

10¢

SECRET AGENT "X"



THE MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES



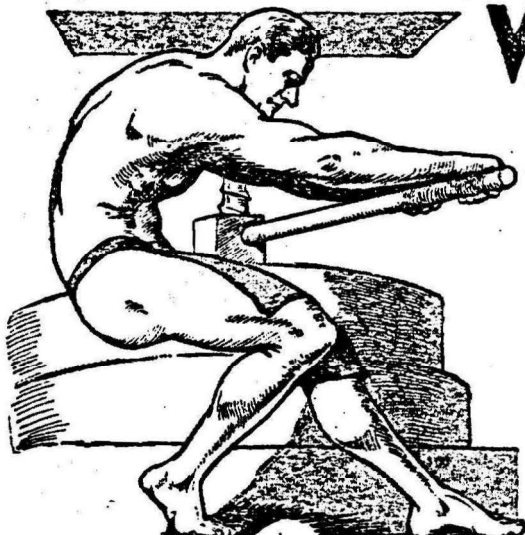
The
**SPECTRAL
STRANGLER**

Complete Book-Length Novel

FEATURING

Secret Agent "X"

STOP YOUR Rupture Worries!



Learn About My Perfected Unique Rupture Invention!

Why worry and suffer with that rupture any longer? Learn now about my perfected rupture invention. It has brought ease, comfort, and happiness to thousands by assisting Nature in relieving and curing many cases of reducible hernia! You can imagine how happy these thousands of rupture sufferers were when they wrote me to report relief, comfort and cures! How would YOU like to be able to feel that same happiness—to sit down and write me such a message—a few months from today? Hurry—send coupon quick for Free Rupture Book, PROOF of results and invention revelation!

Mysterious-Acting Device Binds and Draws the Broken Parts Together as You Would a Broken Limb!

Surprisingly—continually—my perfected Automatic Air Cushions draw the broken parts together allowing Nature, the Great Healer, to swing into action! All the while you should experience the most heavenly comfort and security. Look! No obnoxious springs or pads or metal girdles! No salves or plasters! My complete appliance is feather-lite, durable, invisible, sanitary and CHEAP IN PRICE! Wouldn't YOU like to say "good-bye" to rupture worries and "hello" to NEW freedom . . . NEW glory in living . . . NEW happiness—with the help of Mother Nature and my mysterious-acting Air Cushion Appliances?

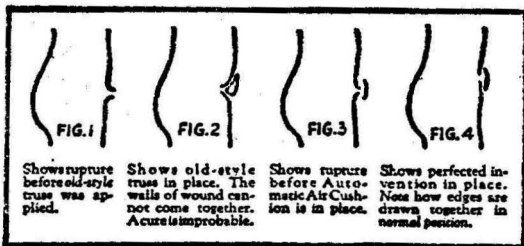


FIG. 1 Shows rupture before old-style truss is applied.

FIG. 2 Shows old-style truss in place. The walls of wound cannot come together. Acute is improbable.

FIG. 3 Shows rupture before Automatic Air Cushion is in place.

FIG. 4 Shows perfected invention in place. Note how edges are drawn together in normal position.

PROOF!

Reports on Reducible Rupture Cases

"LIFTS 400 LBS."

"Have no further egg for your Appliance as I'm O. K. Wore it a year, now can lift 400 lbs., without any fear." — Mr. J. Borden, 686 W. Locust St., York, Pa.

"CAN RUN UP HILL"

"I had a rupture about 14 years, then wore your Appliance for 8. It is about a year since I threw it away. I feel fine, gaining weight nicely. I can run up and down hill which I never could before." — Mr. J. Borden, 686 W. Locust St., York, Pa.

Sent On Trial!

My invention is never sold in stores nor by agents. Beware of imitations! You can get it only from my U. S. factories or from my 33 foreign offices! And I'll send it to you on trial. If you don't like it—if it doesn't "work"—it costs you NOTHING. But don't buy now. Get the facts about it FIRST! Write me today. I'll answer in plain, sealed envelope with amazing information free. Stop Your Rupture Worries; send coupon!

Mall Coupon Quick for FREE Rupture Revelations

Rupture Book FREE!

CONFIDENTIAL COUPON FOR RUPTURE SUSPECTS

Dr. C. Brooks, 573 State St., Marshall, Mich.

Send me your new Free Book, amazing rupture method revelation, proof of results, etc. without obligation, and in plain, sealed envelope.

Name

State

City

Send to for man, woman, or child



Dr. C. Brooks, Inventor

Vol. I
No. 2

SECRET AGENT

OR
X

THE MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES

MAR.
1934

Rose Wyn, Editor

Another complete novel in twenty-two thrill-packed chapters based on the amazing exploits of Secret Agent "X"

THE SPECTRAL STRANGLER (Book-length Novel) By BRANT HOUSE 6

Screams of terror throttled by a ghostly garroter! Lips sealed by a death so awful that men turned their eyes away! A genius of evil flung a challenge in the path of Secret Agent "X". And, with all the resources at his command, he played Death's Lottery along that terror trail.

THE SECRET COUNCIL 83
Behind the scenes with Secret Agent "X"

SATAN'S SCALPEL By EMILE C. TEPPERMAN 85
Roger Vane, ace dick of the B.P.A., was up against the most ghastly spectacle of his career.

MASTER OF FEAR By FRANK GRUBER 96
Two short words were all this soft-spoken stranger uttered—and men covered in fear.

TERROR TRAIN (Complete Novelette) By RICHARD B. SALE 105
The Crescent Limited, snowbound in the Rockies, became a gory horror.

Published monthly by Periodical House, Inc. Office of publication, 29 Worthington St., Springfield, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 56 West 45th Street, New York, N. Y. Second class entry pending at the Post Office at Springfield, Mass., under the act of March 3, 1879. This registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1933, by Periodical House, Inc. Manuscripts will be handled with care but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. For advertising rates address Periodical House, Inc., 56 West 45th Street, New York City.

THE STRANGE
EXOTIC WORLD
OF TWILIGHT
MEN AND WOMEN



THE THIRD SEX:
MAN OR WOMAN?
CAN YOU TELL
"THEM" FROM
OTHERS?

MYSTERIOUS FASCINATION

A Great Social Evil Uncovered



Now a Doctor has dared to tear away the veil of mystery that hides the facts behind homosexuality. In blunt understandable words he describes the unbelievable facts. "STRANGE LOVES, A Study in Sexual Abnormalities," by Dr. La Forest Potter, noted authority, is a document so weird, so startling, as to amaze the civilized world. Dr. Potter says, "NO MAN ON EARTH HAS A CHANCE AGAINST A WOMAN ONCE SHE HAS SUCCEUMBED TO ANOTHER WOMAN." A startling, provocative indictment against the false modesty that has been responsible for the growth of these fantastic, strange, amatory curiosities among savage and civilized races.

Dr. Potter tells about the hidden secret passions that dominate these women's exotic lives. He talks about the tragic duality of the effeminate man—half man—half woman. Fearlessly, openly, the meaning of many misunderstood subjects is brought under the searchlight of truth. Sadism—Necrophilia—Phallic Worship—Sodomy—Pederasty—Tribadism—Saphism—Uranism—the normal man and woman will refuse to believe that such abnormalities exist and have been practiced through the ages.

For hundreds of years men and women have talked with hushed voices about "STRANGE PEOPLE"—men who are not men—women who are not women. No one has ever dared to talk out in the open about THE "THIRD SEX." Is it any wonder that the shocking, lurid facts of this great social evil are unknown to the great mass of men and women. Because this subject is considered taboo, strange nick-names have arisen. "Fairies, Fancies, Queers, Lesbians, Perverts"—these are but a few of the names used to describe these female men and male women.



ASTONISHING DISCLOSURES ABOUT THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS MEN!

How many of the famous men of history were considered "odd"? Socrates, Plato, Caesar, Virgil, Oscar Wilde, Leonardo da Vinci, Lord Byron, Tchaikowsky, the musician; Walt Whitman, the gentle, lovable poet; Napoleon—men and women of all kinds in all stages of life.

For Sophisticated

Adult Readers!

This document in book form contains bewildering disclosures and discoveries of a subject that is seldom if ever discussed, that most people know little or nothing about—yet one that deserves the most painstaking and thorough investigation. A limited edition has been prepared for ADULTS ONLY. 256 pages, beautifully bound in cloth, printed on fine paper—for the book lover and collector of rare, esoteric literature. Reserve a copy of this book—the most startling document of its kind—by mailing the coupon. **Order Today—Edition Is Limited!**

ROBERT DODSLEY CO.

110 W. 42nd St., Dept. C-27, New York, N. Y.

THE ROBERT DODSLEY CO., Dept. C-27,
110 West 42nd Street,
New York, N. Y.

Please send me IN PLAIN WRAPPER a copy of the new edition of Dr. La Forest Potter's book "STRANGE LOVES—A Study in Sexual Abnormalities." I hereby affirm that I am an adult person.

I am enclosing remittance of \$2.50. Send book all charges postpaid.
 Ship C. O. D. I promise to pay postman \$2.50 plus postage on delivery.

Name

Address

Town

State

(We reserve the right to return all orders after this edition is exhausted. Prepaid orders receive preference and will be shipped before C. O. D. orders.) (Canadian and Foreign orders must be accompanied by remittance for \$2.75.)

Please mention PERIODICAL HOUSE GROUP when answering advertisements

Stomach Disorders Threatened His Life Says N. Y. Patrolman

"I tried everything," says Officer David R. Caldwell, 3781 Bronxwood Ave., New York City. "I suffered from gas in the stomach and heartburn so bad that I could hardly stand it. My case was diagnosed by one doctor as ulcers.



DAVID R. CALDWELL

I suffered much agony and lost weight until one day I saw an advertisement in the New York Daily News, by the Udgas Co., St. Paul, Minn. I wrote for their treatment and thanks be to God I did, for today I am a different man. I have no pain, can eat anything and I am getting back to my normal weight."

Acid Stomach Afflicts Millions

as every physician agrees, the curse of millions. It is the curse of millions. It is the most common cause of stomach or gastric ulcers as well as many other distressing conditions and there are comparatively few adults who can truly say it has never troubled them. In addition to stomach ulcers, acid stomach is

often the direct cause of gas pains, dyspeptic condition, poor digestion, pains after eating, bloating, belching, gnawing pains, heartburn, gastritis, sour stomach, constipation, etc.

Double Acting Treatment Needed

To combat these conditions you need a treatment that will first neutralize these excess acid secretions and then protect, soothe and tone the membranes of stomach lining in order that the process of healing may take place. This is the function of the Udgas Treatment and the excellent results it has produced in so many thousands of cases are due to this double acting feature. For stomach ulcer victims, the Udgas treatment includes a diet list prepared by a world-famous clinical hospital.

Offered On
15-DAYS TRIAL

And now that the merits of this splendid treatment have been so conclusively indicated, the distributors invite all sufferers to try it at their risk and are willing to send a full 15-DAY TREATMENT ON TRIAL. So if you can believe what your own stomach tells you—if you agree that freedom from stomach pains, distress and misery are the surest proof of results, accept this liberal trial offer and see for yourself what the Udgas Treatment can do for your sick stomach.

***** Clip and Mail Now *****
UDGA, Inc., 1152 Feet-Schultz Bldg.,
St. Paul, Minnesota.

Please send me your 15-DAY TRIAL OFFER on the Udgas Treatment. Also free copy of your book on stomach troubles. Add 50¢ of postpayment and \$1,000.00 Reward Offer to back it up. This does not obligate me in any way.

Name

No. and Street

City

State

Please mention PERIODICAL HOUSE GROUP when answering advertisements

NEW STUFF!

WINNIE WINKLE

For men only. Boss & Bubbles, Fannie Hill, Only a Boy, Harold Teen & Lillians, Farmer's Daughter, Papa and Mama, The French Stenographer, The Vampire, The End of Helen, What Tommy Saw Under the Parlor Door, Twelve Gay Love Letters Read Two Ways, Gay Life in Paris, also, 50 Rare and Daring French type pictures. (Kind men like.) Also 50 Montmartre type pictures of beautiful girls in thrilling, snappy, artistic poses with their fellows. We all order the same day we receive them. All for only \$1.00. Send cash, stamps or money order.

IMPERIAL NOVELTY CO.

176 FIFTH AVENUE NEW YORK CITY

"BRONCO" 25 Cal. AUTOMATIC



Fires 7 shots in 3 seconds; accurate; powerful; will not misfire \$7.45 or 1am; double safety; 3rd model; perfect grip; blued.

25 Cal. 19 Shot \$7.95
Hoster, 600 Cartridges, 600 box
22 Cal. 8 Shot Automatic \$8.45
Mil. & Police D. A. Revolver 5" Blued \$2.20; & \$8. \$10.00
\$2 Deposit on C.O.D.'s. S&W, Colts, etc. Catalog for stamp.
H. G. LEE SALES CO. H. G. 25 West 32nd St., New York

Pep!

are simply marvelous. Used for 28 years by millions of men who sought youthful vigor, pep and energy. Don't experiment, but be safe, sure and satisfied. 42-tube package, triple strength, 25-tube boxes, 25. SPECIAL STRENGTH (for severe cases) 12-tube boxes, 15. C.O.D. add 15c. Plain wrapper. Money back if not pleased. (Agents Wanted.)

VITA DRUG CO., Dept. CR
170 W. 74th St., New York, N. Y.

Title and Mac

Maggie and Jiggs, Dumb Dora, Boss and Bubbles, Franches and Brownie, French Stenographer, A Bachelor's Dream, A Model Life, Adam and Eve, Rip and Alice, Harold Teen and Lillians, Toots and Casper, The Gumps, Winnie Winkle, Gus and Gussie, Barney Grogg and Squat-Flegs, Enoch McNut and Pearl, Title the Teller, Care-men Love, (Chorus) Girl Love, Turkish Love, Apache Love, Old Maid's Love, Papa Love, Sailors on Shore, What Tom Saw Through the Keyhole, When Harry Comes Home, What the Window Washer Saw, Mabel and the Ice-man, A Turkish Harem, Mexican Love, and 80 Snappy French Girl Poses, 5 full size French Lovers' Pictures, French Kiss and Women in Fashion's Love Faces, Also Eula-Hula Dancing Girl. All the above will be sent you prepaid for only \$1.00. SEA-BREEZE NOVELTY HOUSE, P. O. Box 1454, New Haven, Conn., Dept. G-13-2-TC.

GET STRONG!

10 WEEK CHALLENGE

ALL THESE ONLY \$2.75 SAVE HALF.

Get 15 copies cheap crusader advertisement. Personal kind price reduction. Full page during best, more than 1000. Best and best ever, this year and next year. Order now! SEND NO MONEY. We'll send you 15 copies of the 15th issue with order.

CRUSADER CO., Dept. 1001, 112 Chambers St. N. Y.

"X" Marks the Spot!

GET ready! Take aim! Fire! Another bull's-eye hit! Like a bombshell, Secret Agent "X" came to you last month. Like a bombshell loaded with Mystery, Adventure, super-thrills and the dynamite of Reality came this master crime-hunter, this investigator extraordinary, this man of a thousand faces, a thousand disguises, a thousand surprises.

He made a host of loyal friends and followers overnight. The first published chronicle of his adventures was acclaimed a bull's-eye hit by readers of detective stories in every section of these United States and in England and Canada.

"X" marks the spot!

Not of a murder victim this time. Not of an accident—but of a man whose actions and exploits are new, original, different, startling.

Because his life is surrounded with mystery, because Death rides ever at his elbow along the black byways of the underworld, he is forced to play a lone hand. Even his few intimates do not know his real identity. He guards the question mark of his past as a priceless possession.

In his battle of wits and resourcefulness and stark courage, with criminals, the secret of his identity is his hidden ace in the hole. He moves with swiftness, with daring, with uncanny insight—and the weapons he uses are unique in all the earth.

The lore of the great detectives is at his finger tips. The lore of the world's police forces. The lore of many branches of science—chemistry, criminology, psychology, cryptography, ballistics, phonetics, pharmacology. The practical lore of the black depths of the underworld where men live by the fierce hatreds, the glaring-eyed suspicions and the stark fears of jungle beasts.

Among this monstrous and motley crew he moves. Among tigerish racketeers. Among red-jawed wolves of murder. Among slack-winged, blackmailing vultures who feast on the carrion of wrecked lives. Among slinking jackals who snarl and snap, dragging their weakened victims down. Among cobra-headed reptiles who pass in the semblance of men.

Again he comes to you in a gripping, book-length novel of twenty-two chapters. Twenty-two chapters of suspense, action, and heart-throb in one of the most startling episodes of his career.

You who followed him last month will welcome him again. You who are to meet him for the first time will be introduced to one of the most strange and glamorous figures ever to make his bow to the reading public. Secret Agent "X"—man of a thousand faces. Man of Mystery—and Destiny.

The

Another
Breath-Taking
Episode
From
the Records
of
Secret
Agent
"X"



While women screamed and men shouted hoarsely, he plunged head first down the slippery hardwood stairs.

CHAPTER I

MURDER IN THE NIGHT

WARNING prickles raced along Federal Detective Bill Scanlon's spine. A hunch told him he was being followed. He was a little man grown gray in the service—gray hair, gray mustache, and thin, grayish features. He looked slight—almost weak. Yet, in the long years he'd worked for Uncle Sam, he'd built up a reputation for courage and ability that few men in the D. C. I. could equal.

He turned his head alertly, stared back, and something seemed to move behind him in the long shadow cast by the trunk of a leafless maple.

For a moment he stood uncertainly, then retraced his steps.

There was no fear on his face, but his eyes were watchful. He slid the flat bulk of an automatic out of his side pocket and held it against his thigh, moving forward cautiously like a man walking on eggshells.

He came close to the big maple, sidestepped around it — but no one was there.

Spectral Strangler

Silent, horrible as the crushing coils of a serpent were those unseen fingers that blotted out men's lives. A criminal of satanic proportions had risen—the "Black Master," whose victims fell with livid, hideous faces and protruding tongues that seemed a ghastly mockery of the fate they had suffered. Along this terrible murder trail Secret Agent "X" gambled with the Dice of Death.

**By
Brant
House**



A puff of night wind clattered branches overhead. They were sheathed with ice and made a dry rattle like skeleton fingers clicking together. Bill Scanlon stood waiting.

Then he relaxed. A cat with coal black fur and glowing green eyes spat at him and slunk away. It might have been an evil omen, but Scanlon wasn't superstitious. He thought it was only the cat he had seen.

Pocketing his gun, he set off up the street again. There was some one on it he wanted to see—some one who

might be a valuable witness in a mysterious murder and kidnaping in which the government was interested.

A shadow detached itself from the blackness of a house stoop opposite the maple. Slinking spiderlike, the shadow moved after Scanlon, stalking from tree to tree, hedge to hedge, and stoop to stoop, drawing closer—always closer.

Scanlon turned to stare again, but he saw nothing. The shadow was crouched as still as death. There was something deadly, something horrible,

in the purposefulness with which it drew nearer.

Scanlon moved on. The person he wanted to interview lived on this block.

A twig covered with ice snapped behind him. He turned a third time, staring, his breath rising like steam in the cold night air.

Still no one was in sight, but the skin along Scanlon's scalp began to tingle. He grasped the butt of his gun, holding it in his pocket, his finger crooked through the trigger guard.

On his left was a hedge of evergreens shielding the lawn of a darkened house. The evergreens were covered with hoarfrost. There was a gap between them that seemed as black as the cavernous opening in the front of a skull. Scanlon stared toward it for seconds.

Then the pupils of his eyes widened. He crouched, opened his lips as if to speak—but no words came.

Somewhere in the darkness behind the hedge there was faint, quick movement. It seemed no more than the blurring of a shadow against another shadow. No one appeared. No hand came into sight. But suddenly Scanlon uttered a hoarse, rasping gurgle and reached toward his throat.

His body jerked spasmodically. For a moment he gave the impression of a man dangling horribly at the end of a taut rope. His shadow writhed and leaped on the icy sidewalk beside him. He slipped, skidded, made choking sounds, his finger tightening involuntarily on the trigger of his automatic.

The gun belched flame in his pocket. It made a report that blasted the silence of the winter night. The bullet struck the icy pavement and whined away into the darkness.

Scanlon had both hands at his throat now. He appeared to be clawing invisible, horrible fingers away from his neck; appeared to be fighting a losing battle with some hideous unseen strangler who had held him in an unearthly grip.

But he wasn't a man to give up eas-

ily. His struggles became more desperate, more frenzied. He tore at his coat, ripped open his collar with fingers as taut as talons. His shadow mimicked every movement he made, leaping like a dancer pirouetting to some mad, macabre rhythm.

Then at last he slipped and fell to the pavement, his face purpling, his eyes bulging out. He continued to writhe, but he made no sound now except the terrible wheezing of air fighting to escape through an aperture too small for it. The mottled, hideous purple of his skin deepened until his complexion had the hue of an overripe plum. Livid spots appeared on it where veins stood out. They seemed ready to burst sickeningly as blood pumped through them from his wildly laboring heart.

His movements grew slowly feebler. Then from his open mouth his tongue protruded grotesquely, horribly, as though he were mocking the unseen, silent thing that had struck him down.

ECHOES of the shot fired by his dying fingers whispered along the night-darkened street. A light flashed in a house diagonally across from the spot where he lay. A man came out on the porch, peered around, saw Scanlon's body, and ran across the street to it.

For seconds the man stood bareheaded, staring down; then he turned quickly, his eyes dark with fright, and ran back into the house to the telephone.

Silence descended on the street again—a silence that was punctuated only by the skeleton clicking of the ice-coated branches. They seemed to be sounding a monotonous, macabre rhythm—a dirge of death.

The rhythm was interrupted at last by the wail of a police siren up the long street. Headlights flared on the icy pavements. A slim, green roadster shot into view. It was a radio cruiser come in response to the bareheaded man's telephoned message to headquarters.

The cop at the wheel was leaning sidewise, staring out. He jerked the car's nose toward the curb and brought it to a halt beside the body of Scanlon. He and his companion jumped out.

They bent down, opened Scanlon's coat, and pulled papers from his pocket—then stared in surprise. The taller of the two cops spoke grimly.

"A Federal dick. Call headquarters quick. They'll want to know about this."

The other cop obeyed. He started at a run across the street, climbed the steps of the lighted house, and disappeared inside.

In twenty minutes the police cruiser at the curb was joined by a black headquarters' car filled with detectives. It slid to a screeching stop. The men leaped out and crowded close around Scanlon, their breaths mingling in the icy air and their long overcoats making sprawled shadows on the pavement.

They stared at Scanlon's credentials and examined his body. Inspector John Burks, head of the homicide squad was among them—a tall man with snapping black eyes and jet-black eyebrows that contrasted sharply with his white hair. He began speaking in abrupt sentences.

"Strangled! Look at his face!"

A police sergeant flashed his light lower, then answered hoarsely, a note of fear in his voice.

"There ain't no finger marks, chief. It's like—like that woman who was killed last week, and those other guys—the taxi driver and the feller with him that they found in the vacant lot. Four of 'em murdered now—and all alike!"

Inspector Burks was silent for tense seconds. His thin face was working. His mouth was harsh. Four murders all alike! Four homicides as mysterious as they were horrible! Men strangled apparently by ghost fingers—their lives snuffed out by unseen hands. There had been no mark even on the white neck of the woman, the

first victim. Yet her eyes, too, had been staring and her tongue had protruded in that terrible mockery of death.

This was no ordinary murder case. It was uncanny, baffling, with the police already in a *cul-de-sac* from which there seemed to be no logical way out. A new and hideous crime wave was engulfing the city. Burks struck his clenched fist sharply against his palm.

"There's a man I'd look for in this," he grated. "A man who might do such things—the criminal who calls himself Secret Agent 'X.'"

The sergeant bending over nodded somberly.

"Right, chief. It's the kind of screwy job he might pull. But he's a tough man to lay hold of. He never looks the same twice."

"He'll slip up," said Burks harshly. "He's almost done it a couple of times. And if—if he pulled this job—by God, I'll land him in the hot seat."

Burks's eyes had an eaglelike fierceness as he stared down at the face of the dead Government operative. The distorted features and grotesquely mocking tongue of Scanlon seemed to speak of hideous things.

The medical examiner was still going over the body. He shook his head slowly.

"No doubt about it—it's strangulation. You'd think a slipknot had been tied around his throat, or fingers held there—except that there are no marks."

"Except!" Burks echoed the word bitterly. The ice-coated branches that were like bony fingers above his head scraped together in a sound reminiscent of soft, sardonic laughter.

Then a detective spoke, touching Burks's arm.

"Who's that guy over there?" he asked.

He was looking up the block at a figure that had suddenly appeared. A man swung into sight. He was tall, an overcoat flapped around his heels, and he was coming toward them

across the street. Blunt features showed under a slouch hat. He was dressed like a young business man; but his eyes burned with a strange, vivid intentness. He walked up to the group of detectives around Scanlon until one of them stepped forward and barred his way.

"Keep back, guy! There's been a murder. Who are you?"

The newcomer didn't answer. He pulled a wallet from his pocket, fumbled in it and drew out a tattered press card.

"A news hound!" said Burks sourly. "How did you get wind of this so quick?"

The stranger uttered one word then, talking with clipped emphasis as though speech were precious.

"Radio," he said.

"It's tough," snarled Burks, "when every Tom, Dick, and Harry listens in on police calls. Headquarters will have to use code for everything if they want to keep the riffraff away."

THE man with the press card ignored this harsh comment. He pushed closer to the dead man until another detective barked at him to keep back.

When he glimpsed Scanlon's face, he gave an abrupt, horrified start. The hot flame of some deep emotion sprang into his eyes. His hands clenched at his sides. He breathed quickly, deeply. Then, as if afraid he might be betraying himself, he set his face muscles into masklike inscrutability.

He stood silently staring down at the features of Scanlon, but the strange, burning light in his eyes did not abate. Then he asked a few pointed questions which the detectives answered sullenly.

"If you print any phony story about this, I'll have your hide," said Burks harshly. "This is murder—the fourth one like it. Something big is up, see? You'd better be damn careful what you hand out in that lousy sheet of yours."

The man with the press card nodded somberly. He took another long look at Scanlon's face as though that face, even with the distortions that hideous death had wrought, were hauntingly familiar. His gaze wandered over Scanlon's twisted, crumpled body.

Then he lighted a cigarette, puffed on it a moment, and, as if by accident, let it drop from his fingers. But, as he stooped to recover it, his eyes rested for an instant on Scanlon's exposed cuff, where faint markings showed, unobserved as yet by the police. The slain D.C.I. man had written them there with a pencil, jotted down an address. And the stranger, in the flash of a second memorized that address, storing it away in his mind. Then, as quietly and mysteriously as he had come, he moved off into the darkness.

Inspector Burks, occupied with the murder investigation, didn't notice the stranger's absence for a few seconds. When he did, he shot an abrupt, uneasy question.

"Where did that bird go?"

The detective-sergeant at his side looked around in puzzlement.

"I don't know, chief. I thought he was still here."

Burks stood scowling, hands thrust deep in pockets, eyebrows drawn together.

"I wonder—" he said slowly. Then he whirled on the men around him and gave a harsh, quick order. "Don't let him get away. I want to talk to him."

Two cops broke swiftly from the group, spreading out in different directions, searching the street, their flash lights in their hands. They covered the whole block, then came back shrugging apologetically.

"He beat it, chief. We looked. We couldn't find him any place."

There was no one in sight along the dark street; but a sound suddenly rose above the clicking of the ice-coated branches. It was a whistle — faint, melodious, eerie. It had a strangely ventriloquistic quality that seemed to fill the whole air at once.

As Burks stood listening tensely, trying to locate it, it died away. Then, somewhere down the street, an auto engine roared startlingly into life. Gears muttered, whined, grew silent as a fast car swept away into the night.

CHAPTER II

A DARING DISGUISE

THE man who had displayed the press card didn't go to any newspaper office. He drove swiftly through the winter darkness, staring straight ahead. His eyes were like living coals. His knuckles on the black wheel of the car were white and tense.

Before his gaze, the dead, distorted face of Bill Scanlon seemed to hover. Scanlon whom he had known and worked with in days gone by! Scanlon who had guided him, aided him along the rough road of a perilous profession! Scanlon, loyal to the point of death, who had once even saved his life.

What would Scanlon's wife and young son say when they heard he had been slain? They knew his work was dangerous. They were never sure when he would return. But that wouldn't make their sorrow at his passing any less.

The man at the car's wheel muttered huskily, softly to himself. The words came almost like a chant.

"There's a kid and a woman waiting!" he said.

The glowing light in his eyes seemed to deepen as his lips moved. It grew more steely, more bright, like flame reflected from the polished, gleaming point of a sword. If wise old Bill Scanlon had failed in his mission, fallen a victim to the unseen strangler, then the police must be right. Then this was no ordinary murder menace. The killer back of it all must have the cunning brain of a fiend.

The man of mystery made sure no one was following him. He turned the battleship nose of his roadster into a cross-town street, sped westward

toward the river, entering upon a long, smooth drive that followed the curving line of the shore.

Millionaires' homes and huge apartment houses rose on one side of the drive. On the other were paths and a parkway leading down to the water, curtained now in darkness. The man threaded his way through evening traffic, parking at last on a side street.

He leaped out of the car and walked forward, the burning look of intense emotion still in his eyes. He turned a corner, moved faster still, then stopped suddenly to press a hand to his side. A twinge of pain had come for an instant. Under his fingers was the scar of an old wound received on a battlefield in France.

A fleeting, bitter smile played over the tall man's lips. Years ago doctors had predicted that the wound would kill him—that he had only a few months to live. But he had gone on living just the same. There was in his body energy that seemed inexhaustible—energy that even death could not seem to conquer. There was an iron will like a living dynamo that drove him on night and day. He had work to do, strange, secret tasks to perform. He wasn't ready yet to answer the call of the Grim Reaper.

He turned into an avenue running parallel with the drive, walking blocks beyond the spot where he had parked his car before heading back toward the river again. He was on a dark street now—a street deserted, with a high wall on one side of it.

Over the wall, against the night sky, the chimneys and peaked roof of a house were faintly visible. It was a huge pile of masonry, bleak and austere—the old Montgomery mansion left empty by the litigation of heirs who could reach no agreement in the settlement of an estate. It had stood empty for years while the legatees battled like wolves.

The man moved along the wall, creeping deeper into the shadows.

Suddenly he stopped. His burning eyes scanned the block in both directions. No one was in sight.

Defly he inserted a key in a door so nearly the color of the wall itself that it seemed hidden.

The door opened, the man moved inside as silently as a shadow. He was in a place of desolation and ruin now. In the old garden behind the Montgomery mansion.

Statues fallen from their pedestals lay like pale ghosts on the weed-grown grass. A summer house, tumbled down and rotting, showed like the skeletal ribs of a great beast.

He picked his way past a fountain that had long since run dry, entering a rear door of the old house. He moved by feeling alone, moved as one familiar with his strange surroundings.

It wasn't until he was safe inside the house that he flashed on a small light. He was behind the old butler's pantry now. Ahead of him were great silent rooms where moths burrowed in the once rich carpets and where rats scurried across the floors.

He pulled at a tier of shelves against the pantry wall, and suddenly the shelves swung outward. The man stepped behind them into the darkness of a hidden chamber. He swung the shelves after him, touched a switch, and lights in the strange room came on. It was a hideout containing many peculiar and remarkable objects.

SEATING himself before a three-sided mirror with movable rod lights above it, the man's long hands began to do strange, mysterious things to his face. Under their magic touch his whole appearance underwent a transformation.

The blunt, roundish features of the business man melted away, disappeared. The eyebrows changed. The hair of the head revealed itself as an elaborate toupee.

Suddenly the man appeared as he really was—as no one, not even his

few closest intimates ever saw him.

The rod lights overhead sprayed radiance on brown hair, on smooth-shaven features that had a boyish cast to them. On gray eyes with a steely glint in their depths.

It was only when he turned to pick something off the shelf that light fell on his face at another angle. Then new lines were brought out—lines that made him seem suddenly older—lines of poise and maturity—with the record of countless experiences and adventures written into them.

He stared at his own reflection for a moment, seeming to salute it grimly.

Secret Agent "X"—the man of a thousand faces—a thousand disguises—a thousand surprises.

The man who was a scourge to the criminals prowling the black alleys of the underworld. The man regarded by the police as criminal himself—even now suspected of murder.

He couldn't set them right, either. He was committed to secrecy and silence; committed to move into terrible dangers and walk into the shadow of the Valley of Death alone.

The police couldn't know what document reposed in the strong box on a shelf above his head. For an outsider to plumb its secrets would have meant death. The lid of the strong box concealed a charge of terrible explosive to protect its contents from meddlers. But every word of the document was emblazoned in the Secret Agent's mind. He could have quoted it from memory, word for word, paragraph for paragraph.*

It was unsigned, but it bore the coat of arms of the United States Government. And he knew that the telegram

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: This document of the Secret Agent's is said to have come from some high official of the Government, giving him strange and unlimited powers. These powers are in recognition of services he performed for his country in the Intelligence Division during the World War. It also gives notice that ten public-spirited men of great wealth have subscribed a huge fund for his use, part of the fund being on deposit in the First National Bank, to be drawn by him under the cognomen of Eliska Fund.

The Secret Agent's strange hideout contains a chemical and photographic laboratory, and a small arsenal of bizarre offensive and defensive weapons of his own devising. Also the elaborates make-up material used in his uncanny disguises.

which had reached him that day by way of the First National Bank had also come straight from Washington, D. C. Before destroying the latter, the Agent read it again, committing it to memory as he had the document.

Mark Roemer, kidnaped chemist, whose assistant was murdered, employed under cover by Chemical Warfare branch of Army. Was working on important formula. Consequences of his disappearance may be disastrous. Advise you investigate immediately.

This, too, was unsigned; but was couched in a Government code. The Agent alone knew its high source. Between the lines of it he seemed to read a second, more sinister message, written by the trailing claws of crime—claws that were weaving a horrible spider's web of murder—building a menace so great that no man could say what hydra-headed horror might rise from it.

Mark Roemer kidnaped! His woman assistant murdered! A taxi driver and an underworld character slain—their bodies left like carrion in a vacant lot! And now brave-hearted, shrewd old Bill Scanlon murdered, too! A sinister crime pattern ran through it all.

Agent "X" crumpled the telegram viciously, touched a match to it, dropped it into a metal dish to burn. Even before he had received it, he had been watching the Roemer case, scenting the unseen miasma of horror surrounding it.

The telegram did not state what formula Roemer had been at work upon, what strange thing he had discovered. But Agent "X" had an inkling. If he were right, then the four ghastly murders were forerunners of others even more terrible.

He faced the mirror again, looked at himself.

Secret Agent "X". Who was he? No one knew. Whispers there were—whispers in a few high places. There were those who said he had the Government's backing, that he was a lone

campaigner in the war being waged on organized crime.

His fingers began to move again. From a shelf cluttered with jars and sticks of grease paint, nose and cheek plates, and dozens of ingenious make-up devices, he selected what he wanted.

He dabbed pigments on his face, covered his skin with a strange volatile substance and sculptured it into new lines. Strips of transparent, tissue-thin adhesive tape changed the contours of his face muscles. He covered his own brown hair with a white, cunningly made toupee, blackened and thickened his eyebrows. As he worked, deftly, surely, his keen eyes studied a photograph on the shelf before him.

Tonight, in his efforts to unravel the mystery and horror of the strangler murders, he was prepared to take a daring, desperate step.

When at last he rose from his seat, he had the exact likeness of the man in the photograph—a distinguished public official. There was the same silvery-white hair. The same gaunt, thin-lipped face. The same shaggy, menacing eyebrows. Once again "X's" skilled fingers had achieved a seemingly magical disguise.

He changed his suit and overcoat, dressed carefully, slipped a set of mysterious chromium tools into his pocket, and selected two weapons from his strange arsenal. Then he set out, pausing only long enough to start the mechanism of a hidden seismographic machine which would record the vibrations of footsteps if any one entered his hideout during his absence.

He threaded his way through the desolate garden and out onto the dark street.

Turning his face downtown, he strode swiftly along and hailed a passing cab, being careful to keep his coat collar up and his hat brim pulled down. The light in his eyes showed like a steady, glowing flame. He had started on a vengeance quest for the murderer of Bill Scanlon.

CHAPTER III MURDER CLUB

THERE was grim method in the movements of Secret Agent "X" after he left his hideout. Step by step, he began to trace the course of the murder wave that had resulted in his old friend's death.

He went first to a sequestered suburb on the outskirts of the city. Here he dismissed his cab and walked again through the night. He had followed the strangler homicides in the papers as he did all murder cases that threatened to be difficult of solution. He knew what festering spot had first given birth to the cancer of this hideous crime.

He strode swiftly along a street of badly cared for wooden houses, turned a corner, and came to a lot which at first glance appeared to be vacant. But there was a high barbed-wire fence around it. In its center, dimly seen, was a cluster of low, shabby buildings. They were buildings which were huddled together as though drawing away from the scrutiny of prying eyes. They were dark and silent now. Murder had laid its pall of quietude upon them.

Agent "X" had seen pictures of these buildings in the papers. From this place Mark Roemer, the Government chemist, had been kidnaped. Somewhere among those buildings Roemer's woman assistant, Cora Stenstrom, had met death at the hands of the invisible strangler.

There was a barbed-wire gate at one side of the enclosure for coal and supply trucks to enter. There was another smaller gate secured by a heavy lock where Roemer and those who came to see him had been in the habit of going in and out.

The Agent paused beside this. A policeman patrolling his night beat sounded measured footsteps up the block. The Agent waited in the light of a street lamp till the cop came alongside.

The policeman stared at the Agent, gave a sudden start, then touched his cap respectfully.

"Good evening, inspector," he said. "Can I be of any help, sir?"

Agent "X's" daring disguise had proven adequate. He shook his head, and, when the cop had gone on, he took the kit of chromium tools from his pocket. There were many of them, seemingly fragile, yet cunningly shaped. He held one in his hand, a glittering piece of goosenecked steel. With quiet efficiency he attacked the lock on the gate. In less than a minute the lock snapped open and Agent "X" passed inside.

He moved like a shadow across the barbed wire enclosure toward the jumbled buildings that loomed ahead. He drew another tool from his pocket kit, approached the door of the largest of the buildings. His hand moved toward the lock, then paused. He was staring at the door's edge.

Some one had been at work here recently. He squinted, nodded understandingly. A burglar alarm had been installed since the murder had taken place. This building was Government property. The work of Mark Roemer had been subsidized by the Government. The Government had taken pains to checkmate any further attempt to pry into the secrets that the building held.

Agent "X" reached into his kit again, drew out a slender band of coiled metal that was like a steel measuring tape. He unwound it from its cylindrical case, probed with the end of it around the door's edge till he found the plates of the burglar alarm.

Forcing the end of the thin steel under the inside plate, he drew the steel to its full length and thrust the other end into the moist ground.

The Agent knew the workings of burglar alarm systems — knew that there were two plates, and that it was the separation of these two plates when the door was opened that caused the alarm to sound. By grounding the



*His fist lashed outward and upward
in a flashingly swift arc.*

inner plate he had prevented the breaking of the electric circuit.*

He now opened the door quietly and entered. Once inside, he clicked on a flashlight with a bulb no larger than a kernel of wheat. It threw a tiny spot

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: Secret Agent "X" has made a study of the various burglar alarm systems just as he has of locks, safes, and vaults. A short time ago a company specializing in the manufacture of protective devices for homes and stores complained that one of their inspectors had been impersonated. There was for a while considerable excitement over it. Then the matter was hushed up. The company stated that it might have been mistaken.

I asked Agent "X" a few pointed questions on the matter, and I gathered from his evasive answers that he was the man who had done the impersonation. Knowing that he works always for justice, law, and order, I could not blame him for taking whatever means he saw fit to acquire knowledge that would aid him in his pursuit of criminals.

of radiance through a concentrating lens, a beam that would not be seen from outside but which enabled the Agent to pick his way. His eyes were glowing eagerly.

He located the laboratory in the building. Here were storage tanks for chemicals and jars and bottles of strange, poisonous-looking acids. Here were gleaming, copper-sheathed re-

torts, crystal refiners, an air-compressing machine, vacuum pumps, and a refrigeration plant. Here was all the paraphernalia for research into little-known and sinister fields of science. Here was where Mark Roemer and his assistant had worked.

It was from this laboratory that Roemer had been kidnaped. It was in it that the body of his assistant had been found. There seemed to be the chillness of death in this deserted building mingled with the acrid odor of chemicals.

Agent "X" walked to the laboratory's window, the one that newspaper accounts of the crime said had been jimmed. For long seconds he studied it, raising it softly, examining the marks that the intruder's jimmy had made. Then he gave a low exclamation.

Marks in the wood of the window frame showed that the pressure which had caused them had come from *inside* the building. They had been made *after* the window had been opened. Some one had left those marks purposely, made it seem that the window had been jimmed. The police had apparently overlooked this.

Like a fitting wraith, the Secret Agent moved about the big laboratory, studying, sniffing, nodding to himself. A wide field of chemical research had been under way here. It was impossible to say without careful study what angle of it Roemer had been concentrating upon before his disappearance; but the Agent had his own ideas.

FEELING that he had learned all he could, he left; reconnecting the burglar alarm again, leaving the building as he had found it. He made his way down the street toward a brightly lighted avenue, passing the bulky form of the patrolling cop placidly walking his beat.

The Agent's next stopping point was a vacant lot a half-mile farther on. It was a dreary spot, filled with rubbish and the rusty bodies of old

motor cars. A lean cat whisked from behind a barrel looking back at him with lambent green eyes.

The Agent moved between tin cans and piles of rubbish, pausing at last to stare at a bare spot on the ground.

News photographers a few days before had taken pictures of this spot. The tabloids had published the pictures. A thrill-hungry public had gazed at them. It was a spot of death—the spot where a taxi man and a petty criminal, a lone jackal of the underworld, had been found dead. The bodies were gone now; but Agent "X," reconstructing the crime bit by bit, seemed to see their empurpled faces and outthrust tongues at his feet. They, too, had been killed by the unseen hands of the ghostly strangler.

He looked back at the curb, at the place where the deserted taxi had been found. Then, pondering silently, tensely, he walked on and engaged another cab.

This time he went back toward the city limits.

When he reached the street where the murder of Scanlon had occurred, he ordered the driver to proceed slowly. The Federal detective's body had been removed. The police cruiser and headquarters car were no longer standing at the curb. But, up the block in front of the address written on Scanlon's cuff, an official car of some sort was parked.

Agent "X" told his cabman to drive on and turn a corner. He paid his fare, got out, and walked cautiously back.

The house that corresponded to the number on Scanlon's cuff was a simple two-story affair. There was a light burning on the ground floor. A hedge ran around the yard.

The Agent walked by the chauffeur who dozed at the wheel of the parked car and slipped quietly into the yard. He moved like a shadow along the building's side. His heart was beating faster now. He was running a great risk. Who was inside?

The shades were closely drawn. He couldn't see. He would have to trust

entirely to his disguise. But before revealing himself he wanted, if possible, to learn what was going on.

He slipped quickly to the rear of the house, tried a door. It was locked, but once again he took his tool kit from his pocket and deftly picked the lock. Then, so quietly that those inside heard nothing, he entered.

He tiptoed to the closed sitting-room door and listened for a moment. A man and a woman inside were talking. The man had the bullying voice of a routine police officer. The tones of that voice were strangely familiar.

"She must have told you," the man was saying. "We found it on her. She must have known what it meant."

"No—no," the woman replied. "She didn't tell me anything. After Cora went to work for Mr. Roemer I never saw much of her. She was secretive always. I never questioned her."

"It's the only clue," the man's voice continued stubbornly. "If you can tell me what it means, you'll be helping the police. You'll be helping to run down the murderer who killed your sister. Did she ever own a car?"

"No—she didn't drive, I tell you. She never had a car."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes—yes, I'm sure."

There was silence for a moment, and in this silence Agent "X" quietly opened the door. His eyes were gleaming. His body was tense. The action he planned was high-handed, unusual even for him; but impulse had its place in his working methods. Here was an opportunity! The police had one clue—one he hadn't heard of. What was it? The police might not like it—but, to aid in running down the murderer of Scanlon, he would demand that they share that clue with him.

But, as he opened the door, he paused in sudden, breathless amazement. Fate had played a trick on him. The one man he didn't want to meet was here! Any ordinary dick from the Homicide Squad he could have handled without exciting suspicion. But

the man standing in the kitchen facing him was Inspector John Burks, head of the bureau—and his own double!

CHAPTER IV

A CIPHER SOLVED

IN that first instant it was evident that the inspector had seen him. Utter stupefaction made Burks's face sag for a moment. His eyes bulged. His thin-lipped mouth opened. So exact was the impersonation that the door might have been a mirror and Agent "X" merely the reflection of himself.

The woman, Cora Stenstrom's sister, was dumfounded, too. Her gaunt homely face assumed an expression of blank amazement.

In the flash of a second, Agent "X's" eyes dropped from the inspector's face to his hand. Burks was holding a slip of paper between tense fingers. On it were letters and figures. Here was the clue that the police had found.

The damage was done now. There was no drawing back. The Agent acted quickly, daringly.

So swiftly that the inspector and the woman could only gape, he crossed the room, gliding up to Burks's side. He uttered an impersonal, coldly clipped sentence.

"Let me see what you have there, Inspector."

It was not a request, but an order. Burks's mouth closed with a snap. His pale, gaunt face flushed to a mottled, furious red.

"Secret Agent 'X,'" he gasped. There was, he knew, only one man in the world who would attempt such a thing or dare such a disguise. His fingers dropped the paper. His hand dived toward his coat pocket. The significant bulge there showed that a police automatic was cradled inside the cloth.

But, in that split second, Agent "X" made his decision. Burks would shoot him dead without question, thinking he had killed a notorious criminal.

"X" didn't give the inspector a chance to draw his gun.

His fist lashed outward and upward in a flashingly swift arc. A hundred and sixty-five pounds of bone and muscle were behind the fist. The Agent's knuckles struck the point of Burks's chin. It was a boxer's blow, straight to the "button." Without so much as a groan, Burks staggered backward and collapsed. He lay peacefully on the floor, like a man in a deep sleep.

Secret Agent "X" stooped and picked up the paper on the floor. It was only a slip. At first glance the numbers and letters on it seemed simple enough.

"A Green Ford 1920 D EHEC."

While the woman stood frozen, too terrified to speak, Agent "X's" eyes ran over it. He realized instantly that it was some sort of cipher. Burks had questioned the woman about it. She had given him no satisfaction. She evidently knew nothing about her sister's private life. It seemed useless to question her further.

The woman, recovering a little, opened her mouth to scream, but Agent "X" silenced her with an abrupt, commanding gesture.

"Quiet!" he ordered.

With no other word to the amazed woman, he turned on his heel and left the house, striding swiftly through the front door. He walked boldly down the walk and stepped into Burks's car at the curb. Instead of getting in back, he took a seat directly beside the driver.

"Get going!" he said.

The driver, half asleep, snapped into alertness.

"Yes, sir. Where to?"

Agent "X" didn't answer. He was holding the slip of paper under the instrument-board light. His face, the face of Inspector Burks, was a blank, but his pulses were racing with excitement. What was this clue that had baffled the police?

"A Green Ford 1920 D EHEC."

While the chauffeur slid the car into gear and shot away from the curb, Agent "X" studied it.

Those letters at the end of the sentence corresponded to no auto license number he had ever seen. The woman had told Burks that her murdered sister had not even known how to drive a car. Here was mystery. Here was a challenge to the Agent's cunning. Here also was something that might lead him to the door of the murderer of Scanlon.

"A Green Ford 1920 D EHEC."

The clue was now in the hands of no ordinary police official. It was in the hands of a man of brilliant insight, a man trained to look beneath the surface and thread his way through the devious, complex channels of cryptography, code systems, and ciphers.

He began in his mind to place letters and figures beneath the sentence. He didn't need any pencil. He had the power of visualization. Seconds passed—and, under the keenness of his analytical brain, the words that had seemed so baffling became understandable.

"Where to, chief?" repeated the driver uneasily. But Agent "X" waved his hand impatiently.

"Anywhere," he said.

As the car rolled on, a perplexed chauffeur at the wheel, the Agent translated the sentence to his own satisfaction.

THERE were five letters at the end of it—EHEC, preceded by a D. The numbers 1920 puzzled him a moment, then made his task easier. There was no letter in the alphabet corresponding to nought. The Agent therefore took 19 and 20, counted along the alphabet and substituted letters for

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: In last month's chronicle of Agent "X's" adventures, "The Torture Trust," I said that he ranked among the world's cleverest cryptoanalysts. There are rumors in Washington that he was at one time associated with Yardley, famous organizer of America's "Black Chamber," during the World War. If so, he must have helped solve the staggering secrets of the German official codes.

them—the letters “S” and “T.” Next he substituted numbers for the letters. This gave him 4, corresponding to D, and 5853, corresponding to EHEC.

To him it was child's play. The thing was a simple substitution cipher. He now had a telephone number—Stuyvesant 4 5853. He guessed at once why such a simple cipher had been used. The maker of it had counted on the words “A Green Ford 1920” to confuse and throw any investigator off the track. They had so far; but the Agent combined the first words into a name, “A. Greenford.”

His eyes were snapping with excitement. Why had Cora Stenstrom, the murdered woman, carried this name and telephone with her? He remembered the laboratory window with its marks of a jimmy meant to deceive. Had Cora Stenstrom herself opened that window? Her dead lips could never tell, but Agent “X” hoped to fathom their secret.

For a moment he fingered the slip of paper tensely, forgetful of where he was. Then he felt Burks's chauffeur's eyes upon him. The man's face was troubled, uneasy.

“You must ‘a’ found out something, chief. That woman must ‘a’ give you a tip. Where'd you like to go next—if it ain't too much trouble?”

“That's a good question,” said Agent “X” grimly. “I'm looking for a murderer.”

“Yeah, I know it, chief, but—”

“A kid and a woman are waiting,” muttered “X” again softly, thinking of Bill Scanlon's wife and young son, seeming to see once more the face of a man who would not come back. A sudden harsh look sprang into his eyes.

The chauffeur lifted a hand from the wheel and, in spite of the winter chill, wiped sweat from his forehead. His face was twisted nervously now. He seemed to sense that something was wrong. There was a look of fear and awe in his eyes as he glanced sideways at his superior.

Secret Agent “X” laughed shortly, bitterly. They were crossing a brightly lighted avenue. Another dark street was ahead.

“Just keep going,” he said. “I'll tell you when—”

He stopped speaking. Another sound had cut in upon his words. The short-wave police radio in the front of the car had suddenly come to life. There was a rattle, a buzz. The chauffeur touched the dial.

“Calling all cars!” came the voice of the headquarters' announcer. “Calling all cars. Look out for—”

With a movement so quick that the eyes of the chauffeur could hardly follow it, Secret Agent “X” reached out and turned the dial, cutting off the voice.

“Stop right here,” he said quickly.

The car came to a halt with a screech of brakes. Agent “X” jumped out, then paused for an instant, staring back at the wondering eyes of the police chauffeur.

“What is it, chief? What's the matter?” the man asked.

With a strange, sardonic smile on his lips Secret Agent “X” reached into his pocket. He drew out the slip of paper with the code upon it, handed it to the chauffeur.

“Give that to Inspector Burks,” he said, “with my compliments.”

“Inspector Burks! Why—what the hell!”

Words tumbled from the chauffeur's lips; but the Secret Agent “X” didn't wait to reply. He slipped around the car, darted across the sidewalk into the shadow of a hedge. The darkness seemed to open up, swallow him.

But behind him, as the excited hand of the chauffeur turned it on again, came the blatant, metallic sound of the police radio.

“Look out for Inspector Burks's official car driven by man impersonating him. Chauffeur believed murdered. Look out for escaping killer. Calling all cars!”

WITH the gleam of sardonic amusement still in his eyes, the Secret Agent ducked between two houses, crossed to another street, and continued on into the night.

He stopped for a moment in the blackness of an alley to change his disguise. As the impersonator of Inspector Burks, he was a marked man now. Police cars would be combing the city. His present make-up would be like a death warrant.

His quick, deft fingers removed it, and pulled other materials from a deep inner lining of his coat. Disguises that took patient minutes to build up could be destroyed quickly. He had other stock make-ups for just such emergencies as this.

Working in the dark by a sense of touch alone, he drew the white toupee from his head, changed it to a gray one, and molded his face into new lines.

He came out of the alley disguised as a man of middle age, with thick lips and sagging face muscles. Then he walked through the night-shrouded streets to the nearest drug store. In a telephone booth, he dialed information. He gave the number he had deciphered and learned that it was the Hotel Sherwood.

Step by step he was creeping ahead. Creeping toward what? Toward the solution of the mystery, toward defeat—death? It was certain that the person who had committed four terrible murders wouldn't stop at committing others. It was certain that menace like a sinister shadow darkened the path that "X" had chosen to follow.

Still disguised as a well-dressed man of middle age, he took a taxi to within two blocks of the Hotel Sherwood. Smoking a cigarette, he walked into the lobby. It was one of the city's smaller, less expensive hosteleries. A place where many transient out-of-towners stopped. His presence attracted little attention. And "X" always prepared for small emergencies, acted deftly, swiftly, now.

He fished in his pocket, drew out a complimentary theater ticket that had been handed to him in a restaurant. Dropping this into a yellow envelope, he sealed it and wrote "A. Greenford" on the outside. He moved across the lobby, dropped the envelope on the reception clerk's desk, and, even before the clerk had seen it, he went back to a seat beside an ornamental palm. From here he saw the clerk pick up the envelope and place it in a numbered box.

A half hour went by, an hour, while the Agent waited tensely. Many cigarettes passed through his fingers. His nerves were screaming for action. Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw a dark, quick-moving man come out of the hotel's elevator.

The man walked jerkily to the desk and asked a question. The clerk reached into the tier of boxes behind him, drew out the yellow envelope and tossed it on the counter. The Agent's eyes, brightly alert, took in every move.

The dark man opened the envelope, frowned at the ticket, and threw it irritably into a cuspidor.

Still frowning, he turned and moved toward a seat in the lobby. He had a brownish, pasty complexion, thin, cruel lips and deep-set eyes.

He stopped suddenly, turning his head toward the door.

Newsboys in the street outside were crying shrilly, shouting:

"Extra! Extra!"

One of them came into the hotel's lobby brandishing a paper.

"Extra! Read all about the big murder! Federal man killed! Read all about the big murder!"

The dark-faced Mr. Greenford jumped out of his chair and stepped forward tensely. He fumbled in his pocket, produced coins, and bought a paper. Agent "X" watching intently, noticed the sudden change that came over Greenford's face. Its pastiness seemed to increase. Evil lines showed around his thin mouth. He retired to a corner with the paper in his hand.

Agent "X" quickly signaled the boy and bought one himself.

Here was the terrible story of Bill Scanlon's murder. Here was a picture of him and his wife and small son. Here was the record of his long and faithful service with the Department of Criminal Investigation. Telegraph wires had been humming. The tabloid presses had been busy spewing out a special edition to broadcast this latest strangler horror. The police had been forced to release details to eager reporters. The papers had played it up.

"Unseen Strangler Claims Fourth Victim," the headlines screamed.

But Agent "X" hardly glanced at the story inside. He knew more than these startling lines told. He was watching the man who called himself "A. Greenford."

The dark-faced stranger was devouring the details of the killing, his long, thin hands trembling, one black eyebrow twitching nervously.

MINUTES passed. The man did not move. Then a uniformed telegraph messenger stepped into the hotel lobby. He went to the desk, handed a telegram to the clerk. The clerk signed for it, gave it to a bellhop. The bellhop's voice rose.

"Paging Mr. Greenford. Telegram for Mr. Greenford."

Agent "X" acted swiftly, daringly again. He rose from his seat, held his hand up and signaled to the boy. Before the angry, incredulous eyes of the dark-faced man in the corner, he snatched the telegram and slipped a shiny quarter into the bellhop's hand. Then abruptly, he slit the envelope with his finger and read the message inside.

"Arthur Greenford, Hotel Sherwood," it said. "Come to No. 40 Bradley Square, top floor, rear, midnight. Important. B. M."

The Agent saw that the dark-faced man had leaped out of his chair and was coming toward him. He did not wait. Thrusting the telegram into his

pocket, he turned and walked swiftly to the door.

He knew that he was being followed. There was an excited gleam in his eyes. The message of the telegram carried mystery with it. It was almost as mysterious as the sentence found on the body of the murdered Cora Stenstrom—the sentence that Secret Agent "X" had deciphered. Who was B. M.? What motive was behind his midnight invitation? Agent "X" would find out.

Theater crowds were thick on the sidewalk outside. Laughing, jostling people moved along beneath the bright, gay lights. They stared at the gaudy, alluring theater posters, blinked at the flashing neon tubes. They did not sense, as "X" did, the sinister spirit of murder that seemed to stalk through the night.

He mingled in the crowd quickly, but not too quickly. He turned his head once. The dark-faced man behind him was catching up. Agent "X" lighted a cigarette. He strode ahead as though preoccupied with his own thoughts. He did not turn when some one touched his arm. Then a hoarse voice spoke in his ear.

"Wait—you have something of mine!"

Agent "X" looked around then. The man who called himself Arthur Greenford was standing tensely at his side. His face was contorted with emotion. Fear and suspicion glared from the depths of his black eyes.

"That telegram was meant for me," he hissed. "What did you mean by taking it? Who are you?"

Agent "X" faced him squarely. His own eyes were blazing with excitement.

"Perhaps my name is Greenford, too," he said.

"Perhaps—and perhaps not. You will give me that telegram, or—"

There was a sinister threat in the man's incompleted sentence. The Agent smiled bleakly.

"You shall have it if you want it,"

he said. "A most unfortunate mistake!"

His hand dived into his pocket. It came out clutching the yellow telegram. Greenford could not see the small metal tube concealed in the palm of the Agent's hand. The jostling crowd milled around them. Agent "X" held the telegram out. Greenford reached out a hand to take it. The Secret Agent's fingers moved. He held the tube tensely, skillfully. His thumb was pressing one end. From the other, the open end of the tube, a hair-thin needle flashed out. It penetrated the skin of Greenford's wrist, buried itself for an instant in his flesh. The prick of its point was hardly more noticeable than the bite of a mosquito.

Greenford drew his arm away, hardly knowing what had happened. He glanced at the Agent, glanced around. But the telegram was in his fingers. Its message seemed to hold him fascinated. He had not seen the Agent palm the tube, a miniature hypodermic needle. An instant more and Secret Agent "X" had turned his back and was striding on.

Greenford called after him, started in pursuit again. But he had taken no more than a half-dozen steps when he began to stagger. He fell against a woman at his left, pulled himself up, and swayed to the right. Then suddenly his knees gave way under him. With his face muscles sagging and a look of utter perplexity in his eyes, he fell to the pavement.

Excited shouts went up from the crowd around him. Greenford was sitting on the sidewalk with a dazed look on his face. He was like a man afflicted with a sudden apoplectic stroke. The crowd stopped, drew around him in a ring, staring with dumb, gaping eyes.

"He's drunk," some one said.

"He's sick," said another. No one made a move to do anything about it. A lethargy of curiosity had settled over the people around—the lethargy of the typical city crowd.

Then a man broke through the barrier of gaping people. His face was

concerned. He was a dignified-looking man, gray at the temples, heavy featured. He had a professional air about him. The man was Agent "X" come back.

He felt Greenford's pulse—rolled his eyelid down and stared at the iris.

"I'm a physician," he said. "Call a cab—at once. This man seems to be ill."

Some one at the edge of the crowd signaled a taxi. The cab drew up to the curb. Some one else helped Agent "X" lift Greenford to his feet. In a minute he was inside the vehicle. Then, with Agent "X" holding him solicitously, the cab sped away.

CHAPTER V

GREENFORD'S DOUBLE

"TO the nearest hospital," ordered Agent "X," still maintaining his professional manner. The driver nodded, heading the cab into a long avenue, honking his horn to keep traffic back.

In the interior of the cab, slumped on the seat, Greenford's body joggled like a sack of meal. His head swayed grotesquely on his shoulder. His dazed eyes stared ahead unseeingly.

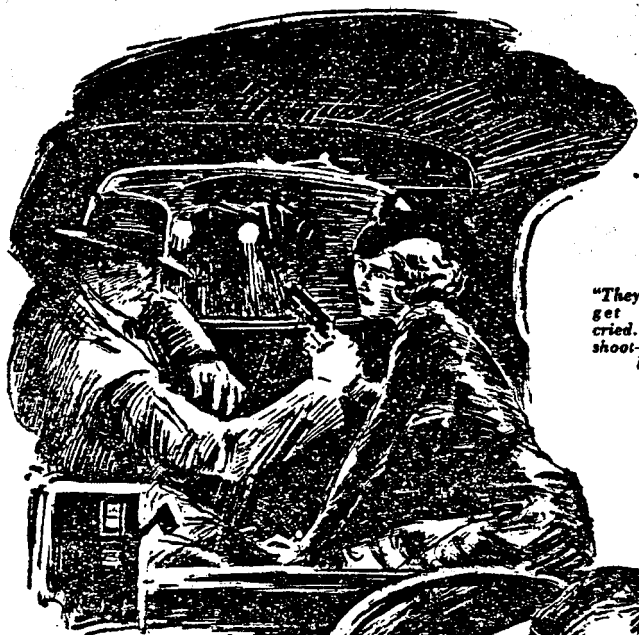
But as seconds passed, the vagueness of his eyes began to diminish. It was as though a curtain were slowly going up. Agent "X" opened a side window. Cold night air blew on Greenford's face. A little of the laxity left his body. He shook himself, opened his eyes wider. A sound like a sigh came from his lips. Suddenly he moved his head, stared at the man beside him. His gaze met the strangely burning eyes of Agent "X." A snarl came from Greenford's lips, then color rushed back into his cheeks, mottling them darkly.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Agent "X" did not answer immediately. He reached forward with one hand, slid the glass panel behind the driver's seat shut.

"Silence!" he said harshly.

"See here—" Greenford was



"They must not get us," she cried. "We will shoot—shoot to kill!"

crouched back on the seat now like an animal at bay. "Let me out of this cab or I'll—"

There was thickness in his voice, the thickness of some foreign accent carefully hidden. He yanked his arm away from the Agent's grasp, his fingers moved suddenly toward his pocket, then hesitated. The burning, strange light in "X's" eyes seemed to hold him fascinated. "X's" right hand had moved, drawn his gas gun out so quickly that Greenford had been unable to follow the motion. The gun was pointed directly at him now. He could not know that its sinister black muzzle held only sleep, not death. The look in the Agent's eyes was deadly.

The Agent offered no explanation, gave no inkling of his plans. But the look of anger in Greenford's face turned to one of fear. A sickly doughtiness came over his features. He began



to tremble. There had been murders. Murder was in the air. In the eyes of this strange man beside him he seemed to read a sinister threat.

"Don't shoot," he babbled suddenly. "Don't kill me. I'll do anything you say."

Here was the voice of a coward speaking, a man whose aggression left him when he saw himself cornered. There was contempt in the Agent's eyes. He had met this breed before. He held the gun steadily. Then he slid the panel behind the driver's seat open again.

"Never mind the hospital," he said.

"Drive to the St. James apartments—ninety Jefferson Avenue."

The cabman gave one puzzled glance and obeyed. If he thought at all, he must have concluded that the address given was a doctor's office.

Greenford continued to tremble, staring with terrified eyes at the man beside him. Agent "X" seemed to radiate mystery and power. There was inexorable command in his glowing eyes. Their glance was almost hypnotic. Greenford wilted beneath it.

The cab drew up at the address given. A big but not too expensive apartment rose at the side of the street.*

Agent "X" thrust the gas gun in his pocket, but the muzzle still pointing at Greenford through the cloth of his overcoat.

"Make any break and—" "X" did not finish his sentence, but he pressed the hard snout of the gun against Greenford's side.

The Agent paid the cabby then, and, with Greenford moving slightly ahead, they entered the apartment building. There was no doorman. A switchboard operator glanced at them casually. Agent "X" pressed the button of an automatic elevator. When the car came into sight, he motioned Greenford into it. He pressed another button, and they ascended to the fifth floor.

Greenford, still trembling with fear, was marshaled down a long corridor and into a simply furnished apartment. The door of the apartment closed after him.

"What do you want?" he asked in a croaking voice. "Who are you? I haven't got—" He did not finish the sentence. He checked himself, stared at the Agent.

The Agent was silent. His burning eyes were still upon Greenford. He

seemed to be studying him, seemed to be analyzing every movement that the man made. Greenford spoke again.

"What is it you want. Don't—"

Again he stopped in the middle of a sentence. His lips opened to scream, but the scream ended in a gasp. For, as quickly as the flash of a snake's tongue, Agent "X" had whipped his gas gun out. His finger pressed the trigger. There was a barely audible hiss. A jet of gas sprayed into Greenford's face, filled his mouth. Without a sound, the man staggered back and collapsed on the rug.

THE Agent pocketed his gun; then drew an open-faced watch from his pocket and glanced at it. It was long after ten now. The telegram he had taken from Greenford had given twelve as the hour of the mysterious rendezvous at Bradley Square. Time was a vital element.

He stooped over Greenford, picked him up. Unobtrusive but steel-like muscles in the Agent's shoulders snapped into life. As easily as though he had been a child, he carried Greenford's unconscious body to a big chair and deposited it there, placing pillows behind Greenford's back, propping him.

Then once again he began studying the man's face. He studied it from all angles, noting the planes of it and the lines.

He walked to a closet in the apartment, drew a suitcase out, and turned it upside down. He pressed two brass studs in the suitcase's underside and disclosed a cleverly concealed false bottom that would never have been suspected unless the suitcase's sides and depth were measured. From this secret compartment he took an assemblage of make-up material. Thin vials of pigments and volatile plastic substances.

He locked the apartment door, spread his make-up equipment before a bureau mirror, and set to work. Glancing from time to time at the unconscious man in the chair, his fingers

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: Using his unlimited resources wisely, the Agent, I have learned, has established temporary spots of refuge in several parts of the city; just as he has bought and placed several cars in garages located at different points. He did not tell me, but I surmise that his place on Jefferson Avenue was a furnished apartment taken on a short lease under some pseudonym.

performed the magic that had made the Agent's name one to conjure with. The man of a thousand faces—a thousand disguises—a thousand surprises, was at work again.

For twenty minutes his fingers moved dexterously. When he turned at last from the mirror, Greenford's double seemed to be in the room. Agent "X" walked across the floor practicing Greenford's characteristic movements. The Agent's disguises went further than make-up. They became a study in muscular coordination as well. He spoke a few sentences, mimicked Greenford's slightly blurred accent.

He searched Greenford then, took a wallet and papers from his pocket and found a money belt strapped around his middle next to his skin. The Agent's fingers were tense as he opened this. It was stuffed with bank notes—bills of high denomination. He looked at their corners. A one and two noughts showed. Century notes!

He counted them. Fifty of them—five thousand dollars! Stacking the bills in a neat sheaf, the Agent pocketed them. They were not for himself. He had no need of money with the account in the First National Bank always ready to draw on. He had never made the test, but he felt sure that his own resources were practically unlimited. But he had a strange outlet for money confiscated from criminals.

There were blank papers in Greenford's wallet. Agent "X" suspected that they held writing in invisible ink. They might give insight into Greenford's strange vocation. But there wasn't time to search for a chemical developer now—and the Agent had already drawn his own conclusions regarding Greenford's character.

He drew the small hypo needle from his pocket again; emptied the colorless liquid from its tubular syringe, and refilled it from a small vial. This he injected into Greenford's arm, close to a vein. The man would stay unconscious for a specific time now,

or until "X" chose to administer an antidote.*

Next he put Greenford's slumped body into a ventilated closet and locked the door.

It was now after eleven. He descended to the street floor and passed the switchboard operator, who took him for a departing guest. He walked several blocks and hailed a cab. What strange and sinister adventure, he wondered, lay ahead of him at No. 40 Bradley Square?

CHAPTER VI

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY

ONE thing he saw in his first glimpse of the house, and he gave a start of amazement. The building was closed up. It was a four-story, brownstone mansion belonging apparently to the Victorian era. Protective boarding covered the windows on the first floor. The others on the floors above were dark and curtainless. There was a "for sale" sign on the building, showing whitely under the glow of the corner light. Bradley Square had become run down. Its past glories were gone. It was a place of quiet and decay. The once flourishing park in its center had been turned into a playground for poor children. Deserted swings hung forlornly in the darkness like gibbets.

A drunken man moved tipsily toward the garish doors of a beer saloon at the far end of the square. A few rooming houses on the side where number forty stood showed dim lights through dusty windows.

The Agent walked past the house of mystery several times. What mad thing was this to bring a man to a deserted house? The dark, empty windows seemed to frown down upon him.

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: From hints he has let drop, I know that Agent "X" has done profound research in the field of narcotic and anesthetic drugs. The opium alkaloids, such as morphine, papaverine, codeine, narcotine, thebaine, and laudanum are known to him; as well as hypnotics of the choral propylveronal, hedonal, trional, barbitalum, and butylchloral hydrate. He can figure to a nicety what dosage is necessary to produce a certain period of amnesia or unconsciousness.

Were there eyes watching him furtively somewhere in the blackness?

He looked at his watch again. Exactly midnight. A clock blocks away boomed the hour, sending cracked echoes across the square. The icy branches of the trees rattled in the night wind, making him think again of Bill Scanlon's staring eyes and protruding tongue. Death seemed to lurk in the night around him. There was a grimly sardonic gleam in the depths of his eyes. It was into such situations, such places, that his strange commission led him.

He mounted the steps of number forty, pulled the metal end of an ancient bell wire. Somewhere far back in the empty house a thin jingle sounded. He listened. There was no answering sound of footsteps. He pulled the bell wire again. The jangle that awoke faint echoes seemed almost sacrilegious, as though he were disturbing the quiet of a mausoleum—disturbing the dead.

Then the hair on his scalp rose. He held himself tensely. Before him, the weather-worn door of the house opened. There was no one in sight, no sound of a human being, only the faint rusty movement of the hinges. A draft of stale air struck his face. The hallway before him was starkly empty. It was uncanny, awe-inspiring—more so than the sight of any sinister figure. The ghostly movement of the door made him think of the phantom strangler, of the invisible, awful thing that had already snuffed out the lives of four people.

But he moved into the house. It was cold inside with the coldness of a place that has long been empty. Behind him, with an eeriness that made his hair rise, the door swung shut. He was in absolute darkness. Was this a death trap? Had some one planned to lure Greenford to his doom? The Agent smiled bleakly again. He had lived too long in the presence of the Grim Reaper to fear him now. He had cast fear from his heart.

He struck a match, moved forward along the ancient hallway toward a flight of stairs ahead. The paint on the old walls was cracked and blackened with dust. The red plush carpet beneath his feet gave out little puffs of dust as he moved, and ahead, in the doorway leading to the big old-fashioned parlor, tattered, moth-eaten draperies hung, a last relic of decayed and dead gentility.

The parlor was as black as the opening of a tomb. He passed it quickly, ascending the stairs. "Top floor, rear," the telegram had said. He moved past floor after floor, striking matches. In the wavering brief light that they shed, his shadow seemed to pursue him like a stalking fiend. He did not use his flash light. To do so would be out of character. It might throw suspicion on him if unseen eyes were watching.

He came at last to the top floor. Here all street noises were excluded. There was no sound anywhere in the old house. The house seemed to be silent, crouching, like a beast waiting for its prey.

The door of the rear top room was shut. He opened it, passed inside. The curtainless windows admitted a ghostly glow from the light in the next street far below. He saw a few pieces of broken furniture that the last tenants of the house had left behind. A springless iron bed, a chair with one rocker gone, a metal washstand twisted into a shapeless mass of rusty iron. There was no one in the room—no living thing. There was a closet and he opened the door of it, struck a match, looked in. That too was empty, save for a man's old overcoat hanging there like a withered corpse.

BUT as he stepped to the center of the room again, a voice suddenly sounded—a voice so close and so harsh that it was like a dash of icy water thrown on him.

He couldn't locate its direction. It seemed to fill the whole room. It seemed to come from his left; but only

blank wall space was there. He listened.

"Greenford," the voice said. "Greenford," it repeated again and again. "You are nearly a minute late, Greenford. It is not wise to come late to this house when an appointment has been made. I expect those with whom I have dealings to be on time!"

The voice ceased as abruptly as it had begun. It was a man's voice, harsh, grating. It was a voice that gave Secret Agent "X" some inkling of the sinister being that he was fighting, a voice that had the assurance and cruel arrogance of supreme power.

Mimicking Greenford's accent, Secret Agent "X" answered.

"The slippery pavements made haste difficult tonight. I am sorry—so sorry."

The voice spoke again.

"Some men learn by their mistakes. Others do not. You will learn to be punctual, or—"

A harsh laugh sounded—a laugh as brutal and evil as the scraping of a poisonous reptile's scales. Then the voice continued:

"I have what you want, Greenford. By murder I gained the thing you sought. Gold would not buy it for you. Death gave it to me. But for gold I will part with it. What amount, Greenford, is your government prepared to pay? Consider well. You have twenty-four hours for cable negotiations. Come tomorrow night at this same time. Take warning! Do not be late! Speak in this room and I will hear. Let me know your answer. I have other customers if your price is not satisfactory. And make no attempt at trickery. You are helpless. You are in the hands of the Black Master."

The voice ceased again, and silence descended on the room, as heavy as the silence of a tomb. Agent "X" pondered a moment.

B. M. had been the initials on the telegram Greenford had received. B. M.—The Black Master. But who was this criminal who held the city in

a thrall of fear? Who was this killer who had brutally murdered four people, among them loyal, brave-hearted Bill Scanlon of the D. C. I.?

The silent room and the old house gave no hint.

The fingers of "X's" right hand tautened for a moment, clenched till the knuckles went white. His lips moved slightly, whispered again that phrase that seemed to ring through his head.

"A kid and a woman are waiting!"

He had come close to the murderer of Scanlon—heard him speak. Yet it was as though rocky walls separated them. He dared not strike now, dared not search through that room as he wanted to. He must wait, watch, proceed with the caution and cunning of a fox. A false step—and all would be lost. The horror would go. Scanlon's cruel killing would never be avenged.

He descended the dusty stairs quietly. His eyes held an inscrutable light. He had till tomorrow night to make a decision. But he was still in darkness, darkness as total as that in the black corridor below. The door opened for him again as though the ghost of some ancient, silent servant still lingered in the dim hallway.

He passed out into the street. Night wind struck his face. The ice-coated branches whispered like mocking laughter.

But as he moved along the street, it seemed for an instant that a shadow moved after him. He had trained himself to see such things. He had shadowed men himself and knew the arts of shadowing. He was being shadowed now. Of that he was certain.

For a bare second he paused. His only hope of running the killer to earth lay in seeming for the moment to comply with the voice of the Black Master. He walked on, conscious still of eyes upon him.

He passed beyond the square and came to a thoroughfare. Standing at the curb, he signaled a taxi. His eyes glinted grimly as, looking back, he

saw another taxi go to the curb, pick a passenger up and follow.

"The Hotel Sherwood," said Agent "X."

Posing as Greenford, he must play the rôle of Greenford until— It seemed now that the cunning of his brain was the only power on earth that could sever the terrible murder chain that unseen hands were forging.

His cab drew up before the bright lights of the Sherwood. The other taxi was no longer in sight. Agent "X" paid his fare and went into the lobby. He picked up Greenford's key at the desk and ascended in the elevator. He was revolving a hundred plans in his mind, wondering what course was best to follow. The man he was battling was a monster—a criminal without scruple, and with infinite cunning. High stakes were at issue. The caution the Black Master had taken proved that. But, even if there were nothing else, the murder of Scanlon was motive enough to drive Agent "X" forward into the very gates of death.

He opened the door of Greenford's room, closed it after him, groping for a light switch. He clicked it on, and the overhead bulbs bathed the chamber in radiance. Then suddenly the Agent held himself taut, holding his breath and with muscles contracted. A woman's voice, sinister as the purring of a sleepy tigress spoke close to his ear.

"Armand—are you not glad to see me?"

CHAPTER VII

THE TIGRESS!

AGENT "X" turned his head slowly, stiffly. For once he had been caught off guard. For once the utterly unexpected had happened.

A woman, blonde and dazzlingly beautiful, stood beside the door. Crim-son lips smiled at him. He caught in that first glimpse the feline, arrogant grace that characterized her bearing. She was leaning against the bureau, one hip thrown out, a hand resting on it, the other hand holding an unlight-

ed cigarette. Her close-fitting dark dress revealed the superb outlines of her figure.

Slowly she lighted her cigarette, took a deep puff, blew smoke through her delicate nostrils.

"You are surprised! You did not expect to see me," she said.

Her lips smiled again; but her eyes did not. They regarded Agent "X" with cold, impersonal calculation. The silvery tones of her voice, her sleekness, her beauty, masked something else—something sinister. Here was a woman as dangerous as she was lovely. A tiger woman who lived by her wits and that stinging provocative appeal of her charms. Who was she? The Agent could only guess. He had pulled himself together. He began playing a game—a deadly, silent battle of wits.

"I am surprised—yes," he said. "But a beautiful lady is always a welcome surprise."

She laughed throatily, came nearer. He could smell the faint clinging perfume that seemed to envelop her.

"You used to call me Nina," she said.

"Nina is a lovely name," he replied.

He lighted a cigarette himself, stared at her, waiting and watching, his eyes narrowed. A false move and she might grow suspicious. He must not slip out of his rôle—the rôle of Arthur Greenford—the man she called Armand.

"It was clever, changing your name," she said. "But why did you choose the same initials? Arthur Greenford—Armand Grenfort?"

He bowed ironically.

"I did not expect that my initials would undergo analysis by such an astute brain as yours."

She laughed again, but her eyes that were dark and bright as polished agate, took on the hardness of agate.

"You are fencing with me, Armand. Do you think I do not know why you are here?"

Her accent and phrasing were foreign. He had catalogued her already.

The theft of Mark Roemer's mysterious formula had brought another evil vulture circling about. For in spite of her beauty, the woman before him had in her eyes the look of some predatory bird or beast.

"You are just as subtle as you used to be," he said softly.

She came and laid her hand on his arm, brushing her lithe body against him for a moment. Her lips, smiling up at him, were challengingly close.

"Perhaps," she said, "we can work together—as we did once before."

He tried a shot in the dark then. He made his voice harsh.

"It's too late, my dear Nina. What I seek is gone. It has been stolen. It is in the hands of another."

The woman pushed him away from her roughly. She stepped back toward the bureau again. A transformation came over her. Hate and greed convulsed her face, making her look suddenly

older, bringing out wicked lines in her features.

"You lie!" she said, and the two words came from her lips like drops of distilled venom. The beauty of her body was like the sinuous beauty of a cobra swaying, ready to strike.

"You lie!" she repeated.

He stood looking at her, shrugging.

"Listen," she said fiercely. "You will let me work with you—share with you, or—"

Her slim hand suddenly reached behind her. She snatched something



With a tigerish leap, she sprang forward.

from the bureau top which she had concealed under a lacy handkerchief. It was an automatic, flat, polished, small as a child's toy—but capable of dealing death. She pointed the gun at the Agent's heart, held it tensely as though it would give her pleasure to shoot. He did not doubt that she had killed men before.

Again he shrugged.

"What about the kidnaping of Mark Roemer and the murder of his assistant?" he asked.

Her lips slid back from her teeth in an evil smile. They formed a crimson, mocking gash across the front of her white face. She nodded craftily.

"I know," she said. "Mark Roemer was kidnaped. His assistant was murdered—not prettily either. I read all about it. That is why I came to see you. You did it, Armand. You are bolder than you used to be. Men learn by their experience. You murdered that woman—and those others. You have Roemer somewhere and you are guarding his secret. If you are not generous with me, Armand, I will turn you over to the police—right now."

"And if I am—generous?" he asked.

"I will forget what I know about you. What is a murder—between friends?"

THE depth of her wickedness was appalling. It was like finding a deadly, coiled serpent concealed in the soft petals of a flower. She was blackmailing him, ready to wink at murder—if he would satisfy her greed.

He shrugged again, resignedly this time.

"You always had strength of character, Nina. You had a way of getting what you wanted. But I'm tired and there are many things to be gone into. Let us go out and discuss this over a bottle of wine. If we are to work together—we must renew our acquaintance—for old time's sake."

She stood glaring at him, doubt in her eyes.

"Any tricks, Armand—and I will anticipate the law. I will kill you!"

"Are you not a little frightened," he said, "trying to browbeat a murderer?"

For a moment the paleness of her face increased.

"I left a note with certain friends," she replied. "It is to be opened—if I do not return. In it are facts about you—details to aid the police."

"In that case," he said, "we are assured of a quiet evening. I am certain we will get on amicably."

She nodded and put her automatic into a hand bag.

"We understand each other, Armand," she said.

The Agent smiled to himself. He understood her, knew that she was an unprincipled spy in the pay of some government, and that she had once worked with Greenford, or Grenfort. But it was ironic to think how utterly in the dark she was concerning the affairs of the real Grenfort. He had spoken the truth and she had not believed him.

She came then and lifted her lips to his, slipping soft arms around his neck.

"We used to be such good friends, Armand!" Her words were a caress and an invitation.

"Let us not mix business with pleasure," he said coldly.

He saw hatred flash in her eyes again. But she began dabbing powder on her face from a silvered compact. Then she slipped into a clinging fur coat that was thrown over a chair. It made her seem more feline than ever.

They descended in silence to the lobby below and turned their faces toward the street. There was a cab waiting at the curb. Agent "X" ushered her into it and gave the address of a small restaurant.

The woman settled herself beside him.

"Remember," she said, "there is a note waiting to tell the police—everything—if I should disappear."

"Let me repeat that I hold your life

as precious as my own," he said mockingly.

She looked at him keenly for a moment.

"You have changed, Armand," she said. "You have more steel in your character than you used to have. That is what murder does for a man."

Suddenly he saw her eyes widen, and a hiss came from her lips that was like the hiss of a startled snake. She was looking back, looking out the cab's rear window. Her fingers tightened over the Agent's arm like clutching talons.

"Armand," she said, "we are being followed. Look—there are men in that car—and they are watching us."

CHAPTER VIII

LEADEN THREAT

AGENT "X" stared back tensely. He was not afraid for his own life. He was afraid only that something might impede his progress in tracking down the Black Master—the invisible strangler. In his first glimpse of the men behind, he catalogued them. There were four, grim-faced, clean-cut. One at the wheel of the car, another beside him, two in the back seat.

One was leaning out, signaling for the cab to stop.

Agent "X" bent forward, jerked the glass panel behind the driver's seat open and hissed in the driver's ear.

"Gangsters behind," he said. "Speed up—for your life!"

With a startled twitch of his head, the driver stared back, saw the pursuing car, stepped on the gas. The taxi leaped ahead like a horse under the lash of a whip.

Agent "X" leaned back smiling grimly. The men behind were not gangsters. They were Department of Justice operatives. Of that he was certain. He knew the type well. But it had been necessary to lie to the cabman to save the situation. Nina, the woman beside him, caught the fleeting smile on his face.

"You—you tipped them off!" she hissed. Her hand flashed toward her hang bag again. He caught her wrist.

"Don't be a fool. You accuse me of murder. Would a murderer tip off the law? They must have trailed me."

The woman blanched and began to mutter fiercely. She was no longer beautiful. She was a harsh-faced tigress.

"They must not get us," she cried. "We will shoot—shoot to kill." Again she dived for her weapon. Again he stopped her.

"You will do as I say," he grated. "You came to my hotel. Perhaps it is you they followed!"

"No," she said fiercely. "I came by plane from Mexico. It was night when I landed. They could not have seen me. It is you, Armand, that they are after."

"You are a notorious woman," he answered, again making a stab in the dark. "The American Secret Service has a hundred eyes. Spies are always under suspicion—but they must not catch us."

"No—no," she echoed. "I cannot be found with you. I will be deported—perhaps jailed. They will suspect me of being implicated in the murders you have committed."

"And," he said mockingly, "you will lose the money that I am supposed to divide with you."

He leaned forward, spoke to the driver again.

"Faster—they are catching up."

The man leaning out of the car behind had stopped signaling now. His face under the glow of a street light that flashed past had the grimness of granite. Something gleamed in his hand.

"They are going to shoot!" screamed Nina.

Her sentence was punctuated by the slap of a bullet against the rear of the taxi and a crashing report in the street behind. The cab leaped ahead again as the driver sought frantically for more speed. A second bullet struck the glass in the cab's rear, splintered

it, sent it tinkling between the Agent's and the woman's laps. Cold air rushed in. Nina screamed again shrilly. For a moment he thought she was hurt. Then he saw that it was fear. A tiny sliver of glass was sticking in the back of his hand. He pulled it out deftly.

"You don't care," she said. "You don't mind that I may be killed!"

"My dear Nina—" he expostulated. The intense glow in his eyes showed the excitement that steely nerves were keeping under control.

The cab flashed across a street against traffic lights. Brakes squealed madly as another car stopped just in time. A policeman's whistle shrilled. The cab plunged on.

THE driver's neck and cheek—all that Agent "X" could see—were white as a sheet. His hands were wrapped stiffly around the wheel. A third bullet whizzed between the two in back, slapped against the glass partition close to the driver's head. He cried out and the cab lurched and bucked as his arms jerked in fear. It threatened for a moment to go over. Then the driver straightened it out. He pressed the gas button down, put on a final burst of speed. They drew ahead a little. A fourth bullet went wide.

"To the park!" barked the Secret Agent. "Turn left—the first gate."

Somewhere behind them now a police siren was wailing. But even the green police cruiser could not catch up. The heavy engine of the taxi was pounding under its metal hood. The rubber tires were whining over the pavement. Traffic was at a standstill. White-faced pedestrians scuttled out of their way, or stood staring fearfully on the sidewalk. The papers had been filled with stories of gang warfare. This looked like an example of it.

The cab's engine began to pound then. It wasn't built for such high speeds. Somewhere a gasket had blown. The cab was slowing down.

Agent "X" looking back saw that the car behind was gradually drawing

nearer. Its headlights were goggling like the eyes of a monster. Two men were leaning out now, their faces purposeful, waiting till they were within small-arm range. They were aiming low, getting ready to shoot for the tires. Blown rubber at such speed might be as disastrous as a bullet. The menace of death rode with them in the night.

The woman, Nina, was white-faced now. Her blond hair was spilling from beneath her hat. She looked suddenly haggish, witchlike, evil as a mad vulture. Her voice had a harpy shrillness.

"They'll get us! We can't escape!"

The Agent made no reply. He saw the park ahead of them. The stone pillars of the gate swept toward them. The taxi hurtled at the gates like a speeding ball headed for two goal posts. It was late. The park was dark and empty. The concrete road ahead was a smooth speedway. But the engine was hissing and pounding at every stroke.

The car behind leaped through the gateway of the park like an avenging nemesis. It roared down upon them out of the night. There was no danger of hitting innocent bystanders now. Three automatics in the black, speeding car spoke in unison. A fusillade of bullets lashed through the night.

One of them ripped across the top of the cab, tearing the fabric into a ribbonlike streak. Another plucked at the cloth of the Agent's coat. In a moment now that centering fire would bring death and destruction. Men in the Secret Service were taught how to shoot.

The Agent's eyes were darting bleakly about. There was a patch of dense leafless shrubbery ahead. The road made a long curve by it. Suddenly the Agent reached forward, gripping the driver's arms. The driver cursed in fear, tried to struggle free. The Agent held on like iron, kept the cab headed for the shrubbery.

The cab lurched off the concrete, taking the low embankment in a ca-

reening, rocking bound. Its wheels struck frosted turf, squealed, and bounced. One tire struck a sharp lump of ice and blew with a report like an exploding bomb. The cab slithered around, went sidewise toward the bushes. It would have turned turtle if the tough stems of the shrubbery hadn't cradled it. It ploughed in amongst them while the driver cried out in fear, flinging his hands before his face.

For ten feet it crunched on, breaking branches right and left, ploughing like a tractor through wheat. Then the tough shrubs won out. A cylinder head in the racing engine gave way. The engine came to a clanking, groaning stop, and the cab slid to a standstill.

Blonde Nina was on her knees on the floor, her dress around her silk-stockinged legs. Agent "X" jerked the cab door open, drew her out. The driver was scrambling out also, howling in fear.

A sudden jet of gasoline escaping from a severed feed line bathed the hot cylinders and leaped into a sheet of flame. Agent "X" pulled the woman away just in time. Flame enveloped the cab, crackled and snapped in the bushes, making a blinding intensity of light.

He heard the squeal of madly applied brakes on the concrete roadway behind. The momentum of the pursuing car had carried it three hundred feet beyond the spot where the cab had lurched off the road.

The Agent clutched at the woman's arm, pulled her through the bushes. They ploughed ahead with the shrubbery tearing at their clothes. Then they came to an open space and ran on till they reached a path. Far behind them the flames of the burning cab made a glow like a torch. Miniature figures, silhouetted against the leaping flames, ran up and stood about. Others beat among the bushes.

The Agent would see later that the cab company was repaid and that the driver was exonerated. He didn't like

to drag innocent persons into his dangerous exploits. This time it had been unavoidable.

THEY ran on across the park till they had reached a safe distance. The woman began tucking in strands of loose hair and straightening her disarranged dress. The expression of fear left her face. She was resuming her former tigerish poise.

"Very good, Armand," she said. "I must congratulate you even if you are a murderer and a thief."

Then suddenly, she cried out and looked at her arm. Crimson was dripping from a superficial wound above her wrist.

"I will take you to your home," he said, "or wherever you are staying."

He signaled another cab at the avenue across the park. Nina gave him the address. They were silent now as the cab rolled along, Nina nursing the wound in her arm and darting analytical glances at him.

She had leased a small apartment in the mid-town section and, when the cab stopped, she spoke to Agent "X."

"You may come up," she said. "We will make our arrangements now. There is still the matter of how much you intend to pay me."

He ignored her words, but followed her into the building. They ascended to a suite on the third floor, entered it, and closed the door.

"Let me fix your wound," he said.

He got water, helped her bathe it, tied it up, then rose.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Away, my dear Nina. We have had an exciting and pleasant evening. Now it is time to part."

With a tigerish leap she sprang forward, clutched her hand bag, and drew the gun out.

Viciously she jabbed its muzzle toward him. He stood smiling, lighting a cigarette.

"I repeat—it is time for us to part."

"You can't go," she screamed. "I'll kill you and hunt for Roemer myself."

"You are an impulsive woman,

Nina—too impulsive for one of your vocation."

He turned toward the door. Behind him the trigger mechanism of the automatic clicked empty four times. She had tried to pump a stream of bullets into his back—tried to murder him.

He turned and bowed.

"I took the precaution," he said, "of removing the cartridges while we were having our little ride."

She gasped and crouched, glaring at him.

"You will be sensible," he continued, "and wait till I have completed negotiations with a certain party. If you call the police or kill me now, all will be lost. But I see that you are not going to be sensible, dear Nina. You are shockingly intoxicated with the greed for gold. Therefore—"

He reached forward, yanked the cord of the telephone out of the wall, flinging the instrument down. Then, with a mocking bow, he opened the door and walked out, taking the key from the lock. Outside, he locked the door and slipped the key in his pocket. It would be some time before she got out, and meanwhile he had much to do.

CHAPTER IX

THE BLACK MASTER'S THREAT

IT was late, nearly one-thirty; but the Agent chartered another cab and gave an address on Twenty-third Street. The taxi sped downtown. It drew up in the middle of the block before an apartment house.

The Agent paid the driver, then, before entering the building, stepped among the shadows on the opposite side of the street. Two walls came together here forming a dark recess. From it, unobserved, he could look up at the side of the apartment. Many windows were still lighted. There was a light in a window on the sixth floor.

The Secret Agent moved his lips and gave a strange, low whistle. It was melodious yet eerie with an oddly ventriloquist note. No one standing even

a few feet from "X" could have told where it came from. It seemed to fill the whole air and it echoed in both directions along the quiet street."

The shade of the window with the light in it on the sixth floor moved upward. The window was raised and a girl's head suddenly appeared. From the street her features were visible. She was no more than an enticing silhouette against the light in the room behind her. She looked searchingly up and down the dark block as the Agent repeated the whistle. Then, seeing nothing, she withdrew and closed the window.

The Agent strode quickly into the apartment building, ascended in the automatic lift, and pressed the button of suite No. 63.

The click of high heels sounded on the parquet flooring inside. The door opened, and the girl who had looked out the window stood framed in the threshold. She, too, was blonde, like Nina, but she was of an altogether different type.

The small, warm oval of her face held sweetness and poise. Her blue eyes were frank, their keenness softened by long, silky lashes that swept to her cheeks. The gleaming wealth of her hair, alive with the glow of the light behind her, made a sunny halo around her head, blending with the creamy whiteness of her neck. Her petite figure was draped in clinging lounging pajamas that revealed its shapeliness. A coolie coat had been flung over the pajamas. She drew this hastily around her and looked questioningly at the man in the doorway.

Her eyes showed no recognition, but her soft warm lips seemed ready to break into a smile. Unable to penetrate his disguise, she was waiting for a signal. He gave it to her, making a motion in the air with his finger—the sign of an X.

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Secret Agent's whistle, as described last month, is a thing peculiar to himself. Once heard, it is never forgotten. On several occasions when he gave it and I knew the Agent was near by, I have tried to trace it down. But I never succeeded. Its source is as hard to locate as the whistling note of certain birds and tree frogs.

Her expression changed instantly. The man before her, whose disguise was so perfect, had revealed his identity by that mysterious gesture. His whistle had told her he was on the way. Now he stood before her—Secret Agent "X."

The girl's blue eyes showed infinite respect. She had never seen the real face hidden behind his thousand disguises. He had fooled her again and again, tested out dozens of make-ups on her. Only on rare occasions, when the old wound in his side gave him a twinge of pain and he pressed his hand to it in a characteristic gesture, had she known who he was without being told by some sign or symbol.

There were reasons for the respect and friendship she felt for this strange man. He had been a friend of her father's—the father who was a police captain slain by underworld bullets. She knew that Agent "X" waged ceaseless warfare on that underworld that she hated and despised.

In her capacity of newspaper woman, a reporter on the *Herald*, she was often able to help him indirectly, give him information about people, or carry out some order that would contribute to the capture of a criminal.

It made her happy to do this, even when by doing so she got into danger herself. And, being human and feminine, she was curious about the real man behind those brilliant disguises. There was in her something that responded to the strange magnetism, courage and daring of Secret Agent "X." She sensed that death was always at his elbow. She knew there was little hope of any romance between them. But by comparison with him, other men seemed tame, uninteresting.

SHE walked ahead of him now into the comfortable living room of the apartment she maintained by her own hard work.

"Sit down," she said. "I'll get you some cigarettes."

The Agent was silent, but his

strange burning eyes followed her. She was a girl in a million, as clever and brave as she was beautiful.

"The harvester has been at work," he said abruptly.

Betty Dale turned and looked at him. Agent "X" seldom spoke like ordinary men. There were generally innuendoes, subtleties, and double meanings in everything he said. His speech was as mysterious as his person.

He was holding a sheaf of bills in his hand now. She saw many bank notes of high denomination. He flipped them on the table.

"For victims of the wolf," he said.

She knew at once what he meant. The money that the Agent took from criminals was used to help the victims of criminals. Betty Dale saw to that. Simply, unpretentiously, she distributed what he gave her among people whom crime had in some way left destitute. The wives and small children of men serving prison sentences. Widows and orphans of murder victims.

Was it only to bring her money that the Agent had come?

She saw that tonight he seemed tense and ill at ease. There was an odd light in his eyes, restlessness in the movements of his body.

"Is there any other way I can help you?" she asked quietly.

He shook his head, blowing quick jets of smoke through his nostrils.

"Ghost fingers are better dealt with alone."

The girl's face blanched at this. Her eyes widened.

"You are fighting the Spectral Stranger then," she said. "There's danger—terrible danger in that. Four people have been killed already. Be careful for my—for every one's sake."

The Agent nodded grimly.

"The trail is getting warm," he said.

She came closer and spoke again. "I've read about those murders. Every one is talking about them. They are ghastly, unthinkable. I was going

to ask a favor of you—but now, now I won't."

For Betty to ask any sort of favor of him was so unusual that the Agent stared at her keenly. Then he spoke quickly.

"A girl with sunny hair and sunlight in her heart has helped me often," he said. "There are debts that it is a pleasure to pay back. Your favor, whatever it is, is granted."

A flood of color swept into Betty Dale's cheeks. For a moment she turned her face away, hiding the sudden surge of emotion she didn't want "X" to see. Love must never come between them, never interfere with his work. And sometimes in his presence, when he showed the admiration he felt for her, she had to fight love down.

"I was going to ask," she said huskily, "that you go with me to Colonel Gordon Crandal's party tomorrow night. The paper wants me to cover it. There's the society angle — and there's something else."

"Something else?" he echoed, caught by the sudden frown on her face.

"Yes," she said. "Colonel Crandal is rich, aristocratic — and the Crandal jewel collection is famous. He's received threats from some criminal who plans to steal them. The *Herald* was tipped off tonight. There'll be lots of detectives at the party. The police commissioner himself will be among the guests."

"Tell me more about this criminal," he said. "What crook plans such a daring robbery?"

"No one knows. He calls himself the Black Master."

It was Agent "X" who paled this time beneath his disguise. For a moment his long thin fingers tightened over his cigarette, squeezing it until tiny golden shreds of tobacco spilled to the floor.

"The Black Master?" he echoed harshly.

"Yes—do you know of him?"

He did not reply, but the vivid light of deep emotion sprang into his eyes.

He was silent for seconds while the girl studied his face. Then he spoke hoarsely.

"Only death could keep me away from Colonel Crandal's party, Betty. You are assured of an escort who will try to match in gallantry the beauty of the girl he accompanies."

CHAPTER X

A BRILLIANT GATHERING

THE Crandal name was an old and honored one. The Crandal mansion, owned now by Colonel Gordon Crandal, a reserve officer with a distinguished war record, was one of the city's show places. It occupied nearly a whole city block. Great iron gates closed the street entrance except at such times as the owner chose to admit guests.

Tonight was one of those times. The many windows of the Crandal mansion were brightly lighted. An orchestra was playing seductive dance music. The huge ballroom, where presidents and visiting royalty had danced, was open, its furniture dusted, its ancient crystal chandeliers glittering impressively.

The end of prohibition had brought old-time gaiety back. The portraits of long-dead ancestors in tarnished frames seemed to smile down in approval at the handsomely dressed company. Men were there in tail coats and dinner jackets. Ladies in low-cut evening gowns. Radiant *débutantes* were attired to reveal charms that would lure hesitant bachelors into the bonds of matrimony.

Faithful old servants of the Crandal family moved silently about the polished floors, trays of cocktails in their blue-veined hands. They seemed as much of an inheritance as the house itself.

Betty Dale and her escort came shortly before nine — shortly before the fashionable hour so that Betty, because of her newspaper work, wouldn't miss seeing the arrival of the more impressive guests.

She wore blue slippers and a clinging blue dress, complimenting the gold of her hair. A white evening wrap was thrown about her shapely shoulders. Her loveliness rivaled that of any blue blood present.

Girls cast envious glances at her as she entered. Men paused to stare in admiration. Her escort came in for a share of attention, too.

Tall and immaculately dressed in formal evening clothes, his face had the lean, healthy look of an out-of-doors man. It was darkly tanned. His hair swept straight back from a strong forehead. His temples were slightly, becomingly gray.

Betty Dale introduced him to those of the guests she knew.

"I want you to meet Clark Manning, the explorer," she said.

She spoke convincingly. People mumbled that they had often heard of Clark Manning. To admit that they hadn't would have seemed both rude and ignorant. A gushing lady spoke admiringly of Manning's travel books—taking care not to mention any particular titles. Manning seemed like a man worth cultivating. His burning, deep-set eyes were strangely compelling and mysterious.

A friend of Betty's brought Colonel Crandal up to them. The scion of the ancient family was in his late forties, tall, gray-haired, poised. He was still a bachelor and eager, hopeful *débutants* flocked around him like satellites around a star.

He acknowledged his introduction to Betty Dale and her escort, Secret Agent "X," now posing as Clark Manning, explorer.

The colonel's swift, experienced eyes appraised Betty from her trim little slippered feet to the sunny gold of her hair. Then he spoke debonairly, asked her to dance, and bore her off, leaving a half-dozen disappointed young ladies in his wake.

The girls looked to Secret Agent "X" for consolation. They begged him to tell them about his explorations. But he shook his head modestly. In a

few minutes he edged away and strode off to reconnoiter by himself.

HE studied the smiling, gay faces around him. Would they be so smiling, so gay if they knew that the threat of the Black Master hung like an evil shadow over this house? Wouldn't their bright laughter turn to whispers of ghastly fear if they knew that the man who had threatened Crandal was the murderer who killed with invisible, choking fingers?

Among the guests were quiet-faced men in dinner jackets—men who seemed to have no part in the festivities.

These were agency and police detectives detailed to watch and protect Crandal's famous jewels from the menace of a daring criminal. But even they, "X" felt certain, didn't know with whom they were dealing. They didn't know that the Black Master and the dealer in swift, strangling death were one and the same.

Agent "X's" gaze was hawklike. Was it possible that the murderer of Scanlon and those others was somewhere in this brilliant gathering?

His eyes wandered from face to face. He saw the city's tall, suave police commissioner talking to a group of ladies, thrilling them with tales of his police experiences, his successful contests with criminals. Before this night was over the commissioner might have something else to think about—something too ghastly perhaps to relate as drawing room conversation.

Then Agent "X" gave a sudden start.

More guests were arriving. He saw a flash of light on blonde hair. A woman in a flame-colored evening gown came through the ballroom door. She moved tigerishly, sinuously across the floor, a tall, dark man at her side. She was smiling radiantly—smiling with her red lips, but her eyes did not smile. They had the cold, appraising look of an adventuress.

"Nina!" whispered the Agent tensely under his breath.

It was a shock to see her here—a surprise. Yet, staring around at the mixed assemblage, he saw that her presence was not altogether out of place.

Whispers had it that Colonel Crandal planned to run for the legislature. People of all types and from all walks of life had been invited to this party. A politician and a city commissioner hovered around the punch bowl. A night-club hostess leaned on the arm of one.

Beyond them, fat and baggily dressed, was Nick Baroni, a big shot in the days when gangdom rode to wealth and power on a flood of illegal liquor. He had paid his income taxes, escaped jail. He had reformed, so rumor had it, and was spending his money to gain entrée into society. A thin veneer of social polish hid brutal instincts that slumbered behind his oily, massaged face. He was balancing a cocktail glass in fingers that had once tensed around the vibrating trigger of a Tommy gun.

The Secret Agent's lips curled.

Then his eyes swiveled back to the woman in the red dress. He edged close, lighting a cigarette, and heard Nina and her escort introduced.

"Piere DuBrong and the Countess Rocazy," the lady who presented them said.

Nina was carrying it off well. An elaborate *coiffeur* had been artfully molded to soften the lines of her face. Her nails were stained a vivid crimson. She held a small fan in her hand, pressing it close against her white bosom. She was capitalizing on her exotic charm, playing on the gullibility of social climbers to whom a European title was a thing before which to bow down and worship. But Agent "X" was not impressed. He believed that her title was bogus.

The man with her, Piere DuBrong, had the alert hungry look of a questing hawk. His glittering eyes indicat-

ed a keen, acquisitive brain. The two appeared well matched.

But why were they here?

Secret Agent "X" made discreet queries. Who was the charming countess? Who was the tall man with her? He learned that DuBrong was attached to the embassy and that Countess Rocazy was a friend of his, a lovely woman just over from Europe who could speak excellent English.

On the surface that explained matters. But Agent "X" wasn't satisfied. His sense of impending menace deepened. The gaiety of the gathering impressed him now as gaudy beauty hiding something darkly evil. The bright skin of a poisonous serpent! A blood-hungry beast concealed in a bed of gay flowers! Nina Rocazy was like that—a tigress cloaking her claws behind velvet fur until the moment came to spring.

She and her escort had separated now. Agent "X" was introduced to her and even danced with her. He felt the strange undercurrent of drama as he held the woman in his arms. What would her reactions be if she suddenly learned that her dancing partner was the same man who had accompanied her on that wild taxi ride which had so nearly been fatal? What would she say if he told her he was the same man she had tried to kill and who had locked her in her apartment?

He gasped at her audacity when she asked if he thought it would be possible to see the Crandal jewels.

"I have heard so much of the riches of Americans," she said. "Jewels are riches that even we poor women can understand. They attract us as children are attracted to bright, pretty baubles. There must be other women here who would like to see them, too."

Agent "X" nodded. She did not understand the mocking light in his eyes.

"Such a woman as you would be doubly appreciative," he said.

Beneath her smile, lines of avarice showed. Money, the things that money could buy, were the gods she lived by.

But would she have cheek enough to make such a request to Colonel Crandal?

"There has been a threat," he said. "A criminal has announced that he intends to steal the jewels."

He watched her face, but her hard eyes were inscrutable. She shrugged.

"Colonel Crandal is a brave man. He will not fear threats."

THE dance ended and he left her. But he followed her through the milling company and saw her cleverly insinuate herself into the group around the colonel. Smiling radiantly, acting as though the impulse had suddenly come to her, she asked if she might see the famous gem collection.

For a moment Colonel Crandal's face showed surprise. Then he smiled and nodded.

"Certainly, countess, I'll have the jewels brought down. All of you can see them then."

Agent "X" edged close. He heard the police commissioner object.

"What about the threat of that crook?" the commissioner asked. "Isn't it going in the face of Providence to bring them out tonight?"

Crandal made a gesture with his hand.

"That's what your men are here for—to give protection. And a lady has requested that they be shown."

The commissioner flushed and nodded.

"Very well," he said.

Crandal whispered the combination of the safe into the ear of an old and trusted butler who had been with the family forty years.

"Go get them, Wilmot," he said. "But be careful."

The butler protested.

"I wish, sir, that you would come with me. If anything should happen—"

Crandal gave the man a push.

"Do as you're told," he said.

Three detectives followed the butler, after a low-voiced conversation with the commissioner.

In ten minutes the butler returned carrying a square leather box in his hands. His fingers were trembling as he set it down.

"There, sir," he said, and there was a note of vast relief in his voice.

The guests crowded around tensely. Crandal opened the box, exposing the glittering collection of gems that rested on a cushion of black velvet.

There were rubies that gleamed like drops of freshly fallen blood, emeralds as green as polar seas, sapphires blue as the sky, diamonds that reflected sparkling prismatic lights and gave off rainbow colors. Many of them had come from the crowns of former kings and queens.

Crandal held them lovingly in his hand, then passed them about.

Nina took a diamond necklace and held it in trembling fingers. She placed it against her neck, let the cold stones touch her skin. Her eyes were dark with greed. She seemed reluctant to give it back.

But the other guests were nervous, holding the jewels gingerly, or refusing to take them at all. They appeared to breathe easier when the gems had been exhibited and put safely back in their box. The old butler picked the box up and solemnly bore it away with his escort of detectives. The police commissioner wiped a perspiring face, and Secret Agent "X," watching Nina's every movement, wondered what was going on in her mind.

The butler had taken the jewels up a flight of broad stairs to a second-floor room. Several detectives hung around this stairway for minutes after he had disappeared. The others remained with him on the floor above.

The dancing began again. Liquor flowed freely. The guests and even the police commissioner appeared to relax. But Agent "X" stood tensely staring around. At the moment he could not see Nina, Pierre DuBrong, or the pudgy-faced Nick Baroni. He pushed his way through the crowd watching the dancers until the blonde head of

the Countess Rocazy came in view. She was in the arms of the politician. He looked about for the others; then suddenly whirled.

A stumbling, horrible figure had appeared at the head of the stairs. It was Agent "X's" hoarse exclamation that stilled the music and attracted the attention of the other guests.

A ripple of tense excitement passed through the assemblage. It increased with the speed of a spreading grass fire. Talk ceased. Laughter died away. All eyes were turned toward the stairway.

The man at the top of them was one of the police detectives. He seemed to be trying to say something. He was waving his arms, staring toward them. Then his hands, clawlike, went to his throat.

He reeled, staggered, clutched at himself. One choking, terrible cry came from his lips. It was silenced as though by the jerk of an unseen noose. The man appeared to be fighting invisible fingers that were wrapped around his neck.

He twisted, swayed, lurched forward. His feet slipped on the top step.

Then, while women screamed and men shouted hoarsely, he plunged headfirst down the slippery hardwood stairs. His body landed with a thud on the rug below. But the man had ceased his struggles now. His face became purple, the terrible livid purple of an overripe plum, the hue which had mottled the dying face of Bill Scanlon. His lips were drawn back in a mirthless, hideous grin. From between them his swollen tongue protruded, mocking, horrible.

While men and women in the room stood frozen with fear, too scared to speak or move, too weighted with horror to do more than breathe, there came a fearful explosion somewhere on the floor above. It rocked the house, rattled the windows.

A *cloisonné* vase dropped off a shelf and rang against the floor. Another of porcelain shattered to frag-

ments as it fell. In the crowd, close to the Secret Agent's side, a woman screamed and fainted. Then pandemonium broke loose.

CHAPTER XI

THE DEAD ARE SILENT

SO terrific was the explosion on the floor above that it seemed as though a bomb must have gone off. Plaster fell from the ceiling. Crystal pendants from the old chandelier followed it in a clattering, tinkling cascade.

Men and women made a wild dash for the doors, jostling each other, crowding, shouting in a mad stampede. Their fear made them forget that they were ladies and gentlemen.

A paunchy man in a dress suit with glittering diamond studs brushed Betty Dale aside with a sweep of his fat arm and charged ahead like a frightened bull.

Agent "X" saw the man's action from the corner of his eye. His lip curled in contempt. The man lurched by him and the Agent thrust a quick foot into his path tripping him, disregarding the fact that the man was the president of one of the city's leading banks. The bank official skidded along the floor carrying a rug with him.

The police commissioner was shouting, too, trying to stem the tide of panic. His voice boomed out. The frenzy began to subside.

Secret Agent "X" leaped up the broad stairway, his eyes burning with excitement. Three detectives, freeing themselves from the milling crowd, followed him.

At the top of the stairs there was a long hallway. Agent "X" looked down it. Another figure lurched into sight. It was the old butler, the man who had carried the jewels down for the guests to see. The butler's fingers were clawing at his throat. He collapsed on the floor as the Agent neared him. His face, too, had the ghastly livid hue of strangulation.

Debris and the broken panels of a door showed the location of the explosion. Secret Agent "X" needed no one to tell him it was the entrance to the jewel room.

The door was hanging loosely on its hinges. He thrust it open, stepped inside. The force of the explosion had shattered every light bulb. In the gloom he almost fell over another form—another detective.

One of the plain-clothes men behind him flashed on a light. "X" saw then that the man at his feet was dead, too. He had evidently fallen before the explosion had taken place. His body was twisted grotesquely, his features mutilated beyond recognition. Death and horror had struck here.

"The safe's been blown," said the detective behind "X" harshly.

The beam of the man's flash light was focused on the heavy iron box across the room. It was twisted out of line now, its sides bulging, its doors blown off.

"Soup!" said another detective. "A bungling job, too. They used enough nitro to wreck a house."

With drawn guns, both men leaped across the room, running to a window which was open. It gave on a balcony. They turned their lights down on the lawn beneath. Secret Agent "X" heard them cry out. Peering over their shoulders, he saw a fourth huddled form on the icy turf. The detective stationed to patrol the grounds had been killed along with the two others.

Guests, taking courage, now that the police were going to the scene of the explosion, were coming up the stairs, crowding into the hall.

Crandal came into the room, two friends with him. The millionaire's face no longer wore its look of easy assurance. He was tense and pale.

"The jewels are gone," he said harshly.

He seemed to forget the dead man lying at his feet, the other men outside. He was staring wide-eyed at the safe.

In front of it was the black leather case that had contained the jewels. It was empty, battered and broken by the terrible force of the explosion. There wasn't a jewel in sight.

Colonel Crandal leaped to the window. He stood speechless, staring out.

The police commissioner appeared in the doorway, a group of guests, including Piere DuBrong and Nick Baroni, with him. The commissioner's collar was torn. His hair was on end. He had been fighting to stop the panic downstairs. He said:

"You'd better go down, Colonel. You'd better go and quiet your guests. Tell them it's over now. That criminal made good his threat."

There was bitterness, defeat, in the commissioner's voice.

"This has been a terrible night, Colonel," he continued. "Three of my men gone. They tell me MacCarthy outside was killed, too."

THE Secret Agent was listening.

His burning eyes were swiveling around the room, staring at the safe and the window. The killer had wiped out clues, wiped out any possibility of identification by leaving a trail of death behind him.

The Agent's gaze came to rest on the faces of DuBrong and Nick Baroni. They both appeared shaken and terrified. But were they? The Agent was baffled. It was as though the Black Master was a being as intangible as the murder weapon he used. Agent "X" stared out the window off across the ice-coated lawn. The commissioner issued a harsh order to those of his men who were left.

"Go out and hunt around. Get some clues that will help Burks."

Hatless and coatless, the Agent dashed out on the lawn. The glow from the lighted windows on the first floor shed ghostly radiance. He supplemented their glow by lighting matches. The detectives came with their flash lights.

But Agent "X" had discovered in his first brief examination of the lawn

how hopeless it was to look for clues here. The ground was frozen as solidly as rock. The short turf was matted with ice. Its glass-smooth surface showed no tracks. A hundred men might have walked over it.

He moved up to the dead detective. The man's distorted features showed that the Spectral Strangler had struck



They were fighting with the desperation of cornered animals.

him down also. What horror had he seen out there in the semi-darkness? His bloodless lips would never tell now.

Down on his hands and knees, Agent "X" examined the ground around the form of the slain detective. For a moment he bent close, then flattened his palm, rubbed it over the icy coating. Something sharper than ice pricked his skin. He drew his hand up, looked at it. Tiny particles of glass were clinging to it. They were even more fragile than the shell-thin globes of electric light bulbs. A detective came up to his side.

"What's the matter? What the hell are you looking for, mister?"

The Agent held his hand out.

"Glass," he said quietly.

The detective swore harshly, took an empty envelope from his pocket.

"Give it to me," he said.

The Agent passed the glass slivers over. He had forced the police to share a clew with him. It was only fair that he share this one now with them. He believed he understood its significance, but he doubted that it would lead anywhere.

A police siren rose into a moaning wail out in the street. A car turned

into the driveway of the Crandal home and drew up before the big entrance-way.

Secret Agent "X" went back into the house. He was there when Inspector Burks of the homicide squad met the police commissioner. The two went into a whispered consultation for a moment; then the commissioner held up his hand, addressing the frightened guests.

"There's a criminal you've all heard of—a criminal I've reason to believe struck tonight, stole Crandal's jewels, and killed these men. I'm referring to the man who masks behind the name of Secret Agent 'X.' It is my belief that he and the Black Master are one."

Betty Dale came close to Agent "X." Her eyes were dark with anxiety.

"We'd better leave," she said. She wasn't thinking of her newspaper work; she was thinking only of the Agent's safety.

His smile reassured her.

"There is work for the lady scribe," he said. "She must stay. But far places call an explorer. He has a rendezvous at midnight."

He looked at the great clock against the wall. It was after ten now.

Some of the guests began to leave. An air of gloom and horror had fallen over the house. The atmosphere of festivity was gone.

Other police cars joined the first one in the drive. Fingerprint experts, Bertillon men, official photographers, the medical examiner and his assistant, and a detail of men from the bomb squad arrived. It seemed that every detective in the city was pouring into the Crandal home.

SECRET AGENT "X," under the guise of Clark Manning, explorer, slipped quietly away. There were deep suspicions in his mind. He intended to investigate Piere DuBrong and the gangster, Nick Baroni. Was it only coincidence that they were there when the robbery took place? But he had a rendezvous at midnight. It could

not be postponed. And a question burned in his mind. After such a fiendish and daring crime, would the Black Master still meet him in that silent, empty house that faced Bradley Square? If so, he had a plan worked out. He was ready tonight to take a desperate chance.

He drove quickly to his apartment on Jefferson Avenue, disguised himself as Greenford again. The spy was still unconscious, breathing peacefully in the closet.

The streets were deserted when "X" reached the square. It seemed a place of ghost houses. There was only one light burning. That was across the square in the beer saloon, dimly seen through the jumble of playground equipment. The rusty chain of a swing creaked in the night wind as the Agent passed it. It made a sound like a body swinging on gallows.

With the faces of the three slain detectives and the butler still before his mind's eye, the horror of the empty house seemed to have deepened.

There was not only the chill of mystery as he climbed the steps now. There was a living threat. The brooding, towering menace of death.

He pulled the ancient bell handle, half expecting that this time there would be no result. How could the man who called himself the Black Master be everywhere at once, unless he was the very spirit of evil itself?

Echoes clattered inside the house. A minute passed. Then again the lock of the door clicked and the old door swung open, moved by unseen hands. The Agent entered quickly. As he moved along the black hallways, he struck a match and noticed something that seemed to add to the ghostliness. His own tracks still showed in the dust. They had not been disturbed. There were no others beside them. It was as though he had entered a house peopled only with sinister spirits.

He was slightly ahead of time. He waited in the still top-floor room, waited till a clock somewhere outside

boomed twelve strokes. Then suddenly there was a dry rattling in the room. For an instant it was horribly reminiscent of a snake or of some huge reptile uncoiling. Then the voice he had heard before spoke.

"The Black Master salutes you, Greenford. What is your answer? Speak loudly."

Imitating Greenford's foreign accent, the Secret Agent spoke. It seemed as though he were talking to the blank walls of an empty room. It was uncanny, spine-chilling. His own voice reëchoed in his ears.

"My government is prepared to pay a large sum for what you have. It is prepared to pay a hundred thousand dollars."

There was an instant of silence, then a harsh laugh broke out. There was bitterness, mockery, contempt in the laugh.

"A hundred thousand dollars! A hundred thousand! You come here and offer me a hundred thousand—for something that will affect the destiny of nations? For something that holds in it the secret of death itself?"

The Agent injected excitement into his answer.

"Give me time then. Perhaps I can make them understand—make them pay more. Perhaps I can raise it to two hundred thousand!"

Again the mocking laughter filled the room.

"Two hundred thousand! The thing that you seek to buy has already snuffed out the lives of eight people. A nation could fall before it as well."

"Eight people!" The Agent gasped the two words, baiting the hidden voice on.

"Yes, eight people. When you read the papers tomorrow, you will understand."

"What is your price then? What shall I tell my government? There must be some reason in this."

"A million dollars," the voice said. "That is my price today. If I am goaded too far, it might rise. Those

who do not pay my price will regret it. Tell your government that."

"It is too much—it is impossible," said the Agent. "With governments bankrupt, with revenues lessening, how can you expect so much?"

"Fool!" said the voice. "I ask less than the price of one submarine, the cost of one dirigible. You have seen how I can strike. Beware."

"Give me one more chance," the Agent said. "I'll see what I can do."

"Tomorrow then—at the same time. It is your last chance. I cannot deal with fools and bankrupts. There are other countries that will pay."

The voice ceased speaking. The room was still. The Agent asked another question; but the walls echoed his own voice back. He went into action suddenly, took a short-bladed, gleaming tool from his pocket.

He moved sidewise, ran the sharp tool down the wall, ripping at the paper. It was from there he decided that the voice had come. Was there a secret room beyond, or—

He gave a harsh exclamation. The thick paper had come free. Behind it, sunk in the wall, was the bell-shaped outline of a radio loud-speaker. There was the small circle of a microphone below it. He ripped at the plaster feverishly, saw the compact radio mechanism behind it, and uncovered antenna wires leading to the roof.

The mystery of the voice in the room was solved. But the Black Master was as much a mystery as ever. The trail of the horror killer led on—into a fog bank of terror, eeriness—and doubt.

CHAPTER XII

THE NINTH VICTIM

AS he left the house he stopped for an instant to examine the door in the lower hallway. The mechanism that operated it was concealed. But he found a wire attached to the old bell cord, leading upward. He pulled this wire and waited. Seconds passed and the door opened. He understood then

that the radio impulse sent out from the same station as that of the voice which had addressed him was responsible for its mysterious movements. Battleships and airplanes had been operated by radio control. The Black Master had installed radio controls on a door.

With burning, intent eyes he descended the steps and moved along the street. Again he had the uncanny sense that he was being followed. He paused with a cigarette in his hand, and, before lighting it, stared back through his cupped fingers.

A dark, flitting shadow moved into an areaway behind him.

As though he had seen nothing, the Agent turned and continued his way along the street. But at the next corner he ducked out of sight into a doorway. Skilled himself in all the arts of shadowing, he planned to turn the tricks on his shadower.

Standing in the blackness of the doorway, he looked back. A small man came around the corner, moving with quick, furtive steps. The man stopped suddenly as he saw that the block ahead of him was empty.

For a moment the street light fell upon his face. His features had a vicious, pallid cast. He looked as though drugs had ravaged his body, made him a depraved and inhuman wreck. His eyes were glittering with feverish brightness, his face muscles twitching. Suddenly he retraced his steps, seeming to sense that he had been tricked.

The Secret Agent waited a moment, then came out of his hiding-place. Walking close to the side of the buildings he followed the small man ahead. So deft and sure were his movements that he seemed no more than a blending shadow.

He caught sight of the small man again as he rounded the corner. From then on it was the other's turn to try and shake off pursuit.

He seemed to think he had. Six blocks from the square, he came out

into the light, walked across the street, and entered a telephone booth. The Agent, watching from the other side, could see him making a call.

Then the utterly unpredictable happened. A movie house next to the drug store disgorged its audience abruptly. The street became clogged and choked with jostling people. The hophead slipped out of the store. His small height made it impossible for any man to see him.

The Secret Agent elbowed his way quickly through the crowd. But, when he reached the other side of it, the small man was gone.

Agent "X" frowned grimly, bitterly. Twice tonight the law of averages had been against him. Twice he had been disappointed. His search of the room in the house at Bradley Square had yielded nothing but the discovery of the concealed microphone and loud-speaker. Now circumstances beyond his control had made him lose the man he was shadowing. It was a thing that happened to the most skilled man hunters in the world. But the Agent refused to accept defeat.

A swift plan came to his mind. The investigation of Nick Baroni and Piere DuBrong would take time, days even. But perhaps Greenford could tell him something about the latter, give him a quick lead.

SWIFTLY he returned to the St. James apartments on Jefferson Avenue. Greenford was still there. With the spy unconscious in the closet, Secret Agent "X" removed the make-up that impersonated him and again resumed his disguise of a middle-aged man. It was almost time for the effects of the anesthetic he had administered to wear off. But in any event he would have found means of bringing Greenford back to full consciousness.

He injected a liquid containing extracts of adrenaline, strychnine and digitalis into Greenford's arm. A large dose of it would have been fatal. But

the Secret Agent was a master of pharmacology.*

The hypo injection acted immediately on Greenford's heart. It brought him out of the quiet of artificial sleep with the abruptness of an electric shock. He sat up, twitching and glaring about. His eyes fell on the Agent and for a moment he tried unsuccessfully to talk. It was some seconds before he found the power of speech.

"You can't hold me like this," he said harshly. "I've got an appointment tonight."

The Agent smiled. Greenford's appointment was already more than twenty-four hours overdue. The man didn't know he had been sleeping a day and a night.

"What time was it scheduled?" the Agent asked.

"Twelve o'clock."

"It's nearly one now!"

Greenford rose to his feet. Fear had come back into his eyes. He looked at Agent "X" strangely.

"Who are you?" he demanded again.

The Agent shook his head. He was staring at Greenford, and he saw Greenford's hand go to the pocket where he had placed the telegram of the Black Master. A startled, worried look came over Greenford's face.

"You stole it," he hissed.

The Agent bowed.

"I saved you from an unpleasant interview with a dangerous man," he said.

Greenford made a snarling sound and clenched his fist.

"You're going to tell me who you are and why you are meddling in my affairs."

The lightness left Agent "X's" voice.

He gazed at Greenford in a way that made the other man tremble. There was burning power in Agent

"X's" eyes. They seemed to have foresight, uncanny magnetism. They seemed to bore into Greenford's very soul.

"Perhaps you'll tell me why you bribed Cora Stenstrom to betray her employer?"

"I didn't—I didn't," said Greenford in a sudden frenzy of excitement.

"She was in your pay. Do you deny it?"

Greenford's face twitched, his eyes wavered. It was plain that he had been lying. Suddenly he burst forth in a torrent of denials, even before the Agent had accused him.

"I didn't murder her," he shrieked. "She was going to tell me what I wanted. She was going to phone me when all was ready."

"You mean you paid her to leave the window open!"

"Yes—yes, I did, but it wasn't I who killed her."

"No," said Agent "X" sternly. "Another and greater scoundrel preceded you. He took advantage of the path that you had made easy."

"I know it," said Greenford. "My God—who was it?"

"The Black Master," said Agent "X" softly.

He watched Greenford. He could see by the spy's expression that the name meant nothing to him. That telegram calling him to Bradley Square was the first time apparently he had had any dealings with the master murderer.

"Who is he?" asked Greenford trembling.

THE Agent was silent. For seconds his burning gaze rested on the man before him, until Greenford could stand it no longer.

"What are you going to do with me?" he demanded.

"Ask you a question," said the Agent. "Who is Piere DuBrong, friend of the Countess Rocazy—the woman you once called Nina?"

Utter amazement overspread Greenford's face.

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: From casual remarks he has at times made, I am certain that Secret Agent "X" is familiar with the works of Schmiedberg, Husemann, Stockvis, Brunton, and other experts in pharmacology and Materia Medica. I suppose he was led first into such studies by the need of dealing with toxicology in murder cases.

"Nina! She is not in this country! She can't be!"

"She is," said the Agent sternly. "Answer my question."

"I know nothing about DuBrong—I swear it! I haven't heard of the man. Nina Rocazy is a dangerous woman—a viper. She is not a countess, but an adventuress—a woman seeking always to prey on men."

The Agent's eyes bored into Greenford's. The spy seemed to be telling the truth. He spoke again.

"I've told you all I know. Now let me go."

"I will," said the Agent, "but on one condition only. It is that you leave the country at once. You made a mistake coming in the first place. Nothing awaits you here—except death."

"You are threatening me!" said Greenford harshly.

"Not threatening—warning you. Will you leave or not?"

The Agent's eyes held inexorable command. Greenford could not meet them.

"You have stolen my money," he said. "My belt is gone."

The Agent took out his wallet, extracted five hundred dollars, and handed it to Greenford.

"It is enough," "X" said. "There's a night plane to Canada. It takes off from the municipal field in half an hour. Your papers are in order—I have seen them. Take the plane and go before death prevents you."

"My luggage!" said Greenford.

"It is too late now to recover it. The American Secret Service is on your trail. Operatives have unquestionably searched your room at the Sherwood. Menace hangs over your head. Your only chance of life is to leave instantly."

Greenford shrugged resignedly.

"I will do as you say," he promised.

But Secret Agent "X" took no chances. If Greenford tried to communicate with the Black Master all would be lost. He wanted to make sure that the spy kept his promise and left. When Greenford went to the

street, Agent "X" stealthily followed. Then he frowned in anger and annoyance.

Instead of going to the flying field, Greenford took a taxi to the neighborhood of the Hotel Sherwood. He got out two blocks from it, walked toward it cautiously. Agent "X" followed, keeping on the other side of the street.

He saw Greenford walk furtively along the front of the hotel, passing the entrance three times without getting up enough courage to enter. There was a watchful man reading a newspaper far back in a corner of the lobby—a government operative. The Secret Agent recognized him; but it appeared that Greenford did not.

He lighted a cigarette, pulled his hat brim down, and started toward the main entrance a fourth time.

But he was destined never to enter.

He crossed the open space of sidewalk before the hotel, and it seemed that a noose was suddenly flung around his neck. He staggered on the pavement, clawed at his throat. Agent "X" heard one horrible choking cry and stared aghast at the drama that was taking place.

Greenford's face was becoming purple—the fatal, livid hue that meant death at the hands of the Spectral Strangler.

CHAPTER XIII

GUNS OF DEATH

AGENT "X" saw a stealthy figure moving across the face of the building. The figure was going away from, not toward Greenford, as would have been the case if it had been a casual passerby. It was the sinister hophead whom "X" had lost sight of in the theater crowd less than an hour before.

By disregarding Agent "X's" warning, by failing to keep the promise he had given, Greenford had walked straight to his death. The emissary of the Black Master had slain him, thinking Greenford was the man who had

shadowed him. He had been lurking in the vicinity of the hotel to destroy the life of a man he thought had tried to pry into the Black Master's secrets.

The Agent darted in pursuit of the killer, resolved this time that he would not fail. He would shadow the hophead to his hideout and through him learn the identity of the fiend who employed him; for "X" felt certain that this drug addict was no more than a tool in the hands of the master murderer. As a criminal, he wasn't of sufficient caliber to have plotted and carried out such a campaign of terror.

There was no chance of the hophead being lost in a crowd now. It was late. The streets were deserted. But because of this it was a difficult task to follow him without being suspected. The Agent depended somewhat on his make-up.

Behind him he heard some one come from the hotel entrance attracted by Greenford's dying cry. He couldn't help Greenford now. The man was beyond human aid, destroyed by his own greed and wilfulness. He was the ninth victim in the terrible series of murders.

The Agent's eyes were glowing with the light of intense concentration.

The hophead was walking purposefully now like a person who has accomplished an appointed task. He dived into a subway entrance, rode uptown, and got off in a section cluttered with theaters and cafés. Once again the Agent got a look at the man's face. He saw that he had the features of a rat. There was cruelty in the feverish glitter of his eyes and the twist of his thin mouth.

The chase ended when the man disappeared into the servants' entrance of a notorious night club—the Club Mephistopheles.

This club, the windows of which were curtained night and day, was known to the Agent. It was a place of evil repute, a place where gangsters hung out and where many criminals had made their headquarters. It was a place of vice and debauchery

where "slummers" came also, social registerites who wanted to spend money freely and taste the city's wild night life.

There were gambling tables inside. Here the underworld and the world of wealth and fashion rubbed shoulders. It had figured in the papers more than once. Bennie Pomarno, beer runner, had been slain here in the boom days of prohibition. In one of its luxuriously appointed rooms a well-known society matron had committed suicide after losing the last of her fortune at the roulette wheel. It was a club to which the Secret Agent had made it a point to get a card.

But dress clothes were necessary to gain admittance. Crime was hidden beneath the trappings of gentility. The Agent thought quickly, then went to an establishment near a dance hall where tuxedos could be rented. He hired one and entered the door of the Mephistopheles Club.

Though it was long after midnight, the activities inside had not begun to wane. The gambling rooms were crowded. The big dining room still held late diners. A jazz orchestra was playing sensuous music.

The Secret Agent strolled about eyeing the crowd that filled the place. He was waiting for the hophead to appear. Was he employed in this club? And if so in what capacity?

A red-headed, flashily dressed hostess came up to the Agent, but he waved her away. He recognized many faces. Here a society woman. There a crook with a police record. There a small-time politician seeking favor with the big shots of the underworld.

Then he drew back with a sudden, amazed intake of breath. He had glimpsed the fat form of Nick Baroni!

The gangster had evidently come straight here from Crandal's party. Why? To seek solace in a familiar haunt after the terrible and nerve-racking experience at Colonel Crandal's, or for some more sinister reason?

The pastiness of fear still showed

on the big gangster's face. The burning eyes of Secret Agent "X" studied him.

Could it be that Baroni was the man he sought—the terrible Black Master? The repeal of prohibition had made it hard for gangs to exist. Rivalry was more bitter. In the days when beer could only be had in speak-easies there had been enough money to support a score of big shots in the luxury that their gross bodies craved. But now this source of revenue had been abolished. The government and legitimate brewers were taking in what the gangsters had formerly regarded as their own. Rackets had narrowed down.

The bitter enmity of the gangs had deepened. They were ready to tear at each other's throats like wolves; and the Mephistopheles Club was in a no man's land between two gang territories.

THE Secret Agent stared and pondered. Baroni had his torpedoes with him now, flat-chested, pale-faced young men who talked without moving their lips and whose eyes were ever watchful; men ready to shoot at the drop of a hat. Rumors that Baroni had reformed were baseless. The fight over the city's slot-machine racket was as fierce as ever. It was centered now between two gangs—Nick Baroni's and Sam Dwyer's river-front mobsters. And now Baroni was on the edge of Dwyer's territory.

Abruptly the Agent's eyes shifted and his body grew tense.

The murderous hophead had made his appearance. He was clad in a black jacket, a wing collar, and bow tie. The man was a waiter in this sinister club, a member of the late night shift. Secret Agent "X" was deeply struck by this.

As an employee here, the man was in a position to get orders from any one of a dozen underworld czars—but he was hovering around Nick Baroni's table. He stepped forward once, struck a match when Baroni skinned the cellophane off a fresh cigar.

Baroni paid no attention to him; but that meant nothing. There were hundreds of prearranged signals by which secret messages and orders could be conveyed.

The Agent watched lynx-eyed. But hours passed and nothing happened. Nick Baroni drank until his face got bloated and mottled. The guests left one by one. Baroni made his exit at last followed by his sinister bodyguards. Secret Agent "X" hung around outside until the hophead emerged again. He shadowed the man to a small furnished room two blocks away.

Then Agent "X" bought all editions of the early morning papers and took them to one of his hideouts. In secrecy and silence he read all available news reports. The story of the murders in Colonel Crandal's home was spread glaringly in headlines across the front pages. The police had made no headway. The famous Crandal jewels were gone. Three detectives and an old family servant had been killed strangely, horribly—strangled apparently by unseen hands. There had, the paper said, been another murder outside the Hotel Sherwood. A man named Greenford, suspected of being an international spy, had met death in the same mysterious way.

Through it all a trail of black mystery ran. The police and Government operatives were baffled. There seemed to be no connection between the jewel robbery in Crandal's home, the murder of Greenford, and the four other murders of like nature that had taken place previously.

But the Agent's eyes were grimly alight. He saw a sinister motive, a connection running through it all. But the picture was not clear. Why had the Black Master, who asked a million dollars for the thing he had stolen from the chemist, Mark Roerner, stooped to such a crime as the theft of Crandal's jewels? Was it merely to provide funds for himself until the big sale went through? Wouldn't even the Black Master find it difficult to dis-

pose of such famous gems as Crandal's? And now that Greenford had been murdered, what would be the Black Master's next move? What government would he attempt to negotiate with next?

These were the questions the Agent asked himself as dawn made the sky gray over the city. Milk wagons rattled in the streets outside. Men and women rose to another day of work. The black mouths of the subways became gorged with hurrying people. But the Agent, silent and alone, pondered a murder riddle.

There was one course open to him, one he planned to follow. He would haunt the Mephistopheles Club, watch developments there, shadow Nick Baroni.

WHEN night came, he was among the first arrivals. Disguised as a young man about town, he played heavily at the gambling tables to avert suspicion. He began to win. Here was more money that would go into Betty Dale's fund for crime victims.

But he ceased playing when ten o'clock came and when he saw the gross form of Nick Baroni entering the room.

For a moment the big gangster, puffing on a cigar, swept the gambling tables with cold, alert eyes. Then, while his bodyguards moved quietly into chairs around him, he settled himself before one of the roulette wheels. He began playing with the elaborate, solemn concentration of a man to whom gambling is a serious business.

Tonight, Baroni had more torpedoes with him than usual. There were six of the sleekly dressed, vicious-looking young men. With cigarettes dangling from their bloodless lips, their eyes were ever alert. It seemed that their right hands were never far from their right coat pockets, where flat automatics rested. There was a tenseness about them as though they expected trouble. Had Sam Dwyer, terror of the river front,

made some veiled threat, warned Baroni that this was his territory?

The tenseness increased when, toward midnight, Baroni left the gambling room and seated himself at a dinner table. The Secret Agent saw why. He saw Baroni's sloe-black eyes shift across the room. Saw his face muscles stiffen.

There, seated at a table near the wall, was Sam Dwyer, Baroni's hated rival. The river-front gangster was a thinner, younger man. There was a mocking light in his eyes as he looked across the room at Baroni.

Spatted, immaculately dressed, with the corner of a white handkerchief thrusting from his upper coat pocket, Dwyer looked like a fashion plate. But there was a hard, lean wolfishness about him that matched the older man's pudgy viciousness.

Ostentatiously Dwyer rose from his seat and walked across the room. Elaborately he bowed to Baroni and gripped his fat white hand. The two men smiled, stared at each other, and hatred glared from their eyes. Baroni's bodyguards edged nearer, their chalky faces glowing like pale, evil moons against the shadows of the room, their hands tensing like talons. Dwyer's crafty eyes flashed toward them. He smiled again. The Agent couldn't hear what was being said, but he knew that Dwyer was giving vent to some mocking pleasantry. The two men seemed like old friends. It was only the bitter lights in their eyes that revealed the murderous enmity they bore each other. The room grew silent, tense.

But Dwyer walked quietly back to his table. He appeared to have no bodyguards around him. He appeared to have come to the Mephistopheles Club alone; but, while he had been talking to Baroni, the tables around the entranceway had filled. Well-dressed, quiet-moving young men, singly and in groups, had entered.

They paid no attention to Dwyer, or he to them. But when Nick Baroni saw the newcomers, a pastiness crept

over his fat face. The Agent, watching hawklike, saw the pudgy fingers holding the cigar begin to tremble.

Smiling slightly, Sam Dwyer was studying his menu. The waiters scurrying about the room looked suddenly like small scared rabbits. Whispers ran among them and among the guests. There were covert glances. Frightened gestures. The manager of the Mephistopheles Club walked jerkily across the floor and went up to Dwyer's table. His face was pale. He remonstrated with the gangster.

Dwyer waved him airily away.

Many guests, still in the middle of their meals, began to rise and hastily leave. Girls, the color suddenly gone from their faces, asked their escorts to take them out. The room was slowly emptying, as the stalking shadows of murder crept out from the walls.

The orchestra on its stand played on, but the music took on a thin, sickly quality. The eyes of the musicians darted from their printed notes to the two groups of men facing each other. Their hands trembled on the keys of their instruments. The rhythm became broken, macabre, like a dance of death.

Baroni was slumped in his seat now. He was trying not to show the fear that made his features dough colored—trying not to let on that he was aware of the showdown that faced him. The stubs of two cigarettes spiraled smoke in the ash tray before him. He lit another and dribbled smoke through his heavy lips and nostrils. The whites of his eyes had taken on a yellow tinge as they wandered toward those tables across the room. He and his bodyguards were outnumbered. Dwyer's friends had come in strength of two to one.

The Agent's gaze was upon Dwyer. What would the signal be that would let hell loose in this room?

The sleek, bland face of Sam Dwyer gave no hint. But, as the Agent watched, Dwyer's well-manicured fingers lifted slowly and touched the handkerchief in his front coat

pocket. He took it out, wiped his lips delicately. When he replaced it, he thrust it down out of sight.

It was a slight gesture, almost insignificant; but it was the pre-arranged gesture that started the fireworks. It was the fuse that lighted the bomb of human hate and ferocity.

In one and the same moment, the men around him left their tables and backed against the wall, drawn guns suddenly appeared in their hands. Dwyer slipped out of his seat as quickly and gracefully as a dancer executing a pirouette. With a hoarse bellow of fear, Nick Baroni lurched sidewise in his chair, deliberately flinging himself flat on the floor. He did it to escape the stream of bullets that lashed the spot where his body had been.

CHAPTER XIV

TO THE DEATH

THE Agent had witnessed many gun fights, but never one which began with such deadly sudden ferocity as this. Both sides were shooting to kill, shooting to achieve the greatest slaughter in the shortest space of time.

Baroni had escaped the first blast of bullets. His huge body was half hidden by the table which he had overturned. It was all that saved him. His bodyguards were crouching, their eyes, black, evil slits. Like Dwyer's men, guns had appeared miraculously in their hands. They answered the fusillade from across the room with a volley that sent a wave of sound blasting back against the walls.

The musicians left their stand, stumbling off it amid a jumble of hastily dropped instruments. They scurried out of sight. The few remaining guests outside of the members of the two gangs, leaped to safety. Only Agent "X" remained as witness of the crimson carnage that was taking place.

He sat at a table close against the wall. There was a heavy *portière* near by. He drew it in front of him.

The fighting men paid him no heed; but he knew that he risked a stray bullet any moment.

One of Dwyer's men had fallen to the polished floor of the club. He pressed a hand to his side, screamed, thinly, horribly. A gunman in the employ of Baroni suddenly threw up his hands and took three staggering steps forward. There was a blue hole in the center of his forehead, a surprised look on his evil face. Even before his body hit the floor, there came the vicious spat of three more bullets striking him. He crumpled up and lay still, a crimson stain slowly spreading outward.

Dwyer, a gun in his hand, and the look of a demon on his face, was edging forward. He shouted some orders to his men. They spread out, slinking along the walls, creeping closer to the group who faced them. Dwyer himself crouched behind a chair. His gun spat.

Another Baroni man dropped to the floor. Lying with one arm twisted under him, he kept up a murderous fire, until his automatic clicked empty. Then, painfully, slowly, he began filling the clip from his pocket until a second bullet shattered his wrist. He screamed then and crawled away toward the wall.

Baroni was getting the worst of it. There was no question about that. This was a battle to the death. Dwyer was fighting to wipe out a rival group, to eliminate competition with the quick scalpel of hot lead. And Baroni's small bodyguard was already reduced by two.

Slowly, mercilessly, Dwyer's men moved in fanshaped formation, trying to reach a point where their crossfire would do the most damage. Baroni, his eyes bulging, his face sagging with fright, still lay on the floor. Either the big gangster carried no gun or he was afraid to draw it. He was depending on his men, waiting for death, palsied with terror.

A third Baroni man dropped his gun now. His arm hung limply. He tried to pick the gun up with his left

hand, failed. There were only three of them left, crouching, white-faced youths whose lives had been spent under the shadow of fear and quick death. They were fighting with the desperation of cornered animals, knowing that their minutes were numbered.

"Get Baroni," Dwyer hissed. "The yellow-bellied punk is hiding behind that table."

Agent "X" saw the mobsters' fire shift, saw splinters begin to fly from the table behind which Baroni crouched like a sodden, frightened hog.

Then quietly, deftly, the Agent moved his hands. He took a small tool from his pocket — a pair of pliers. They were not ordinary pliers. There was a trough in the middle of them for wires to slip into, a needle point centering in this trough. He snapped the pliers over the cord of the electric table light. His wrist tensed. The needle point was driven through the rubberized insulation, through the strands of copper wire beneath. It formed an instantaneous short circuit. There was a brilliant spark, a puff of smoke. The lights went out as every fuse in the building blew.

The Agent slipped out of his seat. Risking death from the leaden hail of bullets, he crossed the floor, slipped to the side of Baroni. He touched the man's arm, heard him cry out in fear.

"Keep quiet," the Agent hissed. "I put the lights out. I can save you."

He had a reason for this. He felt no friendship, no sympathy for the craven gang lord who had, in his day, ordered the deaths of many men. But there was a chance that Baroni could lead him where he wanted to go — along the trail of the Black Master.

Dwyer's men, taking advantage of the blackness, were circling in like sinister wolves in the night. A bullet plucked at the sleeve of the Agent's coat close to the shoulder.

Then some one, a member of Dwyer's gang clicked on a flash light, setting it on a chair and leaping back.

Its rays illumined one of Baroni's decimated bodyguards. A volley of bullets riddled him, made him collapse like a slumped sack of grain, before he struck. Only two were left now.

THE Agent smiled grimly. Dwyer's men were all around them. Guarding the exits, guarding the windows. Dwyer planned to wipe Baroni and every man of his gang out, leave no witnesses of the terrible battle. He would kill the Agent, too, if he got the chance.

But Agent "X" was busy. From a deep inner pocket, he took a small vial with a screw cap. It seemed a strange thing to bring out at such a time, a strange thing to pit against a dozen flaming automatics. In the vial were a score of tiny pellets, like pills.

He unscrewed the top of the vial with deft, quick fingers, then waited a moment while air seeped in. There had been only a vacuum in the vial before. It had been airtight.

On contact with the air the tiny pellets began to smoke and glow.*

Suddenly the Agent made a sweeping motion with his arm. The pellets left the mouth of the vial, scattering around the room, rattling on the floor.

A second later one made a report like a giant firecracker exploding. It seemed fantastic that such force could be contained in such a small body. A second exploded close to one of Dwyer's men. The man screamed with fear, dropped his automatic, and leaped back.

The firing ceased abruptly. Dwyer screamed and screamed orders.

Then a half-dozen of the Agent's harmless-looking pellets let go, and the room became a crashing, exploding medley of sound. Air waves hurtled this way and that. The windows rattled.

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Secret Agent never explained the nature of these pellets to me; but it is certain that they were covered with some compound containing phosphoric acid. Phosphorus ignites on contact with hydrogen in the air. When the coating of the pellets heated up, the thermal stimulus must have discharged whatever sort of explosive they contained. I had known for some time that Agent "X" was a master of certain branches of chemistry.

The Agent, calm through it all, spoke sharply in Baroni's ear.

"They are harmless — come with me."

The fat gang leader, shaking with terror, floundered to his feet. He stood dazed, rocking, while the din of the exploding pellets kept up.

Leaving his side a moment, the Agent went to the nearest of his henchmen who was still alive.

"Come," he said.

The man turned with the squeal of a rat, tried to shoot; but the Agent knocked the gun from his hand.

"Fool!" he hissed.

He rounded up the other man, drew them to Baroni's side. The gang leader gave a brief explanation.

"This guy did it," he said. "Let's scram."

They slunk out of the room, passed an exit from which Dwyer's men had fled in terror as one of the Agent's pellets burst close to it. They crept down the stairs unmolested, and out into the street.

An excited crowd was gathering outside. Baroni lumbered through it, scattering people right and left like a hippo ploughing through reeds. His two henchmen and the Agent trailed him.

Down the block two big limousines stood, the fenders of one touching the rear of the other. Baroni piled into the first car. One of his surviving torpedoes took the wheel. Baroni, the other gunman, and the Secret Agent were in the rear. "X" was sticking close to the gangster now, calmly carrying out a preconceived plan.

Gears whined and the car sped away into the darkness. Behind them, police sirens were screaming as a half-dozen radio cruisers, summoned by the frantic appeals from headquarters, converged on the Mephistopheles Club. No doubt the emergency squad cars would be called out, too. It was the biggest gangster battle of the season.

Nick Baroni, slumped and speechless, was mopping his fat face with a

silk handkerchief. Rhythmically, monotonously, his plump hands moved round and round. It seemed to afford him relief. His gunman, shivering and crouched like a frightened rat, said nothing as the car tore ahead. But once his eyes shifted strangely, fearfully, to the face of the Secret Agent.

The Agent's features were the bland, even features of a young clubman. His immaculate tuxedo was not even creased. He fingered his tie for a moment, straightened it. Only his burning eyes showed the dynamic fire of hidden emotions.

NICK BARONI spoke then as the speeding limousine carried them to safety, carried them beyond the noise and turmoil of the Mephistophelles Club.

"What's your name, guy—an' what made you chisel in?"

The Agent spoke quickly. This was a question he had been expecting. He was ready for it.

"You seemed to be getting a tough break—and I felt like a little excitement."

The crafty eyes of Nick Baroni, regaining some of their arrogant poise now, focused on him thoughtfully, taking in his patent leather shoes, his sharply creased trousers, his well-fitted coat.

"Just a playboy out for a little fun, eh?" he said.

The Agent stiffened. Irritation leaped into his eyes for a moment.

"Did I act like a playboy?" he asked harshly.

Baroni seemed to wilt. He opened his mouth, spoke quickly. There was a sudden uneasy look in his eyes, as though he sensed for the first time the uncanny power of the stranger beside him.

"Don't get me wrong, mister. You came in at the right time. It's O. K. by me. Those Dwyer rats might have made it a little tough for me. And that pop corn of yours? What the hell was it? How did you think it up?"

"Just a few fireworks," said the

Agent quietly. He had slipped back into his role, hiding his dislike for the man beside him, hiding his contempt for the man's arrogance and callousness. For Baroni was pretending now that he would have won the fight with Dwyer anyway. He was ignoring the fact that four of his bodyguard lay dead on the floor of the Mephistophelles Club.

"I'll get that rat, Dwyer," Baroni was breathing. "I'll burn his guts for this." He turned fiercely on the man beside him.

"What do I pay you lice for? Why did you let him get the drop on us?"

"You're talking through your hat, boss," said the gunman sullenly. "Burnie, Monk, Steve, and Fred were wiped out. The rest of us would have got it too, if this mug hadn't edged in."

Baroni lapsed into silence, mopping his fat face again.

"I gotta have a drink," he said presently. "My nerves are shot. Stop at Frenchy's place, Al."

The torpedo driving the car nodded. A block farther on, brakes squealed and the big car slid to a halt before the door of an underworld dive.

"Come in, guy, and I'll set you up a snifter," said Baroni expansively.

The Agent followed the trio to the door of this joint that was still a speak-easy, even though prohibition had been repealed. A slit-eyed man with spiky mustaches opened the door, stared at them through the grating, and admitted them when he recognized Baroni.

"Where's the rest of the boys?" he asked.

"They got into a little trouble, Frenchy. Fix up some Scotch."

Darting an inquisitive look at the Secret Agent, the little Frenchman went off to obey orders. Baroni motioned toward a back room and heaved himself into a chair. He was still perspiring. His hands were trembling. His pasty, soggy face showed evidences of the terror that had almost paralyzed him. He gulped

three glasses of whisky before turning to the Agent.

"Now," he said. "What's your name and who the hell are you?"

"James Porter," said the Agent quickly. It was one of his many aliases. He drew a card from his wallet, handed it to Baroni to prove it.

The big gangster stared at the card impressed.

"What do you do for a living?"

"Dabble in the stock market a little."

Baroni's eyes showed cunning.

"You ain't making much money now?"

"No," said the Agent. "You know what happened to the market."

Baroni rested his fat chin on one hand, placed his elbow on the table.

"Listen," he said. "You seem like a good guy. Maybe I could give you a job that would bring in some kale. Then you could hit the high places regular. Four of my torpedoes were wiped out tonight. I gotta get some more. How would you like to be one of them?"

The Agent nodded slowly.

"I'll think it over," he said. This was what he wanted. This would give him a chance to see what, if any, were Baroni's connections with the hideous strangler murders. But he didn't want to appear too anxious.

Baroni took another drink and his self-confidence and suavity increased.

"I got Dwyer's number," he said.

"I'm going to get him and take over his rackets. There may not be as much dough as when we was running alky—but there'll be plenty. There's a dope racket that I'm gonna look in on. You could contact the rich guys and high-steppin' dames with that million-dollar manner of yours. We could clean up."

Baroni stared blandly at the Secret Agent, seeming to see in him possibilities for a new type of clean-up—dope peddled to society people who could pay for it. The Agent hid the contempt he felt.

He was about to answer when the

three men beside him stiffened. A police siren had suddenly sounded in the street outside. It was followed by the sound of a car sliding to the curb.

Baroni's eyes darted to the windows in the rear of the room. But a thunderous knocking came at the outside door before he could move. Frenchy, trembling, went to the door. They heard him arguing for seconds. Gruff voices sounded outside. Then the Frenchman slid the bolts and stepped back, wringing his hands.

The Agent, looking over the shoulder of Nick Baroni, saw the foremost figure in the group that was entering. It was Inspector John Burks of the city homicide squad.

CHAPTER XV

TAKEN FOR A RIDE

WITH a deep scowl on his face, Inspector Burks strode into the speak-easy's back room. He eyed the group sitting at the table distastefully.

"Well, Baroni, I figured I'd find you here," he said.

The big gangster spread his fat hands and shrugged.

"There ain't no law against a guy having a little drink with a few pals."

Slowly, sternly, Inspector Burks eyed the faces of the assembled group. He removed his hat, ran quick, tense fingers through his snow-white hair. His contrasting jet-black eyebrows drew together as he frowned.

"Haven't I got enough trouble with the strangler killings without you gangster rats making more?"

"I don't get you, chief," said Baroni blandly. "Me and these mugs have been here all evening."

"Don't lie to me," cried Burks. "Four of your men were picked up on the floor of the Mephistopheles Club—stiffs all of them. You and Dwyer have been fighting again."

"Maybe we did have a little scrap," said Baroni. "But I ain't admitting it."

"I've got fifty witnesses," said Burks. "You were seen there."

Baroni's voice grew unctuous, smooth as syrup.

"Who started it, chief—did anybody tell you that? If I was there and if I fought, it was only in self-defense. The law says a guy's got a right to—"

Burks silenced him with a wave of his hand.

"Murder is murder, Baroni. Three of Dwyer's rats were killed, too. You were mixed up in murder tonight. It may land you in the pen, or maybe the hot seat. You'd better come clean."

A sickly, pasty hue had come over Baroni's face again. His tone grew whining.

"Listen, chief — maybe I did get mixed up in a little trouble tonight. Maybe there was some guys wiped out. But I didn't start it, I tell you. It was that rat Dwyer. He'll get a bellyful of lead for this. He'll—"

Inspector Burks struck the table with his clenched fist until the whisky glasses leaped and the bottle tipped over, gurgling its amber fluid on the floor.

"I'm going to have a talk with Dwyer, too," he shouted. "I'm going to tell him the same thing. You two mugs are going to make peace, or I'll see that you both go to the hot seat. Prohibition's over. This racket stuff's got to stop. Both of you are going to break up your gangs and go out of business. If you don't, I'll get you on murder charges for what happened tonight."

It was a threat. The Secret Agent knew that. Inspector Burks was taking what seemed the wisest course. There were few convictions for gang killings. It was hard to get witnesses who would testify in court, harder still to pin crimes on the mobsters. They hired the cunningest, most unscrupulous criminal lawyers to be had. Baroni could plead self-defense. He might get off. But by threatening him, Inspector Burks hoped to win his point.

Baroni's face muscles sagged. He had visions of a golden stream from

new rackets being diverted from his pockets.

"I'll—I'll think about it," he said.

"You'll do as I say. You'll bury the hatchet with Dwyer — shake hands with him and go out of business. If I find you in any public place again with torpedoes around you—if there is one more killing, I'll railroad you both to the pen on a first-degree murder charge. I'm going to talk to the D. A. about it."

With this ultimatum, Burks turned on his heel and stalked out of the place.

Baroni wiped his face again.

"Let's have another round of drinks, boys," he said.

For minutes he sat brooding, his head sunk into the rolls of fat around his neck. He was lost in thought. Finally he spoke.

"You heard what the inspector said. There's one way of putting it over on that bird. I hate to do it. Maybe I won't. But it's worth considering. If me and Dwyer went in together, stopped fighting, we could clean up on dope. Booze is out; but dope's still good. Now that mugs can get all the liquor they want, they won't want it so much. We'll start 'em on dope and get 'em to like it."

Baroni stopped, took another gulp of liquor. His piglike eyes were gleaming. His shrewdly acquisitive brain was active. He had forgotten the fight in the Mephistopheles Club. Forgotten the dead men on the floor. Forgotten his hatred of Dwyer. Gold took precedence over everything.

"Dwyer and I can open up a swell joint somewhere," he said. "Together we can keep any other guy from chiseling in. If anybody wants snow or coke they'll have to come to us."

The Secret Agent rose.

"Where are you going?" Baroni snapped.

"Out," said the Agent. "I've got some business to attend to."

Baroni eyed him speculatively for a moment. Then he spoke slowly.

"What I said goes," he remarked. "I

can use a guy like you in more ways than one. You got class and brains. If I hitch in with Dwyer, there'll be a place for you. Drop around here and Frenchy will tell you where to find me."

"O. K.," said the Agent. There was a mocking light in the depths of his eyes that Baroni didn't get. He was satisfied with the way things were going. If Baroni and Dwyer joined forces, he would have a chance to learn the intimate secrets of both gang chiefs. As a side issue, he'd smash their evil dope racket. But he'd find out first whether either was the Black Master. Now that he thought of it, Dwyer, with his polished manners and suavity, was more the type who might plan such a colossal crime.

BUT, as he stepped into the street outside of Frenchy's place, the Agent's calmness left him. He tensed suddenly, whirled toward the curb. His momentary let-up of vigilance had brought new danger upon him.

A dark sedan with lights out was sliding to the curb beside him. The door was open. A voice addressed him from the interior.

"Come here, guy. Stick your hands up."

The Agent knew the threat of death when he faced it. There was death in that voice. He could see no features; but, just inside the door where the glow of the street light fell on it, he saw the dull, gleaming muzzle of an automatic. He hesitated an instant only, then moved forward.

By the curb he came to a standstill.

"Closer," said the deadly voice inside.

The Agent moved closer still, his scalp prickling.

Then rough hands seized him. He was dragged into the car's interior. Almost instantly gears whined and the car shot away. There were three men in the rear of the car. He caught the silhouette of one and held his breath. He was staring at the sharp, wolfish features of Sam Dwyer, river-

front mobster, the man who had butchered four of Baroni's bodyguards.

He did not speak. The car sped on for six blocks. The men beside him were silent; but the hard, cold muzzle of an automatic pressed against his side.

Then the voice of Dwyer sounded again.

"You're the guy," he said, "who cribbed our show tonight. I'd have got that hog Baroni if it hadn't been for those firecrackers of yours. You pulled a fast one—but one of my mugs saw you going out."

Still the Agent was silent.

"What have you got to say about it?" snarled Dwyer. "Who are you, and since when did you start working for Baroni?"

"Just now," said the Agent. "My name's Porter."

"What do you mean — just now? You helped him make a get-away when I had him trapped."

"I horned in just for fun," said the Agent casually.

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

Dwyer was silent for seconds. He turned on a small flash light, studied the Secret Agent's face. There was contempt in his voice when he spoke again.

"Just a dolled-up softy," he said. He swore under his breath and continued. "You shouldn't have done it, fella. Nick Baroni wasn't worth it. He gave you a job, you say?"

"Yes."

Sam Dwyer laughed thinly, making a sound in his nose that was like a harsh whinny.

"I'm going to save you a lot of trouble, fella. You wouldn't like to work for Baroni. He'd work you hard. He's a bad man. You'd come to a lot of grief. I'm going to save you all that. I'm a good guy."

Dwyer stopped speaking. He laughed again, and one of the others in the car with him laughed, too. Their laughter was harsh, mirthless;

it was laughter that held a terrible threat. When Dwyer spoke again, he didn't address the Agent. He spoke gruffly to the driver of the car.

"There's a field at the end of Mari-gold Avenue," he said. "They're going to build on it when they get around to it. There ain't nothing there now. That will be a good place."

There was coldness, cruelty, in his tone. The driver nodded understandingly and stepped on the gas.

The Secret Agent stiffened. He knew to what use Dwyer planned to put the vacant lot. He knew that they were taking him on a ride of death for the part he had played in Nick Baroni's get-away.

CHAPTER XVI

THE BLACK MASTER'S ORDERS

THE pressure of the gun against his side increased. The Agent thought quickly. He had often been in the presence of death. It held no terrors for him. But death before his work was done was something he could not face calmly. The gangster killings he had witnessed had been evil, vicious. But they were as nothing compared to the horror of the Spectral Strangler murders. In his mind's eye he saw again the swollen, purple face of Bill Scanlon—the tongue thrust grotesquely between lips silenced forever. He saw, too, the features of those others who had met death in the same terrible fashion.

His own face was calm, but his eyes burned with the deep, glowing light of determination.

Sam Dwyer spoke then, harshly, mockingly.

"Baroni can save the dough he was going to give you. You won't need it; but he will—for funeral expenses. A big shot's got to have a decent funeral—an' Baroni comes next—after you."

Dwyer's hard, glittering gaze was fixed upon the Agent. The others were staring at him also. There was sadistic cruelty in these men that made

them contemplate murder with fierce pleasure.

"Shall we give it to him now, chief, an' chuck him out afterwards — or wait till we get there?"

The man who had spoken was fingering the cold butt of his automatic. He spoke again, his voice eager.

"It won't make no noise if I put the muzzle close. The rat cheated us to-night. Let's smoke him."

Dwyer answered harshly.

"Pipe down, mug! You're not giving orders — you're taking 'em. There's cops around. We're not taking any chances—tonight."

The car rolled on, nearing Marigold Avenue. The Agent knew that it was a long, bleak thoroughfare lined with warehouses and factory buildings. There would be no cops there.

Dwyer corroborated this.

"I'll give the word when we turn the corner," he said.

The Agent began to tremble as though in a palsy of fear. They did not know that the man they had captured was a superb actor. The quivering of his arms and body seemed real.

Dwyer's lips curled back from his white teeth in a mirthless grin.

"Can't take it—can you?" he said. "Don't worry, fella—it won't be long now."

The others chuckled evilly. Then the Agent spoke, his voice hoarse, as though terror were constricting his vocal cords.

"How about a smoke?" he asked.

"Wait a minute!" Dwyer's hands felt through the Agent's pockets for a gun. He found none.

"O. K.," he said, "but make it snappy. You ain't got long. The parking ground for rats who don't mind their own business is just ahead."

With hands that shook, the Agent reached toward his vest pocket. He seemed to be fumbling, but his fingers were working purposefully. He drew out a silver cigarette case such as a playboy might carry. He thrust a cigarette between his lips, replacing

the case, and drew a small lighter from another pocket.

In the dimness of the car's interior, the gangsters watched his trembling, awkward movements with wolfish satisfaction.

"Soft," said Dwyer. "You never could have taken what Baroni would have handed you. Better thank us for rubbing you out."

Dwyer's gun poked against the Agent's ribs accentuating the remark. Dwyer laughed harshly.

The Agent was silent. With his left hand he snapped open the cap of the lighter. His thumb was on the tiny knurled wheel that made the flint spark. His right hand hung listlessly in his lap.

Then, so quickly that the men beside him could not catch the movements, he whirled the lighter in a swift arc and clamped the fingers of his right hand over Dwyer's gun wrist, pushing the gun away.

No spark came from the lighter. There was a soft, quick hiss. A jet of concentrated tear gas, stored in the base of the lighter under pressure, lashed into the gangsters' eyes.*

The man at the Agent's left clawed at his face. Dwyer at his right cursed furiously and pumped the trigger of his automatic. But the gun, deflected, sent bullets into the back of the front seat.

The driver turned a tense, frightened face. A second jet of gas caught him straight in the eyes. He bellowed with fear, took his hands off the wheel, instinctively jamming down on the brakes.

Agent "X" rose, leaped across Dwyer, and thrust open the car's door. It was slowing down, wabbling. The front tire struck the curb. The car rocked and slewed around. Agent

"X" leaped out, landing on his hands and knees. In an instant he was up, speeding into the darkness, with Dwyer and his men still cursing and clawing at their eyes.

The Secret Agent's own eyes were glowing. He hoped to get back to the Mephistopheles Club in time to locate the hophead and see what his reaction to the gangster fight had been.

BUT while Agent "X" was still a block away from the club, the hophead was leaving it. He had witnessed the mobsters' battle, but his small animallike face showed no expression. The police had questioned him among other employees. He had answered in adroit monosyllables, telling nothing. And now he was on his way to his sinister employer.

In killing Greenford, he had carried out instructions to the letter—the instructions of a man he had never seen and probably never would see — the Black Master, the man who supplied him with the soul-shattering morphine derivative that his nerves and body craved. His nerves were jumping now, crying out for a fresh shot of the drug.

The hophead had a report to make to his employer also. He feared no pursuit tonight. Greenford was out of the way. No one else, he felt certain, suspected him of being implicated with the Black Master. Nevertheless, he was careful. The Black Master was a man who tolerated no errors, no oversights. Fear of his unseen employer helped, besides his craving for the drug, to make the man a faithful employee. There was in his heart a dread that amounted almost to superstition for the criminal for whom he worked.

He changed cabs twice, walked along dark, unfrequented streets. On one of them he came at last to a small empty office building. Like the house on Bradley Square, this building was for sale. The neighborhood had run down. It was no longer a business section. The few remaining tenants in

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: One thing I have learned about the Agent's methods. He seldom repeats himself. His ingenious brain is always figuring out new weapons of defense. In his battle with the "Torture Trust," which was chronicled last month, he used tear gas in the stem of a watch in escaping from an embarrassing mix-up with the police. But, being afraid perhaps that the police would ever after be on the alert for a man with a trick watch, he discarded that method of defense for another.

the building had been evicted six months before for non-payment of rent. It stood bleak and deserted now, with the chill emptiness peculiar to office buildings that are no longer in use.

The hophead, with a key from his ring, let himself into the front of it. He climbed an old metal stairway to the second floor. Here he entered an office in the center of the building. He touched a switch, turning on overhead lights.

The office was hardly more than a cubbyhole, windowless and airless. The lights he had switched on could not be seen from the street. But, unlike the rest of the building, this office had been renovated. Small as it was, there were indications that some one had recently been at work here.

The place had been dusted, the ceiling and walls had been painted and the light fixtures were new. A huge mirror was set into the rear wall divided in two by a narrow metal panel that ran down its center. The mirror gleamed brightly, reflecting the glow of the lights and sending the dope fiend's own image back to him. There seemed to be two thin-faced, rat-eyed men in the strange little room.

He studied himself for seconds in the mirror, then glanced at the small clock that was clicking on the table. This was a business office; but mysterious and sinister was the business transacted in it.

The clock showed one minute to twelve. The hophead fingered his collar, tried to control his twitching nerves. There were shadows of fear in his eyes. He waited tensely while the hands of the clock moved slowly round to midnight. Once his gaze darted upward to the elaborate, rose-petal design overhead into which the light fixture was set. Then he stiffened.

A voice suddenly spoke to him out of the quiet of the room.

"What have you to report, Taub? Speak and I will hear."

The voice was dry, disguised. It was the voice of the Black Master. It

seemed to come from overhead, perhaps from a speaker concealed somewhere around the light fixture. It continued:

"I am watching you, Taub. I see your face plainly. Tell the truth — about everything. Don't lie to me. Never lie to the Black Master. It is not well. He sees all—knows all."

The dope fiend's face turned a shade paler. His lips moved. He spoke excitedly—in English that had a slight accent.

"Taub never lies, master. Taub always tells the truth. Taub is a loyal servant."

A chuckle filled the room. The dope fiend, Taub, began his report, telling in jerky sentences of how he had caught Greenford trying to shadow him and had killed the spy according to instructions. He mentioned, too, the gangster fight in the Mephistopheles Club.

SILENCE had descended as though the very walls were listening. Taub could feel eyes upon him, but he could not locate the direction from which they came. This, too, filled him with dread. He repeated again and again that he always told the truth.

The eyes that he felt upon him were real enough. He was under close, continuous observation by a man watching not ten feet away.

In another small office behind the mirror, which formed a heavy partition, the unseen watcher sat. He was facing the mirror, the back of it. Through its surface, which appeared silvered to the hophead, he could see Taub plainly. The mirror was of Argus glass, the glass used in diamond brokerage offices, the glass that will admit light rays in one direction only. It was eight inches thick — thick enough even to withstand bullets. It formed an invulnerable barrier between the rear office and the mysterious room where Taub stood. But, as an added precaution, the man sitting behind it wore a heavy black mask.

His features were hidden. Only his eyes showed, watching the dope fiend. Before him was a tiny microphone connected with the amplifier above Taub's head. He could speak softly into it and his voice would resound in the next room.

When Taub had finished his reports, the Black Master spoke again.

"Greenford was a fool. I do not need him. I have other plans. To make men realize the value of the thing I have to sell, perhaps I shall have to demonstrate it—in a spectacular way."

The Black Master was silent for a moment. Taub waited. Then the Black Master's laughter sounded again. It had the harshness of infinite evil.

"You say these two gangs battled—tried to wipe each other out? What if I aided them in their mutual ambitions? What if I gave the police, the city, and the country a demonstration of wholesale killing that they will remember? Nine murders have taken place already. Would it not be more conclusive to the powers that be if I demonstrated what I can do by wiping out wholesale a nest of rats—two nests of them?"

"Yes, master," said Taub in a trembling whisper.

"I shall destroy Baroni and Dwyer and all those who follow them, Taub. It will be amusing as well as beneficial. As men spray powder on annoying insects and kill them, I shall destroy these criminal parasites. Then—certain men will understand. Then I will get the price I ask for what I have to sell. If not—there will be other murders—till I have made my point clear. You shall aid me, Taub."

"Yes, master. When do these gangsters die?"

The Black Master was silent for a moment. Behind the mask his eyes glittered.

"When conditions are right," he said. "When they least expect it. Go back to the Mephistopheles Club, Taub. Find out Baroni's and Dwyer's plans. Find out what effect the battle

tonight will have. Find out where they can be located."

"I will, master."

Taub hesitated after he had spoken. He seemed to be waiting for something—something that he was afraid to mention. The Black Master's laugh rang out.

"I know what you want, Taub! The laborer is worthy of his hire! As long as you are a faithful laborer, you shall be paid. Come close to the panel between the mirrors."

Taub moved forward uneasily. He waited in front of the panel. A section of it disappeared suddenly, disclosing a round dark hole six inches in diameter—large enough for a man's hand to come through. Fingers appeared in this hole, gloved fingers holding a small vial—the fingers of the Black Master.

Taub took the vial. His face was convulsed with the craving that possessed him. Here in this super-potent drug, an opium alkaloid that he could get nowhere else, was peace for his jumping, screaming nerves. It would produce visions that would wipe out the memory of murders he had committed, give him a few hours of rest—and steel him for other murders to come. The Black Master held him in bonds that were stronger than steel chains. He was one of several drug addicts who served the arch criminal. They were safe employees. They would not squeal. To do so would mean an end to their drug supply—with consequent torture to mind and body that would make death welcome.

The Black Master's hand withdrew. The metal plug inside the panel was shoved forward again. The hole was blocked up. The Black Master's voice sounded.

"Go now, Taub. Do as I have ordered. Report here tomorrow night. Baroni and Dwyer and their mobsters shall be destroyed like insects—when the time is ripe. Their deaths shall be a further warning that the power of the Black Master is invincible."

CHAPTER XVII FLOWERS OF DEATH

TWO days after his escape from Sam Dwyer's death car, Secret Agent "X" received an invitation. It was handed to him by "Frenchy," the owner of the speak-easy where Baroni had taken refuge following the battle in the Mephistopheles Club.

The invitation was from Baroni himself. Secret Agent "X," disguised again as James Porter, young man about town, had gone to Frenchy's place seeking news of Baroni. Was there a chance, he wondered, that the two gangsters, Baroni and Dwyer, would forget their animosity and join forces in a new and more sinister racket, as Baroni had proposed?

It seemed possible. The greed for gold was the motive that made gangs organize in the first place. It was stronger than hate — stronger even than the fear of death. And if these two men organized, Secret Agent "X" wanted to watch them. One or the other might conceivably be the terrible Black Master. Or, in contact with them, he might be led to the hideout of this greater criminal.

Baroni's message was short and to the point.

"Porter," it said, "come to my place at eight this evening and come dolled up. Big doings, and I can use guys like you. Frenchy will tell you where to come."

Agent "X" read the note with interest. What was Nick Baroni planning? He spoke to Frenchy, and the rat-eyed, spike-moustached proprietor of the speak-easy gave him Baroni's address. It was in a flashy suburb built up with the gaudy mansions of the newly rich.

Prepared for any emergency, Secret Agent "X" went there at the appointed hour. He had "dolled up" as Baroni had suggested. He was dressed immaculately, dressed in the height of fashion. No one could guess, looking at him, that in the linings of his tuxedo were many small, curious articles

that would have no place on the person of the playboy that he seemed to be.

Baroni, as "X" had suspected, lived in one of the most elaborate houses in that pretentious section of the city. It was ornate with bay windows, towers, and colonial columns. A long drive led up to it. Well-clipped shrubbery covered the lawn.

A man servant who had the sneaky look of a gangster admitted him.

The inside of the house was even more ornately elaborate than its exterior. Here the ex-beer-runner indulged his childish impulses and showed his shockingly bad taste. Pictures, art objects, tapestries, and indiscriminate pieces of furniture formed a confusing jumble. Thousands that he had made in illicit enterprises had been spent in decorating this house.

The air was heavy with cigar smoke. There came the clink of glasses from a room opening off the front hall. The squint-eyed servant ushered Agent "X" into this.

Baroni's thick voice boomed out. Surrounded by a group of his underworld followers, gunmen, fences, paid torpedoes, the gang leader was in his glory. Arrayed again in an ill-fitting dress suit, he welcomed Secret Agent "X" boisterously.

"Here's the guy that I was telling you about," he said. "Here's the guy that's gonna throw in with us—him an' his firecrackers."

He was introduced to the circle of men whose bland faces masked depths of evil. The two surviving torpedoes of the night before were there. Four new ones had re-enforced them. In such hard times there were few crooks who were not glad to join in with Nick Baroni. The gangster looked at his watch.

"We're gonna start in ten minutes," he said.

"Start where?" asked the Agent.

Nick Baroni winked at him, broadly, mysteriously.

"I got a little surprise for lots of you guys," he said.

The hired torpedoes hitched the guns in their pockets expectantly, thinking apparently that another battle was in store. Baroni turned on them suddenly. His face was serious now. He waved his cigar in pudgy fingers.

"None o' that," he said. "You mugs are going to leave your rods behind tonight. They won't be needed."

Astounded looks met this announcement. Baroni nodded.

"Yeah, I mean it. Get un-heeled before you leave. If any guy has a gat when he steps out of this house, I'll have him put on the spot."

Glumly the men about him rose and deposited their automatics on a sideboard in the big room, making the sideboard look like a young arsenal.

"How about you, fella?" said Baroni, staring at the Agent. "Ain't you heeled?"

The Agent shook his head.

"I'm not carrying a gun," he said.

Baroni looked sly.

"Don't set off any of them fire-crackers, either. You got to act polite where we're going."

Mysteriously he rose then and beckoned for the others to follow.

THEY put on their coats and hats, and, when they reached the porch outside, a collection of limousines awaited them. Some were Baroni's own cars. Others he had hired for the occasion. Their drivers seemed to know where they were going. No directions were given. The Secret Agent had a place of honor in the first car with Baroni. The fat gangster, full of zest tonight, joked and laughed as the cars rolled away.

They headed back toward the city, drove in a procession through the night streets. Then the Secret Agent gave a start of surprise. The cars were drawing up before a familiar entranceway—the door of the Mephistopheles Club. Hadn't Baroni had his fill of bloodshed and violence in this place?

As nonchalantly as though no kill-

ings had ever taken place there, as though there had never been bleeding, bullet-riddled corpses on the floor, Baroni entered. His followers came behind him, gaping, wondering.

The club's manager came out to meet them. A few whispered words and he led Baroni across the main floor. They climbed a short flight of stairs, entered the club's biggest, private dining room. Then the Secret Agent started again.

A huge table was set in the center of the room. Gleaming plates and silverware showed. Spotless napery spread like a field of snow under the lights. At the table, ranged around it, waiting, was a group of men. But it was the man at the table's head that caught the Agent's eye.

Sam Dwyer!

A sudden tenseness filled the room. Baroni's torpedoes crouched in their tracks, their hands stiffening, forgetting that they had left their rods behind. Baroni waved a sudden affable hand. He spoke suavely.

"This is the surprise I was talking about. Me and Sam here has buried the hatchet. We're gonna behave ourselves now. There ain't gonna be no more killings. All you mugs has gotta make friends and get acquainted. Ain't that right, Sam?"

The thin, dudish gangster at the head of the table rose.

"Business before pleasure," he said. "Maybe Nick Baroni and I would like to sling a little lead at each other, but it don't pay. Times have changed, boys. Nick and I are going into business together. This is a dinner to celebrate our partnership. We both know our stuff. We oughta make good."

Dwyer's eyes focused on Secret Agent "X" for a moment. Sudden malice sprang into them.

"That guy!" he said. "You brought him along, too, Nick?"

"Why not?" said Baroni. "What if he did pull a little stunt here the other night. We gotta forget all that."

"I wasn't talking about that," said

Dwyer. "It's something else. I don't like him."

As though in bitter recollection, the thin gang leader rubbed his eyes for a moment. They were still lightly bloodshot from the traces of tear gas that Secret Agent "X" had flung.

"Whadda yer mean?" asked Baroni. "Nothing," said Dwyer. "But keep him away from me."

"He's gonna sit at my end of the table," said Baroni. "But you fellas has got to be friends, too. Everything's gotta be peaceful from now on. We both give Inspector Burks our word."

Baroni winked again leeringly. The two gangsters were keeping their word to the head of the homicide squad. They had buried the hatchet, made up with each other. But "X" knew what sinister ambitions filled the breasts of the two men. They hoped to flood the city with narcotics, fatten like vultures on the broken bodies and broken souls of drug addicts.

The men of Baroni's gang eased into their places. Waiters came in. Suddenly Secret Agent "X's" eyes grew intent. Among them he saw the slim, cat-footed form of the dope fiend he had shadowed; the emissary of the Black Master.

The hophead had evidently been detailed by the club manager to wait on the gangster's tables. The rat-eyed man looked around for a second, then disappeared to return a moment later.

In his arms this time he carried a huge floral piece. There was something funereal about it. Roses, carnations, and cornflowers were wired in a big frame. More wire was wrapped around the thick bundle that their stems formed. Maidenhair fern formed a mat around this. But, funereal as it was, it made a gay display.

Baroni and Dwyer turned their heads in surprise.

"For the gentlemen," the hophead waiter said politely.

"Who's it from?" barked Baroni.

The waiter shook his head.

"Bring it here — let's look for a card," Baroni demanded.

The waiter picked the flowers up, brought them close. Baroni looked amid the gay blossoms, shook his head.

"There ain't no card," he said. "It's from the manager of this joint—or maybe the police commissioner himself. Set it down over there, you pasty-faced mug."

The waiter nodded and drew the mass of flowers into a position where all could see them.

"They make me think of a funeral," said Baroni. "But they smell good. Bring on the food and let's eat."

SECRET AGENT "X," watching the face of the waiter, had a sudden, tingling sense of danger that he couldn't quite fathom. But there was a look in the hophead's eyes that was hard to interpret—a look of uneasiness, of expectancy.

It was the hophead who helped serve the soup course, and "X," missing nothing, saw that the man's hands were shaking. Something was wrong with him. Something was in the air. What?

The courses of the dinner progressed. The gangsters ate their food, drank their liquor, and grew noisy. Baroni hurled jokes across the table at his former enemy, Dwyer. The hands of a clock at the end of the room moved toward ten. As the hour approached, Agent "X" noted that the hophead's manner grew more mysterious.

A dusty whiteness had come over the man's already pale face. His small eyes rolled in his head. Twice they stabbed across the room, focusing on the clock. He almost spilled the coffee in serving it.

At five minutes to ten, with the huge meal over, Nick Baroni rose to his feet and proposed a toast.

"To the future of this gang," he said. "To all the dough we're gonna make an' the good times we're gonna have."

They drank gustily, emptying their

glasses. Baroni ordered another round and spoke again.

"This has been a swell meal," he said. "I want the guys who cooked it and the guys who served it to come in and drink with us. I want the club manager, too."

The hands of the clock stood at two minutes to ten now. The Agent's eyes were focused not on Baroni but on the rattish, evil features of the hophead waiter. He saw the man's gaze move toward the clock for the dozenth time; then the fellow slipped furtively toward the door. His movements were quick, scared at the last. He seemed to want to get out of the room as though it harbored some terrible evil—something that struck dread to his soul. Baroni saw the man's movements.

"Here," he said. "You gotta drink a toast, too, you dope-eating mug."

The waiter shook his head and jerked open the door.

"Get him—bring him back," roared Baroni. "Just for that I'm gonna pour whiskey down his throat till he can't stand up. He ain't no gentleman."

Secret Agent "X" leaped up. More than any one else in this room he was interested in the waiter. What could account for the man's strange actions? He did not want him to get away. He flung out the door after the man, saw him darting down the hall. The hophead was running as though all the devils in hell were after him, running as though to escape death itself.

Agent "X" pursued him as far as the end of the corridor. Then a sound made him turn his head and look back. The door that he had just left, the door of the dining room, had swung open. A man stood in it, a man clawing at his throat.

The man was one of Baroni's henchmen. As the Agent stared in horror, the gangster's eyes bulged, his face grew purple, and, with a hoarse, terrible cry he pitched forward and lay writhing. Another figure followed him, a man who seemed to be fighting

invisible terrible fingers encircling his neck.

As he held the door open for a moment, Secret Agent "X" got a look into the room he had just left.

A gasp of sheer horror came from his lips. For the room was a shambles. Men at the tables had risen to their feet. Chairs were being overturned by reeling, staggering figures. Purple faces showed.

Then suddenly the bark of an automatic sounded. It was followed by another and another. Some of the mobsters who had come to the dinner "un-heeled" had worn concealed weapons. They were using them now. Each gang held the other responsible for the thing that was happening. Leaden death slugs were being added to the horror of invisible murder.

Two men, clawing fiercely, fighting like demons, lurched through the door. One was a Baroni man; the other a henchman of Dwyer. The latter held an automatic. The Baroni man was pinioning his wrist. But the man with the gun jerked free as a sinister purple hue spread over his enemy's face. Before the unseen strangling death could do its work, he sent three bullets crashing into the head of the Baroni mobster.

Then he dropped his gun, clawed at his own throat. In a few seconds he had collapsed to the floor to join the body of the man he had just killed.

Sam Dwyer himself came from the dining room. His immaculate clothes were in disorder now. His sleek hair was streaking down his face. He wrenched at his freshly starched collar as though that were the thing that was cutting his wind off. Then he gave a fearful scream and staggered against the wall. The livid, plum-colored hue of the strangling death spread over his face. His eyes started from their sockets, and he fell forward on the floor.

It was like a glimpse into the mouth of some ghastly inferno. Agent "X" shuddered. The Black Monster had struck his most hideously ironic blow.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MAN HUNT BEGINS

NEWSBOYS were shouting in the streets three hours later. They were peddling papers on which were spread headlines telling of the greatest underworld killing in the city's history. Tense-faced men and women were reading the story. The police were staggered by the magnitude of the crime. The Baroni and Dwyer gangs had been wiped out. The two gang leaders and all their followers but one, dining in state at the Mephistopheles Club, celebrating the end of their long feud, had been slain. Two score men had been killed by the horrible strangling death.

Cordons of police still surrounded the Mephistopheles Club. Grim-faced detectives were viewing the scene of this most colossal of crimes.

It was the one surviving member of the gangsters' party that aroused the press and the police to a state of hysterical excitement. Employees of the Mephistopheles Club remembered having seen him coming from the corridor of the private dining room. He had left the building just before the terrible crime had been discovered. The manager of the club had seen him, too. He gave a description to the police.

"Tall, well dressed, even featured—a typical playboy." This was what the manager had said. He remembered having seen this man in the Club Mephistopheles before. He had been there two nights previous when the gangs of Baroni and Dwyer had had their bitter battle. No one knew his name. But dozens of detectives were detailed to comb all the underworld of the city. Descriptions of the man were sent out to every precinct. Every patrolman on the beat was on the watch for him.

Inspector Burks of the homicide squad, called to the scene of wholesale murder, believed that he had seen the man also. He had his own opinion as to the man's identity. He remembered

that it was at Frenchy's speak-easy, on the night he had warned Baroni not to battle with Dwyer, that he had seen the mysterious stranger.

Detectives were sent to question Frenchy. Trembling and white-faced, Frenchy babbled the truth. The playboy stranger was not a regular member of Baroni's gang. He had helped Baroni in some way. Baroni had invited him to the fatal party. Frenchy had overheard Baroni and the stranger talking. The stranger's name was James Porter.

Armed with this information, the police increased their efforts. They even searched the membership lists of the exclusive clubs. Newspapers gave the man's name to their readers with the request that any reader who heard of him, telephone police headquarters immediately.

But no call came in. No one had heard of James Porter. The name was obviously an alias.

Inspector Burks, hearing this, swore fiercely. The police commissioner of the city was beside him at the moment. The Inspector turned to him, spoke with the bitterness of a man who is baffled and distraught.

"James Porter and Secret Agent 'X' are one and the same," he said. "Secret Agent 'X' is the man behind all these crimes. He's the murderer we want to get. I said so that night at Crandal's home. I say so again now. This city will have no peace until he is behind bars waiting for the electric chair."

The police commissioner nodded gravely, convinced that Burks was right.

And, sitting tensely in a restaurant in an entirely different disguise, Secret Agent "X" was studying the papers. There had been no time to make an investigation of the death room in the Mephistopheles Club. He had his own ideas about how the mass murders had been committed. He remembered that floral piece which had been presented to the gangsters with no name attached. The Black Master's

drug-crazed slave had brought it in. The Black Master was behind those terrible deaths. But, in his horror at seeing the shambles in the room, Agent "X" had lost sight of the hophead who had disappeared.

HE knew at whom the hunt was being directed. Toward the man who called himself James Porter—toward himself. There was irony in that. He was fighting the Black Master, risking his life. So far he had come nearer to the truth than any one else; but the police were convinced that he was the murderer. The papers were calling him the Black Master.

From the description that Frenchy of the speak-easy had given, several staff artists on several newspapers had drawn pictures of the disguise Agent "X" had worn.

These were being run on the front pages of the paper as an aid in identifying him. He realized by what miracle he had escaped death in that room. But his own alert faculties were partly responsible; those and the fact that he had been suspicious of the hophead.

A floral offering! "Like a funeral," Nick Baroni had said, and the mass of gay flowers had masked a death more hideous than any one in the room had suspected. Why had the waiter kept looking at the clock? Why had he left like a frightened rat as the hands approached ten? The answer came forcibly to the Secret Agent's astute mind.

At the hour of ten, the Black Master had sent out the waves of radio impulse which had operated some hidden engine of death concealed in that mass of sweet-smelling flowers. The brain of a master criminal had conceived of the terrible plan.

Agent "X" was waiting, reading the papers, wondering when the police would examine the floral offering. But even if they did, he hadn't any hope that it would lead them in the right direction. The Black Master was too clever a man to leave clues

that would point the way. The police might guess, as he did, *how* the murderer had been committed, but they wouldn't be any nearer knowing who the murderer was.

As the Agent read the stories of the crime, studying, pondering, a special delivery letter was received at the city headquarters of the U. S. Department of Justice.

It was a letter that brought the chief of the office, working late, out of his chair. A letter that made him strike the desk with a clenched fist. It was a letter from the Black Master.

There at the bottom of the page in typewritten capitals the arch murderer's name was printed. There was nothing phony about it. The contents of the letter showed that it was genuine.

"Gentlemen:" the letter said. "At this moment you are reading newspaper stories and listening to police reports of the murders that have taken place at the Mephistopheles Club. Look at the mailing date on this letter. It was dropped in a post office box at ten o'clock. That was the hour that the murders took place.

"The writer of this letter has a weapon of such terrible strength that the Government cannot afford not to buy it. The Government has seen now what it can do. It has seen men stricken down at a precise hour in a terrible way. I am offering this weapon for sale. It is now on the market. Several countries are interested in it.

"My price is high. But if my price is not paid, other atrocities will follow. I destroyed a nest of rats tonight. The Government, I know, will thank me for this. But if my price is not paid, a reign of terror will follow in which people who are not rats will die. If that is not sufficient evidence that I mean business, I will move my base of operations to the nation's capital.

"Think well over this. Consult with your superiors. My theft of the Cran-

dal jewels will give me sufficient funds to carry on. I am prepared to wage an indefinite campaign until my demands are met. If some other country buys my weapon first, that will be America's loss."

The Department of Justice official read this letter again and again. He called his colleagues to his side. The city police heads were shown the letter. Messages flashed back and forth between them and Washington. But if the Black Master meant what he said, if he were not a madman, it was a baffling, terrible problem. No civilized country would consider the use of such a terrible weapon even in the chemical warfare branch of its army. The Black Master must be caught, destroyed, before his terrible campaign had reached shocking heights.

A day went by, and no progress was made. That evening, in his office, a public official received a threat. It was from the Black Master telling him that he had been marked for death.

He called up police headquarters. Squads of detectives and Government operatives were sent to guard him. A cordon was thrown around his home to see that no stranger entered. Motorcycle cops rode beside him as he left his office in his own private sedan. The chauffeur was an old and trusted employee. But a detective rode beside him.

When the official reached the safety of his home, he was prepared to stay under cover for days if necessary—for days till the Black Master had been caught. The block was cleared as the official's car rolled up to his house. Detectives watched from all sides.

Then, just before the car stopped, just before the door was opened, the official and the two men with him were seen to rise and clutch at their necks. As detectives rushed forward, they lurched from the car with purpling, hideous faces, clawing at their throats. They staggered, reeled, and fell dead on the sidewalk with their tongues protruding in the mocking, characteristic manner of the strangling death.

A hasty search of the car's interior revealed only one thing. The tiny electric bulb in its roof was broken. Bits of glass lay on the floor. The mystery of the Spectral Strangler was as black as ever.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SPIES' NEST

AGENT "X" read about this murder in the papers. That night he called on Betty Dale. It was late. She had just returned from the *Herald* office. Her eyes were wide with fright and excitement.

"I was afraid," she said. "Afraid something had happened to you."

The Secret Agent nodded.

"The hounds are chasing a fox while a wolf runs free."

"The Black Master," she said. "Do you know that he made a broadcast to the papers tonight? Do you know he threatened a campaign of terror if the Government does not meet his price?"

The Agent shook his head.

"You wouldn't have heard about it," said Betty Dale. "The broadcast came just before I left the office. It was on a special short wave. They haven't been able to trace it."

"They won't," said the Agent harshly.

She saw by the burning, intense look in his eyes how deeply the news affected him.

"The whole city is hysterical over it," she continued. "Rewards are being offered for the Black Master's capture. My paper has offered ten thousand dollars. Colonel Crandal has offered another ten. The loss of his jewels—those murders at his home—have shaken him. He came to the office tonight. I talked to him. The police commissioner came, too. They all think it's you. If I could only tell them that it isn't!"

"Let the hounds of the law chase the fox," he said bitterly. "The fox will hunt the wolf."

Again fear sprang into her eyes.

"I am terrified," she said. "Terrified

for you. He—the Black Master—seems able to strike anywhere. And you were there at the Mephistopheles Club when those awful murders took place, when all those gangsters were killed!”

He nodded and for a moment patted her hand. There was a light in his eyes warmer than the burning glow of the man hunter. He was human for a moment, glad that somewhere in all the world there was one person who knew he was not a murderer; glad of the friendship and abiding loyalty of this sweet girl.

And the flood of color suffused Betty Dale's cheeks again. The Agent's fingers upon hers made her heart beat strangely. She wanted for an instant to have him put his arms around her, to melt into them and beg him for her sake not to risk her life. But this would be interfering, hindering the strange, important work to which he had dedicated his life. She spoke primly, almost casually, checking the flood of words that sought to pour from her lips.

“Be careful,” she said. “Don't take any chances you don't have to.”

Secret Agent “X” left her with grim determination in his heart. Three times now he had moved in the wrong direction. Each time, however, he had drawn nearer his goal; yet each time the Black Master had won the point, while Death kept score. The man, whoever he might be, was a monster of cunning as well as cruelty. He was holding the whole detective force of the city at bay, fooling them utterly. And now he had even dared broadcast to the papers, telling them of the campaign of terror he planned.

The Agent knew that the Black Master had a dual purpose in this. It was a free advertisement of the hideous thing he was trying to sell. He was letting the whole world know that the murder weapon he used was on the open market. He hoped by such means to start competitive bidding, to raise its price.

And this made the Secret Agent

think of Piere DuBrong and the blonde woman, Nina Rocazy. What were they doing?

He made many discreet inquiries. Countess Rocazy had been staying at the Hotel Imperial for a few days. But she had checked out. It was believed she had gone South. Piere DuBrong had left for Washington. But a long-distance call to the embassy office elicited the fact that he was not expected back for several days.

A grim light showed in Agent “X's” eyes.

He changed his disguise, got one of the cars he kept, out of a garage, and silently drove through the night. In the mid-town section, he parked his car and walked along a quiet street. Then he stopped in front of a small apartment building.

This was the place to which he had escorted the blonde after their memorable ride in the speeding taxi.

Was she still here? Was this her hideout when she wasn't playing the rôle of countess?

HE looked in the mail boxes. The name of Rocazy was not there. Perhaps she had another name, or perhaps she had moved again, gone quietly to some hideout where she could consort with her own kind. He did not believe for an instant that she had left the city.

The Agent remembered the location of her apartment. He stared up the side of the building. A fire escape moved past a window in one of the rooms she had had. The window was dark, curtainless. The apartment seemed empty.

But the Agent moved along the side of the building and drew himself up on the fire escape. Muscles hidden under his well-tailored clothes worked with springlike quickness and precision. Noiselessly he climbed upward till he was on a level with the third-floor suite Nina had had.

His observation from the street below had been correct. Nina's apartment was empty. Not only that. Plas-

terers had been at work getting the place ready for a new tenant. Small drops of splashed calcimine showed on the inside of the window.

Pressing his face close to the glass, he could see the workmen's stepladders, pails, and brushes standing in the middle of the room. All the furniture had been moved out.

It seemed futile to search for traces of Nina's whereabouts inside. But the Agent hesitated only a moment. His quick mind was working. He never overlooked small bets. He remembered a thing which he had noticed in his one quick survey of the place. The room had an open fireplace. An ordinary detective would have passed this by. But Secret Agent "X" tried to pass nothing by.

He drew his kit of chromium tools from his pocket, thrust the clawlike teeth of one under the window sash. The place was empty. He could risk a little noise now to gain entrance quickly. If there was nothing here, he did not want to waste time.

He pressed down on a rodlike handle which he fitted into the tool. The sudden, tremendous leverage snapped the lock. In a moment he was inside, walking on quick, silent feet. There might be some one in the apartment below. Overhead footsteps would attract attention.

Painters' canvasses, spread over the parquet flooring, helped to deaden the sound. He drew out his tiny flash light, turned its beam on the fireplace. Then he moved forward eagerly. An old broom leaned against the bricks of the fireplace. The painters had carefully swept the floor before starting work.

He had noticed that Nina hadn't been a neat housekeeper. A woman in her dangerous line of work had no time to think of the little domestic niceties. There was a miniature mountain of gray dust and gray ashes on the cold hearth of the fireplace.

The Agent had studied the habits of all types of people—careful people, slipshod people.

Crouching before the fireplace with his small light turned on, he began raking through the ashes and dust with a splinter of wood that the painters had used for mixing plaster.

He worked slowly, painstakingly, missing nothing that the fireplace contained. When he stopped at last, he held three objects in the palm of his hand—the stubs of two cigarettes with lipstick adhering to them, and the crumpled cardboard covering of a package of matches. He discarded the cigarette butts after a close examination of them. They had no name; but a sniff convinced him that they had been Russian.

His eyes glowed when he stared at the match paper. "Café Levant" it said. A border of gold stars and scimitars on a blue background framed the words. The Agent turned back to the ashes and raked again. He unearthed several bits of charred cardboard. These, too, were blue.

He had conclusive proof now that the woman, Nina, made a habit of going to the Café Levant. She bought her matches and cigarettes there. She flung her stubs and empty match papers in the fireplace. All this fitted in with his estimation of her character. She was exotic, slipshod. She might have changed her living quarters, but, if she were in the city, he doubted if she had changed her eating place.

Agent "X" left the apartment quickly and stopped at the nearest telephone. But the Café Levant was not listed. Grimly, purposefully, he called up the service department of the city's lighting company. He was a workman, he said, sent out on a job. Where was the Levant Café located? The girl on duty looked in her books, gave him the address.

The place was far downtown, near the waterfront. The entrance to it was shadowed by the elevated which snaked overhead like an endless black serpent. There were small cluttered shops of Syrian, Armenian, and Arabian pastries along the street. Agent

"X" smiled. If she made a practice of coming all this distance to dine, she would undoubtedly keep it up.

The Agent, looking like a sight-seer who had casually wandered in, entered the grimy doorway of the Café Levant.

It was nothing more than a small, smoky restaurant serving Russian and Oriental foods. The large, greasy proprietor stood behind the cashier's desk near the door. There were a dozen people in the room, sitting at the small, soiled tables; and Agent "X" noticed one thing immediately.

The buzz of conversation ceased as he entered. This was a place where the same diners came night after night. It was a place unadvertised, unknown to the world uptown. The coming of a stranger was noticed at once.

But the Agent sat down casually at a table near the door.

He did not at first return the glances that were directed his way. Conversation began to rise again after a time. It seemed to him that it came in a medley of many different tongues.

His gaze swept the mixed men and women diners, and he saw then that their faces like their voices showed the blood of many countries. The Café Levant was the meeting place of at least a dozen different nationalities—the meeting place perhaps of international spies. And suddenly he bent down, staring at the menu card, hiding the glow of excitement that filled his eyes. For, sitting at a far corner table, talking to a shabbily dressed man, was the woman he sought, the blonde spy, Nina Rocazy.

CHAPTER XX

THE SPY'S BARGAIN

FROWNING at the bill of fare as though its exotic dishes were unfamiliar to him, the Agent finally signaled the hovering waiter. He ordered coffee and pastry.

Over the steaming cup of thick Turkish mocha, he furtively scrutinized each face in the room. However

shabby their clothing might be, the people around him had a sharpness, an intelligence that seemed out of keeping in this smoky little place. There was a tenseness in their manner, an avid look in their eyes.

He had suddenly the impression that the room was filled with human vultures, quarreling, distrustful, hovering near some prize piece of carrion.

The blonde, Nina, did not glance his way, or, if she did, saw nothing to make her gaze linger. She looked older, more strained. The man with her was as tense and bright-eyed as a hunting hawk. They fitted in with the general atmosphere of this room. It was as though the murders of the past few days had whetted their appetite to possess the Black Master's secret weapon, as the sight of raw meat whets the appetites of a group of tigers. The heads of Nina and the man were close together.

What was she telling him, "X" wondered? Was she attempting to blackmail him also, as she had Greenford? Apparently not, for the man's face had the intentness, the greed, of some one who expects gain.

Agent "X" finished his light meal and left the Café Levant, walking swiftly away. At the end of the block, staring back over his shoulder, he saw the greasy-skinned proprietor come out onto the sidewalk and stare after him.

Agent "X" circled quickly, walked around the block and approached the café from the other direction on the opposite side of the street. There were little shops here, closed up for the night, their windows dark. He backed into the entranceway of one, fumbled a moment with one of his master keys, and opened the door softly.

In the dark interior he crouched, waiting. Looking through the dusty window at a slant he could see the door of the Café Levant. Those coming out of it would never see him, never suspect that they were being spied upon. He could take no chances now. Too many lives hung in the balance.

If the Black Master were not caught soon, the sinister threat of his presence would grow into a horror that would shock the whole nation. He had seen the gangsters wiped out like insects. The thought of innocent people being destroyed in the same way made something clutch at his heart as though icy fingers were pressing there.

There was no question in his mind but what those men and women in the Café Levant were spies, here in America to dicker for the Black Master's secret. Just as crooks sought each other's company, so, too, there were places where the undercover operatives of various nations gathered. But these in the Cafe Levant were, he guessed, for the most part the rabble. Their loyalty could probably be bought by any country willing to pay the price.

Several people entered the Café Levant; several emerged; but it wasn't until nearly an hour had passed that the blonde Nina made her appearance. The hawk-faced man was with her. He was tall, slightly stooped. He was still talking excitedly, leaning over her. They were absorbed, their faces close together in the darkness. This was no mere amorous intrigue. The softness of love in any form was not upon them. They were like two stalking jungle animals, male and female.

When they had nearly reached the end of the block, the Agent emerged. He closed the door of the shop softly after him, moved along in the shadows under the elevated structure. They took a cab down the block, and the Agent followed in his car.

Blocks away, in a Bohemian section of the city, the cab stopped and they got out. Agent "X" parked and got out also. He followed them again until the trail led to one of a row of small, old-time houses on a crooked little street.

Here artists and writers lived, radicals and long-haired poets. Here, too, apparently, international spies found refuge, for the man opened the

door of the house with a key and entered with the blonde at his side.

There were no lights in the old house until Nina or the man pressed a switch. Then a glow appeared in a second-floor room. Apparently they had come here to continue the subject under discussion.

The Agent thought quickly. An impulse stronger than a hunch told him that these two were after the death weapon of the Black Master. Nina herself had informed him that that was her purpose in coming to America. She wasn't the type of woman to give up easily a thing she coveted.

SILENTLY as a shadow, the Agent sprang up the steps of the old house and unlocked the door with one of his skeleton keys. Then he checked himself and tensed. He had almost made a fatal error. He could pick any modern lock, open any present-day door, but a protective device on the door of this old house had blocked his way.

There was a heavy brass chain inside, bolted to the wall, its end slipped into a slot on the door. He could not reach it with his fingers. He had almost pushed the door against it. To have done so would have meant a rattle that might have warned the two on the floor above.

Many minutes of patient work would be needed to devise a way of unfastening that chain. The lower front windows were shuttered.

Grim-lipped, the Agent moved swiftly along the block and went around to the rear of the house. The rear door, too, was fastened with a chain. There was no fire escape snaking up the back of the old place, no way of getting to the unshuttered windows on the floor above.

But the Agent wasn't balked. There was still a possible way of learning what those two in the room were discussing. To do so, however, he had to reach the roof of the house they were in.

The houses in the row on the block

were all of the same height and period. He walked along till he found another one empty. The old door, with no chain fastened, opened easily under one of the keys he carried. He closed it behind him and swiftly climbed the stairs.

Uncarpeted boarding creaked under his feet. A mouse squeaked and scurried away. There was a smell of dust and mold in the air. It reminded him of his own hideout in the old Montgomery mansion far up the drive.

He reached the attic, found an old iron ladder leading up to a skylight. It was the work of a moment to un-snap the four hooks that held the skylight cover in place. A second more and he was up on the tarred roof, three stories above the street.

Counting the houses as he moved, he crossed swiftly from roof to roof until he was on the building where the two had gone in. Looking cautiously over the coping, he could see the glow of their windows a story below. The shades were closely drawn. From his vantage point he could not look in. The skylight, he knew, was fastened on the inside. The two in the room imagined themselves safe from all listeners. But the Agent drew from his pocket a device which might invade their privacy.

He unfastened a flat, black leather case, took out the delicate mechanism it contained. It was perhaps the smallest telephonic amplifying device in existence—a thing that he had worked patiently on in his spare moments.*

A dry battery like that in the smallest flash light gave it power. Wire hardly thicker than thread connected between the single earphone and the amplifying microphone of the instrument. He had fifty feet of the wire strung on a small reel like a spool. This spool was pivoted inside the case itself.

* **AUTHOR'S NOTE:** From hints he has let drop during conversations I've had with him, I am certain that Secret Agent "X" has made a profound study of all electrical instruments which might aid in his pursuit of criminals. These include dictaphones, dictagraphs, tel-autographs, teletype machines, amplifiers, and many types of sound and light recording mechanisms.

He walked softly to the chimney in the center of the roof, stood on his toes and stared down. It was a two-passage chimney connected with open fireplaces in the front and rear rooms. This he had guessed as soon as he had seen the old house. It had been built in the days when open fireplaces were the only means of heating. There was a faint glow visible far down the sooty throat of the chimney. But it was not the glow of a fire. No smoke or heat was coming up the chimney. It was the glow of the light in the room shining into the fireplace. A gas stove probably supplied heat, and they had not bothered to light a fire.

The Secret Agent held the microphone end of his miniature amplifier in his right hand and slowly lowered it down the chimney. He unreeled the threadlike wire with his left. He dared not drop it all the way. If it appeared in the square opening of the fireplace, it would give warning to those below.

By the length of the wire he had lowered, he estimated the distance. The bell-shaped microphone of his instrument must now be close to the room where the two had gone. It must be hanging just out of sight in the fireplace.

He made a turn of the wire around the chimney to hold it, then stooped and bent over his delicate mechanism. He switched on the small dry battery, the voltage of which had been stepped-up with special chemicals. Two brass screw heads gleamed inside the case. One induced clarity. The other regulated volume.

WITH the receiver of the amplifier clamped to his ear, the Agent crouched in the darkness of the roof and began to listen. At first only a faint blur of sound reached him. He turned the delicate knurled head of the clarifier adjustment. Gradually the blur of sound resolved itself into human voices. But they seemed faint and far away—the voices of pigmies talking in some subterranean cave.

His fingers remained on the clarifier adjustment till the sounds had reached needle sharpness. Then he turned on the volume control.

Like a distant radio station coming into earshot, the voices in the room below grew in size, grew till it seemed that the lips of the people who spoke were close to the Agent's ear. His tiny microphone, made with exact scientific skill, was doing its work.

He could even hear the extraneous noises that the two in the room made, the faint stirring of their feet, the creaking of a chair, the noise the man made as he cleared his throat.

It was Nina who was speaking at the moment.

"I am nervous, Gustav—always nervous since Grenfort was killed. I am ready almost to give up—and go back."

Agent "X" heard the woman's restless footsteps as she paced. A man's harsh, jeering laughter sounded.

"That is the way of women—brave until danger comes!"

"But Grenfort—"

"Grenfort was a fool, a bungler. You are talking to Gustav Mogellen now. He does not bungle. Grenfort did something to anger this absurd madman who calls himself the Black Master. We don't know what. We cannot say. But I have not angered him. I have treated him with deference like the lunatic he is."

"You are a fool yourself to talk like that, Gustav. The Black Master is not mad. He is a criminal, and he wants money just as you and I do."

"Bah—all Americans are mad."

The man chuckled softly, then spoke to the woman again.

"They will have something to be mad about later when they find that a nation was willing to buy what they scorned and feared."

"You are sure, Gustav? You do not intend to trifle with the Black Master?"

"Trifle! I might, in a gay moment, trifle with you, a charming woman, but I would not trifle with this mad-

man. I tell you Gustav Mogellen is wise. He does not trifle with infants, animals, or madmen. What I have told him is true. My country is willing to meet his absurd price."

"It seems unbelievable," gasped Nina.

"Unbelievable! Unbelievable that a small nation like mine should want to possess a weapon that will give it dominance over others! In the event of war—" There was a slap as the man below struck his fist against the palm. A laugh followed the blow. "In the event of war we should win by the sheer horror we would inspire in our enemies. Armies would refuse to fight. Men would throw down their arms. In my two sessions with the crazy monster in that mad office of his, I have convinced him that I am not fooling. I would not dare fool. Each time I have left it, I have been followed, shadowed. One slip, and I would die like our dear friend Grenfort. Tonight I go to make final arrangements. Tomorrow night, to show my good faith. I will give him an advance payment of fifty thousand dollars—a mere option—but he has agreed to cease his sensational activities and wait quietly till the payments are completed. In a few weeks the weapon that all men fear will be ours."

CHAPTER XXI

THE CHAMBER OF DEATH

FOR nearly an hour, or until the tiny battery in his amplifier began to give out, the Secret Agent listened. The man, Gustav Mogellen, gloating, triumphant, continued to impress the woman with his astuteness.

Agent "X" wondered if her fear were genuine, if she were not playing some deeper game. He wouldn't trust her not to murder the man, say that he had been killed, and take whatever commission his government planned to pay.

But that didn't interest him. It was the immediate future upon which his mind was set. A foreign power was

planning to pay the Black Master his price, buy Mark Roemer's stolen formula. This must not happen! The murderer of Bill Scanlon must not escape.

With tense, quick fingers the Secret Agent reeled in the threadlike wire of his amplifier. Carefully, fondly, he put it away in its case. That tiny instrument was all that had stood to-night between America and a plot that might become a menace of world importance.

His eyes were glowing with that strange, burning light as he left the roof by the way he had come. There was much to be done, a hundred chances that he might slip up.

Far down the block he waited, watching the door of that house where Gustav Mogellen had discussed his plans with the blonde. And it was toward midnight that he saw Mogellen emerge. The man, dressed in a dark overcoat walked quickly into the shadows.

Now as never before Secret Agent "X" used his uncanny skill as a shadower. Mogellen looked around once, saw nothing, and strode on. He seemed confident that no one guessed what affairs he was about.

Agent "X" saw him take a taxi at the junction of the street and a nearby avenue. The Agent followed blocks behind in his own car. His sharp, burning eyes, staring ahead, missed nothing.

When the taxi turned a corner, he sped up. When at last it slowed and stopped, he, too, parked, still blocks behind. But he almost ran through the darkness. He was watching as the man, Mogellen, entered a block of empty office buildings. The onward sweep of the city seemed to have left this section deserted. Business offices had been moved farther uptown. No wonder Mogellen in his talk with the blonde had referred to this place as the Black Master's "mad office."

The Agent saw Mogellen look around once, then fit a key into the building's front door. He saw him dis-

appear inside. Two hundred feet ahead, Agent "X" saw another fitting shadow.

He crouched back in the darkness. The man in front was the hophead, the murderous, vicious employee of the Black Master. He saw the man creep forward into the building after Mogellen. He stayed there, no doubt, close at hand, unseen, ready to kill the visitor if anything went wrong.

For twenty minutes the Agent waited amid the darkest shadows on the opposite side of the street. Then he saw Mogellen emerge and move rapidly off. The small, wicked-looking dope fiend slipped out of the building and followed after. The man, probably, had been instructed to shadow Mogellen all the way home, to kill if his actions became in any way suspicious. But Mogellen did not look back. He walked swiftly on, disappearing down the block.

Agent "X" remained in hiding a half-hour longer, then stole forth and quickly crossed the street. He was at the very gates of death now. But he gaged his time. He must search this building while the hophead was away shadowing Mogellen, and finish his search before the man got back.

Noiselessly he fitted a key into the lock and entered by the door through which the spy, Mogellen, had gone. Did the Black Master live here, or was it only his place of conducting business? The cold, damp chilliness of the unheated building made "X" believe that the latter was the case.

Risking sudden death, not knowing what he might find, he began probing with his tiny flash light. In the dust of the floor he was able to trace Mogellen's tracks. He followed them, coming at last to the small, strange office on the second floor. The Agent saw instantly that there was only one door into this office.

He flashed his light, then waited breathlessly — waited for possible death. But nothing stirred. In that one flicker of light he had noticed the mirror covering the rear wall, the

mirror with its metal panel down the center.

It had meant nothing to the disordered mind of Taub, the dope fiend. To Agent "X" it instantly conveyed meaning.

He had seen such mirrors in the doors of high-class speak-easies in the days of prohibition. From them the proprietors could look out, but no one could see in. The proprietors could tell just who was ringing the bell, customer or prohibition agent.

Just so the Black Master could look through this mirror at any visitors who came into his office. Was he behind it now? The thought that unseen, sinister eyes might be upon him was spine-chilling. But the Agent gambled all on logic. He felt the surface of the mirror. It was as cold as the rest of the room. It seemed unlikely that the Black Master would linger on in this cold, damp place. He had no doubt left at the conclusion of his interview with Mogellen.

Working on this theory, risking all, the Agent boldly switched his flash light on and began examining the mirror. He soon discovered the round crack in the center of the panel and guessed that there was a secret opening here. It clarified many things in his mind. The hophead had probably never seen the face of his employer. No one, conscious of the fact, had ever looked at the features of the Black Master and lived.

Agent "X" tested the opening in the panel. It was, he saw, fastened tightly on the inside.

He went out into the hallway, investigated, and found that in the remodeling of this office the whole second floor plan had been changed. There was no visible entrance to that room behind the mirror. The way by which it was reached might be from almost any direction. There might be a secret stairway leading up or down, passageways leading even through empty buildings into some other street. To hunt for the hidden en-

trance would be a lengthy process. Worse still, it would scare the Black Master away.

The Agent knew then that the man must be outwitted if he were to be caught at all. Quickly, quietly, he went away from the mysterious office, leaving it exactly as he had found it. A theory was building up in his mind—a theory that had slowly been dawning. To test that theory he began to construct a startling, fantastic plan.

IT was twenty-four hours later, with darkness again spread over the city that Agent "X" climbed for a second time to the roof of the house occupied by the blonde woman, Nina, and Gustav Mogellen.

Lights burned in the windows of the second floor. The hour was ten. Secret Agent "X" carried a leather suitcase in his hand. He knew that the two were again in the room. He had shadowed them there. He was prepared to risk everything on the plan he had devised.

He took a box from his suitcase, opened it, and again lowered something on a wire down the chimney. But this time it was not a microphonic amplifier. This time it was a small metal cylinder capped at both ends.

One of the caps was held in place by a strip of fusible metal. Electric wires were attached to this in such a way that when current passed through the wires the fusible metal would heat up and melt—releasing the cylinder's cap and the cylinder's contents.

The Agent lowered it swiftly. At the instant that it appeared in the square opening of the fireplace below—the instant a faint shrill scream told him it had been seen, he touched a switch connected with a small but powerful storage battery in his suitcase. Nothing happened apparently. But the scream was not repeated. No sounds came up the chimney from the room below.

The Secret Agent drew his cylinder back up. He rewound the wire and

packed it in his suitcase. Then he took out a strong rope. One end of this he fastened to the base of the chimney. The other he lowered over the rear edge of the roof and climbed down it agilely.

He was not careful to be quiet now. He knew there was no one to hear him. He jimmied a window on the top floor and climbed in, pulling his suitcase after him.

Down through the house he went to the room below. The lights were still on. The Agent held his breath and threw up a window. Then he waited outside a few moments. When he entered again, the night air had cleared the room of the anesthetizing gas it contained—the gas he had released so quietly from his metal cylinder.

The forms of a man and a woman lay on the floor. One was Nina, the other, Gustav Mogellen. Both were breathing quietly, as though in a deep untroubled sleep. They would remain so for hours.

The Agent deposited the woman on a couch, made her comfortable. She was a killer, a murderess at heart, a plotter of evil; but early training made him always more gallant to women than to men.

Gustav Mogellen he propped up in a chair and tied there with a piece of rope.

A small leather brief case was on a table. The Secret Agent went over, opened it, and examined the interior. The brief case contained fifty thousand dollars in United States currency. It was in bills of large denomination, done up in neat packages. The Secret Agent smiled to himself. Here was the "option" money to be paid to the Black Master tonight. He added a package of tens and one of twenties from his own pocket, then put the money back in the brief case, returned to the side of Mogellen. For long minutes he studied the man from every angle. There was no line of the face, no skin blemish, that he did not take note of. Tonight the Agent's very life,

the lives of perhaps untold others, depended on his skill.

He set to work then on one of the most masterly disguises of his career. With his make-up materials spread on the small table, with his pigments, face plates and volatile plastic materials before him, his dexterous fingers began to accomplish the seemingly impossible.

With clinging, quick-drying face putty, the Agent duplicated Mogellen's hawklike nose. The planes of his face followed. At the end of half an hour it seemed that two Gustav Mogellens were in that small room. If the blonde Nina could have regained consciousness at that moment, she would have thought the gas that knocked her out had made her see double.

WHEN all was ready, when the Agent had put on the last finishing touches, practiced Mogellen's walk, imitated the sound of his voice as it had come to him over the amplifier, he took the keys from the spy's pocket and picked up the brief case.

He crossed the room, shut the window, slipped into Mogellen's hat and overcoat. Turning out the lights, he descended to the street and locked the door after him. He was going to meet the Black Master tonight for the first time. Even if the Black Master's dope-crazed slave were watching outside, he would not guess that the man he saw was not Gustav Mogellen.

The Agent traveled swiftly through the night in a hired taxi. He left the cab behind him, walked along a block of silent, empty buildings. Whether the hophead was waiting to follow, to spy on him, he did not know or care. At the moment he was not Agent "X." He was Gustav Mogellen, international spy, interested in making a down payment on a secret and horrible weapon that was for sale.

He fitted Mogellen's key into the lock of the deserted building, entered, and closed the door after him. He lis-

tened a moment. His sharp ears detected faint movement somewhere in the darkness. The murderous hophead was following close at his heels.

He entered the small strange office on the floor above and turned on the lights. This time as he did so he heard some mechanism in the door click metallicly and the lock snapped shut. He was trapped in the room.

He looked at his watch. It showed one minute to midnight. He waited, fingering his tie, registering the uneasiness that a spy might be supposed to feel on such a strange mission.

Then a voice spoke to him out of thin air. A strange, harshly disguised voice that he had heard before. The voice of the Black Master.

"You are on time, Gustav Mogellen. You are anxious to clinch the bargain!"

A second of silence followed, then the Agent answered.

"One does not keep the Black Master waiting," he said, imitating the voice of the man who now lay unconscious in the house a mile away. "I have the money I promised. I am ready to seal the contract. My government has kept its word."

A dry chuckle came from overhead.

"Your government has done well. Yours will be a strong nation. Approach the panel between the mirrors. I am ready to accept the money—and remember! You are locked in this room—a prisoner until our negotiations are completed."

Agent "X," posing as Mogellen, hesitated a second.

"When," he said, "can I hope to receive the secret weapon? I shall have to cable my government details?"

"When the last payment is delivered," said the Black Master. "The quicker the payments, the sooner the thing that you seek will be given into your hands."

"And you will remain silent and hidden from now until all payments are completed?"

"Yes. There shall be no more kill-

ings. The Black Master will appear to be dead. He will appear only in this room to transact his business with you."

The Secret Agent nodded. He came close to the panel between the mirrors. A small, six-inch opening in its center appeared as if by magic. The fingers of a hand reached out. They were black-gloved, almost invisible against the blackness of the opening. The Secret Agent thrust a package of his own ten-dollar bills into the hand. The hand withdrew.

"For your own convenience," the Agent said, "I am making payment in small bank notes. Big bills arouse suspicion and are more easily traced."

"You are thoughtful," came the sneering voice of the murderer.

A package of twenties followed the tens. The fingers of the Black Master's hand seemed to express the inhuman greed that their owner felt. They curled avariciously, reaching for more bills.

Then it was that the Agent's left hand dipped into his pocket and drew something out. So swiftly that it was like a trick of legerdemain he transferred the object he had removed to the palm of his right hand, slipping a package of bills over it. Under cover of the bills, his finger pressed into it. It was a small thimblelike cap with a sharp needle point at its end.

He passed the package of bills to the eager, black-gloved hand of the archmurderer. Then, quick as the head of a striking snake, he jabbed the needle on the thimble cap into the Black Master's hand.

One faint, harsh cry came through the black hole in the panel.

The Secret Agent's hand darted through it—clutched the arm of the man inside, drew it toward him, and turned the beam of a small flash light into the opening that was left.

The light rays fell for a moment on a masked face.

The Agent thrust the mask aside—and gave a harsh exclamation of sur-

prise. For seconds he stared tensely; then he let the inert body of the man inside fall.

As it did so, a signal bell sounded somewhere in the building. To his horror, Agent "X" heard stealthy, quick footsteps answering the bell. He guessed instantly that the hophead he had seen was only one of several vicious degenerates who were slaves of the Black Master.

His scalp prickled as seconds passed. The threat of unseen death stalked through the empty spaces of the dark building. The seconds deepened into minutes—one—two—three. Then suddenly, the lights in the room went out. The Agent was alone in the strange, dark chamber with the knowledge that doom was creeping upon him.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MAN BEHIND THE MASK

HE waited tensely till a faint noise sounded over by one wall. There was a scrape of metal, the mouselike squeak of a hinge. A mysterious panel door was opening. He could not see it, but his sharp ears and tensely alert mind told him what was happening.

Agent "X" moved then. He took three silent strides to the wall, flattened himself against it, and inched toward the spot where the noise had come from. His fingers crept ahead of him, feeling, exploring. They discovered a break in the wall surface, and he paused, as still as death.

He could hear faint breathing now. A man was standing only a few feet away, crouched before the opening that the panel had left.

Secret Agent "X" drew back on his toes. Then, using the flat of his hand and his arm like a battering ram, he gave the unseen man a violent shove. At the same instant, he leaped through the break in the wall. With a jarring, sickening thud he bumped into a human body. In one and the same motion he clutched the man, whirled him around, and threw him headlong.

Then his swiftly groping fingers found the panel and drew it shut.

As he did so, something crashed against the closed metal—something that had been thrown at him and missed. The tinkle of breaking glass came; then a horrible gurgling scream sounded. It was a scream of terror, of agony, of stark despair. It was followed by the thud of wavering, stumbling footsteps. Clawing fingers slid down the panel, beat against it, but the Agent held it shut. To open it meant death for himself as well as those others now beyond human aid. For faint, acrid fumes seeped around the edges of the oblong of metal. They were burning to the nostrils, constricting to the throat.

The stumbling footsteps inside grew more disordered. Two bodies thudded to the floor. Then silence—the silence of death—filled the strange dark building.

The Agent waited for minutes more, holding the panel shut, until the seeping fumes had thinned and vanished. Then he opened it cautiously. The air inside was still stuffy but breathable. The last of the fumes slipped out of the room into the passageway in which he stood and past him like an evil spirit escaping.

He turned his flash light into the chamber. Horror met his eye. Two huddled figures lay on the floor, their faces contorted by the strangling death. But the skins of both and the dilated pupils of their staring eyes indicated that they were drug addicts. The tongues of both were thrust from between blue lips as though mocking him. But the Agent had not killed them.

They had died by the force of the evil thing they dealt in—died by the weapon with which they had tried to snuff out the Agent's life. Small splinters of glass lay on the floor by the bottom of the panel. They told a hideous story.

The Secret Agent stooped over the body of one of the dope fiends who would murder no more. He felt in the

man's pockets. Wrapped in a nest of cotton was a tiny crystal globe. It might have been a Christmas tree ornament—but it wasn't. The Agent didn't need to be told what it contained.

It was a globe of imprisoned gas—corrosive gas so strange and deadly that it had the power to constrict a man's throat until he choked to death. Gas, however, that would dissipate after a few moments of contact with the hydrogen in the air, losing its power, leaving no trace, its deadly work done. Gas that was Mark Roemer's secret—a horrible weapon which he had discovered during the course of his researches and planned to discard—but which unprincipled governments desired as a weapon of war. It was more efficient than lewisite or mustard gas which left trenches uninhabitable for hours and prevented a conquering army from moving in. It could be used to attack civilian populations, to create a rein of terror worse than long-range guns or air bombs. The Secret Agent shuddered; glad that he had been in time.

HE looked around the room for a moment. The whole story was here. The dead hopheads. The sinister crystal globe. Those glass splinters on the floor—and the unconscious man behind the barrier of mirrors. Who was he? Let the police find out. When they came there would be little to do—except batter through the mirrors and make the most sensational arrest in the city's history—the arrest of the Black Master.

But there was one question burning in the Secret Agent's mind. Where was Mark Roemer—kidnaped chemist? He was a witness needed to complete the amazing denouement. The Agent turned his light into the opening of the wall panel again. The mouth of a passage showed.

He entered this, closed the panel after him, and walked forward till he came to a flight of secret iron stairs leading up. He went cautiously. There

might be more of the murderous hopheads. He probed with his flash light, listened every few seconds; but he encountered no one. The stairway led him to an attic of the building. Here were three rough bunks, a table, packs of well-thumbed cards, and a smoky oil lamp. Here were the quarters of the Black Master's slaves. Then he saw a heavy door with a lock upon it at the end of the room. There seemed to be a closetlike room behind it. The lock had been newly placed there. The Agent's eyes gleamed, and he took out his kit of chromium tools. The lock gave him some trouble, but he finally opened it.

As his flash winked on, it illuminated the thin, haggard face of a middle-aged man. The man had evidently been waked from sleep by the Agent's work upon the lock.

He was crouched back on a small, rusty bed in this windowless room—crouched fearfully like a frightened animal. He did not cry out, but his bony hands lifted. There was the fear of death in his eyes. His feet were fastened to the foot of the bed by chains and the bed was bolted to the floor.

"Roemer!" said the Agent tensely.

"Who are you?" The man, who had been kidnaped and held a prisoner for days, spoke in a shaken, terrified voice.

"Never mind! Listen to what I say and all will be well!"

The Agent walked forward, his burning eyes commanding the gaze of the kidnaped chemist. A low-voiced conversation followed. At the end of it Secret Agent "X" left the room, descended by a series of iron stairways to the ground floor, and passed quietly out into the street.

Before changing his disguise Agent "X" did two things. He stopped in an all-night drug store and bought a heavy manila envelope and stamps. Into this he put the packs of bills he had taken from the spy Gustav Mogellen. He placed cardboard around the

bills, sealed the envelope up carefully and addressed it in disguised writing:

"To Mrs. William Scanlon, care of U. S. Department of Justice, Washington, D. C."

Once again his lips moved as he whispered that sentence that had rung through his mind like a war cry in his battle with the Black Master.

"A kid and a woman are waiting."

Fifty thousand dollars wouldn't compensate for the death of a beloved husband and father. But it would make life easier for a woman who had a young son to bring up.

"I hope he turns out as swell as his old man," the Agent muttered huskily. Then he turned and moved into a telephone booth.

A HALF-MINUTE later, a mysterious call came into police headquarters. It was a call that brought the sleepy desk sergeant up from his blotter with a jerk. The sergeant tensed as he listened. His hands gripped the telephone like claws.

When the message was ended, the sergeant asked the name of the person who had given it. There was no answer. A low laugh sounded. Then the receiver at the other end clicked up.

The sergeant, red-faced, his eyes bulging with excitement, called Inspector John Burks, head of the homicide squad. He dared even to get Burks out of bed, refusing to listen when Mrs. Burks said her husband had a cold.

"Cold, hell!" said the sergeant. "I got a tip-off. The Black Master's been caught. Mark Roemer's been found!"

When the inspector came to the telephone, the tenseness in the sergeant's voice, and the news that he had, electrified Burks into action.

In ten minutes he was speeding down town in an official car with two police cruisers and a squad of detectives trailing him. He went to the address that the mysterious party who

had called the sergeant had given. This was an old and apparently deserted office building on a dark and run-down street.

The next half-hour was one of the most exciting in Burks's whole career.

What the police found in that building Burks told a group of tense press reporters who had gathered like buzzards, following the wailing sirens of the homicide cars.

Burks was still mopping his face from the intense activity of the past few minutes. He knew that the newspaper men were waiting. He knew that he was the man of the hour. With trembling fingers, he lit a cigar and blew smoke from his nostrils before he spoke. They were standing in the Black Master's small office. The double mirrors were broken now, smashed in by police axes. Burks waved his hand toward them.

"That gave us the biggest job, boys," he said. "Those mirrors were eight inches thick."

A tall red-headed reporter edged forward. No one seemed to know him, but he had a press card. There was a faintly malicious gleam in his eye.

"How was it the man behind those mirrors didn't scam while you were breaking them down?" he asked.

"Wait—I'm coming to that," said Burks a little irritably. "First I want you to know that we've got the Black Master and Mark Roemer, the man he kidnapped. Roemer has told us his story. He was being held to make the gas he'd invented when the supply on hand ran out. He didn't want to do it. He would rather have bumped himself off—but Roemer's got a young daughter in finishing school. The Black Master threatened to kill her if Roemer didn't do as he was told."

"And who's the Black Master?" shouted the reporters. "Come on, Inspector—don't hold out on us!"

Burks grinned like a showman about to display a prize exhibit. He waved his hand, gave an order.

"Bring him out, boys!"

TWO perspiring cops came through the jagged opening broken in one of the big mirrors. They carried the limp body of a third man. This man had a black mask over his face. The reporters seethed forward.

"Take it easy," said Burks. "You got a big surprise coming."

With a sweep of his hand, he drew the black mask back.

The reporters tensed. One of them swore harshly.

"God! Colonel Gordon Crandal!"

"That's the boy," said Burks. "He won't do any more murdering now. He's headed for the hot seat or the bug house."

"It can't be! It sounds phoney," said a rosy-cheeked reporter.

"I thought so, too," answered Burks, "until Roemer spilled all the dope."

"But Crandal's own jewels were stolen!"

"I know it. He stole 'em himself to get the insurance. He'd lost all his money in the stock market. He didn't have a cent left—and he was too proud to work. Too proud, too, to sell his house or the jewels. He wanted to keep on being a gentleman. He had to have a lot of money quick—so he figured out a way of doing it. He was in the chemical warfare division during the Big Fuss. He knew what the stuff that Roemer had, the gas, was worth. He must have been shell-shocked, I guess, to turn into the kind of crook he is."

"He's not dead then?"

"No—only knocked out. I wanted to get him alive—make him stand trial."

The troublesome red-headed reporter asked another question.

"You were pretty clever to knock him out before you broke down the glass!" he said.

Burks glared at the speaker.

"The police have a lot of tricks up their sleeves," he said.

"And this joint," went on the reporter, "only a pretty smart bird would have thought of looking here. How did you get wise, chief?"

A slow red spread over Burks' face. "I've told you guys all I'm going to," he said.

"One more question, chief," persisted the redhead. "Didn't you pass it out a few days back that the bird who committed these murders was a crook named Secret Agent 'X'?"

"I was working on a bum steer," said Burks defensively. "But I delivered the goods in the end, didn't I?"

"All by yourself," muttered the red-headed reporter innocently. His head was bent. He seemed to be writing on his notebook. When he straightened up, Burks was glaring at him. For the space of five seconds the two men's eyes clashed. The reporter carelessly dropped a leaf from his notebook and mumbled:

"I've got to be getting back to the office."

He turned and left while Burks stood staring, frowning and puzzled. His footsteps clattered down the stairway, and suddenly from the night outside an eerie yet melodious whistle sounded.

Burks swore and started for the door. But as he did so, his eye fell on the scrap of paper the red-headed reporter had dropped. On its white surface something had been written, a small penciled letter—the letter "X."

Before any one else could see, biting the end of his cigar nervously, Inspector Burks moved sidewise and planted his foot over it. There he stood, the look of puzzlement in his eyes, while the strange musical whistle in the night outside grew fainter and fainter and finally died away.

Be Sure to Follow the Adventures of Secret Agent "X" in

THE DEATH-TORCH TERROR

Twenty-four Thrill-packed chapters

In the April Issue

Out One Month from To-day]

THE SECRET COUNCIL

Behind the Scenes With Secret Agent "X"

THE council chamber is ready! Give the password. Enter the doors of mystery!

Last month we met for the first time in this silent room, drawn by our interest in a hunter of criminals who has no equal in all the world. Now, through the published records of his adventures, we have learned to know him. His mannerisms, his habits and his methods of working are familiar to us. Concealed behind his strange disguises, we have seen him follow the trail of a startling and ghastly crime.

The case of the Spectral Strangler has been laid before you!

When invisible fingers reached out of the darkness, throttling the breath in men's throats, turning their faces into mocking masks of death, Secret Agent "X" dared to go where the hidden clues led. Step by step, while a monster of wickedness fed ghoulishly on the terror of men, Agent "X" crept close to the source of that hideous crime.

None were safe. In the lavish splendor of a millionaire's mansion, the strangling death struck. A gorgon's head leered behind the painted lips of society beauties. The click of gay feet became a skeleton's dance of doom.

And later, when gangsters gathered together for a night of boisterous revelry, the Spectral Strangler stalked into their midst. Their white shirt fronts became like stark tombstones marking the grave of their sordid ambitions—marking the spot where Death was to strike. The Grim Reaper laughed. Agent "X" crept on.

Hunted by the police, suspected himself as a criminal, his way was often made doubly difficult by the well-meaning minions of the law. And sometimes his own desperate chances led him close to destruction.

For behind the thousand brilliant disguises that mask his identity lies the soul of a gambler. Not a gambler with cards or dice; but the sporting spirit of one who gambles with the hidden straws of life itself. Yet he does not gamble pointlessly. You have seen that, my friends. The slender scales of Justice are always close to his hand. That wrongs may be righted, that those who have suffered at the hands of heinous criminals may find some solace, that honest men may live in peace and happiness, Agent "X" stands ready to range like a hunting hawk through the crooked canyons of Evil.

HIS exploits so far have proved it. You have seen him in stirring action. You have witnessed the stark drama of his life.

And next month you will want to go with him again. Another case is brought to you—an amazing episode that stands unparalleled in the history of detective action chronicles.

"THE DEATH TORCH TERROR."

That is the title of the thrilling, twenty-four-chapter, book-length novel, featuring Secret Agent "X." That is the name of the strange menace that men spoke of in whispers of fear.

"The Death Torch Terror!" It was a terror certainly when a goggled and helmeted fiend, distorted into the shape of some hideous crustacean monster, sprayed fiery death with an unheard-of weapon.

Beneath the hissing, consuming flame of that weapon living men became charred and blackened corpses. Its quivering breath disintegrated their very bones.

But Agent "X" went deeper than the horror of the actual death. Like

a grisly beast seen approaching through a curtain of shifting fog, he saw the horrible specter of Murder itself. In a desperate effort to learn facts which the police withheld he undertook the most daring disguise of his career.

For the police themselves were being stricken by the Death Torch Terror. A succession of ruthless cop killings was breaking down police morale, undermining the courage of the force, threatening the safety of the public.

A headquarters car in which Secret Agent "X" rode was attacked by the Death-Torch Terror. In seconds of paralyzing danger, while before his very eyes a living man was reduced to a ghastly grotesquery, the full, relentless horror of the thing he was fighting was brought home to him.

And then the murder trail led off at a strange tangent. Into the night skies it led, far above the roofs of the tallest buildings, far above the night-shrouded waters. And pulse beats of excitement blended with the mighty throb of airplane motors. Alone, taking a desperate chance, Agent "X" followed a cloud trail of mystery.

A wicked searchlight eye of evil focused upon the plane he was pursuing. Destruction came like a thunderbolt from the air above. A human life was suspended within a split second of eternity—and Agent "X" reached a decision that few men would have had the courage to make.

THESE are some of the incidents in this great and gripping novel. There are many more—thrills that are unexpected. For Agent "X" is a doer of the unexpected. The beaten byways of crime detection are not for him.

In the strange case of the Death Torch Terror, clues were only the stepping-stones to breathless action. While the police were running in circles, like hounds with their noses to the ground, Agent "X" was far

ahead—a fox snaring at the heels of the demon, Murder.

No description, no word picture, can do justice to the startling facts of the chronicle itself. "The Death Torch Terror," featured next month, is the third in the amazing series of cases taken from the exploits of Secret Agent "X."

This Man of a Thousand Faces—a thousand disguises—a thousand surprises—is a character who has already won the hearts and the minds of detective story readers the country over. All men love a fair fight. All men who have a right to the name of men respect courage, justice, and that something in the soul of a human being that will make him battle against any odds when he is convinced that the cause he is battling for is just. This is no mere copy-book maxim. Might does not always make right. A single sword, forged in the bright steel of Honor, has been known to make the thrust that put a dark legion to rout.

And Secret Agent "X" in his lone battle against the black forces of crime carries not only the armor of his ingenious weapons and remarkable disguises but those invisible allies, Wit, Courage, and Justice.

Make a habit of following the adventures of Secret Agent "X" each month. Hundreds of the world's best-known lawyers, doctors, statesmen, and thinkers find pleasure and relaxation in reading detective and mystery stories. And thousands of readers throughout the United States, England, and Canada, have read and approved of the chronicles of Secret Agent "X." Here is something new, different, original. A magazine that is more than a magazine. A magazine that carries the two-fisted, red-blooded impact of reality and breath-taking excitement. A magazine chronicling the exploits of a man who is a high adventurer in an underworld of terror. Secret Agent "X"—master of mystery.

Roger Vane, ace dick of the B.P.A. was up against the most ghastly spectacle of his career. He saw a man with an empty skull. That living-dead man had walked the streets without a brain. And when that man died, the medical examiner could not call it murder. For it was merely an accident. The police were baffled, helpless. But Roger Vane played a hunch — and was plunged into a grisly hall-hole of horror.



He snatched up a keen-edged scalpel

SATAN'S SCALPEL

By Emile C. Tepperman

WHEN Red "Killer" Dolen escaped from the death house in state prison by the absurdly simple device of walking out of the exercise corridor, apparently un-

scathed himself while every other inmate and official was rendered unconscious by a swiftly vaporizing gas, not a single line of news was allowed to reach the general public.

The keepers recovered their senses a half-hour later to find that Dolen, the most brutal strangler of the decade, had cheated the electric chair. How he must have laughed, they thought, as he drove through the gate, unchallenged, in the warden's personal car.

A small quantity of the gas was found where it had settled in a damp pocket of the cellar. The police chemist had difficulty in analyzing it, but thought it showed traces of a hitherto impossible combination of ethyl chloride and scopolamine.

An intensive undercover search was conducted, but at the end of a week no single trace of the escaped convict had turned up. The whole business gave evidence of having been planned and carried out by a highly scientific mind endowed with devilish ingenuity.

Now, Roger Vane, special investigator for the Bankers' Protective Association, knew about the Dolen escape all right. There was little in criminal activities that slipped past his notice. Yet the knowledge lay fallow in his mind for a week until the day he looked at the man with the empty skull.

At that particular time Roger was working on the biggest case of his career—the disappearance of three million dollars in gold from the Empire City Bank. The B. P. A. paid him a very comfortable salary for that kind of work—not to hunt for escaped murderers.

The events leading up to that disappearance, as Roger outlined them in his mind, were, briefly, as follows: Courtlandt Spears, the middle-aged president of the Empire City Bank, had returned to his office after a short vacation which he had taken for the purpose of undergoing a minor operation.

It was a bright Monday morning. The special officer in the lobby of the bank greeted him warmly. But he got only a sour nod from the president,

who went straight through and up to the mezzanine where his private office was located.

MR. SPEARS' first official act was to summon the cashier. "Mr. Hubble," he said, sitting behind the immaculate glass top of his broad desk, "under this new National Recovery Act we are compelled to turn our gold in to the Government. What are we doing about it?"

Hubble shuffled from one foot to the other and arranged his tie with nervous fingers. Though he had been with the bank for twenty-two years he always felt slightly awed by "Old Man Spears" of whose moods he was wary. "We now have three million dollars in gold in the vaults, sir, all earmarked for the Treasury. We were awaiting your return, as we have no authority to move it without your formal signature."

As he summarized the situation for the president, his fascinated eyes focused on his superior's left cheek where that old familiar birthmark flamed brightly red. He called it a birthmark for want of a better term. In reality it was a discoloration of the skin about the size of a dime in diameter, just below the cheek bone. It usually flared up when Spears was laboring under some undue excitement. And now it was flaring to a brilliant hue.

"Funny," Hubble thought. "I wonder what's biting the old man now?"

Spears said to him calmly, as if ordering a chicken sandwich sent up for lunch, "Make the gold ready to be moved, Hubble. It is now ten-thirty. At eleven-thirty an armored car will be here to pick it up."

"B-but, Mr. Spears," Hubble stammered, "this is very irregular. We have no arrangement with the Treasury. They won't be ready to receive it. And besides, there should be an adequate guard. Three million—"

Courtlandt Spears interrupted him coldly, very low-voiced. "Make out

the proper order and I will sign it. Do you understand me, Hubble?"

The cashier knew that tone. When the boss talked like that it was safest not to argue. So he went out and dictated the form. He brought it into the office and watched the president affix his signature—the signature with that inimitable curlicue at the end.

"That's a signature nobody in the world can imitate, sir," Hubble said, with the proper tinge of admiration. This was one of the boss's weak points, and the cashier liked to play on it. He always made the same remark, and he always got the same satisfied smirk in response.

This time, though, Spears only peered at him in silence, lifting his eyes from the paper—and Hubble felt his chest contract with a queer, clammy coldness. The eyes of Courtlandt Spears seemed to mask some strange, grotesque personality.

Still feeling cold and creepy, he went down to the vault and superintended the moving of the gold into the armored car that appeared shortly.

When he told his story later to Roger Vane and Inspector Cummins, his face was white and his hands were cold. He could tell them nothing further to aid the investigation except that there seemed to be only one guard with the driver of the armored car, and that at the last moment Spears himself had come down and announced that he was going to ride with the gold. No one had dared to argue with him for he appeared to be in a vicious mood.

The reason for the investigation was, of course, that the armored truck never showed up at the Treasury, and that Courtlandt Spears vanished from the earth.

ROGER VANE spent a week following up the most far-fetched of clues and the thinnest of leads. The Bankers' Protective worked closely with the police, but nobody could even get to first base on it.

Roger was going over every fact at his command, hoping to catch something that had been previously overlooked, when he got the phone call from Inspector Cummins. The inspector's voice, for all his kidding, held a strange overtone of excitement. "If you're not too busy drawing pay from the B. P. A. for nothing," he said over the wire, "come up here to Pelham Parkway. I'll show you exhibit number one in the Empire City job. And it's so-ome exhibit, believe me!"

"Okay, Mike," Roger said. "I'll be up there in twenty minutes."

"Don't call me Mike, you lanky beanstalk!" Cummins roared over the 'phone. "Inspector to you!"

"All right, Mister Inspector Michael Cummins," Roger murmured sweetly. "Just where are you at?"

He got the exact location, then put his mouth close to the instrument. "Thanks. I'll be up there pronto, Mike—you hippopotamus!" He hung up, cutting off the inspector's bellow.

Roger Vane's cab driver, enticed by the promise of double the meter reading, made it to Pelham Parkway in eighteen minutes flat.

Just past the intersection of Eastchester Road there was a good-sized crowd—and it was growing bigger by the second. The Parkway was cluttered with radio cars. An ambulance stood near by. There was a cleared space in the center of the crowd.

Roger used his elbows ruthlessly. A couple of neck-craners got sore ribs, but he fought his way to the inner circle. He was greeted by Inspector Cummins whose double chin shook as he said, pointing to the stretcher on the ground, "There's your exhibit one. Get ready for the shock of your life."

An interne was kneeling beside the stretcher. On the canvas lay a man, naked under a white sheet. Roger's gaze traveled up the supine body to the head, and his eyes bulged. Suddenly he felt sweat on the palms of

his hands. His jaw opened but he said nothing. For once he was speechless.

Cummins nudged his elbow. "You wouldn't believe it if you didn't see it, Roger!"

In the top of the man's head was a gaping hole. And the inside of his skull was empty.

The young interne's face had a greenish tinge. He was holding the man's pulse. But the other hand, that held the watch, was trembling so that the numerals on the dial seemed to be doing a macabre jig.

Roger swallowed and asked, "What killed him?"

The interne looked up from the watch. Something sounded in his throat that was meant to be a laugh. "Nothing killed him," he said in a wet voice—the kind of voice you use when your salivary glands are discharging freely. "He's not dead yet!"

"Not dead!" Roger shouted down at him. "How can a man live with his brain gone?"

THE interne waved widely, nervously, with the hand that held the watch. "Did you never see a chicken stagger around without its head? Or a snake? This is the same—only it's a man!" He squeezed his eyes hard shut, and opened them swiftly. "God! I never saw anything like this!"

"How did it happen?" Roger demanded. "Where did he come from?"

But the interne hadn't heard. He bent swiftly to the stretcher, watching the man's face tautly for seconds. Then he sighed deeply and put the watch away. He allowed the wrist he had been holding to drop to the canvas.

He arose and dusted his knees. He took out a handkerchief and brushed his lips, then carefully wiped his hands. "He's dead," he announced. He fumbled for a cigarette and lit it after losing the light from three matches.

Roger waited till he got a deep inhalation out of his lungs, and repeated

his question in a kindly tone. "Now, doctor, tell us something about this. Where did he come from?"

"I was in the rear of the ambulance," the interne related, "when I saw him. We were coming down the Parkway and I just happened to glance out across the field there. Do you know what he was doing?" He jabbed a finger at Roger and then at Inspector Cummins. "*He was running!* The field is at least half a mile wide. He must have run that far—*without his brains!*"

Roger Vane let his eyes travel to the gruesome form on the stretcher. "Go on," he urged. "What happened?"

"Well, I yelled for the driver to stop. And this chap came running toward us. Then he dropped right here, alongside the road. He might have lived longer, but the undue exertion severed the membranes that had been sewed together at the ends of the intraventricular channels in the cerebellum. This permitted the cerebrospinal fluid to escape. Death followed."

Roger had dabbled in many things in the course of his career. He had a smattering of the elements of surgery, and he knew enough of anatomy to understand the interne's labored explanation. But Cummins boomed out in his bull's voice, "Never mind why he died. Anybody can see he was overdue to cash in. What I'd like to know is, how he stayed alive—how he could run without a brain!"

The interne's eyes were bright with an unhealthy light. "I'll tell you, inspector. This man has had an operation performed on him—one that has never before been attempted on a human being! Do you know what was done to this man?" He gulped and went on, the words coming feverishly. "Whoever cut him up is probably the greatest surgeon in the world—and a ruthless devil!"

"He trephined this poor chap's skull, turned up a flap of scalp and bone, then lifted out bodily the whole

cerebral cortex—the thinking part of a man's brain. He left in the cerebellum, which is that part of our brain controlling the reflex actions. A man with only a cerebellum can perform physical actions such as feeling, tasting, smelling, running. He can know fear and hate. All these faculties are governed by the cerebellum which that surgeon of hell left to this poor devil. But he took out the cerebral cortex, which is what makes man superior to animals!"

They were interrupted by the arrival of the medical examiner.

THE inspector drew Roger aside. "You know why I got you up here?"

Roger nodded. "I do, Mike."

"Dammit!" Cummins growled. "Don't call me Mike!" Then, anxiously, "Well?"

Roger inclined his head again, this time very somberly. "It's Spears, all right. He's so emaciated it's almost impossible to recognize him at first glance. But that birthmark is there. You can't mistake it."

"What's the answer?" Cummins demanded.

Roger was reflective. "I don't know, Mike. It's big, whatever it is."

Cummins' laugh grated. "Sure! Three million bucks is big in any language. Whoever that surgeon is, he's a lot smarter than you and me! Can you figure out what he wanted the old man's brain for?"

Roger suddenly snapped his fingers. "Listen, Mike. Spears had just come back from an operation before he pulled that disappearing act. You looked into that end of it. Who was the surgeon?"

Cummins thumbed through a note book and read off the information. "Operated on for appendicitis at Doctor Felix Gassner's Private Sanitarium, 1800 Eastchester Road, New York City. Operation successful. Dr. Gassner is noted surgeon. His patients among wealthiest in country. He came

here from Vienna five years ago. Has international reputation. Cassner states he discharged Spears in good health. Has no suggestions to offer."

Roger gripped the inspector's sleeve. "I think," he said, "that things are beginning to clear up."

Cummins scoffed. "Don't get all het up."

"Listen," Roger insisted. "1800 Eastchester Road is less than a mile from here. Spears might have come from the sanitarium."

"Sure, that's bright! And if Gassner is the one who cut out his think tank he's too smart to send him out to be found in this vicinity! And anyway, what would he want to do the whole thing for? If Spears had the gold he could just have taken it and killed him."

"Just the same," Roger replied. "let's get a warrant and go up there."

The medical examiner had finished his task. He came over to them.

"What say, Doc," Cummins asked.

Doctor Evans was putting away his stethoscope. He shook his head in a puzzled manner. "The ambulance doctor is correct. The man's cerebral cortex has been removed by a most cunning operation. The surgeon who did it is a wizard."

"How long," Roger inquired, "would an operation like that take?"

"About five hours. It is first necessary to cut through the bone of the skull. This is done nowadays with a drill and burrs. Under the bone is a layer of tough, fibrous membrane. Then below that we find the thin web-like tissue that is the envelope of the brain. All this is familiar territory. Modern surgery has occasion very often to penetrate this far in order to relieve pressure on the brain.

"But that was only the beginning for this surgeon. He had to sever all the membranes connecting with the cortex, and then he had to sew them at once to prevent the escape of the brain fluid which is contained in little hollows known as ventricles. The job

has always been considered impossible."

Roger said, motioning to the body on the stretcher, "It's murder, isn't it?"

Doctor Evans shook his head. "Not technically. The operation was entirely successful. He could have lived indefinitely. His death was accidental. A membrane was severed and the brain fluid escaped."

"You mean to say," demanded Roger, incredulous, "that you're calling this accidental?"

THE examiner shrugged. "What can we do? Inspector Cummins will agree with me. The evidence here points to nothing but the fact that an operation was performed. We cannot even say that it was illegal. I don't care if Spears made away with three million or thirty million. I have nothing to do with any other crimes that may be connected with this. My business is to determine how this man died, and I tell you I can't call it murder!"

Cummins grinned. "Well, Mr. Vane, how about that warrant you were going to get? What would the charge be?"

"Go ahead," Roger snapped. "Have fun! I'm going to pay a visit to Doctor Gassner anyway!"

"Your privilege," Cummins said nastily. "You're a high-class investigator. You can follow hunches and things. Me, I'm just the police. So I'm starting a house-to-house canvass of the neighborhood. Maybe we'll find some one who saw where Spears came from."

ROGER dismissed his cab a block from Dr. Gassner's sanitarium and approached the three-story brownstone on foot. He did not, however, go up the steps to the front door, but walked around and proceeded down the auto runway that ran along the side of the building.

There was a big brick garage in the

rear, that covered the full width of the lot.

He did not see the car that pulled up at the curb a minute behind his cab, nor did he see the figure that followed him down the block on foot and then stole up the steps into the house.

He was interested in that garage. The front of the garage consisted of four sliding doors that went up to the roof. Set in one of these doors was a smaller door that swung on hinges. This smaller door was securely fastened by a huge padlock. Roger drew a set of keys from his pocket. The padlock snapped open after a moment's work, and he stepped through the doorway into the darkness of the interior.

He snapped on his fountain pen flashlight, and his eyes narrowed. An expensive small coupé stood in one corner. But it was dwarfed by the immense moving van that occupied most of the rest of the space. This was the type of van that is used for trans-continental trips. Its rear doors were also padlocked.

He brought his keys into use again, and swung open the doors. He whistled as his flash played on the armored car within the body of the van.

He peered closer and saw that the van had a double floorboard. The lower leaf slid out when pulled, and sloped down to the ground on hinges, forming a perfect runway on which the armored car could have been driven into the body of the bigger car!

That was all he needed to see. He clicked off the flashlight and turned to go. Then he stopped, rigid, his hand arrested on its way to his shoulder holster.

The lights blared on in the garage. A man stood just inside the doorway, covering him with an automatic. The man was big. He towered over Roger's five feet ten. The hand that held the automatic was hairy, tre-

mendous. The face was a *potpourri* of broad, flat features and expressionless eyes. He said to Roger in a dull voice, "Come out."

The two words were plenty. Roger came out.

"Up the back steps and in the house," his captor ordered.

Roger had more a feeling of curiosity than of fear as he let himself be herded into the house and along the corridor into a room that was manifestly the office of the sanitarium.

A small wiry man with a hair-line mustache and keen black eyes sat at a desk. The big fellow closed the door behind them and stood with his back to it. Roger couldn't see him now. He faced the other.

The little man arose and made a signal to the one with the automatic. Then he bowed to Roger. "You are," he said in a smooth, precise voice, "the well-known Roger Vane, investigator for the Bankers' Protective Association?"

ROGER nodded. "And you, I suppose, are the famous Doctor Felix Gassner?"

"Correct. You are very clever, Mr. Vane. I am glad that I sent Ivan, here, to watch the crowd over at the Parkway. Had it not been for that, you might have surprised me."

Roger was only half listening. He was gauging the possibility of springing aside and drawing his gun before the big Ivan could attack him from the rear.

Doctor Gassner seemed to read his mind. He smiled. Roger saw that those thin lips could be utterly cruel. The black eyes stared at him like two soulless disks. "It'll do you no good, Mr. Vane. Don't you feel it already? There is a gas in this room. Look behind you and you will see the tank alongside the door. Ivan just opened the valve at my signal."

Roger cast a quick glance behind and saw that it was true. Ivan grinned at him mirthlessly.

Doctor Gassner went on. "That gas is a development of my own. It is a compound of ethyl chloride and the basic anesthetic, urethane. Your police chemists were unable to break it up, I noticed. They thought it contained scopolamine."

Roger was dazed. He felt giddy, but suddenly he saw the connection. "Then you—"

Gassner nodded with a self-satisfied smile. "I am the one that arranged Dolen's escape. But we will go into that later. I have plans for you. About the gas, though, I used urethane because I have perfected a serum which I find renders me immune to its effects. Ivan and I have both taken injections of the serum. You, of course—"

The room, and Doctor Gassner's face, suddenly lit with the anticipation of unspeakable horrors, seemed to be reeling farther and farther away from Roger's dimming senses. He tried desperately to raise his hand, to get at the automatic. His brain ordered, but his muscles were numb—they failed to react. Everything seemed to grow dull. He saw the doctor's face fade to a grotesque shadow. Then his legs gave under him, and he went to the floor under a wave of blackness.

WHEN his eyelids struggled open he was not in the same room. It was still light. His head seemed clear enough. The gas had left no after-effects.

He tried to move but couldn't. He was strapped to an operating table. The thick leather straps were buckled tight about his elbows, wrists, thighs, and ankles. He was naked, but a sheet had been thrown over his body from the chest down. He shuddered. What plans did that fiend have in mind for him?

His eyes wandered across the room. Along the opposite wall stood a row of tall glass cabinets with glass shelves. On the shelves lay a multitude of glittering steel instruments.

Among them were many knives, some straight and long, others curved and short and ugly, but all with razor-keen edges. What dreadful things those knives could do to the human body. His face blanched as he realized that he lay helpless in the operating room of Doctor Felix Gassner's sanitarium.

He tore his gaze away from that glittering array of chilled steel instruments. He turned his head in the other direction. And suddenly every fiber in his body contracted. He could feel the sheet that covered him grow wet from the sweat that began to run from every pore of him.

It was a man, yes. And it sat rigidly in a chair by the widow, staring at Roger. It's eyes were dull, but behind them could be discerned a primitive killer's instinct, lurking, waiting for the spark that would bring it forth!

The top of its head was swathed in bandages.

Roger knew what he was seeing. It was another man with an empty skull.

But how different it was from viewing a body on a stretcher.

ROGER forced himself to return the stare of those eyes. He inspected the face, and recognized it. He had seen Red Dolen's picture. This was Red Dolen.

It was only minutes, but to Roger it might have been hours that he lay that way while Dolen, the Strangler, stared at him with an expression impossible to fathom. And they might have been etched in bronze, for neither moved. Roger felt the sweat running down into his eyes, but he dared not remove his glance from that man who had been turned into an animal by a devilish operation.

And then the tension was relieved by the sound of a cool, precise voice from the doorway. It was Doctor Gassner.

"Have no fear, Mr. Vane. Dolen's murderous instincts are quite under

my control. I have no doubt that you recognized him, of course?"

Gassner came into the room and closed the door behind him. He wore rubber gloves and was covered completely by an operating robe. He approached the operating table.

Roger gulped, and forced himself to ask with a semblance of levity, "I suppose I'm the next candidate for your skillful scalpel?"

Gassner put his hands on the table and looked down at his prostrate prisoner. "I regret to say that you are, Mr. Vane. Yours will be my third successful brain removal!" His eyes glittered. They had a trace of madness. "Such operations as have never been imagined by the profession! I experimented much in Vienna. Here I reap the rewards!" He sighed regretfully. "It is too bad I cannot write reports for the American College of Surgeons!"

Roger shrank mentally from the fanatical gleam in those wildly bright, piercingly black eyes. He asked, "Is my—er—operation necessary to your plans, Doctor?"

"It is. Would you be interested in hearing them—before I begin?"

"Nothing would interest me more," Roger murmured. And then fiercely, yielding to the terrible strain on his nerves, "Except getting my hands on your throat!"

There was a slow rustle of motion from the animal-like figure of "Red" Dolen. The strangler shifted in his chair and grunted deep in his chest. His hairy, ugly hands came away from his knees and clawed into talons.

Gassner looked sharply at the man with the empty skull. He snapped his fingers. "Be quiet!" he ordered curtly.

Dolen subsided sullenly.

ROGER thought he had detected a little note of apprehension in the doctor's voice. Wildly his mind strove for a scheme. He recalled that Dolen had been convicted of choking a man to death—unnecessarily. His

brain seemed to be vainly groping for something—a key to escape. In the meantime he made conversation.

"Why did you help him to escape, Doc? You might as well satisfy my curiosity."

Gassner beamed with pride. He nodded, and said, "Gladly, Mr. Vane. There are so few I can confide in, and you—are safe, now. You see, my plan was of the very essence of genius. First, I offered Dolen his liberty in exchange for the use of his brain!"

Roger started. "The use of his—brain?"

"Exactly. I smuggled a hypo of serum into him in prison, so that he was immune to the gas. Ivan did that when he visited him. Then he drove out of the prison grounds. That was how Ivan spread the gas in the prison. The exhaust of the car was fitted to a tank under the floor boards—a tank of my ethylene-urethane. In that manner everybody was gassed while Dolen walked out, a free man!"

"Marvelous," Roger gasped. "Your'e a genius, Doc!" He said it, partly to lull the other by the flattery which he obviously yearned for, and partly to cover up the wild light in his own eye. For he had just thought of a wild, impossible scheme to frustrate this madman—a scheme that might well end, though, in his own destruction.

Gassner went on. "That was only a single step. It happened that Courtlandt Spears, the president of the Empire City Bank, was here at the time, for an appendectomy. I timed Dolen's escape carefully to coincide with that. I removed Mr. Spears's appendix. But I went further. I also removed his cerebral cortex!"

"Dolen came here from prison. He had enough confidence in my ability as a surgeon to submit to the same operation—with three million dollars of loot in sight!"

ROGER looked at Dolen. The recital seemed to be making no impression on the animal part of the

brain that he had left. Only in his eyes was there a hint of the smoldering instincts that had finally sent him on the road to the electric chair. Roger turned his head back to Gassner, who was going on:

"And then, my friend, I reached the pinnacle of wizardry in the profession of surgery! I placed Dolen's brain in the skull of Courtlandt Spears! Can you imagine the delicacy of such a transplantation? I had worked for years to perfect a protoplasmic substance which would knit the membranes together. This is what I used.

"The result was that when the president of the Empire City Bank returned to his office, he carried back the brain of a criminal! But the body was the body of Courtlandt Spears, with all his instinctive reactions. You recall, perhaps, that the cashier noted the birthmark, and that he commented on the signature? Spears was in a position to order the gold shipped out without opposition. It was, my friend, the perfect imposture!"

Roger was astounded. Merely to follow this recital taxed his imagination. But many things became clear.

"So you and your man, Ivan, drove the armored car, eh? Then you drove out to some lonely spot and ran it up the runway into the van. I see it now. That was why it looked as if Spears and the gold had vanished from the face of the earth!"

Gassner nodded enthusiastically. Then he sighed. "But I was careless. When Spears returned, I operated on him once more and removed Dolen's cerebral cortex. I left the operating room unguarded for a moment, and Spears, with the instinct of fear which was governed by his cerebellum, ran out, naked as he was, and fled across the field, to the place where he was found by that ambulance doctor."

"And now," said Roger, "you are going to replace Mr. Dolen's cerebral cortex?"

Gassner leaned closer, his lips a thin straight line of heartless cruelty. "No," he confided. "This is where you come in. I am going to put Dolen's brain in your skull!"

Roger's throat was parched. "But why?" he demanded in a hoarse whisper.

"Because then the renowned, the trusted Roger Vane, special investigator for the Bankers' Protective Association, will escort the van of gold out of the city to the boat I have chartered! Gold, my friend, is good all over the world!"

Incredible as it sounded, Roger knew that this madman could do just what he threatened. He knew, too, that Gassner would destroy him and Dolen after he was safely away. He wasn't going to split that three million with Dolen or anybody else.

This was the time, he decided, to try his almost hopeless plan. He took a deep breath. "I should think," he said, in a loud, sharp voice, "that Red Dolen would choke the life out of you, Doctor!"

Gassner started. His eyes narrowed suspiciously.

From the chair by the window came a low animal growl.

"Yes," Roger repeated, "he ought to get his two hands on you and choke you—choke you!"

Dolen half rose from his chair, eyes glued to Gassner. He was responding to the suggestion.

GASSNER was pale. He snapped his fingers. "Sit down, Dolen, you fool!" he barked.

The strangler seemed to hesitate. He was deeply under the surgeon's influence.

Roger desperately raised his voice to a shout. "Choke him, Red! Get your hands on his throat! Choke him! Kill! Kill!"

Little red spots appeared in Dolen's eyes. He was like a bull before whom a red flag is waved. A low roar came out of his throat. Slowly he rose and

walked around Roger's table. A fierce grin spread over his mouth, saliva drooled from the ends. His big hands with the red hair showing on their backs opened and closed with grim deadliness as he made for the doctor.

Roger's voice was hoarse. "Choke! Choke!" he urged in a desperate monotone.

Gassner's eyes distended with fear. He retreated to the instrument cabinet, fumbled behind, and snatched up a keen-edged scalpel. With that in his hand he faced the advancing killer. "Get back!" he croaked. "Get back!"

But Dolen came on, ponderous, inexorable. He needed no more urging from Roger. His open pajama jacket showed the red hair of a heaving chest. His brutish features were contorted into a terrible mask of killing lust. With the bandages of that inhuman operation on his head, he was the ghastliest thing that Roger had ever seen in his life.

Gassner, with his back to the cabinet, lashed out with the steel scalpel, leaving a deep gash in Dolen's chest, from which the blood oozed horribly. But he seemed not to feel it. His hands came up, his fingers encircled the doctor's throat in a terrible grip.

Gassner lashed out again and again with the scalpel, and brought blood in a dozen places. But those implacable fingers clung to their grip. Gassner's face grew purple; he gagged; his eyes bulged. A strangled scream like the bleating of a sheep escaped from his mouth, then he sagged limply.

Roger had been unable to tear his eyes from the awful picture. Now he saw Dolen drop the doctor's body as a child would drop a discarded toy. Then he turned slowly and advanced upon Roger, hands opening and closing spasmodically.

This was what Roger had feared. The killer deep within him had tasted the sweet taste of blood and would not be stopped now. Blood gushed

from a dozen wounds left by Gassner's scalpel. The bandage on his head had come askew. But he came on, his murderous eyes feasting on Roger.

ROGER squirmed in his straps. He could do nothing but wait for those hungry hands to close on his windpipe.

And then while Dolen's feet brought him slowly closer, Roger heard the doorbell outside ring. As in a haze, he heard Ivan going to answer it, heard a familiar voice saying, "We're canvassing the neighborhood. Did anybody here see a little old guy running around naked? He was found on the Parkway. Came from this direction."

And he heard Ivan's answer as Dolen's claws were reaching for his throat. "I'm sorry, sir, I can't help you."

Desperately, Roger shouted. "Up here, Mike! Up here, for God's sake!" His own voice sounded like a stranger's—weird, unnatural.

From the outer hallway came an angry bellow. "Don't call me Mike, dammit!"

Heavy feet in the hallway, the sounds of a scuffle.

Roger's eyes closed against his will. A hot breath was in his face. Dolen's hands were tightening on his throat. "Too late," he thought. Through his head went the refrain, "Too late, too late, too late!"

He gasped for air. Dolen's beastlike fingers were searching under his neck, to snap it. The door of the operating room was locked; he remembered that the lock had snapped when Gassner closed the door. Mike could never make it in time.

"Coming, Roger," Inspector Cummins shouted from the corridor.

Then there was a pounding at the door, and Cummins' voice raised in profanity.

And suddenly a great gust of air swept into Roger's lungs. The fingers about his throat relaxed. A great weight fell on his naked chest. He

opened his eyes. Dolen lay across his chest, soaking him in his blood!

Roger breathed deeply, his lungs burning with each intake of air.

A panel of the door crashed in. A hand was inserted and turned the catch. Cummins barged into the room. He stopped short. Two uniformed men crowded in behind him.

The inspector took a look at Roger, then put his hands on his hips and roared with laughter. "Well, Big Shot," he taunted, "I never saw you look so pale before! What's happened here?"

His eyes swept the room, took in Gassner's broken body, and settled on the form of Dolen.

"This guy is Dolen," Roger whispered through a burning larynx. "He finished Gassner, over there, and he was doing the same for me."

Cummins dragged Dolen's body off Roger and started to undo the straps. "What happened to him?"

"He must have collapsed from his wounds, or else he caved in the same as Spears did. He had the same kind of operation. Gassner was our man, all right. He operated on them."

Cummins helped Roger up. Roger flexed his stiff muscles, and looked up to see the inspector grinning at him. He glanced down at himself and flushed. The two cops who had come in behind Cummins snickered.

"Just like Adam," the inspector jeered at him. "Did you forget your clothes?"

"Okay, Mike," said Roger. "Laugh! Go ahead! Give me the ha-ha for the rest of my life. Only get this—my hunch was right! And you'll find the gold in the garage in back of the house. Go ahead and laugh now!"

He had some measure of satisfaction as he saw Cummins scoot out the door for the garage. But the vision of the brainless Dolen with fingers on his throat, still clung to the retina of his eyes. As long as he lived he felt he would never be able to purge himself of the memory of that apparition out of hell!

Two short words were all this soft-spoken stranger uttered as he faced the drawn guns in that back room of Luke Mingo's road house. Yet those ruthless rowdies dropped their gags and cowered in fear.



Master's calm statement had the effect of a bomb tossed into the room.

MASTER OF FEAR

By Frank Gruber

DON MASTER pushed open the door of the back room of Luke Mingo's road house. He entered the room and faced a group of men gathered around a crap table.

The beetle-browed giant who was running the game said, "Who the hell let you in?"

"I want to see Luke Mingo," stated Master.

"I'm Mingo," replied the giant. "What do you want?"

Master nodded at the others. "These your boys?"

"Yes—and they'll do what I tell 'em to do. If you haven't a damn good

reason for busting in like this, they'll throw you out on your ear."

"I'll throw him out for you, Luke," piped up an ambitious young hood, and advanced threateningly on Master.

The latter did not budge an inch. "Lay a hand on me," he said, "and the boys will be buying you a silver casket."

Luke Mingo came around the crap table. "Tough guy, eh?" he snorted. "You'll tell me what you want or you'll be needing that silver casket."

"I'm a shamus," said Master, "and I'm looking for the boys who snatched Martin Craig."

Master's calm statement had the effect of a bomb tossed into the room. Mingo let out a roar, and his boys charged upon Master. Guns flashed into sight.

Mingo tapped Master on the chest with a hamlike hand. "Fella," he snarled, "that crack is going to get you the damndest licking you ever got in your life."

Master shook his head. His face was still as calm as when he had first stepped into the room. "You're mistaken, Mingo; your boys are not going to maul me. You see—my name is Don Master."

"Don Master!"

Luke Mingo and two or three of the others repeated the name together. Gasps went up, and the men fell back. One or two guns were quickly dropped into shoulder holsters.

This was the first time Don Master had ever been in Center City, but his name was known here, as it was in every other city in the country. He was a national figure—the peer of all private detectives. It wasn't that he was such a particularly good detective, or that he had solved so many cases through brilliant work; it was because he was a colorful and—deadly—personage.

Six years ago in reporting Master's first sensational exploit, a newspaper man had dubbed him with the title, "Master of Fear," punning upon his

name. "He is absolutely devoid of fear," the newspaper man wrote. The man and the name had caught with the public. The newspapers published columns about him. Every one of his exploits thereafter received national prominence, partly because of his connection with them and partly because of the merciless tenacity with which he carried them through. He seldom wound up a case in which some one wasn't killed. Criminals became cornered rats when they learned that the Master of Fear was on their trail. They fought to the death, and so far it had always been their own deaths.

Although the newspapers were spread with Don Master's exploits, he himself never talked to newspaper men. He was a silent man, preferring to let his actions speak for him. He thought and brooded much, however. Perhaps he was devoid of fear, as the newspapers said. But what was there to be afraid of? Once he had faced a German firing squad—and he had not been afraid. He had been picked up with seven German bullets in him and had lived.

But the peculiar absence of fear in his make-up antedated the war. A shipwreck had thrown Master and four other sailors on a tiny coral atoll in the South Pacific. There was no food . . . the men had gone mad . . . cannibalism . . . Master and one other sailor were finally rescued more dead than alive. After that stark experience Master had never known fear, or any other emotion.

WHEN he had stepped into Luke Mingo's back room, Master had not done so through reckless bravado. He had gone there for a purpose. He was fully aware of the respect his reputation had brought him, and he knew that in all probability he would walk out of Mingo's place, even if the underworld czar of Center City was in some way connected with the Craig kidnaping, which Master rather doubted.

The sudden scare which the an-

nouncement of his name threw into Mingo's boys disgusted Master.

"What the hell's the matter with your boys, Mingo?" he asked. "Are they all as yellow as this?"

Mingo himself had stepped back a pace at the announcement of Master's name. He still looked truculent, but there was a trace of deference in his tone as he spoke. "So you're Don Master! I've heard of you. And you're on the Craig case?"

"Yes, that's why I came here. What do you know about it?"

"Nothing, Master," said Mingo. "Beer, hooch, and gambling are my games. I don't go in for snatching."

"Maybe not," said Master, "but you run this town, don't you?"

Mingo spread out his big hands. "I don't know a damn thing about this snatching. You're barking up the wrong tree."

Master looked at him coldly for a moment then turned away. "All right, Mingo."

He pulled open the door and stepped out of the room. He almost knocked over a wiry fellow, dressed in a waiter's outfit. The man had evidently been listening at the door.

He tried to scurry away but Master caught him in one or two quick strides. He seized him by the collar and clouted him on the ear. The man bounced to the floor and came up sitting with his back against the wall. His hand started for his left armpit, then stopped. Cold, glittering eyes looked at Master, but the man did not move.

"I hate eavesdroppers," said Master, flatly.

"All right, I'll remember—Don Master," stated the other.

Master continued out.

Fifteen minutes later, he dropped from a taxi in front of the palatial residence of Martin Craig. The butler let him in and a tear-stained woman of about thirty-five ran out into the hallway to meet him.

"Mr. Master," she cried, "I just heard from them. They—they know

I've employed you—and—and they made threats."

"What kind of threats?" snapped Master.

"Said if I didn't let you go, they would kill Martin. Oh, what shall we do?"

"Do nothing," replied Master.

Mrs. Craig looked at him with wide eyes, then broke into a sob. "But Mr. Master! We can't. They—they will kill him. They killed Henry Farnum."

Master nodded. "Yeah, so they did, but that was because Farnum's family couldn't raise over five thousand. Farnum wasn't as wealthy as the snatchers thought he was. They didn't kill Edward Jason. But Jason had money, and he paid out—at least fifty thousand. How about your husband? What do you know of his financial affairs?"

Mrs. Craig looked distressed. "Martin sold out his business a year ago. But he has money. I—I talked to Mr. Meyerson, the banker, this morning. He said, while he didn't approve of it, if he received instructions from Martin or myself, he could give me up to thirty thousand dollars."

Master nodded. "All right, Mrs. Craig. In that case you have nothing to fear. They won't hurt Mr. Craig. Have the police been here to-day?"

"No, I haven't heard from them since yesterday, when the chief of police spoke so nastily to me because I sent for you."

Outside Master hailed a taxicab. "Police headquarters," he said to the cabby.

Ten minutes later he introduced himself to Chief of Police Roberts. The latter did not seem very pleased to meet him.

"I've heard of you, Master," he said. "You're supposed to be quite a boy in your own bailiwick, but this is Center City, and I think the department is more capable of coping with the situation than an outsider. Mrs. Craig has probably told you that I advised her very strongly not to hire you."

"She did say something of the sort, chief," said Master, easily. "As for coping with the local situation, you don't mind my saying that I think you've made a devil of a mess of it. This is the third man to be kidnaped in this town in a month. One of them paid heavy ransom; the second was killed."

Roberts swore heartily. "Wise guy, eh? Well, all I can say is that you'll get no co-operation from this department. And I warn you, Master, if you obstruct our work, it'll go damn hard with you. Get me?"

"I get you. I just wanted to know where you stood. Well, I'll be seeing you."

FOR the last half hour something had been buzzing in the back of Master's head. He returned to Luke Mingo's road house. He found the local vice lord in his office behind the cashier's desk.

Mingo frowned when he saw Master. "Back again? I tell you, you're wasting your time. You're on the wrong track."

"Maybe so," conceded Master. "But something didn't quite click when I was here before. A waiter, pasty-faced fellow with a long nose—why should he have listened at the door when I was in the back room with you?"

Mingo's eyes opened wide. "That's funny, that bird quit his job just fifteen minutes ago. Jake Summers he said his name was when I hired him a week ago."

Master leaned forward slightly. "Is he a Center City man?"

Mingo shook his head. "No, these waiters come and go. I don't pay much attention to 'em. There's nothing they can get away with here."

"His address?"

Mingo reached into a pigeonhole in his desk and scooped out a note book. "It's on Howard Street—2237 is the number."

Jake Summers had flown. The address on Howard Street was a shabby rooming house.

"He came here only ten minutes ago and got his bag," the landlady said.

Master was disgusted with himself. He had muffed his one possible chance of establishing contact. He should have paid more attention to Jake Summers. Even waiters in road houses don't pack guns in their working clothes, and Summers certainly had started for a gun. That should have told Master that the fellow wasn't an ordinary waiter.

He returned to his hotel, went to his room, and dropped into a big chair. He had to think things over before his next move.

His chair was turned to the window. His back was towards the bathroom. He did not hear the stocking-footed man come out of the bathroom. The first he was aware of any one's presence in the room was when a cold ring of steel was suddenly pressed against the back of his neck.

"Steady, Master!" gritted a voice in his ear.

A hand reached over his shoulder and whisked out his automatic from the shoulder holster.

"You can get up now," continued the cold voice.

Master rose and turned. "Hello, Jake," he said in his even, calm voice. "Glad you dropped in. I was afraid I'd lost you."

Jake Summers showed his teeth in a wolfish grin. "Thought you'd tumble after a while. That's why I came here."

Master nodded. "Your face bothered me for a while. I place you now; Barkus is your real name—Pete Barkus."

The other's eyes narrowed. "How come?"

"Newspapers," said Master. "I got a good memory. And where's Joe Canada? You two usually play together."

"He'll be here in a few minutes," said Barkus. "You might as well sit down. We're waiting for Joe."

Master dropped to the bed. He

studied the ceiling. "What's the matter with Chicago, Pete? The boys getting too tough for you there?"

Pete snorted. "Too tough for Pete Barkus and Joe Canada? Don't be a fool, Master. We saw a chance to make some big money here, so we came. Doing pretty well, too."

"Why the waiter act at Mingo's?" asked Master. He was purposely drawing out Barkus, hoping the little Chicago hood would make a slip. Pete liked to talk.

"Just in case. Every one goes to Mingo's dump sooner or later . . . Quiet!"

A knock had sounded on the door. Pete didn't say a word. The knock was repeated, two long and three short ones.

"All right," called Pete.

Master raised his head to see the newcomer. Joe Canada came in with a gun in his hand. He was a taller man than Pete and had a colder glitter in his eyes. More brains too.

"Good work," Canada said, then to Master, "What'!! it be, shamus—the works or do you leave the city?"

Master had dropped back and was again studying the ceiling. "I never quit, Canada," he said.

"So I've heard," retorted Joe Canada. "O.K. then, come along. The boss wants to see you. Maybe he can make you change your mind."

Master swung his feet to the floor.

"We're going through the lobby," continued Canada. "Pete on one side and me on the other. You know how to behave."

BARKUS went to the bathroom and got his shoes. Then he slipped his left hand through Master's right arm. Canada took Master's left arm. Their free hands were in their coat pockets, gripping guns.

They left the room and walked to the elevators. Barkus and Canada chatted on the way down. Master helped in the act by smiling now and then. The elevator operator thinking them old friends saw nothing out of

the way in the fact that two men held the arms of their companion.

They walked through the lobby the same way. A half-block up the street they halted before a black touring car. "In the rear," said Canada, pushing Master. Master climbed in and Canada followed. Barkus got into the front seat behind the wheel. He switched on the ignition, stepped on the starter, and pulled away from the curb.

Master leaned back in his seat and relaxed. Joe Canada had heard of Don Master and was keeping a close watch on him. Besides, it wasn't the time for anything. If he did get away from the two hoods, he'd be just where he had started. It wouldn't be so easy to establish "contact" the second time.

They left the city, and Barkus stepped on the gas. For twenty minutes the big car roared along, making better than sixty on the straight stretches. Barkus was a good driver.

The car left the paved road and lurched into a graveled road. Barkus drove slower now because the road was narrow and rough. Ten minutes on this road and Barkus turned up a narrow lane through a heavy growth of pine trees. A few minutes later, the car stopped before a log cabin.

Canada and Barkus climbed out and motioned Master to follow. They entered the cabin. It was large and luxuriously furnished in the rustic manner. The hunting lodge of a wealthy man who loved his comfort when "roughing it."

A man with a black silk hood over his head turned from the fireplace. He regarded Master for a moment without saying a word, then he spoke in a deep voice, evidently disguised: "You were hired by Mrs. Craig. What for?"

Master shrugged, "What do they usually hire private dicks for?"

The hooded man nodded. "We had intended asking Mrs. Craig for forty grand. She hired you, so the amount is now fifty thousand."

Master shook his head. "Then you've a corpse on your hands. Mrs.

Craig can't raise over twenty-five grand even if she hocks the family jewels."

The hooded man swore. "Damn these rich guys. They've got nothing but a big front these days. This is the second one."

"Yeah—the second one," agreed Master, his eyes narrowing.

The snatch leader turned to Joe Canada and Pete Barkus, who were standing a short distance behind Master with their guns in their hands. Then he looked at Master again.

"All right, the amount will be twenty-five thousand. You'll bring the money."

"Me?"

"Yes. What the devil do you suppose we brought you here for? Oh, I'm not afraid of anything you'll try. You're hired to save your client's life—not to have him killed. Here's the plan. To-morrow afternoon at exactly three o'clock you will leave Center City on Highway 218. You will drive Martin Craig's limousine. When you are exactly twelve miles out of town, you will pull to the side of the road and jack up the left rear wheel and take off the tire.

"Highway 218 hasn't so much traffic on it, but there will be some cars passing. When we figure the coast is clear, we'll stop for the money. After we get it, you'll put the tire back on the car and drive back to Craig's home. Craig will be home about the time you get there—if you haven't tried any funny stuff."

Master shook his head. "What assurance will we have that you'll let Craig go after you get the money?"

"None," said the hooded man. "You take my word for it, that's all. So far it's been fifty-fifty. We turned Edward Jason loose."

"Yeah, but what about Henry Farnum?" asked Master.

The other made a gesture with his hands. "They didn't pay—and the same thing will happen to Craig if the money doesn't come through. The

Farnum killing ought to show that we're not bluffing."

There was nothing else for Master to do but to agree. To attempt anything now would have been suicidal. "All right," he said. "I'll tell Mrs. Craig to get the money. How do I get back to town?"

"Walk back," said the hooded man. "We play safe. Martin Craig isn't anywhere in this vicinity and we borrowed this shack just for to-day. I'm telling you so you won't waste your time looking around. Ready, boys?"

Pete Barkus ran out of the lodge, and a moment later the motor of the touring car turned over. Watching Master carefully, Joe Canada and the hooded man backed out. Master ran to the window just in time to see the car dash off.

It took him forty minutes to walk to the paved highway and another ten minutes before he could catch a lift to Center City.

MRS. MARTIN CRAIG sobbed with relief when Master told her that he had made contact with the kidnapers of her husband.

"You'll have to get \$25,000 in small bills ready by to-morrow noon," he told her.

She nodded gladly. "I don't care at all about the money, if only Martin will come back safe. I—I'll go to the bank right now."

Master did not tell her how the money was to be delivered. He did caution her, however, about keeping everything quiet. "Don't tell the police anything," he emphasized. "The kidnapers mean business, and it would be exceedingly dangerous to have the police butt in and spoil things."

Mrs. Craig did tell the police, however. Lieutenant Kirby and Sergeant Needham of the Center City force dropped in on Master at his hotel that evening.

"Mrs. Craig told us," announced Kirby.

The muscles stood out on Master's

jaw, but otherwise he showed no emotion.

"Where's the pay-off going to be?" continued Kirby.

"Find that out like you did the rest," said Master. "And if you do, I assure you that there'll be another dead man to chalk up for your splendid police work."

"All right, keep your mouth shut and see what it'll get you," snapped Kirby.

They left, but Master knew that they were not giving up. Just to test them, he went out for a walk. A plain-clothes man picked him up in the lobby and kept a short distance behind him. He returned to the hotel and went to bed.

At nine o'clock the next morning, he called at the Craig residence. "Is the money ready, Mrs. Craig?" he asked.

"Yes, it was brought from the bank only a few minutes ago."

Master opened the small gladstone bag and nodded. It was almost full to the top with packages of paper money.

"You shouldn't have told the cops," he said, as he picked up the bag.

Mrs. Craig reddened. "I didn't mean to, but they badgered me so much I finally let it out. I do hope that it won't hurt Martin's chances any."

Master shook his head. "No, but it's going to make me a devil of a lot of work shaking off the cops. That's why I got the money so early. I'll need your car too. I want you to see that it is parked at Market and Sixth at two o'clock. The ignition key should be in it. I suggest you have your chauffeur take the car out about one o'clock and leave it at that corner. And tell him not to return here until at least three-thirty. If he drives off alone, I don't believe he'll be followed. Do you understand everything?"

Master returned to his hotel with the money, followed by his police shadower. At twelve o'clock he looked out of his room and saw a man loitering in the hallway. They were closing

up now to make sure that he would not avoid them.

At two o'clock Master looked over his automatic and slipped it into his shoulder holster. Then he picked up the bag containing the ransom money and left his room. He rang for the elevator. The man who had been loitering in the hall came up and prepared to ride down with him.

The elevator door opened. Master reached out suddenly and gave the detective a shove that sent him staggering against the opposite wall. Then he sprang into the elevator.

"Down you go, and quick!" he cried to the operator. The lad took one look at Master, and the car dropped swiftly.

"All the way to the basement," said Master.

A moment later he stepped out of the elevator into the kitchen of the hotel dining room. A cook and several helpers stared open-mouthed at him as he tore through. He did not even look at them. He climbed a flight of stairs and found himself in a corridor behind the elevator banks. A door at the end caught his eye. He opened it cautiously and swore. A man was leaning against the building a dozen feet away. The police were certainly guarding the hotel well that day.

Master closed the door, then opened it again. He whistled. The detective came over. Master dropped the bag of money and smacked the man a terrific blow on the jaw. He fell like a log. Master pulled him inside the door, then catching up the money bag darted up the alley.

He came out on the next street and mixed with the crowd. He walked slowly for two blocks, then hailed a taxi. During the next half-hour he rode in two other taxis, walked through a department store, and took a short street car ride. Then he found himself clear of the business section.

He walked rapidly to Sixth and Market and there saw a big limousine parked at the curb. He climbed in, saw

that the ignition key was in the lock, and stepped on the starter. He headed for the country, in the opposite direction from his rendezvous with the kidnapers. Five miles out he began taking side roads and working back in a northerly direction. He avoided the city, however.

At 3:10 he was on Highway 218 five or six miles out of Center City. He watched the road markers, and when he estimated that he was twelve miles out, slackened speed. Ahead was a long straight stretch of road, with only a farmhouse or two in sight. This was evidently the spot the kidnapers had had in mind. They could see for a mile or two in either direction. An ideal place for their purpose. Master drove up another mile, when he judged he was about in the center of the straight stretch of road. Then he pulled the car to the side of the road and stopped.

HE got out the tools from under the driver's seat and jacked up the left rear wheel. He took off the tire and scattered the tools around. The bag containing the money he set beside the wheel. Passing autoists would think it was a tool kit.

He waited for fifteen minutes, during which time a dozen cars passed in both directions. Every time one approached Master busied himself at the wheel—but he watched each approaching car carefully.

The kidnapers had used a black touring car yesterday. If they were smart, they would have a different car to-day. A brilliant green sedan shot by him once. Five minutes later it came back from the other direction. The second time Master noted that there were two men in the front seat, but they had their heads down as they passed and he could not recognize them, but he did not doubt that they were Joe Canada and Pete Barkus.

A few minutes later the green car approached again from the direction of Center City. No other cars were in sight and Master felt instinctively

that this time they would stop. They did.

The engine was left running and Pete Barkus and Joe Canada climbed out. They were carrying their guns in their hands. Master was holding the tire iron in his hand. The bag containing the ransom money was at his feet.

"Got it?" snapped Canada.

Master kicked the bag.

"Look at it, Pete," said Canada.

Pete stooped and opened the bag.

"O.K.," he said.

Master had been watching Canada's face and suddenly saw that what he had been expecting was about to happen. They were going to kill him. He knew them and they couldn't risk letting him go—not with Henry Farnum's murder and the kidnapings hanging over their heads.

Barkus was straightening before Master. The latter suddenly clipped him on the head with the tire iron. Barkus fell against Master and at that moment Joe Canada fired.

The bullet went clear through Pete Barkus and burned Master's left arm. Then Master had his own gun out. He threw Barkus from him and fired at Canada just as the Chicago hood was firing the second time.

Canada staggered back, and Master shot him again, through the head. Canada's second shot grazed Master's throat.

As Canada fell Master turned to the green car just in time to see a black-cloth-covered head lean out, and a gun pointing at his head. The snatch leader hadn't trusted Canada and Barkus with the money and had come along.

Master dropped to the ground like a plummet, firing even as he fell. He saw the hooded man's head jerk back, then he fired again. He was taking no chances. After that he sat down on the running board of the Craig limousine.

Less than ten minutes later, a police car came tearing up, siren screaming. Lieutenant Kirby and a

half-dozen policemen piled out and stormed over to where Master was still sitting.

"Geez!" exclaimed Kirby, in awe, as he surveyed the scene. "You got 'em all. Who's the guy with the black sack over his head?"

"Look for yourself, lieutenant."

Kirby strode over and tore the black hood from the dead man's head. He cried out in astonishment. "Martin Craig!"

"That's who I figured it was," stated Master, calmly.

"He kidnaped himself!" ejaculated Kirby.

Master nodded. "He'd lost most of his money, so he went to Chicago and hired Joe Canada and Pete Barkus and went into the snatch racket. He

got fifty grand from Edward Jason. Then he made a slip and killed Henry Farnum. Craig had to cover up his tracks then, so kidnaped himself. I suspected it yesterday, but wasn't sure until a little while ago."

Kirby looked at him sharply.

"What made you suspect him?"

Master shrugged. "The amount of the ransom for one thing. Craig had a big place, but he didn't have so much money—if we don't count the money he got from the Jason snatching, which of course he was too smart to put into his bank as yet. I told him Mrs. Craig couldn't raise more than twenty-five grand. He let it go at that. Any one not knowing his circumstances would have stuck out for fifty grand, at least."

New!

Thrilling!

Different!

EVERY STORY COMPLETE!

Now

Only

10^c

LOVE

FICTION MONTHLY

*Here are just a few of the pulsating stories
in this big bookful of glamorous romance:*

TIN GODDESS—A complete novel

By Mary Frances Doner

DREAM AGAIN—By Marian O'Hearn

HEARTBREAK MOON—By Peggy Gaddis

CAREFUL, LITTLE LADY!—By Jean Johnson

Hollywood Highlights—News of the Screen

In the March Issue

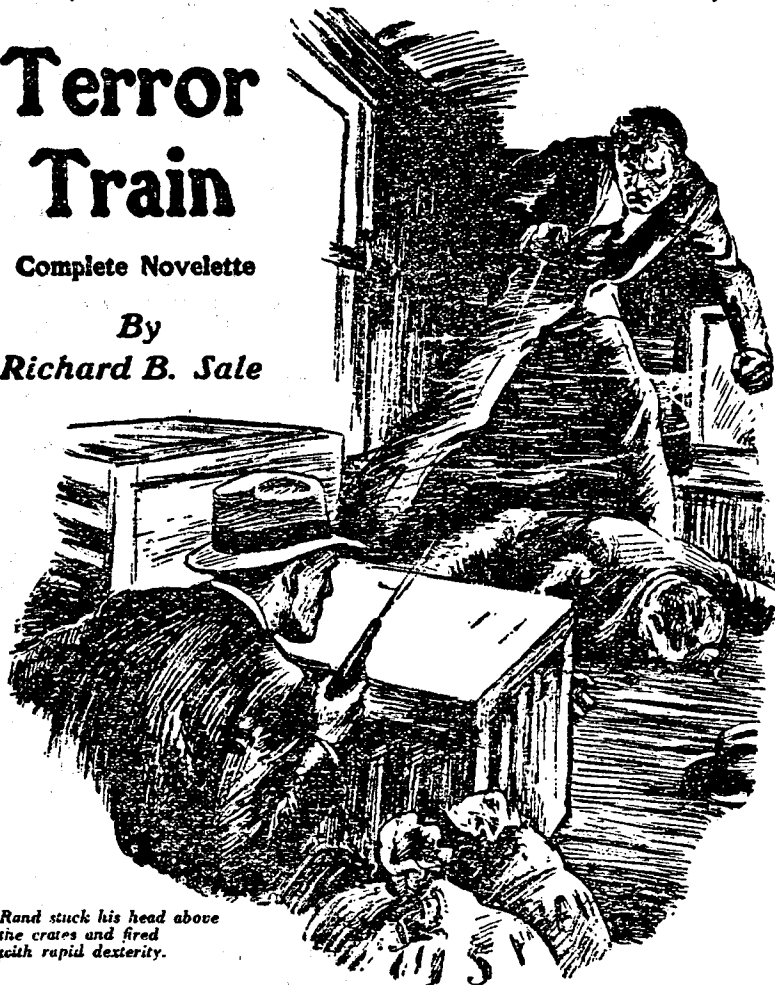
Now On Sale

Suddenly and with shrill horrific cadence, a macabre tortured shriek split through the nocturnal silence of the night. In that instant The Crescent Limited, snowbound in the Rockies, became a

Terror Train

Complete Novelette

By
Richard B. Sale



Rand stuck his head above the crates and fired with rapid dexterity.

CHAPTER I COLD STEEL

OUTSIDE the car window, the wind howled maniacally. Snowflakes, fine and sharp, bit into the glass of the window as the rush of air hurled them wildly about,

dancing like wraiths through the ominous, deliquescent obscurity of the bitter cold night.

Roy Rand, lying in lower berth 3 of the first Pullman car of the Crescent Limited, wondered dully at the intuitive hunch which had brought him

out into this forsaken wilderness of ice on the trail of an escaped killer.

As a special investigator, acting *sub rosa* in homicides, it had been his lot to hunt a quarry through many strange and nefarious locales. But never in all his years as a free-lance criminal nemesis, had he ever run into such a storm.

The Crescent Limited, crack trans-continental train, had left Spokane five hours before. It had been snowing then, but after the train had reached the first slopes of the Rockies and had started to climb upwards into the mountain recesses, the storm had increased in rising fury. And here, somewhere north of Hermit Mountain on the Cascade peaks, the Limited was marooned, snowbound by giant deposits of ice across the shining steel rails.

The other occupants of the Pullman car had retired an hour or two before. The car itself looked gloomy, curtained with the deep green drapes which hid each upper and lower berth from the aisle.

Rand, however, was fully dressed. As he gazed out of the frost-covered window in front of him, his mind was not on the turbulence of the careening snowflakes. He thought of Limpy Kirk. And again, to refresh himself on the subject, he glanced down at the newspaper in his hand.

It was one which he had purchased in Spokane, five hours earlier when the Limited departed for Chicago. In two-inch caps, glaring and truculent, the headlines of the paper screamed: "Kirk Escapes from Erwin Penitentiary!"

There was more about the killer in the story which followed the streamer, but Rand knew it all by heart. Limpy Kirk, gunman, had broken out. He was at bay, dangerous, homicidal. Limpy Kirk, one of the foremost public enemies of the country. Loose.

Rand had read that news story in the Union Station in Spokane. At the same moment, he had seen two men go by him. Two men whose records

were covered with crimson gore. They were Rocco Faroni and Frankie Vincente. And—coincidentally—Limpy Kirk had belonged to Faroni's mob in Chicago!

So Rand had played a hunch.

He followed Faroni and Vincente, saw them board the Limited, take up bunks in the first Pullman behind the baggage car. Acting on the spur of the moment, Rand, too, had boarded the crack train. And he had been fortunate enough to procure a berth in the same car with Faroni and his bodyguard, Vincente.

The car was as still as death. Only the sound of the whipping snow against the glass broke the utter taciturnity of the marooned train.

Rand rose and left his berth. He went to the smoking room in the rear of the car. The Limited's chief conductor was there. Rand knew him. They had met before in chases of this sort.

"Hello, Kelly," Rand said, taking out a cigarette and lighting it. "Anything new?"

William Kelly, the conductor, grinned and shook his head. "I'm afraid you're out of luck this time, Rand," he said. "I've been through the whole damn' train. And there's no sign of Limpy Kirk nor any one who looks like him."

"There's Faroni and Vincente in my car," Rand replied dryly. "If that doesn't smell funny, what does?" He paused. "Who else is registered here?"

"You mean in Pullman number one?"

"Yeah."

"Let's see . . ." Kelly reached into his pockets and tugged at voluminous data on the occupants of the entire train. He finally found the correct list and perused it, his face gnarled into deep wrinkles. "There's yourself," he observed, "Faroni, Vincente, a Richard Barnes—"

"That's the young chap," Rand interrupted. "I saw him."

"And Lola Luce," Kelly continued. "She's a movie actress, ain't she?"

Rand nodded. "A poor one, too. On the way down. Who else on your list?"

"Sarah Pitts. She's secretary to Lola Luce. And there's a man named Tolbert C. Emery Tolbert."

"Saw him," Rand said. "Obese, bald. Typical business man. Well," shrugging, "that seems to settle that car. You've checked all the others?"

"Sure, Roy," Kelly shook his head. "I tell you there ain't any sign of Kirk."

"How about the baggage car?" Rand asked.

Kelly made a wry face. "Not a damn' thing up there. Mostly mail. Few crates. Small ones. A man couldn't hide in them. And—oh yeah, Roy, there's a coffin up there."

Rand's eyes narrowed. He flipped his cigarette to the floor and extinguished it. "A coffin?" he repeated.

Kelly nodded. "Belongs to this Richard Barnes in your car. He's taking it back East."

"What's his destination?" Rand snapped with acerbity.

"New York." Kelly squinted at Rand and smiled. "And if you've got any idea that Limpy Kirk is hiding out in that coffin, Roy, just lose it. There's a genuine bona fide corpse in that package. I seen the death certificate myself. It's the mother of Richard Barnes."

Rand was plainly disappointed.

"The whole thing looks like a wild-goose chase," he admitted reluctantly. "But it seemed like a good hunch at the time. After all, it's once in a blue moon that you find two mobsters heading east from Spokane on the same day that one of their boys breaks jail. I expect that Kirk is hiding back in the city until the holocaust dies down a bit. But I'm keeping my eyes on Faroni and Vincente just the same."

"Why?"

"It stands to reason," explained Rand, "that it was no innocent coincidence they were in Spokane the day Kirk escaped."

Kelly grinned and opened his mouth to reply. Words never left it. He suddenly snapped taut, rigid. Rand himself tensed automatically into immobility.

Suddenly and with shrill horrific cadence, a macabre, tortured shriek split through the nocturnal silence of the train!

It rose up slowly in a mournful banshee wail, horribly inhuman, and then broke at its zenith into a harsh strident screech of pain and terror! The awful, unholy sound permeated throughout the smoking room and clamped down a terrible effluvium of eeriness and oppression upon the two men there.

Following the cry on the instant, a gruesome gurgling rattle floated dully and fantastically through the car.

RAND glanced at Kelly, speechless, shuddery tremors coursing weirdly up and down his spine. He had the oddest sensation of the hair on his neck standing straight out.

Kelly had blanched a deathly yellow. His lips moved soundlessly, and his eyes bulged from his head as though from acute ophthalmia.

Simultaneously, there was another sound—a sharp cutting scream! Rand identified it instantly as one of fright. A woman. It seemed like years as he sat there, transfixed at the suddenness of the whole thing.

Then Rand leaped to action. He hurled himself from the lounge where he had been smoking, next to Kelly, and plunged headlong into the outside corridor back towards the belly of the Pullman. He tugged at his shoulder holster as he ran. An ugly blue-steeled Mauser leaped into his hand as his finger curled hungrily around its trigger.

The car was in an uproar. Kelly, with the natural instinct of a trainman, had also left the smoking room and had run to the end of the Pullman to lock the door. He finished the task with such alacrity that he was almost

on Rand's heels when Rand reached the berths of the Pullman.

The green drapes of the car were all pulled aside. Heads were peering from them. In the center of the car, in front of lower six, Lola Luce stood, white as a sheet and wavering uncertainly on her feet. She was staring—staring in repugnancy and fear at something in lower six.

Then, with a low moan, she collapsed, just before Rand could reach her, into the arms of a man alongside. It was Frankie Vincente.

"Put her on one of the lower berths!" Rand snapped. "No one move! This car is locked. Stay where you are! Kelly!"

The conductor moved to his side.

"Yeah, Roy?"

"Lock that front door, next to the baggage car," Rand ordered sharply. "No one leaves here."

Kelly nodded and tore recklessly through the Pullman to the end nearest the baggage car, where he also locked the door on that end. The Pullman was now sealed.

Rand shoved his pistol back in its holster. There was no need for it. He moved up to lower six and looked into it.

A raw gory horror lay there. It was a man. His throat was sliced wide open, exposing the inner parts of the gullet and trachea. The jugular vein was spouting crimson blood all over the pillow and sheets. The hands of the cadaver were stretched towards the gaping throat in a grisly effort to stay the flow of blood. The eyes were open, glaring, horrible!

It was Rocco Faroni.

Rand turned quickly to Kelly, who gulped at the nauseating sight and wheeled away.

"Murder!" snapped Rand. "And some one here did it!"

He bent down over the corpse again and studied it with apparent reluctance. It was a nasty thing. There was no sign of the weapon. The killer had taken it with him. That Faroni had

been slain with a long flat-bladed knife was glaringly evident.

Rand rose grimly and closed the green drapes in front of the berth. Silently he surveyed the occupants of the car. They had all assembled now and were waiting, watching him tensely.

Rand spoke to Vincente.

"Where were you when Faroni cried out?" he asked.

Vincente's eyes rolled in abject fright.

"Holy God," he whispered hoarsely, "you don't think I did this? I was with him. I was his body guard. I wouldn't have killed him like—"

"I asked you where you were," Rand said tartly.

Vincente's mouth closed with a snap. A furtive, canny look pervaded his eyes. "I was in my berth," he replied tersely. "Upper six. Above Rocco."

"Yeah?" Rand sounded sarcastic. "Asleep?"

Vincente nodded.

"With all your clothes on like that?" Rand said softly. "Or are you going to tell me you dressed *since* Rocco was killed?"

"I slept this way," Vincente replied warily. His eyes danced back and forth across Rand's face, never focusing in one spot. "I didn't want to struggle in that damn' berth. I didn't undress."

LOLA LUCE, the movie actress, stirred where Vincente had laid her after her fainting spell. Her eyes fluttered and, when they opened, were quickly filled with loathing and fear at the memory of the disfigured corpse.

She began to sob hysterically right away. Rand grabbed her and lifted her to her feet.

"Now listen, Miss Luce," Rand said, shaking her gently to break the crying spell, "that won't do a bit of good. Stop it!"

She desisted at the commanding

tones of his voice and looked up at him.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Roy Rand, special investigator."

Rand flashed his honorary shield and nodded to Kelly. "He'll check on me. He knows me."

Lola Luce mumbled, "Police!" Then she fell silent, staring at Rand like a cat watches an unwary canary.

"Why did you scream right after Faroni did?" Rand asked.

Lola Luce's mouth tightened.

"I—I heard him as I walked by his berth. It was awful! I fell against the berth across the aisle. And then, suddenly, a man came away from Faroni's berth and shoved me aside! He ran down that way towards the baggage car."

"A man!" Rand exclaimed. "What'd he look like?"

"I couldn't tell," Lola Luce answered tremulously. "I didn't see his face. He was big and tall. And he limped."

"Limped?" Rand cried. He shot a glance at Kelly. A glance of triumph. "Kirk is on this train, Kelly! I knew he was!" He turned back to Lola. "What were you doing out of your berth? How did you happen to be passing Faroni's berth?"

"I—I was thirsty. I wanted a drink of water."

"Water's at the other end of the car," Rand snapped. "That's a pretty weak yarn, Miss Luce."

Vincente had been watching the questioning. He suddenly broke out, "She's lying, Rand! I know it!"

Rand looked at the gunman. His face was curled up in hatred and anger. Rand asked, "What do you mean?"

"She's his moll," Vincente said acidly. "Faroni's moll. It ain't no coincidence that she's on this train. Rocco arranged it. She's traveling with him. I know. And now she's bumped him!"

"No!" Lola Luce cried sharply. "That's not so! I didn't kill Rocco!"

"But you knew him all right," Rand said.

Lola Luce nodded. "Yes, I knew him. I was traveling with him."

"She's Rocco's wife!" Vincente snarled.

Rand waved at him to shut him up. "Is that true, Miss Luce? Are you—were you Rocco's wife?"

Lola Luce's head fell dejectedly. "Yes," she answered dully, her tones flat with despair. "I was his wife."

"Tell them the rest!" Vincente persisted. "Tell them how you and Rocco was separated. How he came after you, made you give up pictures. Tell them how you swore you'd get him for it. And why? Because he blackmailed you into giving up pictures. He had something on you!"

"All right!" Lola Luce cried out. "I did do all that. Rocco did have something on me. And now he's dead and I'm glad of it! But I didn't kill him! And you know it, Vincente! You might have done it yourself!"

Vincente paled perceptibly.

"I had nothing against Rocco," Vincente whined. "He was my pal. I didn't kill him."

Rand watched the byplay silently.

"I understand it now," Lola Luce said gratingly. "You knew how I stood with Rocco. So you planned to kill him and blame me for the job. Everything was fixed pretty for you. You threw me aside there and ran towards the baggage car. You wanted me to think that the killer limped—that the killer was Limpy Kirk. He escaped this afternoon, and you knew he would be a good character to use. It would make my story of a limping man sound crazy because Limpy Kirk isn't here."

"You're crazy!" Vincente replied harshly. "I wouldn't do anything like that! Why should I bump Rocco? He was my pal!"

"Was he?" Rand put in cuttingly. "Stand back, Frankie!" The ominous Mauser had jumped up again in Rand's hand. "Reach for the ceiling,

Frankie," Rand said grimly. "I'm searching you."

Vincente was quivering with apprehension. A heavy cold sweat exuded fecundly from his face. His hands went up slowly.

Rand frisked the gangster quickly. He brought out a revolver from a shoulder holster.

"I've gotta permit for that," Vincente said.

Rand nodded. He went on in his search. There was no knife. Rand did, however, find a letter. He glanced at it. It was postmarked "Chicago" and in the upper left-hand corner was the return address. The letter was registered.

But it was the return address that fascinated Rand. The name was Maxey Gerron. And Maxey Gerron had been Rocco Faroni's rival for Chicago beer territory!

RAND smiled mirthlessly. He broke Vincente's revolver open, expelling its content of bullets onto the floor of the car. Then he handed the empty gun back to the sullen gangster, who immediately stuck it back in its holster.

Vincente then snapped, "Give me back my letter!"

Rand shook his head.

"I'm going to read it, Frankie," he replied. "A letter from Maxey Gerron to a bodyguard of Rocco Faroni should be very interesting reading."

An intense trembling seized Vincente. His black eyes sparked furiously as he bit his lip. With a swift, almost surreptitious action, he snatched at the envelope in Rand's hand.

Rand sliced down instantaneously with the heavy butt of his Mauser pistol. It cracked into the flesh of Vincente's outstretched hand, thudding painfully, and left a livid raw welt flaming across the skin.

Maddened into a semibestial state by the detective's movements, Vincente clipped his good hand around in

a lightning blow, clenched fist aimed bullet-like at Rand's jaw!

Rand saw the blow coming, but he was not agile enough to avoid it fully. He ducked away. Vincente's fist slammed into the detective's shoulder with a sickening crunch of flesh hitting flesh.

Rand went down like a log! He rolled on the floor of the car momentarily, still stunned by the viciousness of the unwonted attack. Lethely, he slipped to one side as Vincente clawed at him for the letter. Frantically, now, Rand jammed the letter into a pocket of his coat, and then grappled with the madman.

His face was mottled from the pressure of Vincente's claws on his throat, digging in to close his windpipe. Blackness began to pervade his vision as a sparkling myriad of flashing stars surged before his eyes. With one last wild swing, he reversed the pistol in his right hand!

It smashed terribly into Vincente's face with terrific force and catapulted the enraged gangster over backwards!

When Rand could climb to his knees, he stared at the unconscious body of Vincente. The face was bruised and sore where the studded gun butt had flared its mark on the skin. The nose was bleeding copiously.

Rand caught his breath and rose, panting. He shoved the Mauser in its holster and took the coveted letter from his coat. With a defiant glare at the assembled occupants of the Pullman car—all staring at him in lethargic fascination—he stripped the envelope off and opened the letter.

CHAPTER II

DEATH IN THE DARK

THE Limited conductor, Kelly, moved over closer to him, curious.

"What's in it, Roy?" he demanded.

Rand shrugged. He cast a queer glance at the stirring bulk of Frankie Vincente on the floor of the car and smiled crookedly.

Vincente suddenly opened his eyes. They rolled oddly in half-circles until they were able to focus with clarity. Vincente wiped the blood from his nose dazedly and stared at the taut faces which towered over him.

Roy Rand pointed an accusing finger at the man.

"Frankie," he said grimly, "you're under arrest for the murder of Rocco Faroni!"

Vincente did not object. He eyed Rand maliciously and looked craftily around him.

But Kelly was amazed. "What the hell, Roy!" he exclaimed. "What is it? What did that letter say?"

Rand replied succinctly, "Here. Read it."

Kelly accepted the letter eagerly and skipped through it quickly, hungrily. The message consisted of one brief but culminative sentence. It said:

"VINCENTE—

If Rocco isn't bumped like we planned it, before he gets back to Chi, you'll not only lose that bonus I promised you, but my boys will meet you both at the station with a couple of typewriters. MAXEY GERBON."

Kelly whistled. "He'll never be able to beat that letter," he said shaking his head. "That's evidence."

Rand smiled. He turned to Vincente.

"I'm putting the bracelets on you, Frankie," he snapped. "I'm cuffing you to your seat until we hit Chi. And if you try any funny business—" Rand tapped his chest, where his pistol rested in its holster, meaningly.

Vincente was pale and strangely calm as Rand cuffed him.

"Listen, Rand," he began in a low voice, hoarsely, "I swear I didn't do it."

Rand waved a contemptuous hand at him.

"I mean it!" Vincente cried fearfully. "You've got to listen to me! You've got to believe me!" His voice rose with hysteria and then quickly subsided into a mysterious whisper.

"I swear I didn't do it, Rand. You can't lose anything by listening to me. I'm cuffed here to my seat. But I'm not taking this rap for any one else. And I'm not getting bumped for any one else either."

Rand's eyes narrowed.

"Spill it, Frankie," he cut in. "What's in your craw?"

Vincente shot an acidulous look at Lola Luce who was watching him intently, white as a sheet.

"If that dame is telling the truth," he said, "although," he added sneeringly, "I doubt it, then something's on the queer here. I didn't bump Rocco. That's straight. And if she didn't—"

Lola Luce interrupted shrilly, "I didn't! I didn't, I tell you! There was a big man! He was leaning over in the berth. And when I came by, he stood up and pushed me away. Look!" She pulled up the sleeve of the negligee which she was wearing. "Look at that black and blue mark. Do you think I did that for fun? That's where I hit the berth brace across the aisle after he shoved me!"

Vincente leaned towards her.

"You said the bird limped?" he asked tensely.

Lola Luce nodded.

"Yes," she answered tremblingly. "He limped. Like a lame man."

Vincente searched for Rand's eyes and found them.

"Rand," he rasped, "suppose Limpy Kirk—"

"—boarded this train after he escaped this afternoon?" Rand finished. "Yeah. I've been thinking about that. In fact, that's why I'm here!"

"That's why you're here?" Vincente exclaimed.

Rand nodded, his eyes shining.

"Yeah, Frankie. That's why I'm here. Limpy was one of Rocco's strong-arm men back in Chi. And it seemed damned funny to me that Limpy Kirk should escape from Erwin on the same day that you and Rocco took the Crescent Limited for Chicago. So I followed you both. I

took a berth in the same car. I thought you might lead me to Kirk."

Vincente stared madly at Rand. He half rose in his seat, but the manacles held him back. His eyes glazed wildly. He tried to speak for a moment, but his lips only moved soundlessly.

Without warning, his voice gained strident audibility as he harshly emitted a despairing groan.

"God, Rand!" he breathed like a doomed convict. "You followed us because you thought we'd led you to Kirk? You thought that Rocco somehow helped Kirk to break jail and lam East? Why, you damned fool, don't you know that Limpy was—"

The Pullman turned into Stygian blackness like a bolt of lightning. The velvet, turbid pitch engulfed the recesses of the train car and pervaded each pulsating heart with the effluence of lurking disaster which nocturnity insinuated.

There was a short silence for a minute.

"What's happened?" Lola Luce cried out, frightened.

Rand said, "Steady all." He called to Kelly.

"No go, Roy," Kelly replied. "Some one's pulled the switch to the compartment lights. I'll have to find them and put them on. Any one got a match?"

"Is that switch in this car?" Rand's voice sliced through the obscurity sharply. "Inside this car?"

"Yeah, Roy."

"But you locked both doors to this car!" Rand was taut with the proximity of danger. "No one on the outside could have turned the compartment lights off. The juice box is in here. That means that some one in this car turned them off."

Silence. The blackness seemed oppressive.

"I—I guess you're right, Roy," said Kelly.

"Stand by!" Rand snapped. "I'm calling a roll. Answer to your name. Vincente!"

"Here," said Vincente.

"Lola Luce!"

"Here," replied the actress.

"Miss Pitts!"

Luce's secretary answered, "Present."

"Barnes!" Rand resumed.

"Here," Barnes returned quickly.

"Tolbert!"

"I'm here," answered C. Emery Tolbert. "What sort of a business is this anyway? I shall certainly take this up with—"

Rand retorted, "Stow it. All present and accounted for. Then who turned off those lights? Any one got a match?"

Richard Barnes broke in. "I think I have." He fumbled in his pockets in the darkness. Presently the irascible scratch of a match sounded. A tiny yellowish light flared up.

It was blown out by a strong gust of wind instantaneously!

"What's that?" whispered Vincente eerily.

RAND strained in the darkness, a queer instinct of unconscionable dread tugging at his stomach. His hand stole into his coat, feeling gingerly for the welcome butt of his lethal Mauser.

Clump! Clump! Clump!

A sodden, ominous thudding permeated through the miasmatic murkiness of the Pullman. It was some one—or something—walking, stomping awkwardly. But the gait was irregular and uneven, and the contact of the shoes on the carpeted aisle of the car was peculiarly distinct in audibility. It was a dull sound. Grim and somehow weird!

Like a lame man!

Roy Rand, his heart beating with excitement and dread, felt something brush by him. Something big and heavy. He reached out instantly and grabbed at it, his pistol ready in his hand. The thing turned on him in silent savagery.

A vague crunching sound. Rand reeled as a clenched fist of muscle and

bone catapulted against his chest and hurled him wildly sideways! The impetus of the stunning blow took him completely by surprise and sent him plunging headlong into the width of a lower berth at his side. His knees buckled up as they hit the boarding of the berth, and he fell.

Sprawling there ludicrously in the darkness, he struggled insanely to regain his feet. It was too much of a risk to chance a shot at the intruder in the darkened car. Too many people around. He might plug the wrong person.

Then, hissing, like the hideous warning of an enraged fer-de-lance, a rough virile voice emanated out of the ebony veil which engulfed them all, close to Rand's ear.

It spoke one word, questioningly, searchingly.

"Vincente?"

Rand guessed the motive of the question instantly. He threw himself forward with his gun and shouted at the top of his lungs, "Vincente! For God's sake—don't answer!"

But he was too late.

Even as he spoke, Frankie Vincente stirred uncertainly in the place where Rand had manacled him for safety, and whispered, "Who is it?"

Some one moved through the jet pitch. The slap of a powerful blow into unresisting flesh sent Rand's blood coursing madly through his veins like ice water.

He flung forward out of the bunk. There was a stifed gasp—a gruesome exhalation of breath which seemed to last an eternity. Then Vincente emitted a grisly moan. It rattled bestially in his throat like the buzz of a carnivorous diamond-back. He coughed rackingly for a second or two. That did it. A terrible roaring stillness encompassed the Pullman.

It was broken instantly by a repetition of sound. The uneven, macabre clump-clumping came to Rand as he stood helplessly in the dark and

cursed himself for not being able to do something.

The clumping faded down the aisle in the direction of the front of the car towards the baggage car ahead.

"A match!" Rand cried hoarsely. "God, Barnes, light a match!"

Richard Barnes fumbled momentarily. A scraping noise suddenly sounded and the tiny guttering flare of a match swept aside the black curtain.

Rand peered—strained, his Mauser waving eagerly.

Mysteriously, the match blew out again like the first one had. But in the brief interval where its light had flickered up sulphurously, Rand caught sight of a lumbering black gargoyle at the furthest end of the car.

The Mauser shot up. Twice it vomited fire and lead through the darkness, emitting sparks and a bursting line of orange flame. The explosion of the pistol bellowed thunderously within the narrow confines of the Pullman.

A cry of pain flipped back from the fleeing invader.

"Winged him!" Rand cried. "Come on, Barnes! I'm going to need those matches!"

He groped his way down the Pullman aisle, stumbling against the berth rests and swearing softly. At the end of the aisle, he had Barnes light another match.

There was a trace of crimson blood on the carpet.

"He's going towards the baggage car," Rand exulted. "And the door is locked. Come on. We've got him!"

Kelly called, "Careful, Roy! He may be heeled!"

RAND laughed shortly and plunged ahead in the darkness. In the passage towards the platform of the Pullman, he bumped into the fuse box of the car. Barnes, at Rand's command, lighted another match. Rand reached into the fuse box and plugged the main switch.

The Pullman exploded soundlessly into glaring light.

Rand blinked blindly at the brilliant flare of the sundry electric bulbs of the car. Dancing black spots jiggled insanely before his eyes as they strained swiftly to focus normally, the pupils contracting to mere pin points.

Gradually, the misty haze cleared from them, and with dubious clarity, Rand was able to see somewhat again. He sped quickly down to the end of the Pullman where the door led to the car platform and beyond to the baggage car ahead.

Rand grasped the knob and tried to open the door, wrenching it strongly. It refused to budge. It was still locked!

"Couldn't have gone out there," Rand muttered, disgruntled. "Must be hiding somewhere in the car!"

He wheeled around and tore back to the others.

"Kelly!" he exclaimed, "you come along up here. All you others, search this car. Women too. Search every nook and corner. Look under berths, in empty drawing rooms, lavatories, everywhere. If you find any one—yell. Come on, Kelly!"

Rand returned to the spot in the aisle where he had discerned the small pool of fresh blood, evidence of the fact that a steel-jacketed slug from his Mauser had hit home. Kelly followed right behind him, his elderly face gray and striated. Richard Barnes came along on Kelly's heels. His young face was frightened and anxious.

Rand dived into the smoking room at the end of the car. It was empty. And there was no other hiding place up in that part of the Pullman.

Yet a tiny twisting trail of blood showed plainly that the limping intruder had retreated by that route—*and had not come back!*

Rand said crisply, "There's only one exit—that door!"

He pointed at the portal which barred the way to the platform and beyond.

"But that's locked!" Kelly cried protestingly. "I locked it myself!"

"And it still is locked," added Rand. "But that doesn't prove anything. Unlock, Kelly, I'm going to have a look up in that baggage car. This may be a trick. But it may be the real thing. Maybe some one is hiding in that car!"

Kelly gasped. He came forward with a ring of keys jingling in his hand. He inserted one in the lock of the door and turned it. Then he opened the door.

"Okay, thanks," said Rand. He took out his Mauser again. "You go back with those others, Kelly. See that the women are all right. And make sure about Vincente."

Kelly nodded and disappeared.

Rand turned and looked at Richard Barnes questioningly.

"I'd like to go along, sir," Barnes said hesitantly. "That is—if you're going up into the baggage car. You see, my mother's—"

"I know," Rand cut in. "You mean the coffin." He noticed the black mourning band on the young man's arm.

"Yes," nodded Barnes. "The coffin is there. And if some one is trying to hide—well, I wouldn't like to think of anything happening to it."

Rand appraised the young man. "Okay, son," he said. "Come along. But take care of yourself. If there is some one up there, he's a killer. Keep behind me. If we hurry, we can catch him. He hasn't had much time to hide."

Rand turned and stepped through the open door out onto the platform of the Pullman. Barnes followed him.

An icy, bone-piercing wind swept through the crevices of the car-joiners and up from the rounded steel platform slides. It cut them bitterly and their breaths leaped out in front of them like clouds of steam and smoke.

Rand stepped across the platform of the Pullman to the connecting joint of the two cars. In a second he was on the rear platform of the baggage car.

But it was dark here. No welcome and disclosing electric bulb glowed overhead in the platform space.

He reached for the baggage car door.

As he did so, something fell on him from behind!

It seemed to have come from the sky. Two powerful lithe fingers came down and rapidly gripped into the skin of his throat, digging, digging cruelly, brutally for his larynx. Rand gasped at the terrible pain of the tightening fingers. Wildly he tried to twist and fire his pistol.

It was no use. The deadly grip began to close with the tautness and power of a contracting python. Rand struggled, groaning and clawing for breath. The Mauser dropped from his nerveless fingers. He heard Barnes cry out behind him, dimly, far-away. The scene began to spin, revolving like a bizarre, starry pinwheel.

As the sable curtain of unconsciousness pervaded his departing vision, Rand was barely able to feel a terrific blow on the rear of his skull.

Then he dipped down slowly into an ebony void.

And darkness!

CHAPTER III

THE INCREDIBLE TRUTH

WHEN Rand regained painful consciousness, he could see nothing. Only a whirling black pool of sparks. Dazedly, he stirred and tried to sit up. But the fracas had sapped his strength. He fell back for a second, panting hotly as though he had run a race.

Everything suddenly cleared. The cold sweep of the zero wind biting through his suit roused him sharply, cleaning his senses. Fortuitously he strove to gain a squatting posture. He groaned at the effort, but succeeded.

He quickly searched for his gun. It was in front of him on the floor. He picked it up and pocketed it.

He glanced around him.

Richard Barnes lay prone, directly

behind him and to one side. The young man was face down, his arms and legs sprawled awkwardly.

Rand grunted and climbed laboriously to his feet. He bent down over Barnes, grabbed the young man by the shoulders, and dragged him slowly into the adjoining platform of the Pullman where a single electric bulb illuminated the scene.

Rand turned Barnes over, lifting his head. He slapped it gingerly and rubbed the young man's skull. There was a big bump and a slight red bruise on the fellow's forehead.

Rand continued his resuscitative efforts vigorously. In several seconds, Barnes began to move slightly, a vague trembling running throughout his frame. His breathing quickened slightly. Rand felt his pulse and watched the young man closely.

Finally Barnes's lips moved soundlessly. His blue eyes fluttered open uncertainly and stared unseeing, apparently, straight ahead.

"Wake up!" Rand said with acerbity, shaking Barnes. "Come out of it, you're all right!"

Richard Barnes looked at Rand stupidly. The uncomprehending glare of his eyes slowly passed away as he took cognizance of the detective.

"Wh-what happened?" he mumbled whisperingly.

Rand gritted his teeth and his eyes narrowed.

"Somebody beat us to the punch!" he snapped bitterly. "Somebody slugged us when we started to go into the baggage car. Come on, boy. Up on your feet. We're still going on."

Barnes struggled weakly to his feet with Rand's aid.

"Yes," he gasped. "Let's go on. My mother's coffin . . . if anything has happened to that—I'll—I'll kill—"

"Skip it," said Rand. He took out his gun. "Follow along. And watch yourself this time."

Rand resolutely crossed through the dark platform and confidently opened the door to the baggage car. He

walked through it steadily and raised his Mauser, ready for anything.

Barnes trudged weakly behind him, and closed the door to the car after them.

The baggage car was dimly lighted, but sufficiently so.

At the nearer end of the car, a lot of wooden crates were piled. They were small crates. Too small for human occupancy. Packages were also heaped around.

And against one wall—by itself—a large pine box coffin sat up on the floor, lengthwise. It was all by itself in the narrow space it occupied and looked strangely somber.

Near the mail racks in a rickety wooden chair which was tilted back against the wall of the baggage car, sat the baggageman.

He was apparently asleep. His hat was down, half over his face. His arms were folded comfortably across his chest. A buzzing, sawlike snore rose from him with astonishingly clear, monotonous cadence.

Rand crossed the car to the man and shook him roughly.

The fellow stirred, started, and awoke.

"Huh?" he muttered, half awake. "What's up? What's the matter?" He looked up at them suddenly. "Hey!" he exclaimed. "What's the idea? Passengers ain't allowed in here!"

"What's your name?" Rand snapped.

"Joe Brown," the man answered automatically. He caught himself quickly. "Say, I'll ask the questions. What're you doin' in here anyhow? Passengers ain't allowed in here. Vamoose!"

Rand flashed his badge and lowered his pistol.

"Oh, cops," Brown said. "I didn't know that. What's wrong?"

"See any one in here at all tonight?" Rand asked.

"Nary a soul," replied Brown.

Rand scowled. "Are you sure?"

Brown shook his head and sighed.

"Course, I'm sure! Ain't I been here all along? Nobody but Bill Kelly's been in here since we left Spokane."

"You haven't seen a big man—a limping man?" Rand prompted.

"I tell you, I ain't seen a soul outside Kelly."

Rand nodded disappointedly. Brown settled back in his tilted chair without getting up.

"How about that coffin?" Rand asked. "Has any one bothered it? Has any one been near it?"

"Listen," Brown said, disgustedly, "I just told yuh that I ain't seen no one. No one's been in—"

"Skip it," snapped Rand. "I heard you the first time. But you've been asleep. You were asleep when we came in. God knows how long you were asleep before that! Any one could have come and gone through this car while you snoozed and you'd never have known the difference!"

Brown colored and gulped. "What the hell," he said shamefacedly, "I ain't no nursemaid for this train. I gotta right to sleep. My work's done until we hit Denver."

Rand sighed and moved over to the coffin. Richard Barnes was examining it anxiously.

"It seems to be all right, Mr. Rand," Barnes said, in apparent relief.

RAND inspected the pine box. It was solidly put together, the spikes plainly visible in the strong boards. Nothing had been jimmied or torn apart. Rand knocked inquisitively but firmly on the coffin box. It sounded solid. All was intact.

Rand was disturbed. "No one's been in or out of here unless it was a ghost," he remarked, frowning. "But where in hell did the fellow go?"

The tired baggageman made a wry face. "You oughta write mysteries!" he scoffed chidingly. "The spook in the baggage car!" He laughed gruffly. "That's a hot one. Listen, brother, I've ridden about two hundred stiffs across

the country in my time. And I ain't never seen one get up and walk away yet. When they're dead—they're dead."

"Skip it," snapped Rand. He glanced nastily at the baggageman and retraced his steps to the rear door of the car. "Keep your eyes open, Brown. If you see anything, let me know. I'll be in the first Pullman."

"Nuts," Brown returned, settling himself again.

Rand eyed him angrily. Then nodded to Barnes.

"Come along," he said.

They left the baggage car. Rand was about to stride across the steel connecting joint of the two cars, baggage and Pullman, when a flashing glint of silver struck his eye. He stopped.

A single long key lay on the steel floor in front of him. He bent down quickly and picked it up.

"Skeleton key," Rand murmured, turning it over in his hand. "So that's how he did it! Used a skeleton key on the locked Pullman door to get in. Then relocked it after he got out. Must have dropped the key making a get-away."

"What does that mean?" Richard Barnes asked.

Rand eyed him.

"It means," he replied ominously, "that Limpy Kirk, escaped killer, is on board this train somewhere!"

Barnes gasped. "Not really!"

"Yes, really." Rand looked thoughtful. "I didn't think so when Rocco Faroni was killed. It looked like Vincente sure. But Kirk fooled me. He's on this train all right. I thought at first that he might be—that Rocco and Vincente had helped him break jail this afternoon in Spokane and were aiding him in a lam east. But Vincente tried to tell us something just as the lights went out. He never finished what he was going to say."

They crossed the platforms and entered the Pullman again. The warmth of the car felt good after the

biting teeth of the icy wind outside.

"What was Vincente trying to say?" Barnes asked curiously.

Rand shrugged as they walked.

"I don't know," he answered. "But I can guess. He was going to say that Limpy Kirk was not on the lam with them. He was going to tell me that Rocco had crossed Kirk, and that Kirk was gunning Faroni and all his double-crossing mob."

Barnes shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"No?" questioned Rand. "Well, it's just this. Kirk was up in Erwin Penitentiary doing a life term. He'd been convicted of murder in Spokane. And at the time, I didn't quite understand the whole business. Maybe Kirk did do it, but Rocco Faroni should have sprung Kirk. Rocco always used to spring his boys if they got in a jam. But, oddly enough, Rocco laid off Limpy Kirk. Rocco didn't raise a finger to help Limpy."

Rand paused for breath.

"Now it's just possible that Rocco thought Limpy Kirk was getting ideas and becoming ambitious. Rocco wanted to put Limpy out of the way for good. So Rocco might have framed Kirk into that homicide charge which sent him up for life. Rocco might have hoped that Kirk would get the death penalty. I remember at the trial, the prosecuting attorney asked for it enough. But the jury gave a verdict of life imprisonment because of insufficient evidence."

"What then?" Barnes queried, his eyes shining.

"Then," Rand continued, "Limpy was sent up. He was 'doing it all' in the big house and planning some day on a break. Somehow, with an accomplice, he found out Rocco and Vincente were in Spokane. He had had this accomplice track Rocco and Frankie. So he struck while the iron was hot—made his break and got away with it!"

"But the accomplice—" began Barnes.

"—arranged everything," finished Rand. "The accomplice, let's say Mr. Jones, followed Faroni's movements, knew that he and Vincente were leaving on the Crescent Limited for Chicago. Mr. Jones told Limpy Kirk, and Kirk followed—to kill them for the double-cross!"

"Gee, Mr. Rand," Barnes exclaimed boyishly, "you certainly have got the motive down. But where is Kirk now? And where is the accomplice—the Mr. Jones?"

Rand looked dumb. He shrugged. But there was a peculiar gleam in his eyes. "Don't know where Kirk is. But he's here—somewhere. A man couldn't live outside tonight very long. It's below zero, and that snow is damned deep. And Mr. Jones—well, he could be anybody."

THE Pullman was weirdly still when they entered the berth section past the corridor and smoking room. The passengers, Lola Luce, Sarah Pitts, and C. Emery Tolbert, were all huddled together with William Kelly, the Limited conductor, at one end of the car.

Kelly rose as Rand and Barnes approached him.

"Find anything?" Rand asked.

Kelly shook his head. "We've looked throughout every cranny in this car, Rand. There's no one else in here. How about you?"

Rand shook his head cannily.

"Nothing either. How's Vincente?"

Kelly made a face which held an effluence of repugnancy. He motioned over his shoulder down the aisle and said, "You'd better take a look yourself, Roy."

Rand passed the group and walked down the aisle to the berth where he had handcuffed Frankie Vincente. Richard Barnes joined him curiously.

Vincente was dead. Dead as hell. There remained nothing but a grisly ghastly cadaver, slowly stiffening in

rigor mortis. Vincente's eyes were open, bursting from their sockets in pure amazement at the satanic thrust which had murdered him.

He sat there quite naturally, his legs folded under him and his arms at his sides, one handcuffed to the berth brace. The coat of his suit was open. Something protruded up, shaftlike, from the white shirt underneath the coat.

It was the hilt of a dagger. Rand looked at it more closely. The blade, thin but evidently wide, was buried gruesomely in the dead flesh right up to the crest of the dirk's grip. The wound was directly over the heart on the left side of the chest. Around the aperture which the killing steel had made, quantities of darkened desiccated blood had soaked through the white shirt.

Rand took a deep breath. It wasn't very pretty. He stooped over and felt the face of the dead man. It was already cold with the chill of death.

Richard Barnes had blanched terribly. His stomach seemed to heave, and he gasped for breath at the repulsive sight. His hand shot to his mouth and he gulped, trying to swallow the excess saliva which filled his mouth at the glimpse of the corpse.

"God!" he rasped, finally. "Excuse me! I feel sick!"

He ran hurriedly down the aisle of the car for the smoking room, one hand on his mouth, one on his stomach. Rand smiled crookedly as he saw the young man go. Barnes finally reached the narrow corridor towards the smoking room and platform and disappeared from sight.

Instantaneously, Roy Rand snapped around and also ran down the aisle. He stopped in front of the car occupants and looked straight at Kelly.

"Bill," he said tartly, "have you got a Joe Brown in the baggage car on this trip?"

"Why, no," Kelly replied in surprise. "Steve McGilley is the bag-

gage-master of the Crescent Limited. And at Denver he picks up Jim Bennet as an assistant until Chicago."

"I knew it!" Rand exclaimed. "There's no Joe Brown at all?"

"I never heard of the fellow," said Kelly.

Rand grabbed Kelly by the arm and started into the corridor, dragging the conductor after him.

"Where you going, Roy?" Kelly asked, in stupefaction.

"After Richard Barnes," replied Rand.

"But he's only in the smoking room," Kelly said.

"Is he?" Rand sounded sardonic. "Well, we've got time. Here's the smoking room. Just stop off and look it over. Tell me what you find there."

Kelly entered the smoking room quickly. It was absolutely empty. He left the room and returned to Rand swiftly.

"Where is he?" Kelly was profoundly puzzled.

"Where else could he be?" Rand shot back.

Kelly stared at him. "You mean, he's gone up into the baggage car?"

Rand nodded.

"To see his mother's coffin?" Kelly persisted.

"Don't be dumb, Bill," said Rand acidly. "That death certificate was a phoney. They pulled the wool over your eyes like you were a baby. That coffin didn't have a corpse in it! Barnes's mother isn't in it! That coffin carried Limpy Kirk out of Spokane this afternoon!"

"What?"

"Yes," Rand said swiftly. "A coffin of death—death which struck down Rocco Faroni and Frankie Vincente in revenge for a double-cross. A coffin which carried a living man to deal death! The whole thing had been planned for months in advance. Kirk wanted to get the other two. He had an accomplice track them, trace them, plan the whole holocaust!"

Kelly was astounded. "And you mean that young Barnes fellow is—"

"Exactly!" replied Rand, biting off each word. "Richard Barnes is the accomplice of Limpy Kirk!"

CHAPTER IV

THE KILLER

THEY stole stealthily across the cold metal floors of the connecting platforms of the two cars and paused before the door to the baggage car.

The wind still howled furiously like an enraged demon and dug its icy claws into their faces like an invisible cat. But it had stopped snowing and the night had become suddenly beautiful as the silvery hue of a riding moon cast down an iridescent, unreal glow across the white powdery snowdrifts.

"Stay behind me," Rand whispered. "And keep low. There may be gunplay."

Kelly nodded silently.

Rand opened the door to the baggage car with advertent slowness. He slipped soundlessly into the car and held the door for Kelly who squeezed through the narrow opening. Then Rand softly shut the door and they both cowered carefully, expectantly, in the deep, dim shadows of the baggage car.

The tones of two masculine voices drifted back to them from the front end of the car. Silently, and with utmost caution, they peered over the piled crates at the speakers.

There stood Richard Barnes. Next to him was Joe Brown, the former baggageman whom Rand had questioned. Brown had only sat in the chair before, but now on his feet next to Barnes, the man towered like a giant. Barnes was protesting and wildly gesticulating with waving arms.

"A hell of a thing!" the baggageman cried. "I'm clearing out of the car and you light a match for the dick! Look at that shoulder. He sent

a slug through it! What were you trying to do? Cross me and have me killed?"

"Listen, Limpy," Barnes retorted pleadingly, "I had to do it. Can't you see that? Rand asked me a couple of times for a match. I had to light them or he would have suspected me. I blew them out as quickly as I could without being seen. I'm sorry you got plugged, but I couldn't do anything else! I'm not crossing you, Limpy. Didn't I work out this whole thing for you? Didn't I help you with your break, bribing that guard, smuggling a rod to you?"

Joe Brown, alias Limpy Kirk, frowned.

"Okay, Johnny," he said. "I guess you hadda do it. What's up now?"

Rand swore to himself. "I thought I'd seen that Barnes mug somewhere else," he whispered softly to Kelly. "His name isn't Barnes! It's John Kirk—Limpy's younger brother! What an ass I've been!"

Kelly gripped Rand's shoulder. The detective fell silent.

"It's the dick," said the younger Kirk. "He's wise, Limpy, I swear he is. He mapped out the whole thing to me as we walked back to the Pullman after he questioned you and thought you were the baggage-master. He's got the whole layout perfectly. He guessed that Faroni and Vincente framed you on that rap. And he guessed that you're on board to get them for it. And I think he's sizing me up. He's been looking at me funny."

Limpy Kirk was thoughtful.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "Rand's no dumb flatfoot. What do yuh think we oughta do?"

"Lay low!" answered Johnny Kirk. "Get back in the coffin and the hell with playing baggageman. If the conductor ever sees you—"

Limpy's face darkened, and an expression of terrible hatred swept across it.

"Nothin' doin', Johnny," he

snarled savagely. "I'm not through yet! There's one more I'm gonna get in this deal. The dame! Rocco's dame!"

"She had nothing to do with it, Limpy!" Johnny cried.

"I don't give a damn!" Limpy returned hotly. "She's getting it too. And then they can fry me if they want!"

He grated his teeth.

"I shoulda bumped her when she saw me leave Rocco's berth after I gave him the steel. But I didn't have time. Rocco cried out. I didn't do a good job there. Then she screamed. But I'll get her now."

Roy Rand's sharp voice sliced through the conversation.

"You'll get no one, Limpy," he said coolly. "You're through, under arrest. And don't try any tricks or you'll get a hot bullet through your head. It's dead or alive, you know."

Limpy Kirk wheeled around in amazement. Johnny did likewise, but there was terror in his face.

Limpy just looked at Rand for a second.

"Hello, Roy," he said casually.

Then he ducked down like a shot, knocking his brother, Johnny, aside, and clawing frantically for a revolver in his back pocket.

The blue-steel of the gun glinted in the dim light and flew up to a bead like lightning.

Crack! Crack!

The two shots sounded like the ticking of a gigantic clock. The Mauser in Rand's hand belched fiery death at the same split second that Limpy Kirk's trigger finger gripped back and fired his revolver.

Rand heard the lead pellet whizz grimly by his ear with the peculiar whine its speed created. His own slug cracked into the side of the boxes and sent splinters careening about.

He ducked down behind the piled crates, yanking Kelly after him unceremoniously. Kirk's revolver

crashed booming twice more. The crates in front of Rand jumped under the slashing impact of the slugs. A bullet tore through one of them next to him and went zooming on to slap dully into the wall of the car behind him.

FOR several moments, there was oppressive silence as the car filled with acrid smoke. Rand crouched there cautiously, his pistol ready. He heard Limpy.

"You packing iron, kid?"

The voice of Barnes, alias Johnny Kirk, replied, "Yes, Limpy, but I'm not using it. I've had enough of this. It's murder!"

Limpy's voice became hard, menacing.

"You use that rod, kid, or I'll—"

Rand stuck his head above the crates and fired with rapid dexterity at the momentarily diverted Limpy.

Kirk cried out in pain as Rand saw the sleeve of his coat jump where the bullet hit.

"Damn!" Kirk bellowed. "He got me in the same arm as before! I'll kill you for that, Rand!"

He shot wildly, blindly at the crates. Rand sucked in his breath as the slugs zipped precariously close through the frail crates. Kelly, behind him, had edged the door to the car open. Taking the hazard, the conductor hurtled through the hole and disappeared out on the platform.

"He's gone!" Johnny Kirk wailed. "Limpy—Kelly's gone to get help! They'll shoot us!"

"Maybe so," said Limpy grimly. "But not before I get this Rand and that dame, Luce!"

Rand shot up his head again and fired. He shot without aiming, in the vague vicinity of Limpy, but he saw to his horror that Kirk had moved. The Mauser slug thudded dully into unresisting flesh!

There was a low moan. Rand risked a glance. Johnny Kirk was on the floor, on his back, and his mouth was streaming a fountain of blood.

Another bullet from Limpy's revolver hit the crates at the same time.

Limpy's voice reached Rand.

"All right, Rand," it said coldly, brimming with unconscionable hatred and seething fury. "You got him—right through the throat. Now, damn you—!"

Rand looked. He was astonished to see Limpy Kirk rise from his crouching position and catapult forward, the deadly revolver still in his hand.

Rand tried to fire, but the lame giant was upon him in two daring strides. Frenziedly, Rand jammed his Mauser back into its holster to grapple with the criminal. He had just got it there and arisen to meet the charge when a roar of thunder detonated before his eyes!

Rand saw the orange fire spit out from the yawning black muzzle of Limpy's blue-gun. He saw that before he heard the ear-racking explosion so close to him.

Then he felt something like a white-hot iron sear his chest on the left side. A terrible iron which reached under his flesh and probed swiftly, tortuously into his torso, searching for his heart.

For a moment after that, he felt nothing, only an awesome, unholy numbness which left him senseless to pain, to thought, to sight, to sound. He was, for an instant, an undead zombi, a being whose body could still move but whose powers were destroyed.

At last a delicious soft lassitude seeped through him like morphine, warming him somehow painlessly, and making him feel so welcomingly tired.

Rand slumped slowly down to the floor and rolled on his side. His eyes closed and he could see nothing. He could hear nothing. He could not even feel the brutal sting of Limpy Kirk's heavy shoe upon his wounded ribs.

A swimming whirlpool
then oblivion!

Limpy Kirk stared down at the spreading bloodstain on the front left side of Roy Rand's coat. His eyes gleamed sadistically. They stole back to his revolver. He broke it open. There was a single slug in the revolving chamber.

"For the dame," he muttered. He glanced at Rand again and kicked the detective's body savagely. "Dead all right. Damn him!"

He reached down, pocketing the gun, and lifted Rand up in his long arms. He dragged Rand loosely along the floor of the baggage car to the sliding doors in the center. He opened one with some effort. Then, with a harsh laugh, he picked up Rand bodily in his arms and hurled the detective out into the bitter cold night.

Rand slapped into the snowbank next to the train with a puffy sound and half sank from sight.

LIMPY KIRK cackled again and took out his revolver. He closed the door of the car and then sped to the rear. Here, looking cautiously around, he crossed the wind-swept platform onto that of the Pullman, opened a door to the latter, and entered.

Kirk warily limped down the narrow corridor past the smoking room. He peered around the corner of the corridor into the belly of the Pullman.

Lola Luce, Sarah Pitts, Tolbert, and another man, a stranger, apparently from another car, were sitting there. At the same time, a group of trainmen appeared at the far end of the aisle with shotguns and began to head for the fore end and the baggage car, headed by Bill Kelly, the Limited conductor.

Limpy cursed softly to himself and dodged back. He leaped into the smoking room, then into the lavatory. There, he locked the door.

He discerned the heavy padding

of the men's feet on the carpet of the corridor as they passed the smoking room, glanced in, and then passed by and onward.

Limpy waited until he heard the front Pullman door swing closed. It told that the men had gone into the baggage car. It told that there was no one here to guard the women—and Lola Luce, the moll of Faroni!

Limpy's eyes burned with an insane fire. He stepped out of the smoking room and treaded softly down the aisle. He was halfway to the group in the Pullman before they saw him.

Sarah Pitts caught sight of his limping frame, then of the revolver swinging carelessly at his side. She screamed stridently and fainted.

Tolbert swung around; his face grew purple with fright.

Lola Luce was pallid as death. She rose and faced him defiantly, but tremors shook her like a leaf.

She whispered, "So you got away?"

Limpy Kirk grinned. "Yeah, Lola. I got away. I swore I would get Rocco and Frankie for that frame. And you, too."

"I had nothing to do with it, Limpy," Lola Luce said, her eyes wide in horror as the revolver lifted up and aimed at her frightened face.

"Maybe you didn't," Limpy snapped. "Maybe you did. I can't argue. They'll be back in a second. And I've got just one slug left. I saved it for you. Rand got my brother, Johnny, back there in the baggage car. So whether you knew about the frame or not—you're paying for him!"

Lola Luce screeched horribly as Limpy Kirk's trigger finger tightened convulsively.

But the revolver never fired!

Instead, there was the incongruous tinkle of shattered glass. No sound but that. And Kirk, his ugly face still gnarled into a hideous evil grin, fell forward on his face like a tall redwood. He thudded into the aisle, twitched once, and then lay still.

And Lola Luce, gaping in, mingled repugnancy and stupefaction at the yawning crimson hole in Kirk's head directly behind his big right ear, knew he was already a corpse.

Her eyes raised uncertainly and rolled slightly as though she were going to faint. She swayed perceptibly, but steadied herself to peer beyond Kirk's cadaver at the broken window in the Pullman.

There was a small round hole in the glass from which, radiating like crooked rays in a translucent sea, a corona of jagged lines stretched. The night wind filtered quickly through the hole.

C. Emery Tolbert, who had watched the drama in abject terror, leaped to the window with amazing dexterity despite his obesity and looked out into the snowbanks.

Something black and misshapen stood out there, thigh-deep in the heavy white blanket. Something which cried out and waved.

"Good God!" Tolbert roared. "It's Rand out there!"

He left the window and scuttled down the aisle like a monstrous lumbering crab, crying, "I'll get the conductor! Wait here! I'll get him!"

HALF an hour later, Roy Rand, weak and piqued, sat comfortably in one of the vacant drawing rooms of the Pullman, wrapped in blankets drinking a glass of toddy.

Bill Kelly, the Limited conductor, sat next to him, his eyes anxiously surveying the detective.

"You all right now, Roy?" he asked.

Rand nodded. "Yeah, thanks, Bill."

"But what happened after I left you up there in the baggage car?" Kelly queried. "I didn't mean to leave you alone. I thought I would get some men to help. I didn't run out on you."

"I know," whispered Rand. "I know you didn't, Bill. It just couldn't be helped. I plugged Limpy's brother by mistake; killed the kid."

"You mean—Richard Barnes?"

"Yeah." Rand sighed and shook his head. "Then Limpy just went sort of wild. He charged me, guns and all. I saw I was in for a tough grapple, so I jammed my Mauser into my shoulder holster and got up from behind the crates to meet him."

Rand sipped the toddy.

"But he wasn't fighting," Rand continued. "He was killing. He fired at me in a range of about two feet. I felt the slug slam me and then I went down. I came to out in the snow." He smiled grimly. "Limpy should never have tossed me out there. There's nothing like cold snow and a zero wind to bring a man back to life if he's been knocked unconscious. When I came to, the door of the baggage car was closed. I stumbled down the track through the snow to the Pullman. I thought, perhaps, you'd be in the Pullman and help me get in out of the night."

Rand paused and sipped again.

"Go on," urged Kelly impatiently.

"But you weren't there," Rand resumed. "And then I saw Limpy standing in front of Lola Luce. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I could read his face. And when he lifted that rod and played it on her head, I beat him to the trigger and let him have the lead from my Mauser. One shot did it."

Kelly marveled. "That's neat work, Roy! But how in hell did you ever escape Limpy's slug hitting your heart or lung?"

Rand grinned crookedly.

"You see, Bill, I had just put my own gun away when Kirk shot me. Look!"

Rand exposed his Mauser pistol to the Limited conductor. Along the steel barrel of the heavy gun, there was a lone curving line as though a trail of acid had eaten the metal.

"The bullet hit the Mauser," Rand explained, "and then ricocheted and hit one of my ribs. Thank God for ribs! Because the bullet ricocheted again on the rib and slid off side-

ways through the flesh on my left, coming out the back. A flesh wound that should have killed me!"

Kelly whistled. "When I took the men into the baggage car, we found young Kirk dead there. So we opened the coffin."

"And found nothing," said Rand.

Kelly nodded. "There *was* a coffin inside. But it was all outfitted to take care of a living man. And the sides of both the coffin and the pine box had a latch *on the inside* by which Kirk could get out without ever disturbing the boarding!"

He hesitated. "Roy, I don't quite see yet how you solved the whole thing. Mind telling me?"

"Sure," Roy Rand replied. "When Rocco was murdered, I honestly thought it was an inside job, and after Vincente fought with me over the letter, I was certain he had done it. Remember—I had come on this train after Limpy Kirk and thought, finally, I was on a wild-goose chase. I thought Kirk was a friend of Faroni's and Vincente's. But when Vincente was murdered—well, that was different. In the first place, the Pullman lights went out while all my suspects were with me. That showed plainly the killer was on the outside. Then that limping thump in the darkness. Kirk's walk. I knew then that Kirk was the murderer and guessed the motive easily. Kirk came down in the darkness and then called Vincente, using Vincente's reply to guide him to his prey. I tried to stop Vincente from answering, but I was too late. Kirk stabbed him in the dark." Rand paused for breath.

"You remember, I asked Barnes for matches. Whenever he lighted one, it would blow out. I thought that queer, because there was absolutely no wind in the car, and suspected him as Kirk's accomplice right off, for Kirk certainly had to have an accomplice. Then Barnes *had* to light one for me while Kirk was making his escape. It didn't stay lighted long, but it gave me a chance

to nick him in the shoulder. So I went after him into the baggage car. I let Barnes come along with me on the pretext he wanted to make sure his 'mother's' coffin was all right. On the platform, some one slugged me. When I came to, I found Barnes next to me on the floor, apparently slugged too. But when I brought him out of it, I knew instantly that *he* had been the one who got me and faked being knocked out!"

"How'd you know?" Kelly asked.

"When a man's knocked out," answered Rand, "his eyes are not normal when he comes to. The pupils are widely dilated, and you have to focus for several seconds before you can see. Also the pulse is slowed down considerably. But Barnes's eyes were perfectly normal. And his pulse was rapid. I felt it."

"But why did he knock you out anyhow?" Kelly asked.

"He had to," said Rand. "I was close on Limpy's trail. He hit me to give Limpy time to get back in the coffin. But Limpy didn't do that. Instead he shot and killed Steve McGilley, your baggage-master and changed clothes. Then he threw McGilley's corpse out in the snow. I found it there when I came to after he threw me out also. Thus, when I finally did reach the baggage car, I talked to Limpy as Joe Brown and didn't know him!"

"So when Barnes made believe that he was sick, but really went to warn Limpy to lay low, you followed him with me," said Kelly.

"That's right," answered Rand. "And you know the rest, the motive and how it was all done."

"I'll be damned!" said Kelly.

The Pullman gave a groan and then a sharp lurch forward. It rolled slowly, a peculiar whining noise emanating up from the wheeled trucks.

"Moving," Rand exclaimed.

"Yeah," said Bill Kelly. "The ploughs have cleared the snow ahead of us. We're going on to Chicago."

WHO ELSE WANTS 150 GALLONS of GAS for Only \$4.00



ELLING O. WEEKS, FAMOUS AVIATOR AND INVENTOR, TELLS YOU HOW TO GET IT

Automobile owners who have been worrying about gasoline expense, will be interested in an amazing invention that is now being offered to motorists by this famous Aviator. Already hundreds of thousands of cars have been equipped and their owners are wildly enthusiastic in their praise.

51 MILES ON A GALLON WINS CONTEST

In an amazing test recently conducted by a Texas Motor Company, 23 cars were entered to determine mileage economy. The winning car, owned by Mrs. C. P. Blalock, pictured to the left, ran 51 miles on a gallon of gas, and the second car 49 miles on a gallon of gas. When official test records were published, it was found that both of these cars were equipped with Mr. Weeks' invention.



Here is Mrs. C. P. Blalock in her Ford car that ran 51 miles on a gallon of gas.

AMAZING GAS SAVINGS ON BIG CARS

Owners of big cars need this new invention just as well as the owners of the smaller cars; the bigger the car the worse the gas eater and the more need of this saving. Emery Shaffer, 3826 N. Ashland Ave., pictured here, the chauffeur of a well-known Chicago business man, says he is delighted with this device. Not only does it save him many gallons of gas every month but makes his car perform beautifully.



Emery Shaffer and Packard Limousine he drives.

HOW YOU GET 150 GALLONS FOR \$4

The average automobile is driven probably 10,000 miles a year. Conservatively figuring this new device on 10,000 miles, it should save you anywhere from 150 gallons of gas and up, but figuring at the minimum—150 gallons of gas—this device only costing you \$4.00, it is as easy as A B C to see that \$4.00 does buy 150 gallons of gas, besides how about the second and third year when gasoline savings continue and there is no cost whatever. Make this test. No matter what kind of a car you have or how big a gas eater it is, this device must save you money. We guarantee that if it does not give you more power, faster pick-up, less carbon, quicker starting and increased mileage a trial will cost you nothing. We invite you to test it at our risk—you are to be the sole judge. Mail free offer coupon today.

ELLING O. WEEKS, Pres.
The Whirlwind Co.

Dept. 2-B Station C Milwaukee, Wis.

FREE OFFER COUPON

WHIRLWIND CO.

Dept. 2-B, Station C, Milwaukee, Wis.

Gentlemen: You may send me full particulars of your Whirlwind Carbureting device and tell me how I can get one Free. This does not obligate me in any way whatever.

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY..... STATE.....

Check here if you are interested in full- or part-time salesman position.



Please mention PNEUMOLOGICAL HOUSE GROUP taken answering advertisements



Is Your Chest-Line Too Matronly?

Here is an easy way to reduce
heavy, sagging tissues

ARE you self-conscious about your figure? There is nothing quite so conspicuous as an enlarged bust, is there? Especially now, when the vogue is all for the sheer, form-revealing dresses decreed by Paris. That bulging, drooping line utterly ruins the silhouette!

Reduce your bust! Recapture the firm, trim contours of youth. My special home treatment is designed for this purpose.

Slenderize Your Bust

Send today and see how easy my method is, and how effective. Nothing difficult or dangerous. Just simple, sensible directions for taking off flabby fat, for lifting the sag and remoulding the form. A large container of my Formula-X is included, a dainty, creamy compound used with my special massage technique. If you want a trim, shapely bust, with smart arching contours, then I urge you to take advantage of the liberal introductory offer below. Your satisfaction is guaranteed—or money back.



A BARGAIN OFFER!

Just a single dollar brings you this specialized treatment for reducing the bust. Mail the coupon or write, enclosing \$1.00, and you will receive your treatment by return mail — instructions and Formula-X, in plain wrapper. Can you afford to miss such an opportunity?

BETTY DREW,
Dept. PH-3,
799 Broadway,
New York, N. Y.

Please send me, under your Money-Back Guarantee, the Betty Drew treatment for bust-reduction. I enclose only \$1.00 in full payment. Mail at once in plain wrapper.

Name

Address

Town State

BETTY DREW

Dept. PH-3

799 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Please mention PHARMACEUTICAL HOUSE GROUP when answering advertisements

Brand New Stuff TILLIE & MAC

Andy Gump and Min. Boss and Bubbles, Peaches and Brownie, Dumb Dora, Margie and Jiggs. FRENCH STENOGRAPHER, a Bachelor's Dream, Adam and Eve, King and Alice, A Model's Life, etc. Original—Nights in Paris, A Countess's Daughter, Tom and Cassie and ever two more. Also, 72 snappy French type pictures AND in addition 30 Photos, Trifling and Daring Monomartre type including one set for men and women in various pose, also women alone in different positions, clear and bright glossy finish. As a special—free with order "Advice How to Win at Cards," also "Night Life in Paris," and "Some Short Stories," etc. You will receive all the above. Immediate shipment. Send Cash, Money Order or Stamp.

SPECIAL—All for \$1.00
FRENCH IMPORT CO.

4156 Park Avenue New York City Dept. L3

A BROKER'S STENOGRAPHER

Model with the old Fiddler, The Faithful Wife, Beautiful Model Flying to Sicily, What the Janitor Saw in the Night, Sundry, A Model in the Bath-room, A Sales-lady and a Scotchman, A Girl, a Fellow, and a Policeman in the dark, A Strip poker game, Taking the morning exercise, The Ice-man on the box-car, A Fireman and a Detective in Building building, All these are cartoon headed picture stories. Also 10 photos of Red Hot French girls, in Naughty Bedroom poses, 10 photos of French girls and fellows, in passionate French style Love Poses, and beautiful French Models with astonishing forms. Taken from life poses. All for \$1.00 cash with order. Formerly sold for \$3.00.

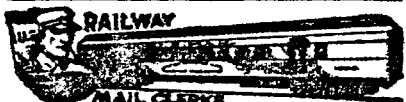
CARIANO SALES COMPANY, Dept. G-15-2-CF, New Haven, Conn.

HAIR NO LONGER

Mr. A. J. of New York City writes: "I had the hair on my head fall out, I used KANDU for 3 months and now my hair is coming again and is thick."

REPAIRS OIL, the excellent hair-restorer, in use for 30 years. The hair grows again, is thick and beautiful and stays that way. Free trial. Write for it. All American. FREE booklet. "Truth About the Hair."

NATIONAL REMEDY CO., Dept. P. H., 30 W. 42nd St., N. Y.



6/10 to 6/25 each month. Every second week off full pay. Common education preferred. Nov.—Mar. 17 mo. write IMMEDIATELY for free 32-page book with list of U. S. Dept. positions. ROCHSTER, N. Y.

PILES DON'T BE OUT

Until You Try This Wonderful Treatment for pile suffering. If you have piles in any form write for a FREE sample of Page's Pile Tablets and you will witness the day that you read this. Write today. E. R. Page Co., 259-A Page Bldg., Marshall, Mich.



by leading Psychologists and Scientists proves that subtlest, alluring odours create Forbidden Desires, and have the Love of Love. Perfumes more often than we realize the attractiveness of an exciting perfume is responsible for captivating romances.

FREE INTRODUCTORY OFFER

Love—Money—Friendship! That's what you want. Isn't it? Get the Secrets of the Stars guide you in Love! KANDU the GREAT will send you "Your Solar Horoscope" which also contains the Master Key "Astro-Numerology" and the interpretation of most Dreams. Absolutely Free. If you purchase it, a new critically intriguing odour "L'Intrigue Mystique" it has all the best-selling enchantment of rhythmic music and dreamy lands. This enthralling aromatic fragrance was previously obtainable by only the select few. KANDU will send you a generous bottle of "L'Intrigue Mystique" with Full Instructions. Make your Love One Desire! You Write today—send only \$1.00 with your full name, address and birth date, and get KANDU's Wonderful offer. If you prefer, KANDU will send you "L'Intrigue Mystique" and "Your Solar Horoscope" with the "Master-Key Astro-Numerology" and Guide to Dreams, C.O.D.—you pay the postage \$1.00 plus postage when you receive the package. Your money will be refunded within one week if you are not more than delighted. Write.

KANDU, Dept. P4 Gen. P. O. Box 562, New York, N. Y.

Vim-Vigor-Vitality

Men—Women—Beware that hot sex that endures you to the opposite sex. Our secret FULLER'S PEPPERMINT TABLETS will help you to reinvigorate your sexual mechanism, your testicles, nerves, strength, etc. The wonderful results from using these tablets will surprise you. Sweet sealed, plain wrapper, 60c. \$1.00 each or \$12.50 C.O.D. Special strength containing a gland product for use in severe cases. \$3.00. Satisfaction guaranteed or money refunded.

PRINCESS ANNE MFG. CO., Dept. P.H.11 Baltimore, Md. P. U. Box 693

WOW! NEW CARTOON CARDS

= 14 pictures of young couples before and after marriage; 100 pictures of actresses; 12 gay love letters; private tips for men; see what Tommy saw under the parlor door—it's good! Book-let for men; The Butterfly; Miss Funder; Gay Life in Paris; Great Sex Poem, and 200-wonderful interesting letter

ALL FOR 25c (coin)
F. H. ARTHUR, 331-14th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Men! No Need to Lose Natural Powers After 35!

Enjoy Youthful Vitality This Easy Way!



For
Peppermint
Vitality
Natural
Powers

WHY suffer from premature loss of Pep, Vigor and Youthful Energy any longer? Why be depressed by this annoying problem when you can so easily build up Natural Powers? Thousands of men and women have found the answer in DORAL VIGOR TABLETS! You, too, can help yourself to healthful vigor with this amazing scientific Glandular aid. DORAL VIGOR TABLETS aid in replenishing nerve force as rich new blood revitalizes tired nerves and vital organs. This is your opportunity to help yourself to stimulate dormant glands and again enjoy the vigor of real young manhood and endurance. Send for DORAL VIGOR TABLETS today. Regular Large size box (30 time treatment) only \$1.00. THREE BOXES \$3.00. SUPER-STRENGTH only \$2.25. TWO BOXES \$2.00. Send Cash or Money Order. C. G. D. 15c extra. ORDER NOW!

DORAL LABORATORIES, Dept. G-73, 303 West 42nd St., New York City

Please mention PERIODICAL HOUSE GROUP when answering advertisements

Banish Fear
Prevent Disease.
End Self-Denial!

KNOW THE AMAZING TRUTH ABOUT SEX AND LOVE!

Stop Worrying
Conquer Ignorance
Overcome Shame



The Forbidden Secrets of Sex are Daringly Revealed!

AWAY with false modesty! At last a san-
suous doctor has told *all* the secrets of
sex in frank, daring language. No prudish
hesitation about the book, no veiled hints,
but TRUTH, blazing through 576 pages
of straightforward facts.

Love is the most magnificent ecstasy in
the world... know how to hold your
loved one... don't glean half-truths from
unreliable sources... let Dr. H. H. Rubin
tell you *what to do and how to do it.*

MORE THAN 100 VIVID PICTURES

The 166 illustrations leave nothing to
the imagination... know how to over-
come physical misadjustment... know what
to do on your wedding night to avoid the
startling results of ignorance.

Learning pertaining to sex is discussed
in daring language. All the things you
have wanted to know about your sex life,
information about which other books only
vaguely hint, is yours at last.

Some will be offended by the amazing
frankness of this book and its vivid illus-
trations, but the world has no longer any
use for prudery and false modesty.



**A FAMOUS JUDGE
SAYS THAT MOST
DIVORCES ARE CAUSED
BY SEX IGNORANCE!**
Normal, sex-erased
young people see their
error because they lack
sex knowledge.

WHAT EVERY MAN SHOULD KNOW

The Secret Link-
Source of the Homosexual
Manifestation of Early Marriage
Promiscuity
Venereal Diseases

How to Regain Virility
Speed Matrimony
Glimpses and Sex Instinct
To Gain Greater Delight
The Truth About Abstinence

WHAT EVERY WOMAN SHOULD KNOW

How to Attract and Hold
Men
Secrets of Women
Essentials of Happy
Marriage
The Sex Organ

Knowledge is the basis of the perfect,
satisfying love-life. Step out of the dark-
ness into the sunlight... end ignorance,
fear and danger today! Money back at once
if you are not completely satisfied!

**576 DARING PAGES
106 VIVID
PICTURES**



Don't be a slave to ignorance and fear.
Enjoy the rapturous delights of the per-
fect physical love!

Lost love... scandal... divorce... can
often be prevented by knowledge. Only
the ignorant pay the awful penalties of
wrong sex practices. Read the facts, clearly,
startlingly told... study these illustra-
tions and grope in darkness no longer.

You want to know... and you should
know *everything* about sex. Sex is no longer
a sin... a mystery... it is your greatest
power for happiness. You owe it to yourself
... to the one you love, to tear aside the cur-
tain of hypocrisy and learn the *naked truth!*

ATTRACT THE OPPOSITE SEX!

Know how to enjoy the thrilling expe-
riences that are your birthright... know
how to attract the opposite sex... how
to hold love.

There is no longer any need to pay the
awful price for one moment of bliss. Read
the scientific pathological facts told so
bravely by Dr. Rubin. The chapters on
venereal disease are alone worth the price
of the book.

**IS SEX IGNORANCE
DRIVING THE ONE YOU
LOVE INTO THE ARMS
OF ANOTHER?**

Let "Sex Harmony"
teach you *how easy it is*
to win and hold your
loved one!



SEND NO MONEY - MAIL COUPON TODAY

PIONEER PUBLISHING CO.

Dept. 341 1270 Sixth Ave., New York, N. Y.
Please send me "Sex Harmony and Knowledge" in plain
wrapper. I will pay the postman \$2.98 (plus postage) on
delivery. If I am not completely satisfied, I can return
the book and the entire purchase price will be refunded
immediately. Also send me FREE OF CHARGE your
book on "Why Birth Control?"

Name _____ Age _____

Address _____
Please Print Name and Address Plainly on envelope

THIS BOOK, NOT SOLD TO MINORS

FREE! NEW BOOK "WHY BIRTH CONTROL?"

This startling book discusses
birth control in an entirely
new way - Tells you many
things about a much-discussed
subject. "Why Birth Control?"
- will be a revelation to you -
Send free to all those who order
"Sex Harmony and Knowledge"
at the reduced price \$2.98.
PIONEER PUBLISHING CO.
Radio City
1270 Sixth Ave., New York, N. Y.

FORMERLY \$3.98
NOW ONLY \$2.98

