

As soon as his arms were free, he reached for the girl, murmuring: "Sweetheart!"

A gun barked outside. Hearing it, Frost shook his head to clear it. He brushed the blood from his eyes and grasped the chair Cole had dropped. Using the chair as a crutch, he limped painfully to the front door.

A man was lying in the center of the road. Macklin, his revolver in his hand, was just lumbering up. A few feet away, the veiled woman stood listlessly, her shoulders sagging. The man in the road was Dillon, Frost saw when he got nearer, and he was dead.

"That's the best shot you ever made, Pete!" Frost said.

Macklin shook his head sadly. "It wasn't me," he declared. "I didn't get

a chance at any of it. *She* shot him!" . Frost looked at her, bewildered. "Florence Blaine! How in the world—"

"I wanted to kill him," she said simply. "You gave this address to your secretary, and I heard her repeat it. I found a pistol in her dresser and slipped away while she was calling a doctor for me. I waited till he came out, and shot him."

Frost extended his hand solemnly. "You've done the world a favor," he told her. "Don't worry about getting in any trouble about it. Macklin, here, will take the blame for shooting him, if you want to avoid publicity."

"Blame, did you say?" Macklin demanded. "I'll be proud to take the credit, if that's what you mean. But why shouldn't she?"

She said, wearily: "No. I only want to rest for a while. I've done what I could for Chet's sake. I don't even want to think about that—beast."

"Then," exulted Macklin, "I'm practically a sergeant already—and I'm your friend for life, lady!"

Frost was feeling in the dead man's pockets. He found the official document that might have freed the mad-dog killer, Fontaine. He found the false confessions Beatrice and Alex Cottrell had been forced to sign. They were wet with blood, but he read parts of them in the lights of an approaching taxi before he began to tear them to tiny bits.

Cole appeared on the porch. Bob Cottrell was still supporting him much to the manufacturer's disgust. Cole was storming:

"Now that you've called the prison and told them to go ahead with the execution, why don't you let go of me and start patting yourself on the back? You old ward-heeler, you've saved your job and your reputation by the skin of your teeth. Now, if it hadn't been for me—"

He saw Frost shredding the papers, and grinned suddenly.

The approaching taxi stopped with a moan of brakes, and Julia Rudow jumped out and ran toward Frost.

"Chief! I only took my eyes off her for a second, and she got out with my gun. Then I suspected she might have overheard this address, and I hurried—" Her blue eyes widened. "You're hurt!" she said, horror-stricken.

Frost put his arm around her, the one that wasn't hanging on to the chair. It didn't matter that his blood stained her dress. He felt happy. The deaths of the three gangsters had gone far toward evening things up for the bank guard, Chet Carr and the precinct sergeant. Beatrice and Alex and the governor were safe from undeserved disgrace. Nothing could ever repay Florence for the loss of Chet, but time would dull the ache and Cole would make good on his promise to give her a career, and that would help.

He said to Julia: "You did just right, taking your eyes off her for that second. Otherwise, justice would have been cheated. As it is, everything's swell, and that includes you. Remind me to appreciate you twice as much when I get out of the hospital."



To save the girl he loved, Detective Doug Weldon challenged killer's hell-guns—with his personal

Reply to Satan



By Ralph Franklin



IN some dark office a phone was ringing with peevish insistence. Its clamor, through the closed door, trickled down the corridor like a wail of a neglected child.

An elevator clanked open its doors. The trim, alert-looking young fellow who stepped from the car quickened his long-legged stride. At the panel lettered "Douglas Weldon, Investigations," he keyed his way in, punched on the light with an accurate thumb, and scooped up the complaining instrument.

"Doug Weldon speaking," he announced.

A nasal whine, which wavered between relief and exasperation, came scratchily. "Been trying to get you, Mr. Weldon. Got a message for you—

sort of urgent, I guess. From Miss Faye Morrow. She—"

Muscles tightened in Weldon's lean jaw. Unconsciously he gripped the handset harder, while a shadow of concern invaded his wide-spaced gray eyes. He jerked out brusquely: "Well?"

The nasal scratch started afresh. "I work at the public library—news-paper back-file department. Miss Morrow came in tonight before we closed. Often does—to look up things for her paper. Tonight—" quavering uncertainty lifted the voice to falsetto shrillness— "well, tonight she slipped me a note, stuck inside a newspaper so nobody would see. I—"

"What did it say, man?" Weldon shook his phone angrily, as if to jar the words out faster.

"Said to call you for one thing," the querulous whine pinched out cautiously. "Said she couldn't—somebody

watching. And that's not all she wanted—not by a long shot! I did what she said, but wish now I hadn't. A certain party in this town—well it doesn't pay to mess with him.”

The tall dick gritted his teeth. “Quit stalling!” he snapped. “What’re you driving at?”

“Not mentioning any names, mister,” the other replied evasively. “No, sir! I don’t want to get mixed up in anything. But let me tell you this—you better get over to that crazy young woman’s place before something happens to her. She—”

“Is that what she wanted?” Weldon cut in sharply. “For me to meet her there?”

“That’s it,” the voice admitted. “And if you’ve got any hold over that fool reporter girl, you better make her mind her step—because she’s sure enough playing with dynamite!”

A sharp click jarred the dick’s ear drum. He slammed down his handset with an oath. But abruptly he snatched it up again, spun the dial to Faye Morrow’s number. Not even the ringing signal came over the wire. Her line was dead! Worry narrowed his eyes, for he figured this was no chance occurrence.

“Little fool!” he muttered through set teeth.

He whipped open a cabinet and stuffed a hurried handful of revolver cartridges into his pocket. What the night would bring forth he didn’t know, but he intended to have plenty of munitions.

Down on the street he swung aboard a cruising cab, barked directions to the startled hackie. His heavy .45 was a comforting drag at his shoulder as he braced himself with the hand-strap and urged his driver to greater speed.

Wild notions jostled loosely in his head. His unknown informant had divulged just enough to make almost anything seem possible. One thing, though, he could be sure of. That name the fellow feared to mention! To that there could be just one answer—Steve

Lorch! Unofficial ruler of the city, string-puller, master of strong-arm methods. Doug Weldon didn’t know what Faye had let herself in for, but it might be pretty serious.

She’d intended to drop in on the political big shot, to shove some pointed questions at him. Recently he’d been involved in the Tri-State Electric franchise, a deal that smelled to high heaven of bribery, graft, coercion. As reporter for the single sheet with courage enough to attack Steve Lorch’s reign of greed, Faye Morrow had made it a personal pledge to fasten something on him that would blast him off his throne.

Partly because of Faye’s impetuous daring, partly because of grievances of his own to square with the political czar, Doug Weldon had practically turned his agency into an organization with a single creed: “Get Lorch!”

AS he flung a bill to his driver and sprinted into the old apartment building where the girl reporter lived, apprehension tightened the young dick’s throat. If anything had happened to her through Steve Lorch’s doing, he vowed he’d take that big grafter apart with bare hands. Vainly he wished now he’d tried to tone down her reckless enthusiasm, wished he’d impressed upon her the utter ruthlessness with which Lorch cut down his enemies.

At her door he gave the three sharp rings which were his special signal. Breathlessly he waited for her to appear, safe, bubbling with high spirits, to tease him for his unwarranted anxiety.

She must have been standing just inside, he thought, for the panel swung open at once. He stepped quickly within. The foyer was unlighted, except for rays which filtered from the living-room beyond. Even as he noted this, he sensed a trap and inwardly cursed himself for walking straight into it.

He started to whirl toward the dim figure glimpsed in the half-light be-

side him, but felt the small, cold ring of a gun-muzzle pressed hard against his neck. A still colder voice warned: "Easy does it."

The hard circle of steel prodded him toward the lighted living-room. Obediently he took three forward steps. What happened then wasn't so much a matter of conscious planning as of long experience in handling tight situations. He dropped suddenly in his tracks. The metal left his neck as his captor, coming behind, stumbled against his bent-over figure. Before the fellow could recover Weldon twisted sidewise. His arm whipped about the gunman's neck, dragged him around in a tight half-circle. A lightning shift of position, a quick, powerful jerk, and the man went catapulting over Weldon's shoulder into the living-room.

He crashed on his spine with jarring impact. The gun flew out of his hand. Flushed with battle, the dick poised for a flying leap to finish the fray, when another voice cut in sharply: "Look—this way—before you leap!"

The detective checked himself, caught the tableau from the corner of his eye before he could even turn his head. Helpless fury quivered his wire-taut muscles. That voice—oily, confident, full of power—was Steve Lorch's full-throated bass. The political czar stood in a far corner, holding in his burly arms the twisting, struggling figure of lovely Faye Morrow. One hairy paw was pressed against her mouth, to choke off the scream that would have warned Weldon of the trap.

In front of the girl, with a blue-steel automatic hard against the soft curve of her bosom, hunched the apelike figure of "Cokey" Mathews, Lorch's bodyguard. A bestial grin contorted his stupid face. The slightest added pressure on his trigger finger would send a slug ripping through the girl reporter's heart.

"Thought that would freeze you," Lorch drawled complacently. "Fan him, Joe."

The bullet-headed thug Weldon had just tossed on his neck scrambled painfully up from the floor. Murderous hatred, barely held in check by the will of his master, Steve Lorch, glared hotly in tiny, red-flecked eyes. Roughly he jerked the detective's gun out of its shoulder harness. With a back-hand swipe he dragged the sights along Weldon's cheek, opening a cruel red furrow from cheek-bone to lip.

FAYE MORROW, blue eyes blazing liquid fire, tore loose from restraining hands, streaked across the room like an avenging fury. Unmindful of the leveled gun which followed her movement, her nails found Joe's face, raked deeply down his stubbly jaw.

"That's how it feels!" she shrieked.

The bullet-headed gunman cuffed her brutally into a chair, and the nose of Cokey Mathew's gun moved up close again to keep her there. She cast a rueful glance at Weldon, as if sorry for bringing him into this. He managed a wry grin in return.

"Nice," he grunted, as he surveyed the torn-up room. Papers from the girl's little cherrywood desk lay strewn across the floor. Window drapes were torn down, and even the upholstery of the furniture had been slashed open. "Button, button, who's got the button?"

Lorch's even white teeth gleamed in a face of fish-belly white. "More than a button, snooper." He turned to his henchman. "Go to work on the dame, Cokey. Make her dig up the stuff." Politely he explained to Weldon: "Your girl friend is a thief. She sneaked some papers from my office this evening. They have no value. In fact, I intended to burn them as soon as some other gentlemen arrived to watch me do it. But they would, I'll admit, be quite embarrassing to me if they reached the wrong parties."

The detective sniffed. "Losing your touch, aren't you, big shot? Just think of it—Steve Lorch so careless as to keep incriminating papers around!"

LORCH met the sarcasm with smiling indulgence. "I had my eye on them," he said. "But that wasn't enough. Your charming little friend, Miss Morrow, was so clever as to slit the bottom of the envelope that held them. Smart girl—too smart!" He eyed her with frank appraisal. "She'd look nice on a marble slab, wouldn't she?"

Her involuntary shudder brought a sardonic grin to his heavy lips.

"You were right, Doug!" the girl burst out to Weldon. "On the Tri-State Electric deal Lorch had his dirty finger in it clear up to the elbow. The evidence was all there—everything. Letters he wrote, canceled checks—the works! The Tri-State gang paid him seventy thousand to grab the franchise for them. He paid out about twenty thousand buying the votes he needed on the city council."

The dick felt a surge of elation. Good girl! She'd managed to do it—get the dope that would nail Lorch to the cross. He'd done worse things, no doubt, but they couldn't be proved. Even now, unless Faye had managed somehow to get rid of those papers, pass them into other hands for safe-keeping, it looked as if her clever stunt would go for nothing.

"I told you to go to work, Cokey," Lorch reminded his squat bodyguard. "The stuff is here—we know that. So it's just—"

Weldon came half out of his chair as Cokey laid his brutal paw on Faye Morrow's wrist. But Joe's menacing gun poked hard against the back of his head. The girl herself sent him a glance that meant—

What? She was playing some sort of game, but what it was the private dick couldn't fathom. His nails bit deep into tight-clenched fists as Cokey twisted Faye's arm till a low moan of pain forced past her lips. The dick's teeth gnawed unnoticed at the corner of his mouth, brought blood. He'd go nuts, he felt, if Cokey pressed Faye's arm any farther back. Why did she warn him, every time he started up,

not to interfere? A little more—and her arm would break!

"Faye!" he blurted. "Let me get the stuff!"

The girl, lips tightly compressed to hold back a shriek of anguish, nodded mutely. Weldon jumped to his feet, and, while Joe's gun kept him company at close range, he strode across to the radio which stood in the space between two tall windows. He yanked the cabinet out from the wall, removed the wooden panel on the back. Inside was a narrow space Faye sometimes used to hide things in.

The papers were there. As he tugged them forth, he was for a moment partly concealed behind the cabinet. He noted with surprise that Faye had installed one of the metal strip antennas which ran up the wall and around the molding of the room. That was odd, for he knew the instrument had a built-in loop antenna that was entirely satisfactory. When he touched the narrow strip, he discovered that gold coloring came off on his finger. He repressed a whistle of astonishment. Now he began to understand why Faye acted as if she had an ace up her sleeve.

"Take 'em," Weldon told Lorch,

The big shot eagerly thumbed his way twice through the papers. "All here," he admitted finally, nodding his satisfaction. "So ends your little escapade, Miss Morrow." Pursing his lips, he demanded: "Why did **you** act as you did? You must've known I'd miss the papers immediately, would send somebody after you. So why didn't you try to rush them somewhere, get rid of them?"

Faye Morrow rubbed her tortured arm, answered bitterly: "I knew as soon as I tried to ditch them, your hired killers would close in. I didn't want to be the cause of anyone being murdered. That's why I stayed away from the D.A., from my office. I—"

Lorch dubiously shook his massive head. "You dashed away from my office in a cab. Of all places to go, you

(Continued on page 122)

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(Continued from page 120)

went straight to the public library. You made no attempt to get the papers duplicated, didn't go near a photostating shop or—"

Doug Weldon didn't like this line of questioning. He tried to turn it aside by gritting out: "You got what you came for, big shot. Now scram!"

"No hurry," Lorch answered smilingly, his tone somehow ominous. "I've still some things to take care of, now that I'm here."

HE piled the documents on a little teakwood table that was a cherished antique of Faye's. Deliberately he touched a match to the stack. The papers blazed up, ruining the table top, then burned down to a crisp

"One other little thing," he announced. "You must realize, both of you, what a considerable nuisance you've been to me." Sadistic anticipation crept into his gloating voice. "Not only in this matter, but on other occasions too. You're likely to keep right on being a nuisance in the future if I let you. So don't you think this would be a splendid time for me to—ah—liquidate you?"

"You wouldn't dare!" Faye cried.

"Why not?" Lorch purred softly.

"No one saw me come—no one will see me go. The rear entrance is most convenient. This is an old building with few tenants, so I doubt whether your loudest scream would bring assistance. As for the little noise that Joe's gun will make, that can easily be covered by turning on the radio."

Weldon looked quizzically at Faye. This, apparently, was something she hadn't anticipated. It seemed that she'd expected Lorch to come to retrieve his papers, but from that point on she hadn't figured straight. There was, as Lorch stated, no reason why he couldn't get away with double murder.

"It will be a tabloid's delight," Steve Lorch smirked. "Outraged lover murders sweetheart—then turns gun on

(Continued on page 124)

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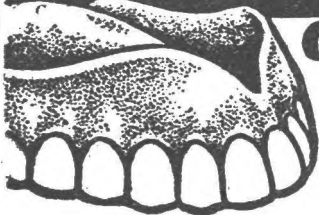
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(Continued from page 122)

self. Quite likely you won't be discovered until your paper sends someone to find out why you didn't show up at the office and why your telephone won't work." He gestured theatrically to Cokey. "Loud music!"

Cokey started forward. Joe lifted Weldon's gun, looked to Lorch for the signal.

"Wait!" burst out Faye. She flung herself before Steve Lorch, her small hands set defiantly on her hips. "Listen to me, you self-satisfied, puffed-up slug! You think your hired stooges followed me, watched me, every minute of the time till I reached home. Well, they did—but they didn't see everything. At the library I slipped out a note. I wrote it in the cab that took me there."

"She's stallin', boss," protested Joe. "Lemme give it to her."

"That's just the start," Faye raced on, warming to her subject. "You probably never heard of it, but there's such a thing as micro-photography. My paper's started to use it, to preserve old files in small space. Libraries use it for the same purpose."

Lorch listened attentively, a look of mingled amusement and worry on his big, unwholesomely white face. "Very educational," he bantered. "Please go on."

"I'll go on," the girl flung back. "With this process, they film whole pages of newspapers on strips of film just thirty-five millimeters wide. These films have to be used with a projector—or else they're too tiny to read. That," she rapped out triumphantly, "is just what happened to your precious documents! I slipped them out in that same newspaper that carried the note—and the fellow in the photographing room made quick shots of them on a film strip. As soon as he'd finished, he slipped them back to me the same way, together with a copy he'd printed from the negative."

Lorch rubbed his chin uneasily, evidently wondering how much of this to believe. His look gradually

turned to panic as Faye added: "As soon as I left, he was to make up two more copies of the film—one for the D.A. and one for my editor. By this time they've been delivered, so it doesn't matter whether you find my copy here or not."

Steve Lorch lurched gaspingly toward the girl, his huge paws lifted as if to seize her slender throat, and throttle her. He stopped, frozen in mid-stride, when a sharp ring sounded at the door.

"Joe," he whispered huskily. "See who it is."

The bullet-headed henchman started uncertainly for the entrance, his little red-tinged eyes darting from side to side, like those of a trapped animal seeking escape. A moment later he called back to say that it was just a messenger boy. He brought in a package, thumped it down on the table.

Lorch's face underwent a spasm of relief. Obviously he'd expected blue-coats. Appraisingly he eyed the little package, then ripped off the cover. From within fell a tumbling mass of photographic film. Faye's eyes widened, horror-stricken, as she watched it cascade through his fingers, Lorch, speechless with triumph, clawed open the note which accompanied the films.

Laughing hysterically, he announced: "Your boy friend at the library—he got cold feet! If you want to send out copies of this, he says, send them yourself. Everything's here, even the master negative!"

"That lily-livered punk!" Weldon gritted through clenched teeth.

THE political czar beamed again, once more restored to his usual composure. "Now we can go right ahead with our little liquidating affair. Only one thing needs to be added to the original plans. Of course, I could make you reveal where you've hidden the other copy of the film, but there's no need. Film is very inflammable. You see, it burns!"

He applied a match to the piled coils

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| 30x5.00-31 | 2.65 | 1.60 | | 32x5.00-31 | 3.05 | 1.60 | 32x5.00 |
| 30x5.25-29 | 2.70 | 1.70 | | 32x5.25-29 | 3.15 | 1.70 | 32x5.25 |
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| 30x5.25-31 | 2.80 | 1.90 | | 32x5.25-31 | 3.35 | 1.90 | 32x5.25 |
| 30x5.50-29 | 2.85 | 2.00 | | 32x5.50-29 | 3.45 | 2.00 | 32x5.50 |
| 30x5.50-30 | 2.90 | 2.10 | | 32x5.50-30 | 3.55 | 2.10 | 32x5.50 |
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| 30x5.75-29 | 3.00 | 2.30 | | 32x5.75-29 | 3.75 | 2.30 | 32x5.75 |
| 30x5.75-30 | 3.05 | 2.40 | | 32x5.75-30 | 3.85 | 2.40 | 32x5.75 |
| 30x5.75-31 | 3.10 | 2.50 | | 32x5.75-31 | 3.95 | 2.50 | 32x5.75 |
| 30x6.00-29 | 3.15 | 2.60 | | 32x6.00-29 | 4.05 | 2.60 | 32x6.00 |
| 30x6.00-30 | 3.20 | 2.70 | | 32x6.00-30 | 4.15 | 2.70 | 32x6.00 |
| 30x6.00-31 | 3.25 | 2.80 | | 32x6.00-31 | 4.25 | 2.80 | 32x6.00 |
| 30x6.25-29 | 3.30 | 2.90 | | 32x6.25-29 | 4.35 | 2.90 | 32x6.25 |
| 30x6.25-30 | 3.35 | 3.00 | | 32x6.25-30 | 4.45 | 3.00 | 32x6.25 |
| 30x6.25-31 | 3.40 | 3.10 | | 32x6.25-31 | 4.55 | 3.10 | 32x6.25 |
| 30x6.50-29 | 3.45 | 3.20 | | 32x6.50-29 | 4.65 | 3.20 | 32x6.50 |
| 30x6.50-30 | 3.50 | 3.30 | | 32x6.50-30 | 4.75 | 3.30 | 32x6.50 |
| 30x6.50-31 | 3.55 | 3.40 | | 32x6.50-31 | 4.85 | 3.40 | 32x6.50 |
| 30x6.75-29 | 3.60 | 3.50 | | 32x6.75-29 | 4.95 | 3.50 | 32x6.75 |
| 30x6.75-30 | 3.65 | 3.60 | | 32x6.75-30 | 5.05 | 3.60 | 32x6.75 |
| 30x6.75-31 | 3.70 | 3.70 | | 32x6.75-31 | 5.15 | 3.70 | 32x6.75 |
| 30x7.00-29 | 3.75 | 3.80 | | 32x7.00-29 | 5.25 | 3.80 | 32x7.00 |
| 30x7.00-30 | 3.80 | 3.90 | | 32x7.00-30 | 5.35 | 3.90 | 32x7.00 |
| 30x7.00-31 | 3.85 | 4.00 | | 32x7.00-31 | 5.45 | 4.00 | 32x7.00 |
| 30x7.25-29 | 3.90 | 4.10 | | 32x7.25-29 | 5.55 | 4.10 | 32x7.25 |
| 30x7.25-30 | 3.95 | 4.20 | | 32x7.25-30 | 5.65 | 4.20 | 32x7.25 |
| 30x7.25-31 | 4.00 | 4.30 | | 32x7.25-31 | 5.75 | 4.30 | 32x7.25 |
| 30x7.50-29 | 4.05 | 4.40 | | 32x7.50-29 | 5.85 | 4.40 | 32x7.50 |
| 30x7.50-30 | 4.10 | 4.50 | | 32x7.50-30 | 5.95 | 4.50 | 32x7.50 |
| 30x7.50-31 | 4.15 | 4.60 | | 32x7.50-31 | 6.05 | 4.60 | 32x7.50 |
| 30x7.75-29 | 4.20 | 4.70 | | 32x7.75-29 | 6.15 | 4.70 | 32x7.75 |
| 30x7.75-30 | 4.25 | 4.80 | | 32x7.75-30 | 6.25 | 4.80 | 32x7.75 |
| 30x7.75-31 | 4.30 | 4.90 | | 32x7.75-31 | 6.35 | 4.90 | 32x7.75 |
| 30x8.00-29 | 4.35 | 5.00 | | 32x8.00-29 | 6.45 | 5.00 | 32x8.00 |
| 30x8.00-30 | 4.40 | 5.10 | | 32x8.00-30 | 6.55 | 5.10 | 32x8.00 |
| 30x8.00-31 | 4.45 | 5.20 | | 32x8.00-31 | 6.65 | 5.20 | 32x8.00 |
| 30x8.25-29 | 4.50 | 5.30 | | 32x8.25-29 | 6.75 | 5.30 | 32x8.25 |
| 30x8.25-30 | 4.55 | 5.40 | | 32x8.25-30 | 6.85 | 5.40 | 32x8.25 |
| 30x8.25-31 | 4.60 | 5.50 | | 32x8.25-31 | 6.95 | 5.50 | 32x8.25 |
| 30x8.50-29 | 4.65 | 5.60 | | 32x8.50-29 | 7.05 | 5.60 | 32x8.50 |
| 30x8.50-30 | 4.70 | 5.70 | | 32x8.50-30 | 7.15 | 5.70 | 32x8.50 |
| 30x8.50-31 | 4.75 | 5.80 | | 32x8.50-31 | 7.25 | 5.80 | 32x8.50 |
| 30x8.75-29 | 4.80 | 5.90 | | 32x8.75-29 | 7.35 | 5.90 | 32x8.75 |
| 30x8.75-30 | 4.85 | 6.00 | | 32x8.75-30 | 7.45 | 6.00 | 32x8.75 |
| 30x8.75-31 | 4.90 | 6.10 | | 32x8.75-31 | 7.55 | 6.10 | 32x8.75 |
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| 30x9.00-30 | 5.00 | 6.30 | | 32x9.00-30 | 7.75 | 6.30 | 32x9.00 |
| 30x9.00-31 | 5.05 | 6.40 | | 32x9.00-31 | 7.85 | 6.40 | 32x9.00 |
| 30x9.25-29 | 5.10 | 6.50 | | 32x9.25-29 | 7.95 | 6.50 | 32x9.25 |
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| 30x9.25-31 | 5.20 | 6.70 | | 32x9.25-31 | 8.15 | 6.70 | 32x9.25 |
| 30x9.50-29 | 5.25 | 6.80 | | 32x9.50-29 | 8.25 | 6.80 | 32x9.50 |
| 30x9.50-30 | 5.30 | 6.90 | | 32x9.50-30 | 8.35 | 6.90 | 32x9.50 |
| 30x9.50-31 | 5.35 | 7.00 | | 32x9.50-31 | 8.45 | 7.00 | 32x9.50 |
| 30x9.75-29 | 5.40 | 7.10 | | 32x9.75-29 | 8.55 | 7.10 | 32x9.75 |
| 30x9.75-30 | 5.45 | 7.20 | | 32x9.75-30 | 8.65 | 7.20 | 32x9.75 |
| 30x9.75-31 | 5.50 | 7.30 | | 32x9.75-31 | 8.75 | 7.30 | 32x9.75 |
| 30x10.00-29 | 5.55 | 7.40 | | 32x10.00-29 | 8.85 | 7.40 | 32x10.00 |
| 30x10.00-30 | 5.60 | 7.50 | | 32x10.00-30 | 8.95 | 7.50 | 32x10.00 |
| 30x10.00-31 | 5.65 | 7.60 | | 32x10.00-31 | 9.05 | 7.60 | 32x10.00 |
| 30x10.25-29 | 5.70 | 7.70 | | 32x10.25-29 | 9.15 | 7.70 | 32x10.25 |
| 30x10.25-30 | 5.75 | 7.80 | | 32x10.25-30 | 9.25 | 7.80 | 32x10.25 |
| 30x10.25-31 | 5.80 | 7.90 | | 32x10.25-31 | 9.35 | 7.90 | 32x10.25 |
| 30x10.50-29 | 5.85 | 8.00 | | 32x10.50-29 | 9.45 | 8.00 | 32x10.50 |
| 30x10.50-30 | 5.90 | 8.10 | | 32x10.50-30 | 9.55 | 8.10 | 32x10.50 |
| 30x10.50-31 | 5.95 | 8.20 | | 32x10.50-31 | 9.65 | 8.20 | 32x10.50 |
| 30x10.75-29 | 6.00 | 8.30 | | 32x10.75-29 | 9.75 | 8.30 | 32x10.75 |
| 30x10.75-30 | 6.05 | 8.40 | | 32x10.75-30 | 9.85 | 8.40 | 32x10.75 |
| 30x10.75-31 | 6.10 | 8.50 | | 32x10.75-31 | 9.95 | 8.50 | 32x10.75 |
| 30x11.00-29 | 6.15 | 8.60 | | 32x11.00-29 | 10.05 | 8.60 | 32x11.00 |
| 30x11.00-30 | 6.20 | 8.70 | | 32x11.00-30 | 10.15 | 8.70 | 32x11.00 |
| 30x11.00-31 | 6.25 | 8.80 | | 32x11.00-31 | 10.25 | 8.80 | 32x11.00 |
| 30x11.25-29 | 6.30 | 8.90 | | 32x11.25-29 | 10.35 | 8.90 | 32x11.25 |
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| 30x11.75-30 | 6.65 | 9.60 | | 32x11.75-30 | 11.05 | 9.60 | 32x11.75 |
| 30x11.75-31 | 6.70 | 9.70 | | 32x11.75-31 | 11.15 | 9.70 | 32x11.75 |
| 30x12.00-29 | 6.75 | 9.80 | | 32x12.00-29 | 11.25 | 9.80 | 32x12.00 |
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| 30x12.50-31 | 7.15 | 10.60 | | 32x12.50-31 | 12.05 | 10.60 | 32x12.50 |
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of film. They went up in a bright, hissing blaze that released a pungent, acrid vapor. It smarted their eyes, set them all to coughing.

"It burns!" he repeated hilariously. "This building is old, full of wood. It would go like tinder." He spread his hands, shrugged. "That will put me entirely in the clear."

Faye flung herself briefly into Weldon's arms, murmured swiftly, "Sorry, Doug."

Immediately she darted aside to leave him a clear path for any last-minute effort he might make. It was three armed men against one unarmed, but she smiled encouragingly as Joe raised his gun with gloating deliberateness and sighted it full against her bosom. His finger slowly constricted against the trigger.

"Turn on the radio!" Lorch ordered Cokey.

Weldon stood poised like a runner awaiting the starting gun, every nerve and muscle keyed for instant, violent action. Beads of sweat dewed his brow, glistened brightly. His hands opened and shut spasmodically, while his jaws ground together in wordless tension.

Cokey flipped on the radio switch, then stepped aside, his own gun ready in his hand.

An instant later a shot crashed out from the direction of the windows. Joe's body pivoted toward the sound, the gun in his hand, leaping like a live thing as his finger automatically worked the trigger.

Weldon was on him in a flash. They slammed to the floor. As Cokey circled for a clear shot, Weldon rolled free. He wrenched at Joe's gun hand, trying to wrest the weapon from his grip. Cokey, still dazed by the speed with which things had happened, hadn't quite recovered his wits.

But his weapon drew a bead on Weldon's threshing body. Just as he fired, Faye struck his arm upward, diverted his slug so that it kicked up a cloud of plaster as it entered the far wall.

The detective, unable to break Joe's grip on the gun, turned its muzzle inward. Flame spurted twice. The first slug tore Joe's throat wide open. The second coursed upward through his face. Weldon jerked the weapon from lifeless fingers, triggered it at Cokey.

One of the gunman's slugs pierced Weldon's thigh, and another burned a crease across his right arm. He saw Lorch with a little automatic in his unsteady hand, firing wildly. On his knees, the detective grabbed for Cokey's leg and jerked. The apelike fellow plunged squarely into Lorch's line of fire. A slug from the little automatic embedded itself in his brain.

The big shot's gun clicked empty. Weaponless, he backed heavily against the radio, which still had not begun to play. He cringed there.

The wounded dick let a contemptuous snarl rip through his torn, bleeding lips. "Look, big shot," he jeered. "This is all that stands between you and going clear. This little piece of film!"

He seized the strip of gilded ribbon which ran from the radio up the side of the wall. "This isn't an antenna. It's gilt-edged evidence. Faye gilded it so that a lame-brain like you couldn't find it. Clean off the gilt, and it's evidence that'll send you up the river for a long, long stretch. Are you going to take the rap without making a fight? Haven't you the slightest trace of guts?"

LORCH eyed the narrow strip of painted film hungrily. A crafty gleam lighted his blood-shot eyes. He bunched himself like a bull to charge. Suddenly he came, the full weight of his ponderous body slamming against Weldon, hurling him back. Wildly the desperate politician snatched at the precious thin ribbon of evidence. His fingers barely touched the strip, didn't damage it, before Weldon flung him away, with a hard, slugging drive of his whole compact, fighter's body.

Lorch threw himself forward with a titantic burst of energy. For such a

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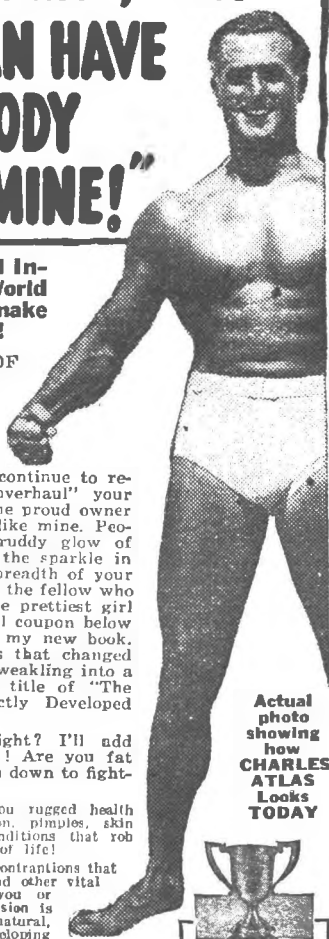
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big man, he moved with amazing speed. But Weldon, lightly as a ballet dancer, stepped nimbly from his path. The big shot, unable to check himself, struck full against the low-lying window. With a crash of glass and splintering of wood, he plunged through, carrying sash, blind and all.

Then he was gone. A fearful, soul-chilling shriek marked his plunge to the ground far below. It cut off sharply as he struck. Faye flung herself into Weldon's arms.

"Suicide, wasn't it?" she asked.

"Suicide," he answered solemnly. "That's the way it had to be. Now the city can clean house from top to bottom. No chance now for a jury to bring in a bribed acquittal, or for a soft parole board to turn him loose. There's no parole from hell."

"Maybe you can tend to your detecting now," Faye suggested.

"Yeah," he grinned. "Might make enough money to buy a house somewhere that a wife could live in."

Faye snuggled her head against him, and whispered, "I think I know where you could find the wife. But, Doug," she said, in puzzled tone, "tell me something. What about that shot that came from the window? I thought some one was covering the place from outside."

The dick chuckled. "That shot didn't come from the window. It came from the radio. From the first I didn't think Lorch would let us stay alive, knowing as much as we did. So, when I got the papers from the hiding place in the radio, I did something else. I figured they'd turn on the radio to cover the gunfire. So I wedged a cart-ridge into the switch, and as soon as Cokey turned the radio on, the current shorted through the brass casing."

"The heat exploded the cartridge?" Faye asked wonderingly.

"Sure," Weldon answered. "Probably even melted some of the metal. It ruined your set, but it got us out of a bad spot. When Lorch called the showdown, that was the only way to give him—a short answer."

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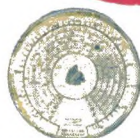
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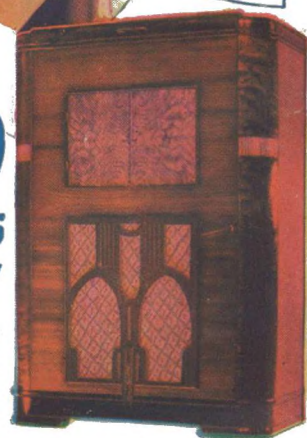
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