

FEBRUARY



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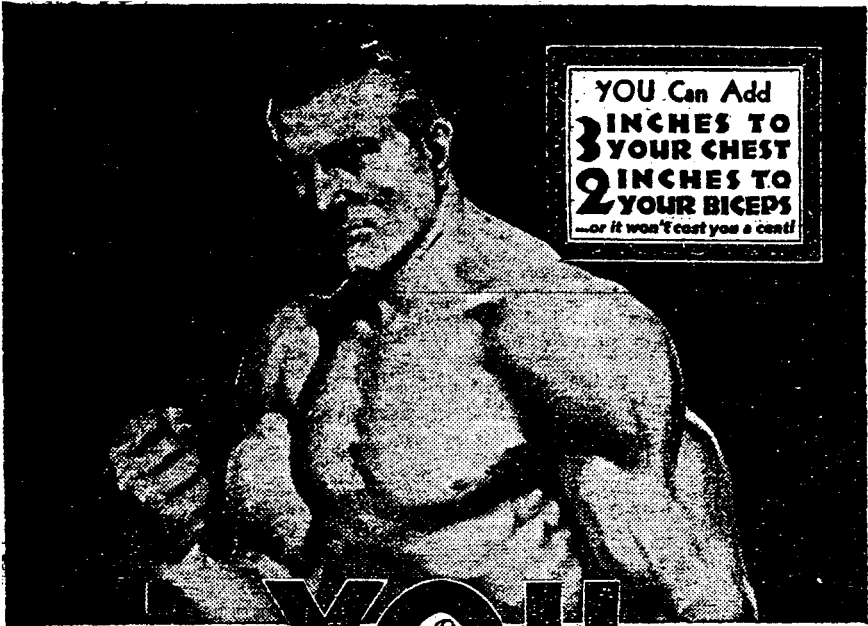
THE MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES



Secret Agent
"X"
In a Sensational
BOOK-LENGTH
NOVEL

Complete in this issue

The
**TORTURE
TRUST**



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Vol. I
No. 1

SECRET AGENT

RR X 99

THE MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES

FEB.
1934

Rose Wyn, Editor

*The first of a series of breath-taking
episodes taken from the records
of Secret Agent "X"*

- THE TORTURE TRUST** (Sensational Book-length Novel) 6
By BRANT HOUSE
*"Masters of Death" they called themselves—that terrible trio who met
in a hidden room. Brilliant men they were, whose scholarly lives cloaked
evil as the black folds of their hoods cloaked their faces. Fearless, clever,
Secret Agent "X" went against them in a desperate battle of wits
at the gateway of destruction.*
- HIDDEN EVIDENCE** 73
By H. RALPH GOLLER
One man died so that another could live
- FANGED FURY** (Complete Novelette) 84
By FREDERICK C. DAVIS
*From a cage that had been securely locked, the deadly Flying Snake
escaped into the blackness of the night.*
- TRIGGER MORTIS** 103
By MARTIN C. BRIGGS
In ten horror-shot minutes he learned just how ghastly death could be
- PUNISHMENT DEFERRED** 110
By JAMES DONALD
Every crime carries its own punishment
- CLUES IN THE DARK** 112
By NORMAN A. DANIELS
Seven unjust years in stir pounded in the blood of Terry Lane
- THE SECRET COUNCIL** 122
Behind the scenes of the Secret Agent's next battle against crime

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The New York Times

LARGE WAISTLINE HELD HEALTH PERIL

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 24 (AP).—The man who keeps his waistline small when he reaches middle age is the most likely to win the race for health, is the conclusion drawn from a new study of the relation of weight to physical defects just published by the Public Health Service.

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It also shows "a great excess of mortality among overweight persons, whatever the age, and also an excess among young adult underweight persons."

The conclusions are drawn from records of more than 3,000 men from 1909 to 1928, showing the ratio of actual deaths to expected mortality, according to different weight groups. In the following table, figures below 100 indicate less than the expected death rate; those above 100 indicate more than the expected death rate:

Weight Class	25-30	30-35	35-40	40-45	45-50	50 and over
25 pounds or more underweight—						
10 to 20 lbs. ...	118	105	83	77		
5 lbs. under to 5 lbs. overweight—	101	94	78	85		
10 to 20 pounds overweight ...	92	84	87	92		
25 to 45 pounds overweight ...	99	88	94	90		
50 lbs. or more overweight ...	113	122	128	119		
100 lbs. or more overweight ...	147	142	144	130		

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With the sword of Courage, the rapier of Wit, the gleaming lance of Cunning, he goes where others dare not follow. Along the black byways of the underworld where Horror stalks. Into the shadow of hideous Death. Down through the twisting valleys of Terror.

Secret Agent "X"

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Secret Agent "X"

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Secret Agent "X"

The blackness of mystery cloaks his past and his coming. So also it cloaks his going. And wraithlike he disappears—leaving behind him one symbol and one only — "X"—the symbol of the Unknown.



Sensational
Book-
Length
NOVEL

The
TORTURE

By Brant

Men with skulls for faces — these were the victims of that terrible trio who met in a hidden room. And secret Agent "X" went against them, during the bottled torment of their deaf-mute slaves, in a desperate battle of wits at the gateway of destruction.

He was thrust through the door
into the presence of the black-
robed men.



TRUST

House

CHAPTER I

NIGHT GET-AWAY

THE prison guard's feet made ghostly echoes along the dimly lighted corridor of the State Penitentiary. The sound whispered weirdly through the barred chambers,

dying away in the steel rafters overhead. The guard's electric torch probed the cells as he passed, playing over the forms of the sleeping men.

It was after midnight. All seemed quiet within the great, gloomy building that was one of society's bul-

warks against a rising tide of crime.

The guard's figure passed through a door at the end of a corridor, and the echoes at last ceased their eerie whisperings.

Seconds of silence passed. Then a new sound came. It issued from cell No. 17—the sound of furtive movement.

The man who had been lying as still as death when the guard passed threw his blankets aside. His hard, shrewd eyes gleamed eagerly. His narrow-boned face took on the alertness of a prowling weasel.

Jason Hertz, down on the prison books as convict No. 1088, had not been asleep at all.

His thin, clawlike hands, which had dabbled in every sort of crime from blackmail to murder, became suddenly active. He drew the blankets apart, wadded one into the shape of a sleeping man, and stuffed it under the other. Then he reached beneath his bunk and drew out a roundish object the size of a melon.

It was a ball made from stale bread mixed with water and kneaded together. The bread he had saved for the last three days. He set it on the end of the bunk nearest the door, covering the top of it with scraps of loose hair collected from the floor of the prison barber shop. It looked like the touseled head of a sleeping man and would serve to mislead the guard when he made his next tour of inspection.

Hertz pulled other articles from beneath his bunk—articles which had been smuggled to him under mysterious circumstances. And, as he looked at them, an uneasy expression crossed his face. He recalled the visitor who had come to him the day before and on other days during the past several weeks—the tall, gray-haired man whose card bore the name: "Crawford Gibbons, Attorney-at-Law."

He recalled the strangely compelling look in the lawyer's eyes, the forcefulness of his manner, the abrupt persuasiveness of his voice.

Who was Crawford Gibbons, and who was employing him? Why was he aiding Hertz to escape?

These were the questions Hertz had asked himself, for, behind the guard's back, Gibbons had quietly slipped him a chamois-skin bundle. In it were tools and instructions making his get-away possible.

The prison authorities regarded Hertz as a desperate criminal. Among his vicious associates in crime, he was rated as being hard-boiled and as dangerous as a snake. But the lawyer, Gibbons, had put fear into Jason Hertz's heart. Gibbons had refused to answer questions, refused to reveal his motives. Yet, under the mysterious dominance of the man's personality, Hertz had felt his own will crumbling. It was as though Gibbons had cast a spell over him.

Conflicting impulses stirred in Hertz's mind; one, the desire to escape and go back to his underworld haunts; the other, the fear that he might be entering some sort of trap. He paused a moment fighting within himself. But it was useless. Something stronger than reason cried out that he must follow the lawyer's instructions.

With a cleverly shaped skeleton key that Gibbons had given him, he opened the door and stepped into the corridor, every nerve alert. He listened, but no sound came except the snores of sleeping men.

Shoes off, as silent as a fox, he walked away from the cell, turning into a branch corridor. He climbed a flight of steel stairs and reached the empty cell block above used for overflow prisoners. It was as deserted as a tomb. Hertz entered one of the empty cells, grasped the bars, and climbed up toward the metal ceiling with the agility of an ape. There was a galvanized iron roof above him. For a moment he struck a match, feet braced on a crossbar below.

The tiny flickering flame showed that the metal, seemingly intact, had

been cut through with a fine hack saw—his own handiwork of the night before.

He lifted his hand, pressed against the galvanized iron, and a circular piece of metal moved upward. A dark opening appeared, large enough for a man to crawl through.

Hertz thrust his fingers up, caught the strong edge of the thick metal, and lifted himself. He braced his elbows, rested a moment, then strained again. In a second he was in the narrow "attic" of the prison, between the ceiling and the roof.

A faint gleam of light made by the night sky showed ahead. Hertz crept toward it, across the top of the metal ceiling, careful to step on the steel rafters to which the sheet iron was fastened. He came to the light—the square opening of a barred window—and used his hands again.

Drawing a hack saw set in a metal frame from his blouse, he attacked the bars before him with the skill of a man accustomed to the use of tools. The hardened chromium bit through the bars one by one and Hertz wrenched them loose.

He fastened a loop of strong line, which he also took from his blouse, to the stub of one bar, threw the end out the window, and crawled through feet first. Hand over hand, he lowered himself to the ground below.

Clouds obscured the stars. Hertz moved forward in utter darkness, his bare feet soundless on the earth.

HE stopped a moment to get his bearings, then walked on toward the southwest wall of the prison. Trembling violently, his fingers groping, he felt along the stone surface till his hand encountered a rope. He had been expecting it, but fear made him recoil for an instant as though the rope had been the dangling body of a snake. Then he approached it gingerly again. The mysterious lawyer, Crawford Gibbons, had kept his word.

Hertz seized the rope and began the ascent of the wall. It was an easy matter for him to draw himself up its side. With a skill born of experience, he avoided the two strands of electrically charged wire at its top. He balanced himself, stepped over them, and went down the rope on the other side.

His escape was an accomplished fact now. He was free, once again a potential menace turned loose upon an unsuspecting society. But fear still made his heart beat madly.

He had moved only a few yards ahead when he halted as abruptly as though a chain had been stretched across his path.

Somewhere close by in the darkness a whistle had sounded. It was a strange whistle, melodious yet unearthly, seeming to fill the whole air with a ventriloquistic note. It aroused in Hertz a stark, unreasoning terror.

His beady eyes sought to pierce the darkness. He almost cried out. Some one was standing directly ahead of him. He had caught sight of a vague silhouette.

"Follow me," said a low voice.

The words came out of the black vault of the night like an inexorable command from Fate itself. They had in them that compelling quality that paralyzed Hertz's will.

The clouds thinned a little, letting a ray of wan starlight through. He saw the quiet face and the silvery hair of the lawyer. He sensed again the unswerving fixity of the man's eyes upon him. Then, like a sleepwalker, he followed as the other turned and led the way.

Where was he going? He did not know. What strange purpose did the lawyer have? It was veiled in black mystery.

Hertz stumbled on through the darkness for what seemed a quarter of a mile. He knew he must be somewhere close to the road leading to the prison. Then he heard the faint

sound of an automobile engine idling. The man ahead clicked on a flashlight no larger than a pencil. Its thin beam disclosed for an instant the lines of a low, powerful roadster parked by the highway.

Crawford Gibbons motioned for him to get in.

Hertz rebelled. Fear of the strange man had been growing in him. He set his jaw and blurted a question.

"What's the idea? Where you gonna take me?"

There was arrogance in his tone now. He was out of the prison. He might make a break for it and escape into the darkness, run away from this fear-inspiring man.

"Get in," said Gibbons harshly.

"What if I won't?" blustered Hertz.

The answer came so suddenly that he gasped. Powerful fingers clutched his arm. He was lifted off his feet, thrust into the car. Then the gray-haired man got in beside him, and the car moved ahead.

Fury and fear welled up in Jason Hertz's mind. His lips opened and he gave a loud, involuntary cry.

"Fool!" hissed the man beside him.

Hertz shrank back in his seat, afraid of what he had done. For his cry had echoed startlingly through the night. A light flashed somewhere on the wall of the prison—another and another. A siren rose like the voice of some monster, beginning with a throaty gurgle and lifting into a furious, spine-chilling wail. The purple shaft of a searchlight on one of the prison towers winked on. Its shimmering beam moved, swung downward, centering on the car. An instant later Hertz cried out again in a frenzy of fear.

For a flickering pinpoint of light leaped out on the wall of the prison. There was a staccato rattle like the drum taps of doom. And, in the air around the speeding car, there came the deathly whine of steel-jacketed bullets.

CHAPTER II

FORCED TESTIMONY

UNDER the lawyer's hands, the roadster leaped ahead in the darkness like a live thing. A machine-gun bullet struck against the metal back of the car. Another passed screamingly between the two men's heads, slapped against the shatterproof windshield, and sent spider-web lines radiating in all directions.

Hertz, his face white and ghastly, crouched whimpering in his seat. He stole a sidewise glance at the lawyer's features, saw the hawklike nose, the jutting chin, and deep-set eyes. The man was driving as calmly as though death were not riding the wind behind him.

They passed at last beyond the searchlight's range, and the bullets ceased to come. There would be pursuit; but it seemed nothing outside of a bullet could catch that speeding car. Under its long, low hood the smoothly running motor rose into a mighty pean of power. The speedometer needle swung to sixty, seventy, eighty as the car leaped ahead along the dark road. Hertz spoke again.

"You gotta tell me where I'm going. I won't stand for this."

"No?" The single word was ironic, mocking.

"Where you taking me—that's what I wanta know."

It seemed that a grim smile spread over the lawyer's face. He was silent, and leaden fear gnawed at Hertz's heart again. He only knew that they were leaving the city behind; that they had reached a country road. Then the car swung sidewise, turning off the smooth macadam. It passed along a dirt lane between rows of pines that moaned and whispered in the night wind. They came to a jarring stop.

"Get out!" said Gibbons.

The mystery of the night seemed to deepen. Hertz's nerves were almost at the breaking point. He crouched

back, showing his teeth, his hands hooked like talons.

"I won't!" he shrieked. "I'll—I'll—"

Under the instrument-board light he found himself looking into the sinister muzzle of an automatic. His craven spirit weakened.

"All right. I'll go. Take that gat away. Don't shoot!"

But the gun was not withdrawn. Hertz walked ahead, trembling, with the gun in his back, and the outlines of a house suddenly rose out of the blackness before him. It looked like a farmhouse, low and ramshackle.

A key grated in the lock. He was pushed inside and the door closed after him. There was the stuffy smell of deserted rooms and musty carpets. Gibbons appeared to know what he was about. He pushed Hertz into a rear chamber, struck a match and lighted an oil lamp. The windows of the room were tightly boarded up. Gibbons thrust a chair forward and motioned Hertz to sit down.

Alone with the mysterious lawyer, Hertz had a deeper sense of dread. The compelling eyes of Gibbons were upon him again. He sensed mystery behind them, and power. It was as though they were boring into his very soul. The voice of the lawyer sounded harshly.

"You are free of prison, Jason Hertz. In return you are going to give me information!"

So, that was it! A snarl rose on Hertz's lips. His eyes gleamed wickedly.

"I won't tell you nothing. I don't know nothing!"

The gray-haired man before him smiled again and drew a clipping from his pocket. He held it in front of Hertz's face. It had been cut from a newspaper—CATRELLA KILLED AT SCENE OF TORTURE MURDER.

"He was one of your pals, Hertz. You've seen the papers in prison. You know that murders are being committed—men tortured to death.

Joe Catrella was in on it in some way. Give me the names of his friends."

The question came relentlessly; but Jason Hertz shook his head.

"I don't know nothing—I won't talk," he cried.

He'd heard rumors of the series of hideous killings that were baffling the police. Prominent people found dead—tortured. "The Torture Trust," the papers called it. Fear sealed his lips.

He knew little; but he dared not tell even that. Death was the penalty meted out to a squealer in the underworld, and there was mystery and horror behind this murder wave that eclipsed anything he had ever heard of before. There was an uncanniness to it that made his spine crawl. He wished he had stayed in jail.

"I don't know nothing," he repeated wildly.

HIS voice died in a gasp. He found himself looking into the eyes of the lawyer, found himself unable to turn away. Like a bird staring at a snake, he was held fascinated.

The lawyer's face was coming closer to his—closer, closer. The lawyer's eyes were pools of blazing light.

Hertz cowered in his seat, pressing till the rungs of the chair cut into his back. Terror of the man before him rose in his throat and seemed to choke him. He sensed again that he was in the presence of a person who had powers beyond his knowledge—vast depths of strength and magnetism. It seemed that his own brain was being battered into submission.

"Think back, Jason Hertz. It is March, 1933. You have not been caught by the police as yet. You are not in jail. You are with Joe Catrella, plotting evil. What is your understanding with him? Who are his friends?"

The eyes of the lawyer were relentless. His voice went on droningly. Jason Hertz felt himself slipping—slipping into the mysterious depths of hypnosis.

From drowsiness, Hertz went into laxity of posture, slumping in his chair, staring with glassy eyes into the face of the man who called himself Crawford Gibbons. Then slowly his body became rigid; his fingers tightened around the arms of the chair; his legs pressed stiffly against the floor. He was in the third stage of the hypnotic state, the stage known as catalepsy, his will completely under the dominance of the strange man before him.

"You will speak, Jason Hertz. You will answer my questions."

Sweat broke out on the forehead of the escaped convict. Fear still fought for control of his subconscious mind. But the man in front of him substituted another fear, deeper, more imminent.

Gibbons reached around the side of Hertz, his forefinger extended. He pressed the tip of it against Hertz's spine.

"There's a machine gun at your back, ready to blow you to pieces, Hertz! You can feel it there, pressing, pressing. You must speak. Who were Catrella's friends? Who gave you your orders when you were with him?"

A gurgle came from Hertz's lips. They moved slowly. The cords in his neck stood out.

"I—don't—know!" he gasped. "The Bellaire Club. We hung around there. Panagakos, the manager, may have been—I got notes in the blue vase—telling me what to do—the vase on the dance floor. So did Catrella. We never knew—who the big shot was—the guy we was working for. We sent notes to him the same way. Don't kill me—for God's sake! That's all I know; I swear it. They got me—in that spaghetti-joint holdup—when I tried to make a little dough for myself on the side. I had a moll and she—"

His voice trailed off. For the lawyer, Gibbons, had stopped listening and had taken his eyes away. A man in the hypnotic state tells the truth



Betty Dale

because he must. Jason Hertz had told all of interest that he knew!

Gibbons moved back and Hertz sat staring straight ahead of him. His labored breathing told that he was in the hypnotic trance. He might stay thus for hours.

Gibbons drew a pencil and notebook from his pocket. He placed the pencil in Hertz's fingers, put the notebook under his hand.

"Write, Jason Hertz! Write one of those notes to your boss—telling him you are out of prison, ready to serve him again."

The fingers of Jason Hertz moved mechanically. The pencil whispered across the paper like the pencil of a spiritualistic medium doing automatic writing. When the note was finished, Gibbons tore the page loose, folded it, and put it in his pocket.

Then he began a series of quick, mysterious movements.

HE brought the light nearer Hertz, studied his face, and, after a few seconds, walked to a cabinet standing against the wall. He opened the front and drew from it a collection of odd-shaped apparatus.

There was a magnesium flare set in the center of a silvered, parabolic reflector. There was a small movie camera, a dictaphonic machine driven by a spring motor, and a set of elaborate measuring instruments based on the formulae of the Bertillon System. He placed them in front of Jason Hertz.

Lighting the flare, he focused it on Hertz's face and body.

"Get up!" he ordered. "Walk around, Hertz."

The escaped convict obeyed, rising from his seat and moving about the room in the manner of a sleepwalker. But his muscles made characteristic movements that the lens of the movie camera in Gibbons' hands began to record.

"Sit down," said Gibbons after a time.

Again Hertz obeyed, and Gibbons brought the camera closer.

"Smile," he commanded, and Hertz did so. Then in quick succession Gibbons ordered the felon to scowl, laugh, register fear, surprise, and arrogance.

He set the camera down with a snap, turned off the magnesium light, and started the motor of the dictaphone machine.

"Now, Hertz—follow me. Repeat first the vowel sounds—aaa—ah—oh—ooo—ee! Now the consonants. Ker—ter—bur—mer—"

The needle of the dictaphone recorded the vibrations of Hertz's voice on the hard-rubber cylinder. Gibbons was using the science of phonetics, setting down every inflection of the convict's lips, throat, and tongue for future use. When he was

satisfied that he had missed nothing, he closed the dictaphone and set to work with his measuring instruments, going over the planes of Hertz's face. He jotted down the widths of Hertz's eyes, mouth, and nostrils, the angle of his jaw, the slope of his forehead, the height of his cheek bones.

Satisfied at last, he put his apparatus away, keeping only the movie film, the cylinder from the dictaphone, and the figures he had set down.

He took up the notebook and pencil and began scribbling a brief note.

"You have betrayed your friends, Hertz," he wrote. "You know the penalty of betrayal in the underworld. There is murder abroad, torture, horror. Your only chance to live is to escape from the country. I am giving you that chance. To catch a wolf I am freeing a rat. In the enclosed envelope you will find a passport already filled out and a boat ticket to South America. Take them, go, and never come back."

The lawyer took a hundred-dollar bill from his pocket, put it in the note he had written, placed it in the envelope with the ticket and passport and pinned it to the front of Hertz's coat. Then he paused a moment, holding the pencil in his hand.

With a strange, grim smile on his face, he reached forward and made a mark on the envelope—a mysterious "X" that seemed to have no purpose or meaning.

But if Jason Hertz could have seen it, he would have understood more about the strange adventure he had been through. For the man whose symbol and trade-mark that "X" was had built up a reputation which had reached even behind prison walls. It was a reputation for swift movement, startling courage, masterly disguises that no man could penetrate—and mysterious motives that no man could fathom.

It was a reputation that baffled the police as well as the underworld. For

the man who hid behind "X," symbol of the unknown quantity, seemed to be working against crime, even while classed as a criminal.

Gibbons turned then and strode through the door into the night, and behind him floated an eerie yet melodious whistle that had in it an unearthly quality like a voice from some other world.

CHAPTER III

THE AGENT'S HIDE-OUT

IT was an hour later that Gibbons, the lawyer, parked his roadster and walked along a quiet street at the outskirts of the city. His movements were quick, eager. There was a strange, restless brightness in his eyes.

The silence of the night was punctured by the shrill cry of a newsboy, peddling an early morning edition. Gibbons bought a paper and the restlessness in his eyes deepened as he stared at the front page. Black headlines were spread across it. They told of another mysterious torture murder—a millionaire's son found dead in his penthouse apartment, his face eaten away by acid.

Somewhere down the block a police siren sounded and a green roadster whirled by. Gibbons, watching from the shadows, recognized the man in it—a detective from the homicide squad. Murder seemed to whisper through the darkness of the night. Menace lay like a pall over the city.

The lawyer's pace increased. Once he paused in his swift stride to press a hand to the left side of his chest. An old wound, received on a battlefield in the World War, had given him a momentary twinge of pain.

A harsh laugh fell from his lips. Years ago doctors had predicted that he had only a few months to live; but he had gone on living, defying death. Perhaps it was this closeness to death that made him so restless— or perhaps it was something else.

He reached a wealthy residential

section at length. The river flowed beside him, millionaires' homes and expensive apartment buildings rose at his right. At the corner of the block he stopped. A high wall followed the line of the side street. A huge pile of masonry, bleak and austere, towered above the sidewalk, the windows of it boarded up. It was the old Montgomery mansion, facing the river, the house that the litigation of heirs, quarreling about the estate, had kept empty for years. Its luxurious rooms were gathering dust now. Mice moved unmolested across its polished floors. Moths were nibbling at the expensive rugs.

The man who called himself Gibbons turned and walked down the side street. There was no one in sight. He followed the wall as silently as a shadow. A few gaunt shrubs that had not been properly tended for years made a sparse fringe along the wall.

Suddenly the man stopped. He parted two shrubs and stepped behind them. His hands moved in the darkness for an instant. An old door leading into the ancient garden swung open. The door closed softly behind him.

He was in a place of ruin, decay, and desolation with the teeming life of the city shut away. Under the glow of the sky overhead, he picked his way through the garden, passed statues fallen from their pedestals, passed a tumble-down summerhouse, passed a fountain that had long since ceased to spray moisture.

He appeared to be at home, appeared to know where he was going, appeared to belong there. He came to the rear of the house, lifted the cover of the cellar door, and descended a flight of stone steps.

A key grated in the lock. In a moment he was inside. Then he paused by another door in a rear room of the old cellar. Flashing a tiny electric light, he pried loose a piece of paneling and stared intently at a hidden dial.

A clocklike mechanism behind the dial moved a cylinder of paper slowly like the drum of a seismograph. There was a stylus poised over the paper. It recorded blows and foot-falls. The paper drum was blank, showing that for the last twenty-four hours no one had passed through the hidden passageway behind the door that led down to the black waters of the river. The man nodded in satisfaction.

He moved up into the house, to a room that was hidden beneath the huge front staircase. It was in reality the false back of the old butler's pantry. The partition had been expertly moved forward and a door into the secret chamber was concealed by shelves that swung outward.

Here the man who had made the house his home could be as much shut away from the world as though he were in the black depths of a vault.

There were strange things in that secret room: a small chemical and photographic laboratory, jars, bottles, and mysterious boxes; a miniature arsenal, containing humane but efficient weapons; gas pistols that could knock a man unconscious within a radius of twenty feet; tiny, stupefying darts concealed in cigarette lighters; a concentrated tear bomb in the stem of a watch that would momentarily blind a man when he stooped to look at the time. There was also a mirror at the side of the wall under strong lights. It had three movable sides that would show every angle of a man's face, head, and body.

GIBBONS walked up to it and stood regarding himself. Then he moved away and seated himself at a shelf before another mirror. His long, restless fingers began to stray across his face. Beneath their tips a mysterious transformation took place. He plucked tiny plates of tissue-thin metal from his nostrils—plates that had made his nose hawk-

like; peeled a transparent covering of fibrous, fleshlike material from his chin and cheeks; lifted the clever, mesh-thin toupe of gray hair from his head. His whole appearance had changed.

The mirror reflected him as he really was—as he was never seen by any living soul—as he never appeared except in the silence and secrecy of this one room. The face that stared back at him from the mirror was even-featured and boyish-looking. Gray eyes that held a hint of humor in them. Brown hair and a smooth-shaven skin.

It was only when he turned his head and the light fell on his face in a certain way that new lines were brought out—lines that made him look suddenly older, mature, poised—with the record of countless experiences written in them, and indications of restless energy and driving will power that would not let him be quiet.

A grim smile came as he looked at himself. Secret Agent "X." The man of a thousand faces—a thousand disguises—a thousand surprises! The man of whom it was whispered that he had the unofficial sanction of a great government in his fight on the criminal hordes preying upon society. The man said to be officially dead in the records of the Department of Justice—his supposed death arranged that he might disappear and fight crime in a new and startling way.

His real name and background were mysteries known, if at all, only to a chosen few. Who was Secret Agent "X"?

Suddenly a frown crossed his face.

* AUTHOR'S NOTE: An intimation has come to me from reliable sources that Secret Agent "X" was, at the beginning of his career, seen entering the White House at a time when the "Crime Commission" was in session. It is my personal belief that he has the full though unacknowledged sanction of that body, backed by a very high government official, in his startling campaign against organized crime. More than that I am not in a position to state at the present time.

I have had many close contacts with the Secret Agent, many conversations even, but he has never chosen to reveal his past history to me by word of mouth. What I have learned I have learned by careful observation and by a process of gathering together small scraps of information and drawing deductions from them.

He glanced at the telegram that lay open on a table in the strange room.

It was in code and it had been sent from Washington, D. C., to a certain Elisha Pond, care of the First National Bank. Its seemingly meaningless words were burned into his mind like a brand.

"Six victims claimed in Torture Trust," the code words of the telegram stated. "Why aren't you on the job?"

He picked the yellow sheet up and walked toward a metal strongbox that rested on a shelf. For a moment he hesitated.

Holding the telegram in his left hand, he ran the fingers of his right delicately along the lid of the strongbox till he reached a certain raised rivet head. He pressed this, and there was heard a faintly audible "click."

The rivet head corresponded to the safety catch on an automatic. But the forces that it held in leash were a thousand times more destructive. There were two pounds of trinitrotoluene concealed in a false bottom of the box which, unless the safety catch was pressed, would explode when the lid was raised. The terrible explosive guarded Agent "X's" secrets from any one who might penetrate his hide-out during his absence.

He laid the telegram for safe keeping on top of a special document that the box contained.

The document bore a governmental coat of arms. It was couched in brief and simple terms, but its words carried a strange portent.

In recognition of brilliant work performed and faithful service rendered, we confer upon you the title of Secret Agent "X." Your way will be a lonely one. You will combat crime, fight ceaselessly against those who seek to destroy law, order, and the decencies of civilization.

You will stand ready to risk your life in the cause of humanity as you did while serving your country in the Intelligence

Division during the World War. For reasons, which you will comprehend, there can be no official acknowledgment of your work or sanction of your methods.

Your funds, however, will be unlimited. Ten public-spirited men of great wealth, unknown to you and unacquainted with your name, have subscribed a fund for your use. A fraction of this fund is on deposit in the First National Bank. It can be drawn by you under the cognomen of Elisha Pond. This account will be replenished whenever it becomes low. Utilize it as you see fit.

With a quick movement, the Secret Agent closed the box and released the safety catch again. There were those who knew of his existence and had absolute faith in his methods. He would endeavor to live up to that faith.

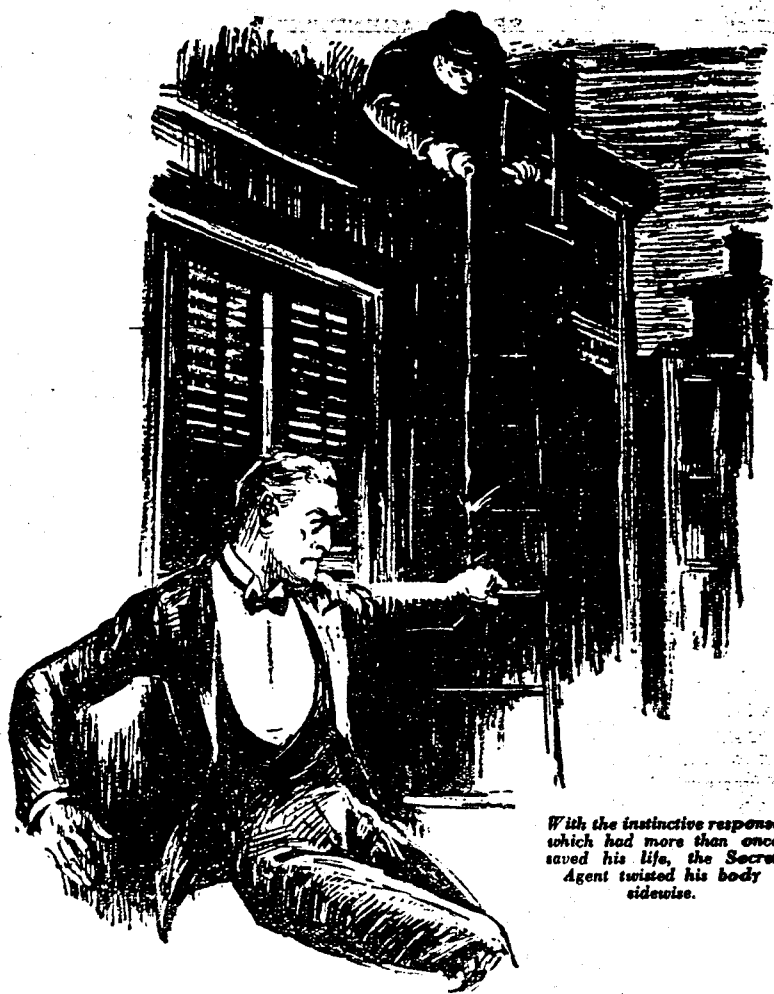
He began going over his face again with quick, deft fingers. The boyish lines disappeared under the magic touch of his hands. Gray hairs appeared at the temples. The flabby contours and dignity of middle age came into being. He leaned forward and stared intently at his own reflection. The man of a thousand faces had again achieved a master disguise.

Jeffrey Carter, clubman and gentleman of leisure!

That was his rôle for the rest of the evening. It was after one o'clock, but he had no intention of going to bed. Sleep was a thing he seldom indulged in. Restless, dynamic forces seemed always driving him on. And tonight there was work to be done—a series of hideous murders to investigate.

He had taken the photographs, the sound record, and the measurements of Jason Hertz for a purpose. No pains were too great, no efforts too laborious in creating a new disguise. When the time came to impersonate Hertz, he would do it with the skill of an artist and a scientist. But the time for the impersonation had not come.

He rose, removed the clothes he had been wearing, and, from a closet con-



With the instinctive response which had more than once saved his life, the Secret Agent twisted his body sidewise.

taining a vast wardrobe, selected a trim tuxedo. It fitted perfectly his lithe, muscular figure; but, as he slipped into the coat, he winced again at the twinge of pain near his heart.

That and the scar on his chest, drawn into the lines of a crude X where a piece of shrapnel had ploughed, might sometime give him away. It was a risk he was prepared to take.

THE Secret Agent, alias Jeffrey Carter, took a taxi down town. He told the driver to swing left at Twenty-third Street, and he gave a number in a block of medium-priced apartment houses. Through the agent's mind a series of sentences were moving, repeating themselves again and again. *Bellaire Club! Panagakos! A blue vase on the dance floor!*

He paid the driver, dismissed the cab, and walked forward. This was not a night-club section, but Agent "X" had special business. Halfway down the long, silent block he stepped back into an angle formed by the intersection of two walls. Here the deep shadows lay as black as ink.

For a moment the agent's eyes narrowed. He was staring upward, along the brick facing of an apartment building opposite. There was a light showing behind the drawn shade in a window on the sixth floor.

The Agent fingered the black bathing tie above his immaculate shirt front, gave his silk muffler a deft twitch, then moved briskly out of the shadows and crossed the street.

He entered the building, passed through a small foyer where a switchboard operator was sitting, and ascended by an elevator. Walking left along a corridor, he pressed the button of apartment No. 63.

There came a sound of high heels clicking over the parquet flooring inside. A moment later the door opened and a girl with blonde hair and a *petite* figure stood on the threshold.

She raised an uneasy hand, patted her gleaming coiffure nervously, and stared closely at Agent "X," her blue eyes narrowing in worried speculation.

"Miss Betty Dale, I believe," the Agent said. "May I come in?"

His voice now was cultured, softly modulated. The masterly disguise he had affected tonight hid his real identity. He was playing a part for a purpose.

"My name is Jeffrey Carter," he continued. "I'd like to talk to you a few moments if you can spare the time."

As he spoke, he watched the girl's face narrowly. It expressed uneasiness, doubt, perplexity. Obviously she did not know who he was. Obviously, to her he was a perfect stranger and a suspicious one at that.

"Come in," she said at last, a note of reluctance in her tone.

She turned, her small pretty face screwed up in worry, and led the way into the sitting room.

The long, powerful hands of Jeffrey Carter moved then. One of them flickered out, the fingers holding something that was like a thin stick of pomade.

He made a quick movement close to the wall as he passed by, then slipped the mysterious stick back into his pocket. There was a faint smile on his face. His disguise had proven adequate under the gaze of a girl whose intelligence and cleverness he rated as high as her beauty.

He reached out and snapped off the electric light switch, plunging the room into darkness.

The girl gave a little gasp of surprise and fear; but the stranger's voice reassured her.

"A beacon shines for all good mariners," he said.

She turned. On the wall at her back was a glowing X, shimmering there with a strange eerie light. It was the mark of the Secret Agent—written in the purest radium paint—paint made by a secret formula and containing thousands of dollars' worth of the world's most expensive metal.*

"It is you then?" she said, relief in her voice.

The Secret Agent had given her many moment of worry in his desire to use her as a test. He had come to her in dozens of different disguises. She never felt sure of her ground until he gave her some characteristic, identifying sign.

His manner changed now. He was no longer the suave clubman. There was a tenseness in his attitude that the girl sensed. When they were seat-

* AUTHOR'S NOTE: This paint of the Agent's is unmistakable. It is ten times brighter than the radium paint used on the faces of clocks and watches which contains only the minutest fraction of the priceless element. It is more luminous than any paint I have ever seen, and it is obvious that the expense and trouble entailed in its manufacture are sanctioned by the Agent as an insurance against imitation. He cannot afford to take chances.

ed in the next room, Jeffrey Carter talked quickly, moving his long-fingered hands restlessly.

"Blue vases are the devil's choice," he said suddenly.

The words were incomprehensible to the girl; but she relaxed in her chair, all uneasiness gone. The Agent generally spoke in metaphors and parables, the significance of which she learned in due time. Almost everything he said had some double meaning.

Respect and intense loyalty mingled in her blue eyes as she regarded the man who tonight called himself Jeffrey Carter. Whoever the Secret Agent really was, she knew that he had been a friend of her dead father's—the father who had been a police captain, slain by underworld bullets.

She had been brought up to feel an intense hatred of criminals. The death of her father had crystallized this feeling.

This man, her father's friend, was working against the underworld. She trusted him, relied upon him, knew that he was kindly and brave. There had been times when he had placed sums of money collected from criminals in her hands—to give to charity, to help the poor and those who had been victimized by underworld plots.

She knew that he kept nothing for himself, asked nothing but to live dangerously, recklessly, gambling with fate. There were moments when wonder filled her as to what sort of face lay behind those brilliant disguises. Would she ever know? Or would death claim him before she had penetrated the secrets of his life?

The Agent spoke mysteriously again, his eyes gleaming with some hidden emotion.

"You are an accomplished dancer, Miss Dale, and to dance beautifully is an art. Tonight I ask you to dance with me."

She gave a start of surprise and flushed slightly. "What do you mean?"

"The Bellaire Club is calling us, Betty. There is music to be danced to

—and a blue vase to be looked at. Put on your best frock."

SHE shrugged, nodded, and flashed him a smile. Something deeper than caprice and a love of dancing, she knew, lay behind his words. And when, at the end of ten minutes, she emerged from her boudoir, she was a vision of loveliness.

Betty Dale was a girl who knew how to wear clothes. Poise and refinement were instinctive with her and that good taste which is something inborn and can never be taught. Because of these things, she had gotten ahead in the world. She had won a career for herself as a star reporter on the *Herald*. When she was covering society stuff, she could meet and hobnob with fashionable people on their own plane. This made her invaluable both to the paper and the Agent.

More than once she had helped him by going places with him when he needed a feminine companion, by carrying out his orders, and by getting information that he required.

Tonight she was clad in a white evening dress with a fur wrap draped over her shoulders. Together they went to the street and signaled a taxi.

They were whirled through the brightly lighted thoroughfares of the great city to the doors of the Bellaire Club, which, for all its gaudy ostentation, was a place of ill repute, a place where sinister things had happened.

It was frequented by the fast, wealthy set, and by gangsters and gamblers who had made big money. There were gambling tables in the rear, a dance floor and a large orchestra in front, with tables for couples to sit at and drink.

The Secret Agent had asked Betty Dale to accompany him tonight because a lone man or woman coming to the Bellaire Club was at once an object of curiosity to Mike Panagakos, the flabby-jowled, sloe-eyed manager. The Agent did not want that.

He whirled Betty Dale around the room once, and his eyes gleamed as

he saw a blue vase on a low settee by one wall. It was a fine piece of Turkish pottery that somehow fitted in with the gaudy, exotic atmosphere of the club. It seemed to have been placed there as a receptacle for flowers, but it was empty now.

As they whirled past it, the Secret Agent's hand flicked out. The note he had made Jason Hertz write fell into the vase.

By that act he believed he was opening a trail that might lead him into the shadow of hideous murder and mysterious death.

When the dance had ended, they seated themselves at a table to watch the moving crowds about them; the sinuous, over-painted women, and the immaculately dressed men.

Then Betty Dale suddenly caught her breath, and the Secret Agent's head turned quickly.

Across the room a group of people had scattered. A woman gave a hoarse cry of fear.

From the center of the group, a man ran forward into the circular spot cast by an overhead light. He was holding his hands to his face, staggering drunkenly—and, as Agent "X" watched, he let forth a scream of agony that shivered through the air with the keenness of a knife thrust. Then he collapsed and lay writhing on the polished floor.

CHAPTER IV

POLICE NET

GASPS of horror went up from those in the room. The orchestra, playing a languorous concert number, came to a discordant stop. Men and women crowded forward, craning their necks.

Agent "X" arose. There was a steely brightness in his eyes, tenseness in the low whisper of his voice.

"Satan has struck," he said.

Leaving the girl at the table, he moved across the floor to mingle with the crowd around the fallen man. Silently, swiftly, he pushed his way

close. Looking over the shoulder of an elaborately dressed woman, he got a glimpse of the man on the floor.

The man's hands were still covering his face. Between the quivering fingers Agent "X" saw inflamed, mottled flesh, pockmarked and drawn together. Faint fumes curled up. The man's skin had been hideously burned. Some one had thrown acid at him.

Agent "X" turned. He ran to the nearest table, grabbed a bottle of olive oil and shouldered his way back, kneeling by the fallen man. With quick, deft fingers, he poured the sweet oil over the man's tortured face.

It was a simple remedy, but, quickly applied, it might save the man from death or life disfigurement. The man moaned and twitched. One side of his coat fell away. The edge of a gleaming badge showed. He was a headquarters detective. He writhed again, pawing at his injured face, then went limp. Merciful unconsciousness had come.

The Secret Agent got up quickly. Mike Panagakos, the fat, sleek-haired manager, was pushing his way forward.

"Call an ambulance," said Agent "X" harshly. But another voice cut in on him.

"It's already been done. Everybody keep quiet. Don't try to leave the room. There are men stationed at the doors with orders to shoot."

The man who had spoken was heavy-set, stern-eyed. He looked out of character in the tuxedo that wrinkled baggily around his lumpy body. He was Detective-Sergeant Mathers of the Homicide Squad.

"It's a raid!" cried a woman, the quavers of hysteria in her voice.

"Raid is right! There's been a murder attempted. There's a killer in this room. Every man and woman of you is gonna get searched."

In Sergeant Mathers' words was a savage note. He glared at the people

around him with a ferocity that was backed by bafflement and fear.

"The Torture Trust!" whispered somebody hoarsely. And a sudden silence descended on the room, broken only by the tense breathing of fear-stricken people. Horror seemed to creep out of the corners. The fat face of Mike Panagakos turned a sickly dough color. The whites of his eyes showed.

Agent "X's" quick brain grappled with the situation. Detectives, he realized, must have been posted in the room all evening. The police, too, must know that Joe Catrella had hung out at the Bellaire Club. They were leaving no stone unturned in their efforts to solve the hideous torture murders. And the "Torture Trust" in its campaign of terror had turned brutally on the police force itself.

Agent "X" looked around the big room. At the main entrance, a man with a police automatic in his hand was standing alertly. There was another close to the door of Panagakos' private office in the rear. A third guarded the window by the fire escape. Sergeant Mathers had worked quickly, efficiently.

"Squad cars are on the way," he barked. "There'll be policewomen to search the ladies. Inspector Burks himself is coming."

The imperious clanging of an ambulance bell sounded in the street outside. It stopped at the door of the Bellaire Club. A moment later, the detective at the main entrance stepped back as two white-coated internes entered, a stretcher in the hands of one.

Sergeant Mathers spoke again, pointing to the figure on the floor.

"Get that man to the hospital as fast as you can."

The internes moved like automata. Opening the collapsible stretcher, they lifted the unconscious detective, placed him on it, and carried him out of the room. The gong of the ambulance sounded again, growing fainter as it wound its way through traffic

that had stopped as if frozen. The bell seemed to leave behind it a black pall of mystery and terror.

In staccato sentences, harsh as the crack of a whip, Sergeant Mathers began questioning Panagakos.

"Donelly was a good man. He's the third who's had stuff thrown in his face. The first one cashed in. Where was Donelly when he got his?"

Panagakos shook his head. He drew the back of his hand across lips that were moist and quivering.

"I—I didn't see nothing," he said. "I was in my office. When I heard the racket I came out."

A foreign-looking waiter in a short-tailed jacket came close to Sergeant Mathers. He made movements in the air with his hands.

"It was from the kitchen that he came, *señor*. It was there that I first saw him—the policeman. But I saw no one else."

Mathers pressed forward, the crowd following, led on by morbid curiosity, and Agent "X" followed, too.

HE saw Mathers round up and question the kitchen staff. Saw them shake their heads. They had seen no one. A hallway led to a big pantry and storeroom beside the kitchen. Agent "X" knew the angles of the building. He made it a business to learn such things. There was likely to be an air shaft in the storeroom. Why didn't Mathers search there? But he couldn't suggest it. It would attract attention to himself. The detectives would have to work their way. He would work his. But there was worry in his eyes.

Any moment cars filled with policemen and policewomen might arrive at the Bellaire Club. Every person in the room would be searched. It was something that Agent "X" did not care to risk. There were strange articles concealed in his clothing—articles that it would be embarrassing to have the police find. Sometimes quick changes of disguise were neces-

Secret Agent "X" developed the art of disguise into an exact science. Before his triple mirror in the secret sanctum of his room, miraculous transformations took place.



sary. Painstaking care had gone into the creation of featherweight, portable make-up. Odd kinds of material were cleverly concealed in the linings of his coat and vest.*

To make matters worse, Inspector Burks of the Homicide Squad was a bitter enemy of the Agent's. Discrediting rumors that "X" was working against the underworld, the formal, routine-loving police inspec-

tor regarded the Agent as a particularly vicious criminal.

More than once their ways had crossed. More than once Agent "X" had led the inspector along the right path to apprehend some evil-doer. But he had done it so subtly, so deviously, that Burks never realized he had been aided. He had only redoubled his efforts to trap the man whose trademark was a gleaming "X." His suspicions would be aroused if he found hidden disguises on the man who tonight called himself Jeffrey Carter.

With a grim smile on his face, Agent "X" made his way back toward the table where he had left Betty Dale. He must get away and take the girl with him before Inspector Burks arrived. With armed men at every door

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: Agent "X's" ability to make quick changes of disguise falls little short of genius. By means of nostril and mouth plates he is able to sculpture his features into new lines, and, using veinlike, plastic material laid over with flesh-tinted pigments, he has developed external make-up into an exact science.

It is my belief that in his strange and varied career he was at one time associated with some great character actor. He has never said so; but he has all the tricks of the stage at his command. In the art of impersonation he has even outwitted Vidocq, the famous French detective who became the first "Chef de Police de Surete," in Paris.

and window, this seemed impossible. Only brilliant strategy could accomplish it.

There were fear shadows in Betty Dale's eyes as he approached her. One slim hand was pressed against her breast.

"We're trapped," she said. "They'll search you! What will you do?"

"Sometimes a leopard can change his spots," he said enigmatically.

Her eyes grew wide with wonder as she stared at him. Sergeant Mathers had said that no one was to be allowed to leave the room. No matter what disguise he wore, it would be the same, she thought. Even the Agent couldn't accomplish the impossible.

Close to their table was a heavy drapery across the front of the private booth for diners who wanted to be alone. The booth was empty tonight. The drapery was partially drawn back.

With the light of purpose in his eyes, the Agent stepped quietly into the booth. Inch by inch he edged the drapery across till the booth was covered—fill he was out of sight.

The girl looked quickly about. The men and women in the room were staring at Sergeant Mathers, following his every word and gesture as he cross-examined Mike Panagakos and the kitchen staff. No one had seen the Agent go behind the drapery. She looked toward the booth for an instant.

A faint light showed under the drapery's edge. The Agent was mysteriously at work. But fear and perplexity still mingled in her expression. Her ears were strained to catch the wailing of police sirens outside announcing the arrival of the headquarters' cars.

Then she gave a sudden gasp. The drapery in the front of the booth moved. A man stepped out—but not Jeffrey Carter, the clubman who had brought her to the Bellaire Club.

The man who emerged had a hard, pale face. His mouth was a thin line.

There was a frown between his eyes. His eyebrows, in contrast to his white hair, jutted blackly. He carried himself with erect, military bearing. She had seen that man before. He was Inspector Burks of the Homicide Squad.

Betty Dale drew in her breath.

She could not be mistaken. One man had gone into the booth; another had stepped out—but she knew they were one and the same man—Secret Agent "X." She knew that his uncanny mastery of disguise had accomplished the impossible.

He didn't try to test his make-up this time. He looked at her, smiled an instant, and nodded. Then his face set again into grim lines. He gestured toward the front entrance and handed her her wrap. She understood.

With wild, beating heart, but covering her agitation, she walked toward the door.

The burly detective guarding it barred her way. "You heard the sergeant's orders, lady—nobody goes out!"

Then the detective gave a visible start. His eyes widened. He drew himself up respectfully and lowered the gun.

"It's all right," said a cold voice. "I'll show her to the street. See that nobody else leaves."

"Certainly, inspector!"

The detective's puzzled frown indicated that he couldn't quite piece things together. He could only go by what he saw. Inspector Burks was at the girl's elbow. The Homicide Squad head must, it seemed, have come in the back way. He must have a good reason for making an exception in the girl's favor. The detective stood back, and Betty Dale and the Secret Agent moved unmolested down the carpeted stairs.

They did not hurry. The man at Betty Dale's side maintained his stiffly erect bearing.

But, at the downstairs entrance, his grip on her arm tightened. He gave a swift look right and left and sud-

denly drew her across the street. Up the block, headlights flared piercingly; a swift car shot around the corner; squealing rubber; and a siren rose into a screaming, pulsating wail.

"The police!" gasped Betty Dale, the words like a sob of fear in her throat.

CHAPTER V

THE ACID THROWER

THERE wasn't time to do more than draw the girl into a dark areaway beside a stoop. Agent "X" did so, crouching beside her. To be seen now disguised as Inspector Burks would put an end to his plans.

He waited tensely as the car with the screaming siren came to a halt opposite. The real inspector was the first to get out, his erect, military bearing and pale face making him easy to identify. After him tumbled three plain-clothes men and two grim-faced policewomen. They crossed the sidewalk and disappeared in the entranceway of the Bellaire Club.

A second squad car rounded the corner and came roaring down the block, sliding to a screeching halt behind the first. All the detectives in the city seemed to be concentrating on this one point. The sirens had attracted attention. Heads were peering out windows. A small crowd was collecting. Any moment sharp eyes might spy out Agent "X" and the girl beside him. But she was safe now. He motioned toward the street and she understood.

"You?" she said. "What will you do?"

"The spots of the leopard will change again," he replied.

Her face was pale and uneasy as she left him and mingled with the crowd on the street. A moment later she signaled a taxi, stepped into it and was whisked away.

The Agent turned his back. Head down amongst the shadows of the areaway, his long fingers began to move. They were working in the dark-

ness now, working by instinct and the uncanny skill that past experience had developed.

He left the white hair on, but drew the jutting black eyebrows off and peeled away the plastic material from his face. He slipped rubber cheek plates against his gums to broaden his features, smoothed the frown of Inspector Burks from his forehead, then turned.

As he sauntered out into the light of the street, no one would have known him for either of the two men he had impersonated earlier in the evening. He looked older now, fatter—and the glittering nose glasses with a black cord attached that he slipped on heightened the effect of dignity and age.

The voices in the crowd around him were tense, electrified with fear. Rumors were running like wildfire. The "Torture Trust" had claimed another victim. A newspaper man with a flash-light camera was taking pictures of the front of the Bellaire Club. Soon the presses of the tabloids would be grinding out another story of mystery and horror for a thrill-loving public to devour at their leisure.

But the game that "X" was playing was a game of life and death.

He slipped through the crowd, moving along the side of the building to the mouth of an alley that tradesmen used. He stared down it, glanced back along the street, then plunged out of sight.

The dignity of his movements fell from him suddenly. He snapped the eyeglasses off, placed them in his pocket. His eyes were bright and piercing as bits of polished steel.

Above him were the lighted windows of the Bellaire Club. He followed the alley on up to the corner of the building. Ahead was a courtyard filled with boxes and barrels. A fire escape snaked up the side of the club, passing the windows of the kitchen, going on up to the roof.

"X" stood a moment, trying to locate the position of the air shaft he

had figured was there. It was either by that or the fire escape that the acid thrower had entered and gone.

Then he drew in his breath. Far above him, silhouetted a moment against the starlit sky he saw faint movement. It might have been a man's head or hand. He couldn't be certain which; but he crouched back in the black shadows of the courtyard.

Then, swiftly as a cat, he crossed the flagstones and leaped up. His fingers caught the end of the weighted fire escape ladder. The ladder came down slowly, its rusty hinges squeaking.

Agent "X" paused and listened. No sound came from the darkness above. He mounted the ladder swiftly, up past the kitchen windows, reaching the darkness beyond just as one opened. Inspector Burks was on the job now and would be more thorough than Sergeant Mathers had been.

"X" took the iron steps two at a time. Speedily, silently, he reached the roof, while behind him a cop stepped out on the second-floor landing. The police, too, were going to search the roof. The Agent had escaped from one difficult situation only to be involved in another. His blood raced madly. Once again he was pitting his wits and courage against the forces of Fate. What if there were no other way down from the roof? What if the police trapped him?

But he didn't dwell on the dangers of the situation.

Lightly as a cat, he leaped to the coping of the roof and balanced there on the balls of his feet.

The top of the Bellaire Club stretched before him. Beyond was another building, higher still—a sheer cliff of offices closed for the day. But against its brick walls he saw vague movement again. A giant spider seemed to be creeping up its bare side.

The Agent's eyes had been trained to work in semi-darkness—to see things that other men missed. There was an iron ladder up the side of the building beyond. Some one was climb-

ing it swiftly—a figure which, even at that distance, had something macabre and sinister about it.

Agent "X" started in pursuit. He was ahead of the police, one jump in advance on the trail of a would-be murderer. As he reached the higher building, he looked behind him across the roof of the Bellaire Club and saw the head and shoulders of the cop. Then his hands were on the ladder and his feet had found the rungs.

It ran straight up, a sheer hundred feet, to the roof above. It passed by unlighted windows, and, as he mounted, it was as though he were hanging in space.

THEN, far behind him, he heard a cry. A pinpoint of flame blossomed in the darkness. There was a sharp, whiplike report. Something struck the bricks beside him and screamed away into the night like a frightened banshee.

The Secret Agent smiled. It wasn't the first time he had been under fire. The cop on the roof below had glimpsed him just as he had glimpsed the man ahead. But there could be no accurate shooting. The policeman's second bullet went wider of its mark than the first. The cop was being blinded by the flash of his own gun.

Agent "X" continued to climb. The cop below turned on a flashlight, but its beam wouldn't reach. Agent "X" was too high up. A moment later, however, the iron ladder gave out faint vibrations, warning the Agent that the man below had reached it and was mounting, too.

"X" traversed the last rungs at dangerous speed. He vaulted over the edge of the roof and stood there like a man on top of the world. The twinkling lights of the city lay below him, peaceful as though murder were not stalking through the night.

He turned and looked along the roof. All seemed quiet. He could see no movement now; but with quick, silent strides, he skirted the edge of the roof, then leaped forward.

At a point opposite where he had come up, another ladder went down. It had become a mad game of hide-and-seek on the rooftops of the city. There was no place up here for a man to hide. "X" tried the one skylight window and found that it was locked on the inside. The man ahead, whoever he might be, was showing that he knew his ground. His fiendish act tonight had been as deliberate as it was diabolical, planned with the cunning that characterized every movement of the "Torture Trust."

Agent "X" grasped the top of the second ladder and began the descent as quickly as he had climbed. Six stories below, his feet touched another, lower roof. He crossed it, reached the fire escape that mounted on the next building. He was moving along the block on the rooftops.

He looked back again, and, far above, outlined against the high office building, he saw movement. The cop was close on his trail.

A sense of menace seemed to descend on him out of the night. He could outwit the police, but he was pitting himself against criminals as fiendish as they were cunning. He reached under his coat, drew out a pistol. It was one of the weapons he sometimes used in moments of emergency—not an ordinary gun. The Agent did not kill. To slaughter a man was a crude way of dealing with a situation. The Agent operated with finesse, ingenuity, and impetuous daring. The chambers of this gun contained concentrated anesthetizing gas of a high specific gravity. Even in the open, fired into a man's face, it could cause unconsciousness.

He gripped the pistol, climbed still faster. He was on the last flight of the fire escape now, with the roof of the third building ahead. He stared up twelve feet. And, as he did so, a black shape suddenly blotted out the stars. So quickly that the Agent didn't have time to raise his gun, a man's arm flashed out.

With that instinctive response

which had more than once saved his life, the Secret Agent twisted his body sidewise. He hung by one hand and foot, swaying perilously away from the iron ladder, out over dizzy space.

Something hissed by in the air close to his face. The stench and reek of chemicals made his nostrils quiver. Burning, acrid fumes made his eyes blink and smart. Then the flesh of his left wrist felt as if a red-hot brand had suddenly been pressed upon it. The pain was so excruciating that his muscles contracted and he almost let go his hold. The silhouette above disappeared.

Biting his lips with pain, the Secret Agent continued to climb. By a few inches only he had missed the liquid torture from the roof above. A few drops of the acid thrower's torment had struck his wrist, showing what terrible thing he had escaped.

His eyes glowing like points of steel, he went on up, peering cautiously over the roof, the gas gun in his fingers. But the roof was deserted now.

The Agent saw why. With a bound he crossed the tarred space to a heavy trapdoor cover. He tugged at it with tense fingers, but it was bolted inside. Then, stooping down, he placed his ear against the sheet metal. From below came the faint stir of descending footsteps. The acid thrower had made good his escape.

Philosophical always in defeat, biding his time, the Secret Agent stood up. He couldn't go back the way he had come. He walked across the building to the fire escape at the rear, and quickly began the descent.

This one seemed to end in a vacant courtyard below. He paused a moment listening. All was quiet.

He reached the bottom, dropped to the flagstones and started toward a fence in the rear, then suddenly crouched back. A bright beam pierced the darkness close ahead. The ray of a flashlight made his eyelids narrow.

"Stand still, guy," a harsh voice said.

Against the glow of a street light beyond the court, Agent "X" got a sudden glimpse of the visored cap of a city cop.

CHAPTER VI

SINISTER SUMMONS

IT was a situation that he hadn't anticipated—a dangerous turn of events. The cop's voice held deadly purpose. The Agent knew that a gun was trained on him. He knew also that the police were nervous, fearful, and ready to shoot at the drop of a hat. Calmness would be necessary and brilliant strategy.

A slow smile spread over the Agent's face. He made his voice drawing.

"Don't be hasty, old man. Nothing to get excited about, you know."

With aggravating deliberation, he dusted his palms together, wiped a speck of dust from the front of his tuxedo and reached toward his vest pocket.

"Keep yer hands in sight," snarled the cop. "Go for a gat and I'll drill yer."

"Really!" said the Agent, poised and unruffled. "I don't think you fully grasp the situation."

With the tips of his fingers, he delicately drew his eyeglasses from his vest. He breathed upon them, wiped the gleaming lenses on his sleeve, and placed them carefully on his nose. Then he raised his head. Looking straight at the cop he spoke arrogantly.

"Now, my good man, I'd appreciate it if you'd take that light of yours out of my eyes. It's quite annoying."

The cop came closer, still tauntly alert.

"What were yer doing on that roof? Who the hell are yer?"

"Name's Claude Fellingafort," said the Agent. "Thought I saw a fellow running around up top. Went up for a bit of a look. Heard that the police were having a man hunt. Thought I'd aid them."

"Yeah?"

"Quite—and now, if you'll just step aside, I'll be on my way."

"You'll be on your way right enough. You're gonna have a talk with the inspector. He's up the block. I've got my orders and I'm gonna follow 'em."

"The devil you say! You'd better give me your number. I intend to register a complaint about this."

The cop's gun thrust against his side. "Move along where I tell yer! Keep your hands away from your pockets."

"You'll hear from me, my good man."

The Agent's voice was outraged now. His pose was that of the injured man-about-town; a citizen furious at the ingratitude of blundering officials. But he moved in the direction the cop indicated. He might learn something from a chat with the inspector.

The crowd in front of the Bellaire Club made way for the cop and his prisoner. They climbed the carpeted stairs to where Inspector Burks was standing just inside the door of the main room. The search of the fifty or more guests of the club was still in progress. The cop spoke harshly.

"I found this guy stepping off a fire escape down the block, chief. He handed me a line. I thought maybe you'd want to talk to him."

Inspector Burks focused the full glare of his black eyes on Agent "X." They were face to face—the official head of the world's greatest homicide squad and the man who worked outside the law for the cause of law and order. But the Agent was protected by his masterly disguise.

The inspector's pale, aquiline face registered no recognition. He was in a dangerous mood, though, ready to grasp at any straw that came this way. The press was clamoring that the "Torture Trust" be smashed. The police were being criticized.

"Who the devil are you?" he snapped.

The Secret Agent adjusted his

glasses again, stroking the black cord.

"I told this fellow here," he drawled, gesturing toward the cop. "My name's Fellingsfort, in case you want to know."

"What do you do for a living?"

"A bit of financial work. Bond selling and that sort of thing."

"What have you got to prove it?"

The Agent reached into his coat pocket, drew out a wallet and opened it. He carried a dozen or more cards with him always, different names upon them. His disguises went more than skin deep. He avoided trouble by checkmating it in advance.

From a deep inner pocket in the wallet, he drew a card bearing the name Claude Fellingsfort, with the legend "High Grade Bonds" directly after it. With an elaborate flourish he presented it to the inspector. Burks glared at it suspiciously.

"What were you doing climbing down off the fire escape, Fellingsfort?"

"One couldn't stay on it forever," said Agent "X" suavely. "Since I went up, I had to come down."

"Why did you go up in the first place?"

"I thought I saw a fellow sneaking around up there as it were. It turned out I was right."

The inspector's eyes narrowed into aggressive pinpoints of light.

"What the hell do you mean?"

Defly the Secret Agent stretched out his arm, pulled up his coat, and drew back his cuff. An inflamed spot showed on his wrist where the skin had been burned.

"The bally idiot threw acid down on me, you know. Sort of an unfriendly devil. I didn't linger to pursue our acquaintance."

"Acid!" Burks' voice had the sharpness of a whiplash.

"Quite. There's the spot—burned rather painfully if I do say so."

"Where did the man who threw it go?"

"Down the block—fifth house from

the end. It might pay you, inspector, to send a couple of men to search the place."

For an instant the tone of the man who called himself Claude Fellingsfort changed. Then he resumed his irritating drawl.

"And now, if you've no objections, I'll be on my way."

Burks reply was icy.

"You'll go down to the station house, Fellingsfort. I'm going to hold you for investigation—check up on your credentials."

He gestured toward two husky cops.

"Take this man down to the station—keep him there till I come."

"I say!" protested Fellingsfort. "That's what I call gratitude! I'm late for an appointment now. I really can't sanction this!"

He drew a gold watch from his pocket and looked at it with a frown.

"Take him away, boys," was the inspector's answer.

The two cops stepped forward, one on each side of the Secret Agent.

The watch was still in the Agent's hand, and suddenly a strange thing happened. His thumb moved delicately. There was a faint click inside the timepiece. Then the Agent's arm described a quick arc in the air before the two cops' faces and a thin jet of vapor spurted from the watch's stem.

With gasps the two policemen fell back, wiping their eyes, momentarily blinded by harmless tear gas. And, quick as a fleeing wraith, the Agent leaped to the door and ran down the stairs.

Inspector Burks cried out harshly and another cop at the entrance attempted to stop "X," but a second jet of gas sent the patrolman back. An instant later and the Secret Agent, alias Claude Fellingsfort, had run into the street and disappeared, lost in the crowd.

Inspector Burks stared again at the card Fellingsfort had given him, then gave a sudden gasp of amazement.

The card had turned black in his

hands, the name disappearing. In the center of the card a glaring white figure stood out. It was a mysterious letter "X," come there as though by magic.*

IT wasn't until twenty-four hours later that Agent "X" returned to the Bellaire Club—and this time he went alone. In the meantime he had followed reports in the papers, questioned numerous people, and done all he could to trace down the hidden members of the "Torture Trust." But in each instance he had drawn a blank.

There was one lead still open, however—the most significant of all, the one upon which Agent "X" depended for success—or death.

As a news item, the escape of Jason Hertz from the State penitentiary had not been important. The story had been tucked away on the second and third pages of the metropolitan papers. The police hadn't linked up his break for liberty with the sinister activities of the "Torture Trust." But Agent "X" knew that somewhere in the city knowing eyes had read of Hertz's escape.

He returned therefore to the Bellaire Club disguised as a young man-about-town. But into his disguise he injected a sleekness of appearance, a sharp, hungry look, that any one acute enough would sense. He had the appearance of a man possessed with the gambling fever.

And only after he had lost two hundred dollars at cards, allaying the suspicions of Mike Panagakos and the detectives stationed around the room, did he seat himself at a table by the dance floor. He ordered a drink and sat hunched over it, smoking a cigarette morosely, like a man despondent at the loss he has suffered.

* AUTHOR'S NOTE: This trick of "X's" is a simple one. He keeps certain cards in a special light-proof compartment of his wallet. These cards have a silver nitrate coating like photographic paper. But a small "X" is placed over the card before the silver wash is put on. Then the "X" is taken away and the card dried. Given five minutes of exposure to light and every part of the card except the uncoated "X" turns black.

The table wasn't ten feet from the blue vase on its polished settee.

Minutes passed, and the Agent's hand moved to the cord of the table-light running below the cloth. No one noticed, but in his fingers was a pair of singularly shaped pliers. They bit down on the cord and did not sever it; but a needle point thrust itself through the outer silk covering into the two copper cables inside.

There was a small spark, a hiss, the odor of burned insulation, and every light in the room went out as the main fuses blew. "X" had deliberately caused a short circuit.

In the hubbub that followed he moved quickly. He crossed in the darkness to the blue vase, slipped his hand inside and withdrew it. In his fingers was a piece of paper.

He pulled the pliers from the light cord, stopping the short circuit. When the blown fuses had been replaced by some one in the kitchen, Agent "X" was again sitting quietly at his table. A half hour later, attracting little attention, he gathered up his coat and left.

It wasn't till he reached a secluded avenue that he opened the note in the hollow of his hand. Then his heart leaped with excitement.

"Come to Forty-four MacDonough Street, J. H., and ring the bell seven times," the note said. And Agent "X" knew that in those brief words lay the seeds of success—or hideous death—depending on his own wits and the cards that Fate dealt him.

CHAPTER VII

MASTERS OF DEATH

FOR hours that night, the Agent worked in his secret room in the old Montgomery mansion. Rats scuttled across the deserted floors. Mice squeaked in the walls of the ancient house. From outside came the occasional noises of the city. The rumble of a heavy truck. The faint blare of a taxi horn. But the Agent's chamber was like a little world in itself shut

The man came toward her. On his face was a terrible smile—a smile of fiendish pleasure.



away from the lives of ordinary men.

He had been extraordinarily careful tonight. He had studied closely the faithful recording apparatus in the cellar, making sure that no one had disturbed the privacy of the house. He had taken special pains to throw any possible shadower off the track.

Now, feeling secure, he set to work methodically to achieve the most masterly disguise of his career. On its per-

fection his very life depended, and perhaps the lives of others, innocent victims of the "Torture Trust."

He took out the movie films, the sound record, and the measurements made during his interview with Jason Hertz. The film he had already developed in his small photographic laboratory.

He set a projector on a tripod, focused it on a silver screen, and switched off the lights in the room.

Then he snapped on the bulb behind the projector and started the machine in motion.

Hertz's image appeared on the screen. Agent "X" studied it again and again, noting each movement and facial expression. He had made a series of still enlargements from the movie film, and these he studied also.

He placed the hard-rubber record on a phonographic machine and listened to Hertz's voice.

For twenty minutes he practised the vowel and consonant sounds, perfecting tongue and lip movements, until he had mastered the timbre and pitch—until it seemed that Hertz himself was speaking in the small room. Then he seated himself before his triple mirror, and, with the measurement chart at his side, began the elaborate make-up.

He used his finest pigments, built up his plastic material, working in thin layers with constant reference to the notes he had made. He reconstructed each plane and line of the ex-convict's features; then practised characteristic expressions. He laughed, frowned, registered fear, surprise, and arrogance as he had seen Jason Hertz do.

Even then he wasn't satisfied—not until he had risen and moved about the room, imitating Hertz's walk and arm movements. When at last he put his equipment away, Hertz's own mother wouldn't have known that the man in the room was not her son.

"X" dressed himself as a criminal and gunman: a cheap, flashy suit, a striped silk shirt, a tie that shouted to the world.

But, in the linings of the suit, he hid other articles. There was no telling what desperate emergencies might arise. He took one keen look at the little chamber before leaving. It might, for all he knew, be the last he would ever get.

A taxi sped him to within a few blocks of MacDonough Street. He got out and paid the driver, doubting that the cabman would recognize him as

Hertz. The police heads would know him. The detective force would be tipped off. He must avoid representatives of the law. But he didn't fear citizens or ordinary cops except in the region that Jason Hertz had frequented.

MacDonough Street was in a dark, cluttered section near the river front. Number forty-four was in a block of ancient, unpainted houses that seemed like a stagnant backwater left by the city's swift progress northward.

The Secret Agent's heart beat faster as he climbed the stoop and pressed the bell of number forty-four seven times.

It was at least two minutes before the door opened. Then a statterly old woman stood before him. Her beady, ratlike eyes were set in a face as evil as a witch's. She licked thin, toothless gums and stared at him out of the black pit of the hall. Then she jerked her head.

"Come in," she said harshly.

She hadn't asked him his name. He knew she had recognized him as Jason Hertz. He followed her along a dusty smelling corridor into a rear room. Here she switched the light on, closed the door after her, and left him alone.

But he had the uncanny sense that eyes somewhere were studying him. He waited breathlessly, and seconds later a closet door opened and a man stepped out.

The man was small, dressed in gray, and his face had the dead, listless color of putty. His eyes, too, were listless, reptilelike; but they focused on "X's" with cold, calculating intelligence.

For seconds the man studied "X" at close range, then took a pad from his pocket and the stub of a pencil. He scribbled a sentence on the pad and handed it to the Agent.

"Come with me," the sentence read.

And "X" realized with a start that the gray-clad man before him was a deaf-mute. Looking closer, he saw that the masklike face of the man

seemed to conceal some horrible inner maladjustment. Was he insane, or a drug addict? There was something chillingly sinister about him, as though he were the very emissary of death.

HE led the Agent out a rear door of the house, through a back yard into another street as evil looking as the one in front. A car was waiting at the curb. It was a dark-colored, closed vehicle, and at the wheel of it was another man of the same type as "X's" guide. His features were not the same; but there was a weird similarity of coloring and manner that puzzled the Agent.

He got into the car at a gesture from the guide. The auto moved away. It glided through deserted streets, passed narrow, one-way alleys, then, in a particularly black spot, the gray-clad man at "X's" side leaned forward. In his hand was a strip of dark cloth. He raised it, slid it across "X's" face and blindfolded him.

The act made the Secret Agent's nerves tingle with excitement. There was no fear in his heart—except the fear of possible failure. The precautions taken by the deaf-mute warned the Agent that he was coming in contact with some supercriminal who left nothing undone.

The car stopped at last. Agent "X," blindfolded, unable to see a step he took, was nevertheless making precise inner records. His uncanny memory was at work, his supersensitive faculties registering impressions.

He was drawn out of the car, guided by one of the evil gray men. He heard a door open, and marked in his mind the position of it. He was led along a passageway, and he kept track of each individual step. He turned to the right, went down a flight of stairs, up another, walked straight ahead through a second corridor.

His ears even registered the acoustic properties of the hall. Another flight of stairs and his guide stopped

him. The Agent's eyes behind the cloth were bright. Brief as the time had been, he felt certain he could retrace his steps. The blindfold had failed of its purpose.

Then Agent "X" had a sense of chill, a sense of quiet, a sense that he was in some old, dark building where gloomy shadows lay. Slowly he was pushed to the center of a room. The blindfold was taken from his face; footsteps withdrew; he was left in absolute darkness.

For seconds that seemed endless, he stood there, wondering what was to come next. There was no movement in the room, no sound. Then suddenly a light flashed on. It was a bulb set in a reflector, a small searchlight, and it was focused directly on his face.

He waited, staring toward the light, certain that other eyes behind it were upon him, certain that he was being observed, analyzed, picked to pieces. Would his disguise stand the test?

Gradually his gaze adjusted itself to the brightness of the light. He could see the faint illumination it shed in other parts of the room. He could see the walls, the furniture. Then he gave an inner start. Perfectly coordinated nerves held it in abeyance. But he let his face muscles sag as Jason Hertz would have done. He registered an uneasiness he didn't feel.

For there were three black figures in the room. They sat on chairs like three ravens of death facing him. There were black hoods over their heads, trailing black cloth over their bodies. Through holes in the hoods he saw the evil glitter of eyes.

There was not one criminal, then, but three behind the murders that had taken place. He was in the presence of the "Torture Trust," the men whose inhuman brains had plotted hideous villainy.

A voice came out of the gloom, cold and precise and dangerous as the buzz of a rattler's tail.

"What have you got to say for yourself, Jason Hertz?"

The Agent gulped, stirred, and imitated Hertz's tone as he had learned it from the phonographic record.

"I—I lammed out of stir. I figured maybe you'd have something fer me to do. That's how come I dropped the note. A guy's gotta eat."

"We know you got out of the penitentiary. We have eyes. We read the papers. But we know your limitations, Hertz. It seems remarkable that you could have escaped without outside help. Will you please tell us exactly how you did it?"

The Agent knew at that moment how perilous was the ground upon which he stood. There were brains of diabolical cunning behind those sinister black hoods. His life hung upon the answer he made.

CHAPTER VIII TERRIBLE SECONDS

SLOWLY he drew his lips into a smile. He straightened his body, threw out his chest, facing the spectral trio with the arrogance of a criminal proud of his handiwork.

He was a student of human psychology, and he acted now as he believed Jason Hertz would do in his shoes.

"You gotta hand it to me," he said. "You're king-pins an' you're smarter than me. But I pulled a fast one when I slipped outta the big house. There ain't many guys could 'a done it."

"You haven't answered our question, Hertz!" There was a relentless note in that cultured, measured voice.

These men, "X" sensed, were not ordinary criminals. They bore no relation to the underworld of thugs, gunmen, racketeers, and gamblers—except that they lived by death and the fear of it that their deeds inspired.

He smiled again. "You wanta hear about it right from the start?"

"That's what we want."

"Well, I bought a hack saw from a

snowbird named Cooper. His brudder smuggled it to him, see? An' he was too shaky to use it. I give him money to buy coke instead. I snitched a key from a guard when he had his back turned talkin' to another guy. The key was on a chain. I stuck a piece of soap on it, see, and made a nifty pattern."

Agent "X," alias the convict, Hertz, chuckled again as though at his own cleverness.

"There was tools in the machine shop," he continued. "I was a good guy. They made me a trusty. I made me a key from the pattern in the piece of soap. When I got the chanct I slipped out and went to the empty cell block uptop. I cut a hole through the ceiling and got amonst the rafters. That's the way a guy they told about in the papers did it."

"Then," came a voice in the gloom, "you cut the bars of an end window—and climbed down to the yard. We read all that, Hertz. But how about the wall?"

"X" laughed again.

"You must 'a seen about the rope, too," he said. "I left it there. They's lots of things a trusty can do. I snitched that rope in the cellar, the one they used to haul ash cans out on a pulley. I tied a bolt to it an' slung it over the wall. There was a loop on it. I caught the loop on a brace that the wires on top of the wall was fastened to. I did a pretty slick job."

There was silence as he finished his tale. He knew that evil brains were debating, weighing the story he had told. He believed it rang true. Hertz *had* been a trusty. Convicts in the past had used exactly the methods he had described to escape.

But there was a slow constriction around his heart and he could feel his pulses pounding. What if he had aroused their suspicions?

Then another of the black-hooded trio spoke. His voice was lower, hoarser, but it, too, had a cultured note.

"You've done well, Jason Hertz.

You are cleverer than we thought. We may be able to use you again. But for a time you will have to lie low. We will call you when we need you."

There was finality in the voice. The Agent's heart sank. He must find out something definite. He couldn't wait around for weeks while the hideous murders went on.

His disguise had worked. He was not suspected, but he had learned little. Who were these men? What faces lay behind those black hoods? Where did they live?

He stared again beyond the range of the searchlight, looked at the black-hooded figures with quick penetration. His eyes came to a focus on one.

The right foot of the middle man was thrust slightly forward. The toe of a shoe projected from under the black robe that dropped to the floor. On that shoe the sharp eyes of the Agent detected streaks of mud—mud that had caked recently, mud that formed an irregular pattern. And, in that brief glimpse, his astute brain registered an impression that was photographic.

The hooded men, so far as he could see, made no signal; but one of the mask-faced deaf-mutes returned. The Agent was familiar with the regular deaf-and-dumb language, but he could not follow the strange finger conversation that ensued between the trio and the mute. It must, he concluded, be in code.

The blindfold was slipped over his eyes again; the light in the room went out. He was led through darkness. The sinister trio obviously believed him to be Jason Hertz. But they were taking no chances. Besides themselves only the deaf-mutes were allowed to know the secrets of this hidden place.

Agent "X" was storing impressions again. He was being led out by a different route. The stairs were different, so were the corridors. The acoustic properties of the latter, responding to his footfalls, gave out different echoes.

WHEN they reached the street, he was pushed into a car and the blindfold wasn't removed until they had driven many blocks. But the Agent had been marking the intersections in his mind by the different sounds that the street openings made. They had passed four. The rumbling note of the wheels changed each time. They rounded a corner, went two more blocks, then another corner. The blindfold was taken off. The car slid into MacDonough Street.

He was motioned up the steps of No. 44 again, and a deaf-mute rang the bell, two longs and a short. Then the mute wrote on his pad: "Stay here," and thrust it under "X's" nose.

The witchlike landlady led "X" to a second-floor room. She lighted a gas jet and left him alone. He heard the deaf-mute descend the stoop and the car drive away.

He crossed the room quickly, thrusting his head out the door. He could hear the faint, shuffling steps of the landlady somewhere below. Taking off his shoes, he tiptoed out, walked down the hall and reached the front door. He made no sound. He kept close to the walls. In a moment he had opened the door and slipped out.

Thinking he was Jason Hertz, escaped convict, they would expect him to stay in the house, glad of a refuge. But the real Jason Hertz was far away, and the man impersonating him had a perilous task to perform.

He moved along the block like a wraith, ducked into a deserted alley, listened a moment, then set to work.

Under the quick movements of his skilled fingers, the brilliant disguise came away. It would take long minutes of patient labor to build it up again; but only a few seconds were required to remove it. And in his coat lining, he had another quick disguise ready.

When he emerged from the alley, he appeared as a young, red-headed street loafer. The silk shirt was gone.

The sweater he had worn under it, surreptitiously, was in evidence, drawn up around his neck. His coat and trousers, specially tailored to be turned inside out, had completed the change. He no longer remotely resembled Jason Hertz.

Keeping close to the shadows, he walked back along the way he had come. He thought out each step, turned the right corners as he came to them, pausing at last by a huge empty warehouse.

His pulses were tingling now. It was into this building that the deaf mute had led him. It was out of it that the sinister trio must come.

Carefully, casually, he skirted the big warehouse. It occupied nearly the whole of a small block. Three sides of it were on streets. But there was a clutter of empty houses in the rear. Agent "X" moved by these. Then his heart beat faster.

In the street outside he saw the glint of moisture. A puddle, barely dried, reflected the light from a distant street lamp. The mud around the puddle was a light yellow. Dried, it would probably appear white. It formed a precious clew.

He took up his position in the shadows across the street. There was no telling how many secret entrances the chamber in the warehouse had. The most subtle precautions had been taken to guard them. Yet the Agent felt certain that at least one of the trio had passed in through these old buildings in the rear. Might he not be expected to come out the same way?

Night wind moaned along the street. The stars glittered coldly. Somewhere far up on the warehouse a piece of loose tin flapped and groaned like a wounded vampire. The street was cold, bleak, and deserted. But the Secret Agent waited.

It was nearly an hour later that he crouched back in his hiding place. A door in one of the deserted buildings had at last opened. A man in a long

ulster stepped quietly out, closing the door after him. His movements were not furtive. They were calm, assured. The man's face was even-featured and calm, too, and he was well dressed.

But the Agent leaned forward tensely. On the man's shoes were pale streaks of mud. He picked his way past the puddle as though a recent unpleasant experience had taught him to be careful.

Shadowing was one of "X's" specialties. He had done much of it in his life. He knew all the tricks. Yet it took every resource at his command to keep sight of the man in the gray ulster.

The man walked four blocks up the street at a rapid pace. He turned left, walked four blocks more to a main thoroughfare and waited for a taxi.

At a fast clip, hands in pockets, head bent low, the Agent walked on by him. His heart was beating rapidly with the excitement of the chase. What if another taxi did not come? What if he lost sight of the man in a traffic jam? These were risks a shadower must always take.

Then he saw a cab approaching from the other direction. He stepped into the street, signaled it. The driver seemed loath to stop because of "X's" unpresentable appearance. But "X" waved a bill in his face.

"Make a U turn," he said. "Then drive ahead slowly."

The driver did so and the Agent looked back. He saw another cab glide in to the curb and pick up the man behind. It came on up the street and passed.

"Follow that car," said the Agent.

THE driver of the cab obeyed. But the man ahead, as though it were part of a customary routine, changed cabs three times, walked many extra blocks, and used other tricks to throw off possible pursuit.

The trail led at last to a house in the suburbs—a house on a quiet, re-

spectable street. There were no lights in it when the man in the gray ulster entered. But they flashed on soon after. He was evidently staying alone.

The Agent waited outside till long after midnight, till the lights finally went out for good. Then he slipped a handkerchief over his face crossed the street, and moved to the rear of the house. If he should be caught, he wanted to be thought a common burglar.

He took from his pocket a kit of tiny, chromium steel tools. There was a glass cutter with a full diamond point among them. He selected the windows of the library, placed a rubber suction disc against a pane, cut the glass noiselessly, and, holding the disc, drew the glass toward him with a faint snap.

In a moment he was in the library, playing the beam of a tiny flashlight over the walls and furniture. There were books, many of them, and a desk with papers on it.

From these he learned the name of the man who lived in the house. Professor Ronald Morvay, psychologist.

That was something. The Agent stored it in his memory. He rotated the beam of his flash, then stopped. It was focused on the wall, on the circular front of a small sunken safe.

The Agent walked to it quickly. House- and safe-breaking were included in his activities—when it was the house of a murderer he broke into and the safe of a murderer he opened.

But there were no clues as yet that would help unravel the plot behind the mysterious "Torture Trust." He knew it was an extortion racket. The police knew that, too. But what diabolical minds were back of it, and how could they be caught?

He knelt before the safe, touched the dial with his long fingers, put his ear to the metal. In the pursuit of criminals he had studied their methods, and he was familiar with the mechanics of safe-breaking. There were few that he could not open by

listening to the faint movement of the lock tumblers.*

At the end of a minute he had the door of the wall safe in Professor Morvay's library swinging outward on its hinges. Then his hand reached inside.

A common burglar would have been disappointed, but the Agent felt rewarded. There were in the safe several small books, their pages filled with fine, close script. And as the Agent turned the beam of his flash on them and studied them, his eyes gleamed eagerly. He began to read—and read on, devouring the lines, page after page.

He was held in the grip of such appalling horror that his skin felt cold. Here was a record of human ingenuity and fiendishness beyond anything he had ever run into. No wonder the books had been placed in the safe!

They told of a series of experiments by a scientist—a psychologist—who used his knowledge for criminal purposes. They told of the experiments of Professor Morvay on that part of the human brain which harbors the sadistic tendencies—the lust to torture and kill. They told how men with a trace of sadism in their make-up could be trained into inhuman monsters. And Agent "X," grim-faced, thought of the gray-clad deaf-mutes with their sinister features. These were Professor Morvay's subjects, the men he had experimented on. These were the sadistic fiends who were only too glad to carry out the orders of their masters. These were the acid throwers!

But the other two members of the murder trio were unknown to him. And there would have to be proof beyond this to convince any jury that the respectable Professor Morvay was a hideous criminal.

* AUTHOR'S NOTE: Because of his unlimited resources, the Secret Agent has access to information beyond the range of the average criminal. I have seen him, for instance, studying the charts and diagrams of the leading vault and safe makers, familiarizing himself with the various types of lock mechanism. It is my belief that if the necessity arose, he could even open the most highly complicated bank vaults.

"X" began searching through the second book. Then he stopped. A faint noise had come. He put the books back in the safe, closed the door swiftly and started to turn toward the window. But instead, he held himself as though every muscle were frozen.

For the lights in the room suddenly flashed on, and standing in the door which he had silently opened stood Professor Morvay. There was an automatic in his hand, and its black, deadly muzzle was pointing straight at the Secret Agent's heart.

CHAPTER IX

THE MURDERERS STRIKE

IN the space of a second, the Agent knew what he faced. The menace of death hung heavy in the room. There was death in Professor Morvay's green-gray eyes and in the thin, cruel line of his lips. Legally he could find justification for shooting the Agent who appeared now as a common thief. Morvay would say to the police that he had shot in self-defense. Any instant the Agent expected to feel the impact of a bullet above his heart.

But the fear that gripped him was not for himself. It was for the success of his plans. Death would bring an end to them all.

But Morvay did not shoot. Instead, he came forward slowly, the gun held in fingers that were as tense as a bird's talons. His eyes were fixed upon the Agent, boring in, trying to penetrate behind the handkerchief.

"X" understood. Morvay was taking no chances. Curiosity was restraining the quick pressure of his trigger finger. The Agent appeared as a common burglar. But there was a chance that he might be some one else—a detective, for instance.

This doubt was the slender thread upon which the Agent's life hung. He would live until Morvay's curiosity was satisfied.

In those brief moments while the

psychologist approached, "X" studied him. He saw the high, peaked forehead, the aquiline nose, the ruthless intelligence of the eyes. Morvay, he suspected, was an intellectual giant who had gone wrong, a man with erudition and a vast store of knowledge at his command. If the other members of the "Torture Trust" were like him, no wonder the police had been baffled. The professor and his colleagues were masters of death, cunning, pitiless, diabolical, laying the threads of their extortion racket like a sinister tarantula's web.

Morvay spoke then, and "X's" keenly attuned ears recognized his voice as one of those he had heard in that mystery room where the deaf-mute had taken him.

"Stand still—lift your hands—or you die!"

Slowly the Secret Agent raised his arms. The acceleration of his pulses had stopped. They were normal now. An icy calm possessed him. His brain was working with the silent, faultless precision of some finely adjusted mechanism. He was matching his wits against death.

Holding the automatic in his right hand, standing only three feet from the Agent, Morvay reached out with his left. He drew the handkerchief down over the Agent's face. Whom he expected to see, "X" did not know. The Agent's disguise was that of a common thug—a street loafer lured into the byways of crime.

And, as Morvay studied him, the Agent saw curiosity give way to another emotion. A sinister message was flashing from the professor's eyes. The pupils had contracted. The whites glinted evilly. He had the look of a crouched jungle beast ready to spring. Morvay was planning to kill, planning it deliberately, ruthlessly, satisfied now that his nocturnal visitor had nothing to do with the police.

In "X's" right shoe was a weapon he might have used—a tiny air gun in the front of the sole, firing a stupefying dart, and discharged by press-

ing back in a certain way on his heel. It was one of many masterly defensive weapons he had devised. But he dismissed the idea of employing it now.

There was a greater issue than his own life at stake. There was the work to which he had dedicated that life. To use the dart now would give away to Professor Morvay that he wasn't what he appeared—a common burglar. Morvay, when he recovered from the dart's stupefying effect would be suspicious, on his guard ever after—and he would warn the other members of the "Torture Trust." They might disappear and carry on their fearful operations in some other community. "X" must stick to the role he had elected for himself.

With the quickness of a striking snake, he lashed outward and upward with his foot. He bent his body back, threw his whole weight forward, and the toe of his shoe struck Morvay's gun arm.

The gun exploded with a deafening report as Morvay's tense fingers jerked the trigger. The bullet went over the Agent's head, so close that he felt it flick the cloth of the cap he wore. His toe broke Morvay's hold on the weapon. It spun in the air, clattered to the floor, and Morvay staggered back with a cry of pain.

In an instant Agent "X" had swept up the gun and had reversed the direction of its muzzle. He snarled in his throat like a vicious thug.

"Stick 'em up, guy. Make any play and I'll burn yer guts. Thought yer was smart didn't yer?"

His eyes glittering like those of a snake, the professor obeyed. Those eyes were upon "X" now, watching, calculating. And "X" knew that Morvay's suspicions were not entirely quieted. The Agent spoke again.

"Open that safe."

To emphasize his words, he thrust the gun closer, skinning his lips back from his teeth, making his face hideous.

"Open it, or I'll drill yer."

With a shrug Morvay turned. He knelt before the safe. His long fingers turned the dial. The safe's door swung outward.

"Stand back!"

With his gun, Agent "X" motioned Morvay against the wall. Then, his face greedy, he stepped forward and thrust his left hand into the safe. He withdrew it, fingers clutching the books. He thumbed them, stared at them closely, then flung them to the floor with a harsh curse.

"Where's the dough? What are yer tryin' to hand me?"

The professor was silent, and "X" pressed the gun savagely against his body.

"I'll give yer two minutes to come across."

Morvay nodded toward the desk. "You'll find money in there. The bottom left drawer."

Agent "X" backed away, crouched, fingers curled over the butt of the gun—the picture of a cash-crazed crook.

He jerked open the drawer of the desk with his left hand, pulled out an envelope. His fingers ripped it open, drew forth a sheaf of bills. There were many of them—tens, twenties, several hundred in cash, he estimated. Growling exultantly, he wadded the bills up, stuffed them in his pocket. There was a telephone on the desk. He yanked the cord loose, breaking it away from the box on the wall.

Then slowly, still holding the gun trained on Morvay, he backed toward the window. He thrust his feet out, eased his body backward, and in a moment the darkness had swallowed him.

HE was certain now that his acting had convinced Professor Morvay—certain that Morvay believed him to be a mere thief.

He crossed through several back yards, gliding between night-darkened houses. In the glow of a street lamp, he examined the roll of bills he had taken. There were more than

he had thought—nearly four hundred dollars. It was money that he would turn over immediately to Betty Dale.

That was his practice when he took cash from criminals. There were worthy people upon whom the shadow of crime had fallen heavily. There was, for instance, the mother of a lad he knew, a boy who had foolishly taken part in a crap game that the police had raided. He had been sent to the workhouse for six months. The mother was destitute. This cash, taken from the murderer Morway, would give her food and a roof over her head while her son was in jail. Betty Dale would see to that.

The Agent placed the sweater under his silk shirt again, making himself more presentable. He took a taxi to the block Betty lived on.

Walking along the block, he puckered up his lips and his strange, melodious whistle filled the air. It awoke echoes along the quiet street, piped eerily among the rooftops and whispered to silence in the dark areaways.*

He came to a stop opposite her apartment building, then stepped back into the shadows formed by an angle where two walls met. Looking upward, he saw that her windows were dark. Betty Dale was out or had gone to bed. He stood for a moment irresolutely.

Then something on the ground caught his eye. A whitish spot lay at his feet. He stooped down.

Close to one toe of his shoe was a cigarette stub. A little farther away was another. He had trained himself to observe small things, to miss nothing. What were these cigarette stubs doing here? Here in the spot where he always stood watching Betty's win-

dows after whistling for her? He stared more closely.

There was a third stub just behind him. They told a story to the Agent. Some one else had stood here, waiting, watching—long enough to finish three cigarettes.

He struck a match and stooped down. Then he drew in his breath with a hiss. His fingers, suddenly tense, reached down and picked one of the stubs up. His eyes narrowed to steel-like pinpoints as he examined it.

On the cigarette butt were yellowish, uneven stains—the marks of the fingers that had grasped it. And the Agent's spine began to crawl with horror, with a slow, deepening dread.

His mind leaped back to those other hands he had seen—the hands of the gray-faced deaf-mutes—the acid throwers. Their fingers, he remembered, had been stained with the fumes of the liquid horror they carried. One of them must have been standing out here, watching Betty Dale's window.

He crossed the street at a run, entered the building. The night switchboard operator was lolling before his plugs, half asleep. The Agent asked a question in a tone that brought the man up with a jerk.

"Miss Dale," "X" said. "Is she in?"

The switchboard operator shook his head.

"She got a call from her paper a half hour ago."

Dread deepened in the Agent's heart. The *Herald* seldom called Betty Dale at night.

"Get the paper at once," he said. "Let me speak to the night editor."

He went to the booth in the apartment's lobby, picked up the instrument. The operator at the switchboard plugged in a number. The crackling voice of the *Herald's* night editor came to the Agent's ears.

"Hello. Who is it?"

"Let me speak to Miss Betty Dale, please."

"Miss Dale? She's not here."

* AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Agent's whistle is a sound which makes an unforgettable impression. I have heard it many times and am always startled. How he does it, I am not quite certain. It may be the peculiar formation of his lips which gives it its characteristic note. Or it may be the way he directs the column of air. In any event, he can vary its timbre and pitch as a great violinist varies the tone of his instrument while still retaining its essential quality. His whistle is always melodious, birdlike—but sometimes weird, sometimes menacing, sometimes questioning.

"Didn't you call her a half hour ago?"

"No—she works here in the day."

"You don't know where she is then?"

"Home, I guess—why? Who's calling?"

The Agent didn't answer. His hands trembled for a moment as he hung up. Fear possessed him—an icy fear that crept along his spine like the touch of some loathsome reptile—not fear for himself but for small, courageous Betty Dale, who had aided him so often.

Some one other than the *Herald's* editor had called her from the outside, lured her away. Some one had spied upon her movements, left cigarette butts with acid stains upon them—the badge of a hideous profession. Betty Dale had fallen under the black and awful shadow of the "Torture Trust"!

CHAPTER X

TORTURE!

WITH no inkling of the menace creeping upon her, Betty Dale had settled herself for a quiet evening at home. She had slipped into a comfortable and becoming pair of lounging pajamas, propped pillows on a sofa, and drawn the bookmark from an interesting new novel.

The reading light sprayed radiance on her gleaming blonde hair, touched her long lashes, caressed the soft contours of her face and figure. She lay back relaxing after a hard day at the office.

When at midnight the call from the *Herald* office came, it surprised her. She was seldom called at night.

"The editor wants you," said a voice. "A big story's broke. He thinks you can help—an' wants you to come right down."

With a sigh and a philosophical shrug, Betty Dale rose and dressed. Her career had been won by a lot of hard work and self-discipline. When

the paper wanted her, she made it a point to be ready.

She powdered her face, gave her hat a smart tilt, dabbed lipstick on, and descended to the street. A proportion of her success had been gained by always appearing chic and alert.

She took a cab at the corner and told the driver to make it snappy. The paper had called. The presses were waiting. There was no time to lose.

The cab rolled swiftly through the deserted streets down to the block where the *Herald* building rose with the lights in its many windows gleaming cheerfully. Men in the linotype and composing rooms were hard at work.

She paid the driver and stepped smartly toward the building's entrance.

Then some one moved from the shadows beside the door. He held up his hand, signaled to her. He was a small man dressed in gray. She could not see his features, for he had a cap pulled down. They appeared to be strangely gray, masklike. She had never to her knowledge seen him before. Nevertheless she stopped.

And, in that instant, the man glided up to her. His movements were so quick, so purposeful, that she thought he was going to hand her something—thought that he must be an employee of the paper.

Instead, his fingers reached out, clutching her arm. With a quick movement that unbalanced her, he drew her back into the shadows. She started to scream, but he clapped a hand over her mouth. She tried to break away and something jabbed into her arm.

It was a sharp, keen pain like the prick of a needle. It was followed by a cool sensation in the surrounding flesh.

Betty Dale gasped and struggled and a wave of icy terror filled her. She felt a sudden roaring in her head, felt her knees giving way under her, felt as though the night were pressing in upon her from all sides. The light-

ed windows of the *Herald* building seemed to move in all directions. They seemed to explode, gyrate, whirl round and round like a galaxy of comets sweeping across an infinite sky. Then the roaring ceased. The comets grew dim. Betty Dale slipped into unconsciousness.

WHEN she awoke, feeling faint and dizzy, she sensed a jouncing motion. She tried to see, but something was over her eyes. She tried to speak and felt something else constricting her lips. She knew then that she was on the seat of a car, and she leaned back fighting the icy terror that possessed her. Her body still felt numb, paralyzed beyond the point of movement.

She realized that the sharp pain in her arm had been a hypodermic needle, an injection of some sort of drug. But who had pressed it in? Who was the strange, gray-faced man she had seen, and where was she being taken?

Fear rose in her mind. She had heard of unspeakable things, of the white slave traffic, of dark, slimy alleys of vice. Fear lay over her mind like a leaden pall.

She lost track of time. It might have been hours and it might have been minutes later that the car stopped. Then a door opened. She was propelled forward over a seemingly endless space, through an infinite duration of time. She was in some building, somewhere, but she couldn't see or cry out.

She was pushed into a chair. The covering was taken from her eyes, and a gag was removed from her mouth. But she was in utter darkness and could still see nothing. She drew in great gasps of air, but she did not cry out. She wasn't the sort of girl who screams or faints easily. She waited and listened in a frozen attitude of dread.

Then a light flashed on directly in her eyes. For minutes she could see nothing and no one spoke. More sec-

onds passed and the light was suddenly dimmed. She could see around it now, behind it, and she caught her breath fearfully.

Two black-robed figures were sitting, regarding her. She saw the glitter of their eyes through slits in the black hoods that covered their faces. Somehow she sensed that she was in the presence of beings so evil that no human appeal would register. She did not speak. She waited to see what was to come.

A voice came out of the semi-gloom, out from behind a black hood. It was measured, impersonal. The tones were cultured.

"Miss Betty Dale! You are here to answer certain questions. A few nights ago you were seen at the Belaire Club with a man who called himself Jeffrey Carter. There was a police raid. You left the club with a man who looked like Inspector Burks of the homicide squad. You were seen crossing the street with him into the shadows of a building. Shortly afterwards the real Inspector Burks arrived from headquarters. Who was the man who led you out? Who was Jeffrey Carter?"

Betty Dale sat still, her keen brain grappling with the situation. Were these men detectives? Was this a new kind of third degree?

"I don't know," she said at last. "I don't know who Jeffrey Carter really is."

The voice spoke again.

"Are he and the man who calls himself Secret Agent 'X' one and the same?"

Betty Dale gasped. Whoever these men were they seemed close to the truth. The facts dawned on her. Horror crep through her veins like a flow of icy water. These men were the heads of the hideous "Torture Trust." They had learned, or guessed, that the Agent was after them. But what could she tell them even if she cared to speak? She knew little about the Agent, and that little was a sedulous-

ly guarded secret. Courage and stubbornness overshadowed fear.

"I will tell you nothing," she said.

One of the hooded figures spoke again, his tone as dry and sinister as the scrape of a serpent's scales across stone.

"Others have said that. But there are things that will make any man or woman talk. There are things so terrible that human flesh crawls in the face of them. Things that make the human will crumble. Do you think that you, a mere girl, can endure such things?"

Betty Dale kept silent. She sat in her chair still, frozen. They might ring the truth out of her, make her admit that Jeffrey Carter was the Secret Agent. She was not a superwoman. She might babble that if they forced her. But she knew it wouldn't satisfy them. They would want more, and she couldn't tell more. It was better to say nothing and let them think she knew all. It was better to stall for time.

She did not see either of the hooded men signal, but suddenly two men slipped into the room — two men dressed in gray, with faces as gray as their clothes. They were men with masklike expressions and reptilian cruelty in their lusterless eyes.

ONE of the hooded figures lifted his hands, making a series of motions in the air with his fingers—motions that the gray-faced men seemed to understand.

They drew Betty Dale from her seat and led her out of the room. The blindfold was slipped on again. She was led along corridors, down stairs, her numbed feet moving as though in a dream. She felt the damp coldness of a basement at last. She felt stone under her feet. Then she saw a light around the edges of the blindfold.

Suddenly she was tipped backwards, forced into what appeared to be a big chair. A scream of terror, her first, came from her lips as she felt cold bands of steel snapped over her wrists and ankles. The blindfold was

removed and, glassy eyed, she stared about her.

The room she was in had a stone floor like a laboratory. The white shelves along the walls were loaded with bottles and tubes which heightened the effect. But the chair into which she had been thrust had no place in a laboratory. It was massive, heavy, made of steel and brass like a chair in a barber shop. The metal that encircled her arms and ankles was bolted to the sides of the chair. She was held as tightly as a prisoner in chains.

And a second look revealed that the room was not a laboratory. A laboratory would be devoted to science, research, human enlightenment. This room was dedicated to the opposite—to agony, fear, unspeakable horror. The room was a torture chamber.

One of the deaf-mutes was working at a shelf now. He had taken the stopper from a tall flask. He poured the contents into another flask, adding a few drops from still another.

Betty saw greenish, slow-moving fumes curling up like steam from a hideous witches' cauldron. They rose around the deaf-mute's face, but he didn't seem to mind. It was as though close proximity to evil had made him immune to the terrible things in which he dealt.

Betty screamed again, straining at the metal cuffs. But it was useless, hopeless, and the two men in the room could not even hear her cries. Their faces were impassive, devilish.

The man with the flask turned and came toward her. He held the flask in one hand and in the other was a stick with a swab on the end of it. He dipped the swab into the flask, brought it out, and she saw that it was wet with a green, sinister liquid.

Slow fumes wreathed up, curling lazily into the air, hideous and terrible as the quiet uncoiling of a serpent. The man moved the swab toward the fresh beauty of her face, toward her skin that was as smooth as the

velvety petal of a rose. On his face for the first time was a definite expression. It was a terrible smile—a smile that seemed to take some of the lackluster from his eyes. It was a smile of fiendish pleasure, as though the thing he was about to do would give him exquisite delight.

Betty Dale screamed again. She screamed because she could not help it, because her eyes were fixed upon those lazy, terrible fumes, because terror seemed to writhe through her body like a living thing.

Then the wave of terror deepened. It engulfed her in a black flood that pressed against her heart. With a piercing, agonized scream on her lips, she fainted.

CHAPTER XI

A CRY IN THE DARK

THE Secret Agent, sensing the awful significance of Betty Dale's disappearance, sprang into action. There were times when he could be patient, times when he could wait, cat-like, hour after hour to achieve some end. This was not one of them.

He felt responsible for the fate that had overtaken Betty Dale. If she had not aided him, been seen with him, this would not have happened.

He left the apartment building in long, quick strides. At the corner taxi stand where all-night cabs were available, he spoke to the drivers.

One was the cabman who had taken Betty Dale to the *Herald* building. He was taciturn at first under the Agent's sharp questioning, but a dollar bill loosened his tongue.

"Did Miss Dale go to the *Herald* office?" The Agent asked.

The cabman could not remember. He had gone on after collecting his fare, he said.

"Was there any one around—any other car near by?"

The taxi driver stroked his chin. Yes, he remembered now. There was a closed car parked down the block.

It had made little impression on him. There were always cars around the *Herald* office.

The Agent nodded. There was the harsh glint of steel in his eyes. He jerked open the door of the cab, got in, and gave the driver a number.

Agent "X," unknown to any one but himself, had invested some of the funds intrusted to him in several cars. In his perilous work he needed one always handy. Each car was registered under a different name. He kept one, a sleek, fast roadster, in a mid-town garage.

The number he had given the driver was two blocks away from the garage. When the cab stopped, he got out, paid the driver and disappeared into a shadowy areaway beside the street. There he affected another disguise. He was H. J. Martin now, the man in whose name the mid-town car was registered.

He strode quickly to the garage, and the night attendant got the car out for him. A minute more and he was speeding toward the West Side river front—toward the dark alleys and sinister dives around MacDonough Street.

The traffic lights had been turned off for the night. The streets were almost deserted. He drove with reckless abandon seemingly, but really with such skill as few men could duplicate. His face grim, his hands tense on the wheel, he rocketed around corners, plunged through side streets, raced against time. He passed through MacDonough Street and onward, a half dozen blocks to the vicinity of the warehouse.

There he slowed the car's speed, creeping forward, lights out, the engine barely turning over, till the big car was close to the vast bulk of the warehouse that rose silent and sinister into the night.

He parked the car in the blackest spot he could find near the row of dilapidated buildings in the warehouse's rear. Then, wraithlike, he slipped from it.

DEATH seemed to lurk in every hidden corner of the street. Death sounded in the sighing of the night wind, in the far-off whisper of the city. He was in a street of death and evil.

Once again he took the kit of steel tools from his pocket. There were delicate skeleton keys hung on a metal ring. There were instruments that could open any door. These, combined with the Agent's uncanny skill, made every lock pregnable.

Moving close to the wall, he approached the door out of which he had seen Professor Morvay come. He kept so near to the building that the dim arc light at the street's corner did not even cast a shadow. He was no more than a darker blotch in the darkness of the night.

One of the small, gleaming tools was in his hand. His touch on the lock was as delicate as the touch of some skilled musician playing a beloved instrument. He moved the steel tool softly, turned it, probed. The knob of the door twisted in his hand. The door opened.

A moment more and he was inside the building. And the instant he entered it, he knew that it constituted a section of one of the routes along which he had been led. The faint acoustics of the walls were familiar.

But the darkness was like a black, evil pall, and, at the end of the first corridor was another door. It, too, was locked, and the Agent paused to open it. He passed through it as easily as some disembodied spirit.

He stood listening, heard nothing, and winked on the beam of his pencil-thin flashlight. By twisting the end he could cut down its light as water is cut at the end of a garden hose by turning the nozzle. It cast a spot of radiance no bigger than a dime. He probed with it along the walls.

But he had to admit that he was at a loss. Where was Betty Dale? There was a chance, a terrible possibility, that she had not been brought here at all. There was another chance that

she was being interviewed by one or more of the mysterious heads of the "Torture Trust."

He knew he could find again that chamber where he had first heard the voice of Professor Morvay. His mind had stored away directions for reaching it. To go there now seemed his only course.

In the darkness, picturing himself as still blindfolded, he began retracing his steps, going back along the way the deaf-mutes had led him. Up a flight of stairs, along another corridor, still on. He was in the warehouse proper now.

There was a feeling of solidity around him. A penetrating dampness in the air as of great, chill spaces. He was getting close to the secret council room, and every nerve in his body was taut.

Then he paused. It seemed to him that he heard a faint sound somewhere in the building. It was like an irrepressible whisper, coming through many thicknesses of walls.

He moved back quickly, half the length of the corridor. Then he listened again.

The sound came once more, and the hair on the Agent's head seemed to rise. The sound he had heard was a girl's scream of terror, faint, muffled, seemingly subterranean, but with such a note of agony in it that it was like a stifling, icy substance constricting his heart.

HE gave up any idea of going to the council chamber now. Betty was not there. Somewhere down in the dark sub-cellars of the warehouse she had been taken. He dared not think what they were doing to her, what had inspired that awful scream.

His ears were straining, his brain trying to locate the exact direction of the sound. He was desperately afraid that he might go the wrong way.

He reached a door along the corridor, opened it, turned on his flash, and saw that it led up. He ran on till he came to another. Dampness beat

against his face as he swung the door back. There were stairs leading down.

He descended and found himself in a place that was like a series of catacombs. Each second seemed like a lost hour. He moved forward frantically, searching, groping, icy fear for the girl driving him on.

Ahead, nearer this time, the scream sounded again. There seemed to be only a few thicknesses of walls between it and himself. His ears had caught its exact location. He moved on with greater speed.

There was another door before him. He opened it with one of his master keys, melted through it, found himself in a dank corridor beyond. Running swiftly, he reached the corridor's end and stopped short. Directly ahead was a faint crack of light, the light below the edge of a door.

Silently as a shadow, he crept up to it. A third frenzied scream came from behind it, so close that it was like a knife stab.

The Agent had to steady his hand as he tried the knob. It, too, was fastened. He had never moved so quickly in his life as he did thrusting the key into the lock aperture. His hand grew steady again. In this crisis, nerves and muscles were cooperating. The crack of the door widened.

Swift as a streak of light, the Secret Agent was in the room. Then horror widened his eyes.

Betty Dale sat in a metal chair that was somehow reminiscent of a prison death house. He saw the metal bands that held her in, saw her face, white as parchment, her eyes stark with terror. He saw the gray-faced deaf-mute who bent over her, the swab of acid-soaked cotton in his hand.

And in that instant the Agent leaped across the floor. There was no time for subtle action. A drop of the greenish, horrible fluid had already fallen off the swab. It had fallen on Betty's dress close to her white neck. Fumes of it were curling up. Fumes from the swab itself were close to her nostrils, close to the satiny softness of

her face, as the torturer brought it nearer.

Betty had come out of her faint only to find her tormenters waiting, ready to go ahead with their terrible deed. The Agent did not know this. He only knew that, mercifully, he had been in time.

So quickly that the mute in front of Betty did not see him until it was too late, he leaped forward. His hand struck the swab from the torturer's fingers. His other hand, balled into a hard fist, struck the gray-clad man in the side of the head, sending him reeling away.

The other mute whirled and came toward Agent "X" with a tube of acid in his hand. He flung it. Reeking fumes filled the air. But the Agent sidestepped and rushed in.

He swung again and sent the man crashing back against a shelf filled with bottles. The bottles leaped and fell with a clatter of breaking glass. More fumes filled the room.

From the corner of his eye, Agent "X" saw the first man he had struck rise and scuttle from the chamber like a streaking gray rat.

BUT there was no time to follow. The air was suffocating, deadly. He turned to Betty Dale. She was sitting in the chair, her face almost corpse-like with the fear that had filled her. She could barely speak.

She watched him dumbly as he stared at the cuffs that held her. Seconds were precious. Where had the deaf mute gone? To warn his masters? To get reinforcements?

"X's" hands were trembling—unusual for him. The steel bracelets presented difficulties. The keyholes in them were too small for any of his master keys.

Then he turned and leaped to the man who lay on the floor. The mute was breathing stertorously. He was unconscious. "X" fumbled in the man's pockets, exclaiming with relief when he found a ring of keys. Two of them were small, fragile.

He thrust one into the locks of the cuffs on Betty's wrists and ankles, and the cuffs snapped open. But it had taken time, and time was a precious thing.

He lifted her out of the chair, stood her on her feet, but she could not walk. Fear and the cramped position she had been in had stiffened her muscles.

He picked her up bodily; turned toward the door of the chamber. ~~Some-where in the vast building overhead,~~ there was a faint noise. It was like a signal bell. Down a long corridor he saw a dim flicker of light. He didn't like it. Deaf-mutes could not hear, but they could see. What if there were others? There was no way of knowing how many of his terrible subjects Professor Morvay had trained.

Running as swiftly as he could, he carried Betty back the way he had come. But he found that one door had snapped shut again. He had to put her down and work with his master key. That took time.

At the level of the ground floor, at a junction of corridors he paused. There was a whisper of sound behind—the sound of running feet. Pursuers were coming out of the darkness. He and Betty would shortly be overwhelmed. The girl must be gotten away at all costs. If she were injured, burned with acid, it would haunt him to the end of his days.

He stooped and whispered to her. "Rats are coming out of the night. A terrier may have to hold them in check. Do as the terrier says."

He carried Betty along a passage into the rear group of buildings. He set her down and found she could walk now. Then he spoke again, calmly, as though death were not close at their heels in the darkness behind.

"Go straight ahead and out the door. A car waits across the street. Drive away—as fast as you can. Go to the Hotel Graymont. Wait for the terrier there!"

He heard her breath come quickly, felt her fingers clutch him. She did

not want to obey—did not want to desert him. But a steely touch of his hand on her arm gave accent to his order. He pushed her forward, heard her footsteps receding.

He was glad he had done it. The sounds in the corridor behind were close now. Betty Dale could not walk rapidly. Carrying her, he would have been overtaken surely. Her only chance of escape was for him to make himself a dyke against the human flood of evil and horror that was surging in upon him.

He waited tensely till the sounds of the running feet were close. Then he whipped out his gas pistol and fired. There were only six gas-filled shells in the gun. He discharged them all, laying a momentary barrage in the corridor.

There was the noise of a stumbling, falling body. Gasps of fear came out of the darkness and the footsteps receded. Then the gas cloud cleared and the fierce wave advanced again. The blackness vomited leaping, flying figures. There were a half-dozen of the gray-clad men.

Struggling fiercely, fighting against the human torrent that engulfed him, the Secret Agent went down in a flying welter of arms and legs and lashing fists.

CHAPTER XII

TRAPPED!

HE fought on blindly in the darkness, expecting momentarily to have scalding drops of acid dashed into his face, to feel his eyeballs, nostrils, and lips being seared into shapeless lumps of quivering, pain-prodded flesh. But none came.

The gray-clad men seemed for the moment to have discarded the liquid horror that they dealt in. They wanted evidently to take him alive, uninjured.

He crashed a balled fist into a man's writhing face. He felt teeth snap, felt the skin of his knuckles rip. But the next instant two men were on his back and snakelike fingers were encircling his throat. He reached up, tried to

break their hold, and some one butted him in the stomach, doubling him up in breathless agony. Then it seemed that a dozen vises had been clamped upon him. Hands pinioned him from all sides. The pressure on his throat increased till his breath was shut off, till he lay gasping.

With unconsciousness close at hand, he relaxed. The fingers on his throat were loosened slightly. He could breathe again feebly. A light was turned on and he saw a forest of legs around him.

The faces looking down at him were impassive, hideous as death masks in their reptilian immobility. One of the men lay moaning, nursing his bleeding gums, but there were five others.

They yanked the Secret Agent to his feet. A gun was pressed against his back so forcefully that it bruised the flesh. He was pushed along the corridor, back the way he had come.

He wondered dully why they didn't shoot, why they didn't kill him now, or throw acid in his face. Then he realized that these men were slaves, being disciplined in evil and committed to do the will of their masters. They were taking him upstairs again, to the council chambers.

Four of them held him outside the door while the fifth slipped inside. "X" had no doubt the man was telling, in finger language, to the hooded masters of death, the story of Betty Dale's escape and his own entry.

The fifth mute came back, his face still impassive, and Agent "X" was thrust through the door into the presence of the black-robed men. But there were only two now. The third had not returned. That one, the Agent guessed, was Morvay.

The spotlight was turned on his face again. He trusted to his disguise, but wondered what their reaction to it would be. He was posing as H. J. Martin now, a sandy-haired, plump-faced business man.

The two men behind the black hoods stared at him, their eyes glittering through the slits. At a gesture from

one of them, the deaf-mutes withdrew to the side of the room. "X" stood alone like a prisoner before the bar.

The voice of one of the hooded men came slowly, tauntingly.

"So—a young Sir Galahad who has rescued a fair lady in distress!"

The other one, his voice gruffer, asked a question.

"Who are you?"

The Agent answered bluntly, quickly, playing his part as always.

"My name's Martin. You devils can't get away with what you tried to do to Miss Dale. I came just in time."

A low, evil laugh sounded from behind the hood.

"She escaped—but nothing can save her now. She was only being frightened to make her talk. But she will be found now—wherever she is—and the beauty of her face will become a thing that men will turn their eyes from in loathing."

The Secret Agent clenched his fist. His voice was tense, high-pitched, as he continued his pose.

"Whoever you are, you can't get away with it, I say. You'll all go to jail, or the electric chair. You're devils, murderers."

They ignored his passionate speech.

"Tell us one thing—Mr. Martin. How did you find your way here? How did you get in?" There was a sneer in the voice—a taunting note.

The Agent sensed what it meant; but he kept up his bluff.

"You're not as clever as you think. Betty's a girl friend of mine. I learned she'd gotten a phony call. I found she'd disappeared and I followed her."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

One of the hooded figures leaned forward. His hands were gripping the sides of his chair. His eyes were glittering points of light behind the eye-holes of his hood, and his voice was low, harsh and deadly.

"Don't think you can fool us—Martin. We know who you are. We know there is only one man who could have

found his way to this place and come through the locked doors. We know there is only one man who could have saved Betty Dale!"

THE room was still as death for an instant. Then a low, dry chuckle sounded.

"We compliment you—Secret Agent 'X'! You have proved your cleverness. Your disguise is beyond reproach. So it was when you played the part of Jeffrey Carter—and when you impersonated Inspector Burks of the homicide squad. So, too, it was when you made us believe you were Jason Hertz. That was your master stroke, 'X.' But we had Hertz watched. When he so mysteriously disappeared from the refuge we had given him, we began to suspect we had been tricked."

Agent "X's" heart stood still. The voice of the hooded man droned on.

"What you did with Hertz we do not know. That is neither here nor there. We know that you helped him out of prison, impersonated him—so cleverly that you fooled us for a time. But you cannot go on fooling us as you can the police. Your methods are dashing, sensational, dramatic. You have annoyed us and will continue to do so if you are not curbed. But we have agents of our own. You have been watched, spied upon from the night you went to the Bellaire Club. Your impersonation of Inspector Burks was seen by the man you chased over the roof."

The chuckle came again.

"I am being frank with you, because I expect you to be frank with us. Your history is intriguing. Just who is employing you? For what particular cause are you working?"

The voice had become almost matter-of-fact now. It was as though "X's" answers were foregone conclusions. But he was silent. The voice behind the hood changed again. It had a steely, imperious note in it.

"You will give us all this information, Agent 'X.' It is necessary for us to know. There may be an effort made

to replace you when—" The voice trailed off with sinister implication.

"Yes, death for you is inevitable. You are aware of that yourself. You are aware that you cannot leave this place alive. But we can give you a choice of two deaths—one quick, painless; the other so lingering, so horrible, so pregnant with agony that you will cease to be a man and will become a blind, babbling creature, a death so unthinkable that you would choose to die a thousand ordinary deaths."

Still the Agent was silent, standing stiffly erect, staring straight before him. Momentarily his will seemed suspended. Momentarily he could only wait and listen. The voice droned on.

"You have seen the faces of men who have been dead many days. Your face will be like that while you are still alive; the flesh eaten away, the eye sockets empty, the teeth skull-like."

Sweat broke out on the Secret Agent's forehead. It was not so much fear as fury against these men—a fury so terrible that it left him white and shaking. Then he grew calm again.

"What would you ask me to do?" he said.

"A small thing. We will provide you with pen and paper and a place to write. You will give us a report of all your activities. You will name your hide-outs, your methods, tell us exactly who you are and who is behind you. We know you work alone. We know that no one shares your secrets; but you are supplied with money. That is evident. There have been whispers that the government is backing you."

"Ask the police," said the Agent coldly.

"The police hunt you, too. They regard you as an enemy, a criminal—that is part of your game. But you will tell us—everything."

There was silence again, and the Agent could feel the eyes of the ravenlike pair before him boring into his own.

"What's your answer?" came a voice at last.

The Agent held himself more erect. His lips remained closed. He stared calmly, silently at his questioners.

"You will not speak! We are not surprised. You are clever in your disguises. You are confident of your ability. But there are things which will penetrate and destroy any disguise. There are acids hungry for the flesh of men. We will give you a small taste of what hell is like—then we will leave you poised on the brink of hell, and—who knows—you may be willing to talk—to avoid the last terrible plunge!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE PLUNGE

THE hooded man's hands moved in the air before him. His fingers made quick motions, delivering imperious orders. Four of the gray-clad mutes stepped forward and grasped the Agent's arms. The fifth man held the gun at his back. He was marched out of the room.

He had no plan of action. He saw at the moment no way of escape. He waited for that small, brief opportunity which might checkmate the awful fate ahead of him. He couldn't do what had been asked of him—betray the secrets that he guarded so jealously. Yet to keep them guarded he would have to submit to more than human flesh could endure. Would it be better, he wondered, to make a break now and invite a bullet in his back?

But he pictured himself lying wounded, helpless, with flesh-eating acid being poured into his face. There was nothing that these men would stop at.

He walked quietly downstairs and through the corridors. They had not blindfolded him—a tribute to his cleverness, to the knowledge that no blindfolds could keep him from knowing where he was. And it was evi-

dence of the certainty that he was to die.

They came at last to the door of the torture chamber. The four men holding him redoubled the force of their grip on his arms. The man with the gun stepped forward, unlocking the door. He pressed a switch and light came from inside.

For the moment this fifth man with the gun was dead ahead, silhouetted against the light behind him. There would never be another opportunity. Within the next minute Agent "X" would be in the chair with the steel cuffs snapped over his legs and ankles—cuffs that no human strength or will could break. It was now or never.

His four captors didn't notice the motion of his foot, or if they did they mistook it for a shrinking back in fear. He lifted his toe, swayed his body sideways, bringing his full weight down on the right heel, pressing the rubber and flattening it so that the metal stud inside that was the trigger of the tiny air gun was pushed home.

They did not hear the faint hiss that came from the end of the minute tube concealed in the thick sole of his shoe.*

The man in the door of the torture chamber, the man with the gun, gave a throaty, inarticulate cry. His face registered intense surprise. He turned slowly, stood swaying on his feet, and, just as slowly, his face changed. The masklike look came again. The face muscles sagged, knotted, and sagged again. The man's gun fell from his inert fingers and clattered to the store floor. The man's knees buckled under him and he collapsed.

The four mutes holding Agent "X" stiffened with amazement. Their lustreless eyes showed utter incompre-

* AUTHOR'S NOTE: It was my privilege once to examine this air gun of the Agent's. He did not explain its mechanism, but the general details of it were simple enough. The tube or barrel of the gun was made of flexible steel that straightened when his foot was lifted. The dart was no larger than a phonograph needle and had a tiny hollow at its end. In this hollow was a drop of the distilled essence of some drug like morphine. Its effect on the nervous system was, I gathered, almost instantaneous.

hension. Their grip on his arms relaxed for the fraction of a second. And, in that fraction of time, he put all the strength of his muscles into one mighty heave. He wrenched himself loose and leaped backwards.

He heard the pounding of feet behind him, saw lights flash again as a secret signal system was put into operation. The gray-clad men were swift runners, too. They sensed now that the collapse of the man with the gun had been a trick of the Agent's. Their fury was animal-like. He could hear their babbling, incoherent cries—the cries of mutes trying to give expression to inhuman rage.

He passed an open passageway and saw two more figures running toward him. He flashed past; but something streaked out, burning his leg so that for a moment the pain almost paralyzed him and forced him to slow down. A splash of acid hurled by one of the men in the corridor had struck his ankle. He ran on, his face contorted.

He had the feeling now that fitting gray shapes were everywhere, that another spray of acid might come out of any dark corner. But he could not see his way. He turned on the pencil-thin beam of his flash for an instant. Directly ahead was the corridor leading through the jumble of buildings in the warehouse's rear. Beyond it was the street.

He reached the street with flying figures close behind him. He burst out the door into the cold night air. But Betty had taken his car as he had told her to. Death was close at his heels.

WINCING with pain, limping, he plunged along the street. Looking back he saw gray shapes moving behind him like wolves in the night. The "Torture Trust's" horrible horde was close behind. The street seemed to harbor death.

He put on a burst of speed that pumped blood into the burned spot on his ankle, increasing the pain until it

was as though a hot rivet had been driven into his flesh.

He turned a corner, ran on with the pursuers gaining. It was late, the streets were deserted. Even if there were a cop in sight he would be of no aid. He would only meet a hideous death, too.

Two more blocks and the Agent saw something that made him increase his efforts. There was an all-night lunchroom at the next corner. A taxi stood before it, its engine idling to keep warm. The driver was inside.

Even as he leaped into the cab's front seat, he heard the sound of another auto starting up behind, backing out of a garage. He remembered the car that had taken Betty Dale away from the *Herald* office, the car in which he had ridden to MacDonough Street.

He raced the taxi's engine, drew the shift lever back, released the clutch, and plunged forward. He heard the hoarse shout of a man behind him—the taxi driver running from the lunchroom. But he had to take the cab. If anything happened to it, he'd see that the taxi company was reimbursed.

The taxi was an old one. Its valves needed grinding. The motor had poor pickup. The car was already shooting down the street, gaining. He shifted frantically, and pressed the accelerator down till the engine coughed. The taxi began to gain speed. It rumbled and jounced over the rough pavement. He spun the wheel, made a skidding turn around a corner, and roared on.

At the end of the block he heard the pursuing car duplicate his maneuver. The sound of the taxi's engine was rising in pitch now. The big cab was rolling ahead at ever mounting speed. The needle on the speedometer showed forty, fifty, fifty-five. He took another corner, heading toward the river to get out of the rough cross-town streets. Then he found himself on a long, wide avenue running parallel with the water. It too, was deserted, until a cop's whistle blew frantically.

But the taxi lurched and roared past.

Agent "X" glanced over his shoulder through the rear window. The goggling lights of the car behind were increasing steadily in size. He pressed the accelerator down as far as it would go—and got up to fifty-five again. But the needle of the speedometer hung there, sliding forward a degree when the street slanted down, going back when there was a slight incline. The pursuing car was only a half block behind.

Then the warehouses and pier sheds to right and left echoed the sudden staccato clatter of a sub-machine gun. Something whined by in the night. An explosive tinkle of breaking glass came from the rear window. He looked back and saw that it had disappeared. It was an old model car. Even the windshield was not shatterproof. The glass partition between the driver's seat and the passenger's compartment was the next to go. Then the windshield flew into crystal slivers before his face. Pieces of it whizzed by his head, pricked his skin.

The night wind beat against his eyes with a force that made them blink and burn. The cab was being torn to pieces, raked by bullets as the devilish chatter of the machine gun continued with a measured, precise regularity that had the finality of doom. In a matter of seconds only the law of averages would take effect; a steel-jacketed bullet would pierce him, and he would slump forward in his seat. The speeding cab would crash into a building, be demolished, burst into flame. The car behind had demonstrated its supremacy in speed.

He shot a glance to the left toward the river, his eyes bright as hot coals. Death by bullets was quick, painless. The old wound in his side had brought him near death often. He was on familiar terms with the Grim Reaper. But there was the cause for which he worked. There was the "Torture Trust" to be smashed, and there was Betty Dale! Unless he fought for her, saved her, she would be tracked down

and hideously mutilated, perhaps killed.

He spun the wheel of the plunging cab viciously. It rocked to the left across the broad street. For an instant the raking stream of bullets left it. Then they found it again. The car behind had swerved, too. But Agent "X" pulled the wheel still farther. The fat tires squealed in protest. The cab groaned in every bolt. It skidded dangerously, then roared ahead. The yawning entrance to an open dock was directly before it; farther still the oily, chill waters of the river moved sluggishly. The cab lunged out across the clattering boards of the dock.

The machine gun ceased its chattering, but the car behind still followed. The Agent did not decrease his speed. He sat hunched low over the wheel, staring ahead through the shattered windshield.

A low protecting bulkhead rose at the end of the dock. There were capstans spaced at intervals for tugs and excursion boats to tie to. He aimed the blunt nose of the cab between them and put on a last burst of speed, holding the wheel steady.

The front tires of the cab struck the bulkhead and leaped up. The cab plunged on like a madly bucking horse, rearing its yellow shape over the end of the dock. An instant it seemed to hang in the air, then it plunged to the black river below and struck with a terrific splash. Steam hissed from the hot pipes of the engine. Yellow foam seethed and slithered sidewise. A second passed—two—and the cab filled and sank from sight.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MARK OF THE AGENT

THE heads of the "Torture Trust" were assembled again in their secret council chamber. All were there, including the sinister Professor Morvay. There was tonight, a question of singular importance to be discussed. First, however, one of the gray-clad deaf-mutes entered, stood before the

black-robed trio, and began making motions in the air—the motions of his strange finger language.

He told for the benefit of Professor Morvay, who had not been present the night before, just what had taken place. He told of the escape of Betty Dale, of how they had pursued the Secret Agent, riddled his car with bullets, and seen him plunge to his death in the black waters of the river.

The fast-moving hand and fingers of the deaf-mute gave a graphic account of that wild chase through the night-darkened streets.

Morvay leaned forward, his eyes glowing behind the black hood. His long fingers answered in the same language, then asked a question.

"Are you certain he is dead? Did you wait to see whether he rose to the surface?"

"Yes," came the answer. "We waited, watched—there was no chance of his survival."

Morvay registered grim satisfaction. The deaf-mute was dismissed. One of the hooded trio spoke.

"You have heard what our slave reports. Secret Agent 'X' is dead. The girl escaped, but she knows nothing. The agent has no close confidante."

Morvay nodded.

"But to make sure," he said, "you are having the girl trailed? You will have her punished as soon as she is found."

The man he had questioned nodded.

"The *Herald* office and her apartment are being shadowed," he said. "She will turn up at one place or the other. We will make an example of her."

Again Morvay nodded. He hadn't seen Betty Dale, but he had been told that she was beautiful, piquant. She had chosen to interfere with the activities of the "Torture Trust." She was an ally of the Secret Agent. Because of that her beauty would be hideously destroyed. She would spend the remainder of her life looking forward to death. The secret strain of sadism that made Morvay the vicious crimi-

nal he was took delight in this prospect. He ran his tongue over thin, cruel lips.

"Let us forget the girl and the Agent now," he said. "One is dead—the other will shortly be disposed of. What of the business in hand?"

The other two men leaned forward. There was the glitter in their eyes of men whose greed for money and power amounts to fanaticism. Money—power! For these they had slaughtered, maimed, and spread terror. They had extorted thousands from fear-crazed millionaires. They began to picture themselves as czars of crime, masters of death, invincible rulers of the underworld. And, scorning the citizens of the underworld, they planned to organize its riffraff into a vast disciplined legion. That would come later, however, when they had more power. Tonight there was something concrete to go over—details of the most daring crime they had ever conceived.

"Fear of our organization is spreading," said the man on Morvay's right. "We are becoming famous. They call us the "Torture Trust." A low laugh followed. "It will make our next move easier. We are known across the water."

THEY then began to discuss the plot they had in mind. It was stupendously daring, yet absurdly simple; but they never acted without long preliminary arguments, weighing each move with cold logic. They had the training, the discipline, of men in high positions. Each could have made a decent living in the world of honest men. But there was in each a hidden strain of criminality coupled with a ruthless thirst for power.

The plan under discussion tonight dealt with Sir Anthony Dunsmark, British financier; one of the heads of the great Bank of England; a man of international repute; a man whose opinions were taken as gospel truth and whose statements had to be issued guardedly because they had power to

influence stock quotations in many countries. Dunsmark had shouldered his share of the financial burdens of the World War. He was on his way to America now to take part in a meeting of bankers, to do his bit toward helping along world recovery. Traveling on the liner *Victoria*, accompanied by one secretary, he would arrive in three days.

The hooded trio were like buzzards before a feast preparing for his arrival. So far their extortion racket had fallen on rich men in the city only. But here was an opportunity to extend operations.

What if Anthony Dunsmark disappeared upon arrival in America? What if his government should receive a letter demanding a vast sum which, if not paid over, would bring about the death of Dunsmark by the lingering horrors of acid?

No government would permit such a thing to happen to one of its best-known citizens. The sum asked would be paid, no matter how great it might be. To have Sir Anthony Dunsmark meet his death at the hands of American criminals would be a blot on the United States. America would contribute to his ransom if necessary. Thus the black-robed trio reasoned. But there were still details to be worked out. Dunsmark would be met at the dock by a police escort. There would be secret service operatives mingling in the crowd. To steal him away in spite of this was a big order. But the trio had confidence in their ability.

"There are many methods," said the man on Morvay's right. "Dunsmark will be lionized for days after his arrival. He will be invited everywhere. We will watch him ceaselessly and wait for an opportunity."

Morvay laughed softly.

"One of us," he said, "might even invite him to our own home. We are not without social position ourselves."

The man on his left growled an objection.

"There must be no hint of suspicion directed at us."

"We will meet again tomorrow night," Morvay answered. "I have feelers out. I will know then the names of some of the people who plan to have Dunsmark as a guest."

The others nodded assent. Discussion ceased. One by one they arose and left the council chamber, each leaving by a different route. Morvay passed through the buildings in the rear of the warehouse. He breathed easier now that the Secret Agent was gone. "X" was the only man so far who had given them any worry. The police were still wandering in confused circles and floundering in a bog of doubt.

It was raining as Morvay stepped into the dark street. He rolled his collar up and strode quickly along, his ulster flapping about his heels. He turned at the corner, heading toward the avenue four blocks away where it was his custom to pick up a taxi.

Then, shortly before he reached it, he was pleased to see a cruising cab coming his way. The rain had increased. This was a bit of luck, he thought.

He held up a finger, signaled the cab, and climbed in. He gave the name of a hotel, one of the points where he sometimes changed taxis, in the routine they all of them followed to throw shadows off the trail. He lit a cigarette and leaned back against the seat, going over in his mind the details of the daring crime planned.

The driver, sitting slumped behind the wheel, drove the cab on through the chill winter rain. Drops of moisture splattered against the glass in the door. Morvay was glad the windows were closed. He did not see the hands of the driver creep down to a small hidden lever beside his seat. He could not, for there was a front partition cutting off his view.

But he began to feel a slow dizziness creeping over him. The air in the cab seemed to be getting stale as though the exhaust had sprung a leak

and carbon monoxide were seeping into the car's interior.

Morvay leaned forward, reaching toward a window. But the dizziness increased to such an extent that he swayed in his seat.

He tried to raise his hand and it seemed to weigh many pounds. His cigarette dropped from shaking fingers. He tried to cry out to the driver, but his voice sounded faint and far away.

He slumped sidewise in the seat, struggling frantically to preserve his faculties. For a moment his face turned toward the ceiling of the cab, and a sudden shudder of amazement passed through his body. He made a desperate effort to rise, but succeeded only in flopping to the floor where he lay, still staring toward the roof with glassy, horrified eyes.

Over his head, in the center of the fabric covering the taxi's roof, something glowed with an eerie, wavering light. It was a letter, an "X," written in some kind of radiant paint. And, as Professor Morvay slipped into unconsciousness, it seemed to hover before his gaze like an accusing, all-seeing eye.

CHAPTER XV

THE INSPECTOR ARRIVES

THE taxi rolled on through the dreary, rain-swept night. In the rear compartment the inert body of Professor Morvay lurched grotesquely with every jounce the car gave. His still face and glassy eyes were like those of a corpse. But he was not dead.

The driver of the cab pressed the small lever beside his seat a second time, cutting off the flow of odorless anesthetizing gas that had swept Morvay into the dreamless depths of unconsciousness. The driver's face was expressionless, but under his visored cap his eyes glowed with piercing brightness.

Several times fares stepped to the curb, signaling him to stop, supposing the cab empty. But the cabman drove by them briskly. He avoided the

lighted streets, turned west, and whirled into a long avenue that led uptown. He bore steadily ahead through the rain with the purposefulness of a man who has a definite objective.

Wheeling into the broad drive that skirted the river, he passed millionaires' homes and block upon block of expensive apartment houses, magnificent with their liveried doormen and glittering fovers.

Once he turned his head and glanced sidewise at a gloomy old house that rose on a corner. Its windows were boarded up. There was an air of decay and desolation about the place. It was the old Montgomery mansion which the litigation of heirs had kept empty for years.

A faint, grim smile twisted the mouth of the cabman, alias Secret Agent "X." In a chamber of that house he had achieved his present disguise. The past twenty-four hours had been exciting ones. A man rated as dead had come to life. The members of the hideous "Torture Trust" believed he had gone down with the speeding taxi that had plunged off the dock. Their sadistic slaves had watched for him to rise to the surface, and he had not risen. The crash of the cab had been something he had planned deliberately.

They did not know that he could hold his breath a full two minutes under water and swim with the swift, powerful strokes of a diving otter. They hadn't seen him when he reached the surface under the inky shadows of the dock. And they didn't know that he had communicated with Betty Dale, told her to keep under cover in her room at the Graymont Hotel.

There was tonight a glint of ironic amusement in the Agent's eyes. This was the second taxi he had driven within a space of twenty-four hours. The first he had stolen and destroyed. This one he had bought. But he preferred to consider the first a loan, for money from the account of Elisha Pond would pay for them both even-

tually. He wasn't a criminal, and when he found it necessary to destroy property he took pains to reimburse the owners. The present cab had been purchased for the purpose of installing the hidden tank of compressed gas, the lever control, and the outlet tube in the passenger's compartment. To aid in capturing a man like Morvay, to break the hideous "Torture Trust," the investment seemed legitimate.

But he was not taking Morvay to jail.

The cab passed on up the drive, turned east, then north, and continued through the heart of the city. Agent "X" drove with the ease of a man to whom all types of cars are familiar.

He came to the suburbs at last, but still forged on through the rain-swept night. Miles beyond the city limits, he turned off on a little dirt road. The cab jounced and pitched like a ship on a stormy sea. The body of the Professor Morvay rolled with it, his glassy eyes still directed toward the ceiling and the "X" that glowed there. But the eyes were unseeing now.

Agent "X" stopped the cab. He opened the door and lifted Morvay out as though he had been a sack of meal. He carried him, arms and legs dangling, through the pelting rain, to the dim outlines of a house. It was an old, ramshackle farmhouse—the same to which he had taken Jason Hertz on the night Hertz escaped from prison.

He held Morvay over his shoulder with one hand for a moment. A key grated in the lock, the door opened, and Agent "X" and his prisoner were inside.

The rain drummed steadily on the worn shingles of the roof. There was the musty, stifling smell of old carpets and moldy walls. The Agent took Morvay to a back room and struck a light.

There he set to work quickly, eagerly, for he had much to do. He deposited Morvay in a chair, backed the chair to an upright supporting the big beams in the center of the room and, after drawing Morvay's inert arms about the upright, snapped handcuffs

over his wrists. Morvay was now a prisoner, held erect in the chair by the metal cuffs.

Agent "X" went to a shelf and drew out a bottle and a piece of cotton. He dipped the cotton into the bottle and held it close to Morvay's nose. The pungent smell of carbonate of ammonia filled the room.

SLOWLY Morvay stirred and began to breathe more deeply as the powerful stimulant overcame the effects of the gas. In three minutes he lifted his head. His eyes opened, closed, and opened again. They were no longer glassy, but were alive, intelligent. Morvay had returned to consciousness.

But fear and horror overspread his features. He tugged at his manacled hands, strained till the cords stood out in his neck, then began cursing harshly. There was the look of an evil, predatory beast on his features.

The Agent's face was bleak, unyielding. His eyes under his visored cap glowed like coals of fire.

"Agent 'X'! You are still alive then?" said Morvay. "They did not kill you—the fools, the fools!" There was bitterness in his voice and fury bordered on the insane. The blundering deaf-mutes were to be pitied if he ever got free.

Agent "X" came closer. He hadn't spoken, but his eyes were boring into those of the professor's. His voice was low, persuasive.

"You are a murderer, Professor Morvay—one of a trio of murderers. The electric chair awaits you. But there is one road of escape. It is a road which no man of decency or principle would think of following. But you have proved that you are neither. Therefore, I am offering you this road. Turn States' evidence, tell me the names of your two friends, your fellow criminals and murderers, and you will escape the death penalty."

Agent "X" knew it would be futile to employ the method he had used so effectively with Jason Hertz—the

method of hypnosis. A man of Morvay's type, a psychologist and hard-headed intellectual, could never be hypnotized.

Morvay blinked at the Agent for a moment, as though weighing the proposition. Then his lips curled back in an ugly sneer and a mocking laugh came from them.

"Fool! Fool! I will tell you nothing! You have no evidence against me! No proof! You will never find out who my colleagues are, nor learn our secrets!"

His harsh laugh sounded again, and seconds passed as their eyes clashed. "X" might have resorted to torture to make Morvay talk. But that was not his way. He knew that men are not always truthful under torture—and the truth was what he wanted.

He stood frowning, irresolute, with Morvay's harsh laughter ringing in his ears. He might turn Morvay over to the police, but the evidence against him was still too weak. There were missing links in the chain; and it wasn't the Agent's concern to have individuals arrested. He wanted to smash the whole hideous pattern of the "Torture Trust."

He turned then, brought his movie camera out, and focused the calcium flare on Morvay's evil face. The professor cursed and struggled in his chair as the camera clicked. Before he realized what was being done, "X" had started the dictaphone machine also, making a record of his voice. Morvay grew wise suddenly, and ceased speaking. There was a light of fury in his eyes, and he followed every movement the Agent made like a tiger hoping for a chance to spring.

Agent "X," silent and intent, filled a hypo needle from a small vial in a rack. There were other vials beside it, marked with different hour numbers.* He selected one, the label of which read, "Thirty-six."

* AUTHOR'S NOTE: Agent "X," I am convinced, has made a profound study of anesthesia and anesthetic compounds. He has often made use of them in his dangerous and daring work and can figure with remarkable exactitude how long a certain dose of a particular drug will hold a man under its influence.

Morvay began cursing again as Agent "X" approached him with the hypo needle. He bared his teeth like a cornered animal and the light in his eyes was satanic. But calmly, deftly, the Agent thrust the point of the needle into his arm and pressed the plunger home.

Morvay's curses became incoherent, babbling. His lips quivered, his eyes closed again. In a few moments his head fell forward. For thirty-six hours he would be dead to the world.

Agent "X" unsnapped the handcuffs from about the upright and carried the professor to the attic. There he deposited him on a pile of straw and carefully went through his pockets, taking Morvay's keys, watch, and private papers. He descended to the first floor room, removed the record from the dictaphone machine, the film from the movie camera, and left the farmhouse, driving back through the rain to the city. His interview with Morvay had not been satisfactory. He had failed to learn the identities of the other members of the "Torture Trust." He was still working in a black pall of mystery.

For hours that night he labored in his hidden room in the old Montgomery mansion. Sleep seemed unnecessary to the Agent. Vital, nervous forces drove him on. He developed the movie film, wound it on a drying reel, put the dictaphone record under a phonograph needle, and listened to Morvay's voice.

Once he thrust a hand into his pocket and brought out a box of varicolored, transparent capsules. They were about an inch long, filled with various essences and strange looking substances. The Agent selected several and swallowed them.*

* AUTHOR'S NOTE: I was surprised and somewhat shocked when I first learned that Agent "X" lives almost entirely on synthetic, concentrated foods. But he accidentally dropped some of his life-sustaining capsules during an interview I had with him. I took the liberty of having them analyzed by a skilled chemist and dietitian. They contained proteins, carbohydrates, and vitamins concentrated into remarkable calorie-producing substances. I understood then that Agent "X" was not starving himself, and I realized that at times in his strange work it must be a great advantage to have his meals always with him.

He continued his work until the slow, gray fingers of dawn crept across the street outside and made steely glints on the surface of the river.

BY the next evening Agent "X" had a disguise of Professor Morvay as perfect as the one he had done of Jason Hertz. He left the Montgomery mansion as twilight descended, and took a taxi to Morvay's house in that respectable street in the suburbs. There he once again opened the safe, and began a more comprehensive inspection of the books it contained. He found something he had not had time to investigate before—a lengthy paper written in code. It appeared meaningless, unintelligible. Groups of five letters were spaced at intervals across the page. Where did Morvay keep the code book which would make the paper understandable? He searched the room for a half hour without results.

Then, philosophically, with a box of cigarettes, a pencil and sheets of paper handy, he settled himself in a big chair under the light. Patience and perhaps hours of work lay ahead of him, but he knew how to go about the task in hand.*

In forty-five minutes, by use of word frequency tables, he had mastered the code of Morvay's paper. His eyes gleamed with excitement. Besides giving methods of work, countersigns, times of meeting, and types of acids used by the "Torture Trust," there were two names listed. The names were Albert Bartholdy and Eric Van Houten, M. D. Names which had a ring to them—names which seemed to carry dignity and prestige.

* AUTHOR'S NOTE: As a cryptographer and cryptanalyst it is my belief that Secret Agent "X" has few equals in the world. I am sure that he was at one time associated with the famous Yardley of the American Secret Service. Certainly he must have had much experience with codes, ciphers, and cryptograms during his work in the Intelligence Service. I have seen him solve multiple-alphabetic-substitution ciphers, bilateral-monoalphabetic-substitution ciphers, ciphers written by means of the Vignere table, combined substitution-transposition ciphers, the Playfair cipher with its diagraphic substitution, and all manner of one- and two-part codes.

The Agent's face hardened. Crime in its most hideous form sometimes blossomed in high places just as the deadliest fungi grew in the richest soil. It was not always the spawn of the poor, the downtrodden, and suffering who turned to the byways of evil. Nature worked strange contrasts.

He put the paper away in his pocket and reached for the telephone book, then paused. There had come a sudden strident ringing of the front door bell. Supposing it were Van Houten or Bartholdy come to pay a social visit to their colleague in crime? His disguise would fool them, but could he play his part, knowing nothing of their relations with Morvay?

With wildly beating heart he strode to the door, opened it, then stepped back, for once finding it difficult to maintain his composure. For the man who stood before him was Inspector John Burks of the city Homicide Squad.

CHAPTER XVI THE TERRIBLE TRIO

TENSE and alert, Agent "X" stared at the man before him. Then he noticed the expression on Burks' face. That expression was grave, thoughtful—not the look of a man who has come to make an arrest or cross-question a suspect. He waited for the inspector to speak first.

"You don't know me," the detective chief said. "I'm Inspector Burks. They told me about you at City College. They said you might be a good man to talk to."

Again the Agent found it difficult not to show amazement. A man of a thousand faces should expect to create strange situations. But this one was unbelievably fantastic.

"Come in, inspector," he said, making an effort to keep his voice casual.

The inspector entered stolidly, his pale, gaunt face composed.

"It's about these torture murders. Morvay," he said when they were seated. "I've got a theory I want to

talk over with an expert—some one like you. These killings strike me as being the work of an abnormal man."

"A sadist," said the Agent quietly.

Burks leaned forward in excitement.

"That's the word. But would a man like that—a sadist who likes to hurt people, have enough brains to execute such a series of crimes? Wouldn't he be deficient mentally?"

The Agent leaned back in his chair, a cigarette in his long fingers, smoke curling lazily from his nostrils. He was enjoying the situation now. What would Burks do if he knew his real identity? It was grotesque, ironic, that the two men pursuing the same group of criminals should meet under such circumstances.

"Have you ever thought," he said "that these acid throwers may be only the tools of some greater criminal, or criminals? The money extorted by the 'Torture Trust' has been gotten with the greatest cleverness. There are cunning brains behind this."

The inspector leaned forward, his eyes snapping.

"By God, I know it! And if there's a master criminal back of this racket, I know who it is!"

"You do?"

"Yes, a man who calls himself Secret Agent 'X.' A man who's as cunning as a fox."

For a moment there was silence so complete that the clock on the mantel seemed to give out sledge-hammer blows. Then the Agent spoke.

"Why not go after him?"

The inspector swore bitterly.

"I had him the other night. A cop caught him sneaking down a fire escape after an acid throwing. But he got away—I won't say how. There are twenty headquarters men out looking for him now."

"Tell them to keep at it," was the Agent's calm rejoinder.

Burks didn't catch the faintly mocking note, and if he had he wouldn't have understood. He asked another question relating to sadism. And

Agent "X," posing as the psychologist Morvay, began a learned discussion of the subject.*

When Inspector Burks left, he was impressed with the fact that Morvay was a well-informed man.

THE instant the door had closed, Agent "X" sprang out of his chair and set to work again on Morvay's desk. All his casualness of manner had left him. A fierce inward fire seemed to be driving him on. He hadn't forgotten those terrible moments in the subterranean corridors of the black-robed trio's hide-out. He hadn't forgotten the haggard, terror-stricken look on Betty Dale's face when he had come in time to save her from awful mutilation. And at any moment the "Torture Trust" might strike again. The threat of it was a black, ever present menace. The inspector's words had brought home to him the utter bafflement of the police.

He finished with the desk and took out Morvay's wallet. It contained sixty dollars in bills, membership cards to several exclusive clubs, a driver's license. Then, in an inside pocket, he found a crumpled newspaper clipping.

It was marked by pencil and announced the sailing to America on board the steamship *Victoria* of Sir Anthony Dunsmark, distinguished official of the Bank of England.

For long seconds the Agent stared at the clipping, his eyes glowing strangely.

He reached again for the telephone book. Albert Bartholdy and Doctor Eric Van Houten were both listed, their addresses given. The Agent paused in doubt. He was faced with one of the biggest problems of his life.

If Bartholdy and Van Houten were the other members of the trio, he

* AUTHOR'S NOTE: I am certain that Agent "X" has a vast fund of information on the theories of criminal behavior as well as his practical knowledge concerning criminals themselves. From scraps of conversation, I gather that he is familiar with the works of Stead, Freud, Adler, Jung, as well as all of the better known criminologists from Lombroso to Robert Anderson.

would have to proceed with the greatest caution. A false step now would put them on their guard. Yet he would have to act quickly, before the disappearance of Morvay was suspected. That tiny clipping mentioning the coming of Dunsmark might be the key to the situation. Why was Morvay interested in Dunsmark?

The Agent left Morvay's house and went first to the address of Albert Bartholdy. He changed his disguise on the way to H. J. Martin. —

Bartholdy lived in a fashionable apartment building. Posing as a credit investigator, Agent "X" learned from the apartment manager that Bartholdy was a lawyer employed as an assistant in the district attorney's office. That explained the trio's uncanny knowledge of police movements.

He got his car out of the mid-town garage, drove to Doctor Van Houten's address, and his eyes brightened. It was a private home.

He parked his car far up the block, then, under cover of the darkness he slipped through a servant's alley, crossed a back yard and circled the house till he located the windows of what appeared to be an office.

Using fingers and toe holds and rising a fall, he climbed stealthily up the side of the building till he got a view into the window under the narrow space below the shade.

A thin, gray-haired man inside was sitting at a desk interviewing a lady. "X" could not hear what was being said, but the thin man's manner was studied, professional. He drew a prescription pad from a drawer of the desk, wrote something on it, and handed it to the lady, as "X" watched. The man was unquestionably Doctor Van Houten.

The Agent studied him carefully. Van Houten, too, had a face of intelligence; but the nostrils were thin, the mouth small, and the eyes narrow and close-set. High, flat cheek bones and a cleft chin gave the features a look of power—but it was a face that

might harbor brutality and greed—the face of a possible criminal.

The Agent slid noiselessly to the ground and began a patient vigil in the shadows across the street. If an immediate crime were being plotted, the trio would surely meet again.

IT was close to ten-thirty when he saw the figure of Doctor Van Houten emerge. Many patients had gone in and come out. The doctor's office hours were over.

With the skill of long experience, the Agent shadowed his man. His heart beat faster. Doctor Van Houten was getting into a cab.

At a safe distance the Agent followed. Where was Van Houten bound? The doctor's next move convinced him. For Van Houten got out, dismissed the cab and walked several blocks. Then, after a glance around him, signaled another taxi.

The Agent overtook the cab, passed it, and went on out of sight. He pressed the gas button down and drove his roadster like a demon. He glanced at the clock on the instrument board. It was twenty minutes to eleven. Could it be that a meeting was scheduled to take place in the mysterious council chamber at that hour? Van Houten's furtive movements seemed an affirmative answer.

He raced ahead of the doctor, reaching the deserted warehouse at ten minutes of eleven. Somewhere inside the sinister deaf-mutes might be lurking, but there was one route through which the Agent felt he could go unmolested. Morvay always entered by the rear buildings, and Morvay would not be present tonight.

Using his master keys, he let himself in through the now familiar door. The place seemed silent and deserted. But "X" sensed the presence of death and horror. He stopped a moment, his reasoning faculties working.

The trio always wore black frocks and robes. Was it to hide their identities from their victims? Or did they

want to remain unknown to their slaves, the deaf-mutes, as well. Morvay had not had the weird garments with him when he had emerged. They must be stored close at hand, for, if they were to protect Morvay from the gaze of the deaf-mutes, he would not want to traverse the corridors without them.

Risking detection, Agent "X" probed carefully with the beam of his flash. Then he stepped forward. Reason had led him aright. There was a locked closet close to the first door. He groped, opened it, and drew forth the hood and robe—symbols of darkness and death.

Standing in the blackness of the corridor, he adjusted them over his body and walked forward. Twice he turned on the flash light, fearless now of being discovered by the mutes.

He was the first to reach the council chamber and he had a strange sense of eeriness as he settled himself into the middle chair. He was taking a terrible chance tonight, going into the very jaws of death. A slip might betray him—some overt act that he couldn't anticipate.

A tiny bulb flashed on, throwing dim shadows around the room. He stared at the floor, saw a slight bulge in the carpet close by his foot and understood then how secret signals had been flashed to the mutes.

The seconds seemed to pass with crawling slowness. He heard no sound in the room or in the vastness of the building outside. Had he been right about Van Houten? Was the man coming here tonight?

Slow footfalls approached. They sounded first as a ghostly whisper, measured, precise. They made his scalp crawl.

Waiting tensely in the dimly lit room, he did not know what the next few minutes would bring.

A faint noise came from the door. It opened slowly and another hooded figure came in. Without sign or word of greeting, the figure moved across the room to a chair at "X's" right and

sat down. Eyes met the Agent's from behind the black hood. Was this Van Houten or Albert Bartholdy, he wondered?

The man did not move or speak, and when minutes had passed, a third figure entered. It was only then that the first man opened his lips.

"What news?" he said in a low, harsh voice. "Are there any new plans to discuss? The *Victoria* docks tomorrow night. When do we move?"

Agent "X" wondered what answers would be given to this. Details, he hoped, would be brought out that would make it possible for him to reconstruct what was passing through their minds. But no one spoke.

Seconds passed. The silence in the room deepened. It grew oppressive, deathly.

"Well?" said a voice at last.

The Agent started then. A slow prickle moved along his spine, reaching to his scalp. He grew tense in his chair, flexing the muscles that the black robe concealed.

For the hooded figures beside him were staring his way—the man who had asked the questions and the other who had just spoken.

He could see a sharp, expectant glitter in the gaze that they fastened on him. And all at once he understood. Professor Morvay had been the master mind of the trio. And, because he had taken the middle seat, they thought he was Morvay. Now they looked to him for guidance and strategy in the crime they planned. He was suddenly placed in a terrible position, with death and defeat as the pitfalls into which he would stumble if the answers he made should be wrong.

CHAPTER XVII

ACROSS DARK WATERS

HE waited breathlessly while the hooded figures at his left and right continued to stare at him with hard, penetrating glances. They, too, were waiting, and Agent "X" cleared his throat.

"I have been thinking—" he said, then paused, his tongue feeling dry against his teeth. It had taken an effort to make his voice sound like Morvay's.

"You said you would investigate—discover where Dunsmark would first be invited," said the man at his right who had first spoken.

"Yes," the Agent spoke slowly, stalling for time. "Many invitations have been sent to him. It will depend upon his own plans. We will not know till he lands."

Aggressiveness crept into the voice of the speaker at his right.

"It has been our method to strike swiftly and depend on surprise and terror. We must not delay too long. We must act while the public and press are still in a furor—while fear of us is rampant. Then Dunsmark's government will pay."

Behind the black hood the eyes of Agent "X" gleamed like bits of steel. He stared from one hooded figure to the other. There was silence in the room again, silence that was pregnant, filled with the greed of men who could not wait. He had learned enough. His voice was low, hoarse when he spoke, but still the voice of Morvay. There was confidence in his tone. They looked to him as the leader, and he would give them leadership undreamed of.

"You are right," he said. "We must strike soon—why not immediately, the moment he lands?"

The man on his right spoke sharply. "We discussed that last night. A police escort will be there and secret service operatives will undoubtedly be guarding him."

Agent "X" made an impatient, deprecatory gesture.

"There is a way. One man can sometimes accomplish what many cannot do. I will capture him myself—bring him here. I have thought of a method."

Exclamations of doubt and amazement followed his words.

"You can't accomplish the impos-

sible. How do you propose to go about it?"

"Trust me," said the Agent quietly.

"We have always gone over our plans together. Three minds are better than one. There may be flaws."

The Agent was stubborn. "I will get Dunsmark alone. Our slaves cannot act in this for us. I will meet him, introduce myself. I will have forged papers from a bank. He will think—"

The man at his left interrupted harshly.

"It is not feasible. It is folly!"

The Agent saw he would have to fight opposition. His voice became aggressive, hard as the rasp of a file on metal.

"I will gamble my share of what we intend to make," he said.

"That is nothing. We are all gambling. We will all lose."

"Have you a better plan to offer, then?"

"Yes." The man at his left spoke now. "The original one. Our slaves will spy on Dunsmark—we will get him to come out alone on some pretext—as we have done with others. We can use the needle and the drug again."

The Agent sneered. "It may be days before that can happen. He may grow suspicious. The police may insist on guarding him night and day. There is agitation against us, my friends. The government is watchful. Have you thought of that?"

The others were silent, and "X" continued, driving home his point.

"Fear of us is spreading. It is good in one way. Fear is powerful and will separate men from their money. It has helped us before. But it may work against us in the case of Dunsmark. There may be no chance unless we act quickly."

There was silence again as cunning brains pondered behind black hoods. The man who had objected spoke at last.

"Very well," he said. "But if you fail, it will end everything. It will be

every man for himself." There was a sinister threat behind his words.

"I have as much to lose as any of you," said the Agent quietly.

"You mean then that you will take him as soon as the boat docks."

"Yes," said the Agent, "that is what I mean!"

"And you will bring him here."

"Yes—at once."

"Very well."

The session was over. The Secret Agent had committed himself to a task that seemed impossible; to the task of snatching Sir Anthony Duns- mark away under the very noses of the police and the Secret Service operators who would be watching. It was a task so daring, so unbelievable, that even the members of the hooded trio were skeptical.

One by one they left the council chamber. Agent "X" drove uptown to the old Montgomery mansion, to his secret room, and all through the night he was awake, alert, thinking, plan- ning.

The next day he went to the photo- graph department of a big metropoli- tan paper and purchased from their files all available photos of a certain public official—the commissioner of police. He followed it by going to a private photographer who specialized in such things and buying others. He now had fourteen photos of the com- missioner in all poses— flash lights of him speaking before a crowd, photos of him in uniform, in private life, and at public functions.

That evening he arranged these photos around the walls of his secret room and studied them carefully. Then with pen and ink, legal-looking paper, and a metal stamp with the seal of the city on it, he proceeded to draw up a document.

THREE hours later, a speed boat left a secluded dock along the water front and shot out across the harbor. It was a roomy boat, with padded leather seats, and a powerful engine that ran as smoothly as a

watch. A muffler reduced the thunder- ous reverberations of the motor to a subdued musical hum. The boat left a white wake behind it as it threaded its way among the tugs and gliding ferries plying between the down-town docks and the towns and cities across the harbor.

The time was eleven-thirty. At the wheel of the speed boat was a tall man in a black coat. He had a soft gray hat pulled low, a muffler around his neck. He stared straight ahead across the water, guiding the speed boat with a skilled hand.

Once wind whipped the muffler loose, and the man folded it again over immaculate evening clothes that showed beneath his coat. He was ob- viously a personage of dignity and importance, a handsome man, ruddy faced, gray at the temples and with a close-clipped mustache lending strength to his firm upper lip. It was the face that was known everywhere—the face of the city's police commis- sioner.

Any cop would have pointed him out in a crowd. Almost any citizen would have recognized him, for his picture had appeared in the metro- politan papers often. And, in case there might be doubt as to his iden- tity, he carried documents to show who he was and to prove that his tenure of office had the city's sanc- tion.

Yet, miles away in the fashionable mansion of a wealthy political boss, the real commissioner was engaged in an exciting game of poker with sev- eral of his cronies. He would have been shocked, furious, terrified if he could have seen the man at the wheel of the boat—the man who would, during the next hour, impersonate himself.

The Secret Agent was gambling again on his mastery of disguise, gambling on a scheme that was in- credibly daring.

The speed boat slowed, began mov- ing in wide easy circles across the face of the dark waters. Once a har-

bor patrol craft hove into sight and the Agent stilled the motor and extinguished the red-and-green running lights on the speed boat's sides. The patrol passed by like a gray shadow in the night.

Far down the narrows a blotch of radiance appeared. It came nearer, increased in size. It was the high, many-windowed, superstructure of a great liner—the *Victoria*.

With the majesty of vast bulk and great power under leash, the greyhound of the seas came slowly on. Pigmy tugs nosed along beside it. Soon the great turbines would be stilled, the tugs would warp the huge vessel into the dock where hundreds of excited people waited, friends and relatives of the thousand or more passengers on board. But before that happened, there was official business to be gone through. The *Victoria* would be held at quarantine until doctors had made certain there were no contagious diseases on board. This might take one hour or several. The ship was one of the crack liners. The passenger list held many distinguished names. The routine of quarantine would be as brief as possible.

As the great ship weighed anchor in the narrows, the Secret Agent circled it and watched. He saw the quarantine boat heave to beside the towering sides of the liner, saw the official doctors board her by the stairway that was lowered.

The Agent steered his speed boat close then, gliding silently alongside the quarantine craft. He made fast a rope and stepped lightly over the quarantine boat's deck.

A sailor stuck his head out of the small hatchway and stared at him in wonder. But Agent "X" offered no explanation.

It wasn't until an officer at the top of the liner's companionway tried to stop him that he drew out the document showing who he was. The officer saluted and stepped back respectfully.

A minute more and he was in the presence of the *Victoria's* grizzled

captain. One of the quarantine men and a customs official were with the captain. They recognized the commissioner at once. His papers this time were not necessary. As he drew the captain aside, his handsome face was grave.

"Sir Anthony Dunsmark is on this ship, I believe, captain," he said.

"Yes."

Agent "X" cleared his throat and stared at the *Victoria's* chief officer, frowning. The quarantine man and the customs official looked on in wonder. They could not hear what was being said, but it was evident that something of vast import had brought the police commissioner out across the harbor.

"There is a plot afoot," said the Agent, "a plot to kidnap Sir Anthony Dunsmark and hold him for extortion money. He may be injured, killed. The city can take no chances. It will be better to spirit him away, keep him out of sight until the police have had a chance to investigate. I will take him directly to my home, captain."

The captain nodded instantly. It was not his business to question the wisdom of a move advocated by one of the country's greatest police heads. Agent "X" was led forward through the slip to the expensive suite of cabins that was occupied by Sir Anthony Dunsmark and his secretary. The captain introduced the commissioner.

AGENT "X" saw a tall, ruddy-faced, slightly stout Britisher. Dunsmark had on a baggy gray suit. A pair of eye glasses hung by a cord from his vest. He was vastly flustered at the news the commissioner delivered in a low, tense voice.

His face had paled a trifle. He was a man unaccustomed to violence. Most of his days had been spent in quiet, luxurious offices where people spoke in subdued voices and where there was an air of efficiency and stability.

"I am terribly sorry, Sir Anthony," said the Agent. "But we can take no chances. You had better come with

me at once, to avoid danger later when the boat docks."

Puffing with excitement, Dunsmark issued orders to his secretary.

"Your baggage can wait for the customs men," said the Agent. "Your secretary can stay and take care of that. This is all very unusual."

"Very," echoed Dunsmark.

"But it is made necessary by the pressure of circumstances. We must combat crime as best we can."

"Quite!" said Dunsmark.

He was hustled off the boat so quickly and efficiently that he hardly knew what was happening. Sailors from the *Victoria* held the slim speed boat while he climbed in. If they or the captain thought it strange that the police commissioner should come out alone, they said nothing. This was an extraordinary condition of affairs, met in an extraordinary way.

Speeding back across the harbor Dunsmark recovered some of his composure. He chatted with the man whom he thought was the commissioner.

"You Americans," he said, "are independent fellows. Fancy an English official being able and willing to pilot his own boat like this!"

It was only after they had reached shore by means of an ill-smelling dock and climbed into a parked roadster that Dunsmark began to show signs of nervousness again. Several times he glanced uneasily at the man beside him.

His uneasiness visibly increased as the car rolled into a maze of streets that were dark, rough, and cluttered; streets that seemed to have about them a sinister atmosphere of crime. He spoke at last.

"Look here, commissioner. I don't quite understand this. I thought—"

His words ceased in a startled, choking gasp. His eyes bulged from his head. For the commissioner had drawn a gun. It gleamed wickedly under the glow of the instrument-board light, and it was pointed straight at his side.

"I'm sorry," said the commissioner softly. "You will have to come with me and do what I say, Sir Anthony. Any attempt on your part to cry out or escape will have very serious consequences."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RAID

AGENT "X" sensed at once that Dunsmark was not a man to cause him trouble. The Britisher was certainly no coward. His many courageous acts and decisions in the world of finance had proved that. But he wasn't used to physical action. And he was still overawed by reports read of crime conditions in America. He sat slumped in his seat, white-faced, silent, ready for the worst.

"X" drove the car on through the night into the shadow of the great warehouse where hideous things had been done and where others would be done again if he didn't prevent them; where the seeds of murder had been planted and nourished.

He ordered Dunsmark out of the car, and told him to stand quietly in the shadows for a moment.

"There are others about, Sir Anthony," he said. "Do as I tell you. Take no chances. Vital issues are at stake." How vital he did not try to explain. Dunsmark could think what he chose for the time being.

Agent "X" went to the back of the roadster, unlocked the cover of the rumble seat and lifted it. In the spacious compartment in front of the seat was the body of a man doubled up. The man was not dead, only unconscious, for he was breathing regularly. It was the body of Professor Morvay.

The Agent reached in, grasped Morvay, and lifted him out. At sight of his limp figure Sir Anthony Dunsmark gasped with fear. Death, mystery, and horror had met him on his landing in America. He regretted that he had come at all. But the sight of a man who appeared to be dead para-

lyzed his will. He took pains to obey the Agent's orders.

Carrying Morvay over his shoulder, the Agent motioned Dunsmark to the side of one of the old buildings, and opened the door. He motioned Dunsmark inside, then quietly closed and locked the door, and deposited Morvay on the floor. Then, standing Dunsmark close to the wall, he turned a flash light on his face and studied him for long moments.

"Sorry," he said again. "But you must do as I tell you." His calm voice seemed at odds with his strange actions.

He took the black hood and robe from the closet by the door and adjusted them on his body without even removing the disguise of the police commissioner. He had to work quickly now, make every move count in the desperate game he was playing.

With the hood over his head and his eyes glittering through the slits, he looked far more terrible than he had as the well-dressed police commissioner. Dunsmark's face went a shade paler. He moved forward like a somnambulist as the Agent made motions with his gun.

Carrying the body of Morvay, and thrusting Dunsmark ahead, the Agent went slowly down the corridor. It was fortunate that the deaf-mutes could hear nothing. It was fortunate, too, that Van Houten and Bartholdy entered and left by different ways. He would not encounter them till he arrived at the council chamber.

Twenty feet from the door of the secret room, in a closet under a stairway that he had previously noted, he thrust the still form of Morvay. Then he flicked on his light for a moment and motioned Dunsmark on.

In silence they at last entered the chamber where so much evil had been plotted.

There was a dim light burning in the room; and two spectral black-robed figures sitting on chairs. They gave harsh exclamations at sight of the British financier. Their eyes

gleamed with a fierce, avaricious light.

"I kept my word," said Agent "X" quietly.

FOR a moment there was awed silence, then the man at the Agent's left pressed his foot on a bulge in the carpet. The spotlight on the ceiling above flashed on. It bathed Dunsmark's face in brilliant radiance. The paleness of his features, the tenseness of his attitude, the combative look in his eyes, testified to the fact that he had been brought unwillingly. Agent "X" had relied on that. It was why he hadn't dared take Dunsmark into his confidence. The unpleasant interlude had been necessary if his plans were to succeed.

"Does he know the reason for his being here?" came a voice from behind one of the hoods.

"No," said the Agent. "I have told him nothing. I have kept my word—brought him. Inform him of what we have in mind."

The man at the Agent's right spoke in a harsh measured voice.

"You are an important man, Dunsmark—important to your country and to the world. Neither your country nor the world can afford to lose you. They will, for that reason, take pains to see that you are returned to them uninjured."

The British banker slowly nodded his head. A sudden surge of blood swept across his face. His cleft chin jutted.

"I understand everything, Dunsmark. You understand, of course, that ransom is expected for your safe return. A child could understand that. You can guess that the amount of ransom for such an important person as you will be large, staggeringly large, but not too large—not more than your country will gladly pay. But you don't understand just where you are. You don't realize what will happen if you fail to meet our demands.

Dunsmark's right fist tightened in to a ball.

"By Gad, gentlemen—I don't care what your demands are. You've picked the wrong victim. You can't intimidate me!"

A harsh, grating laugh came from behind the black hood.

"Have you followed the news, Dunsmark? Have you heard of that mysterious organization called the 'Torture Trust'? Have you read reports of what happens to men who refuse to meet its demands?"

Dunsmark's face paled again, and its expression showed that news of the terrible series of crimes had reached England.

"I see you've heard of us," continued the voice. "You have heard of dead men, rich men and their sons, being found with their faces gone, eaten by acid. You are a man of imagination. You can picture to yourself no doubt what the slow claws of acid can do. You can understand why you will pay."

"Damn you!" cried the Englishman. "I still say you can't intimidate me. I won't sell my country out to ransom my own carcass."

"No!" the persuasive voice went on. "That is noble of you. That is loyal. You are a man of high ideals, of great principles. You will sacrifice yourself. But have you ever had liquid drops of torture poured on your skin, Dunsmark? Would you want to return to your country marred beyond recognition? Would you want to spend the rest of your life looking so hideous that your friends will turn away from you in horror."

"Damn you—damn you!" gasped the Englishman. "Let me out of here!"

"That will be easy," said the voice of his tormenter. "We can ask the ransom money without your consent. But everything will be better, more simple, if you will write a note yourself directing your country to pay what we ask. We will make all arrangements for the note's delivery,

the delivery of the money, and your safe return. It will be conducted in a businesslike way."

Dunsmark was quivering with fury now.

"All we ask," said the hooded figure, "is a sum proportionate to your high position. A sum which your country, or you yourself perhaps, can well afford to pay. All we ask is five hundred thousand pounds!"

The Secret Agent gasped. They were demanding over two million dollars.

Dunsmark, still trembling violently, remained silent.

"What do you say," came the voice. "Will you cooperate—make things easy for yourself and us? Or must we give you a taste of what hell is like?"

"Go to the devil, all of you," the Englishman cried in a sudden burst of fury. "There are police in America! There is law and order. You'll go to prison and the gallows for this."

The Secret Agent spoke then.

"He will not be convinced, my friends. We will have to take him down below. Call our slaves."

The hooded figure at his right silently pressed the button concealed under the carpet—the button that flashed lights in the deaf-mutes' quarters. A moment later four of them glided in, and the same hooded man flashed orders with his fingers.

The Agent spoke then.

"I am going with him," he said. "Let us all go. Let us see that our slaves make no blunder in this."

Silently they rose and wound through the chill corridors to the cellar below. The door of the torture chamber was unlocked. Struggling and protesting fiercely, Dunsmark was thrust into the metal chair. In a moment the metal cuffs had been clamped over his hands and ankles.

"We have come," said the Agent, "to give you a chance to change your mind—before it is too late."

One of the mutes, precise as an

automaton, had gone to a shelf and taken the stopper from a bottle of acid.

"You see it," said the hooded figure standing by the Agent's side. "You see the liquid that no human will can endure."

"God!" cried Dunsmark. "There are decent laws and police in America, I say. You'll go to prison. They won't let this happen."

As though in answer to his words, a sudden sound reverberated through the building. It was a clanging metallic note. Then somewhere far above, faint and shrill, a whistle sounded. The noise of a blow came again, repeated, taken up and echoed, till the whole warehouse shook and trembled, as though a hundred axes were crashing through the doors.

"The police," hissed the Agent, fiercely. "A raid. Every man for himself!"

CHAPTER XIX

MYSTERIOUS INSTRUCTIONS

IN her room at the Hotel Graymont Betty Dale paced restlessly. She lit innumerable cigarettes, took short quick puffs, ground them out. Her eyes were dark with worry. Once she went to the window and stared out across the rooftops. Lights showed on the river far away. In the streets below, after-theater crowds surged and jostled, and the faint blare of taxi horns rose in an uneasy murmur.

There was laughter and gaiety in the ceaseless stream of humanity that flowed on the sidewalks around the hotel like a stream washing the base of a great cliff. There were smiling faces and lightly moving feet. But Betty Dale had a sense of uneasiness, a sense that strange, sinister things portended.

That afternoon she had had a visit from the Agent. He had come to her as H. J. Martin. His card had read: "Credit Manager, Felder & Wright Department Stores"! He was dis-

guised as a sallow-faced, sandy-haired man. She had been fooled as usual until his card had turned black in her hands leaving a glowing white "X" on its surface. Then she had known.

But this time his instructions had surprised her even more than his disguise. He had discarded for the moment his habit of talking in parables and innuendos. He had issued short, crisp statements.

"I want you to do something for me, Betty. If I don't call back before one o'clock to-night, I want you to phone police headquarters. Ask for Inspector Burks and tell him that Sir Anthony Dunsmark has been kidnaped. Tell him Dunsmark has fallen into the clutches of the "Torture Trust," and tell him where Sir Anthony and the members of the trust can be found."

He had given her explicit directions then—street numbers that Betty recognized. The place he described was the old warehouse where she had been held and threatened with torture. Her face paled at the recollection.

"And you," she said. "If the police raid the place, where will you be?"

The Agent had remained silent and Betty had noticed that in his eyes was a strange, bright light. When he spoke again his words had not been an answer to her worried query, but further instructions.

"Don't use the hotel telephone, Betty. Go at least four blocks away. Use a store phone booth and leave as soon as you have made your call."

He had gone away then, leaving Betty Dale anxious, uneasy. The hours had dragged by. All evening she had hoped he would call again; hoped that he would countermand his strange orders. How could even the Secret Agent know that Sir Anthony Dunsmark would be kidnaped? The British banker, she knew, had not landed in America. Had Agent "X" wormed his way into the innermost circle of the "Torture

Trust," and if so what desperate game was he playing?

Twelve o'clock came with no further word from him. She called the steamship office then. They told her the liner *Victoria*, on which Dunsmark was arriving, was in the harbor, but that it would be held at quarantine for an hour or more.

A quarter of one came and Betty put on her hat and coat. She took an elevator to the lobby, walked through it and passed out into the street. Five blocks away she entered a cigar-store telephone booth and dialed a number. The sleepy voice of a desk sergeant at police headquarters answered her and Betty said:

"I want to speak to Inspector Burks."

"You can't, lady," the sergeant said. "He ain't here. He's gone home."

"I must speak to him anyway. This is very important."

"Who are you?"

"Never mind. Get the inspector. It's a matter of life and death."

The sergeant grumbled and complained, but at the end of a minute he had made switchboard connections. Another voice sounded over the wire.

"This is Inspector Burks. What's it all about? What do you want?"

In quick, breathless sentences Betty Dale relayed the message that the Agent had asked her to deliver—the message announcing Sir Anthony Dunsmark's abduction—and the inspector's voice rose into a harsh irritable rasp.

"That's impossible! You're lying! The *Victoria*, the boat he's on, hasn't even docked. She's still at quarantine. I know because I've got cops waiting to look out for him. Who the hell are you, lady?"

But Betty Dale didn't answer. She had done her duty, done what the Secret Agent had asked. She hung up quickly and left the store before the police tried to trace the call.

INSPECTOR BURKS at the other end of the wire jangled the receiver futilely. His pale face had turned a shade paler. There was an uneasy look in his eyes. The girl who had called him up and refused to give her name was obviously a nut. What she had told him couldn't be true. Dunsmark couldn't be kidnapped before the *Victoria* landed. But still he was uneasy. And he wasn't a man to let anything pass.

Growling in his throat, still irritable from having been waked up, he lifted the receiver again and demanded the ship-to-shore service.

"Get me the steamer *Victoria*—now in the harbor. Let me speak to her captain."

In a moment the call had leaped through the air across the harbor by wireless telephone. The voice of the captain buzzed in his ear. Inspector Burks asked a blunt question.

"Is Anthony Dunsmark still on board? This is the head of the city homicide squad."

The captain answered quickly.

"Sir Anthony left nearly an hour ago. The police commissioner came and got him."

There was an instant of dead silence, then Burks spoke hoarsely.

"The commissioner—say—he wouldn't do that without letting me know."

"It was the commissioner I tell you—there's no doubt about it."

"What the hell!" exploded Burks.

He was beginning to tremble now. He was beginning to sense that something somewhere was terribly wrong. It wasn't like the commissioner to do such a thing without informing the heads of his departments.

With shaking hands, Burks dialed the commissioner's house and got the commissioner's red-haired wife.

"I want to speak to Charlie," said the inspector.

"He hasn't been home all evening. He's out with the boys again—playing cards, I suppose. You'll probably find him at MacDorsey's."

Burks knew who MacDorsey was—one of the city's richest political bosses. He made the telephone dial buzz like an angry bee, and when he got MacDorsey on the wire his voice was a husky croak.

"Better not interrupt the com-mish," said MacDorsey. "He's drawing for a royal flush."

"I've got to speak to him. It's im-portant."

Burks gulped for air when he heard the commissioner's polished voice, a little chiding now at being disturbed during off hours.

"What is it, inspector? More grief I suppose?"

"Did you go out in a boat tonight, chief, and take that Englishman, Anthony Dunsmark, off the *Victoria*?"

"Did I what? Say have you gone crazy, Burks? What are you talking about?"

"You didn't get him off about an hour ago?"

"No. Say! I've been here with the boys all evening. What the hell's the matter with you!"

"Dunsmark's been kidnapped, chief. The 'Torture Trust' has got him. The captain of the *Victoria* says some one who looked like you grabbed him off the boat. I've been tipped off to where he is. I'm going to raid the place."

The commissioner's tone was apoplectic.

"For God's sake don't let this get into the papers! We'll all look sweet. I'll sit in at the raid. Where is it?"

In brief sentences Burks told him. Then he made the wires hot. His rasping voice started the various departments in action, got other inspectors on the job. He asked that trucks of the emergency squad be sent out, asked the boiler squad to cooperate, and ordered all available men of the homicide squad rounded up.

Half dressed, with his shoes unlaced and his collar unbuttoned, he sent his own car roaring down town through the night-darkened streets.

THE biggest raid in the history of the city police was under way. Telephone wires were humming. Captains and sergeants were bawling orders.

A green, high-speed truck of the emergency squad, cops clinging to the brass rails on its sides, came hurtling out of a side street and roared down town with its siren screaming. Two motor-cycle cops joined it, clearing the way, adding their horns to the din.

Private cars drew aside. Pedestrians scuttled to safety. Inspector Burks, his face bleak, drove madly, holding his own horn down.

The tip-off, whoever had given it, had been complete. And he had made his own instructions complete also. No one was to act until he arrived on the scene to direct the raid.

He found grim-faced men waiting in the dark streets around the old warehouse. There was the glint of dim light on riot guns and on the black, wicked snouts of automatics held in steady hands.

Sergeant Mathers, roused from sleep, his eyes bloodshot, came up for instructions.

"Throw a cordon around the whole building," said Burks. "Circle the block. Don't let any one get out."

Stealthy-footed men approached the building from all sides. "Those houses in the rear," said Burks. "Watch them, too."

A sleek, official car with a uni-formed chauffeur slid to a halt, then crept through the lines of detectives. The commissioner himself had arrived, his mouth under its mustache a hard, straight line. Some one had put him in a bad spot. Some one had made him appear ridiculous.

"Let's get going," he snapped.

The raid began then. Men with axes, sledge hammers, and crowbars started battering in the doors. Powerful searchlights mounted on the trucks of the emergency squad flashed on, sweeping the sides of the big building, making the dark evil streets as bright as day. Patrolmen

and plain-clothes detectives poured in, battering down doors and racing along corridors.

It was Inspector Burks himself who first saw a spectral black-robed form ahead of him. The man flashed into sight for a moment around a passage angle, and Burks saw the evil glitter of eyes behind the slitted hood.

"Halt!" he said. "Stand where you are or I'll shoot."

The hooded man ignored the warning. He tried to spring up a flight of stairs.

There was the harsh crack of an automatic. Burks had been a dead shot in his day. The man on the stairway screamed and spun around. He tottered, clutched at the wall. Then his body slumped and rolled backwards. He collapsed on the floor of the passage and lay still.

Burks ran forward and snatched the hood loose. Then he gave a swift gasp of surprise.

"God! Albert Bartholdy—one of the D.A.'s snooty assistants. No wonder the cops didn't have a chance."

There was a blue hole in the side of Albert Bartholdy's head. One member of the "Torture Trust" would never plot evil again.

But a patrolman with a riot gun down the corridor cursed in pain. Two sinister gray-clad figures had appeared ahead of him as if by magic. One of them had flung a glittering tube of liquid. It was only by a miracle of good luck that the cop stepped aside in time.

The tube smashed against the wall close to his head. Reeking chemical fumes filled his nostrils. Drops of searing acid struck his cheek.

He cursed again, crouched low, and his finger pressed the trigger of the riot gun. The automatic mechanism jumped and clattered. Flame sputtered from the black muzzle.

The two evil, gray forms wilted before it, plunged to the floor, and lay still.

The raiders penetrated to the cellar then. Somewhere ahead a light showed. The inspector ran forward, then stopped. Another black-robed figure lay at his feet. He held his gun steady, but the figure did not move. He stooped, pulled the hood aside, and his face muscles sagged in amazement. For seconds he stared in utter bewilderment.

The man at his feet was not dead but only unconscious. He was breathing harshly, regularly, in the manner of a man under the influence of drugs. But his presence in that place and the black hood he wore showed that he, too, was a member of the "Torture Trust." Burks recognized the features.

"Morvay!" he gasped.

Two cops came forward holding another black-hooded form. He was struggling, clawing, trying to break away. They drew the hood from his head and Inspector Burks looked into the patrician, cruel features of the murderous doctor. Eric Van Houten. The expression of bafflement, rage, and fear in the man's eyes was evidence of guilt.

THE inspector turned and ran on toward the lighted room ahead. His gun was in his hand, but he holstered it and breathed a sigh of deep relief. They had not been too late.

A man in an English-cut tweed suit was slumped in a metal chair in the center of the room. His arms and legs were manacled, holding him a prisoner, but he was unhurt. His loud voice showed that.

"Bully for you!" he said. "I told those devils the police would come. There were three of them—murderers, torturers. I told them there was law and order in this bally country."

"Dunsmark," said Inspector Burks.

He recognized the famous banker from the many photos he had seen in rotogravure sections of the papers. There was vast relief in his voice. He

and his men had saved the city and the country from disgrace. And the "Torture Trust" had been smashed, trapped — its three hypocritical members caught red-handed and exposed: Morvay, Bartholdy, and Van Houten.

Then Burks saw a small key on a shelf near by. It looked like the key to the manacles on Dunsmark's arms and legs. He tried it, found that it worked and freed the Englishman.

Sir Dunsmark stood up, stretched his limbs and grinned.

"This isn't such a bad country after all," he said. "I had a scare for a time. Things happened rather suddenly, you know."

"What about that man who came for you on the boat? They say he looked like our police commissioner."

Sir Anthony was apologetic, courteous, but firm.

"I'll tell you all about it later—tomorrow—if you don't mind. I'm a bit fagged by all that's happened. Excitement isn't good for me, you know, and I'm a bit late for a rather important appointment. You gather what I mean?"

"Sure thing! Of course."

Burks knew when to be courteous and when to be hard-boiled. A man like Dunsmark wasn't to be trifled with and told what to do. There might be trouble involved. He personally escorted Dunsmark through the building and turned him over to the commissioner. Cops and plain-clothes men were still smashing doors, and rounding up the last of the gray-clad men.

The commissioner was solicitous.

"You must take my car," he said. "I'll see that you have a police escort."

"Really," said Dunsmark, waving his hand in the air. "No fuss or publicity, if you don't mind. As I told the inspector, my nerves are a bit fagged. I'll just borrow your car and slip out. Thanks awfully."

He got into the car and gave the

chauffeur the name of a hotel. The car rolled away on velvety springs.

A few blocks from the warehouse and Sir Anthony Dunsmark seemed suddenly to change his mind.

"I'll get out here," he said. "A bit of walk will do me good."

The surprised chauffeur started to object, then closed his mouth. It wasn't for him to quibble with a distinguished passenger. He stopped the car, hopped out, and opened the door with a flourish.

"Give this to Inspector Burks at once," said Dunsmark.

He slipped a small envelope into the chauffeur's hand.

The chauffeur touched his cap, took the note, and got back into the car. He watched Sir Anthony Dunsmark's tall figure disappear down the street.

"That guy's nuts," he muttered.

Then a faint, melodious whistle reached his ears. It was a whistle that stirred echoes high up in the rooftops and whispered eerily along the faces of the buildings. With a prickle on his scalp that he could not quite explain to himself, the chauffeur turned the car and drove rapidly back to the warehouse. He made his way inside the building, found Inspector Burks talking to the commissioner and gave him the note.

"Sir Anthony Dunsmark handed it to me," he said.

Inspector Burks opened the note wonderingly, then stared in amazement, his eyes narrowing. The sentences of the note were brief and to the point.

Dear Inspector: Look in the closet at the extreme end of the basement corridor. You will find a little surprise. Kindly offer my sincere apologies to Sir Anthony Dunsmark. I regret the inconvenience I caused him; but he is a good sport. I'm sure he will understand when you explain the matter to him.

The note was unsigned. The inspector could make nothing of it. But he ran downstairs again, with the commissioner following him.

There was a door at the end of the lower corridor—a door into a small closet, so flush to the wall that they had overlooked it. They yanked it open now and stood speechless with amazement.

A man clad only in his underclothes sat on the floor of the closet bound with an old piece of rope and gagged with a sleeve of his own shirt. When they pulled him to his feet and drew the gag off, he spoke in a cultured British accent.

"Great Scott! What's the meaning of this?" he said.

"Anthony Dunsmark!" gasped the inspector.

"Yes—and who are you—policemen, or more thugs and murderers?"

"Policemen," said Burks. "This is the commissioner himself!"

"The commissioner," said Dunsmark bitterly. "That's what he told me before. If this is your idea of a bally joke, gentlemen—"

But Burks wasn't listening at the moment. He was staring at the note that the commissioner's chauffeur had handed him. It had been unsigned when he first read it. But now at the bottom of the white page, the outlines of a letter were slowly appearing, turning black as the light fell on it. The letter was an "X"—and it seemed to Burks suddenly that the "X" was like an eye staring up at him and winking in sly, sardonic amusement.

Next Month

Another breath-taking episode taken from the records of Secret Agent "X"

"The Spectral Strangler"

Every chapter of this amazingly thrill-packed novel will hold you spellbound.

Can you imagine a murder being committed with no visible clew left behind? Can you imagine a man strangled by ghost fingers that leave no mark? Can you imagine a body being found with purple features and protruding, mocking tongue, with no explanation for it?

That was the menace that held the city in a thrall of horror.

Alone, unafraid, the Secret Agent went to meet this menace that was closing in — went to match wits with a criminal whose cunning was almost satanic.

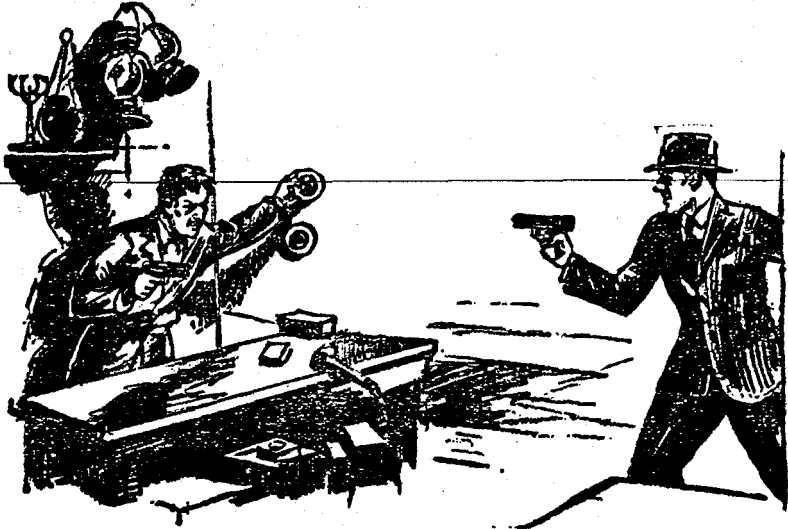
10c

SECRET AGENT
OR

THE MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES

Out
 One
 Month
 from
 Today

Five times Peter Starr's attempts to escape from San Quentin had been thwarted. His sixth attempt could not fail. For the next prisoner to die would bring his freedom.



"Not a sound out of you," he hissed, pistol covering the man half out of his chair.

HIDDEN EVIDENCE

By H. Ralph Goller

"LUKE PARKINSEN, you've framed me. Some day I'll come back and make you pay." Five years ago Peter Starr had stood up in the court room and said those words to the district attorney who prosecuted him. Five long years that were like centuries behind gray prison walls, but the words burned as clearly in Peter Starr's mind today as they had the day he uttered them.

Five years and Peter had tried unsuccessfully to escape five times. Once every year he attempted to hurtle those gray walls of San Quentin and return and make Luke ParkinSEN pay. Five times he had been thwarted. Five times he had been

shot by an alert guard and sent to the prison hospital in a critical condition. Four times he had recovered, determined that the next time he would escape. But he never had. Would he the sixth?

"Six was always my lucky number, Mike. If you'll help me—I'll make it this time. It's an air-tight scheme. I can't lose. And you—"

"An' me," whispered the emaciated skeleton of a man in the adjoining bed. "I'm dyin'. Got two—three days to live yet, the Doc told me. Mebbe I'll kick off tonight. Just another victim of T. B."

"That's what makes the scheme air-tight. They always believe a dying man. You were in Los Angeles

when I was sent up. You were even arrested as a suspect. By the time my busted hip gets well, I'll be a free man. Of course, it's a lot to ask of a man."

"A lot, hell!" wheezed the dying convict. He tried to laugh and started coughing. When he had stifled his wracking coughs, he lay panting for a minute, then continued. "It ain't much. I'd do most anything to help a friend. I'm a bad man, Pete. I've murdered people—I've robbed 'em—done everything. Now I'm dyin'. I don't care what happens after I'm dead."

"Then you'll do it?"

"Yeah. I'd do more if I could, just to get a last crack at th' damned law that made me what I am—an' Luke Parkinsen. Don't worry, Pete. I'll tell 'em a story that'll make their souls cringe, damn 'em. You've been my friend four years now. Th' only friend I ever had."

"Shhhh! Here comes the screw," warned Peter Starr.

The attendant paused between the two beds. He glanced down at Peter. "Five times you've been shot trying to escape. Takes a long time for some convicts to learn they can't escape. Anyway, you'll remember this time. You'll be lame the rest of your life."

When Peter continued to stare at the ceiling, he turned to Mike Shabin. The dying convict was breathing with difficulty. Each breath threatened to be his last.

"Th' chaplain," gasped Mike. "I'd like to see th' chaplain. Wanta make a confession. Don't wanta die till I do."

"Want to make peace with God before you kick off, eh?" grunted the wooden-faced attendant. "It won't keep the devil from getting you, but I'll send the chaplain around. Time to take you to the death row, anyway."

"Good-by, Pete," Mike whispered, as the attendant moved away. "I'll do my best."

"Good-by, Mike. I'll never forget you. God bless you!"

Two prison nurses came then and Mike Shabin was wheeled away. Peter Starr lay staring at the ceiling. All the hatred, the bitter gall of injustice, welled to the surface. Five years of living hell. Five years for a crime he had not committed. It was no wonder that Peter Starr had gone a little mad when the steel gates closed behind him. No wonder he had tried to escape—to return and make the man who framed him pay.

"Luke Parkinsen!" he breathed the words in a silent whisper, a grim smile twitching at his lips. "You murdered my uncle and made me the goat. It took me two years to realize that, but you're gonna pay."

HOW poignant was the memory of his murdered uncle. He had quarreled with Sam Starr one day. The next day he had returned to ask forgiveness, only to find his uncle dying in a welter of his own blood. Sam had tried to talk, to tell Peter who shot him, but only two words passed his lips before the grim hand of death claimed him. Then Luke Parkinsen had entered with the chief of police. That entrance was not a coincidence, but Peter had not realized it at the time.

Luke Parkinsen. The very name nauseated him, filled his soul with burning hatred. Parkinsen had demanded his arrest. He had proved to the court that Peter was the murderer of his uncle. How well he had proved it. He had proved that the bullet which killed Sam Starr had been fired from Peter's gun. He used Peter's quarrel for the motive. And Peter, he had been unable to prove his innocence. Far from it. Shocked at the fate that had crashed down upon him, he had completely forgotten the two words his uncle had gasped out. It wouldn't have done him any good had he remembered then. Parkinsen would have seen to

that. But after two years in prison, Peter had recalled the two words. He had guessed at their meaning—the prompt appearance of Parkinsen. He realized Parkinsen had committed the crime. Why, he did not know, but he was going to return and then—

Peter let his mind drift back to Mike Shabin and his scheme to escape. Hour after hour he lay staring at the ceiling, thinking, scheming with a mind sharpened to a razor edge by five years of prison life. The hours lengthened into days. His bullet-shattered hip was mending nicely. Another week and he would be up and hobbling around on crutches. Two months and he would be as well as he ever would be.

Those three months passed swiftly for Peter. He was back in his cell again. Still there was no word of Mike Shabin. But Peter only smiled to himself. Mike, of course, was dead and buried—forgotten by this time. Yet Peter knew that Mike had not failed him. Only the law could fail him.

But the law did not fail him. A week after he returned to his cell, he was called before the warden.

"Peter Starr, I have good news for you," said Warden Ackley, smiling. "The governor has granted you an unconditional pardon."

Peter's eyebrows lifted in surprise, but that was the only sign that he had heard.

"Possibly you would like to know how this came about," the warden went on. "One of the men arrested as a suspect at the time you were arrested died in this prison about ten weeks ago. Mike Shabin was his name. Possibly you remember him. Just before he died he confessed to robbing and murdering Sam Starr. I sent his confession to the governor. This pardon is his answer."

He held out the pardon to Peter. Peter grasped it with fingers which trembled a little. There was a wry

smile trying mightily to form on his lips, but couldn't.

Pardoned! The fruit of his scheming. It was his day to laugh, but he didn't laugh. Not Peter Starr. No one must ever know that Mike Shabin had died with a lie on his lips—no one must ever know that he, Peter Starr, had coached Mike Shabin into making that confession. It was Peter's secret, his escape from behind gray walls.

"I can appreciate your many attempts to escape. Five years in prison for a crime you never committed." The warden shook his head sadly. "A terrible miscarriage of justice. I cannot blame you if you are bitter with the law. You have a right to be. You must try to forget, though. You are an American citizen again—a free man. You have had a terrible setback, but you must not judge the law too harshly. You still have many years before you."

Peter nodded slowly. "I have no complaint against you, the prison, or the law," he said, meeting the warden's sympathetic eyes. "It was just a miscarriage of justice, as you say."

"That's the spirit," the warden said. "You'll get much out of life."

AN hour later Peter Starr left the penitentiary. His head was up and his lean shoulders were squared and there was a light of triumph in his eyes. The taxi at the penitentiary gate took him to San Rafael. He stepped out of the cab and disappeared—vanished completely from the world.

But though he had vanished to the world at large, Peter Starr did not for a moment forget the man who had framed him. Five years ago he was no match for the witty Luke Parkinsen, but now—His mind was as keen as a razor. He was capable of matching wits with the cleverest of the clever.

No one who had known Peter Starr before he was sent to prison

could have recognized him as the shabbily dressed tramp shuffling along the highway in a limping walk. His once black hair was now a dirty gray. The once broad shoulders were shrunken and bent as if they had carried a great burden for many years. The once handsome, laughing, reckless face was lined, shrunken. The dark eyes that once danced with the joy of living were now puckered and squinting. His skin was brown and dried out.

Peter had not made the mistake of returning to Los Angeles too soon. He had deposited some money in a San Rafael bank before he entered the penitentiary. He drew it out and from San Rafael he had journeyed south and disappeared into the wastelands of the Mohave Desert until such time as the prison pallor had left his skin—until his muscles were like steel. Luke Parkinsen was a treacherous snake and he was taking no chances of being recognized.

Luke Parkinsen was no longer district attorney. Several questionable cases had lost him his prestige and he had been defeated for reelection at the polls. But he was still to be feared. He would know that Mike Shabin's confession was a lie. Fear for his own safety would cause him to plot against the freedom of Peter Starr.

Peter realized that his precautions were justified the moment he reached Los Angeles. He had hardly reached the city before a car rolled up to him and two sharp-eyed police officers looked him over. Peter smiled to himself as the police car rolled away. The cops were looking for a young man with black hair and dark brown eyes.

"Luke ain't taking any chances," he mused, as he plodded on. "He's got the bulls watching for me. I'll bet he's got all my old haunts watched. I'll have to be careful."

But Peter had no fear of being

recognized. Parkinsen was the only man he feared. Neither did he worry about the cops that he was certain were watching his old home, or rather his uncle's old house on West Third Street. There were things about the old house that neither Parkinsen nor the police knew.

He boarded a street car and rode through the business district and alighted two blocks from his old home. He entered a small second-hand clothing store, bought a shabby handbag and a change of clothes. Then he walked cautiously down the street until he was opposite Sam Starr's old house. He didn't glance across the street at the old house, but instead stepped into a tiny café. From the café he could watch the house and spot the dicks watching it.

He ordered his supper and sat down at the table nearest the window. His steak arrived after a few minutes and he began to eat, but with one eye on the house across the street. The house appeared to be about the same as when he had last seen it. And it was vacant. Peter was glad it was. Until he had settled accounts with Parkinsen, he would live at the old house. After that he would fix it up a little and sell it, together with the rest of the property he had inherited from his uncle. After that he would go to some other state and begin life over.

Just as he finished his dessert, a Packard coupé rolled to a stop before the house. Peter caught his breath. Luke Parkinsen got out of the car and glanced at two men standing in a doorway. When the men shook their head in answer to Parkinsen's inquiring glance, the ex-district attorney nodded his head, walked up the steps, produced a key, and entered the house.

Peter frowned, then chuckled to himself. He suddenly knew why the house was vacant. Parkinsen had seen to it that it remained vacant.

There was something hidden in the house that he wanted — something Sam Starr had hidden. The fact that Parkinsen was entering the house was proof that he had not found what he was looking for.

"And he won't find it," Peter soliloquized. "I'll just give him a scare."

~~Peter didn't know what it was~~ Parkinsen was looking for, but he did know that if Parkinsen had business at the house that business concerned the murder of Sam Starr. It also concerned Peter Starr.

PETER picked up his bag, paid his check and sauntered out on the street picking his teeth. Walking to the corner, he crossed the street and turned down toward the house of Sam Starr. There was a cheap rooming house alongside the house, and he entered it.

"Like tuh have room 210 if'n it's vacant," he said, when the heavy-set landlady appeared. "Had it once afore, 'bout five-six years ago."

The landlady grunted and handed him a pen. He signed a name, planked down a dollar, picked up the key the landlady tossed at him, and went up to room 210.

Peter chuckled as he locked the door and slid the bolt as an added precaution. Sam Starr had rented this same room on several occasions. Peter wasn't supposed to know this, but he had caught his uncle doing the same thing he was now about to do. Sam Starr was a queer man. He had built his house to fit his own needs and fancies. While his life was mostly a closed book to Peter, Peter, boylike, had learned most of the secrets of the house where he grew to manhood. In prison he often thought of those secrets and had as often wondered at his uncle's past. Now those secrets were to be of service to him.

Opening the one window, he glanced across the three-foot open-

ing between the two buildings. The window directly across from his was closed and the shade was drawn. But that fact didn't worry him. Making certain no one was watching him, he reached across the gap, opened a tiny door concealed in the siding, caught hold of a steel ring and pulled. The window across the gap slowly opened.

With another glance around, Peter stepped across the space and into the house of the late Sam Starr. He chuckled grimly as he thought of meeting Luke Parkinsen in the dark house. To meet him now and put a scare into him—to make him suffer fear of the damned would be a good beginning of the payment he would exact for the years in prison.

Peter closed the window behind him and started down the hall. Doors were open on either side of the hall and he glanced through them to see ransackage everywhere. The entire floor had been gone over by a relentless searcher. Furniture was torn apart, scattered about; the floors were torn up; the walls and ceilings were a wreck.

On the ground floor a door slammed. Peter catfooted down the stairs, glanced cautiously about. A shade was up in the library and a tall, raw-boned man, with snake eyes and cold features, passed before the window. He was cursing like an infuriated mule-skinner.

Then he turned and saw Peter standing in the doorway. His glittering, beady eyes swept over the man he had five years before condemned as if he was looking at a stray mongrel.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded harshly, coming toward the door, right hand gripping an automatic pistol in his coat pocket. "This isn't a bum's hotel."

"Possibly I have a better right here than you have, Parkinsen," Peter returned softly, smiling coldly. "I own the place."

Parkinsen stopped as if shot. He

sucked in his breath in one huge gasp. He stepped to one side so the light would strike Peter's features. His face was white with sudden fear; his snaky eyes were boring through Peter with disbelief.

"By God, I recognize you now," he gasped at last. "You're Peter Starr. You've come here to—"

Peter Starr laughed harshly, the first laugh in five years. "No, nothing so crude as killing you, Parkinsen. I promised you I'd come back and make you pay. You're going to begin to pay now—tonight. You're going to answer for those five years in prison. Just look what it did to me."

"Answer to you," Parkinsen fairly screamed, face chalk white, eyes dilated with the fear of death, his huge frame crouched. "Yes, I'll answer to you—you murderer."

His hand jerked from his coat pocket with gripped automatic. Up flashed the gun, leveling with Peter's breast. Crack! Flame and smoke belched from the blue muzzle.

PETER STARR'S harsh laugh followed the explosion. He had been expecting Parkinsen to draw his gun and was ready. His steel-hard muscles were ready. He ducked and leaped an instant before the gun roared and the bullet intended for his heart fanned his cheek. Before Parkinsen could pull the trigger again, Peter caught his wrist in a grip of steel.

Parkinsen screamed in mortal terror as his wrist was cruelly twisted. The pistol fell to the floor. The terror of death gripped him. He leaped back, tore his wrist from that vice-like grip with superhuman strength.

Before Peter could get another hold, Parkinsen was bounding for a side door like a madman. Peter leaped after him, but his crippled hip slowed him. The door had been flung open and Parkinsen was racing madly down the hall for the

street door, yelling for the police, before Peter reached the door.

"The yellow cur!" Peter muttered, as the front door opened and Parkinsen leaped outside. "Not man enough to stand up and take it. He'll have the dicks in here in about thirty seconds. But damn him, he won't get a chance to frame me again."

He picked up the pistol that had fallen to the floor, glanced at it to see that it was loaded, set the safety and dropped it into his pocket. Then he bounded for the living room. As he paused in the great room for a momentary glance at the ravaged furniture, he heard the two detectives cautiously enter the front door.

He chuckled. Let the police hunt for him. They would never find him, not unless he wanted them to. And Parkinsen— There was a surprise awaiting the ex-district attorney; that is, if Peter was not mistaken. And this very night.

Still chuckling, he bounded across the room to the huge fireplace, making certain that he did not leave his footprints in the thick dust. Bending down into the huge opening of the fireplace, he raised up and reached up into the sooty chimney. His groping hand found another of Sam Starr's secrets—an iron ladder rung. He pulled himself up, found another rung. Hand over hand he went up. His feet found the bottom rung and he crawled slowly up the chimney.

It was a tight squeeze, but he made it. Why Sam Starr had made the chimney big enough for a man to ascend and fitted it with iron rungs, Peter hadn't guessed until he was in prison. But there were a lot of things people hadn't guessed about Sam Starr. No one ever found out why he had come to Los Angeles twenty-five years ago with his infant nephew, then built a house and settled down to the life of a real estate broker.

Peter reached a square crevice in the chimney somewhere in the vicini-

ity of the second floor. He was sure it was built into the clothes closet of his uncle's bedroom. He stood on the lower edge of the indented crevice and listened.

Voices reached him. One was loud and angry; two were low and consoling.

"But I tell you he must be here somewhere," the high-pitched voice said as the detectives paused in the living room. "And he's got a gun. He—he shot at me."

"Probably went out the back door as we came in," said one of the detectives. "But we'll look around. Come on, Ed. He ain't in here."

"That's one more lie against you, Parkinsen," Peter muttered to himself as the voices trailed away.

THEN he took the small flash light from his pocket and flashed it on the crevice. The two words Sam Starr had uttered before he died were: "Safe—chimney." Now if Peter's deductions were correct, there was a safe hidden in the chimney. Ah, there it was.

Before Peter was a square steel door about a foot square with a thumb latch, covered with a thick coat of soot. He opened the door and—there was the safe.

Sam Starr had given Peter two safe combinations some months before his untimely death. One had been for the safe in the library, the other combination was for an imaginary safe. At least Peter had thought so at the time. It had taken Sam's two dying words and two years of cogitation in prison for Peter to grasp the location of that second safe. Now his heart pounded as he recalled the combination, a combination kept fresh in his memory by constant repeating.

He twirled the knob with throbbing nerves, taut with grim expectation. In a minute he had the safe open. He breathed a sigh of relief, laughed silently.

He turned his flash light in the safe and with fingers that trembled as with ague examined the contents. There was an old newspaper dated 1904. There were two large envelopes. One of the envelopes contained five one-thousand-dollar federal reserve notes; the other contained an affidavit written and signed by Sam Starr, with a notary's seal affixed, and a note of instruction.

Peter stuffed the contents into his breast pocket and closed the safe and snapped off his light. The detectives were still searching the house and he didn't care to take any unnecessary chances. He could pursue the contents of the safe at leisure in his room.

Climbing on up the chimney, he cautiously raised his head above the chimney and glanced around. The way was clear. Already darkness was settling down and he made an indistinguishable shadow as he climbed out onto the roof and glided to the edge of the building. A glance over the side told him there was no one in the narrow alley. He leaped across to the roof of the rooming house, trotted to a trapdoor in the roof, opened it and climbed down the ladder, closing the door after him.

Once in his room, Peter brushed the soot from his clothes and washed it from his hands and face, then he sat down to scan the contents of the safe. He chuckled satisfactorily as he thought of Parkinsen and the detectives searching the house for him. Let them keep on hunting. They would never find him.

He was still chuckling as he drew the affidavit from the envelope and started reading it, but the chuckle soon changed to a laugh of sheer satisfaction.

"My hunch was right," he thought when he had finished the document. "Uncle Sam was too smart for Parkinsen."

He laughed silently and long.

Then he read a certain item in the old newspaper. Lastly he read the note of instructions. He nodded his head with satisfaction. He was all ready now to make Luke Parkinsen pay for those years in prison.

Changing his clothes, he pocketed the documents and left the rooming house. The tramp had disappeared; he was now a well dressed middle-aged man with a limp and a walking stick. Parkinsen and the detectives were not in sight as he stepped out on to the sidewalk. Neither was the former's car. So far so good.

"A cigar, a telephone call, the theater, then I'll make a call on Mr. Parkinsen. He ought to be home by then," he decided, as he made his way to the street car line.

LUKE PARKINSEN'S home was located in the city's most prosperous residential district. Peter had been to the house but once, but he had no difficulty in reaching the rear of the house unobserved. Here he met an obstacle. The same two detectives he had seen at his uncle's old house were on guard. But he only grinned to himself. He had learned many things in prison. Luke Parkinsen might lock himself in his palatial home and place detectives on guard outside, but Peter would find a means of entering.

He waited patiently until the detective on guard at the rear had strolled around to the front, then he leaped over the fence and darted for a basement window. It took him but a half minute to unfasten the screen and pry open the window. Another half minute and he was in the basement and had closed the screen and window behind him.

Silently and cautiously he felt his way about the basement until he located the stairway. He went up the stairs as silently as a cat. As silently he opened the door and stepped into the kitchen. The kitchen was dark, but opening a door he gazed down a dimly lighted hall.

As he approached the house, Peter had seen a light in one of the front rooms. Luke Parkinsen, if he was in the house, and Peter was sure he was or there would have been no detectives on guard outside, would be in that room.

With Parkinsen's automatic in his hand, the stalking man catfooted down the hall. A board squeaked underfoot and he froze against the wall with stilled breath. A chair scraped in a room down the hall, but no one came to investigate.

He crept ahead, testing every board before he bore down on it. He came to a door. Light shone under it. He bent down and peeped through the keyhole. He smiled with satisfaction as a long row of books met his eyes.

The room was Parkinsen's study.

He took hold of the doorknob and turned it slowly and silently, then pushed gently on the door. It opened. A chair scraped again and a man cursed.

Peter shoved the door wide and leaped inside with the ease and grace of a panther.

"Not a sound out of you," he hissed, pistol covering the man half out of his chair. "An' keep your hands in sight. I'd like nothing better than to shoot you, Luke Parkinsen. Don't touch that phone."

"Starr!" Parkinsen gasped, his heavy, bleak face chalk white. Suddenly his knees gave way and he sank back in his upholstered chair. "You come to kill me?"

"Maybe I'll kill you, you yellow-bellied snake," Peter hissed, all the hate of injustice boiling in his blood. "You should've been killed in 1904."

"You—you—God—you found—"

"Yeah, I found what you hunted five years for and didn't find. Too bad I didn't know your past five years ago. My ignorance cost me five years of hell. But you're going to pay now. I made you a promise when you sent me up for a crime you

committed. Now you're going to pay."

Luke Parkinsen knew he was staring death in the face. He knew his minutes were numbered, unless he could trick Peter—kill him. If he was to live Peter Starr must die. His snake eyes darted about the room. He thought of the unsuspecting detectives on guard outside; he thought of the gun lying under a paper on his desk a foot from his hand; he thought of the telephone. He was at his wits' end. But Peter Starr must die. His hand moved slowly toward the gun under the paper. Peter couldn't have seen the gun.

"Don't move," Peter warned, facing the man he hated across the desk. "Just to make sure you won't hurt yourself, I'll take that gun under the paper." He reached across the desk, brushed the paper aside and picked up the gun. Then, "I'll give it back to you when I leave. You might want to use it."

HE stepped back, a grim smile on his lips, his eyes boring like hot irons into the cowering man across the desk. It was the moment for which he had waited five years.

"I've asked an old friend of yours to meet me here at midnight," he went on, his voice now like chilled steel. "Judge Keller who sentenced me to San Quentin. He should be here any minute now."

Parkinsen's eyes jerked to a wall clock. It was five minutes of midnight. He licked his bloodless lips, cleared his throat, then turned his scared eyes back to Peter.

"I'll give you anything you want if you'll turn that affidavit over to me," he said, with desperation. "Say a hundred thousand."

"Here comes the judge now," Peter drawled, as his keen ears caught the sound of squealing brakes. "I told him your servants were out and to walk right in."

"I'll make it half a million!" Park-

insen cried, breathing hard. "God, you can't do this to me, Starr!"

Peter laughed at him. Footsteps sounded in the hall. He got up, slipped the automatic into his pocket, and opened the door.

"Come right in, judge."

"This is rather unusual, Mr. Parkinsen," the judge began as he stepped into the room. "A man who didn't give his name telephoned me to meet him here on important business." Then he saw Peter and stopped.

"Take a seat, judge." Peter motioned to an upholstered chair. "Yes, it's unusual, judge. But I have a strange story to tell you. I'm going to prove to you that I didn't murder my uncle, Sam Starr."

"What's that?" Judge Keller stared at Peter, his gray, sympathetic eyes wide with astonishment. "Who—who are you?"

"Peter Starr."

"I—I remember you now. Yes, I remember. You were pardoned several weeks ago. Now you wish to prove you were innocent. I don't understand."

The short, dried-up, gray-haired judge sat down, his eyes darting from Peter to Parkinsen sitting behind his desk as if stricken with palsy. He frowned.

"I'll explain, judge," Peter said, handing the old newspaper and the affidavit to the judge. "Those papers will prove my story."

"Well, it's late, and I'm waiting," said the judge, his mind going back to the trial of Peter Starr. He remembered it vividly. Also he was remembering the confession of Mike Shabin, and Peter's consequent pardon.

"At Keokuk, Iowa, in 1904 two men held up and robbed a Judge Hess of one hundred thousand dollars," Peter began, keeping a wary eye on Parkinsen. "The judge was killed and the bandits escaped. There wasn't a clew and the robbery was never cleared up. But a little

later Sam Starr and Luke Parkinsen left Iowa. Sam Starr came to Los Angeles and went into the real estate business. Parkinsen wandered about the country for several years, then came to Los Angeles and started practicing law. Here he met Starr again. He wanted money and began to fleece Starr."

"Just a minute, Starr," the judge interrupted, leaning forward with keen interest. "Make it a little plainer. Are you trying to say that—"

"That Sam Starr and Luke Parkinsen robbed and killed Judge Hess," Peter finished for him. "They did, judge. Sam Starr bought real estate with his share, but Parkinsen squandered his. When he found Sam Starr had invested his and was prospering, he demanded another cut, threatening to expose Sam unless he got it. Sam kept giving him money until bankruptcy threatened him, then he refused to give Parkinsen another penny.

"They were at a deadlock until Parkinsen threatened to prove that Sam had committed the crime single-handed. Sam wrote an affidavit, giving the details of the robbery and murder, stating that Parkinsen was the actual slayer of Judge Hess and giving the one bit of evidence that would fasten the murder on Parkinsen—his fingerprints. This he showed to Parkinsen along with the account in the newspaper which stated that the police had found the pistol used to murder the judge and had discovered the murderer's fingerprints. Parkinsen compared his fingerprints with the classification published in the paper and found they compared.

"Parkinsen then tried to get the evidence that would convict him, but Sam hid it and demanded return of all the money he had given Parkinsen. Parkinsen murdered him to silence him, but he never found those papers. You know the rest. I didn't know about those papers when he made me the goat and sent

me up. And I couldn't trust any one else to get them—not with Parkinsen looking for them."

"Are these the papers you mentioned?" the judge demanded, glancing at the papers Peter had handed him.

Peter nodded. "They are. Read them carefully."

The judge did. When he finished with them, Peter took them from him and pocketed them.

THE judge frowned. "You have presented a very convincing case. I have no doubt that Parkinsen can be convicted of the crime." He glared frostily at the silent, cowering Parkinsen. "In fact I'm sure of it. Not only the murder of Judge Hess, but of Sam Starr. However, I don't quite understand why Mike Shabin confessed on his deathbed to murdering your uncle."

Peter chuckled. "I coached Mike into making that confession so I could get out and settle with Parkinsen."

"Clever, I must admit," the judge replied, and chuckled. "As far as the law is concerned, you're a free man. However, what are your plans. I stand ready to help you."

"Thank you, judge!" Peter said, and smiled. "I would appreciate it if you'd drive me to the offices of the Los Angeles *Examiner*. I want the newspapers to get a chance at those papers before I do anything more. The more publicity, the more Parkinsen will suffer. After that, well, I'll turn this old newspaper and the affidavit over to you so you can have me pardoned again—and can send Parkinsen to San Quentin to take my place. Then—I'll turn Sam Starr's property over to the heirs of Judge Hess. Uncle Sam came by it dishonestly and I want none of it. He left me five thousand dollars that he came by honestly. That will give me a start somewhere. We'll leave Parkinsen here. He can't get far."

Museum of Madness

Milestones marking the path to the nameless depths.

ONE of the strangest, least known museums in New York is the narcotic squad's trophy collection at Police Academy. Just a row of glass cases in a corridor, but the stories of the exhibits would fill a thick book with true dramas of crime, tragedy, and ghostly humor.

Let's glance at the cases. A row of opium pipes. You would expect to find them. But what are *those things*—toys? Yes, little bowling balls and tenpins, but never intended to be any child's playthings. For some of them are hollow, and once contained quantities of cocaine and heroin. They were shipped from Germany to a fake customer in Kobe, Japan. In New York they stayed a few days in a bonded warehouse. The idea of the smugglers was to remove the dope, replace the hollow toys with solid ones, and forward the shipment—to lie forever unclaimed in Japan. But the narcotic squad caught the smugglers on the job, and three men today are doing a long stretch in the penitentiary.

What's in the next case? A curious collection of objects! A book entitled "16th Annual Report of the State Board of Health," a pair of slippers, an eyeglass case, a package of letters, a scarf pin, some fountain pens, a trick cigar, an electric light socket, some police and other official badges. What have they to do with dope? A great deal. These objects represent a few of the thousand tricks employed by peddlers for carrying dope about with them. The book has a hollow pocket cut out of its inner pages. The seams of the slippers once held cocaine crystals, to be smuggled to a prisoner. The eyeglass case once contained a dozen little papers, folded square, about the size of your thumb-nail—"decks" of heroin. The letters were

mailed to a prisoner, after being soaked in morphine solution. The jewel in the scarf pin concealed a secret compartment, small, yet large enough to hold sufficient "happy dust" to speed some victim on the road to hell. The fountain pens and cigars—conveniently hollow. The electric light socket was part of the kit of a dope peddler who posed as an honest electrician.

What are the badges for? Not for hiding dope, but used by peddlers to hi-jack and shake-down other peddlers. For the dope peddler is a vulture who preys not only on addicts but on his own kind.

Another case in this little museum contains samples of every kind of narcotic used by addicts. Opium, favorite of the Chinese. Morphine, cocaine and heroin in powder form. Decks of what are *supposed* to be one of these three narcotics are sold at from one dollar to three dollars. "Supposed to be" because the peddler never sells honest measure. Usually decks are adulterated as much as ninety per cent. Often they prove to be only salt or powdered sugar when the addict comes to open them later in secret.

Here is a queer group of objects: A spoon, a medicine dropper and a safety pin. This combination is known as "The Works," perhaps the saddest exhibit of the lot. It is the pauper-addict's morphine syringe. In the spoon he "cooks" his solution. With the pin he jabs a hole in his tortured flesh. With the medicine dropper he forces the "shot" into his system. Possession of this outfit confesses that its owner reached the lowest rung on the ladder of horror leading from clean manhood down to the nameless depths.

FANGED FURY

Swiftly Professor Van Dyk swung the door shut. Too late! Through the opening twished a glittering green dart of light. The deadly flying snake had escaped!

CHAPTER I WINGED POISON

NICHOLS glimpsed the name on the stone gate-post just as his car went dead. The headlights blinked out; the engine whirred off; a vicious sputtering sounded beneath the seat. Nichols swung to the side of the road, applied the brakes, and stopped in darkness blacker than the depths of oblivion.

He slid out, shifted the seat cushion, and struck a match. The storage battery was a smoking, odorous wreck. The cable had shorted. Nothing could help but a new battery. The match went out and darkness closed around Nichols again.

It was open, sand-hill country, miles out of Los Angeles. The road was unpaved, the section undeveloped, lonely. Nix Nichols hadn't seen a house for a long stretch, but there was one directly ahead. He groped toward the stone gate-post, struck another match, and read the name on the board:

Prof. Peter Van Dyk

"I almost made it, anyway," he thought.

He strode through the gate, along the driveway, toward the house which sat on the barren crest of the hill. Some of its windows were gleaming. Finding that the driveway circled far around, Nichols left it to cut straight toward the house. Presently he passed a gnarled, black tree.

He heard a startled gasp.

He stopped short, and looked around. In the darkness under the tree something was moving. Nichols turned toward it, took two quick

steps. Suddenly there was a rustling of leaves, and the figure darted away, swiftly.

It ran like a girl.

"Wait a minute!" Nichols called. "It's all right!"

The girl stopped, looking back. Nichols walked toward her quickly. The glow of the windows fell on her face, lighting her eyes. Her hair was wind-blown, her face pale, her lips and cheeks high-colored. She peered at Nichols intently.

"Who are you?" she asked in a rush of breath.

"Nixon Nichols, from the *Register*."

"A reporter?"

"Yes."

The girl seemed uncertain. "You frightened me. People usually drive in. You came along so quietly—"

"Apologies," Nichols said. "My car broke down right outside."

Then weird sounds came out of the still night. There was a braying, a chirping, and something that sounded like a snore, all mixed into a cacophonous chorus.

"If you don't mind my asking," Nichols commented, "what the devil is that?"

The girl smiled faintly. "Don't be alarmed. Those are only the specimens. They're caged and quite harmless. Were—were you sent for?"

She began moving toward the door. The stronger light showed Nichols that she was even prettier than he had thought—and about twenty. And she was still studying him curiously.

"Professor Van Dyk phoned the *Register* and asked that a reporter



A
COMPLETE
NOVELETTE

By
Frederick C.
Davis

The air throbbed with the beating of diaphanous wings as the flying snake circled the room.

be sent out," Nichols answered. "I'm it."

"I'll tell father you're here."

The braying, snorting and squealing reached a high pitch of discord. Nichols peered into the depths of the night around the house, but he could see nothing. Something sent a tingle down his spine—an apprehensive warning.

SUDDENLY the front door of the house opened, releasing a shaft of light which sprang across Nichols. A tall, gaunt man stood silhouetted on the sill. He called sharply:

"Evelyn! Is that you? What's making the—who's that?"

"Mr. Nichols," Evelyn Van Dyk answered, "from the *Register*. You asked him to come out, father."

Peter Van Dyk seemed reassured. "Come in, sir!" he called to Nichols.

The house, Nichols saw, was a rambling one-story structure of Spanish tendencies. He stepped aside to allow the girl to enter first, then followed. He walked into a long, quiet, cool room filled with Spanish antiques. There was a strange odor about the place, an odd atmosphere of bustling in spite of the quiet.

Evelyn Van Dyk, with a quick glance at Nichols, disappeared through a door as the professor signaled Nichols to a chair.

The professor strode back and forth across the heavy carpet, a lank, sun-burned man, with dancing black eyes. He thoughtfully stroked his goatee as he spoke.

"I tell you frankly, Mr. Nichols, that I sent for you because I want publicity. I hope that some publicity will arouse interest in the new expedition I have planned. I want to raise funds, if possible. Not that I want to make a direct appeal—far from it—but I think a good feature story about the new expedition will bring the desired results."

Nichols drew a pencil and a pad of copy paper from his pocket. "Fair enough. I've handled stories about you before, professor. You take an expedition into the tropics every year, don't you? Whatever happened to that weird beast you brought back from your last trip?"

The professor stopped his pacing and fixed Nichols with a glittering eye. "You mean the flying snake."

"The flying snake, yes."

"It's precisely that oddity which I want you to feature in the story," the professor exclaimed. "It will catch the fancy of the newspaper public as nothing else will. The purpose of the expedition this time is chiefly to find another specimen of the flying snake. They are extremely rare, you know."

"I understand it's the first specimen ever caught and brought out of the jungle. Is it still alive?" Nichols asked.

"Very much so. Come—I'll show it to you."

The professor walked through a doorway into the rear of the house. As Nichols followed, a door opened, and a man stepped into the professor's path. He was stocky, bull-necked, and breathed heavily.

"Seamon," said Professor Van Dyk, "this is Nichols, of the *Register*. Seamon is my secretary, Nichols. This way."

Seamon squeezed Nichols' hand and mumbled something. The professor opened another door, into another corridor, and then another. The room Nichols entered was suffocatingly hot—steam pipes on the ceiling were sizzling. Professor Van Dyk led Nichols to a large wire-mesh cage in a corner.

"There," he said, "is the flying snake."

Nichols felt his flesh crawl. He peered through the mesh at something which peered back at him—peered unblinkingly, with beady, black, lidless eyes. It was a snake, its slimy scales glistening in the light; but it was a reptile such as Nichols had never seen before.

Lying against its shining sides were four wrinkled things that might be wings—two on each side, a pair near the head, another pair nearer the tail. It was a poisonous green color; its head was blunt. As it stared at Nichols, it opened its jaws, and a single in-curved fang shone white.

"A snake without any doubt," the professor said softly, "and yet it has wings. It flies like a bird. Nothing like it has ever been seen before. More than any other variety of snake it resembles the snakes of the sub-order *Ophidiæ Colubriiformes*, family *Attractspididae*, found in Africa. Yet it comes from the Matto Grasso region of South America.

"Like all snakes, it is carnivorous. Also, it is poisonous—extremely deadly. You notice its one fang, in the center of the upper jaw, is hinged, and swings into striking position as

the jaws open. Its fang is grooved and when it strikes it squirts venom into the puncture it makes. Death is almost instantaneous."

"Very pretty, I'm sure," said Nichols with a shudder.

"Of course, like a snake, it has no legs. Its wings are powerful enough to lift it off the ground and send it sailing through the—"

Suddenly the flying snake's wings spread out, glistening metallicly like a giant butterfly's. Both pairs tightened into membranous air-foils as the snake's jaws opened wider and its single fang lifted. Suddenly, like a flash of iridescent light, it sprang into the air—flung itself straight at Nichols!

Nichols cried out hoarsely, flung himself back. The snake struck the mesh, beat its wings against it, then dropped to the floor of the cage with wings again folded, jaws still parted, fang still bared . . . Nichols took a deep, long breath as the professor chuckled and Seamon smiled.

"A pleasant little pet!" Nichols gasped.

"There is nothing to fear," Professor Van Dyk assured Nichols. "The gate of the cage is securely latched. You agree with me, don't you, Nichols, that it is a most interesting little animal?"

"So interesting," said Nichols grimly, "it makes me sick to look at it!"

WITH another chuckle, the professor led him from the room. Seamon followed Nichols. When they reached the huge living-room, Evelyn Van Dyk was there. Her fingers were straying softly over the keyboard of a grand piano, but she stopped when the three men entered.

"Usually, you know, Nichols," the professor resumed, "interested parties supply me with funds necessary to make my expeditions. My most generous patron has been Clifford Kendall. You know Kendall? He's made millions in oil. But this year Mr.

Kendall finds it impossible to supply—"

"Do you think those details are necessary, professor?" Vincent Seamon interrupted.

"Why not?" the professor asked. "I am frankly making an appeal to the public for funds, much as I regret the necessity of it. I was saying, Nichols, that Mr. Kendall isn't able, this year, to supply me with as generous a contribution as in the past, and therefore—"

A knock sounded at the outer door. Evelyn Van Dyk crossed the room, and answered the summons. In a moment she returned, followed by a young man wearing a gray sack suit. His face was full and ruddy, his eyes a faded blue.

"Hello, Hubbard," the professor greeted him. "Mr. Nichols, Mr. Hubbard, Hubbard is Mr. Kendall's secretary, Nichols. We work together on planning our expeditions."

Nichols took Hubbard's hand briefly. Hubbard asked the professor: "Mr. Kendall isn't here yet?"

"No, but I'm expecting him presently."

Hubbard nodded. "He told me he would be here by this time—it's a little past nine. I had a call to make in Hollywood, and came directly from there. I thought he'd be here."

Hubbard took a chair. Nichols' eyes strayed to the girl, who had returned to the piano. She was watching him curiously. As his eyes met hers, her glance dropped and her cheeks grew crimson. Nix Nichols settled comfortably in his chair. The professor could talk all night, he decided, so long as this young lady remained in sight.

"I can furnish you with excellent photographs for the purposes of illustration, Nichols," the professor was saying. "I am particularly anxious about this, because I feel that my work has reached a stage of the highest importance. Birds and snakes, you know, are biologically related in the tree of evolution. The flying snake

bridges the gap between them. It is a survivor of early archeological eras and—"

The professor broke off, listening. From the hallway came a dull thump, a faint rustling sound After a moment of puzzled silence, Professor Van Dyk resumed.

"Scientifically, it is of startling significance. Nothing of its kind has ever—"

As another, louder thump came from the hallway, the professor paused again. His eyebrows drew together. Abruptly he strode into the hallway. Nichols rose, followed him swiftly. The hallway was dark, but several of the rooms beyond were lighted. At the door of the hot room, in which Nichols had viewed the repulsive flying snake, the professor paused.

Something thumped against the panel inside. In the air sounded a soft whir, a swish—and then silence.

The professor turned the knob of the door, inched it open. The room beyond was dark now; Seamon had snapped out the light when leaving it after the inspection of the winged snake. The professor listened through the crack, into silence; then he threw open the door and stepped inside, reaching for the light-switch.

Instantly a loud *swish* sounded, and something fluttered through the darkness.

"Good God!" the professor's awed voice came in a gasp. "It's got out of its cage! The flying snake!"

The dark was full of the swift fluttering now. It swept close, past the door, swerved into the depths of the room again.

"Keep out of the way!" the professor called hysterically. "If it sees you, it'll attack you!"

From behind Nichols came a sharp, terrorized cry: "Father! *Father!*"

Nichols whirled, saw Evelyn Van Dyk staring in horror. Behind her was Seamon, shocked rigid. Nichols snapped at them crazily:

"Get out of here, for God's sake!"

His words echoed into quietness. Still, the air throbbed with the beating of diaphanous wings as the flying snake circled in the room.

"Stay away, all of you!" the professor's agonized cry came. "It may fly back into the cage! Get back—I'm coming! I'm going to close the door!"

A quick footfall sounded. The sound brought a response; the thing flashed through the air with faster-moving wings. Suddenly Professor Van Dyk, crouching, darted into the hallway. Grasping the knob, he swung the door shut.

Too late!

A glittering, green dart of light came out the door the instant before it slammed! The flying snake streaked into the gloom of the hallway! It circled swiftly, jaws open, fang exposed, wings invisible with the swiftness of their movements save for their ghastly metallic shine!

Professor Van Dyk stared up at it, stricken. Nichols recoiled. Evelyn stood transfixed. Seamon stared. Hubbard trembled.

The flying snake circled swiftly above their heads. Then, swift as a lightning flash, it winged through another door, into one of the lighted rooms.

Swiftly the professor sprang after it. Nichols followed. In the doorway they jerked to a stop.

The flying snake flashed straight toward a window—an open window. There was one last glint of its iridescent wings, and then it was gone.

Escaped into the night!

CHAPTER II

THE HOVERING HORROR

PROFESSOR Van Dyk sped across the room. He grasped the open window, slammed it shut, jerked down the blind. He spun about, facing those in the doorway, his eyes rimmed in white.

"Draw all the blinds!" he exclaimed. "Turn out every light we don't need. Instantly!"

He sidled past Nichols, and flung open the door of the steam room. The lights snapped on, blinding bright. In the glare Nichols, peering past the professor, saw the door of the flying snake's cage standing wide open.

Nichols stepped aside and watched, conscious of hurrying movements behind him. The professor quickly drew the shades of all the windows save the center one, which he pulled halfway down. He grasped the mesh cage and dragged it around so that its open gate faced the window. Next he raised the sash, and shoved the cage close against the wall. The opening in the mesh was flush with the open window now.

Still moving quickly, the professor picked up a table lamp, and placed it directly behind the cage. Its light shone through the mesh, into the open night beyond.

Quickly he turned—apparently having forgotten Nichols—and raced along the corridor. Following him, Nichols heard the breathless voices of the professor and Seamon in the living-room.

"All the shades are drawn? No other lights shining outside? Good! It may—come back!"

Nichols shuddered as he remembered those fluttering wings sweeping close to his face in the darkness of the hall.

"Look here!" he snapped. "You said that thing is poisonous—that it attacks people: Is that true?"

"Yes!"

"Then it might strike at people on the street. It's apt to kill anybody it—"

"I know—I know! It's horrible!" the professor gasped. "As long as it's at large, it's—it's a menace. If it does strike any one, it will mean that person's death, but—but we can only hope that it will be drawn back."

"'Drawn back'?" Nichols repeated. "What will bring it back?"

"The flying snake is lithotropic," the professor explained quickly. "It is attracted by light—like moths.

There is no light around here now except the one behind the cage in front of the open window. The light may draw it back into the cage."

"And if it doesn't?"

The professor shot Nichols a horrified glance. For a moment every one was silent. Clifford Hubbard, staring from one face to another, broke the silence.

"Mr. Kendall is coming up here.

The thing may be drawn to his car by the headlights. Good God—what if it attacks him?"

And again—silence. Nichols, scowling, glanced about. He was looking for a telephone.

"Can it fly far?" he asked breathlessly.

"For miles—many miles!"

"Then everybody's got to be warned against it—as many people as possible!" Nichols blurted. "The police can get all the radio stations to broadcast a warning. God knows, everything possible has got to be done to prevent that snake's killing some one!"

HE glimpsed the telephone in an antique cabinet in the corner. Striding to it, he snatched it up, clattered it. His scowl deepened as he waited. The line did not sing, as a live line does. No operator answered.

"This phone is out of order!" Nichols exclaimed. "Where's the next house? People have got to be warned—"

"'Out of order'?" the professor repeated in amazement. "It was in perfect order a short time ago. That's strange—very strange. The next house is over a mile away, Nichols."

"Then," said Nichols swiftly, "I'm going to that phone!"

"Wait!"

The professor snapped the word. Nichols, on his way to the door, paused.

"It may not be necessary, Nichols. Broadcasting that warning would spread terror. And it wouldn't do much good. Think of the thousands at

the beaches, on the roads, away from all radios. I think there is a better way."

"What?" Nichols demanded.

"I told you the flying snake is lithotrophic. It will fly toward a bright light. This is unsettled country, and there are no other lights within a mile. I'm confident that the snake will be attracted back into the cage within a few minutes, perhaps by the time you could reach the phone, Nichols—then the warning would frighten people needlessly."

"It's a damned big risk to take," Nichols reminded him.

"I know, but—there is no more we can do. If news of this got about, I'd never—never be able to raise funds by popular subscription. I beg of you, Nichols, wait a few minutes?"

The professor turned and hurried down the hallway. In the steam room the light was still burning behind the mesh cage against the open window—but the cage was still empty.

"I—I can't understand it!" the professor said breathlessly. "The cage was latched tight. It couldn't have become unlatched of its own accord. You see, Nichols—the catch had to be lifted, brought forward, before the door could be opened."

"I see that," Nichols agreed, bending over the cage.

"It looks as though the cage were deliberately opened—the flying snake deliberately set free," the professor went on, his eyes widening with the horror of the thought. "But the room was empty. No one could have come in here."

"Why the devil should any one deliberately free that vile thing, anyway?" Nichols demanded. "Professor, look here. As long as that snake is at large, somebody's going to be killed by it. I'm going to that telephone."

"Wait—please wait!" The professor's eyes shone anxiously. "We must make sure the snake is nowhere around here, that it has left this hill, before we broadcast the warning, Nichols. We must do that."

"How can we?" Nichols demanded.

"We can go outside—look for it. We will be reasonably safe. As long as we stay in the dark, the snake will not attack us, since it is drawn only by light things. We can station ourselves around the grounds and look for it. Then, if it is gone—"

Again the professor hurried past Nichols, into the living-room. Evelyn, Seamon and Hubbard were still there. The professor said rapidly:

"I'm going out immediately. Seamon, you know it's reasonably safe—will you come? And you, Hubbard? Nichols, I won't ask you to do that, and Evelyn—of course, you'll stay here, inside."

Seamon and Hubbard quickly assented. Nichols smiled and remarked:

"If it's safe for you, it's safe for me. I'll go with you."

Professor Van Dyk did not argue the point. He hurried into the hall and came back carrying two canes, and two umbrellas. He solemnly passed them out, saying warningly:

"If it is out there, and comes close, these will help you to protect yourselves. You can beat it off. Are you ready? Seamon, go out by the cages. You go to the rear of the house, Hubbard, and I'll take the front. Nichols, you take the opposite side."

They nodded grimly, and moved toward the door.

"Turn off the light, Evelyn, before we open the door," the professor warned as he grasped the knob.

Promptly the lights snapped out, flooding the big room with intense darkness.

Cautiously the professor slipped outside. Nichols, Seamon and Hubbard followed him. The door closed tightly behind them, and they began to separate. Nichols watched while the three other men scurried off through the black night.

Quickly he shifted around to the side of the house, on the bare slope of the sand-hill, and stationed himself.

No light shone except that near the professor's stand, the light behind

the open window and the cage. All around there was ringing silence. Nichols hunched low, gripping his ridiculous umbrella tightly, ready to use it if necessary. He watched the sky, alert for the first flicker of any flying thing.

Long, empty moments passed . . .

Suddenly a shrill scream came—muffled.

Evelyn Van Dyk's voice called, "~~There's something in the house!~~ Something in the house!"

NICHOLS bounded up, raced toward the front door. As he reached it, two other black figures rushed out of the night—the professor and Seamon. They slammed into the big dark room. As the door thumped shut again, the professor snapped on the light.

Evelyn Van Dyk was crouched in a chair, hands to her throat, pale as death.

"I heard something—in the rear of the house!" she gasped. "Something moving!"

Swiftly Professor Van Dyk turned to the light-switch. It clicked again; darkness again filled the room.

"It may have come back!" the professor declared huskily.

Nichols felt him grope past, toward the hallway door. He felt his way after the professor, along the wall, until at last they reached the entrance to the steam room.

"I left no other window open," came the professor's strained voice. "It must be in the cage."

He thrust open the door. The blinding light struck their eyes sharply. Blinking, Nichols hurried forward with Van Dyk, toward the cage, with Seamon pressing close behind him. They stopped, peered at each other wonderingly.

The cage was empty.

"That's strange," the professor said, turning away. "Very strange. If it had entered the cage, the light would have held it there."

Quick footfalls sounded in the hall.

The professor strode to the door as Evelyn came into the light. She was still pale, frightened.

"It wasn't in here, father," she said breathlessly. "I'm sure it wasn't. I thought the noise came from the laboratory."

"The laboratory!"

Professor Van Dyk stepped out of the steam room, hurried farther back along the hall. At another door he paused, hand on the knob, listening. Nichols strained his ears to hear any slight sound that might come through the panels; but there was only silence.

"It couldn't have got in here," the professor said in an odd tone. "There is no way—"

He opened the door, stepped through. A switch clicked again. In the flat ceiling light the strange contraptions of the laboratory glittered. Retorts, beakers, test tubes, flasks, seemingly without number, mingled with bottles of reagents on the shelves and tables. Van Dyk paused, peering at a window on the opposite side of the room.

It was wide open.

"I left it closed!" he blurted.

He strode to it, slipped it shut. Nichols moved toward a door standing open in the side wall, disclosing a deep closet behind. A few drawers inside it had been jerked open; a pair of rubber boots lay on the floor, as if thrown aside; a cloth hat, stained brown, and a wicker creel rested beside them.

"What's that?" the professor asked sharply. "Seamon, you didn't leave your fishing tackle in that mess, did you?"

"Certainly not!" Seamon answered, startled. "It was all put away in order—but some one's been into it."

Nichols asked quickly, "Anything else touched? Some one didn't come in here to break into a lot of fishing tackle."

Professor Van Dyk and Seamon moved about the laboratory quickly,

inspecting the shelves, opening cabinets, peering into drawers. Nichols watched them curiously, glancing now and then at Evelyn standing in the doorway. Presently the search ended.

"Offhand, I'd say nothing is missing," Van Dyk announced. "It's scarcely credible that some one would break into this house to get into your fishing tackle, Seamon. Did you see any one open that window?"

"I was watching the sky," Seamon answered, puzzled. "It was so dark I couldn't have seen any one at the window, anyway. But somebody certainly did sneak in here. There's nothing in those drawers, either, but my tackle, and—"

"Hubbard!"

THE professor blurted the name, looking around. Surprise flooded Seamon's face. A new light of fright came into Evelyn's eyes. For the first time they realized that Hubbard was not with them.

"Where is Hubbard?" Van Dyk demanded.

"He didn't come in with us, professor," Nichols answered. "Just we three. Where did you station him?"

"Good heavens!" the professor breathed. "Perhaps something's happened to him! Perhaps the flying snake—"

Quickly he strode to the switch, snapped it. As darkness filled the laboratory again, the professor threw up the window sash. With darkness shielding those in the room against an attack through the window by the flying snake, Van Dyk put his head out and called:

"Hubbard Hubbard!"

There was no answer.

The professor drew back. "Surely he would hear if—if nothing had happened to him."

Seamon blurted, "It's possible the snake attacked him. If it did—I don't wonder he doesn't answer!"

The professor quickly closed the

window again. When the lights snapped on, the three men and the girl peered at each other with dread in their eyes.

"Did you see anything of the snake, Seamon?"

"No, professor. There was no sign—"

"You, Nichols?"

"No."

The professor was trembling with anxiety. "We must look for Hubbard. Something has surely happened to him."

He strode from the laboratory, and turned toward the rear of the house. He was scarcely across the sill when the low hum of a motor came into the house. Van Dyk turned, startled.

"It must be Kendall!"

"If the snake's still near the house, the lights of the car will draw it!" Seamon exclaimed.

Professor Van Dyk broke into an awkward run along the hallway. Nichols loped after him, chilled at the thought that death might swoop out of the night sky on the professor's unsuspecting caller. As they reached the big living-room, the humming of the motor sounded directly outside.

Anxiously the professor jerked open the door. Light came in, shining from the powerful headlamps of the car which had rolled to a stop. Before the professor could speak, a big man moved directly into the glare, looking toward the door.

"Professor!" came a brusque call. "What's up? No lights—"

"Put out your headlights, Kendall!" the professor answered in terror. "Put them out at once—or run in here!"

The big man paused, bewildered—still directly in the shafts of the strong lights. He was blinded by them, and unable to comprehend the urgency of the professor's warning. He paused, and half turned back.

"Put out the lights? Why—"

Then something hissed through the air.

Kendall recoiled from something in the darkness. He flung up his arm, making a startled exclamation. Those in the doorway saw a brief flash in the light at the level of Kendall's head. Instantly it disappeared.

Kendall tottered, made a guttural exclamation, clutched at the hood of his car—and fell.

"Merciful God!" Seamon blurted.

Professor Van Dyk sprang out of the doorway, toward the car. His hand groped for the headlight switch, turned it off. In the baffling darkness Nichols stooped, dragging the heavy form of Kendall into his arms. Seamon helped him; they carried their burden into the house.

They faltered in the dark room. The big door slammed; the lights snapped on. Professor Van Dyk hurried toward Kendall. Nichols and Seamon put him on the couch. The big man was writhing as if in torturous pain, staring with glazing eyes.

On his cheek was a bright trickle of blood, not an inch long, which had dripped from a single dark puncture in the skin.

Nichols, Van Dyk and Seamon, crowded close together, stared at it in horror. Kendall's eyes were turned toward them, grotesquely wide. His lips were moving, as though he were striving to speak, to overcome a ghastly paralysis that was seizing him.

His husky voice came: "Hundred—professor—it was—one hundred—thousand!"

The stiffness took his whole body. A rigid convulsion shook his frame, then ceased. Kendall's eyes remained open, staring. His jaw clamped hard, his colorless lips pressed together.

"The snake!" Seamon gasped. "The snake got him!"

Nichols bent low, pressed his ear to Kendall's chest. He straightened again, breathing hard.

"Kendall," he said, "is dead."

CHAPTER III

DEATH GIVES AN ALIBI

A SOB came from the farther side of the room. Nichols turned to face Evelyn Van Dyk. She was staring at the couch, horrified, inarticulate.

Professor Van Dyk said huskily, "Evelyn—you'd better go to your room. You shouldn't see this!"

The girl's eyes went to her father's, then to Nichols'. She made an effort to control herself. "I'm all right," she said. "I'm not a child. I—"

Her voice trailed off.

Seamon, with a shudder, turned away from the couch. He strode from the room and, a moment later, returned, carrying a folded blanket. He spread it over the stiff form on the cushions, and faced Professor Van Dyk grimly.

"We've got to capture that snake, professor. We've got to do everything possible to snare it."

"Yes!"

Nichols crossed the room to the telephone, took it up, and rattled the hook. It was still dead. He put the instrument down, thoughtfully.

"There's nothing else to do now," he declared. "A warning has got to be broadcast. The police have got to be notified."

The professor scarcely heard. He was gazing with unbounded concern at his daughter. Evelyn, in spite of herself, was trembling; she seemed about to faint.

"You must go to your room!" the professor said sternly.

"I—I will," she answered in a voice scarcely audible.

Nichols, eying the professor, took a moment for a bit of thinking. He was, first and last, a reporter. He wanted every available particle of information he could get before the broadcast warning brought other reporters to the scene. He moved toward Van Dyk quietly.

"I—I'll telephone the police my-

self," the professor said quickly. "I—I should do that—yes."

As Van Dyk started for the door, Nichols' hand on his arm stopped him.

"One moment, professor. Kendall was trying to say something when he died. It must have been important. He used his last strength to blurt out something about 'one hundred thousand dollars.' What did he mean?"

"I—I don't know."

"You were expecting him here to-night. Why?"

"He—he phoned. He said he wanted to talk with me."

"About what?"

"About financing the new expedition. I'd written him a letter. He wanted to talk to me about that."

"Was one hundred thousand dollars the amount he was donating toward the expenses of the expedition?" Nichols asked flatly.

"No—no, it wasn't. That's what I don't understand, Nichols. That was the amount he usually donated—for six years he's given that amount every year—but this year, because of economies he had to put into effect, he could give me only twenty-five thousand."

"That's quite a drop, professor," Nichols commented. "I hadn't heard that Kendall was running in hard luck, either. But why did he blurt out—when he was dying—'it was one hundred thousand'?"

"It—it's very bewildering. I can't explain it."

Seamon declared, "The man was poisoned, Nichols. He was in frightful pain. It's very probable that he didn't even know what he was saying."

"On the other hand," Nichols answered, casting a speculative eye on Seamon, "probably he did." He turned to the professor. "Have you a copy of the letter you sent Kendall? I'd like to see it."

"Yes—I typed it myself," the pro-

fessor answered. "I'll get it for you."

"Look here!" Seamon snapped. "Nichols, you're taking advantage of a stricken man. Professor Van Dyk is scarcely himself, and you have no business pressing him. You're not a police officer, you know."

Nichols frowned and confronted Seamon squarely. "What's the idea, Seamon? Is there any reason why you don't want me to see that letter?"

"Certainly not," Seamon answered indignantly. "But I won't stand for your—"

"It's all right, Seamon," the professor interrupted vaguely. "I'll get Nichols my carbon of the letter."

THE professor hurried from the room. Nichols, turning, saw that Evelyn had not yet gone. She went as they waited. Seamon lighted a cigarette nervously; Nichols eyed him curiously. In a moment Van Dyk was back, bringing a sheet of yellow paper.

"There it is, Nichols. I—I'm going now to telephone. Seamon, I want you to go into the steam room and watch the cage while I'm gone. If the snake returns to the cage, shut the door instantly—do you hear? Instantly!"

Nichols suggested, "If you don't mind, professor, I'll take a look outside. Hubbard hasn't shown up yet, you know. Something must have happened to him, too."

"Yes, I entreat you to, Nichols. Hubbard went to the rear of the house. I—I'll be back immediately."

The professor hurried out the front door, closing it quickly. His heels gritted in the gravel walk as he hastened away. Seamon, with an acid glance at Nichols, went into the hallway. Nichols saw him step into the steam room. In a moment the sound of a car came around the house. The professor was driving off—without lights.

Alone in the library, Nichols glanced about quickly. He jerked the blanket off Kendall's face, bent close,

inspected the tiny wound. It was, as he had seen before, a single puncture in the skin of the cheek.

Straightening, he replaced the blanket, and read the carbon of the professor's letter:

September 10

My dear Kendall,

I have just learned from Seamon that your contribution this year is smaller than usual, and I hasten to assure you that I accept it as gratefully as though it were of its usual generous proportions. Seamon tried to keep it from me, preferring that I not concern myself with finances; he has been soliciting contributions elsewhere in order to make up the difference; but I want you to know that I fully understand, and that my thanks to you are as sincere as always. The \$25,000 will go a long way toward paying the expenses of the expedition.

Yours very truly,

PETER VAN DYK.

"But Kendall said," mused Nichols, "It was one hundred thousand dollars."

He slipped the carbon into his pocket, went to the door, and sidled outside. Keeping cautiously close to the side of the house, glancing warily into the sky to catch any warning of fluttering wings, he hurried to the grounds in the rear. On the sloping hillside, only a few scrub oaks grew; otherwise it was open.

Nichols moved back and forth quickly, searching the ground. He walked from tree to tree, peering into the shadows; but he saw no sign of Hubbard. He went far down the slope and back again; he made sure Hubbard was nowhere behind the house.

His movements aroused a repetition of the chattering noises as he went toward rows of cages built on the hillside. He saw through the bars the dark movements of strange beasts, brought back from the tropics by the professor's expeditions. He gave them only a glance, and concentrated on the ground.

When he returned to the front

door of the rambling house, he had found no trace of Hubbard.

He slipped inside, quickly, closed the door, and paused. He crossed to the couch, and once more drew the blankets off the dead man.

With a sudden resolution, he flipped open Kendall's coat and probed into the pockets. He found nothing unusual until his fingers touched a folded envelope in a side-pocket. It was brown, and bore the return card of a Los Angeles bank; it was addressed to Kendall. Nichols opened it.

From it he drew a conventional bank statement, a few checks folded inside it. As he fingered through them, an exclamation passed Nichols' lips. Peering at the final check, he saw that it had been issued to the order of the Van Dyk Expedition Fund to the amount of \$100,000.

Nichols turned it over, studied the endorsement. It was a rubber stamp, bearing the written initials: VS. Vincent Seamon.

A sudden burst of voices spun Nichols on his heel. From the hallway, far away, he heard a man shout angrily. Then a girl's voice, high-pitched, answered.

NICHOLS hurried through the hallway, toward the voices. They grew louder, then suddenly ceased. At the very end of the hall, past the steam room, a light was shining from an open door. Hurrying past, Nichols saw Seamon was not in the steam room.

He raced to the rear door. On the sill he brought himself to a short stop. Evelyn Van Dyk and Seamon were struggling; his arms were wrapped about the girl's body; she was straining breathlessly to break from his grasp. One of her arms was extended, the hand crumpling a bit of stiff yellow paper.

Nichols sprang in. He grasped Seamon's collar, dragged the man back. Seamon, loosening Evelyn, whirled on Nichols. In a rage he struck out.

Nichols ducked under, let go an upercut. His knuckles clicked squarely to the point of Seamon's chin.

Seamon staggered back, fell on the bed, groped dizzily to get up.

Evelyn Van Dyk stared at Nichols, still clutching the yellow paper. He took her hand, removed the paper from it; she was too startled to resist. His eyebrows crawled up when he found that it was a bank statement similar to the one he had taken from Kendall's pocket.

It had been issued by another bank; only two checks were enclosed. Rapidly, Nichols saw that the account had showed a balance of \$100,000. One of the checks, drawn to the order of Peter Van Dyk, was for the amount of \$25,000. The other for \$75,000 had been drawn to the order of a third bank; and both were signed by Seamon.

Seamon was dragging himself up. Nichols faced him, smiling broadly.

"Take it easy," he warned.

"She—she had no right coming into my room and getting into my private papers!" Seamon exploded. "I found her here—rifling my desk—like a common thief—" Then, he saw the bank statement in Nichols' hand, and broke off, appalled.

"'Thief' isn't an appropriate word coming from you, Seamon," Nichols answered. "Not when you've done a bit of thieving yourself, to the extent of seventy-five thousand."

"Then—it's true!" Evelyn exclaimed. "I was sure of it. I've never trusted him. He did steal—"

"He certainly did steal," Nichols declared. "A little fancy juggling of different accounts, and he took seventy-five out of the hundred thousand that Kendall donated, and passed on twenty-five to the professor. Big stakes, Seamon! Right?"

Seamon blurted, "You—you can't prove—"

"I can prove plenty. I not only have these checks you wrote, but the one Kendall wrote, for a hundred grand to the expedition fund."

"He could do it easily!" the girl declared. "He handled all the finances for the expeditions—received the contributions, paid all expenses—relieved father of all that detail. By juggling a few checking accounts, he could almost cover himself and—"

"Almost but not quite!" Nichols interrupted.

"When Kendall said—'it was one hundred thousand'—I knew something was wrong," the girl rushed on. "Seamon was the only one who could have managed it. I came to his room deliberately—hoping to find some proof of it—and I did!"

"You certainly did!" Nichols said admiringly. "You, young lady, have got nerve. Seamon, the professor's going to be very interested in this. I'm going to keep an eye—"

Seamon jerked up suddenly. His right hand swung from his hip-pocket, and an automatic glinted in the light. Evelyn gave a little cry and backed away. Nichols' smile faded as he eyed the leveled weapon.

"Give me those statements, Nichols!"

Nichols promptly folded the statements and tucked them into his trousers pocket.

"You'll have to take 'em from me, Seamon. Don't be a damned fool, man. You're caught. You can't cover yourself now. I know about it—Evelyn knows about it—and you're stuck with it, unless you're willing to commit a couple of murders on the spot. And you couldn't get away with that, either."

Seamon blinked, his eyes glittering as metallically as the gun in his hand. Nichols saw realization come into them, a grasping of the truth. Seamon eased up, began moving toward the door.

"All right, you've found out!" he rasped. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to jail for it. Be careful, Nichols. I'm getting out of here. If you try to stop me, it'll be the last thing you'll ever do."

Nichols' lips were curving wryly.

"Well," he said. "Have a pleasant trip—if you can make it."

Seamon backed into the hallway. He eased to the rear door, threw the bolt, twisted the knob, pulled the door open. Backing out, he said:

"Stay away from me, Nichols. I'm getting into a car and leaving here. If you try—"

Suddenly he screamed.

Something flicked past his face—something that came like lightning, and disappeared. At the same instant a spot of red appeared on Seamon's chin—a spot that grew into a trickle.

"The snake!" Evelyn cried.

NICHOLS sprang to the door, peering up. Now the air was clear, the darting thing gone. Seamon was sagging; his weakening knees were giving way. Swiftly Nichols caught him, dragged him toward the door, and through it. Kicking the door shut, he carried Seamon bodily into the bedroom, and lowered him to the bed.

Seamon was quaking; his eyes were popping. His fingers rose trembling to his chin and he stared at the blood that stained them.

"Seamon!" Nichols exclaimed. "It got you! You saw what happened to Kendall. You can't get out of it now. Have the decency to clear it up—tell the truth."

Seamon mouthed, "God! That vile—snake—!"

"Seamon! You did it—got seventy-five of the hundred thousand that Kendall paid to the fund—didn't you? Seamon!"

Seamon was gasping. The powerful poison in his blood was stiffening him. His lips worked.

"Yes—I took the money. But not alone . . . Hubbard was in it with me. He planned it all out. We were going to split—the seventy—five."

"Hubbard!" Nichols exclaimed.

"He—planned it. We could've gotten away with it—if the professor—hadn't written that note to Kendall. He did it—without my knowing it.

That—exposed the whole—deal."

Nichols' eyes were blazing. Evelyn was bending over Seamon, listening tensely to each gasping word.

"Hubbard—common crook—" Seamon's words were coming with tremendous effort now. "Stop at—nothing. He must've—opened the cage—tried to cover it up—by kill—"

Then the last tremor shook Seamon's frame. His lips stopped moving.

Nichols turned away, drawing Evelyn with him. He stepped from the room quickly, closed the door.

"Did you hear that?" he said rapidly. "Seamon thought Hubbard opened the cage of the flying snake—trying to kill the professor that way and cover himself up. He could've done it—opened a window from the outside and unlatched the cage gate. I remember now—I didn't hear Hubbard's car come up the drive before he came in—did you?"

"No." Evelyn's eyes were frightened, but dry. "Is Seamon—"

"Dead—yes. Killed by the same thing that killed Kendall. God, it's horrible!"

He drew the girl away from the door, toward the front of the house.

"If the professor had been killed by the flying snake, Seamon could have lied out of it—could have told Kendall that it was a mistake. If Kendall had investigated, they could have got the rest of the donation back in time for a check-up. Hubbard's idea, was it? Where the devil did Hubbard go to—if the snake hasn't got him, too?"

As they reached the living room, the hum of a motor again came from outside. Gazing through the partly opened door, Nichols saw it was a car without lights—the professor, returning. The car stopped; the professor slipped from the wheel, and hurried to the door.

"I've notified the police," Van Dyk said breathlessly, closing the door behind him. "Has it returned—come back to the cage? Until it is cap-

tured there will be a reign of terror."

He broke off. Another car was coming up the drive, its gears grinding—and its headlights on. The professor, alarmed anew, jerked open the door and cried a warning; but the car came on, blazing. Van Dyk stared out, too terrified to move. Nichols hastily moved him aside, turned to hurry out.

The driver of the car was already walking toward the door. He was holding something in his hands.

"Good evening, professor," the man said, "Say, does this ghastly thing happen to belong to you? I was driving out of my garage an hour or so ago, when this thing threw itself against one of my headlights. I thought it was a bat, and didn't get out to see. But when I came back, just a few minutes ago, I saw it lying in the driveway, and picked it up. What the devil is it, professor?"

The professor looked haggardly into the face of his nearest neighbor. His eyes dropped to the thing in the man's hands—a thing resting on a folded sheet of newspaper, glistening green and limp.

It was the flying snake—and it was dead.

Automatically the professor took it. "Yes—yes, it belongs here. Thank you, Adams—thank you."

Nichols was staring at the hideous thing. "Listen!" he snapped at Adams. "When did you say this happened? When did you find it dead?"

"Just now—but I must have run over it, going out," the neighbor said. "It must have got killed—oh, more than an hour ago."

Nichols nodded slowly. He dimly heard a brief, further exchange of words between Adams and the professor; he watched the car roll away. The professor turned back into the living-room, carrying the dead snake, and Nichols followed. Suddenly he exclaimed:

"An hour ago. It was killed an hour ago! That was *before* Kendall came!"

It could mean only one thing—it was not the flying snake which had killed Kendall and Seamon!

CHAPTER IV

THE LASH OF DEATH

PROFESSOR Van Dyk gazed at the dead green thing with mingled relief and regret. He turned dazedly, and walked into the corridor. Nichols' eyes went to Evelyn's.

His mind was working fast, fitting together the bits of information like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. He crossed the rug and back, nervously. The professor returned to the room. He stroked his goatee and sank exhaustedly into a chair.

"Where is Seamon?" he asked dazedly.

"Professor," Nichols told him, "prepare yourself for a shock. Seamon is in his room. And he is dead."

"Dead!"

"Killed in exactly the same manner Kendall was killed. Do you understand that, professor? The snake didn't kill them. The snake *couldn't* have killed them. Something else did."

The professor stared, speechless.

"They were murdered," Nichols declared.

Van Dyk sprang to his feet. "What are you saying! Murdered! Here? In my home? How—how is it possible?"

Nichols snapped his fingers impatiently. "Listen—the police are coming, aren't they? In a little while this place will be overrun with them. We've got to get this thing straightened out. Professor, Seamon has been robbing you—"

Rapidly Nichols disclosed to Professor Van Dyk Seamon's trickery with the checking accounts established for the purpose of stealing money donated to the expedition fund. The professor listened aghast.

"Seamon declared that Hubbard must have released the flying snake from the cage. Hubbard could have opened a window of the steam room from the outside, released the catch,

and closed the window again. After that he came in—you remember. Professor, his idea must have been to let that snake kill you."

"Kill—me!"

"Keep hold of yourself, damn it! Don't you see, Hubbard was desperate. He was working with Seamon, robbing you of the seventy-five thousand. They'd planned it all out—"

Evelyn interrupted. "They had plenty of opportunity to do that, father. I never trusted Seamon—and Hubbard was Kendall's secretary during the past year. I didn't trust him, either. You know that Hubbard and Seamon went into the Sierras not so long ago on a fishing trip. They probably planned it out then—"

"Fishing trip?" Nichols echoed. "The two of them? That means something. Whoever it was that broke into the laboratory got into Seamon's fishing tackle. Listen, professor. You usually dictated your letters to Seamon, didn't you?"

"Yes—yes."

"But when you learned that Kendall was giving you a smaller donation this year, you wrote him yourself, didn't you? You didn't dictate that letter to Seamon?"

"No—I didn't."

"That's what wrecked their plan, then. If you had dictated the Kendall letter to Seamon, as you usually did, Seamon would have altered the figures and covered up their crooked operations. But your letter to Kendall let the cat out of the bag. Seamon and Hubbard knew there was trouble ahead. When Hubbard let the snake loose, professor, his only idea was to cover himself."

"By—"

"By killing you, yes. With you out of the way, Seamon could have explained it away—produced evidence to show you had received a hundred thousand from Kendall, and not twenty-five. They were desperate—playing for a stake of seventy-five thousand. But the snake failed to strike at you, professor—and it es-

caped. Hubbard's plan to get from under failed to work.

"Then Kendall died. That, too, would cover it all up, wouldn't it? You didn't know you'd been robbed, professor. Kendall suspected it. Getting him out of the way meant safety for Seamon and Hubbard. Kendall was murdered, I tell you! But Seamon didn't have anything to do with it. Seamon was here, in this room, when that thing—whatever it was—struck Kendall in the face."

"Then it must have been Hubbard!" Evelyn Van Dyk exclaimed.

"Yes, it must have been Hubbard," Nichols answered swiftly. "But—how was it done? Where did Hubbard disappear to? Damned if I know!"

"The—police will find him," the professor said weakly.

"I'm not so sure of that." Nichols paced back and forth across the room. "If Hubbard killed Kendall, he killed Seamon, too. He killed Seamon either to shut the man up, or to get the whole seventy-five grand for himself, or both."

ABRUPTLY he turned, picked up the telephone again, and clattered the hook. The instrument was as dead as before. A new gleam came into Nichols' eyes as he turned away.

"The cops'll be here any minute now," he said. "Stay here, both of you, please. I've got a hunch—"

He opened the door, stepped out quickly. Slipping along the side of the house, he searched for the lead-in of the telephone line. He saw the black strand against the sky and followed it to the stucco wall of the house. He trailed it down to the ground-box, fingering the wires.

He felt a raw edge—a cut.

"Snipped the wires!" Nichols said half aloud. "Hubbard's work again. He needed time, wanted the police kept away as long as possible, so he and Seamon could cover themselves."

He rose, looking around. Suddenly a sound startled him—a sharp, crackling sound, as of wood splitting.

It came from close at hand, from the other side of the house. Nichols sprang to the corner and peered around into the open—and at first saw nothing.

There was only silence now. He moved along the wall quietly. A breathy exclamation came from his throat as he saw something dark against the side of the wall. Coming close, he saw that it was a lattice-work trellis, about which a flowering vine was entwined.

One of the thin cross-pieces was freshly broken.

Nichols drew away from the wall, looking up. The trellis rose to the edge of the roof. It formed a fragile ladder by means of which a man could climb to the flat top of the house. And the broken cross-piece was not far below the cornice

Nichols paused, his eyes glittering. His suspicion that some one had climbed up the trellis to the roof—that some one was on the roof even then—grew stronger when he saw that the latticework was affixed to the wall near the window of the laboratory.

He hesitated. He had no gun. Then he remembered—Seamon had had one. What had become of it? He peered at the edge of the roof, but could see nothing. Without making a sound, he skirted around the corner to the rear of the house. He was about to push open the door when he saw something glint at his feet.

Seamon's gun. Seamon had dropped it when the death-dealing thing had stung his face. Nichols scooped it into his hand, turned back, ran again to the trellis.

No sound came from above. Nichols could see nothing beyond the edge of the roof save the black sky.

He gripped the gun tightly, put a foot into the lattice, and pulled himself up. It was a precarious support that sagged under his weight. Staring up, he lifted himself again. The laths creaked; the vine rustled; and Nichols cursed the noise he was mak-

ing. Cautiously he lifted himself until his eyes were level with the cornice, and he could see across the flat roof.

At first he could see nothing but blackness. But he sensed a presence—sensed that some one or something was watching him. Quickly he pulled himself up, crouched at the edge.

SUDDENLY a form reared out of the pool of blackness that covered the roof. It unfolded into the figure of a man, facing Nichols. Nichols jerked up his gun, leveled it. The black figure stood motionless, twenty feet from him, hunched forward in a menacing attitude.

Then the figure's arm rose. In its black hand it was holding a long, slender pole which whipped under its own weight as it rose. Nichols crouched tensely, tightening his grip on the gun.

"Easy, Hubbard!" he warned.

A throaty exclamation answered. "This is your finish, Nichols. You can't stop me!"

Nichols was aiming carefully. "You're stopped now, Hubbard. I've got you on the bead"

Hubbard uttered a crackling laugh. "You haven't got a chance, Nichols! You're going as Kendall and Seamon went. You'll die with a horrible poison running through your heart!"

Hubbard's arm was still rising, lifting the long, whip-like pole.

"You see what I'm doing, Nichols," came Hubbard's voice rasping. "This is a fly-casting rod I have in my hand. I'm an expert fly-caster, you know. I can put a fly anywhere I wish, within a circle of six inches—and your face makes a circle about that size."

Nichols watched tensely as the rod continued to rise.

"There's a needle on the end of this line, instead of a hook, Nichols. A sharp needle. Dipped in curare. You've heard of curare, Nichols—the deadly arrow poison. One flip of this rod, and the poisoned needle is going to fly into your face!"

"Raise that thing another inch and I'll put a bullet through you!" Nichols threatened.

The rod flipped back in Hubbard's hand.

Swiftly Nichols pulled the trigger of the gun. A hollow click answered him—nothing more! He stared down at it, dumfounded. Instantly he pulled the trigger again—and again! A gasp escaped him.

The gun was empty!

"Here it comes, Nichols!" Hubbard whispered.

The supple rod swished backward. Flying through the air, the slender line stretched out, a glittering steel needle at its end. A needle coated with horrible death.

Nichols sprang up. He snapped the gun back into his hand, hurled it. It spun through the air, straight at Hubbard. Hubbard was in the act of flicking the deadly needle forward when he saw the weapon spinning toward him. He cried out, leaped aside—and at the same instant the pole snapped forward.

Nichols leaped again, madly.

A sudden, gasping cry came from Hubbard. He raised to his tiptoes, rigid. He cried out again—and dropped the pole. He turned—then, crazily, began to run. He tottered to the edge—clawing at the air.

Suddenly, losing balance, he crashed over the cornice, spilled into empty darkness.

Nichols raised himself, peered over. Hubbard was lying on the black ground, writhing. Nichols hurried to the trellis, lowered himself rapidly, and bent over Hubbard. He could feel Hubbard trembling. Quickly he struck a match, and the yellow glare fell over Hubbard's form.

Hubbard was sprawled face down. And Nichols saw, on the back of his neck, a little red spot from which blood had trickled.

Hubbard's leap aside, to escape the gun thrown by Nichols, had destroyed his aim with the casting-rod and line. The needle, dropping from

behind, had stung through Hubbard's skin. And now Hubbard, like Kendall and Seamon, was dead.

NICHOLS kept the professor and Evelyn in the livingroom.

"It's fairly easy to piece it together," he explained quickly. "When the flying snake failed to kill you, professor, Hubbard was forced to attack in a different way. He had to think fast—and he did. While we were all outside, watching for the flying snake, Hubbard got into the laboratory.

"He took Seamon's fly-rod from the closet, and a bottle of curare poison from the lab. Those things are still up on the roof. He planned to kill Kendall while making it appear that the flying snake had done it. Waiting on the roof, he saw Kendall come to the door. He had the needle on the end of the light fishing-line, and had dipped it in the curare.

"He cast the needle out, and it snapped into Kendall's face. That's what we saw—not the snake. He did the same thing with Seamon. On the roof, he was probably able to hear everything that was said below. He must have seen a chance to grab the whole seventy-five grand for himself, and to silence Seamon. God!

"He was on the roof all the time. He was climbing down, trying to make a get-away, while I was outside. He was going to kill me in the same way—crazy and desperate as he was—but the needle got him instead."

Professor Van Dyk sat weakly in his chair. Evelyn was watching Nichols' face intently. He said:

"Listen—I'm a reporter. I've got to get this stuff to my paper before all the reporters in Los Angeles come trooping in here. May I use your car? I—I've got to beat it—"

His eyes were on Evelyn's . . .

"But I'm coming back," he added.

From outside came the snarl of a motor. A pair of headlights threw their shafts through the open door.

The police were arriving . . .

Combatting Crime

East and West

THE Far East has shaken off the shackles of the centuries and is stepping right into line with the more modern Western world to combat crime. Here are some notes taken from the police files of both East and West.

The research departments of the American police have discovered a chemical that will aid in restoring numbers on automobile parts, guns, watches and other metal articles, mutilated or partly obliterated by thieves in an effort to baffle identification. They are restored with a chemical prepared by members of the stolen-automobile detail of Chicago's police department. The chemical, in liquid form, is applied to the part where the original number is believed to be. In five minutes or five hours, perhaps, depending upon the kind of metal and the degree to which the old characters have been worn away or obscured, the faint outlines of the original numbers usually can be seen.

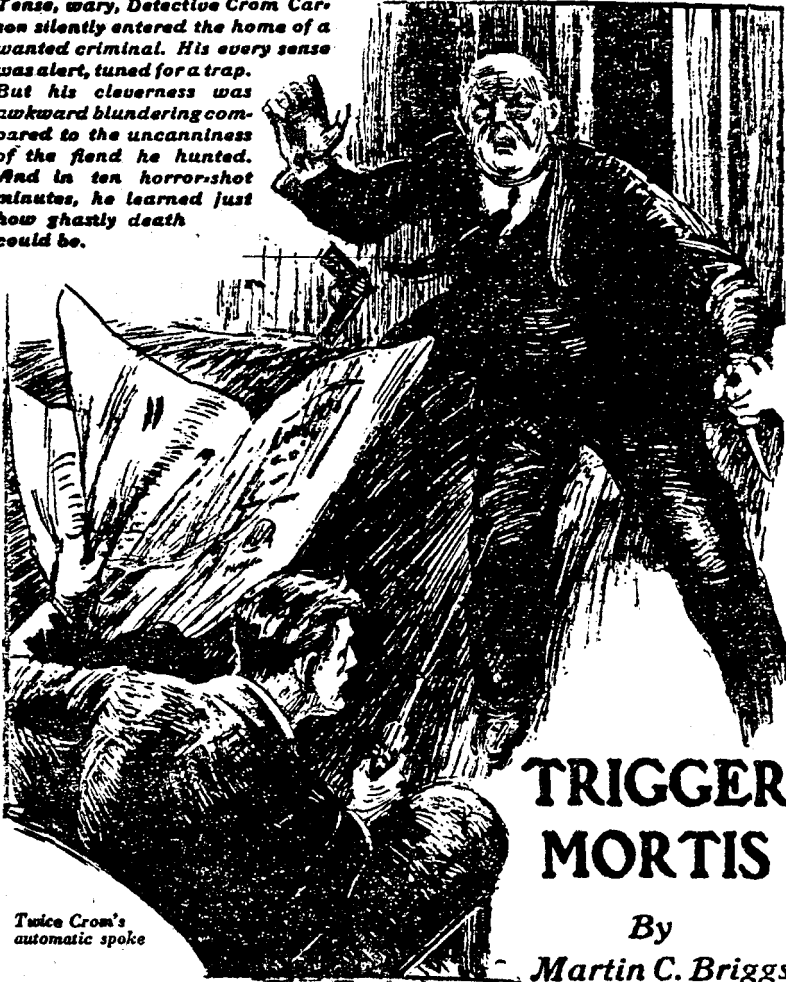
Torture by electricity is reported to be the latest crime-detecting device of the new government police in China. Chinese courts have long recognized torture as a legitimate means of inducing reluctant witnesses to speak. The victim is stretched out full length on a frame of bamboo and tied there, with his hands crossed on his chest and fastened to the terminals of the electric machine. The current is then turned on and produces such unbearable agony that the partially electrocuted victim instantly promises anything whatsoever or confesses any secret that he knows.

Talking pictures have been tried successfully as an aid in fighting crime by the Philadelphia police department, which has made talkies of crime suspects to aid the police or possible future victims in identification. It is also planned to use the talkie in recording the confession of a crime in an effort to show that the criminal was not tricked into admitting his guilt; and already this has been done in several cases.

Death masks of the living are now used in a new method of crime detection and identification of crooks which has been perfected by Dr. Alphonse Poller, an anatomist of Vienna. This system, which the police department of the Austrian capital has substituted for the old Bertillon fingerprint method, is based on the use of "negacoll," an extremely plastic modeling material, by means of which amazingly accurate masks of both the living and the dead may be quickly and easily made. The Viennese rogues' gallery now resembles an old-time dime museum, filled with reproductions of the faces, noses, ears, and particularly the hands, of all manner of lawbreakers.

In many cases negacoll is superior to clay and other substances used in making plaster casts. Fashioning a cast of a living person is a lengthy, laborious process, involving the danger of suffocating the subject by closing his pores. With negacoll a head may be reproduced inside half an hour.

Tense, wary, Detective Crom Carson silently entered the home of a wanted criminal. His every sense was alert, tuned for a trap. But his cleverness was awkward blundering compared to the uncanniness of the fiend he hunted. And in ten horror-shot minutes, he learned just how ghastly death could be.



Twice Crom's automatic spoke

TRIGGER MORTIS

By

Martin C. Briggs

STRANGELY, the heavy door yielded easily to his touch. Detective Crom Carson pushed it wide open and listened. No sound came from the inky blackness of the apartment.

One minute, two, he waited. Somewhere, now, a clock was ticking, and the rhythmic beats synchronized with his thudding heart. He heard the clock tick off the seconds—ten—eleven—

twelve. Creeping like a cat, he crossed the threshold into the impenetrable dark. One hand gripped his automatic; his other hand groped for the light-switch. He felt the button, and at his touch the electrics flared in a brilliant glare.

The room was empty. Maitland was away.

Crom sighed with relief. So far—good. He had hardly dared hope for

this luck. He had only to wait here until Maitland returned and catch him unaware. Before morning, probably, he'd have Maitland behind bars.

He walked toward the center of the room. Furnishings of rococo ornateness crowded it: a carved teakwood chair, Ming pottery, a bust by De Buzo, on the wall a life-sized painting of a man.

Suddenly the scarcely audible creak of a turning hinge startled him. Crom wheeled; gun ready. His gaze fixed on the door through which he had entered.

The door was closing slowly, propelled by an unseen hand.

In a bound, he leaped toward it. Too late. The mahogany slid silently into place, and there came a faint click. Crom tried the knob. Locked. He ran toward the other egress. That door, too, was fastened. Trapped!

With deepening dismay, he turned to face the unknown menace that he knew now awaited him. Tense stillness, broken only by his own stertorous breathing, pervaded the room.

He'd begged Cap Jackson for this chance—to bag "Diamond" Maitland alone—and Jackson, reluctant at first to give such a ticklish job to a new man, had finally consented. Maitland had laid a cunning trap, and he'd blundered into it. Might have known better—

Crom paced the floor, his young face wrinkled in thought. Two doors, both locked. He inspected the room minutely; no other way out. He might batter through one of them and get away. No! He had come for Maitland, and he would get Maitland. His chin set in determination.

"Listen!"

Crom jumped. The voice, biting, cruel, chilled his marrow. He whirled to face the apparent direction from which it had come, and he saw a man, a young man, well set up, looking straight at him. Instinctively his finger tightened on the trigger of his gun. Then he almost dropped the weapon. The man was his own reflection

in a large wall mirror. Crom pulled himself together.

From behind the mirror the voice continued:

"You have come here uninvited, evidently seeking information of the jewel robberies of which I am suspected. No uninvited guest has ever crossed my threshold and lived. Probably you belong to the police, and policemen are especially repugnant to me; they hamper me in my work."

The speaker paused, and resumed suavely, suggestively, "Shall we call it the third murder?"

For an instant, Crom's red blood froze in his veins. Then his pounding pulses calmed and his brain cleared, became cold as ice.

"If you like," he said. "You have killed other men, then?"

"Perhaps," the other fenced.

CROM looked at the large painting, and something in the fixed, sardonic expression of the face told him that this was Maitland himself, the demon that he had to fear. At least, he knew what the man looked like.

The heavy aura of impending death hung over the apartment.

The lights! If he could extinguish them—

Before he had taken three strides, the voice spoke again:

"Stop! The lights remain on."

Ignoring the uncanny divination of his thoughts, Crom flipped the switch. The incandescents did not even flicker.

A mocking laugh sounded.

"I have certain devices here for my protection. Since you will never leave this room alive, I can tell you what they are. The lights, for instance, have double wiring, and the doors close by pushing a button. But this mirror—ah—it is wonderful. From my side I can look through and see the entire room, plainly. But from your side it seems an ordinary mirror. Just a little invention of my own—one of the precautions that my scientific mind deems necessary to preserve my liberty."

Crom faced the glass. "Maitland,

you can't get away with this. The men at headquarters know that I am here. If I do not return—"

Maitland caught him up: "Naturally, they will come here. Of course. I will say that I never saw you. Your body will not be found. In order to prove the crime of murder, the body must be produced. *Corpus delicti* I believe the legal gentlemen call it. Checkmate! What next?"

Crom did not answer him. How or when the struggle would come he had no means of knowing. Perhaps a shot; perhaps gas. Involuntarily he looked toward the ceiling.

A hole marred the fresco, and from the hole a short pipe protruded!

He moved farther away. Detective Crom Carson, unafraid of facing danger, was helpless in the lap of fate. He could do nothing but await the next move of his mysterious antagonist.

Calmly he crossed the room. The evening paper lay on the table, and he bent over it. He picked it up, taking it with him to the teakwood chair, and, as his tense body sank into the cushions, he spread the paper before him. It shielded his face but not his vision. Through the small hole that he had punched through the sheet when he picked it up, he could see most of the room.

He had not long to wait. The side door moved open a few inches, hesitated, and opened wider. As the aperture widened, a man peered in.

CROM gasped. He had seen monstrosities in human form, but this man was unlike anything human save that he had arms and legs and a body. His chalk-white face was distorted with a fantastic leer. His head, too big and misproportioned for a normal man, was superimposed on a body so squat and muscular that it might have belonged to a gorilla.

Cautiously the man entered, and the door closed noiselessly behind him as he sidled through. He moved with quick, sharp movements, as a snake wiggles its form preparing to strike.

The brute's right hand gripped an automatic; more terrifying, his left hand closed over the hilt of an ugly knife.

Through his peephole, Crom watched the automatic rise toward his head, and for a chilling instant he gazed down its dark muzzle.

Quick as light, the detective ducked his body, bending almost double, while his arms remained upward, holding the paper in almost the same position that it had been before.

Just in time! The fiend's gun roared, and the bullet whizzed through the paper.

Twice Crom's automatic spoke, and, when the acrid smoke had cleared away, a man no longer human, and perhaps never possessed of human attributes, lay stretched on the rug.

Crom bent over the grotesque form. Dead. Dark blood from the wounds in his breast welled over the exquisite Sarouk rug that had cushioned his fall.

The door! Crom rushed for the door through which the man had entered, but it had closed. He tried the knob. Locked. He might have known that Maitland's diabolical cunning would have seen to that.

Crom looked expectantly toward the mirror. Surely this chapter in the unfolding chain of astounding events deserved special mention from that quarter. But the mirror gave forth only his own image, and no word came from behind its adamantine glaze. Might Maitland and the dead man be one and the same? If so, the menace no longer existed, and his only problem was to free himself from the locked room.

Carefully he examined the edges of the glass where it was fastened to the wall. Cemented firmly, it appeared to be set permanently in place. No way out there, unless he smashed it.

Suddenly the voice boomed again, so close that it seemed to be speaking in his ear. Crom jumped back.

"Remember, the third murder!"
The cold glass showed only his own

pale face as if he himself had been the speaker.

The third murder? In a frenzy, Crom stepped back and raised his gun. One shot would shatter the glass, perhaps reveal Maitland.

A peculiarly sweet, overpowering odor stole into his nostrils. Too late, he remembered the pipe in the ceiling.

His arms felt like lead, and every nerve quieted with lulling lethargy. Again he feebly tried to raise the gun, but the gas, seeping into his senses, overwhelmed him. Down, down he slumped into oblivion.

WHEN Crom opened his eyes again, his languid glance wandered over the room. What was this place? Where was he? He tried to recollect, but his numbed senses failed him. Pleasanter to sleep—

Some one was prodding his arm. "Wake up."

A bottle was forced between his teeth, and he tasted the burning stimulus of raw whiskey. Gradually his mind cleared, and he looked about him.

Was he dreaming? It couldn't be real—that thing. Ten feet away a man sat slumped in the teakwood chair. The man's eyes, veiled with the film of death, looked straight into his. The face, ashy white, and the head twice too big for its body. The lifeless hand clutched a revolver, an automatic.

Recollection came to Crom with a rush. The mysterious attacker that he had shot! He remembered everything now, and with remembrance he felt the paralysis of fear, but he managed to fight it off. In an instant, he was alive again.

He tried to rise from the chair in which he sat, but sturdy ropes bound him with a firm hold. Pinioned and helpless, he waited for what was to come next.

"You are with us again, I see."

With a thrill, Crom recognized the voice of the mirror; but now the owner of it was in the room with him. The man, who had been standing behind,

came forward, and Crom saw him for the first time.

His sharp eyes took in every detail of the man. He had the face of a scholar; the lofty, bulging forehead crowned regular features. Almost handsome, except for his eyes, which were closely set. They were small, bright eyes, and in them was a peculiar burning glint. In the brightly lighted room the man's complexion seemed a trifle sallow. The suit that covered his thin body was of expensive cut and fitted perfectly.

"I'm Maitland." The shrewd eyes appraised Crom.

Crom knew as much. He jerked his head toward the picture.

"Your portrait flatters you, Maitland."

The equanimity of Maitland's face was not disturbed by the dubious compliment. He smiled slightly.

"Perhaps. That is neither here nor there. There are more important matters to consider. You are of the police, and the police and I are natural enemies. You probably know that I am suspected of certain jewel robberies that have recently taken place, and that is why you have come here. Right?"

"Right," said Crom.

"This will be the third—"

Crom interrupted, "The third murder, Maitland? You have said that before."

"Precisely."

Maitland joined the tips of his fingers, and his face composed in thought. He resumed:

"Your death, however, will be different. In dying, you will be comforted by the thought that you have contributed to science. I will explain partly by action."

As he listened, Crom's muscles were straining under the bonds, but the cords held him relentlessly. He watched Maitland approach the dead man.

Maitland turned. "Allow me to introduce Barney. You met him before this evening and exchanged compli-

ments. As a result, poor Barney will not be with us again, but he, though dead, will have eternal revenge upon his killer."

Crom was in a cold sweat. Was the man mad? He hung on Maitland's words.

"Barney was my valued assistant. For years he has helped me. He will help me now, and your blood will not be on my hands." Maitland laughed callously. "Too much blood on my hands already; sometimes I have difficulty in sleeping nights."

Maitland coolly raised the dead man's hand—the hand clutching the gun—and laid it on the chair arm. He adjusted the weapon so that it pointed directly at Crom. Stooping, he sighted along the short barrel.

"Right at the heart," he said. He wiped his hands with his handkerchief, and smiled. "Now—we shall see. The term *rigor mortis* doubtless means nothing to you. However, it is a scientific fact that shortly after death the tendons of the muscles shorten, draw together, as it were. Barney has not been long with Satan, though the time may, to you, have seemed interminable. Am I not right?"

Crom shivered. Maitland's voice droned on, "In a few minutes, Barney's dead fingers will begin to draw together as *rigor mortis* sets in. The pressure on the trigger of the automatic that he holds will increase. Soon, without warning, the gun will be discharged."

Maitland paused dramatically, and venomous hate dripped from his words, "The gun points toward your heart!"

THE full import of Maitland's machinations dawned on Crom. For minutes that would crawl like leaden hours he must sit waiting, staring at the unseeing eyes until the hand, flexing in the throes of after-death, hurtled lead into his body. No use to cry out; the house was too isolated.

Maitland was regarding him. He

saw the man cross to the radio and pull a button.

"In your last hours—no, more exactly, minutes—you may wish to listen to the police broadcasts. This is a short wave set, attuned to them. It may serve to distract your mind from the depressing business so close at hand. Meanwhile, I shall be waiting."

Faint hope stirred in Crom. He might move the chair out of range. He pushed his feet hard on the floor, but the chair did not budge.

Once more the uncanny prescience of Maitland asserted itself.

"Of course I took the precaution to fasten the chair to the floor; it cannot be moved."

Crom strained against the hempen bonds until the fibers creased his raw flesh. If he could get out of line of that threatening muzzle—the bonds gave not an inch.

Panic seized him. Away from those dead eyes, then. He could easily close his own, but the dead man's countenance, like a supernatural magnet, held his gaze, and the enormous head with its ghastly face filled his vision and could not be erased.

Abruptly the radio blared forth.

"All squad cars attention! We now have the exact description of the man who held up the Traub jewelry store this afternoon. Note carefully: about five feet four, squat, muscular body. Distinguishing feature, an abnormally large head. Complexion, ashy white. He is believed to have an accomplice who waited for him in a large car. Traub offers a reward of five thousand dollars for either man, dead or alive."

Crom's glance, momentarily distracted, fixed again on the dead man in the chair.

Maitland laughed harshly. "Yes, they are speaking of Barney. Too bad you can't collect!"

Crom did not appear to hear him. His head lay on his chest in an attitude of utter dejection.

Maitland rasped: "Lost your nerve, eh? Oh, well," he shrugged.

CROM had not lost his nerve. Suddenly he had discovered that with his teeth he could reach the rope that bound his arms and shoulders. His keen incisors clamped down. One strand gave way. Another. He glanced upward, and the hope in his heart smothered at sight of that malignant face watching him, gun ready in a lifeless hand.

How long? If what Maitland said was true, and it sounded plausible, any minute, any second—

He bent his head again, but the rope eluded him, and sudden fear shot to his heart. There! He found it, and another strand snapped. He strained against the rope, but it did not weaken.

Maitland was reading a newspaper, paying no attention to him.

Silently he worked his strong jaws, champing on the rope, and one by one the infinitesimal strands that held him were giving away.

Once Maitland spoke without looking up. "Soon, now. Barney has been dead eight minutes."

Crom could feel the rope weakening. His heart throbbed with wild elation. One fiber broke of its own tension. Another.

In spite of himself, he looked again at Barney. One of the dead man's eyes was partially closed, and the sight flooded him with quick terror. *Rigor mortis*? Was it coming now?

The dead hand held steady, and behind the threatening muzzle, Crom imagined that the finger was tightening. He could almost see it tightening—

Frantically he bit at the rope. Any moment Maitland might look up and discover him. But curiously, Maitland did not look up, and Crom was watched only by an eye that would never see.

The rope started to give. Not ceasing in his work, he began to move his numbed muscles so that they would be ready to respond to instant action.

Only a few filaments between him and freedom. Crom's brain danced.

He took a deep breath, and all the power in his body flowed into a forward

ward jerk. The rope twanged like a bowstring.

Snap! He was free!

He bounded from the chair, only to face the wicked gun that Maitland held on him. So absorbed had he been that he had not noticed that Maitland had witnessed his escape and was ready.

Crom danced sideways, but the gun followed him. He paused for a split second to gather himself together. The spring in his legs relaxed, tightened. In a flash he catapulted through the air, straight at Maitland.

The gun thundered so close to his ear that the fire burned him. He heard the tinkle of glass as the overhead light was shot out. Darkness, instant and terrible, Mad mêlée of thrashing bodies. He felt Maitland's agile form squirming in his grasp, but it eluded a firm hold.

MAITLAND still had the gun. Crom tried to hold his arms, to reach the gun, but they evaded him. Blows hammered on his head and body. Weakened as he was from the narcotic and the strain, he clung desperately to his adversary. Crom's breath was coming shorter, in gasping pants.

He marshalled all of his strength for one last effort. His right fist drew back, poised, shot blindly into black space. Given luck, he might hit Maitland.

He felt his muscles crack against solid flesh. Heard the thud of a body as it struck some piece of furniture. A low moan. Too spent to follow up his advantage, Crom slumped in a heap. Tense quiet pervaded the room.

Where was Maitland? Was he getting ready for a new attack? Crom strained his eyes into the impenetrable darkness but he could see nothing. Somewhere, Maitland was waiting—

The suspense was unbearable. Crom raised himself.

A faint rustle from the center of the room. The noise was not repeated, but he fixed the direction of the sound.

Cautiously, not to make a noise, he

raised himself. Without hesitating, he flung his body toward the spot from which the sound had come.

Suddenly the thundering roar of guns filled the air with hellfire. Flashes of blue-yellow light bit into the dark. The room became a black inferno filled with belching flame.

Bullets whizzed by him. He dodged, cringed, drew back. If only he had a gun—

The deafening noise stopped abruptly, and the room settled to pregnant quiet. The smell of gunpowder wafted to his dazed senses, filling the air, choking him with acrid fumes.

Where was Maitland?

Thump! Thump! Crash!

Some one was pounding furiously at the outer door.

For one uncertain moment he did not know whether it was friend or foe. Then he heard his name called.

"Crom!"

The police! Unmindful of personal danger from Maitland, he ran to the door and shouted.

"Be careful, boys. There's a dangerous man here and he has a gun!"

His words were drowned in a splintering crash as the door fell inward. Three men plunged into the room, and from the faint light in the hall Crom recognized Detectives Thomas, Olson, and Adams. Thomas had an axe.

"That you, Crom? You didn't come back, so Cap Jackson sent us after you."

"It's me, all right. Watch out! Maitland's here," Crom added sharply.

In concerted understanding, every man listened. Not a sound.

Crom remembered the flashlight that he had not dared to use before. He pulled it from his pocket, and touched the switch.

The sight that the beam revealed made him recoil in mute horror. One of the detectives started to speak, but the words trailed to a gasp.

Maitland, blood-spattered, was slumped in the chair that Crom had so recently vacated. Crom's blow had sent him sprawling there, and the thundering gun had done the rest. Blood flowed from many wounds. The man, target of a murderous fusillade, was stone dead.

Sickened, Crom pointed the light to where Barney sat. The lifeless fingers were still clutching the automatic. It was pointed toward Maitland, as it had pointed toward Crom when he had sat, a prisoner, in that same teakwood chair.

Crom shuddered. Unsteadily, he walked toward Barney and touched the gun.

The metal was hot.

Barney's fingers, in *rigor mortis*, had pulled and held the trigger until the magazine of the automatic had emptied.

"That's all, boys," said Crom. "Maitland's done for."

"You killed him, Crom?"

"No, *rigor mortis* did it."

"Reggie Morris? Who's that guy? Never heard of him," said Detective Olson.



PUNISHMENT DEFERRED

By James Donald

¶ *Though Jasper Carlton knew that a man was embezzling money from his bank, he dared not discharge or accuse him.* ¶

JASPER CARLTON, president and treasurer of the Midford County Bank, sat behind his mahogany desk in deep perturbation. It was clear that a situation had arisen that baffled him. Every now and then he would shake his head and puff furiously at his cigar, as if his thoughts had reached a blind alley. So engrossed was he in his problem that for several moments he did not notice that some one had entered.

The newcomer was a tall elderly man, with the characteristic stoop of a bookkeeper. "Well, I've got what you wanted," he announced.

"You've figured out how much his shortage is?" asked the banker.

"Not exactly, but it's between eight and nine thousand dollars, more likely the higher figure."

Carlton winced. "I had no idea it was that much."

"It doesn't take a young fellow long to blow in that much when he begins going with a fast city crowd," pointed out the bookkeeper. "Especially if he's never been able to get along on his salary before."

"He used to borrow money from you, didn't he?"

"Only two or three dollars at a time, but I wasn't the only one."

"Figure out what he took from you and let me know. I'll make it good."

"Thanks, but it doesn't amount to enough to bother about. Funny thing, though, it was that which first started my suspicions of him. He stopped borrowing money toward the end of each week, yet seemed to have plenty."

"They always leave some clue," observed Carlton, wearily. "Where is he now?"

"In his teller's cage, as usual."

"Do you think he at all suspects that we know?"

"Not in the least." The bookkeeper's mouth became a hard thin line of indignation. "It would not surprise me if he were still continuing with his thievery right now!"

Carlton did not comment on this. Instead, he fell into a brooding silence.

The bookkeeper waited impatiently a few moments, then asked, "Well, now that you have the goods on him, what are you going to do about it, Jasper?"

"I don't know," replied the banker, not the least bit annoyed by the interruption to his thoughts. "I don't know what I can do about it!"

It was significant of their relation that the bookkeeper and the banker exchanged such frank confidences and addressed each other by their first names. Jasper Carlton and Vincent Stagg had known each other for many years, indeed even before they both had entered the employ of the Midford County Bank twenty-odd years ago, when the late Clyde P. Woods owned it. The fact that one had risen far above the other did not interfere with their friendship. Jasper Carlton was that kind of a man, and everybody knew it and loved him for it.

Just now Stagg was obviously annoyed at his chief's reaction to the theft. "See here, Jasper," he asked, "you're not going to let this thing go just because the thief happens to be old Woods' son?"

"Clyde P. Woods was my friend and I owe a lot to him," replied Carlton. "Besides, he left Donald in my keeping."

"That's true enough, but you've done all a man can do for him. He was bad from the start. I remember when he went to college, you were called away regularly every couple of weeks to get him out of some mess or other. And when he finally got kicked out of college and had run through his inheritance, you took him in here at a high salary, though he never was worth a damn. Now he shows his gratitude by robbing you of nine thousand dollars."

When, after a lengthy pause, Carlton still remained silent, the bookkeeper continued indignantly, "You'll only encourage him to do worse, if you don't treat him like any other thief right now, Jasper. It isn't as if you'll have to worry about what people will say. There's not a man or woman in town who doesn't sympathize with you for what you've had to put up with from Donald Woods. If you sent him to jail now, everybody would say, 'Good riddance to a scoundrel!'"

"But I can't do that, Vincent!" insisted the banker, with finality.

"You mean you're going to let him go scot free, without any punishment at all?"

"Punishment?" echoed Carlton, as if to himself. "It's always seemed to me that every crime carries with it its own punishment." He reached for his phone, and said into the transmitter, "Send Donald Woods in, please."

"Are you going to speak to him about it?" asked Stagg.

"Yes, but you can stay, Vincent. In fact, I want you to be here."

SEVERAL minutes later, a thin narrow-chested young man shuffled into the room. An ugly sneer crooked his mouth, as he demanded, "You sent for me?"

"Yes, Donald," returned Carlton amiably. "Sit down, won't you?"

"No, I'll take anything you've got to say standing." He lit a cigarette. "What is it now?"

"We've just discovered a shortage in your accounts," said the banker gravely.

The young man puffed insolently at his cigarette. "So you've found that out, have you?"

"Yes, and it's a very serious matter, Donald," returned Carlton with paternal patience.

"No more serious than your stealing of my father's bank," shot back the young man.

Carlton flushed, as if he had been struck. Nevertheless, he managed to say, with relative calmness, "That isn't so, Donald. I don't know what gave you the idea, but it isn't true."

"Well, why don't you have me arrested on this charge, then? Why don't you have me brought to trial, if you're not afraid?"

Carlton did not answer. Even Stagg, who had absolute confidence in his friend and chief, wondered why he let the young man go out with a triumphant sneer.

"Jasper," finally said the bookkeeper, "why didn't you tell him what everybody knows—that old Woods left you the bank for long and faithful services?"

"Because he didn't!" Carlton quickly replied. "I'm going to tell you something in strictest confidence, Vincent. Old Woods knew his son, and was afraid to leave the bank to him. Before his death, therefore, he arranged to have it apparently left to me, whereas in reality I was merely to be its president and treasurer, and one of the three trustees of the estate, which eventually goes to Donald."

"That's why I can't press the charge against him. In a way he already has been punished. The money he stole is really his own!"



By Norman A. Daniels

Lead was whistling over him. His gun spoke rapidly. Kelly was a crack shot.

All the pent-up hatred of seven unjust years in stir pounded in the blood of Terry Lane. He fought to conquer that festering evil, for a friend had placed him on his honor. But when Death's grisly fingers plucked life from a man, Terry shuddered at the ...



CLUES IN THE DARK

CAPTAIN GEORGE KELLY rose and cleared his throat as the big steel door clanged shut. Kelly had felt embarrassed in his twenty-odd years of police life, but never more so than at this moment.

He looked queerly at the well-built man who stood outside the big door now. Kelly strode forward, right hand outstretched.

"Sergeant Kelly," the young man looked up with a pair of clear blue

eyes. "God, it's good to see you. I've never forgotten the kindness you showed me on my trip up here."

"Nerts," Kelly reddened. "That was nothing. I'm damned glad it's me who's bringing you back, lad. I brought you to this place and I'm taking you back—and I want you to know I've believed in you every minute."

"If it were not for you, sergeant," the young man wrung the outstretched hand, "I'd have given up hope long ago. I'm going to repay you if I can, but as for the others—"

A hard look that Kelly had never seen in those smiling eyes before grew quickly. The grip on Kelly's hand tightened unbelievably. Seven years of prison life hadn't softened this man. Rather, it had hardened him physically. Kelly wondered if the same thing were true with his mind. Had the seven years behind those gray walls made of his brain a concrete thing set only on thoughts of revenge? It seemed so, and Terry Lane's next words proved it.

"I've spent seven years in hell, sergeant, because of the thick-headedness of certain cops. There are a lot of others mixed up in this thing, too, and every one of 'em is going to pay. Right through the nose."

Kelly didn't want to hear that and he promptly changed the subject. "You're still technically under arrest, Terry," he said. "I've come after you and you'll have to be my prisoner until the court says you're free. Now will you be a good lad—or shall I handcuff you?"

Terry grinned. "Oh, no," he said, "nothing like that. Any thoughts I have for revenge, I'll not carry out until this is all over. You didn't cuff me when you brought me here, sergeant. Do you think I'll make a break now—on the verge of freedom?"

"Of course not," Kelly laughed. "Well, unless you like this dump, we'll move. Say, you don't look so bad for being seven years in this joint. They treat you good?"

A certain grimness came over Terry's mouth. He looked up at Kelly. "At first they didn't. Somebody on the outside—some of the rats that sent me here—put in the works for me. I spent two years in solitary before the warden changed. I got a break then. That's just one of the few things that happened to me because I knew too much."

"Forget it, Terry," Kelly said. "Let's get going."

The train carried them swiftly toward the great city. Terry sat as one in a new world. Seven years of monotony hadn't broken him, but it did make him appreciate the things he had missed. His first train ride in seven years. His first glimpse of humanity not worried by the care and strife of prison life.

"I'm supposed to lock you up, Terry," Kelly told him as the train began shaking to a halt. "I'm not gonna do it though. Not on your life! You and I are going to my hotel. I've got a nice room next to mine reserved for you. There'll be better clothes there, too. The stuff you had when you were sent up is no good any more. I looked it up and say—it looks like the stuff men wore when women had bustles. It's just a little walk to the hotel. Want a ride?"

"No, sir," Terry shook his head vigorously. "If you've got the time, let's walk—slow. There's ten million things I want to see and then I want the story of how you worked me out of the pen. I don't know very much. They tell you just a little up there."

"Okay, we'll talk as we walk. You can act like a rube at the same time. There's lots of big new buildings here since you—ah—left."

"And now I'm back. You took me to the pen and you came after me. If it hadn't been for you, sergeant, I'd have rotted there for all any one cared. I'll never forget it."

"Aw hell," Kelly replied, "I never did think you bumped those two dames. A lad like you couldn't have done that job even though everything

pointed toward you. One of the dames was related to you, wasn't she?"

"Cousin," Terry answered flatly. "A nice kid gone wrong with a lot of big shots. They framed me nice. There was the motive—the other dame, Kitty, hated me, and I didn't like her. She was the one that led the kid into the whole mess. Sure I had threatened to kill her. I felt like it, too. Then I had to wake up in that room with the two of 'em strangled to death beside me—and me drunk as a loon. My fingerprints all over their throats. It was a pipe! Lucky I didn't get the chair."

"Yeah," Kelly snapped off the end of a cigar. "They tried that, but it wouldn't work. Circumstantial evidence sent you away, but they couldn't fry you on that. What was back of it, lad?"

"Plenty. Crooked politicians, crooked police and lawyers. People I knew things about, and who hated me. Why, even the bosses of the paper I was on wouldn't stand behind me. They were that scared of their own lily-white hides. But hell's going to pop, sergeant—and damned soon!"

THEY were walking slowly, Terry breathing in the unclean air of the great city as though it was the purest country ozone. He was thinking hard.

"What's on your mind, lad?" Kelly read his face.

"It's that place up there—the one I just left, Kelly. Seven years in there didn't do my disposition any good, and I've made a lot of friends. I said friends—get me?"

"You mean, Terry, you're going to fall in with that bunch of lousy crooks? You can't do it, lad. I'll smash you myself if you do. They're a bunch of rats, lad. Have nothin' to do with 'em."

"I can't help it, sergeant. I can't, I tell you. They talked it to me every parade, every recess. It's like it was born in me now. Who's going to pay

for those seven centuries I spent there?"

"Tut, lad. They told me they'd give you plenty of dough for the stretch you did. Pay you for every day you were there. That'll help, and anything I can do, I'll gladly help you with."

"It's awful, Kelly, awful I tell you. They talked it into me up there. Night after night I listened to them. I know all the tricks of the trade. I can blow a safe, feel the tumblers, do a good stick-up—everything. I want to do them. Society owes me something! But then I think of those poor fools up there who boast about what they did. And look at 'em. Every mother's son of 'em there for years. I tell you, sergeant—"

"We'll talk about that in the mornin'," Kelly cut in and then he made a correction that had been on his lips for hours. "I guess maybe you don't know. I'm a captain now. On the homicide squad."

"Good," Terry was elated and then something clicked in his mind. "You're a captain—then you're Captain Kelly. You sent Swipes McGrath up last month?"

"Sure I did—why?"

"God—get in toward the buildings. You're on the spot, ser—I mean—captain. I heard 'em sending word down the grapevine that you were going to be blasted. I—"

Kelly didn't know at first what had happened. His mind was absorbing Terry's words when he felt two husky arms about him and he was dragged downward toward the pavement as a football player dives for the mud. His hand instinctively sought his gun but he had no chance to draw then.

"What the—" he began, but Terry only reached out a long arm and shoved his nose to the sidewalk. Kelly saw red, but it quickly vanished. He raised himself a trifle and then flattened his face on the dirty walk again. Lead was whistling over him and the chatter of an automatic rifle came to him. His eyes saw the spot where the jet of flame originated. His

gun spoke rapidly. Kelly was a crack shot. He ducked again, but his head fell where he could watch his prisoner.

Terry was slowly rising now, his eyes were squinted. Kelly licked his lips, but no further shooting came. Police whistles were screaming and an excited roar of voices came to him. Terry had risen and was already entering the dark alley from which the shots had come. Kelly followed, first beckoning to a patrolman who was racing toward him.

IN the alley Kelly couldn't see a thing. The tall buildings, towering on both sides, permitted no light to enter. It was like a cavern of walls. He stumbled over ash cans and swore.

But Terry walked with sure steps, making no more noise than a cat. He stopped before a spot a little darker than the atmosphere and bent down. Instantly Kelly was at his side.

The patrolman was hurrying into the alley now, his flashlight coming toward them in sweeping gestures. The uniformed man grasped the situation quickly and centered the spot of brilliancy on the supine form.

Kelly rolled the man over and grunted. A pain-contorted face looked up at him. The gunman was dead. His body contained four wounds, though Kelly could see only one now. The police captain looked at Terry, and the doubt had suddenly gone out of his eyes.

A clock, not far away, began to slowly count the hour of six.

"I'm due at headquarters to make a report of this thing," Kelly said almost an hour later. "Come on along. We'll go to our rooms after."

"I'll come," Terry answered slowly. "But I don't want to see any of those rats that framed me."

"Okay," Kelly subsided into a stony silence wherein his thoughts raced. As they hove into view of the twin green lights, he expressed himself audibly.

"You know, Terry, anything I can

do for you, just ask. You saved my life tonight. If you hadn't knocked me to the sidewalk, that killer would have plugged me surer than hell."

"Don't thank me," Terry countered soberly. "I've too many thanks owing you. I'd have to save your life a dozen times to even begin repayment. It was only a matter of luck that I overheard a plot to kill you. And I spotted that killer in the alley, too."

"Oh." Kelly didn't know what else to say. He led Terry into his office at headquarters and dropped behind his desk. He excused himself a moment and talked quickly into a dictaphone, his words making history of the gunman's death. When he finished, he leaned back in his chair.

"As I said a minute ago, if there is anything I can do, just name it. I'm under an obligation to you, Terry, that I can never wholly repay."

"It is nothing, captain. I only want to do right. Sometimes I have to fight myself, but when my mind gets working I see the flame of hate. I can't convince you that the urge within me is to do evil—to hurt—to kill. Let me work with you sometimes—on the side of the law. That will help more than anything."

"Well, I can't make you a dick. I haven't got the power. And if I went to those that have it, they'd laugh at me. Nobody could stop my friend Terry Lane from going around with me though. Could they now?"

"I see your point, captain, and it seems the only way. Shall we let it go at that?"

The grip of their hands was broken by the peal of the telephone bell. Kelly picked up the receiver, grunted a hello, and then he tensed. Terry felt the tension and his two lean hands gripped the arms of his chair closely. Kelly hung up and reached for his hat.

"I don't know whether I can horn you in on this party or not, Terry," he said, talking fast. "That was the police commissioner calling. He wants me at his house right away. Says his

life's been threatened and he's worried."

"I promise I won't be in the way," Terry said simply and in a pleading voice. "I may be of some help."

"Well," Kelly hesitated. But the urgency of the case warranted no time for argument. If the commissioner kicked him out, okay. Kelly would have nothing to do with that.

"Never mind the lights and use departmental privileges, Murphy," Kelly ordered the driver of the police car. And then Terry had one of the wildest rides of his life. Kelly glanced at him and smiled. Terry's eyes were glittering in excitement; there was a rapt expression on his face.

THE car slid to a halt behind two other big cars parked before the commissioner's house. Kelly cursed as he saw them.

"So we won't be alone," he muttered, and then aloud, "If you get thrown out of here, Terry, don't blame me. I'll get you in, but I can't keep you there. Inspector Johnson is in there and so is the mayor and Doc Cudding, our departmental surgeon. He's a rat, that guy."

"The doctor, you mean," Terry commented, "or Johnson? He was in charge of the case against me. We're not exactly friends." He was matching Kelly's steps, and there was a look of childish elation on his face.

"I mean the doc. He's got a political plum in that job. Ten grand a year for doing nothing and believe me that's all he does, too. He'll probably have you heaved out on your ear."

They were evidently expected. A uniformed sergeant opened the door and Terry saw that the hallway was manned by patrolmen. The sergeant looked at the lithe young man inquisitively, but passed him at Kelly's nod. They were promptly escorted to a big room that served as the commissioner's study.

There were no introductions, and those in the room paid him scant attention. Terry withdrew and sat

down, unobtrusively, in a corner. His eyes were taking in those before him.

He recognized Commissioner Maloney and Mayor Todd from newspaper pictures he had seen. Then there was a short, stout man whose eyes were piglike. Terry decided this was Doctor Cudding, the departmental surgeon. He registered instant dislike for the man. Inspector Johnson was a huge, fair-haired hulk of a man whose face was lined with worry. Terry knew that face.

"I've called you here, Captain Kelly," the commissioner was saying, "to enlist your aid. I've had anonymous tips that I'm going to be killed—in fact, that I'm on the spot now. This may be all hooey, but I'm cautious enough to want to make sure that nothing will happen to me. There are several things I've got to do before I pass out, and I'm doing some of them tonight."

"Yes, sir," Kelly nodded.

"Graft and treachery have been rife in the police department. That isn't generally known, gentlemen, but the fact that there is remains. I've been conducting a secret investigation into the bank accounts of certain prominent members of the force and I'm going to make a few predictions and maybe a couple of changes in the department tonight. I'm rather sure that those implicated know of my investigation—that's why I lay so much emphasis on the fact that those tips I've been receiving are possibly correct. I'm placing a guard around my home and I'm not going to stir until this whole affair is settled. I'll start it tonight—you gentlemen can finish it."

"And I'm waiting with interest, Mr. Commissioner," the Mayor spoke. "If you will proceed—"

"Certainly," the commissioner twiddled his thumbs nervously. He was seated in a swivel chair. With the exception of Terry, the others were standing in tense attention in front of the desk. The commissioner began to talk again:

"As I said, certain members of the force are going to pay the penalty for their ways. I've evidence enough hidden in a secure place to send certain persons to prison for long terms. I'm going to use that evidence."

"You are the only person who knows where it is hidden?" Mayor Todd inquired.

"I am. Of course, I'm going to tell those whom I am sure of where it is concealed. But enough of that. I'm going to make a direct accusation. You—"

As five taut men waited with bated breaths, the lights failed. Instantly a roar of voices arose from within the room and from without. It was evident that not a light was operating in the whole house.

Hardly a sound came then in the instant when breaths were held.

"The commissioner!" It was Kelly's voice that rose above the cries. "Guard him!"

"I'm doing that—you fool."

Terry didn't know whose voice that was.

"He's okay," the same voice continued.

"Somebody look at the switchboard," Johnson's voice roared. "Step on it!"

"We've sent down cellar all ready, sir," another voice answered from outside the room. Then as if in acknowledgment of his statements, the lights flashed on.

KELLY stood directly beside the commissioner. Inspector Johnson stood a little to the left. The mayor was wiping a glistening forehead fully five feet away, and the doctor, mouth agape, was standing behind the commissioner.

"Well, for the lovamike," Kelly muttered as he bent over the figure of the commissioner, "he's passed out."

Doctor Cudding quickly moved to the side of the commissioner. The man was bent over his desk, head resting

in his arms. He was quite still—very still.

The doctor raised his head and cried aloud in terror. He let go and the head fell back inertly to the desk.

"He—he's dead!" the doctor finally managed.

"My God!" Mayor Todd cried. "Who—how?"

"Wait a minute," Inspector Johnson assumed command and his voice was hard. "Take a better look, doc, and be sure. Then see what killed him—if he is dead."

"It must be his heart," Cudding muttered as he went to work. "He told me the other day it wasn't so good."

"Funny that it should stop just when he was going to spill something important," Kelly remarked.

"Shut up, Kelly!" Johnson cried. He swung about, eyes blazing, and they fell on Terry, who had resumed his chair.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"Terry Lane, inspector," Terry half rose and bowed a little. "I came here of my own accord. Shall I go?"

"Like hell you'll go," Johnson rasped. "Not now anyway—and when you do, there'll be bracelets on your wrists. I've seen your mug somewhere before."

Terry shrugged.

Doctor Cudding was working fast. There was a look of amazement on his face. He bent close to the dead man's face and sniffed.

"Kelly," he cried, "take a smell of his mouth. If that isn't cyanic acid gas, I'd like to know what!"

Kelly sniffed and wrinkled his forehead. He nodded in assent.

"What'd he do, swallow some?" Johnson asked.

"I don't think so," Doctor Cudding answered slowly. "It has an intense action on the membranes of the mouth, and I don't see a sign of it. Unless he killed himself, I don't see how that stuff could have been administered. There wasn't time, and well—of course, if he was murdered,

some one in this room did it. How, I haven't the slightest idea."

"Pardon me," Terry rose and walked swiftly to the side of the dead man. Before any one had a chance to stop him, he lifted the dead man's head and looked searchingly at the face. Then he turned to the doctor.

"Hydrocyanic gas is very quick, is it not, doctor?"

"Certainly. Much faster and more thorough than the salt of the acid."

"It could kill quickly by simply being breathed into the lungs?"

"Why—yes, of course. You mean—"

Cudding pushed him aside and made a swift examination.

"You're right," he exclaimed. "Somehow that gas was forced into his lungs—through his nose. But how?"

"And by whom?" Mayor Todd cried. "We've got to clean this mess up—and quickly. If we only knew who Maloney meant to accuse, our work would be easier."

"We'll find him," Kelly muttered grimly. He went down on his hands and knees and began to search the floor. Doctor Cudding smirked.

"Looking for footprints, captain?" he inquired sarcastically. Terry recalled that Kelly hated this doctor and he saw the attitude was reciprocated.

"I'm looking for something the murderer carried that gas in," Kelly said. "He didn't hold the gas in his hand, did he?"

"It is my suggestion that every one in this room be searched," Mayor Todd said. "We can call in a lieutenant from outside to do the searching."

"Exactly," Cudding declared smugly. "Just what I was going to suggest."

INSPECTOR JOHNSON explained quickly to the uniformed lieutenant what was desired, and the man went to work. His methods were thorough. Every man disrobed, in turn. His clothes were searched, turned inside

out. His body was closely examined. It took almost an hour. Outside the clamor of reporters could be heard, but they were kept at a safe distance.

The lieutenant spread his hands in a hopeless gesture. "Nothing doing."

"All right," Johnson said tartly. "Scram."

When the door closed, Johnson sat down on the top of the flat desk. His eyes were narrowed in suspicion. They fell on Terry, who had maintained a stony silence.

"You're a con," he said slowly, "a guy I still think committed two murders. How'd you get in and what's your business?"

"I saw this door open, knew there would be some excitement, so I walked in," Terry said glibly.

"He's lying, inspector," Kelly said wearily. "I brought him in. I got him at the Big House this afternoon. He did me a good turn a little while ago. He asked me if he could tag along, so I didn't stop him. I didn't say he could though," he finished pugnaciously.

Johnson nodded his head slowly. "Just like that, huh? This is a secret meeting and you drag a convict in here. Well, he ain't going to leave as easy as he got in. You're under arrest, Lane."

"Sure," Terry agreed with a smile, "and I am delighted to be under arrest. Especially with such dignified personalities as are in this room."

"What do you mean?" Mayor Todd cried. He walked close to the man, half-raised his fist and then dropped it. There was a certain fascination in those clear eyes. Todd couldn't fathom it. They seemed to look through him. He shuddered and stepped back.

"I mean," Terry answered quietly, "that every one else in this room is no less under suspicion than myself. If I am under arrest, why, I presume every one here is, also."

"Ah-h," Johnson said with a wrinkle of his nose. "Sit down."

Doctor Cudding was still examining the dead man. He raised his head and spoke professionally.

"Commissioner Maloney was murdered all right. Somebody shoved something into his right nostril and discharged a quantity of lethal gas. What the instrument that was used is, I cannot determine—can't even hazard a guess. But it must be in this room."

"Sure it's in this room," Johnson responded. "And what's more, it's going to be found. Nobody leaves until it is—not even you, Mr. Mayor."

"If I wished to leave, inspector," Todd said coldly, "I'd go. My position as mayor of this city places me above any orders from any police official. But, of course, I'll stay here. I'd be foolish to expose myself to suspicion by leaving. But I'd thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head."

There was no answer to that. Johnson shoved a hand under his coat and dragged out a big cigar. He bit off the end viciously and spat the stub on the floor. He lit a match and puffed furiously on the weed. Then he cast a venomous glance in Terry's direction, but he met only a warm smile.

Kelly walked to the side of his friend then and whispered to him.

"Got any idea who did it, Terry?"

Terry grinned. "Perhaps I have," he said enigmatically.

KELLY sighed in satisfaction. Somehow he had developed a lot of faith in this man. Inspector Johnson was clearing his throat for words.

"So what?" he asked, his gaze full on Terry.

"It just came to me, inspector," Terry replied, "that the instrument used in administering this gas must be small. Infinitesimally small. It would be too bad for our murderer if he swallowed the thing, wouldn't it?"

Terry looked about quickly. Faces paled. Only Kelly's florid Irish countenance remained unchanged.

"There would be enough of the poison clinging to the instrument to insure the death of our murderer if he did swallow it—or in some other manner cause it to be taken in by the

blood stream. The commissioner only had to inhale it—"

Johnson swore and heaved his cigar into a receptacle on the floor. He stepped closer to Terry.

"Okay, smart guy," he rasped. "You know so much, who did the job then. I suppose you know that too?"

"Oh yes," Terry answered lightly. "I've known that for some time. In fact, right after the murder."

"What?" four voices chorused. The men stepped closer to him, their faces lined with anxiety.

"Who was it, Terry?" Kelly asked. He knew this man wouldn't fail.

"Why didn't you tell us before?" Doctor Cudding cried.

"Because I had no evidence," Terry replied. "My accusation would have sounded foolish. There was some one in this room that was going to be hit hard by the commissioner's statements tonight. He had to prevent that. There was only one way—murder. He came fully prepared for his little act."

"You've got to back up those statements with evidence," Inspector Johnson roared. "You got that evidence?"

"No." Terry backed away a little. His lithe body was straight as an arrow. His eyes gleamed in a radiance of cold fury. Satan was showing himself through those eyes now. All the accumulated hate of seven years in hell.

"You dropped that evidence a moment ago, inspector," he continued.

The two-hundred-pound body of Johnson seemed to lift from the floor. He flew at Terry and the two men went down like logs. Johnson quickly had his victim beneath him and his thumbs were pressing against Terry's windpipe. Terry lay strangely quiet. The pressure increased.

Suddenly the blue eyes opened and stared directly into Johnson's soul. The inspector trembled violently.

Two long white hands came up like a flash and fastened themselves under Johnson's thick throat. There was a gentle motion of the hands, and Johnson fell flat upon his victim.

Kelly came to life first. He quickly hauled the inspector up and dropped him in a ludicrous position on the floor. Terry rose, felt of his throat tenderly, and glared murder at Johnson.

"I almost killed him, captain," he said in a low voice. "God help me, I still want to."

"Take it easy, lad," Kelly soothed. "Now what was this evidence you were talking about?"

"It's in that spittoon, Kelly. Johnson came here tonight with a small rubber balloon. He had it filled with extremely concentrated hydrocyanic acid gas. It must have been almost liquid. Some one in his pay doused the lights and he just yanked the commissioner's head backward, shoved the tip of the balloon into his nose, and let him have it. Then he rolled the balloon into a ball and put it in that cigar he was smoking. That's why it wasn't found in the search.

"I imagine we'll find that the cigar was hollowed out. Johnson was just getting ready to burn up the only evidence there was to this crime. But when I remarked how dangerous the stuff was, he became afraid to smoke the cigar and inhale the fumes from the rubber. I doubt if it would have harmed him, but he couldn't take it."

"And is he—dead?" The mayor asked.

Doctor Cudding straightened up from beside Johnson. "No," he said, "but knocked out completely. You know your anatomy, Lane. I saw that trick you used."

"An old one, but an efficient one, doctor," Terry answered. "Now that this is over, perhaps we can go. I have business to talk over with my friend, Captain Kelly."

Kelly opened the door then, gave short orders to the men without, and in a moment the still unconscious inspector was carried out. His wrists were securely cuffed with his own handcuffs. Kelly liked the irony of that.

Mayor Todd cleared his throat. "Of

course, Inspector Johnson will be discharged. There's a vacancy, Kelly, and you're acting inspector for the present. I'll get the council to make it permanent at the next meeting. And to you, Terry, many thanks on my own and the city's behalf. God knows what Johnson would have done if he had been allowed to get away with this. God knows—"

"The devil, you mean," Terry corrected, and there wasn't a sign of a smile on his thin face.

"Ah—yes—of course," and the mayor went out. He didn't like those eyes. Doctor Cudding left to make arrangements for an autopsy of the murdered man. Kelly and Terry Lane were alone in the room—alone with the dead.

Kelly's hand was outstretched, and Terry grasped it.

"I'm an inspector, lad. Did you hear what the mayor said? That gives me plenty of rights. After you're legally freed, I'm making you a dick. In fact—"

He fumbled in his pocket, grew excited, and then swore.

"If you are looking for your badge, inspector," Terry grinned, "I've had it for the last half hour."

He flashed the gold badge in the palm of his hand.

"I'm sorry I had to lift it from your pocket. You wouldn't understand, inspector. You see I knew who the murderer was. The evil bred in me up there cried aloud for my mouth to remain closed—for me to help the murderer perpetrate more evil. But with that piece of metal in my hand, I could laugh aloud."

"Okay," Kelly was chagrined, but amused also, "keep it. It'll help you if you stick your nose in any more things like this. But one thing, Terry—how did you know it was Johnson?"

"I heard him do it," Terry answered. "But who would have believed me? Truthfully, you cannot say you would have. Not a jury in the land would have taken my testimony. Only

a prosecutor who was a fool would have even placed me on the witness stand."

Kelly silently agreed, but there was still a question in his mind. He voiced it. "I was in the room, too, Terry. I didn't hear anything. That room was as quiet as an empty church."

"Or the dark dismalness of solitary imprisonment. Do not forget that I spent two years there. It was pitch dark in that cell and I got so I could see a little in the darkness. But most

of all it was quiet. Only the footsteps of the guards or new men sentenced to the torture. I got so I could tell who walked by my cell door by the sound of their shoes. Every one's have a different sound. Some are hard—some just squeak. Johnson's squeaked like hell. I noticed that when I came into the room. When the lights went out, his were the only shoes I heard move. So it really was easy, eh, inspector?"

"For some people—er—Detective Terry Lane."

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HERE in this dark, silent place we have met, my friends, to discuss the exploits of an extraordinary man. He may be with us now. We wouldn't know it. You may have passed him on the street. You wouldn't be aware of it. Unless he leaves his symbol, the sign of an "X," behind him—unless you hear his strange whistle echoing through the darkness—you do not know he has been close at hand.

You've read "The Torture Trust," however. Amazing and sinister was the plot behind it. Horror radiated from it as ripples radiate from the center of a poisonous, miasma-laden pool.

But it was no more amazing, no more sinister, my friends, than things that are happening in the world about us. Criminals are at work. The forces of good and evil are ever in conflict. Some men respect justice, fair play, decency. Others sneer at these things. At this moment, in underworld dives and behind the stately fronts of millionaires' mansions, there are men plotting evil. Whipped to a murderous frenzy by the thirst for money, power or revenge, there are no heights, no depths, to which their wickedness will not reach.

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Washington tipped him off, but Agent "X", ever on the lookout, had already sensed that death was creeping close. Alone, unafraid, he went to meet the menace that was closing in. He went to match wits with a criminal whose cunning was almost satanic.

NEXT month in a great book-length novel you will read about this. "The Spectral Strangler," is the name that the editors have given to this episode taken from the records of Secret Agent "X".

If you like thrills, suspense, action—if you are among the ranks of the brave and adventure loving, you will want to go with Secret Agent "X" in his battle against the hideous criminal who called himself the "Black Master."

You will want to follow him along that strange murder trail. A woman

killed first, a man kidnaped. Then a taxi driver and a petty criminal found dead in a vacant lot. Then a government operative on a strange mission pursued by a flitting shadow along a wind-swept winter street—slain before his objective was reached.

Police sirens wailed. Grim-faced men from the homicide squad came to the scene; but it was Secret Agent "X" who hung closest to the murderer's trail.

Alone, armed with his bizarre weapons and his uncanny disguises, it was the Secret Agent who followed—until the ruthless hand of the Black Master, czar of darkness and death, reached out for him.

It was on the night of the ball in millionaire Crandal's home that the horror killer struck his most ruthless and terrible blow. The laughter of brightly dressed women, the gay conversation of men changed to screams of terror. For a detective ran to the stairway of the great Crandal home clutching his throat. He pitched down the stairs and lay at the feet of Crandal's guests, mocking them in death, mocking them with his strangely protruding tongue and horror-filled eyes.

EVERY chapter of this amazing, thrill-packed novel will hold you spellbound. When the horrible and extraordinary facts of the Spectral Strangler case were put before me, I, Brant House, chronicler of the Secret Agent's exploits, hardly knew where to begin. Not until the police records had been studied, the newspaper reports compared, and all details of the case arranged in chronological order

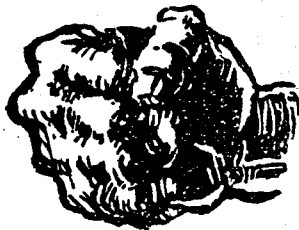
did I see the crime pattern as a whole.

Through it all I saw the strange, ingenious and devious path that Secret Agent "X" had run. It was only with the greatest reluctance that he would tell me anything. It was only by indirect conversation, and hints pieced together that I finally found the missing links in that ghastly murder chain.

For, as you have learned, my friends, the Agent's lips are sealed in secrecy. His past is shrouded in mystery. His actions have the cloak of mystery around them. His simplest movements have a question mark before them. He is like this mysterious world in which we live. The electricity that makes our lights glow, that runs our radio, seems a simple thing, an everyday fact. But who knows the real essence of that invisible, silent force that flows at lightning speed along solid wires and leaps through endless miles of space? The greatest scientists proclaim it a mystery, its origin unknown, its future unpredictable.

Electricity, unseen, unheard, moves through the air that we breathe and live in. And so, too, the Secret Agent may be with us, close at our sides. He is a friend worth having even if we are not aware of his presence—even if we only glimpse his strange career in the records of his exploits.

Look for Secret Agent "X" each month. Here is a magazine that is more than a magazine. Here is a magazine that brings to you the startling, amazing records of a man who is a master of mystery. The man of a thousand faces—a thousand disguises—a thousand surprises. Secret Agent "X".



"I Paid Iris Vorel \$1 and I Won \$5,000 and Happiness"

Like millions of others I came to the beginning of the year 1933 completely bewildered.

One business venture after another had failed; I couldn't hold a job—because my employers went broke—I was up against it.

I had a dollar. What good was that to me when I needed hundreds for my wife and children and mother and others who looked to me for support.

Foretold Future Day-By-Day

I played Iris Vorel to win (as a gambler would say) with my bottom dollar—and I WON! I bought her famous day-by-day Forecast for the coming year. I confess I didn't believe much in it at the start, but week-by-week as things began to happen, *precisely* as she said they would, I began to *bank* on those forecasts. I would look ahead in my book and plan my actions on days Miss Vorel said would be favorable.

Attempted Assassination of Roosevelt

Miss Vorel told me in her amazing—I should say *startling* forecast—that "A New Leader Will Arise (Roosevelt)... Hoarded Money Will Come Out of Hiding (the gold order)... Beer Would Refresh Me... Attempted Assassination of World Leaders (Roosevelt, Cermak, Mussolini, Dollfuss)... A Small Market Boom (July-August)... Recognition of Russia (near completion)... Prohibition Will Be Repealed."

Of course, these things are now common property—but I knew they were going to happen months before they happened—because I was banking on Iris Vorel. I can't tell you the thousand and one little things that helped me daily—almost hourly. How and When and Where to find a job was naturally the biggest help, accounting for my \$5,000 income.

But I was able also to prepare for my daughter's illness—knew when she'd be well; how to comfort my wife in these depression days—what to say and do and when—how to manage my mortgage—every word practical, useful, worthwhile and to the point.

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The Cosmic Press, distributors of Miss Vorel's world-renowned forecasts has asked my permission to print my experiences and I am very pleased to permit them to do so. You may be sure that I got my Iris Vorel Mammoth Astrological Guide and Forecast for 1934, the very first minute I could—and I'm happy to say that I have absolute confidence in 1934 because she predicts a doubled income and I know I'll get it!

J. L. R., New York, N. Y.

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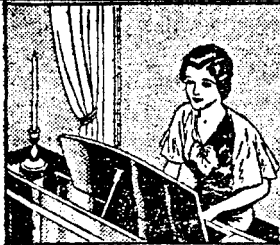
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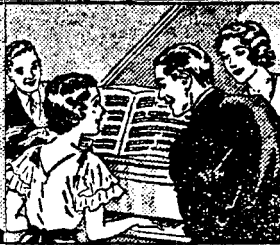
At parties everyone seemed to be able to add to the fun, while I was just a wall-flower.

I received fewer and fewer invitations. Only long, dreary evenings seemed to be in store for me.

Then one day I read about a new way to learn music that had made countless millions of thousands.



The Free Demonstration Lesson proved that this way of learning music was as easy as A-B-C. Real fun, too!



Then came Janet's party. All were fascinated when I offered to play... and actually did!



No more faceless evenings now. My musical ability has brought me romance—Bill and I have announced our engagement.

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—shortest road to friends, popularity, good times

THE interesting story told above is not just one unusual case. It is typical of the experiences of more than 600,000 other folks who have learned music—who have become socially popular—this quick, modern, easy as A-B-C way.

You, too, can learn to play—to entertain others—to pep up any party—just as these thousands of others are doing. And best of all you can accomplish this without the expense of a private teacher.

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The success of this U. S. School method of musical instruction is due to two things. One is the fact that it makes everything so simple—so crystal clear—so easy to understand. First it tells you how to do a thing. Then it shows you in pictures how to do it. Then you do it yourself and hear it. What could be simpler?

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