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The Fear Merchants

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The Fear Merchants - Secret Agent X

Brant House

CHAPTER I

The Crucible Of Crime

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

At the corridor's farther end a high window rose. The leader of the quartet stopped abruptly when he came to this. He was a big man, ruggedly built, with features that suggested cubist art. His head was almost square. His mouth was a straight line across a square-cut jaw. His eyebrows formed a higher line set at right angles to the jutting downsweep of his nose.

The others saw his profile outlined dimly against the faint glow that crept up from the street factory building that lay dark and still below. They watched as he softly raised the sash. They saw For seconds

he peered at this, eyes squinted up, him poke his head cautiously into the chill night air face stonily intent. Then he pulled himself in and and stare down three stories to the roof of the turned. There was a faint click as his electric flash went on. Holding the light cupped deftly in the palm of his big hand, he let its beam fall on the features of his companions, studying each as he had studied the roof below.

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

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

The holder of the flashlight scowled. “You’d better wait here, Peaselee.”

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

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

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

THE ROPE ladder finally lay swaying in the darkness like a giant

snake. Bates nodded grimly, swung a leg over the window sill and groped for the first rung with his foot. "When I get down, I'll jerk," he snapped. "Scallot, you come next."

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

The others followed. Peaselee came last of all. Yet, in spite of his awkward, trampish and feeble look, he didn't falter. Bates eyed him a moment, angular jaw thrust out. Then he gave final instructions to his men.

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

Bates angled his big body to the roof edge and peered down into the street. On both corners of the block, alert figures were visible.

Others prowled in the shadows across the way. There was a police cordon around the factory tonight. The way down the warehouse wall was the only means of entrance. This the police had overlooked.

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

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

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

moment the cover was lifted and the men were ready to descend.

Bates was scowling, keenly eyeing Peaselee. Then he clipped: “We’ll go straight down. Begin at bottom, work up. Easy with those lights.”

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

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

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

PEASELEE moved away from the others toward a cluttered corner of the room. His stabbing, tiny beam systematically covered every foot of wall space, every brace and pipe. His strange, dark eyes followed the

shifting ray with the questing eagerness of a hawk. Minutes passed. Suddenly he tensed and knelt.

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

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

Peaselee stared at the nozzle a moment, then jerked to his feet. His light arced upward. His quick eye followed the sprinkler pipe to the automatic vent above. There were dozens of those vents in every room of the building. If some substance containing calcium carbide had been put into the sprinkler system itself, if this were ignited, what would be the result?

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

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

He started toward it, suddenly stepped back. For a tongue of flame had spurted against the pipe.

It came from the wall, lancing outward through a break that had opened. Hot and straight as a torch, it played against the pipe.

There was a sizzling sound, a boiling. The pipe appeared to swell before their eyes. A crack opened in it, greasy liquid gushed out. In

an instant it glowed with lambent life, became a luminous, snakelike mass of writhing flame. The heat mounted, increasing internal pressure in the pipe. A melting, devouring fury of flame shot like a swift sword across the room. It struck the side of a great boiler, bit with the force of a gnawing canker into the steel.

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

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

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

The watchman they had heard came running to them, sweat streaming from

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

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

CHAPTER II

Fiend Of Fire

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

Peaselee abruptly drew the detective toward the north side of the room. Another chamber led off here. There was no glow of bursting sprinkler pipes in evidence as yet. But to reach it, he and the others had to run a gauntlet of savage flame. It singed their clothing as they swept by, it reached curling fingers at their flesh. They plunged on into the unlighted chamber, stopped.

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

No window, and the heat of the flames behind them was increasing every second. Escape by the exits was cut off. They were imprisoned by a

flaming barrier, sealed in this ventless chamber till more flame entered and snuffed out their lives in a torrent of molten steel.

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

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

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

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

A faint sputtering like an electric spark came from within the box.

Peaselee turned and dashed back toward the spot where he had left the

others. He pulled them down behind a piece of heavy machinery. Their blank faces showed that they did not understand.

Before they could even question him, a tremendous explosion shook the room. The floor seemed to rise and quiver. Plaster and bits of bricks whistled above their heads. Dust filled the air in stifling clouds. Deafening echoes sounded.

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

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

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the hiss of the flames outside, and the men's deep breathing. Then "Peaselee" nodded. He

pointed to the hole in the wall. “Follow me!”¹

They did so, obeying silently, quickly, like well-trained automata.

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

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

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

“And you, chief,” Harvey Bates said firmly.

“I’ll hold off the cops.”

1 AUTHOR’S NOTE: Followers of the Secret Agent’s published chronicles

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

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

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

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

They came on, guns gleaming, flashlights bobbing in their hands. There were only two of them he saw, but they had apparently glimpsed Harvey

Bates and his men and had heard their voices. One of the bluecoats crashed three quick shots along the hall. Bullets ricocheted, whined. The pungent smell of cordite rose to the Agent's nostrils. He waited, crouching, every muscle tense. They were only ten feet away, five feet. They were directly under him now.

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

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

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

One located his weapon when the Agent had taken fifty strides. But the cop's flashlight was broken and the corridor was dark. The bullets

that the policeman sent after X screamed harmlessly by. He ran on, reached the open door of the warehouse, plunged quickly through it—and he knew that Bates and his operatives were also safe.

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

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

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

Outside, along the wide avenue at the end of the street, sirens rose

in a screaming tumult. Already a half dozen alarms had been turned in. Fire engines and police radio cruisers were converging on this festering spot of incendiary crime.

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

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

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

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

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

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

another emergency call. Now it was proving its usefulness.

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

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

Police and firemen on the pavement saw it. Eyes in the dense crowd outside the fire lines watched its actions in straining silence. It banked once more, and came down till its black wings almost touched

the housetops—till a puff of heat made its striped fuselage roll like a cask at sea. And in that instant the gloved hand of the lone pilot moved out from the small plane's side.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III

Death's High Carnival

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

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

The Agent stood with clenched hands, eyes dark with horror. This was something he had not reckoned on. He had come on the trail of mysterious, undercover crime. He had come to investigate the activities of an arson ring which he knew was active in the city. Now

he was faced with the fact that the arsonists were also murderers, killers as fiendish, as merciless as any he had ever known. Death was holding high carnival around him. The firemen who had dared to interfere with the incendiaries' work had themselves become targets for destruction.

And the flames, like fiends rejoicing in newfound freedom, were leaping higher. Their livid light was reaching out across the street. The factory was doomed.

An ambulance clanged noisily down the block. It came nosing through the tense crowd and whirled up to the fire. Interns, their white suits turned red as blood by the light of the burning building, bent over the dead and dying and lifted them on stretchers. A half dozen of the hideously bloated bodies were borne away. Other ambulances joined the first. Following them came a long car filled with police detectives.

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

Burks, grim dealer in murder mysteries, was on hand.²

He was followed by a group of experts from headquarters. Fingerprint men, official photographers, an assistant medical examiner.

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

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

“I own that building!” he shouted. “I’m Herron—Jason Herron! Why isn’t something being done to stop the fire? What are the engines here

for?

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

“What are these men doing? I pay taxes! Why don't I get protection?”

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

“I don't care what's happened, or whether men have been injured. It's

their job to see that property owners aren't ruined. That's my building burning up!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Burks lifted a hard gray face and stared at Herron. His cold eyes seemed to bore through the factory owner. His answer was rasping. “Get

out! I'm not interested in you or your building. Men have been murdered tonight. That's all that interests me. Take a look at this corpse and stop your yelling. Be glad you aren't in this man's shoes! And if you've complaints to make, make them to the commissioner. I'm here to run down killers."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Agent knew her. She was a girl reporter from the Herald, Betty Dale, who took her job so seriously that she was usually among the first to arrive where news was hottest. More than that—she was one of the few people in all the world who knew of the Agent's daring, secret work. She was one of the few who had gone with him into the shadow of death during more than one grim battle with crime.³

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monkford nodded. “They’ll call me up and gloat as they did before. They’ll make new demands, and name another property to be destroyed if I don’t pay up. They’ll be sure now that I’ll agree.”

“Will you?” put in Betty Dale.

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

of her father's death that has given her a hatred of criminals as keen as the Agents own.

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

"Can you trust their promise?"

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

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

"What makes you say that?" Monkford snapped.

Herron's eyes wavered a moment. Fear crossed his face. His answer was

husky. “Because Santos gave me trouble a couple of times when I was building this factory. Labor trouble. He was the head of a racket. He made threats, and I had to meet his demands.”

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

“If you think Santos is back of these fires why didn’t you mention it to the police?”

HERRON quailed. “I shouldn’t have said it. I don’t know that he is. I only know—”

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

A police ambulance drew up and men from it lifted the body over which the assistant medical examiners had been bending. Burks and his squad

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

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

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

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

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

The Agent's second finger flicked a small control lever in the side of the radio case. It pitched the instrument to an entirely different wavelength. Bates could no longer hear him. The Agent got in touch with another crime-fighting organization which he maintained.⁴

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

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

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

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

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

This was what he had been waiting for. He edged through the tense crowd ahead of Monkford. He passed the insurance man's limousine, noted the uniformed chauffeur up front, and moved on almost to the end of the block. Here he stood close to the curb and casually lighted a

cigarette. In a moment Monkford's big limousine came nosing along. It was just beginning to gather speed after the congestion in the street.

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

CHAPTER IV

Doom's Disguise

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

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

With a shuddering gasp, the insurance company head fought for breath. But the battle lasted only a second. His indrawn breath had sucked the vapor deep in his lungs. His eyes began to glaze. His head fell forward. In a moment he was swaying inertly as a sack of grain.⁵

⁵ AUTHOR'S NOTE: The gun that fires a dense anesthetizing vapor is one of the Secret Agent's scientific weapons. It is loaded with cartridges

of a harmless chemical gas under pressure. The Agent never takes human life if he can help it. He battles with wits and science in his warfare on criminals.

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

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

Keeping his gun hand thrust through the partition window, he opened another at the limousine's side to let the gas escape. He had held his

breath to keep from being overcome himself. The air inside was stifling. Night wind flicked the vapor out.

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

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

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

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

the car forward.

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

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

He laid the chauffeur on a sofa, propped Monkford up in a comfortable

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

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

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

When the Agent turned to lift a tube of makeup from a table, light struck his face at a slant, and he looked suddenly older. Faint lines

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

The Agent squeezed fresh volatile plastic substance from a tube. He spread the stuff out with the tips of his powerful fingers that had the strength and delicacy of a sculptor's. He began creating Monkford's features on his own.⁶

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

When he ceased his work finally he was Monkford's double. And now, in the silence of the shuttered room, he practiced for a few moments the characteristic accents of Monkford, as he remembered them. The effect

was uncanny. The newly-created Monkford seemed to be talking in Monkford's own voice.

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

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

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

The building that housed the Great Eastern Insurance Company was a massive affair. One of several new downtown office buildings, it

towered above the block. But, with the exception of two uniformed guards, the great vestibule was deserted. The offices had long since closed for the day. The huge edifice was dark.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Right!" The Agent nodded. "Joe" meant Joe Reiss, the company's treasurer. The name was printed on one of the letterheads in

Monkford's pocket. Purcell had accepted him as Monkford, and now he was going to call the company's third official.

PURCELL dived into a telephone booth and made his call. The Agent opened the door of Monkford's office and turned on the light. He peeled off his coat and gloves. He looked about him. It was a handsome office as befitted the president of a company. A huge, flat-topped desk, a comfortable chair, a safe, a set of files. But the Agent did not attempt to go through the files just now. He was content to wait here until the arson ring called.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER V

Car Of Death

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

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

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

Horror tingled the Secret Agent's spine. He recalled the bloated, hideous face of the dead fireman he had seen. In all his contact with vicious criminals he had never heard of a terrorist weapon more

ghastly. The masked gunman seemed to sense the impression he was creating. A gloating laugh came from his lips.

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

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

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

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

sinister missile poised to throw.

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

The gunman had commandeered another elevator. It was the one in the rear of the building, used for freight and supplies. While Reiss and Purcell and the Agent crowded in a corner, one of the masked men operated it. The car sank slowly down the shaft.

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

A guard and the building's watchman lay on the floor. Under the glow of the single bulb that burned overhead their faces looked inhuman. They had the grayish pallor of death and they were hideously bloated;

grotesque monsters that had once been men, their features almost obliterated by the swelling. The man with the machine gun laughed.

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

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

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

“You mean you’re going to keep us prisoners?”

A mocking laugh was his only answer. The Agent’s brain seemed to be on fire. He got the drift of things now. They were being kidnaped. They would be held somewhere, or perhaps slaughtered later in some secret place. Neither of these things must happen. The real Monkford would come to in a few hours. He would escape from the house where the Agent held him. The criminals would learn that they had the wrong man, that

Agent X wasn't Monkford. And this would spell certain, horrible death for the Agent. They would destroy him ruthlessly for a meddler, as they had the firemen at the burning factory.

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

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

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

Purcell and Reiss had lapsed into frozen silence. X sat at the end of the seat silent also. No one of the masked criminals spoke. But there

was deadly precision in all their actions. Whatever plan they had in mind had been prearranged. The car drove as X had driven previously that evening. It followed dark streets, rolling at an unhurried pace, almost without noise. Somewhere ahead in the night a prison chamber or a torture chamber awaited them.

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

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

He made none, but the fingers of his left hand reached slowly out. Inches away a cigarette lighter dangled on a flexible cord. It was a small thing upon which to pin hope of life in the presence of death. A small thing, but the Agent was a gambler.

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

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

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

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

leader. The Agent had been waiting for this.

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

PURCELL and Reiss were screaming, swearing. One of the men up front swung in his seat with a shout. He tried to bring the muzzle of his weapon down on the Agent's head. Instead it struck the head of the masked leader whom X shoved forcibly back. Smoke from the burning cushion and the gun muzzles filled the whole interior of the car. In the blinding, thundering confusion X struck right and left. He was choking himself, eyes smarting and streaming with the fumes. His fist

glanced off the back of the driver's head and the man jerked the wheel.

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

As it stopped X turned the handle of the door and lashed out with his foot. Glass broke as the door flew open. Cold night air swept in. X clutched two human bodies, Purcell and Reiss, and dragged them with him. They hit the pavement together, went down in a heap, bounced up. Behind them an automatic cracked savagely and bullets slapped and screamed at their feet.

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

But the Agent didn't let them rest. Not till he'd led them deep into a

driveway between two empty houses did he pause. Then the siren of a police radio cruiser was screaming a dozen blocks away. The shots had aroused the whole neighborhood and some one had sent in a call.

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

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

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

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

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

“Let’s go to my place and talk it over,” said Purcell hoarsely. “We all need a drink. I do, anyway. And I’ve got guns there. We won’t take any chances from now on.”

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

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

“Get us some brandy, Shima,” Purcell snapped. While the yellow-skinned man hurried off for the liquor, Purcell went to a cabinet and pulled

out a box. He raised the cover, displaying a dozen automatics and revolvers of various types. There were also rifles, shotguns and shooting trophies in the cabinet.

Purcell selected three automatics, snapped them open and loaded each with a clip of shells. Then he passed the weapons around. “Never mind if you haven’t got permits,” he said grimly. “Keep these—and shoot to kill if those fiends come back. I’d rather die by bullets than—” He left the sentence unfinished, shuddered. Agent X pocketed Purcell’s weapon, a sardonic gleam in his eye.⁷

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

“See that all the doors and windows are locked, Shima,” said Purcell warningly. “Don’t let anybody in. And here—you’d better take one of these.” He handed the servant a small revolver, which the yellow man took with a frightened grimace. “We might have visitors,” Purcell added.

Shima bobbed his sleek, black head. “Shima understands,” he said. “The

devil men who set big fires may try to harm the honorable master.”

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

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

The Agent nodded, and for a moment his gaze clashed with the slant-eyed servant’s. Shima’s fingers were taut as claws around the siphon.

He was trembling violently. When he had finished distributing the soda, he quietly left the room. Moments later he returned, and said:

“Shima would like to speak to honorable master.”

“What is it, Shima?” Purcell asked.

“Shima would prefer to talk in private.”

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

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

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

Purcell returned in a moment, his lips tightly set. Holding one hand behind him, he fixed a burning gaze on the Secret Agent. “I—I can’t believe it!” he gasped. “But Shima says you aren’t Monkford!” He

licked his lips, peered downward. “Monkford’s left-handed. He never holds a glass like that!”

“What!” Reiss leaped to his feet, spilling his brandy.

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

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

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

The Agent was silent, blood pounding like a hammer in his temples. He was trapped. Each second he remained silent counted against him. He

fixed his eyes on Purcell, tried bluffing. “Get hold of yourself, Bill! You must be wrought up to suspect any such thing. Can’t you see I’m Monkford?”

“The numbers!” persisted Purcell.

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

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

Reiss lifted his voice.

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

CHAPTER VI

X Under Fire!

“DON’T MOVE!” warned Purcell. “Don’t move—or I’ll shoot! You must have murdered Monkford. I won’t hesitate to kill!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Purcell gasped. “Agent X! By heavens, you may be right! I’ve heard of him. One of the most dangerous criminals in the country.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

primitive methods of battle.

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

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

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

He swivelled his head, caught sight of blue uniforms and visored caps charging through the door. The grim faces of cops showed underneath the visors. There were two of them, occupants of the fast radio cruiser that had drawn up below. In their fingers police positives gleamed.

“This is the man!” screamed Reiss. “Help me. He’s killing—”

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

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

“No!” screamed Reiss, getting back his breath. “It’s this man who’s posing as Monkford.” The police stopped again. Their uncertainty gave

X his chance. He ran straight toward them in long flying leaps. He struck right and left with hammering fists, knocking them both to their knees. He reached the door and slammed it behind him plunging quickly along the apartment hall.

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

“Mr. Monkford!” he gasped. “What—what’s all the shooting?”

“Down!” said the Agent. “We’ve got to get more help!”

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

“Certainly!” The Agent’s arm flashed out. His open hand caught the

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

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

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

In his new role, sure that he wouldn't be recognized, he chartered a cab, raced back to the vicinity of his hideout where he had left Monkford. He walked the rest of the way on foot, entered the shuttered

house with a special key, came to a pause in the mysterious room whose silence was disturbed only by the breathing of the two sleeping men.

THE AGENT worked quickly, putting Monkford's clothes back on him, returning everything that had been in the pockets. Then he took the two unconscious men back to Monkford's car. He laid them on the floor of the rear compartment, spread a dark robe over them. But, before he drove the car out, he put on another set of plates, one of several he had made himself for just such occasions.⁸

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

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

The Agent paused in a dark doorway and his fingers went again to the tiny radio instrument at his belt. He engaged the cord of the receiver, tapped out the secret signals that would be heard by Bates.

Almost immediately an answering series of dots and dashes buzzed in the receiver. The Agent's fingers pressed the button key again.

“Waiting for report!”

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

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

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

“Good!” tapped X. “Have further plan of action. Arson ring can be expected to threaten other big insurance companies. Immediate installation of midget automatic dictographs in offices of all

executives necessary. Meet man named Sculley carrying tan suitcase at corner of Jay and Crosby Streets in half an hour. He will provide equipment.”

The Agent changed his radio to Jim Hobart’s wavelength. The redheaded operative who worked for the man he knew only as A. J. Martins corroborated Bates’ report on Herron and Santos. To him X issued a different order.

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

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

X left his temporary station and strode grimly off into the darkness.

He himself would play the role of “Sculley” and distribute midget dictographs to Harvey Bates and his operatives. He would then be in a position to learn any extortion threats the arson ring might send.

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

MAN OF MYSTERY, SECRET AGENT X,

BEHIND THREAT TO CITY

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

They remembered nothing of what had taken place during the time they had been unconscious. They didn't know where they had been taken. But it was obvious that a master of disguise had impersonated Monkford. That man, the police believed, could only be one person—Secret Agent X.

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

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

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

a short time, Secret Agent X would know.

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

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

“Norton King, head of Universal Insurance Company, contacted by arson ring this afternoon. Under threat of ten properties being destroyed, aggregating four million dollars in policies, has agreed to pay over two hundred thousand in cash for immunity. King will charter plane and pilot at City Airport, then fly due west at eight this evening with cash in suitcase. No other instructions. Plane equipped with radio may receive second message in air.”

The Agent clenched his fist as Bates stopped calling. He had expected something like this—a foolproof method of delivering the extortion

money when the arson ring contacted a victim sufficiently scared to yield.

The Agent gave Bates swift instructions not to attempt to shadow King.

He had obtained the information he desired. The rest was up to him.

CHAPTER VII

Sky Menace

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

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

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

Even before the arson ring had called him up, King had made his decision. If immunity could be bought he would buy it, however big the price. A two-hundred-thousand-dollar payment was better than having millions in property go up in smoke. And the good name of his company with it.

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

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

He dressed with particular care, putting on a tweed traveling suit,

trying to steady his jumping nerves with small routine activities. He paused at the door of his closet, frowning over which pair of low tan shoes he would wear—as though it mattered.

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

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

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

The strong wisteria vines held his weight. He reached King's window in

a moment. One glance through the crack under the shade told him, as he had figured, that this was the right room.

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

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

The insurance man's eyes bulged. X had appeared as swiftly, as miraculously as some apparition out of the night itself. X spoke

softly, with a steely, compelling note in his low-pitched voice.

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

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

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

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

KING’S frame was slightly bigger than his own. The clothes were slightly larger. He put them over the suit and trousers he was

wearing, and the garments beneath took up the slack. He appeared to be Norton King in the flesh as he straightened.

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

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

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

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

you'll hear from me in the morning.”

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

A taxi bore him to the downtown bank where he had learned previously that the suitcase of cash was ready. The bank employees, waiting overtime for his arrival, accepted him as King. He took the suitcase and was driven in twenty minutes to the City Airport.

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

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

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

“I like fresh air,” X muttered grimly.

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

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

“Yes, and don’t forget to keep your wing lights on.”

“Where will you be wanting to land?”

“You’ve got your radio. You’ll get instructions later on. Follow them.”

THE pilot still looked anxious. “It’s pretty indefinite, sir. What altitude would you like?”

“Two thousand will do, and—” the Agent lowered his voice grimly—
“don’t be surprised or lose your nerve whatever happens. If you handle the plane nicely there’ll be a hundred-dollar bonus.”

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

The Secret Agent, experienced veteran of the air, saw at once that his pilot knew his job.⁹

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

far below.

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

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

The Agent looked at the radium figures of his wrist-watch. Eight-thirty. An uneasy sense of waiting filled him. When would the sinister criminals send out their unseen instructions? X did not know. The plane droned steadily westward. In a half hour they had gone almost a hundred miles. He held the suitcase of cash gripped firmly between his knees.

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

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

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

The plane came down like a gray specter of the clouds, its superior

altitude giving it added speed as it dived.

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

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

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

X waited grimly, too. The black object had resolved itself into a man. He was hanging on the end of a rope ladder as the gray plane settled

lower. Already one arm was reaching out. Under the glow of the cockpit light something glinted in it. The man held a gun. This was how the criminals intended to make their contact. This was their foolproof scheme to pick up the cash. It was simple as well as daring, but the Secret Agent's mouth set in a hard, straight line. The man on the rope ladder was only twelve feet above him now. He was making gestures with his gun, beckoning. X could dimly see the gleam of his goggled eyes like those of some huge crustacean.

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

CHAPTER VIII

Webs Of Crime

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

Wind clutched and tore at him with giant fingers. The man he grasped was a human pendulum swinging in a sickening arc, a plunging weight of dynamic fury, seeking to break his hold and send him hurtling into the black void below. The man's fist beat a tattoo against his body. The man's breath fanned against his face. The gleaming, goggled eyes glared deadly hate.

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

of the bloating death.

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

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

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

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

The Agent jerked back, risking a loosening of his hold, forcing the man before him to straighten his arms. The strangling thumbs still held, biting deep into the Agent's glottis, shutting off his wind. The Agent struck up between them in a rocketlike jab that brought his knuckles against the man's bony chin. The man quivered, and his thumb hold lessened slightly. He butted his head forward savagely against the Agent's face. His helmeted skull pressed in the Agent's goggles, almost broke them against his eyes. Pain racked his forehead.

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

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

brain.

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

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

Then a light winked on. A dazzling, lancing beam fell on the Agent's upturned face, blinding him utterly. He swung backwards with all his might, under the belly of the ship, avoiding the beam. Momentum brought him back in a moment, the light caught him again, and a

sinister cough above the roar of the skycraft's motor told X that the pilot was shooting. The leaden lash of a bullet brushed his arm.

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

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

For a second his heart stood still He started to climb desperately.

What if he had killed the pilot?

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

earthward.

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

At first he thought the pilot had been shot and had lost control, then he sensed that the man was alive and filled with deadly purpose. He was power diving deliberately, trying to whip the Agent off. Somewhere below the black ground was rushing up. The mad dive continued through seconds that were eternities. Only the Agent's steely muscles prevented him from losing his hold. There could be no question of climbing now. If he hung on he would be lucky.

Breath came from his mouth in a choking gasp. He had turned his head slightly, into the teeth of the wind. He was staring down. The black earth had taken form and shape. There were lights showing, the lights of a broad highway. The pilot was plunging toward this. The man above had devised a sure way of killing him. In a matter of seconds now his body would strike; either against the trees that lined the highway, or

against the wires strung along it. The pilot was taking a chance to destroy him, counting that the frail rope would break, that X would be torn from his hold or battered into jelly.

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

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

With teeth clenched, knowing that certain death awaited him if he held on an instant longer, the Agent let go his hold and dropped. His body turned over and over in the air under the thrust of his battering momentum. He could see nothing, hear nothing, save the roar of the wind in his ears. An instant, without his knowing it, his life hung by

a slender thread. For the arc of his fall carried him almost beyond the pond, up to its very edge.

He struck in six feet of icy water with a mighty splash. Half on his back, half on his shoulders, the air was knocked from his lungs. The pond's surface seemed as unyielding as cement, so great was his speed. Only his thick coat saved him from broken bones. He ploughed through the water, choking, gasping, finally coming to a stop, feet jammed among slimy reeds.

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

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

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

The plane's landing lights and a spotlight mounted on the motor

cowling were on. It skimmed down so low that its airwheels almost brushed the back of the Agent. The pilot had seen him, realized the X wasn't dead. The man was shooting insanely.

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

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

They appeared to be hardly breathing. Their postures were frozen. Their glittering gazes were fixedly intent. No sound penetrated the chamber till one of them gave a short harsh laugh, coming almost as an

explosion in the silence. The words which followed, low and muffled by the fabric across his mouth, were like whispering echoes in the hideous twilight of a tomb.

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

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

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

He glared around imperiously for a moment. When no one answered he continued in an undertone of contempt. “Why get hysterical? Two hundred thousand is nothing to what we’ll make later on! Our plan has

unlimited scope, unlimited possibilities. This setback tonight needn't worry us. It's proof that our idea is fundamentally sound. People are becoming frightened. Frightened people will pay."

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

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

"With Secret Agent X!"

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

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

"Yes. He showed up the weakness of our method of collection. No one else would have dared attempt what he did, but the next time our

contacting plane might easily be shot down. Suppose there had been a million waiting instead of two hundred thousand! We would have lost that, too. We've got to find some better method."

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

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

"I don't get you!"

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

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

"Exactly. And we've had convincing proof of it. Even though we were familiar with his habits we didn't suspect that he'd play the part of

Norton King—not till the incident happened in the plane. He fooled us. Has it occurred to either of you that such a man, can go anywhere, appear as anybody he pleases through his ability at impersonation, would make the ideal collector for our own undertaking?”

The bodies of the two other black-masked figures tensed. “You’re being absurd, theatrical!”

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

“It can’t be done!” shouted the man at the speaker’s right. “You ought to know it. If that’s what you’ve had on your mind all along, you’re insane! X is a lone wolf, a crook who has no friends in the underworld and no allies. He plays for high stakes, but he always plays alone. We’ve nothing to offer that would make him join in with us. And if we had, we wouldn’t trust him.”

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

“Not X. He has power, position, money. He’s independent. You’d be playing with fire.”

The answer came in a tone that held arch cunning, gloating cruelty.

“Fire is our specialty. I have in mind a very unusual method of bargaining.”

CHAPTER IX

Murderers' Trap

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

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

The tinkle of the telephone startled her from her reverie. She got up, crossed the floor buoyantly in graceful, swinging strides, alert as always. For the sound of the phone often meant hot news. And, besides being a lovely, high-spirited girl, Betty Dale had built up a reputation for herself as a reporter. There were many gentlemen of the press who envied her her ability at piecing together a story from the most slender leads.

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

"This is Miss Dale speaking."

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

"What about?"

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

“All right, I’m listening.”

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

“Then why do you want to tell me about it?”

The husky voice at the other end of the wire became harshly sullen.

“Did you ever hear of a guy throwing a girl down? I got a chip on my shoulder, dearie. I got a chip as big as a log of wood. I’m a nice, quiet girl, but when a mug gets tough I get tough, too. I’m going to spill something that will tear this town wide open. And when I get through there’s going to be a certain mug who’ll wish he’d been nicer to his sweetie. Now, I guess you get me?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“All right,” said Betty. “I’m a blonde. I’ll be wearing a gray squirrel coat and a small gray hat.”

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

In a moment she was on the street. Ten minutes later a taxi had whirled her to the vicinity of Avenue A. She walked to it, headed uptown on the west side, and kept her eyes open for the “nifty dresser.” So intent was she scanning the sidewalk ahead that she didn’t notice the brown sedan nosing slowly along beside her. The light was dim now. The men in it, and the car itself, were hardly more than confused shadows. Betty did not turn until the car pulled in to the curb directly beside her. Then the cry of amazement and terror that rose in her throat froze in silence on her lips.

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

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

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

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

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

He stood in the shadows across from her apartment, back braced against an iron fence. He was staring up at her windows. A moment before he had given his strange, identifying whistle.¹⁰

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

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

was on.

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

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

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

The Agent crossed quickly to a small desk and opened a drawer. His pencil flash sprayed over its contents and abruptly he frowned. The automatic he had given her wasn't there. His nerve fibers tensed.

Among many secret understandings he had with Betty was one concerning this gun. She left it in the drawer except when danger threatened. Its disappearance now meant that Betty feared something. What?

The Agent's thoughts raced swiftly. Too often in the past the black cloud of crime had menaced her fearfully because of her association with him. He tried always to keep her from danger; but her courage, her loyalty made her an active worker for his cause. The Agent searched her apartment, hoping to find some message from her, some note or clue, and found none.

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

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

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

“A call. From whom?”

“Some woman. She didn’t give her name.”

“Did you hear what they said?”

“No, mister! I plugged in and let ‘em talk. I’m no eavesdropper.”

The Agent tipped his hat and hurried out.

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

MIDNIGHT came. One o’clock, two—and there was no news of Betty.

Abruptly the Agent's finger dropped to the button key of his radio set. His face was bleak. All evening, routine reports had come in from Hobart and Bates; messages that they were still trying to locate the racketeer, Boss Santos. Operatives who worked for X without knowing it in a score of American cities had searched for Boss Santos in vain.

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

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

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

ARSON RING THREATENS TO STRIKE

AGAIN TONIGHT

INSURANCE HEAD REFUSES TO PAY

EXTORTIONISTS

POLICE TO GUARD

DOOMED PROPERTY

Details of the sinister story followed:

L. L. Slater, head of the Mercantile Bonding & Indemnity Corporation of this city, received an extortion threat from the criminal arson ring this afternoon. The telephone was used. The message came from a

dial pay station which the police were unable to trace. Slater was told that if he did not pay five hundred thousand dollars for protection, the great department store of Jacoby & Sons, insured by his company, would be burned to the ground. Though Slater would not state the amount of the policy it is believed that the store is covered by a ten-million-dollar premium. Slater bluntly refused to accede to the criminals' demand and sought police protection. The threat was then made that the store would be destroyed this evening. Reserves have been called out, and the entire fire department is waiting. Commissioner Foster has issued a statement to the press that in this instance the criminals cannot possibly make good their threat.

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

X knew something of L. L. Slater. He was a stiff-necked, high-principled executive. To anyone familiar with his character it was a foregone conclusion that he would not traffic with criminals. So from

the first it seemed to X that the store of Jacoby & Sons was doomed.

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

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

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

Inspector Burks' gray face broke into a sour, humorless grin. He

jerked his thumb toward the sky. The pressman blanched suddenly, and started. The sound of airplane motors droned down out of the darkness. Their mounting roar was getting steadily closer. Police and waiting firemen heard it. Bodies tautened with dread as faces lifted.

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

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

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

The tension increased as the evening deepened. It did not seem

possible that danger threatened in that great lighted building. Every bulb in the Jacoby Department Store had been left on. That was another idea of Commissioner Foster's. Prowling incendiaries would be seen if by any chance they slipped into the store.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER X

Betty Dale Condemned

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

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

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

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

The Agent stared with haggard eyes. It was true. As mysteriously, as

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He had learned too late what method the arson ring had used this time.

He ran gasping into the street. No one noticed him. Pandemonium had broken loose. Fireman were yelling, cursing, dragging their apparatus up. News of the girl on the balcony had passed like wildfire from mouth to mouth. The crowd was roaring.

There was the discordant, sinister note of mob fury in it. It was known that some of the watchmen had been trapped in the burning building; known also that a fire inspector had died.

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

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

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

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

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

The thing was hopeless from the start. Though no bombs of the bloating death rained from the sky this time to halt the firemen's labors, the conflagration was too furious to be stopped. The bombs weren't needed.

The patrolling planes overheard could only circle over a scene of devastation. The store had somehow been honeycombed with inflammable substance. The firemen this time couldn't even get near enough to pump in the smothering gas. The most they could do was to save other adjacent buildings. The inferno in Jacoby & Sons store was a hideous demonstration of the arson ring's power.

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

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

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

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

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

The murderous members of the arson ring were striking a blow at him.
They had ferreted out the fact that Betty Dale was closer to him than
any one in the world. He was being punished for his interference.
Punished—or was there something deeper?

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

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

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

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

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

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

He waited as a shabby, frail-looking figure came along the block. The figure was a man, a beggar, with a tray of chewing gum tied around his middle. He had been on his evening rounds of lighted corners and subway exits. Though his face was pale, wrinkled, there was a

strangely peaceful expression on it. A pair of dark glasses, covered his eyes, and he looked neither to right nor left. The man was blind, forever denied a glimpse of daylight; but the calmness, the composure of his features indicated that he enjoyed some sort of inner vision.

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

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

"Thaddeus Penny," said the Agent. A faint, grim smile twitched his lips. He never ceased to marvel at the blind beggar's amazing acuteness. Months before, made up as a man named "Robbins," X had done Thaddeus Penny a great service, and Penny had become his friend for life. Several times he had helped X identify men by their steps and by

his faculty of never forgetting a human voice. And, because he moved ceaselessly and unnoticed through many shady sections of the city listening and keeping his own counsel, his mind was like an encyclopedia of underworld information.¹¹

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

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

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

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

"She?"

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

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

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

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

“I know it,” said X grimly. “But you have ways of picking up

information that the police have not. Don't put yourself in any danger. But go to some of the places where Santos was known, and listen to what you hear. I'll meet you again, later." The Agent dropped a dollar bill in the blind beggar's tray, but Penny heard the soft fall of the bill and shook his head violently.

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

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

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

Grimly he went the rounds. At the last box, hired under the name of Gregory Marsedon, he saw a white piece of paper and his heart gave a

leap. He opened the box, grasped the paper, a small envelope, and suddenly went cold.

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

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

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

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

With dread still clutching his heart in a grip of ice, the Agent dashed

outside and hailed a taxi. He pressed a handful of bills into the driver's hand. "Stillwell Avenue and Twenty-third Street as quick as you can. Step on it! Don't mind the lights."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“She isn’t guilty!” rasped the Agent. “Do you think I don’t know it?”

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

woman—would serve as well as any. You are enough of a psychologist to realize that!”

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

“Why are you telling me this?” asked the Agent.

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

X was silent, and the voice at the other end of the wire asked coldly:

“Do you agree?”

The words came in a tortured whisper from X’s lips. “I agree!”

“Right. I thought so. You’re not a fool. Go at once to the empty house

at number forty-two Stillwell Avenue. You'll find the basement door open. Walk through the kitchen to the large empty closet in the rear. Close the door behind you and press the electric button under the shelf in the center of the wall."

CHAPTER XI

Fiends' Bargain

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For seconds he studied these, filled with a sense that there the secret of the closet lay. But the ceiling was far above his head. He

had come here, not to tamper, not to pry too deeply into what he was not supposed to know, but to fulfill a bargain. A grim thought possessed him. Perhaps he had come here to die.

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

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

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

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

His fingers flew to his pockets for his kit of chromium tools. But his knees gave way. With a roaring in his brain, a tightness along his scalp, an increasing pressure in his lungs, he slipped to the floor. Another moment and he had lost consciousness in a black, sweetish void.

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

He stirred, and one of the links that held him gave off a faint rattle. A voice instantly spoke in the darkness close at hand.

“Welcome to our meeting, Secret Agent X.”

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

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

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

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

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

“This isn’t getting down to business.”

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

The Agent breathed a moment quickly. “The girl!” he said. “Where’s Betty Dale?”

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

“How did you get her out of the fire?”

“Silence! You’re not here to ask questions. You’re here to obey.”

“I’ll do nothing till I know the girl’s alive.”

“Of course. We expected that. Look beside you.”

THE Agent turned his head. A panel in the black wall was opening.

Behind it a girl in a tweed suit was standing. Her face was pale, troubled, but tinged with the glow of life. Gold gleams touched her yellow hair. Her arms were bound to the slim lines of her figure.

Betty Dale!

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

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

The Agent spoke to the foremost black figure. “If you want me to help

you, I must have a few words with Betty Dale—alone.”

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

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

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

“Still,” said X, “you need a collector—or you wouldn’t have brought me here.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You have forgotten,” said X, “that Betty Dale was seen by a hundred people. The police are after her now. I know she isn’t guilty. But who would believe it, unless I have proof?”

“We’ll give you proof—when your task is done.”

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

The black-masked figure chuckled.

“You will have to take our word. You have no other choice.”

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

as the man who had first addressed him went on speaking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The black figures reached out and touched something on the wall. The Agent heard a faint sound of movement directly above him. He lifted his head. A dark, cone-shaped object like a monstrous bell was descending from the ceiling on cable pulleys. It came down over his head and shoulders, covered him like a mantle. Again he smelled the sweetish fumes of bromine gas. In less than a minute, his head fell forward on his chest.

CHAPTER XII

The Death Flower

THE tap-tap of Thaddeus Penny's cane came slowly nearer. The Agent leaned against a lamppost, hiding the tense expectation that he felt.

It was day again. He was free for a while to carry on his desperate undercover battle with crime. Free, after being left in another vacant house, and coming to with no one around and no notion of where he'd been taken.

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

The Agent had formulated several desperate plans. None gave assured promise of success.

Before putting any of them into operation he wanted to hear what

Thaddeus Penny had to say.

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

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

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

Penny's head bobbed. "That was her name. She dropped out of sight at the same time Santos vanished. It was thought they'd skipped the country together. But catty female tongues are saying that Blossom is still in the city, that she has gone high-hat, and is living uptown under the name of Madam Colemont. She was seen and recognized in a

beautician parlor by a former underworld friend. This friend told a hat-check girl. The hat-check girl whispered it to an acquaintance. And a blind man's ears overheard."

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

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

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

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

The Agent studied again some photographs he had of Boss Santos. They

had been taken by a press cameraman and they were not entirely satisfactory. A daring thought had occurred to X; but he shook his head. These pictures would never do.

A message from Bates came in just an hour over the radio in the Agent's hideout. "Madam Colemont located. Rich divorcee. Lives alone except for servants. Nineteen Morningside Square. Credit unlimited. Extravagant spender, but no social contacts. Friends few. Only men. Await further orders."

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

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

purring drawl.

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

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

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

HE passed through a passage at the rear of his hideout, down to a

basement garage. Four cars were stored here.¹²

¹² AUTHOR'S NOTE: To aid him in his strange work, the Agent has invested many thousands of his secret fund in cars, planes and boats. They are kept in different parts of the city and surrounding suburbs, always ready for instant use.

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

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

It was past noon when he reached the square. He circled it, braked slowly before the huge, ornate apartment house numbered nineteen. Suddenly he stopped. For a limousine with a uniformed chauffeur was

standing at the curb, and a woman with a dazzlingly made-up face was stepping toward it under the wide marquee.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

HER questions were pitfalls that the Agent avoided dexterously, feeling his way.

“Never mind about me. I had to scam. Business. But tell me about yourself. You look like you were doing well for yourself, kid!”

The woman’s eyes darted nervously around the room. They returned to the Agent’s face and brightened. “Gee, it gave me a shock to see you! But about me doin’ well—you said it! I’m in on a gold mine, Boss! I’m helpin’ along a racket that makes the old days look cheap!”

“Yeah? What is it—and what about the gang?”

“Most of the boys are workin’ for me. I’m holdin’ the mob together. You ought to thank me!”

“Swell, Blossom! How you doin’ it, kid?”

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

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

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

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

The Agent winked, and rose. “I’ll be seein’ you, Madam Colemont,” he purred.

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

MARSEDON: Slater contacted. Has agreed to pay. He will get money in bills from bank sometime before five and hold same for our instructions. He will be at home with cash all evening. You know what to do. When you have picked up money, proceed at once to Hotel Hadley, where room on third floor, facing south, is being held for Marsedon. Claim room, go to it, and as soon as you are alone pull up shade and blink lights six times. Go at once to drugstore across street and take call in booth for Marsedon.

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

He began making plans at once. He would go to Slater's home with forged credentials and in the disguise of a police official. He might, as he had suggested, even impersonate the commissioner. There was no

doubt in his mind that he could collect the money. With proper make-up it would be a simple task, even though the house was ringed with detectives. What excited him more was the thought of the strange, revelations Blossom O'Shean might make that evening.

THE Agent's visit had left "Madam Colemont" too nervous to eat her lunch. In her hard, calculating way she was in love with Boss Santos. She had visions of what dashing figures the pair of them would cut, swaggering through the capitals of Europe. His sudden return opened up glamorous possibilities. They would have a yacht, larger than any now afloat. They would have cars, houses, princely suites in London, Paris, Berlin. They would hobnob with royalty—after they had made their pile. She could steer Boss Santos into the stream of lawless gold that was carrying her to undreamed-of riches.

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

She opened this with a special key. There were no writing materials in

the desk. Instead, there was a compact but elaborate mechanism of dials and boxed-in tubes. She reached forward and pulled out a microphone on a movable arm. She slipped a pair of disc receivers over her head. She threw a switch that turned on an electric current, drawn from a cleverly concealed connection made where the desk's leg fitted into a floor plug. The desk held a two-way wireless telephone, operating on a super-short wave.

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

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

She did them now, and presently a harsh voice sounded in her ear,

“Station Zero. What do you want?”

“Madam Colemont speaking. I’ve got some big news.”

“Go ahead. What is it—”

“The Boss has come back! My old pal, Santos! He’s a great guy, on the up-and-up when he likes you, and I’d like to get him into our racket.

Him and me make a sure-fire team. I want your okay.”

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

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

There was a moment’s silence before the harsh voice answered. Then the words had a strange measured quality that made Blossom O’Shean feel cold. “I’m going to give you some news, too—Madam Colemont—something

I haven't told you, because it didn't seem wise. Something that I'm afraid will be a shock."

"Go ahead, spill it!"

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

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

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

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

"Foolish woman!" There was rasping annoyance in the unseen speaker's

tone. “You have let an impostor, a criminal, trick you, fool you. You have played into the hands of Secret Agent X.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

More than that, Blossom O'Shean recognized the suit as one she had seen Boss Santos once wear. And there was something horribly, gruesomely familiar in the set of those slumped shoulders. She took two fearful steps into the room and screamed again. For a familiar

heavy gold ring gleamed on a bony finger of one of the skeleton's hands. It was the lucky ring that Santos had always worn and prized.

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

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

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

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

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

“Swell—he’s coming to me tonight.”

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

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

“Why should I?” demanded the woman. “He got the Boss. I’m going to get him.”

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

The woman stiffened slightly, cringed away. “Why—why shouldn’t I kill him?” she gasped.

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

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

But, when he left her, fear gave way to rage once more. It mounted against the man who had killed "the Boss" until veins stood out in her neck. It mounted until she was like a wild animal, a panther, thirsting for blood. Trembling, she went to a bureau in her apartment and opened a drawer. She took out a flat automatic and snapped in a clip of shells. She walked to the telephone next and called up three men. She told each to come that evening for a "job" she wanted done. She paced the floor, hissing between clenched teeth: "I'm gonna smoke that rat! I'm gonna give the works to Secret Agent X!"

CHAPTER XIII

The Trap

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

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

The collection of the money had been simple for Agent X. So far, he had kept his promise to the extortionist group. But his face under the disguise of Commissioner Foster was tense. He was preparing to make desperate plays, still uncertain of his game. He did not change his disguise and drive to the Hotel Hadley to claim "Marsedon's" room. Instead he went to his nearest hideout and made up once more as Boss

Santos. He left the canvas pouches of money in a secret vault under the floor. As Santos he sped in his low-slung coupe toward Morningside Square. When he drew up before No. 19 the doorman gave him a curious glance. But X's manner was impressive. He stalked into the apartment's vestibule swinging his gold-headed cane. The girl clerk at the reception desk gave him a brief, admiring glance. The Agent carried off his sporty suit with the air of a cavalier. "Just tell Madam Colemont an old friend's calling," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She pushed heavy draperies aside and entered a luxuriously furnished room. Wealth had been lavished here in rococo taste. The oriental rugs, Akbar, Sarouk and Anatolian, were as deep-napped as grass on a lawn. The furniture was upholstered in tapestried silk. The Agent's eyes swung to the rich curtains that covered the windows and two other doors. One of the curtains over a window seemed to him to bulge slightly. His vision, trained to detect the most microscopic movements, caught a breath-like stir. There was no maid visible in the apartment. That, too, was significant.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Light from the bulb in the hallway made a ghostly glow in the chamber. The Agent knew he was still visible against the pattern of the rug. He

jumped again, escaping by fractions of inches the bullets that snarled around. He felt the hot lash of a slug across the skin of his leg. He fired with desperate quickness at a pinpoint of flame by the door. There was only a metallic click in his hand. The gun was empty.

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

The third gunman fired two wild shots and fled. The thud of his receding footsteps sounded in the room behind the curtain. A window opened and banged shut. The Agent found a bridge lamp and snapped it on.

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

The man he had shot lay moaning on the floor. The other, with the

sword point in his body, had sunk to his knees and was clawing dazedly at the blade. Blossom O'Shean leaned against the mantel, hands pressed to her breast, face white as plaster.

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

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

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

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

"No!" she gasped. "No—you wouldn't do it. Don't kill me like you did the Boss! I'm a right dame. Don't!" The Agent's gun moved closer and words came in a frenzied rush from the woman's lips. "I get it! You

want to double-cross the guys I work for. I—I'd help you if I could—
But listen! I don't know nothing about them, see? Honest, it's the
truth. I'm giving you the straight dope. I don't want to die.”

“Prove it!”

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

Watching his face fearfully, she slid away. She beckoned with a hand that seemed almost frozen. The Agent followed, suspicious of some trick. She moved with the steps of a person in the grip of a nightmare horror into another room. It was her boudoir, and she led him through it. She opened a top bureau drawer while the Agent watched tensely. She thrust a queer-shaped key in the lock of a door. Beyond was a smaller chamber, and the woman pointed to a desk.

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

a right dame, givin' you all the dope—and—don't smoke me.”

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

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

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

The Agent's hand lashed out. He brought the hard muzzle of the gun

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

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

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

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

HE opened the window, stepped out, and moved swiftly down the fire

escape. He paused in the shadowed courtyard for a moment to make deft changes in his face. Then he slipped through an ally into the street and hailed a taxi.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The call did not come for nearly fifteen minutes. The Agent sipped a cup of coffee at the soda fountain, waiting tensely, conscious of the canvas pouches under his coat. He jumped when a telephone bell tinkled. In a moment a clerk answered it and said: "Call for Mr. Marsedon."

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

"You were successful, Marsedon?"

"Yes."

“Go to the house on Stillwell Avenue. Press the button.”

There was no uncertainty in the order, no betrayal of nervousness or doubt. The man who gave it was sure of his mastery over X, sure that the Agent would follow orders—because of Betty Dale.

The Agent left the drugstore quickly. A taxi bore him to the house of mystery where he had been the previous night. He entered the dark kitchen, crossed to the closet with grimly resolute steps. He stepped inside and closed the door without an instant’s hesitation.

But before he pressed the hidden button, his hands worked deftly, swiftly. He brought the flask of oxygen from his pocket, attached the coiled rubber tube to a valve at its top. He thrust the tube in his mouth, gave the valve a twist, and pressed the wooden clamp over his nostrils. He breathed the sweet, life-giving vapor, and gave the button under the shelf a jab.

In a moment he felt the heavy bromine gas descending in an eerie, smothering cloud. He waited in utter darkness, knowing that he had made a gambler’s play with death.

CHAPTER XIV

Murder Bait

NONE of the bromine vapor entered the Agent's lungs. He kept the valve in his flask half open, let the oxygen stream into his mouth. But he sank to the floor in a position of utter laxness.

Endless minutes seemed to pass before steps sounded. The flask of compressed gas was almost empty when they paused outside the door, The Agent took a deep breath of oxygen, filling his lungs, then swiftly, cautiously put his flask and tube and clamp away. He lay like a man unconscious while the door opened softly.

A light flicked on. Through closed eyelids he could see the redness of it playing over his face. A harsh voice spoke a whispered order, and two men picked him up. He was lifted, carried to a square box like a Chinese coffin, and dumped inside it. With his knees drawn up to his chin his body just fit. The lid that was instantly clamped down pressed against his head.

He felt the box lifted, knew that he was being carried again to an accompaniment of stealthily shuffling feet. They crossed the kitchen, climbed the basement stairs, moved into the street. The box was raised higher and deposited in a car. Another whispered order which he couldn't catch, and the mysterious car rolled away.

Fully fifteen minutes passed, with only the rumble of the car wheels and confused traffic noises. Once a policeman's whistle shrilled, and X knew he was being taken through the heart of town. A million dollars was passing under the officer's nose and he didn't know it. Crime was making one of its biggest plays while the Law looked on.

The car stopped at last and the box was lifted from it. Like a package of laundry or merchandise, X was carried through some sort of alley. He heard shoes scrape down stone steps and was borne across a floor. The box was set down a moment, and a door clicked open. It was lifted and placed on what seemed to be a wobbly shelf. Then the door catch clicked again.

In a moment X heard the slapping ropes of a dumb waiter. The shelf he was on jerked and quivered. He had a distinct sensation of ascent. It

kept up for many seconds before the dumb waiter stopped. The Agent's temples hammered.

Muffled steps sounded somewhere not far off. A second door clicked and the box that the Agent was in was jerked roughly forward. It was carried about twenty feet, set down.

The Agent tensed as the clamps above him grated. Deft hands above him slowly raised the lid. The Agent's eyes, smothered in darkness for the past twenty minutes, saw plainly. He got a glimpse of a sinister, black-masked figure. He was in the secret meeting place of the arson ring's heads.

Four pairs of hands reached in and lifted him cautiously. Through half-open eyelids he caught sight of a third masked figure holding a gun. The weapon was pointed toward him. These vulturelike men seemed ready for any trick. They laid cunning plans and added evil caution.

The Agent came to life at the instant his feet touched the floor, risking everything in this final, desperate play. He swung both arms like flails and shoved back with all the force in his legs. He went

down in a tangle of cursing, tumbling bodies. Fists struck at him with battering-ram blows. Arms tried to hold him like twining snakes.

He got a swirling glimpse of masked faces and glittering, murderous eyes. He saw the man with the gun trying to find a spot to shoot, saw him crouching, hand poised to fire. He gave the killer no chance to aim. In that lightning-fast, tumbling battle a bullet would menace the lives of his masked assailants. He was counting on this, risking a shot in those first mad seconds.

He fought with the fury of desperation, fought with the knowledge that this was his last and only chance. But he didn't lose his head.

Twisting, turning, writhing like a wrestler, he clutched wildly at heaving arms and legs. He struck with tight-knuckled fists, delivering blows that brought a gasping grunt. A man's voice close beside him screamed an order. "The gun! Over here—let me have it—quick!" The masked figure with the weapon moved closer.

Another voice snarled: "Shoot—damn it, shoot!"

There was a jab of metal across the Agent's shoulder. A muffled report came, so close that powder flame singed the Agent's neck. The gun had a silencer on it. The bullet had missed him by a fraction only. The next one might strike home, for the masked men were becoming desperate. The man they had thought was unconscious had become a human tornado in the room.

The Agent sensed his increasing peril. He landed a blow against a masked face, driving his knuckles into teeth. He heaved up with his left arm, got a second masked figure almost on his shoulder, and jerked himself erect. Head down, half stumbling, he flung his human missile at the man with the gun. The armed man sidestepped and the Agent leaped away.

HE plunged across the box that had held him, as bullets probed for his life. He lifted the box and threw it at the masked killer with all his might. The man cried out and went down with clawing arms, the box on top of him. His gun spun away. Another vulturelike figure tried to snatch it up, and the Agent's fist cracked behind his ear. The man fell sprawling, while the Agent caught up the gun.

He turned and saw that the third masked criminal had got a silenced weapon from somewhere. Their arms swung up together. The Agent's was a fraction of a second more swift. Flames sputtered from the sound-deadening tubes at the guns' ends simultaneously. Lead plucked at the Agent's arm, but struck the man before him in the dead center of the chest. The man spun on his feet, black coat swirling away from his body like membranous wings. He pitched forward with a gurgling scream and lay on his face.

The figure beneath the box was just getting up. X thrust the gun toward him, menaced him with a harsh command. "Back up! Raise your hands. You, too—or you'll get what your friend here just got!" He included the second masked figure in the deadly arc of his gun.

Both men raised their arms above their shoulders, glaring hate through slitted eyes. The Agent spoke again.

"Release Betty Dale at once."

The masked figure debated a moment, then reached for the telephone. He husked: "Bill, I've changed my mind. Let the girl go. Have her call

back as soon as she is free.” Replacing the phone, he chuckled. “Betty Dale is now walking into the streets, a free woman. She will be free about fifteen minutes—before the police will pick her up. Then she will burn in the electric chair. It was a very clever move on your part, Mr. Secret Agent X.” The black figure shook with mirthless glee.

X said a bleak nothing. In ten minutes time, the phone rang. He scooped it up and made a soft, melodious whistle that sounded strangely in that room.

“It’s—you!” came the breathless answer. “I don’t understand it, but they’ve let me go.”

“Yes,” said X quietly. “I persuaded certain gentlemen to let you go. Now listen closely. Get in touch with headquarters. Tell Inspector Burks how you were taken prisoner—”

“Isn’t it dangerous?” asked Betty. “The police—”

“You trust me, don’t you?” said the Agent.

“Yes,” came Betty’s soft answer. “You know I do.” Then she added quickly: “Wait! The number I was given was Matthew Monkford’s apartment. I remember it, because I called him and tried to get a story.”

X smiled strangely. “I know that, Betty. And you can tell that to Inspector Burks. The police will find the heads of the arson ring here—and Slater’s money. Good bye, Betty.”

One of the black-masked figures leaned forward pointing toward X. “And now, Mr. X, you have strapped the girl into the death chair.”

“That is merely your opinion, Matthew Monkford,” said X quietly. “You can take off your mask.”

The fingers of one masked figure plucked at his face. The mask came away revealing features that the Agent had seen before—the shrewd, austere features of Matthew Monkford. He stood like a statue, while his companion also unmasked. Joe Reiss glared at the Agent. X knew without looking that the third was Purcell, the man who was now a corpse.

The Agent said: “When you walk into the death house, Monkford, you can blame only yourself for going there. And it’s ironical that the thing that first trapped me is the one thing that started me thinking in your direction. Your phenomenal memory for figures and dates. You had policy figures of other companies than your own right at your fingertips.”

Monkford’s eyes did not flicker. They held the Agent’s with glittering contempt. “Let’s start at the very beginning, Mr. X. From the first you’ve been outwitted. You were fooled by the little drama in my office. Purcell knew you were an impostor when you toyed with a pencil—in your right hand. You rescued us from our own men. Shima spoiled our plans by phoning for the police. We’re giving you credit for daring from the beginning. It’s only in the field of sheer intellect that you’ve failed. We let you live because we hoped to use you. If you’ve got Slater’s money, hand it over and we’ll see what can be arranged. Purcell’s death is unfortunate, but will cause no stir in police circles, since it is known we are being victimized by criminals. You have gained nothing by setting Betty Dale free. She will die by the law.”

“You are forgetting the films, Monkford,” said X.

“What films?” demanded Monkford, and his voice showed the first tinge of fear.

“THE films of Betty Dale,” replied the Agent. “The ones you took when you first brought her here and drugged her—which took place before the fire at Jacoby’s store. Betty Dale was not at Jacoby’s store. Her image appeared on the blank wall of the balcony because you threw a colored telephoto picture from a movie projector. Possibly, one of your men was hidden about a block away to do the job. Double films made the image stereoscopic. With these films in my possession, Betty Dale will be cleared of starting the store fire.... Get them!”

Monkford tensed. Reiss gulped: “Better to take a chance on his bullets, Monk. Those films will—”

The Agent backed away suddenly and unbuttoned his coat, His left hand plunged inside. His voice came tonelessly like a prophecy of doom.

“All right, Monkford! I see you’ve chosen death—but let me choose

the way you'll die." His hand came into sight grasping a nutlike missile. "One of your bombs which didn't explode at the fire! I've saved it carefully for just such use as this."

Monkford's face went rigid, Breath came like a sigh between his teeth. The Agent's voice droned on. "You'll go out knowing the bitter taste of your own medicine." X raised his hand, poised to throw the object forward—and Matthew Monkford screamed. He went down on his knees suddenly, slobbering insanely.

"I'm wrong. I give up! You've outplayed us! I—don't throw it in heaven's name! I'll get the films!"

Monkford walked stiffly to a desk against the wall. While X watched him eagle-eyed, ready for any treacherous move, Monkford lifted a round package.

"Put them there on the table," said X, "then go back and stand by the wall."

Monkford obeyed, and the Agent backed toward the films. For a moment

he put the round thing in his hand on the table, stripped the canvas pouches from around his waist.

“Five hundred thousand dollars,” he said coolly. “The police will find them here beside the films. The cops have the number of every bill, of course. Slater, as you said yourself, was stubborn. The district attorney will enjoy finding them for his case against you. And now, Monkford, I’m going to say good bye.”

In the Agent’s hand was the round object that had made Monkford weak with fear. Monkford’s eyes widened. He screamed horribly as X suddenly hurled the thing at his feet. He staggered back, clutching at the wall. The Agent’s taunting voice cut through his panic. “Steady, my friend. Look at it carefully. See what it is!”

Monkford’s eyes rolled wildly to the thing at his feet. It had cracked open when it struck the floor. But, instead of shooting formic acid crystals that would cause the bloating death, only yellow kernels showed.

“Just a walnut!” said X softly. “I stopped at a store and bought some

on my way here tonight. The size of your pet bombs gave me the idea, A bluff took the last trick against criminal masterminds!”

The snarling cry of anger in Monkford’s throat was cut short by the spurt of vapor from a gun the Agent whipped into view. The gas that would keep him quiet till the police arrived sent Monkford to his knees, then to the floor. Another spurt made Joe Reiss follow.

The Agent slipped through the apartment like a shadow. A door opened and closed behind him. He walked leisurely down a hall. For a second time his strange, eerie whistle sounded. Its echo hovered like an all-knowing presence in the chamber with the three silent men. It grew more distant slowly, faded—and was gone.

THE END

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