

City of Flaming Shadows

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THE FLAMING SHADOWS fell upon the city, shrouding whole neighborhoods in a fiery gloom—wherein walked screaming death and merciless destruction.... Go with THE SPIDER as he battles, single-handedly, the Flaming Shadows—to save the very people who pray for his destruction!

CHAPTER ONE "Talk or Die!"

The road ahead was black. Trees crowded close, reached down leafless, skeleton arms. The low-hanging clouds of the night seemed to squat on their tops.

Richard Wentworth sent the rented Ford roadster bumping up a rutted hill, leaned forward and switched off engine and lights. The car, in total darkness now, sped on with its momentum, topped the rise and scooted creaking down the steep grade beyond. Wentworth watched the parting of treetops overhead that marked the direction of the road, a lighter gray streak amid the darkness.

Without warning, he wrenched the wheel violently to the right. The car's tires whined and popped on the gravel, struck a ditch violently and the Ford jounced with a rattle and crash into the woods. It battered through the underbrush, found almost miraculously a break in the thick trees and jerked to a halt.

Wentworth sat motionless, listening. That swerve from the road had not been blind. A break in the tree tops had revealed the small opening into which he had wedged the Ford. Above him a cold wind rattled leafless branches. Shrubbery creaked, springing back into place behind the Ford, concealing it from the road. Distantly a dog howled. That was all. No sound of that car which, hanging persistently at his heels

for ten miles, had finally sent him crashing into hiding.

No sound? That was the answer for which Wentworth had hoped. He was pursued. Detecting that trailing car, he had spurred on past his goal, doubled back. But the car had persisted, and there was work to do. He had no more time for dodging through country roads. If they found him now, they would find the *Spider*.

And crooks who overtook the *Spider* often lived—briefly—to regret it!

Wentworth's lips were smiling thinly as he slipped from the car, a hand brushing the twin guns that nestled in the pockets of his black leather jacket. The shadows reached out and absorbed him.

A half mile away a cottage gleamed white in a small clearing. A single yellow light peeped through the denuded shrubbery that clattered hard switches against its side.

The gleam of the house was not paint. Once it had been bravely white. Now it was lopsided and loose shingles slapped in the wind. Its sides were polished by wind and rain.

A shadow detached itself from the encircling woods, drifted to a shrub where the darkness was thickest. The man's hands went to his face, and a black silk mask slipped into place.

The *Spider* crept toward the lonely cottage.

Months had passed since last he had donned that mask to battle with the Black Death, months in which it had seemed to him and to Nita van Sloan that at last their dreams were to be realized; that the *Spider's* single-handed battle against crime had wiped out the master minds of the underworld, had left only petty criminals with whom the police could cope. It had seemed that at long last he and Nita could consummate the love that had been forced to wait upon Wentworth's crusades of justice.

Now, once more, the tocsin had sounded.

Not in New York itself, but in Hamlettown, far upstate. Wentworth had read in the newspapers of the crime there and his face had grown grim. For in those few lines of type describing the looting of a small, but very rich bank, Wentworth had seen a menace that threatened to strip the nation of its wealth, to impoverish millions and send the nation plunging back into the depths of depression from which it had just begun to climb!

The robber gang had a system that even the *Spider* would be at a loss to combat. Working with uncanny knowledge and precision, the criminals had isolated all Hamlettown, had severed all connection with the world. Telephones had been useless, alarm systems disconnected and, adding to the mad confusion, even the lights had been dimmed throughout the city.

The looting of the bank itself had been simple. The guard had been murdered, as had two police, who finally stumbled on the crime, and Joseph Ringer, the president of the bank. Working with a flaming electrical torch of incredible heat, which apparently had been hooked into the city's electrical system by a powerful transformer, the gang then had burned through steel doors and vaults as if they were so much butter.

The treasury of the United States itself could not resist such an attack!

No wonder the *Spider*, stern defender of humanity and nemesis of the underworld, had dropped

everything to race to Hamlettown and take up the trail, a trail that led him now to this lone cottage.

Wentworth made a slow, careful circuit of the house, but found no lurking guard. Touching his guns, he stole forward. In his body was no crouching stealth, no furtiveness; directly he moved, with swift strides, yet without a sound.

At the lighted window he paused an instant, listening, heard a man's slow, heavy feet pacing, pacing. Then he crossed to the door, and his hand slid to a compact kit of chrome steel tools beneath his arm. From it he drew a lock pick, a slender long flat rod with a hooked end. A moment he manipulated it in the keyhole; there was a soft rasp and the door yielded beneath his hand.

He closed it softly behind him and located the slow, heavy footsteps. At the end of a short hall a narrow line of light slitted beneath a door.

Wentworth glided to it, peered through the keyhole. On a table an unshaded lamp flickered. Back and forth before it moved the slow shadow of the pacing man, a heavy, hunch-shouldered figure. As Wentworth watched, the man checked suddenly, ground out a curse and pounded to the right out of sight. He was gone a moment, then his body blotted out the lamp again.

He was crouched forward now, with bent head and elbows close to his sides. Slowly he moved aside, dropped into a chair. He stared at the table—and Wentworth stared, too, his lips twisted in a mirthless smile.

On the table was something that glittered warmly in the lamp light. On the table, mingled with sheafs of banknotes, were heaps of gold coins!

The *Spider* straightened and flung open the door. The man cried out, whirled, a crouching menace, eyes glaring in a weather-reddened face. He stepped quickly in front of the table so his body hid the money. Wentworth shut the door slowly. He stood with hands empty of weapons, without movement and without a word, watching the man through the slits of his black mask.

The man's arms were half raised for attack, his big fingers opening and closing slowly, his breath pumping the chest that showed hairy and thick in the opening of his shirt. A small tin stove glowed red to his left. There was a cot in a corner, the chair and the table. That was all.

“Who—who are you?” the man asked uncertainly.

“What do you want?” His voice was a growl. Wentworth did not answer, but faced him with utter calm. He was taller than the man, his body tapering athletically from broad, fluid shoulders that seemed slight beside the bulk and crude strength of the man he confronted.

The man became disconcerted by the silent regard of those slitted eyes, the blank expressionless mask. He took a half step forward, fists clenching.

“Speak up, damn you!” he roared. “What do you want?”

“Less noise,” said Wentworth gently.

“What!” It was a shout.

“Less noise,” Wentworth repeated, “and sit down. You're going to give me some information.”

In the other's eyes, he read mounting desperation and fear. Suddenly the fellow hunched his shoulders and without warning lunged forward.

Wentworth's right hand moved like a flash. A pistol crashed. The flame of the lamp jumped smokily. The man reeled backward, clapping a hand to his head. Uncertainly he took it away and stared at his palm. It showed no blood. He blinked at the masked, erect figure by the door, a gun held carelessly now in its right hand.

"Just by way of warning," Wentworth said casually. "I clipped a lock of your hair. The next bullet might be an inch lower."

Fear made the man's face work. Creases showed white against the leathery red of his skin. His eyes flitted about as if seeking escape.

"In God's name," he gasped hoarsely, "who are you?"

Wentworth stared at him fixedly and did not speak.

The man's fear grew frenzied.

"You're not—not from them. I know it. Who —please—"

"My time grows short," Wentworth said curtly. "And there is certain information you must give me."

The man's head shook slowly from side to side. "I don't know nothing," he said. "I don't know nothing."

"You know plenty, Reardon," said Wentworth. "I'll tell you what you know. You are a linesman of the electric company. You know where the main feed wires of the town are, the telephone and burglar alarm cables."

"No!" cried the man. "No!"

Wentworth's voice went on coldly. "A while ago a man came to you and offered to pay you for that information. Last night they used it—and men died."

"I didn't know why they wanted it," the man cried. "I didn't know."

He was kneading his strong hands before him.

"You are the one who is responsible," said Wentworth.

The man took an uncertain step forward. There was no menace in it. There was only pleading in his half out-stretched hands.

"You're not a crook," he said. "You don't talk like a crook. You talk—you talk more like a cop. But you've got that damned mask on. Who are you? Who are you?" he cried.

The gun in Wentworth's hand advanced two inches. "Take a step backward," he ordered.

The man's hands locked together so the muscles quivered in his hairy forearms.

“Who are you?” he pleaded.

Wentworth's lips behind the black mask twisted into a thin smile. “Over by the fireplace,” he ordered.

A light footfall sounded in the hall, and Wentworth's eyes glinted. So the occupant of the pursuing car had come at last! But the *Spider* was ready. He had been alert for that sound, but he gave no sign of having heard.

Slowly, pressed back by a superior strength, Reardon retreated. Wentworth's left hand slid into his vest pocket, extracted a cigarette lighter, and his thumb pried off the base. Masking the entire lighter in his hand, he pressed it on the stack of money on the table, stepped back.

The man's eyes fixed on the money. On the top bill a spot glowed like a drop of blood, a tiny red seal—the Seal of the *Spider*!

The man's breath came hoarsely through his open mouth. “Good God!” he gasped. Suddenly he was on his knees. “In God's name, *Spider*,” he said, “don't kill me. I didn't know. I didn't know!”

Wentworth's eyes glinted. This was splendid hearing for whomever lurked in the hall. Ears tautly attuned, he listened for the first sound of attack. He had moved out of range of a pistol shot through the door. Well, on with the play. He eyed Reardon.

“Yet,” said Wentworth softly, “you helped to rob a bank and four men were murdered.”

“Listen,” pleaded the man. “Listen to me. I know I did wrong, but listen. A year ago my wife was ill. I went to the bank for money. They wouldn't give it to me, and my wife died because of that. The only reason I kept on living after that was because of my boy, and he's sick now. I tell you that old man Ringer who was killed was responsible for my wife's death. You're supposed to be just, *Spider*. Tell me, didn't Ringer deserve to die?”

Wentworth's tones were cold. “There is something in what you say. Perhaps I won't kill you.”

“Oh thank you, thank you,” the man babbled. “But there is a condition,” the *Spider* rasped. “Tell me the man who paid you for the knowledge of where the wires were.”

The man's hand crept slowly to his throat. His head began to sway from side to side.

“No, not that,” he said. “Not that! They'll kill me!”

Wentworth's words leaped at the man. “Then die now!” His gun jutted forward.

There came a slight rasp of the doorknob. Wentworth was ready. He whirled as the door fanned open and squeezed the trigger. Then, even as he fired, he jerked up his hand so that the shot blazed harmlessly into the ceiling. For dashing through the doorway, hurling straight at him was no armed enemy. It was a girl!

Her blue eyes were desperate. Blonde, long hair streamed backward as she sprang, snatching for the gun. Wentworth whirled aside, dodging. The girl plunged on past him, caught herself and spun to face him again. Her breasts panted beneath the mackinaw coat that covered a cheap gingham dress. Her eyes were narrowed in anger. Her mouth was never meant to be as thin and bitter as now.

“You leave him alone,” she gulped out. “Leave him alone now.”

Wentworth's eyes gleamed with admiration. “Why didn't you tell me, Reardon,” he said softly, “that you had so lovely a defender. We might have had her in to plead for you.”

The girl's face was white, except for the spots on her cheeks where the wind had kissed them. She was erect, with a proudly carried head. She began to walk slowly toward Wentworth. He thrust forward the gun.

“Get back,” he snapped.

The girl looked straight into his eyes behind the mask.

“You wouldn't shoot me,” she said slowly. The cords in her throat were tight. “You wouldn't shoot a woman. The *Spider* doesn't.”

She continued to advance. Wentworth laughed softly and turned his gun toward Reardon who still, in a seeming daze, crouched on the floor.

“But I kill criminals,” Wentworth said softly, “and this man has helped murder four others.”

The girl checked, her hand going slowly to her throat. She swallowed with difficulty. “Oh, you couldn't! You couldn't!” she cried.

Wentworth did not answer her. He watched her intently and spoke to Reardon.

“Who is this?” he demanded.

“It's—it's my son's friend,” he said. “Elsie— Elsie Thompson.”

“I see,” Wentworth said softly. “Now Elsie, suppose you get over by the stove and keep warm until I finish my little talk with Reardon.”

The girl shook her head dumbly. “Quickly,” Wentworth ordered. He turned the gun toward Reardon, and the girl moved backward in a panic.

“Now,” said Wentworth, “talk, Reardon.”

The man closed his eyes. “I'll talk,” he said. The strength seemed to go out of him. He sat upon his heels, his shoulders slumped, his head hanging. His words came almost inaudibly.

“The man who gave me the money said his name was Wiggard. I never saw him before he came up to my house one night and offered me money. He was the only man of the gang I ever saw.”

“What did he look like?”

“Short, wide shoulders, bushy black hair— and he had long fingers. If I ever talked about him, he said—” Reardon's hand went to his throat once more—“he'd strangle the life out of me.”

“Have you seen him since?”

The man shook his head. "No. The money came by mail. I was supposed to leave the country right away. But my boy—Jack—is sick."

Wentworth acted quickly then. He strode to the table, scooped money and gold into his pocket. The girl cried out softly, but Reardon did not protest.

Wentworth drew his wallet and from it fingered five hundred dollar bills and laid them on the table.

"That will get you away," he said. "Don't worry about your son. Tell me where he is and I'll see that he's taken care of."

The man gazed up at Wentworth with baffled eyes.

"Don't tell him!" exclaimed the girl.

"I'm returning this money to the bank," Wentworth said quickly. "Where is your son?"

Reardon spoke dully.

"He's at the hospital of St. Vincent de Paul in New York."

"Right," said Wentworth. He backed across the room. "Stay here," he warned, "or the bogeyman might get you!"

He laughed shortly and strode out into the dark hallway, closing the door behind him. Two strides took him to the front door. Another and he was off the porch. But he moved alertly. He had not forgotten the auto that had trailed him. He crouched beside the bole of a huge oak tree that leaned above the house, searching. Then, from behind, fingers plucked suddenly at his throat!

Before they could clamp shut, Wentworth had seized the wrists and jerked sharply forward. A short curse, and a man hurtled over Wentworth's head and landed heavily on the ground. He was up in an instant, and Wentworth made out his vague figure. A short man with abnormally wide shoulders; his hat had been knocked off, and bushy hair made his head enormous. Wiggard! The man with the strangling fingers!

These things Wentworth grasped in a flash as the man charged. Grim laughter poured from the *Spider's* lips. He had scarcely counted on such luck as this. This was a man higher up in the chain by which the gang communicated with its underlings. He would capture this one—

He ducked aside from the swift bull-like rush of Wiggard; lashed out with his fist and caught the man on the chin. Wiggard shook his head, retreated a half pace. There was a gleam of metal. The *Spiders* sprang forward, seized the man's right wrist and twisted. A sharp pain shot through his hand. A knife had sliced it. Straining arms locked. Their breaths came hoarsely. They fought in the darkness for possession of the weapon.

The man's strength was enormous, but slowly Wentworth forced his knife arm down and up again behind his back. Forced it up until breath panted in hoarse pain from his opponent's lips, upward until the man screamed and the weapon dropped from his fingers.

Wiggard panted out a single hoarse curse and flailing around with his left fist caught the *Spider* a violent

blow on the throat. Wentworth reeled back, but the man, one arm disabled, did not press his attack. He raced off.

Wentworth braced against a tree, dragged out his gun. The man had disappeared into the blackness. The *Spiderran* after him. A motor roared out into the night, gears clashed, but no lights showed. Wentworth crouched and fired twice at the sound. The motor raced off, dwindled.

Wentworth whirled and raced toward where his own car was parked, a half mile away. He crashed through snagging underbrush, battled through trees that whipped knifelike switches across his face. Panting, he reached the Ford, flung into the seat and fought the cold motor to life. He jerked it raging into the road, then cut it, listening for that fleeing auto.

The wind moaned through the bare tree limbs, rattling them like dry bones; mournfully the dog still howled. All else was silence.

CHAPTER TWO A Man Is Hanged

The room was in darkness except for a low- swung light that funneled white glare down upon a mahogany table. That lamp revealed two human beings, one with hands resting on the table, fingers pyramided calmly, the other a man being hanged.

Behind those pyramided hands gleamed the formal white of a dress shirt. But that was all that was visible. The sharp edge of the light's white shaft cut across just below the shoulders. The face was in black shadow. A low, musical voice hummed softly, the fingers tapped soundlessly together.

They were sensuous, long fingers and their tips bent backward slightly, tapering from thick bases to slender points. They were corpse white, and the hands from which they stemmed were covered with thick black hair that curled and seemed to crawl as if every individual hair were endowed with separate life.

The man who was being hanged was perhaps ten feet from the foot of the table, at the opposite end from those hairy hands. His arms were bound behind him, and his whole body seemed stretched. His neck was abnormally long, strained by the noose that dragged upward from behind. And the man was not dead.

The rope about his neck, swinging from the ceiling, was just long enough to allow him to touch the tips of his shoes to the floor, and frantically the man was balancing himself on his toes. He wavered, fell off balance, and the rope yanked tight about his throat. His neck corded with pain; his weathered face turned dark red with congested blood; his eyes bulged.

Desperately the man's shoes pecked at the floor. Finally he got his toes on the proper spot and strained upward, relieving the drag on his neck. It was not enough entirely to loosen the noose, just enough to allow frantic breath to whistle hoarsely through his restricted windpipe.

The humming stopped.

"Bravo!" cried the man softly and the corpse-white palms beat together softly in applause. "Bravo, Reardon! Never have I seen a man last so long!"

Reardon—for it was the linesman Wentworth had forced to talk—fixed glazing eyes on the speaker's

hairy hands. Murderous hate was in his stare, but he was helpless. He fought to keep his balance on straining legs, breath rasping.

“You are stubborn, Reardon,” the soft voice went on, “but not quite stubborn enough to resist talking to the *Spider*.” A chuckle of gentle mirth interrupted the words. “But stubborn or not, in the end you will die, too, Reardon. They all do.”

For a few moments the hands pyramided again, and the tableau continued in silence— silence save for the creak of the rope and Reardon's hoarse breath. Then one of the hands moved slowly and touched a button, returned to its former position, finger-tips against those of the other hand.

Light showed in a narrow streak on the far side of the room. It widened, a door opened, and three men walked across the deep-piled carpet to the table and sat down silently beside it. They too placed their hands upon its top, but unlike the one of the hairy hands they were entirely visible in the glare of the light, visible except for their faces, which were covered by black masks.

The masked faces stared intently into the darkness above those hands, then swung to regard the man who slowly strangled, swinging in the noose of torture. No one spoke. They waited.

A husky chuckle rippled out, and the white- shirt bosom behind those hairy hands leaned forward slightly. The hands pressed their tips upon the table. The chuckle turned into a low voice that intoned:

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered in this place—” laughter bubbled through the words, “to separate a man from his soul. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say, two men from two souls.”

The voice was mild. “This fool who is dying betrayed us to the man who calls himself the *Spider*. After he investigated our little play in Hamlettown, he traced Reardon—and Reardon talked. He won't again.”

As if that had been a signal the three men turned their masked faces toward the man strangling. His eyes were closing painfully; the dark red of his face was turning slowly blue, and the tip of his tongue was thrust out between his teeth that were clamped upon it. His struggle for balance was weakening, but stubbornly he fought on.

“I shall not attempt,” the one with the hairy hands went on, “to bring the *Spider* here for punishment. It will be enough that he dies. But die he must, if we are to reap the harvest that awaits us. The police are as nothing; Commissioner Kirkpatrick is smart, but he is not smart enough to catch us. Only one man is—and he already is on our trail—the *Spider*. Tonight, the *Spider* must die.”

The white hands slowly clasped. “There are millions in this—millions,” said the voice behind them. “Perpetual wealth for all of us. Not one man nor one thousand men can stand in our way.”

One of the masked men spoke up for the first time. His voice was deep.

“A thousand murders? Yes, that I agree to. But the *Spider*—he is a dangerous man. More plots of genuine genius have fallen through on that man's account than for any other reason. If we could get by without antagonizing him—”

One of the hairy hands waved in a small gesture, cut off the man's words.

“Without antagonizing him! My dear fellow, let's be sensible. The man already is on our trail. There is no choice, but to kill him, before he kills us. I personally have no desire to be put on a morgue slab with that

villainous little red *Spider* of his printed on my forehead!”

One hairy hand balled into a fist and slammed down on the table top.

“Even the *Spiders* shall not foil us. There's not a bank in the city that can withstand us—not even the treasury of the United States itself!”

The one who had first spoken among the masked men stirred uneasily.

“It's true our first venture came off all right,” he said. “But there we had a linesman to point out which telephone and burglar alarm cables to cut, and the wire for our torch. But here in the city no one person could possibly know all the wires that run beneath it.”

One of the hairy hands disappeared beneath the table, and in the silence that followed Reardon's rasping breath grew loud.

The masked man stirred and turned to glower at Reardon.

“I wish he'd die and quit that confounded noise,” he grunted impatiently.

His eyes swung back to the table. The hairy hands held now a scroll of oiled paper, which they slowly unrolled, revealing a map of Manhattan Island, criss-crossed with red, blue, black and green traceries.

“No one person knows,” said the man at the head of the table softly, “but someone has taken very good pains to record where these things are. This map shows in detail every main wire in the city and where every connection is made. It shows every burglar alarm, every telephone connection, every main feed wire. It shows tunnels through which these go beneath the streets.

“I have enlargements covering all of this and showing in even more minute detail every inch of the tunnels and wires beneath the city.

“Do you see now why the *Spider* must die?” There was a trembling in the voice of the masked man. He cried, “The *Spider*? My God, I'd wipe out the whole police force single handed for that map, and what it means!”

Once more the bubbling chuckle issued from the darkness behind the light.

“Splendid! But fortunately that will not be necessary. Only the *Spider* must die—and the Tarantula will gobble up the *Spider*.”

He chuckled again as though he had made some great joke.

“Ah yes, the Tarantula.” The shirt front leaned forward again, and one hand ticked off fingers on the other as he spoke.

“First, we know certain things about the *Spider*. We know he is a man of wealth and refinement, a member of society. He has appeared often in the underworld in evening dress, in expensive clothes. There can be no doubt that these are facts.

“Secondly, we know that when he fought Wiggard, Wiggard slashed his left hand with a knife. Also, we succeeded in convincing Elsie Thompson, the fiancée of Reardon's son, that the *Spider* had done away

with Reardon. She is working for us, and she is certain she will recognize his voice when she hears it.

“Now then. Earl Carroll's 'Vanities' are opening tonight. Every member of fashionable society will be there. The *Spider* will be there. Do you think it likely that in that assembly there will be two men who have a knife gash on their left hands and who talk like the *Spider*?”

The speaker paused and the heavy, tense breathing of the three masked men became audible. Behind them Reardon struggled weakly in the noose, but his breath could not be heard. He wasn't breathing.

“This, then, is the plan,” the low, smooth voice went on. “When the girl has spotted the *Spider*, she will signal and all the lights of Broadway will be turned off. While three men take care of the *Spider*, our boys will take jewels from the women in the lobbies, get the money from the box office; it will help finance us in our further ventures. And”—the Tarantula's voice sank a full note—“if any of our men sees that he had been identified, or if he even suspects anyone has seen his face, kill the witness!”

A murmur from one of the masked men. The Tarantula's fist slapped down upon the table.

“Kill the witness!” he snapped out. “There can be no hesitancy about this. We are modern pirates. The ancient pirates survived because there were no witnesses. They killed every victim. It is the only safe way. There is too much at stake in this to haggle over a few lives.

“Are the instructions understood?”

One asked slowly, “Can we trust the girl?” A hairy hand waved. “She merely has to identify the man. After that, she does not concern us. Wiggard has a fancy for her—”

“Knives for the *Spider*?” asked another. “Knives,” the Tarantula rolled the word on his tongue. “Usually I prefer them. They are silent and you know where they're going in the dark. But for the *Spider*—machine guns!”

And once more the Tarantula queried softly, “Are the instructions understood?” Slowly, one at a time, the three nodded, and the Tarantula leaned forward so that a black mask loomed behind the brilliant light, so that the hands with their hairs that seemed to crawl and be alive upon their backs were pressed flat upon the surface of the table.

“Understand this. When the *Spider* is spotted, the three chosen to kill him follow—and the *Spider* dies. There must be no botching of it. Wait until the *Spider* is in a place where our killers can make sure he is dead.

“If our killers fail, no matter for what reason, if they fail to kill the *Spider*—”

One of the hairy hands raised slowly, and a long finger pointed toward Reardon, hanging dead in his noose. “If they fail, they shall die like that—the penalty for all who fail the Tarantula!”

The black-masked head loomed behind the light, turned slowly from one to another of the three masked men about the table, and each in turn nodded.

“Tonight,” repeated the Tarantula softly, “tonight, we kill the *Spider*!”

CHAPTER THREE “For the Spider—!”

The Broadway that soon was to go black at the bidding of the Tarantula, that soon was to hear men scream, and screaming die, because they had seen too much—Broadway blazed with light. The Great White Way danced with blue, green, red, and dazzling yellow signs. The front of a motion picture house was a solid mass of bulbs spelling “Berkeley Square.” Another blazoned “Dinner at 8.” And the figure “8” glowed and died, leaped and glowed and died again.

Streams of taxis and limousines, flowed with the green lights, panted impatiently when they turned red, and another lane of traffic equally heavy and dense streamed across. Two police at each of the four corners of each crossing; sidewalks thronged with crowds; five minutes to walk a block. Barkers shouting the movies: “Plenty of room. Feature just starting.”

Queues at the ticket office, waiting, another double line thronging the lobby, waiting. A burlesque house flaunting coy nudes. “Hold Your Horses,” ballyhooing Joe Cook in a thousand lights. Bing Crosby's voice crooning from a loud speaker in front of “Too Much Harmony.” Gobbling voices, raucous horns. And over all, the dancing, flickering, pulsating lights. Bright as day—brighter.

Down the river of light to Forty-second street, where a string of words in lights went sliding endlessly along the news bulletin board about the Times Building.

THE BODY OF A MAN MURDERED BY HANGING WAS FOUND TONIGHT IN AN EAST SIDE STREET. THE POLICE FEAR THAT THIS INAUGURATES ANOTHER GANG WAR.

If the crowds could have known what Reardon's death heralded! A gang war? Wholesale murder and looting! And somewhere, the Tarantula was waiting to strike, biding his time until the *Spider* was in his trap—patient fingers folded, horrid corpse-like white hands with hair that seemed to crawl....

Around the corner from Broadway and that warning news sign into Forty-second Street, the New Amsterdam theatre was a living mass of light. Earl Carroll's “Vanities,” opening tonight. Curious throngs watching the fashionable first nighters. Full length posters in the lobby of girls coquettishly exposing seven-eighths of their bodies; a sort of glorified burlesque.

At the curb, a constant procession of expensive motors, pausing a moment to discharge men in high silk hats and women in furs and jewels; a glimpse of dazzling white shoulders; cars drawing away to make room for others; Packard, Rolls Royce, Minerva; Lincoln, a Duesenberg, a long-nosed Lancia....

The Lancia purred to the curb; a dark-faced Hindu sprang from the seat beside the liveried chauffeur, flung wide the door, his face impassive, but his eyes glittering beneath his dark turban. This was how Ram Singh liked his master to live; amid the luxury that was native to Richard Wentworth; elaborate ostentation; glittering wealth on every side. It pleased Ram Singh's Oriental soul.

Richard Wentworth alighted, silk-hatted, an Inverness cape showing its white satin lining, white gloves in his hand; a tall, distinguished man, notable even among that rich assembly; an alert man with an intensely vital, alive face. He handed out Nita van Sloan, Nita of the clustering lustrous hair, Nita of the blue eyes of mystery.

Her hand on his arm, she smiled up into his face, red lips apart. Only one thing marred the perfection of the couple, as they strolled in through the elaborate, pestered lobby. On Wentworth's left hand, along the joint between the thumb and forefinger, was a conspicuous strip of court plaster, covering the wound that Wiggard's knife had inflicted....

Presently the curtain rose and eventually, after the swift passing of many entertaining minutes, it fell again. Everywhere a spontaneous applause burst from the wealthy bon vivant audience. The intermission was on, the intermission when the Tarantula would strike.

Wentworth and Nita rose and made their way to the lobby, joining a slow line of dozens of others such as they. Unobtrusively a girl with piled blonde hair, garbed in a clinging black dress, filed out also with a bushy-headed man.

If Wentworth saw them, he seemed to pay no heed. He and Nita nodded to many acquaintances. Stanley Kirkpatrick, Commissioner of Police, smiled behind the suave points of his mustache. Big Tim Lally, a stout and polished politician, waved a negligent hand and introduced the woman beside him, a woman with hair that flamed like fire above the pure, gleaming white of her dress, Tamara Lamaris.

A thin, bespectacled man with a gray, narrow face stood with him and nodded also; Professor Johnson Hague, an electrical engineer; a blond, excessively muscled young man who had lost a thumb from his left hand, Russell Daliot, swimming instructor at an athletic club.

All these and many more Wentworth saluted as he stood chatting with Nita. He drew a platinum cigarette case and proffered it to Nita, flicked flame to her cigarette and his with his light. And across the lobby the girl with massed blonde hair, the girl in the clinging black, gripped the arm of the man with her and stared at the court plaster on the hand that held the lighter. The two drifted closer to Wentworth, passing just behind him and listened as Wentworth bent close above Nita, murmuring in her ear.

“*M'amie*,” he whispered, “in just about two minutes, all hell is going to pop loose! Get to Ram Singh, go to my apartment. I'll join you there later.”

He turned slowly toward the blonde girl. She pulled her hand out of her bag and pointed a revolver at Wentworth's breast. Her eyes were wild, her face distorted with rage.

“You are the *Spider*!” she screamed. “You killed—”

Wentworth sprang in, seized her hand and forced it straight up. The bullet spattered tile work in the ceiling.

“The *Spider*! The *Spider*!” men cried.

Screams tore out. The bushy headed man who had been with the girl raced for the door, ploughing through chatting people, bowling over a woman.

The girl clung to the gun, striking at Wentworth with her free hand. Over her head Wentworth saw Kirkpatrick struggling toward him through the crowd. He twisted the revolver, still in a vertical position so that no one would be wounded, jerked it free and tossed it to Nita.

“Keep the girl here,” he cried.

He raced headlong toward the door after the man who had fled. The theatre lobby was in wild disorder. The murmur of shouts swelled to a screaming hysteria. Wentworth tangled with three men and two women bolting for the door, saw Kirkpatrick reach the girl and Nita.

Then the lights went out.

It was as if a great black hand had suddenly throttled that entire throng. The dark smote silence over the theatre for an instant. Then a woman screamed. A man shouted, "Thief!"

Bedlam rioted through the house. Ushers flashed on hand torches, and their minute spots of light flickered weirdly over the audience.

Wentworth fought frantically to get through the tangle. He was certain the man who had fled was Wiggard. He must capture him! About Wentworth, men shouted angrily, and suddenly another woman screamed, and another.

"My jewels!" one screeched.

A sharp cry tore from Nita. Wentworth whirled toward her, arms thrown out protectingly. His charge knocked down a man. He raced on, saw the gleam of a raised knife. Wentworth lashed out savagely. His fist crunched upon flesh and bone and a body struck the floor.

"Nita!" cried Wentworth. "Nita!"

The gleam of an usher's light spotted her. Her dress had been stripped almost from her body. Her gleaming topaz necklace was gone. Wentworth jerked off his coat and threw it about her, stooped over the unconscious man on the floor. The necklace was in his grasp. He seized the man, hauled him to his feet.

"Where's the girl?" he asked Nita swiftly. "With Kirkpatrick," she gasped, "outside." "Follow me," Wentworth shouted.

With Nita behind him, he once more battled the surging, screaming mass of humanity to the street. Not a light on it except the crazy beams of auto lamps. Forty-second street was dark. Broadway was dark.

All the flickering dance of lights was stilled. Darkness lay thick as soot upon the entire district. But it had not silenced the voices of the multitude. From theatres and shops people poured. A mob charged from a subway entrance. Trains were stalled, and darkness below the earth meant terror. Women fell in the panic and were trampled. Their screams added to the bedlam.

Wentworth shielded Nita with his body, fought off surging masses of people and inched gradually to the curb, still dragging his unconscious captive. A man screamed in mortal agony. A woman ran by, her clothes hanging in rags.

The headlights of autos gashed bizarrely through the gloom, showing the masses of panic-stricken people, dashing wildly one way, turning and rushing back; revealed Kirkpatrick upon the curb, alone except for one traffic officer.

"Every phone and burglar alarm in the district is dead," he shouted, as Wentworth finally reached his side. "I've sent a man for help."

"The girl," cried Wentworth, "where is the girl?"

Kirkpatrick stared at him blankly, then jerked a hand impatiently.

"I couldn't fool with her in this panic," he shouted back above the chaos.

Wentworth cursed, then shrugged. One more possible clue wasted. He dumped his captive at Kirkpatrick's feet.

"Here's one of the gang," he shouted.

The sharp clap of a pistol bit through the confusion of sound and the man on the pavement jerked convulsively, threw out a hand and rolled over on his back. A bullet had ploughed between his eyes. The gang had removed a witness!

Wentworth whirled, angry eyes searching the mob-choked darkened street, but found no trace of the gunman. His eyes held an ugly light. His last possible clue had been wiped out.

Out of the tangled mass of traffic, Wentworth's Lancia nosed its way to the curb. Wentworth thrust Nita into it.

"Ram Singh," he snapped in Hindustani, "guard the *Missie Sahib* with your life! Home, fast!"

The Hindu's eyes glittered. "*Han, Sahib!*" he said, and sprang to the seat. The car spurted away.

In the distance police sirens were at last wailing. Wentworth shoved off into the crowd, his white vest and shirt-front gleaming.

"Wait!" cried Kirkpatrick, "Wait, help me here! You're the only cool head about."

Wentworth grinned crookedly at him, the glimmer of auto headlights showing his lean face.

"Sorry, Kirk," he said, "I have business out there." He darted off into the darkness, Kirkpatrick's shout ringing after him.

He found a taxi, ordered out a frightened, pinch-faced man.

"No, no!" the man cried, "I got this first!" Wentworth caught him by the coat, jerked him out.

"Police business," Wentworth snapped, whirled to the driver.

"Somewhere in this district," he told him, "there's an emergency service truck of the electric company. Find it!" He thrust a twenty dollar bill into the man's hand.

Wentworth's mind was racing. He recognized the technique of this wholesale robbery and knew that his fears had been realized. The gang that had staged the Hamlettown bank holdup had struck New York.

Yet this had been an excessively elaborate setup for the small loot they could have hoped to obtain. There had been some other motive, Wentworth was sure. And the attempt of the blonde girl—Elsie Thompson it had been—to kill him? What did that signify? He was certain Wiggard had been with her. A smack against the back window of the cab and a tinkling of glass punctuated his thoughts.

Wentworth crouched, peered back. A bullet hole was in the glass. But behind them was a tangle of cars; there was no way of telling from which it had come.

The taxi driver looked back with a frightened face. He jammed on gas, and the car leaped ahead. Wentworth was unarmed. He rarely carried a gun when in evening dress and had not tonight. Nothing to

do but run for it.

The taxi stewed around a corner, jammed on brakes, and the driver turned a white face.

“You got to get out, mister,” he chattered. Wentworth snaked his cigarette lighter from his pocket, leveled it at the man.

“Get going,” he ordered. “Fifty dollars if you do as I tell you. If you don’t—” he thrust the lighter forward like a gun.

The man’s mouth sagged. He gasped a curse, sent the taxi hurtling forward. He was just in time. Around the corner behind lunged a heavy sedan. Tires squealing, it slammed against the curb and spurted after them.

A gun hammered behind. Lead plunked into the back of the cab as it did a two-wheel skid into Fifth Avenue. Traffic was jammed ahead from curb to curb. No passage there, and the death car behind!

The driver flung a glance over his shoulder, jerked on the emergency brake, and in the same movement threw himself out and behind another car. Wentworth spotted the murder car sweeping into the Avenue. He leaped to the running board, into the driver’s seat, and jammed on the gas.

A solid rank of cars blocked his way. He twisted the wheel, headed for the sidewalk. People scattered before him. The taxi hurtled the curb, did acrobatics toning on the walk. Fifty feet, and it shot off into 39th street. Cut gas! Jam brakes! Wrench the wheel and give her the gas again! The cab, shivering and rocking, pounded westward. He hurtled south on Sixth, roared downtown for several blocks, got back to Fifth and headed north.

He had left the area of darkness now. Street lights blazed. People, huddled in overcoats, stared curiously at the coatless man with his gleaming formal shirt and vest driving a taxi. The bitter wind knifed him. Traffic was congested as in the rush hour, but Wentworth expertly wove through it. He turned east when he reached the block on which his apartment house stood and braked up to its back entrance. He stepped from the cab, started across the sidewalk. Then he shot a swift look behind him and bolted for the door at a dead run. But before reaching it, he checked abruptly and dived to the pavement.

The staccato laughter of a machine gun filled the street... Machine guns for the *Spider*!

CHAPTER FOUR The Tarantula Strikes

Machine gun bullets blasted chips from the wall of the apartment house before which, a moment before, Wentworth had stood. They turned the door into a sieve. Wentworth, flat on the pavement, rolled frantically back toward the taxi.

Flakes of cement flew past his head. The stream of lead raced toward him, followed with a vicious splatting on the walk as he flung himself beneath the taxi. Bullets ploughed up the asphalt, beat a drum roll on the cab, but Wentworth, huddled far forward where the thick iron of the engine shielded him, was safe for the moment.

For the moment, yes, but there was nothing to keep that death car from stopping, nothing to keep the killers from thrusting the muzzle of their fast-speaking gun beneath the cab and sending a dozen slugs to tear the tile out of him.

Wentworth, face on the cold pavement, peered out cautiously. The death car had halted a hundred feet behind, snubbed to a stop to allow the gunner better aim. But now it lurched forward again, gears screaming with speed.

Wentworth threw a desperate glance about. The men in the car didn't know he was unarmed, but they would suspect it, if he did not soon return their fire. Then he would be doomed. The car's headlights glinted on something in the gutter, a broken milk bottle. Wentworth seized it with an exclamation. A pitifully weak weapon against a machine gun? Yet the *Spider* smiled.

The flying wheels of the death car raced closer. Once more bullets tore into the cab, probing for their prey beneath it. Wentworth calculated carefully, swung his arm horizontally and sent the bottle slithering across the pavement. His aim was true. It struck, point first against a tire. The jagged points bit through the soft rubber.

A hiss of air! A wild swerve! At fifty miles an hour, the death auto careened across the street, the driver fighting a crazy steering wheel. The car hurdled the curb. With a rending crash, it rammed a steel lamp post. The post slammed down. The car's rear slithered about and smashed broadside against the stone wall of a building.

Instantly Wentworth was out from beneath the taxi, sprinting toward the wreck. The engine was killed. A headlight sent its beam straight upward. Over the steering wheel a man lay like a discarded rag. Wentworth ignored him. He jerked open the battered rear door, scooped up the machine gun, looked swiftly for the second man.

A face stared at him through the opposite window. Wentworth jerked up the muzzle, then with a grim smile lowered it. It was the face of a corpse!

The gunner had tried to leap out and been pinned between a two-ton car and the wall. He was held upright like that.

Wentworth spun to the other man limp across the steering wheel, caught his hair and hauled back his head.

The steering post had speared into his chest. As Wentworth grimly implanted the *Spider's* seal upon the man's brow, the eyes fluttered open a moment, blood dribbled, then poured from the mouth and the man doubled forward, dying.

Wentworth leaned through the car and imprinted the seal on the face of the corpse that stared at him unblinkingly through the window. Queer that police had not come yet, he thought. But probably the force was stripped down to throw as many as possible into the Broadway area.

Wentworth climbed out, then whirled, dodging as he turned. A knife flashed over his shoulder, grated against the side of the car. A brutal face was within inches of his own.

Grinning, the *Spider* dropped the machine gun and struck out savagely. His fist smacked the face, sent the man reeling. Only a knife? Here was an easy capture, a witness against this murderous gang. Wentworth's glance shot beyond him. A small car was parked behind the taxi. It was empty.

The man recovered, threw up his knife hand and flung the blade, a fleeting gleam of light, straight at Wentworth. The *Spider* twisted his body aside and laughed aloud.

“Now,” he taunted the man, “you haven't even a knife. Want to surrender?”

The man's answer was a headlong charge, and Wentworth waited his attack with lips thin and eyes alight with the joy of battle. As the man rushed in, he stepped close and slammed two blows against his body.

His assailant made no effort to ward them, but locked his arms about Wentworth's body, pinioning him. The arms were like steel. The man rammed his head under Wentworth's chin, thrust upward savagely. Wentworth was bent irresistibly backward. Pain shot through his spine.

And now finally, the cold winter air rang with the whine of police sirens, a whistle screamed and a half block away a policeman pounded toward them at a dead run. No help for the *Spider* there. That seal on the dead men's foreheads would doom him as surely as this man's arms would snap his spine unless he broke the hold.

Wentworth's arms were pinned helpless at his sides, but were free below the elbow. He gouged his thumbs into the man's sides, groping for the nerve center that would paralyze him, a jiu-jitsu trick. But the man's muscles were hard and tense with the fury of his struggle. He writhed in pain but held on, tightened his arms until Wentworth's breath gasped hoarsely, until his spine seemed about to snap.

Without warning then, the *Spider* allowed himself to go lax, let all his weight sag upon the man's arms. His assailant was thrown off balance. The two men lurched to the street together.

The policeman was close now, but the man made no effort to escape. He seemed intent only upon killing Wentworth. His hold had been weakened. He released it, flung himself upon the *Spider* and seized his throat.

Wentworth doubled up his knees, struck savagely with them. The man pitched backward with a scream of agony, and Wentworth reeled to his feet.

The policeman was fifty feet away. He threw up his gun.

“Halt!” he shouted.

Wentworth dodged like a jackrabbit and sprang to the taxi. The officer could easily take his assailant captive now, and that would serve Wentworth equally as well as holding the man himself. And the *Spider* must vanish.

Those seals on the brows of two dead men spelled doom if he were caught.

Behind him the cop's gun roared. The windshield cracked, as the cab behind surged forward. Again the gun boomed. Lead whined by.

Wentworth twisted his head, stared back and saw the man who had attacked him rise up in back of the, policeman—saw a knife slash down. The killer snatched the policeman's gun, leaped into his own machine that had been parked behind the taxi. The chase was on again.

Police cars skidded into the streets behind. Wentworth, low over the wheel of the taxi, sped north again, twisting and turning. Knife-like wind stabbed him with cold, but he did not feel it. His blood raced with excitement. The man behind him made no effort to escape from the police who were hard upon his heels, seemed intent only upon one thing—the death of the *Spider*.

The *Spider* smiled grimly. If he could lead this man away from the police for a few moments, he still might capture a witness against the gang.

Wentworth jerked around a corner on two wheels, squeezed between two trucks and spun north, took another corner, cut through an alley and turned west. He flung a half-second glance back over his shoulder and, smiling, found the killer's roadster still burning along in his wake.

South again, ploughing through the heavy trucking of First Avenue. Slamming brakes, crashing fenders through holes a motorcycle would have feared to try, Wentworth drove as only a fearless man who knows he is master of his car would dare. And always behind him, he drew the roadster, never quite within striking distance, yet never lost.

Without warning a tower of steam geysered from the radiator of the taxi, gushing hot water over the windshield. Wentworth's lips tightened. Bullets had drilled the radiator. A few blocks now and the cab would stall. He had to act at once. He must overcome this man despite gun and knife, take him prisoner and escape from the police. Their cars were everywhere now. On all sides sirens wailed.

But police must not take the *Spider*. The taxi marked him as the fugitive from the spot where the *Spider* had twice killed. Wentworth knew he would be blamed also for the stabbing of the policeman. And the *Spider* must be entirely unhampered, if he were to save the city from this murderous gang—if he were to avert the peril that only he could see towering over the very nation itself.

Wentworth flung another glance backward. The killer's car was only a half block behind now, and gaining. A tight smile lifted Wentworth's mouth. He let the man creep even nearer, then slammed around a corner into a deserted street, locked brakes and leaped from the taxi. He landed in a foot-slapping run, seized a lamppost and pivoted behind it.

Tires squealed as the killer spun his car into the street. Too late he saw the taxi. His brakes shrieked, the back end of the car swayed wildly and the roadster slammed into the cab. The rear of the cab crumpled. The roadster reared like a horse, its front wheels climbing the taxi.

The killer dived head first into the windshield. The shatterproof glass sagged, radiated cracks, but did not break and the man bounced back into the seat like an explosion-tossed sack of meal.

Wentworth darted to the car, hauled him out. Working swiftly, he stripped off the man's coat, dragged him to the lamppost and rapidly bound him to it with the man's own belt. Then he laid just beyond reach the police gun and the knife.

Wentworth bent then and on the unconscious man's forehead printed the small red seal of the *Spider*.

If the police would only believe, here was evidence to clear the *Spider*. Here was the killer and the weapons with which he had slain the policeman. And he had put into their hands, where he also could question him, a member of the robber band.

Wentworth jammed arms into the coat he had taken from his victim and raced off into the shadows. The sirens were at hand now and a police car skidded, swaying into the street, dodged the two crashed cars by a hair's breadth and slid to a frantic halt.

But Wentworth was already a block away, not running with pounding feet, but slipping from shadow to shadow, weaving back toward First Avenue. The dress shirt and white vest were hidden now by his

victim's coat. And as he glided along, he tore off the formal winged collar and tie, thrust them into his pockets. He dug his patent leather shoes into gutter slime, splashed mud over his trousers, slouched his shoulders.

Wentworth was gone. The *Spider* was gone. A bum shuffled out among the stacked crates of produce that lined the sidewalks of the First Avenue market district.

A half empty truck jammed to a halt to avoid a racing police car. Wentworth shuffled out and swung up on the tailgate, sat jolting laxly with the rumble of the truck as it roared into motion again, watched other police cars zip futilely by, followed by the muttered imprecations of the truck driver.

Wentworth swayed patiently. Now that he was quiet, he felt the still cold of early morning. His breath made white funnels of fog from his nostrils. He shrugged his shoulders higher about his ears, content. In good time he would get in touch with Kirkpatrick. Together they would worm out this killer's secrets.

Then abruptly Wentworth straightened, his eyes narrowed. If these criminals could trail his taxi, why could they not also have trailed the Lancia in which he had sent Nita van Sloan to his home? Why could they not have struck at her to make doubly sure of his elimination from the chase?

His lips grim, Wentworth slid from the truck and ducked into the warmth of a subway, hurried to a telephone booth. He dropped a coin in the slot and zipped the dial. His head was steady, but in his eyes there was dread.

The clickings of the phone mechanism buzzed in his ear. Then the intermittent, fixed ringing the bell began. Began, and went on and on. Half dazedly he counted the rings, *five—six—seven—eight!* Good Lord, why didn't Jenkyns answer? Even if Nita herself were not there, the faithful old butler never would leave without Wentworth's express permission—*eleven—twelve—thirteen!* Wentworth slammed up the receiver as a train hammered into the station. He darted across and squeezed through closing doors, stood tensely on the rear platform watching gleaming steel rails race backward into blackness.

His eyes did not see the tracks. His eyes were pin points of rage. Freely he risked his own life in the service of humanity in the foiling of the underworld. But when the slimy hand of crookdom reached for Nita... !

The night train crawled, clacking over switches, rumbling to slow halts at stations. Wentworth's fists clenched in impatience. He beat one with slow tension against the side of the door. Finally the train jolted into Twenty-third Street.

Wentworth streaked across the platform, up steps three at a time, swung into a taxi, flinging a Fifth Avenue address at the man. The fellow stared at him, snarled: "Get out of there, you bum!"

Wentworth thrust a bill at the man.

"Get moving!" he snapped.

The driver hesitated. The man looked like a bum, but that voice crackled with command, and the bill in his hand—he looked down at it—was twenty dollars! The driver kicked his motor into life, sent the taxi leaping forward like a race horse when the barrier is sprung. Wentworth sat tightly forward on the edge of his seat, hands white-clenched fists on his knees. Wind whistled past.

"Faster!" he shouted. "Faster, and you get another twenty!"

The cab roared down a side street, as the lights switched red ahead. The driver clapped his hand on the horn button, held it there and ripped through the already moving traffic. Shouts rang after him. A police whistle burred. The cab darted on, got a break on the next light, just changing, and stormed down Sixth Avenue among the elevated pillars. One more frantic two-wheel turn, another that tore the tires and they skated with locked brakes to a halt. The address Wentworth had given was two doors from his apartment. He flung the second twenty at the man, but for all the fear that tore his breast, for all his impatience, he got out slowly, slouched past his own doorway and to the back entrance.

For five minutes, while the watchman stood chewing a toothpick Wentworth was forced to wait. Twice he started to identify himself and thrust past. There could be some excuse.... But caution forbade—caution and the certainty of Kirkpatrick's keenly suspicious inquiries when he learned the *Spider* had killed at Wentworth's very back door. The wrecked car still lay across the street, Wentworth saw.

Finally, the watchman vanished into the building and Wentworth slid in, raced upstairs. Panting, he reached his floor. He sprang with a rush for the knob, then jerked himself to a halt, chest against the door. Suppose all this was a trap, suppose Nita van Sloan was a prisoner within, held pending his return, bait for a trap?

Wentworth crouched to one side of the door, unlocked it and thrust strongly. There was an explosion like dynamite. Hot air blasted past within inches of his face, protected behind the wall. A great slab of plaster cracked and tumbled from the doorway and Wentworth dived inside the room, rolled and came up ready to attack.

No one in sight, but on a table directly across from the door rested a sawed off double-barreled shotgun, braced against the wall. A heavy book-end had jerked a wire fastened to the triggers when the door's opening had yanked a string, pulling the book-end off the table. A simple, but effective, death trap.

Wentworth took that in in a flash, raced through the apartment.

"Nita!" he called. "Nita!"

Silence answered him, broken only by the rapid slap of his own hurrying feet. He ran on, searching one after another of the fifteen rooms. Finally, by the kitchen door, he found a trace of the men who had come and gone, found Jenkyns, his old white head torn by a bloody wound, crumpled on the floor.

Wentworth went down on his knees instantly. Life still fluttered in a feeble pulse. Fury distorted Wentworth's face.

Jenkyns slugged, perhaps fatally wounded—and Nita van Sloan vanished!

CHAPTER FIVE Orders From the Tarantula

Wentworth sprang up from beside the injured butler, raced to the phone in the hall. This was once the *Spider* could legitimately call on the police for help, once when the wide-flung police organization could work better than the *Spider* alone.

He snatched up the phone, dialed the police swiftly.

“This is Richard Wentworth,” he told the man who answered, and he gave his Fifth Avenue address. “I want—”

Then his eyes spotted a crude drawing that hung on the wall, and his voice choked. His hand tightened about the phone until it ached with strain, and rage burned over him in a white-hot tide. He swallowed hard, stilled his racing pulses.

“I want,” he continued, voice cold and utterly without expression, “an ambulance from the hospital of St. Vincent de Paul rushed at once to my apartment. There's a man here injured seriously, a blow on the head. That's all, thank you.”

And he hung up without asking that police throw out their wide flung dragnet for Nita van Sloan, hung up the phone and stared with bitter eyes at the drawing on the wall.

It was hasty work, but done by a fiendishly clever hand. It depicted Nita van Sloan being hanged!

There was a rope about her soft throat, and her toes barely touched the floor, so that she was strangling slowly, dying as had died the man who first had given information to the *Spider*.

The drawing showed Nita's face distorted, eyes bulging, skin darkening with congested blood. It sent chill fingers of fear probing through Wentworth's veins. Nita—his Nita—

He tore his eyes from the fearful fascination of that drawing, saw then a folded paper attached to its lower edge. He tore it loose, read with eyes of dread:

Dear *Spider*,

When a man strangles slowly, it is unbelievable torture. But you probably know that already, don't you, *Spider*? I have tried to show you with my humble art how your charming lady will strangle. You will notice that her tongue is between her lips, and that she has bitten completely through her tongue. This is not unusual in cases of slow strangulation. I would not advise, dear *Spider*, that you call the police.

Better wait until we phone you.

TARANTULA

Wentworth reached out a slow hand to that horrible drawing, placed it, carefully folded, in his pocket. He snatched up dressing gown then, to hide his telltale clothing from police, kicked off muddy shoes and toed into house slippers, hurried to Jenkyns side. He placed a pillow beneath the bleeding head, got water and bathed the wound.

Soft footfalls jerked him about. Ram Singh, eyes narrow beneath his dark turban, stared down at Jenkyns. His figure stiffened.

“*Wah!* Ram Singh is a bungler, a fool!” he berated himself. “I go search for you and this happen!”

“You left the *Missie Sahib!*” Wentworth's voice was accusing.

Ram Singh touched his forehead. “*Han, Sahib!* She send me for you.”

No help here—and no blame. That was like Nita. Wentworth turned back to Jenkyns. He was still working over him when the heavy thump of feet in the hallway heralded police. A surgeon rapidly completed the first aid Wentworth had begun, ordered Jenkyns carried to the ambulance. Wentworth touched the surgeon's arm.

“A private room, doctor, and spare no expense to pull him through.”

The doctor nodded, eyes curious behind thick glasses, and strode out. But two policemen remained on guard at the door, and when the elevator returned, Stanley Kirkpatrick stepped from it.

Wentworth spoke to Ram Singh without moving his lips.

“Not a word,” he said. “Understand?”

Ram Singh said nothing, but seemed to recede into the shadows, motionless as a statue.

Kirkpatrick was immaculate as always, a gardenia gracing the lapel of his elegant evening dress, Chesterfield coat over an arm. He glanced down at his clothing apologetically.

“This is not really a formal call, Dick,” he said. “It's just that I've not had time to change yet. It's been rather a busy evening.”

His keen glance strayed about the hall, spotted the shotgun trap. He turned and surveyed the shot-peppered wall of the hall.

“You too, seem to have had a busy evening. Damnable of them to slug old Jenkyns.” His voice was careless, too careless. “Any idea who did it?”

“Not the slightest.”

Kirkpatrick touched his pointed mustache with a thumbnail, crossed to the gun and fingered its mechanism.

Wentworth watched him narrowly. He knew the commissioner, knew that when he was most casual, he was most keenly alert.

“Any luck in that chase of yours?” Kirkpatrick asked over his shoulder.

Wentworth shook his head slowly. “No.” His crisp hair was disordered and his fists were thrust savagely down into the pockets of his black silk robe. There was a slight smile on his face, but there was tension in his breast. It was an effort to keep himself in hand. Within him was only the thought that Nita—his Nita of the blue eyes of mystery and the red, red lips—was in the clutches of that ruthless gang, of a band of wanton murderers. Nita in peril, and he was forced to remain inactive, unable to ask help of this man who could assist so mightily—able to do nothing but seek to get rid of Kirkpatrick so that the *Spider* might search.

And Kirkpatrick was questioning him in his cannily indirect way. That girl's cry in the lobby of the theater: “You're the *Spider*,” which apparently had signaled the robbers' attack, two killings by the *Spider* in a single night, had renewed Kirkpatrick's always active suspicions, Wentworth knew. He smiled casually, took out his platinum cigarette case and offered it.

“You're hinting at something, Kirk,” he said lightly, “out with it.”

The police commissioner allowed him to light both cigarettes before he spoke again.

“Just curious about that chase of yours, Dick. Tell me about it.”

Wentworth compelled patience in himself, kept his voice calm.

“I saw a suspicious looking car,” he said. “I trailed it for a long while, but apparently I was wrong in my hunch. I came home, rang the bell. When Jenkyns didn't answer, I became suspicious and in that way avoided this gun trap. I found Jenkyns unconscious and phoned at once. I didn't ask for you because I thought you'd be busy.”

“Nonsense, Dick,” Kirkpatrick, waving his cigarette so that the blue thread of smoke spiraled. “Never too busy for you. In fact, I was going to look you up, anyway. You must let me reimburse you for that long taxi drive on police business.”

Wentworth veiled his eyes. He must put his mind more directly on Kirkpatrick. Worried about Nita, he had been paying only half attention to the Police Commissioner and this was getting serious. So they had traced the taxi!

“That would be difficult,” he laughed, “I changed taxis four times and I've forgotten the amounts.”

Kirkpatrick dragged on the cigarette. His eyes glinted.

“So you changed four times?” he asked softly. “Curious. That taxi in which you first rode tonight was mixed up in a shooting affray at the back door of your apartment. Machine guns apparently.

“Then a car was wrecked, two men killed in it, and the seal of the *Spider* put on their foreheads. A policeman came up and was stabbed to death. In other words, the *Spider* is running wild again.”

He looked directly into Wentworth's level gaze.

“Was I mistaken tonight, or didn't the girl who pointed that gun at you in the theater say, 'You're the *Spider*'?”

Wentworth smiled slowly. “She did.” He vouchsafed nothing further.

Kirkpatrick continued to stare at him. “Hmmm,” he said, “I thought so.” He crossed to the table and ground out his cigarette on an ivory ashtray.

Wentworth's pulses throbbed hard and slowly. He knew that thin old scar upon his right temple was glowing red. His heart cried out against the delay. Nita! Nita was in peril. He looked down at his own cigarette, his lips twitching mockingly.

“Do you want to examine my cigarette lighter again, Stanley?”

Kirkpatrick shook his head. “I've done that at least three times. Do you care to hear the further adventures of your taxicab?”

“You mean the taxi that I first rode in tonight, I take it?” Wentworth said precisely.

“Yes,” said Kirkpatrick, his mouth grim. “The *Spider* escaped in that same taxi and later it was in a smashup down on the lower east side. Another man was injured and tied to a post, and the seal of the *Spider* was found on his forehead, too.”

Abruptly all Wentworth's attention riveted on Kirkpatrick. Here was hope, here was a trail that might lead to Nita. He had feared the man was dead.

“You said 'injured,' I think, Stanley?” he asked, restraining his anxiety.

“Yes, he's in Bellevue,” said the Police Commissioner. “This time it served the *Spider's* purpose to let the man live. Beside him he planted the weapon with which the *Spider* had killed the policeman, trying to pin his crime on the man. The man—he's a lad named Corey—recovered consciousness in the hospital. Said he turned the corner, saw a taxi ahead and tried to stop... That's all he remembers.”

“Perhaps,” ventured Wentworth, “perhaps this time the *Spider* was not guilty. It looks as though he had turned the murderer of the policeman over to you.”

Kirkpatrick watched him narrowly. “It's more likely,” he said slowly, “that the *Spider* wanted us to think he had done that.”

Wentworth shrugged. His voice was light. “Perhaps you're right. But you know, I'd like to question that man Corey. It's just possible he might be tied up in some way with those crooks who robbed the people in the theater tonight.”

Kirkpatrick's face grew grave.

“Robbery,” he said, “is the least of the crimes committed tonight. Eight persons were murdered. Apparently they got in the way, or saw the robbers' faces.”

Wentworth's gravity matched his own. This was part of the horror he had foreseen in that robbery upstate. “Do you realize the potentialities of this business of turning off lights, telephones and alarm systems?” he asked slowly. “Do you realize what that means in looting banks? Unless we find some way to foil that gang they'll strip the city. Man, the very financial structure of the nation is in danger!”

“You're telling me!” said Kirkpatrick, but his voice was deadly serious.

Wentworth pressed a heavy palm to his forehead. It was close to four in the morning. He was weary, his mind besieged with worry. “Something must be done at once,” he said. “I think possibly the first thing to do is question Corey. If you'll give me a few moments' time, I'll change and be with you.”

He had started for an inner room, when the telephone's ring stopped him. Its low metallic buzz was like the whirring of a rattlesnake. Wentworth's thoughts flashed to that warning from the Tarantula. But his hand, picking up the phone, was steady, his voice expressionless.

“Richard Wentworth speaking.”

The answer was a low, mocking laugh. “The Tarantula speaking! We have your Nita here!”

Nita! Nita! Wentworth's heart cried. He heard Kirkpatrick's light tread, and his mouth corners tightened. He was watched on every side, by the police, by the underworld....

“May I speak to her, please,” he said to the Tarantula in a conventionally polite tone.

Again came low laughter. “Why not?”

Abruptly Nita's voice was vibrant in his ear: “Don't let them coerce you, Dick, I don't matter-”

Confusion over the wire. No chance to say a word. Kirkpatrick listening. When the phone transmitted a voice again, it was the Tarantula's hatefully dulcet tones.

“A brave woman, and a clever man! Allow me to congratulate you. I did not think you would fall into the crude traps my rather less intelligent workers set for you. But there was no harm in trying. It is imperative that you cease to interfere with our plans. There is too much at stake, too big a fortune for myself.

“This is what you must do, *Spider*, and Nita van Sloan is our hostage to force you to obey to the letter. You will book passage on the *Europa*, sailing Thursday, day after tomorrow. I will tell you later what I wish you to do in Europe, and there will be someone on hand on the boat to see that you do your part. Nita will talk with you every day, to assure you that we are fulfilling our side of the bargain.

“But at the first disobedience on your part, the first day the man we send to watch fails to report to us, on that day *Nita van Sloan dies!*”

It was fortunate Wentworth's face was turned toward the wall. It was distorted with anger too strong for even his masterly control to hide, anger the more furious because it was impotent. He thought frantically. There was no way out.

“Well?” came the Tarantula's voice, sharper, more commanding. “What do you say?”

And Wentworth, teeth locked, jaw muscles ridged, forced himself to speak casually. Kirkpatrick must not suspect.

“I agree,” he said slowly, forced a laugh, and added, “let me compliment you on your art. Your technique is irreproachable, but I cannot say that I like your choice of subject matter. If what you painted should ever come to be a reality”—his voice rasped suddenly—“I do not think that even you would find the earth a very pleasant place to live.”

The mocking laughter of the Tarantula answered him.

“Very clever, *Spider*. If I had not known how clever you could be, I should not have phoned you while the commissioner of police was at your elbow!”

A click of disconnection and the line went dead. Wentworth stared at the mouthpiece.

“Yes,” he said, “I should be glad to see more of your work.... That's a date, then.”

He hung up and turned slowly to Kirkpatrick, his face calm again despite the mad whirl of his thoughts.

“I think I shall have to reconsider, Kirkpatrick, that little trip I was to make with you. An artist friend has just invited me to go abroad and view an exhibit in Paris. We shall be sailing almost at once, and I have quite a number of things to wind up before I leave.”

Kirkpatrick's smile faded slowly. His searching eyes inspected Wentworth. "It is absolutely necessary for you to go at this time?"

Wentworth nodded. "It is absolutely necessary."

"It seems a little strange," said Kirkpatrick, "that you should change your plans so suddenly. A little strange."

The eyes of the two men fixed unwaveringly on one another. Kirkpatrick raised a freshly lighted cigarette to his mouth, funneled smoke from his nostrils. A thin blue veil drifted between them.

Wentworth nodded affably. "I'll admit it must seem strange. However, as I said, it is necessary."

"I see," said Kirkpatrick. He bowed slowly. "If you'll excuse me, Mr. Wentworth," he said, "I'll be going."

Wentworth half raised a hand. "Don't be like that, Stanley."

Kirkpatrick raised a quizzical eyebrow, turned on his heel and strode away, calling his men behind him.

Wentworth started after him, stopped, shook his head. He couldn't blame Kirkpatrick. He turned slowly to his dressing room, then shook off his lethargy and swiftly donned dark tweeds and a soft shirt. Yes, what he had done had been necessary. The Tarantula had known Kirkpatrick was in the house. Wentworth could not afford to leave with him, lest the Tarantula exact payment for that violation of his agreement—payment that would mean suffering for Nita.

Wentworth's face was bitterly lined. As always, the *Spider* must play a lone hand.

"Stay here," he ordered Ram Singh. He caught down a dark soft felt from a shelf and pulled its brim down over his eyes. Automatics slid into twin holsters beneath his arms. A loose topcoat that would not hamper his movements, and the *Spider* stalked from the apartment.

Out through the service entrance, down four flights of stairs before he signaled an elevator—in case the Tarantula watched. He left the building by the trade entrance, strolled with slow, casual steps along the avenue until he was out of sight of the apartment building, then he sprang to a cab.

"Bellevue hospital," he snapped.

There was no need to go by the desk. He knew where the prison ward was. He strode swiftly into the gray stone pile, entered the elevator and on the third floor paced rapidly, with the oddly muffled sound that hospital floors give out, to the prison ward. Against the door a policeman was seated in a tilted back chair, a gun upon his knees.

Wentworth strode swiftly to him, taking out his wallet. He held out the wallet with his police card showing. "I'm Richard Wentworth," he said, "I want to see Corey."

No answer from the man. No indication that he saw Wentworth at all. What the devil! Was the man asleep at his post? Wentworth caught him by the shoulder, shook him violently. The gun clattered to the floor. The policeman's body lurched sideways, the chair tilted with it, and both plunged to the floor. Then Wentworth saw the reason. A knife had been driven through the man's neck into his brain!

Wentworth seized the door and thrust it inward. His groping hand found the light switch, clicked it and a thin smiled twisted his lips. The Tarantula took no chances of his gangsters' confessing. Corey was dead—hanged—with a rope about his throat drawn up over a closet door!

Wentworth moved swiftly down the hall, took the stairs to a side entrance. No need for Kirkpatrick to know he had come. He caught another taxi several blocks from the hospital, sped back to his apartment. Nita was safe, for the present, he reassured himself; safe as long as Wentworth left the city and remained inactive; safe until the Tarantula had looted the nation and no longer needed a hostage from the *Spider*.

Then, Wentworth knew, Nita and himself would both die.

Alighting from the taxi a few blocks from his apartment, Wentworth re-entered the same way he had left. He strode swiftly to his music room, caught up his violin with eager hands, tucked it beneath his chin. Strident, angry music whipped from it as he shot his bow across the strings. Music was his one consolation in time of trouble.

The whirl of the telephone interrupted him. Wentworth did not wait for Ram Singh to answer. Violin beneath his arm, he crossed to the phone in two strides.

“Wentworth speaking.”

“The Tarantula speaking,” words snarled at him. “You agreed not to enter this case, to keep hands off. You broke that agreement!”

The voice stopped, but another sound reached Wentworth's ears. He heard Nita cry out, heard her cry out again, in pain. She was struggling for breath; a sob caught in her throat; the breathing ceased!

“In God's name, Tarantula,” Wentworth pleaded, “stop! I'll drop the case, I'll ...”

A sob of pain, a gasped breath from Nita, quickly hushed as though she were ashamed of that cry, and over the wire came the Tarantula's voice again.

“That is a little warning of what will happen to your Nita if you repeat tonight's attempt. One more such errand and the strangling will continue until Nita's little white teeth bite through her tongue!”

CHAPTER SIX The Altar of Duty

Wentworth's face was haggard. During those few moments in which Nita had suffered, years had written their agony across his face. He spoke slowly, his voice calm as death, his eyes like glacial ice.

“You harm her, Tarantula,” he said distinctly, “and all hell will not be able to hide you from my vengeance.”

The transmitter rasped with his vehemence. For a full minute then, the only sound over the wire was the faint buzzing of the current.

Wentworth's face was rigid, his nostrils dilated and rimmed with white. He waited. Finally other sound filtered through the phone. Laughter. The Tarantula was laughing!

“You have a nice knack of expression, *Spider*,” the voice mocked. “I find it a little startling. Your

warning is accepted at face value. However, in the meantime—” and the voice turned brittle with command—“you will obey!”

Wentworth controlled himself rigorously. “I have agreed to that, but I would like to make you another proposition.”

“And that is?”

Wentworth drew a deep breath. “Let me ransom Miss van Sloan.”

“Of course,” the Tarantula answered. “That was my intention.... ”

“How much?” Wentworth snapped out. “Ah, but you grow impatient,” there was a tantalizing slowness in the Tarantula's drawled words, something feline, womanish, in the way he dragged out the torture. “The payment I demand is not in money, but in service.”

“I am rich.”

A bubbling chuckle cut off his words. “Rich? Of course you are, *Spider*—but not rich enough! Not all your millions could comprise one-tenth the money I shall take. One-tenth? Not one- twentieth! For when New York is stripped, there is London, and Paris, and ...” the laughter burst through again. “But you get my point, I fancy, *Spider*?”

Wentworth cursed, a single tearing oath. Despite all his efforts at control, fury poked hot irons into his brain; fury at his own helplessness; fury at the enormity of the crimes proposed, crimes that the *Spider* would be helpless to prevent.

“Yes, *Spider*, it is unpleasant,” the Tarantula drawled again, “but you will obey. Ah, yes, I think you will obey, for any deviation from strict neutrality will mean.... ”

“It is unnecessary to repeat that,” Wentworth snapped.

“Ah, you do not like to hear what will happen to—Nita?”

“Miss van Sloan, *vermin*!”

“Vermin, yourself!” mocked the Tarantula Wentworth held himself rigidly in check. This would not do. He was allowing the Tarantula to goad him, and that was a disadvantage. There was high good humor and self-satisfaction in the Tarantula's voice when he spoke again.

“The conversation is pleasant, Wentworth, but time grows short.” The tone became crisp. “Here are your final instructions. When you reach London, you will immediately determine the best way to obtain maps of its wiring systems. Your brain is too valuable to keep merely idle. I have decided to let you assist me. If you don't.... ”

Wearily Wentworth hung up and stared into the blank wall ahead of him, seeing in imagination again that dread sketch of Nita, hanging. His face was set in a grim mask. It was obvious that every time he left the house, a henchman of the Tarantula trailed him. At the Spiders first counter attack, Nita would suffer.

Wentworth walked slowly to the music room, picked up his violin again. But his music was uncertain. Wentworth's mind was torn between duty and his love. On one side he placed the nation's bankruptcy,

which undoubtedly was threatened through the lootings of the Tarantula. He placed there, too, the scores of murders those lootings would mean, the misery of an impoverished populace.

A few more robberies, and long lines of depositors would form at the doors of the banks. Runs would destroy more than the robbers stripped, and penury would spread throughout the land. The Tarantula was endangering the recovery of the entire nation, finally beginning to fight its way up out of the depths of depression!

That was the weight he must place on one side of the balance, and on the other—good God!—the life of one woman! Wentworth's music grew wild, half mad in its throbbing. What did it matter if one life was that of the woman who above all others meant everything to him? What did it matter if her death would tear his heart in two? It was one life against scores, one life against the life of a nation.

Wentworth's music faltered and died. He stood with the violin hanging at his side, his shoulders bowed. Between his love for Nita and his service to the nation, there could be no choice. Nita must be sacrificed on the high altar of duty, must die that the nation might live!

Wentworth's hands became huge knots at his sides. There was a dry cracking, and the neck of the violin snapped in his hand. He looked down at it slowly, touched the jagged ends with a finger and woodenly placed the broken instrument in its case. He turned and strode from the room, draped a hat down over his brows, almost subconsciously caught up his sword cane, and paced to the door. Silently as a shadow, Ram Singh strode after him.

“No, Ram Singh,” Wentworth said dully. Ram Singh bowed submissively, touching cupped hands to his brow, but Wentworth saw determination in his face.

He started to insist, then lifted wide shoulders in a half shrug. What difference did it make? He moved blindly to the elevator and out of the apartment house, walking with weighted feet, his head bowed.

Cold wind moaned between the buildings. It made street lights sway and circle. The air was sharp with frost. Wentworth, without his overcoat, did not notice. He strode on, scarcely realizing where his feet led. He stumbled once and peered about curiously with vacant eyes. Abruptly, then, his head snapped up and his gaze sharpened.

All about him, street lights were dim! They had not gone out, but seemed drained of all current, showed only as faint yellow blobs choked by darkness. Alertly Wentworth peered about. He was at the corner of Eighteenth Street and Fifth Avenue. Neighboring apartment houses and shops displayed only dying lights. Wentworth knew what that portended. The Tarantula had struck again!

A swiftly moving figure across the avenue caught his eye. A policeman pounded up to an alarm box, clanged open the door and grasped the lever. The metallic rattle of it reached Wentworth. The policeman cursed, slammed the box shut, plunged up the dark, deserted street with slapping feet.

Wentworth watched him go, turned back to survey the street. A man slipped from nearby shadows and stalked toward him, his shoulders furtive. Wentworth faced him, his hands hanging ready at his sides, the sword cane with its tip forward. The call to action stirred his blood.

The man came on unhurriedly. The shadow of a pulled down hat hid his face. Three feet away he stopped.

“Go back to your apartment,” he ordered. “And just why?” A curious lightness crept into Wentworth's

voice.

“You know why,” the man said. “These are orders.”

Wentworth spoke with mocking humility. “I hear and obey.” He bowed, sweeping his left palm to his forehead. There was no anger in him. He had found the way out. For the present he would obey. But afterward....

He turned and strode back the way he had come. Distantly in the north now he heard the growling moan of police sirens. From the west came a sound that made Wentworth's heart contract, the staccato death laughter of machine guns!

An armored motorcycle with blue-clad police crouched low behind the shield, shot past and skittered into a cross street. Wentworth a small smile unwavering on his lips, strode steadily northward. This was the kind of thing police could do. The *Spider's* battle would come later.

Ahead, a police squad car halted at Twenty-sixth Street. Men spilled from it. Behind, bedlam broke loose. The pop and chatter of guns was continuous. There were screams and shootings. Wentworth pushed steadily on, walked deliberately up to the police who had thrown a cordon across the avenue at Twenty-sixth.

“Halt!” a stocky cop challenged.

“Righto,” said Wentworth lightly, “but I can't give the countersign.”

“What are you doing in there?”

“Just taking a morning stroll,” Wentworth explained.

“Yeah,” growled the officer, “well, you just stroll along over here until the sergeant comes back.” He was an alert youngster, getting a huge kick out of his job.

Wentworth nodded affably and went with the cop, watched as other men of the squad commandeered autos from a nearby parking lot and placed them in a barricade across Fifth Avenue, headlights streaming full strength into the darkened area.

“Commissioner Kirkpatrick has ideas, I see,” Wentworth commented.

The policeman peered at him suspiciously. He held his gun ready. Presently the sergeant strode across, glared at Wentworth beneath truculent eyebrows. “What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded.

Wentworth slid a card from his vest pocket and presented it between two fingers. The sergeant grunted at it, read by flashlight and looked sharply back at Wentworth.

“I'm sorry, sir,” he said, “but you'll have to wait. Commissioner's orders. No one to leave the area until he's looked them over.”

Wentworth bowed silently, and the stocky young policeman marched him to a small, picket-fenced yard, standing guard with a tensely held gun. Wentworth peered down the avenue now brilliantly illuminated by the headlights. Where was Ram Singh, he wondered. A thin smile twisted his mouth. No need to worry. If Ram Singh wished to, he could penetrate a cordon held by the entire police force of

New York.

Shots continued to echo from the distance, then a tearing explosion ripped out. A momentary lull in the firing, and a heavy car skidded out of Twenty-fourth Street into Fifth. Two others squealed behind it, and the three raced toward the barricade.

Police opened a spattering fire. The cars charged on unwaveringly. An arm thrust out a car window and a small black object arched ahead through the headlight glare.

Wentworth shouted a warning, threw himself to the ground. His guard dived, too. White flame blossomed among the parked cars. There was a terrific detonation. Two autos heaved up like flung toys, black against the white and red burst of fire. Wentworth reared up, snaking guns from beneath his arms.

Men, torn by steel and blast, screamed in the street. A body lay in a bloody puddle on the walk. There was a gap the barricade. The cordon was broken.

With scarcely slackened speed the escaping gang cars skirted the pit the grenade had torn in the pavement and roared on up the avenue. Wentworth, crouching, banged at the tires of the foremost car.

The stocky police guard cursed beside him, hurdled the fence and ran, firing, toward the autos. A machine gun spat from the second car. The cop stopped, took two quick steps backward, hands gripping his stomach. He folded over slowly. His face skidded on the pavement.

The first car in the line yawed wildly as Wentworth continued his careful fire. It wobbled around a corner, the other two closing up behind it. Wentworth hurdled the fence, gun ready. An armored motorcycle burst past, took the corner with its side car in the air. Its machine gun stuttered into action.

Wentworth went slowly back to the policeman, turned him over and stared down into his youthful face. No chance for life there. A dozen slugs had torn through belly and chest.

Holstering his guns, he paced to the yard and picked up his sword cane. He went back beside the body. His face was austere, lined. Wholesale murder—and his hands were tied! The twist of his lips showed his teeth in a smile that was half snarl. But not for long, not for long!

Wentworth looked up sharply as a big Cadillac snubbed its nose to the curbing. Commissioner Kirkpatrick's dark, striding figure, thick in a black camelhair coat, pounded up the street, and presently returned more heavily to where Wentworth stood beside the body. Kirkpatrick peered up from under his derby.

"Lord, Dick!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Just out for an early morning stroll," Wentworth said casually. "Got stopped by your cordon on my way home."

"Stroll, oh, at six A.M.?" Kirkpatrick was distraught, his words seemed preoccupied. "You picked an unfortunate locality. I'll have to ask you to return to headquarters with me."

Wentworth raised a shoulder in a slight shrug. "Whatever you say, Stanley, but can't we get this over with here? I very foolishly came without my coat—and it's chilly."

The wind moaned as if to confirm him. Kirkpatrick's coattails flapped against his legs. He eyed

Wentworth steadily a moment, began talking monotonously.

“One of my men punctured a tire of the lead gang car. They abandoned it around the corner and got away in the other two. They left two of my motorcycle men there dead. That makes eighteen tonight. Eighteen of my men and twelve others. They looted a bank on Fourteenth Street, burned through doors and vault like so much butter. God knows how many millions were stolen.”

His words had come out slowly, like the report of an automaton. Now he spoke with a forceful directness that told he had made a decision.

“It is queer, Dick,” he said, “that you always manage to be on hand when this gang gets busy.”

Wentworth's alert eyes took in the police commissioner's forward thrust shoulders, his suspicious glance.

“Yes, it is queer,” Wentworth said. “Scarcely seems it could be coincidence, does it?”

“That was what I was thinking,” Kirkpatrick's voice was soft. “There is another thing, that I should like to have explained. The watchman at the bank was stabbed in the back, and in the wound I found this.”

He held out his hand and across it lay a thin blade of steel, perhaps twelve inches long, jagged at the end.

“This is obviously,” said Kirkpatrick, “the end of a sword, broken off in the wound. It is a queer weapon for a criminal.”

The commissioner took a step nearer.

“Dick,” he said, “you are one of the few men I know who carries a sword cane. That is it in your hand now, isn't it? Let me see it.”

And he reached out his hand for the cane that Wentworth carried.

CHAPTER SEVEN Reardon's Son

Wentworth looked down at his stick as if he were seeing it for the first time. It was of simple dark wood with a slender amber handle that fitted as neatly as a foil's hilt across the palm. Where the amber ended, a jerk would separate hilt from scabbard and a thin blade of fine steel would be instantly ready for offense or protection.

As Kirkpatrick had said, a strange weapon, but one that Wentworth, skilled in fence, had found tremendously effective. Yet Wentworth, so familiar with its excellence, stared at it strangely. He felt as if he had grasped a venomous snake in the dark. Until now he scarcely had been conscious he carried the stick, had picked it up as a matter of habit when he left the house. But now he knew suddenly that this well-loved weapon had become a thing of peril.

He knew, just as surely as if he held that blade bared in his hands, that its tip was broken off and that the jagged steel would match this murderous fragment that Kirkpatrick held in one hand while the other reached out for the cane.

Wentworth remembered with a sense of shock the shadow who had ordered him back to the apartment.

Of course, the Tarantula could not have known he would carry the cane, would want him at home to receive Kirkpatrick when the police commissioner came. He knew—even as he smiled suavely and told Kirkpatrick, “Of course,”—that the Tarantula had planted this trap for the *Spider*, was seeking to involve him in his own crimes and tighten his strangle hold.

“Of course,” Wentworth said again to Kirkpatrick. “My stick.”

He lifted it from the ground, but in the act of surrendering it, hesitated, looking at the commissioner sorrowfully. “Why do you distrust me so, Kirkpatrick? Do you think I am the sort to stab an innocent man in the back?” There was bitterness in Wentworth's voice.

He was stalling for time, thinking furiously to find some way out. Short of running away, a thing that would condemn him more surely than the broken point of his sword, how could he escape this trap of the Tarantula?

Kirkpatrick's eyes did not falter; his hand outstretched for the cane was not less demanding.

“Eighteen police were killed tonight and twelve bystanders,” he said heavily. “That's thirty lives, thirty wiped out by this gang of criminals. I cannot do less than investigate every possible clue. Even if it pointed to myself, I would feel compelled to demand that my men investigate it.”

Wentworth laughed aloud, and again there was a bitter note in his voice. But his eyes were sparkling.... He had glimpsed the shadow of a man beside the adjoining building. “Friendship,” he said, “the golden love. There is a proverb about that.” His words were harsh, unnaturally loud as he quoted in Hindustani. He finished the phrase and said, “Since you demand it, here's my cane, Kirkpatrick,” and once more he lifted the stick.

There was a sharp, muffled sound of a blow and, without warning, Wentworth pitched forward on his face, the cane beneath his body. Kirkpatrick cursed once, staring down in bewilderment. On the ground beside his fallen friend a knife gleamed. In the darkness at the corner, a shadowed form showed an instant, then fled. Police guns banged. Kirkpatrick pounded after that fleeting shadow. Wentworth's eyes opened carefully. From beneath his body he whisked the sword cane, sent it slithering along the gutter into a sewer opening.

He pulled his hand back beneath him and lay as before.

Presently feet pounded back beside him and Kirkpatrick dropped his prostrate friend over into his arms. His breath was short.

“Dick!” he called urgently. “Dick!”

Wentworth flickered his eyelids, opened them slowly. He muttered, rolled his head.

“What—what happened?” he asked weakly. “Someone threw a knife,” Kirkpatrick said. “Luckily it turned. The hilt knocked you out.”

Wentworth sat up heavily and squeezed his temples between his palms, propped elbows on his knees. His voice was muffled.

“Now, in the name of heaven,” he mumbled, “why do you suppose anyone did that?”

"I'm trying to figure that myself," said Kirkpatrick, his voice sharpened. "Where is your sword cane?"

"Sword—cane?" said Wentworth slowly. He took one hand from his head and groped about on the ground, turned heavily and looked on the pavement. "Got a light?" he mumbled. A detective splashed the beam of a hand torch.

Wentworth scrambled to his feet, stared around.

"The damned thing's gone," he exclaimed. "Now I see why that knife was thrown!"

He whirled toward Kirkpatrick.

"Don't you see?" he demanded. "Someone is trying to throw suspicion on me. A sword is broken off in a man's back. When I'm about to clear myself by giving you my sword, unbroken, they knock me unconscious and steal the sword cane so that I can't prove my innocence."

Kirkpatrick stared directly into Wentworth's eyes.

"A very clever trick," he said.

"You're dealing with a very clever criminal," Wentworth told him.

Kirkpatrick nodded slowly, his gaze still on Wentworth's.

"A very clever criminal," he agreed. "That should make you the more anxious, Dick, to help me capture him."

Wentworth rubbed the back of his head gingerly. His voice was regretful.

"Yes, it should," he said, "but unfortunately I've promised my artist friend to sail Thursday." He sighed. "It's too bad. This case does seem quite interesting."

Kirkpatrick's voice was harsh. "I never thought," he said bitterly, "I'd live to see the day Richard Wentworth would run from danger."

Wentworth allowed his hand to fall to his side. "Neither did I," he said quietly. "Do you want me any longer? As I pointed out before, it's chilly."

Kirkpatrick's gray-blue eyes were scornful. "No," he said shortly. "I want you no longer." Wentworth nodded, picked up his hat from the pavement and walked slowly up the avenue to his apartment house. He strode in jubilantly. Ram Singh bowed impassively, eyes glittering beneath the spotless white of his house turban.

Wentworth grinned boyishly. "The next time I tell you to throw a knife at me, Ram Singh," he said, "don't throw it so confounded hard!"

There was very little sleep for Wentworth that night. He and Ram Singh packed. They threw together two compact theatrical make-up kits, then flung themselves down for a nap. At ten o'clock, Wentworth roused, found Ram Singh had prepared a simple breakfast. He ate hurriedly.

"You have on two suits of clothing, Ram Singh?" he asked.

“Han, Sahib!”
the Hindu bowed.

Wentworth nodded. “Good. Now have the florist make up some flowers, order a big basket of fruit and have Jackson bring the Lancia around at once.”

“Han Sahib!”
Ram Singh was gone.

Ten minutes later, Wentworth descended and entered the Lancia.

“The hospital of St. Vincent de Paul,” he told the chauffeur and Jackson, tanned, square-cut face smiling, saluted and sped the Lancia on its way.

A bespectacled, stout nurse directed him to Jenkyns' room and he went directly there with Ram Singh carrying the baskets of fruit and flowers. Jenkyns was conscious, but white and weak. His head was swathed in bandages.

He told Wentworth in whispers that he had not seen the assailants who had knocked at the door and struck him down when he answered.

Wentworth glanced over Jenkyns' chart with a practiced eye.

“You'll be up and about soon,” he assured him.

Behind Wentworth, Ram Singh was rapidly unpacking the basket of fruit. He deposited half on Jenkyns' dresser, then together Wentworth and Ram Singh left the room, signaled a nurse.

“Jenkyns has asked me,” Wentworth told her, “to give part of his fruit to the son of an old friend who, he says, is in the hospital. Jack Reardon is the name. Will you find out where he is, please. I want to deliver it personally.”

The nurse hurried off, came back in a few moments and led them to another wing of the hospital, to a public solarium where a gaunt young man sat in a wheel chair. Ram Singh deposited the fruit on a table beside him, and the nurse left.

Young Reardon stared curiously at the two. His identity was apparent in the modeling of face and head, but his forehead was more intelligent than his father's.

Wentworth looked him over slowly, nodded in approval. He pulled up a chair.

“I'm Richard Wentworth,” he said. “I promised your father I'd look you up to see if I could help—”

Reardon continued to study him, hostility creeping into his gaze.

“My father wrote me about some one who had promised help, but didn't identify him. Elsie— that's my fiancée—doesn't.... ”

Wentworth nodded. “She doesn't believe my intentions are good, eh? I gathered as much when she tried to shoot me the other night.”

Reardon frowned, eyes wide.

“Elsie tried—Oh, I don't believe that!” Wentworth smiled quietly. “Can you stand?” he asked.

Reardon's surprise was still large upon his face.

“Elsie wouldn't do a thing like that,” he said stubbornly.

Wentworth waved a hand.

“Let's not quarrel over it,” he urged. “I haven't filed any charge against her and won't. But she is in danger from another source, the people who have deceived her about me. Right now, I want to do something for you. Can you stand?”

Reardon stared fixedly at Wentworth. The *Spider's* keen, vital countenance was the sort to inspire confidence. After a few moments of study, Reardon nodded slowly.

“Yes,” he said. “I'm leaving the hospital tomorrow.”

Wentworth looked him over slowly. Despite his recent illness and the poorly-fitting hospital pajamas, it was apparent that Reardon was well-built. He and Wentworth were of about the same size.

Wentworth nodded. “I think a sea trip would do you a world of good,” he said. “You're sailing tomorrow.”

The youth stared at him, his eyes, as gray as Wentworth's, going wide. “Gee, that's swell of you, Mr. Wentworth!” he said. “But I got to get to work and send Dad some money. He ain't making much these days, and....”

Wentworth measured the boy with his eyes again, took in the firm line of the jaw.

“Your father doesn't need your help,” he said slowly.

The boy's chin got stubborn. “It's kind of you, of course, but I can take care of him. I don't want him to have to depend on charity.”

Wentworth shook his head slowly, his eyes kind.

“He's not on charity,” he said. “But he doesn't need your help.”

Wentworth's sympathetic tone penetrated the boy's consciousness. He stared into the older man's face and his eyes got wider. He put a hand on the chair arm to steady himself.

“You mean something,” he got out with difficulty. “You mean something you're not saying.”

Wentworth nodded slowly. “Your father is dead,” he said gently.

The words did not seem to register with young Reardon. He shook his head, pressed his right palm to his forehead, looked up quickly at Wentworth as if he suspected some joke, realized then what had been said and slumped back into the chair.

“Dead,” he said. “Dad's dead. But how? What?”

Wentworth's face went grim. “How much guts have you got?” he demanded.

Reardon's questioning eyes narrowed slowly. His jaw clenched.

“I'm no kid,” he said quietly. “I can take it.” Wentworth inspected him closely. “I think you can,” he said. “You'll have to. Your father was murdered by a gang of criminals.”

The boy's posture did not change. But the pallor of his face deepened and an ugly light glinted in his eyes.

“You know who did it?” the words rasped. Wentworth shook his head slowly. “I know the gang that did it, but I don't know its identity, its whereabouts, or its leaders. I need your help to find out.”

Reardon said slowly, “Will you tell me about it?”

And Wentworth did, sparing the youth nothing.

“You can help me catch those criminals if you will,” he said. “But it will require courage and fortitude.”

The boy struck a clenched fist upon his knee. “Try me,” he demanded.

Wentworth had been studying the youth throughout their conversation, and he was satisfied. He nodded.

“You will take a sea trip, disguised as myself. This will permit me to work against the gang unhampered by shadowers.”

“But ...” Reardon began.

“Yes, I know,” said Wentworth, “You want to come to grips with the gang yourself. I said this would require fortitude.”

“It seems more like running away,” the boy said, and the stubbornness of his jaw became more emphatic.

Wentworth locked gaze with him. Reardon was no youth to be browbeaten, but Wentworth willed to dominate—and the *Spider* was Master of Men! Reardon's eyes dropped.

“You're right, sir, of course,” he said. “It is foolish of me to attempt to butt into a thing like this. I'll—I'll do as you say.”

“Fine!” said Wentworth. “Let's go to your room.”

Reardon got up and moved steadily to a nearby door.

Wentworth gestured to Ram Singh. The Hindu entered, began to unwind his sash. He seated the boy on a chair, took a make-up kit from the fruit basket and rapidly tinted Reardon's face the same hue as his own. He reshaped the nose with wax, built the cheekbones higher, gave Reardon one of the two suits he wore, took shoes also from the basket. In ten minutes there were two Ram Singhs. Wentworth looked

Reardon over carefully.

“Fold your arms,” he instructed.

Reardon did so.

“Now bow slowly and say *Han, Sahib!*” Reardon did as bidden, and Ram Singh's white teeth showed in the flash of a smile. Wentworth spoke rapidly to the true Ram Singh in Hindustani, then he and the false Ram Singh went down the stairs, out past an unsuspecting nurse. In the Lancia they sped to Wentworth's apartment. Much later, the true Ram Singh returned.

“You were not seen?” Wentworth asked. Ram Singh's smile was proud. “I was not seen, *sahib*.”

“Good,” Wentworth nodded. Immediately he set about instructing Reardon in posing as Wentworth, imitating his voice, gestures and posture. The make-up would do the rest. There was a day and a half in which to prepare him.

He had a struggle with Reardon over the impossibility of notifying Elsie, but finally prevailed. “I promise to restore Elsie to you unharmed,” Wentworth pledged. “And what I promise, I fulfill.”

He had Ram Singh keep watch for her at the hospital, to follow her and perhaps obtain a clue to the Tarantula's whereabouts. But Reardon's disappearance from the hospital had been in the papers and apparently she had taken alarm. She did not show up.

Finally, an hour before sailing time, on the second day, Wentworth made up Reardon as himself. Then, giving final instructions to Ram Singh, which he made the Hindu repeat after him, he watched as the two of them left the building and entered the taxi that would take them to the *Europa*.

Each day he had been allowed to talk for a few moments with Nita. She was unharmed and fairly comfortable except for her close confinement, but over her head always hung the threat of death. Once she had tried to beg Wentworth not to go, to sacrifice her and fight the criminals, and the connection had been broken abruptly. Later the Tarantula had telephoned a warning.

Using the marvelous distaphone that Professor Brownlee had invented for him, Wentworth had made records of his love making, of his violin, enough to last a full month of daily conversations with Nita. These Reardon had taken with him. Wentworth knew he could count on Nita's ready wit to fill in any gaps.

Late that night the *Spider*, in slouch hat and worn clothes, left his apartment building by the tradesmen's entrance. He took a cab, left it at midtown and took another. Left the second cab at Ninety-sixth street and took a downtown Seventh Avenue local to Brooklyn. There he hired a Ford at a self-drive station and headed, along night-darkened roads, toward his Long Island estate, secure in the knowledge that the Tarantula thought him miles at sea on the *Europabound* for England.

A man darted from the shadowed porch, as Wentworth brought the hired car to a stop in his own driveway and stepped out.

“Put the car up, Jackson, and have my large cruiser ready in twenty minutes.”

The man's tanned, square-cut face was smiling. He had firm lips, trustworthy eyes. “Yes, sir,” he said. “In ten minutes, Mr. Richard.”

But Wentworth was already a dozen feet away, racing toward the porch steps. He kept his servants to a minimum; the fewer there were, the fewer could discover his secret enterprises. And of them all, only Ram Singh and Jenkyns knew that Wentworth was the *Spider*.

But Jackson was trustworthy. He would give service without question, doing whatever Wentworth commanded. Jackson had been in the army with him, a first sergeant in his company originally, a sergeant major when Wentworth had become colonel, and he had followed Wentworth back to civilian life. All the tortures of the Inquisition could not drag from him one syllable of Wentworth's secrets.

So Wentworth had not hesitated to enlist Jackson's help in his scheme to trick the Tarantula. He raced into the house, seized a phone, and put through an emergency call to Kirkpatrick. In less than five minutes the commissioner's precise accents vibrated over the wire.

"This is Commissioner Kirkpatrick."

Wentworth's lips twisted in a slight smile. Stanley was in for a surprise.

"Richard Wentworth speaking."

He heard Kirkpatrick's breath catch, rushed on without giving him an opportunity to speak. "I'm at my Long Island estate," he said. "Tell you later how I contrived it. This is the important thing now. The gang that have been terrorizing the city kidnapped Nita the night of the theatre holdup. They are holding her hostage and forced me to leave town and to keep hands off their depredations.

"That was why I told you I was leaving town." Kirkpatrick broke through the torrent of words. There was a buoyancy in his voice apparent even through his sharp, clipped speech.

"Bully for you, Dick. I should have known you wouldn't desert."

Wentworth's voice was grave. "You don't know how near I was to deserting you, Stanley, with Nita in danger."

"Couldn't blame you," Kirkpatrick snapped. "But I need your help, now, Stanley. I can't return to town as Wentworth. This is my plan. The *Britannic* docks late this afternoon. I'm taking my fast cruiser, and I'll board her somewhere around Montauk. I'll be in disguise and under the name of Rupert Barton, from Scotland Yard. I'm supposed to have been called in by you for consultation. Will you radio the captain for me and meet me at Quarantine?"

Kirkpatrick's tones were lively with hope. "I will. And what we won't do to this gang, won't be worth doing."

There was no gaiety in Wentworth's tone. The battle plan was laid, the rival forces were poised on the verge of conflict, but even before the fight started the Tarantula held the strategic points—Nita was in his power.

"Don't underestimate the Tarantula," Wentworth said heavily. "He is a shrewd conspirator, and very powerful. Till tonight, Stan."

"Till tonight."

CHAPTER EIGHT “I Know the Spider”

Wentworth hung up and in the same movement whirled and darted from the house again. There was no time to be lost if he were to reach Montauk and board the *Britannic* while it was still dark, before even the sunrise passengers were aboard to detect his subterfuge.

Pounding out onto the dock, he heard the low-throated mutter of the cruiser's powerful engine, but the cautious Jackson had not turned on the boat's lights. Wentworth sprang into the cockpit.

“Montauk, Jackson,” he called, “and two hours to make it in.”

Jackson's firm-lipped face was ruddy in the hooded light from the binnacle. Wentworth's feet had hardly touched the deck when, with a deepening hum, the cruiser sheered off from the dock. Spinning the wheel with a practised hand, Jackson turned to smile at Wentworth.

“I'll have you there with a half hour to spare, sir,” he promised.

His hand went to the throttle. Deeper roared the motor. The prow of the cruiser lifted, a white crested wave curled back from the cut-water.

Wentworth walked slowly forward, glimpsed dark sea water sliding past. Going down into the cabin, he called back, “Wake me when we reach the light,” then flung himself down on a locker and was almost instantly asleep.

When Jackson aroused him an hour and a half later, they were rounding Montauk and dead ahead on the southern horizon the yellow lights of a liner gleamed. Wentworth studied her carefully through night glasses, picked out the familiar silhouette with its two squat funnels, a black stripe near their tops. It was the *Britannic*.

“Lay me alongside that liner, Jackson,” he said, “then get back to the estate and forget this little excursion.”

Half an hour later, clad in brown English tweeds, his hair bleached yellow, his features altered with a makeup kit, he hailed and boarded the *Britannic* and found the way paved for him by Kirkpatrick. He remained out of sight through the day in the captain's cabin, resting and planning.

At Quarantine, Kirkpatrick boarded the liner from a swift police launch and greeted Wentworth formally as Inspector Rupert Barton of Scotland Yard. Chatting carelessly, Wentworth in the clipped English drawl that he knew so well, they descended to the launch, and not until they were in Kirkpatrick's private office, did either man betray Wentworth's true identity. Then their palms met in a solid grip of friendship.

“I want you to forgive me, Dick, for ...”

“Nonsense,” interrupted Wentworth. “You were fully justified. Now let's get busy.” There was a grimness about his face that not even the pleasure at being back on the scene, able to battle again, could lighten. His eyes gleamed like dull gray steel.

Kirkpatrick, eyeing him keenly, nodded. “You won't mind if I have Joe Roberts in on this, will you? You know, the president of the Board of Aldermen.”

Wentworth shook his head. "He's honest and keen. Let's have him in by all means."

Kirkpatrick touched a buzzer and Roberts was ushered in, a bluff, heavily built man with a strong face. After brief introductions, Wentworth dropped into a seat by Kirkpatrick's desk and put a palm flat on its top.

"First of all, I have no clues to the Tarantula. I have only a plan. Since this gang worked first of all by cutting wires, it must have an intimate knowledge, or among its members must be someone who has an intimate knowledge, of the city's wire system.

"Such a person must be connected with either the telephone or electric company. And that person must be of sufficient influence and importance to have access to those maps freely and without question. That gives us something to work on.

"Now as to foiling the gang of the Tarantula, let's get a master map of the city's wiring system, and see what we can do toward guarding those wires."

Kirkpatrick's gravity matched Wentworth's own. "I think you've got something, Dick," he said slowly. He picked up his phone, got in touch with the two companies and requested that they send over maps and the heads of their mapping departments at once.

"If you need any added authority, gentlemen, I'll get it for you," Roberts put in. "Meantime, if you'll excuse me, the Board is meeting."

Wentworth and Kirkpatrick nodded farewell. "Don't forget to call on me if you need me," Roberts said as he went out.

His help was not needed, however, in obtaining the maps. The Tarantula had the city by the throat, and officials were frightened.

Within half an hour, the phone company's representative arrived. His name was Peter MacPherson, a short, beetle-browed Scotchman, who came with a long roll of oiled paper beneath his arm.

"This is damn foolishness," he snapped without waiting for Kirkpatrick to speak. "Carting maps like this through the streets. Man, these things have got valuable information in them!"

Kirkpatrick ignored the outburst. He arose, and Wentworth did also. "Mr. MacPherson," said Kirkpatrick, "this is Inspector Barton of Scotland Yard. He's cooperating with us in stopping these burglaries."

"And about time you did something about it, too," said MacPherson testily.

Kirkpatrick's eyes glinted, but once more he overlooked the man's attitude. His desk was clear. He indicated it with a wave of his hand. "Spread the map here," he ordered.

Glumly, his beetling brows working, MacPherson unrolled the map, placing weights to hold it down. Wentworth watched him curiously. The man's hands accorded ill with his person. Instead of being square and gnarled, they were beautifully kept, with tapering fingers. But their backs were incongruously covered with wiry hair, sandy like his head.

Wentworth and Kirkpatrick bent over the chart. "Would it be possible," Wentworth asked, "to guard

central points of your telephone cables so we could prevent their being cut?"

"Certainly," MacPherson grunted, "if you had fifty thousand men."

Wentworth raised his brows. "Fancy, fifty thousand men! It seems to me, Mr.—ah— MacPherson, that you order things very poorly here in America. Now in Lond'n...."

MacPherson sniffed. "London be damned. This is New York—"

"Precisely the point I was making," said Wentworth and turned again to the map.

MacPherson turned, muttered under his breath, and Wentworth, for all his appearance of scrutinizing the map, studied him carefully. The man had a thin, cruel mouth with pursing lips from which a score of lines radiated. The eyes were deep-set and sharp behind thick glasses; but it was the hands that chiefly drew Wentworth's attention, the tapering, delicate, incongruous hands with their strangely hairy backs.

A knock on the door, and a policeman walked in with a fatuous grin on his face. "From the electric company," he said.

Wentworth looked at him quickly, glanced beyond. The other official was a woman, a singularly charming woman, her cheeks flushed with cold. He saw a smiling mouth and a small but intelligent face nestling in the turned up collar of her mink coat. Hair like flame peeped out beneath a small close toque of brown. Her green eyes met Kirkpatrick's directly.

"I came as soon as I could," she said, her voice low, full of soft throat tones.

"Miss Lamaris," cried Kirkpatrick, "this is a surprise, I didn't know that your duties included the mapping."

The woman laughed. "Oh, I do a little of everything." She turned to Wentworth, and Kirkpatrick hastily introduced her.

"Inspector Barton of Scotland Yard."

Wentworth bowed. "Charmed, I'm sure." She held out a straightforward hand. "The name is Lamaris—Tamara Lamaris. Commissioners are so careless about those things."

Wentworth took her hand, bent low over it. "One often hears of the charming women of America. One meets one such as you so rarely."

Tamara Lamaris pressed her left palm to her heart, closed her eyes and sighed ostentatiously. "Positively you make me blush," she said.

She turned toward the door. "But you wanted to see my maps, I believe." The policeman was still standing there, gazing at her. "Oh, there you are," she smiled at him. "Would you mind telling Charles—he's the man in uniform outside—to bring my maps in? That's a dear."

She unfastened her coat and Wentworth expertly relieved her of it. Her dress was woolen, of dark blue. Modishly snug, it subtly emphasized the rounded maturity of her figure. She walked toward the desk, smoothing her hips, and Wentworth thrust forward a chair, conscious of Kirkpatrick's quizzical glance.

MacPherson broke in dryly. "When you've quite finished being gallant in the Lond'n manner, Mr. Inspector Barton," he said, "would you mind telling me whether you're through with my maps so that I can be getting back to my work."

"I think," said Kirkpatrick, "that we can let you go now, Mr. MacPherson. I believe Miss Lamaris has all the necessary information, and"—his voice rasped—"I believe she's more inclined to cooperate. Let me tell you, Mr. MacPherson, that it is men such as yourself who make it increasingly difficult to keep down crime in this country. You want crime suppressed, but you are willing to do nothing to put it down."

MacPherson frowned his beetling brows at Kirkpatrick. His sharp eyes behind the thick lenses were angry. "Listen, Mr. Commissioner," he began.

"That will be all," Kirkpatrick snapped. "You may go. We have work to do."

Still glowering, MacPherson rolled up his map and strode to the door.

"You may call it work," he grumbled back, turning. "But it's just plain gallivanting."

He slammed the door on Tamara Lamaris' laughter.

For an hour then when the policeman had brought in the maps, Wentworth, Kirkpatrick and the woman pored over the charts. But it was even as MacPherson had said, unlimited men would be required to guard the wires. Wentworth straightened slowly.

"That makes it rather difficult," he said. "We'll have to work another way. May we have, Miss Lamaris, a list of all persons who have access to these maps? And by the way, Miss Lamaris, there is a request I'd like to make. Couldn't you give a reception of some sort and invite major officials of the company? I'd like to look them over, without their being aware of the scrutiny."

The woman turned wide green eyes on Wentworth. "Why, Inspector, surely you don't suspect ..."

Wentworth smiled dryly. "I'll suspect even my friend, Commissioner Kirkpatrick here, until I have eliminated him."

Tamara Lamaris looked into his face quite seriously, her folded hands resting upon the maps, smooth soft hands with delicately tinted nails. "Then you suspect me, too, Inspector?"

Wentworth nodded gravely. "Of course." And then he smiled. "In fact I think I had better keep you under close personal surveillance from now on."

Her green eyes smiled at him.

She rose, and Wentworth helped her into her coat, murmured something about dinner that evening. But she laughed and shook her head. "Positively," she said, "not a single time until the reception, which will be on Wednesday. That's four days from now."

Wentworth sighed. "I don't see how I can stand it," he said. "But I'll try to bear up."

"Stout fellah!" she said and clapped him on the shoulder. She shook hands with Kirkpatrick and left with a smile.

Kirkpatrick's gaze was curious. He touched his mustache points and sat down, surveying the maps that Tamara Lamaris had left. "I must say," he laughed, "that for a man on such a serious case ..."

"Don't be a fool, Stanley," Wentworth growled, "the woman may be useful. Now we have free access to the maps at any time—the more detailed maps, I mean, and this reception will give us an excellent chance to look over the suspects. And by the way—" he leaned forward and tapped the desk with a forefinger, "in a day or so, will you ask her to invite also Tim Lally, and Johnson Hague. I've seen both with her and either might have obtained the information about the maps, without her having any idea she was being pumped."

Kirkpatrick looked at Wentworth intently. "You suspect those two, then?"

"I suspect everybody," drawled Wentworth, "just as I told this woman."

The buzz of the phone at Kirkpatrick's elbow interrupted them, and the commissioner picked up the receiver impatiently.

"Yes," he said, then all his impatience vanished into concentrated attention, as he caught the phone excitedly with both hands. "Yes," he said again, "but can't you tell me more than that. I—"

He hung up quickly, rapidly signaled the operator. "Have that can traced immediately," he snapped, "and shoot men out on it. A woman was calling. I want her taken into custody and brought here." He replaced the receiver on the hook, raised his eyes slowly to Wentworth's questioning gaze.

"That was a woman," he said, "who gave the name of Elsie Thompson. She said," he hesitated—"she said she was the woman who pointed a pistol at you in the lobby of the theatre the other night. She says you are the *Spider*, and that she has evidence that you killed two men, Jack Reardon and his son. Then she said that Wentworth, the *Spider*, apparently had sailed for Europe, but actually was back in town now!"

Wentworth was holding a cigarette in his left hand, his lighter in his right. The cigarette crumbled.

"Careless of me," he muttered, dropped it into a wastebasket and drew on another, lighting it with steady hands.

"That means," he said slowly, "that the Tarantula knows I'm back in town." His voice suddenly went hoarse, broke despite his effort at control. "God knows what it means to Nita!"

Kirkpatrick snapped to his feet. "I'm not forgetting that *Spidercharge*," he said, "but that must wait. First, we must save Nita."

The phone buzzed again, and he caught it up in a clenched fist. "Yes," and he listened. "Very well," and he hung up with a heavy hand.

"The phone company reported that call came from a pay station, Fifty-Sixth street. My men got there—too late. Elsie Thompson was gone."

CHAPTER NINE Kirkpatrick Misses a Date

Wentworth regarded the end of his cigarette, casually streamed smoke from his nose. But a rap on the door spun him with a tenseness that betrayed his anxiety. A man in uniform stood there, nearly filling the entrance with his broad shoulders. Their width made him seem even less than his five feet six.

“Yes, Penrose?” asked Kirkpatrick.

The man's eyes were small and glittering in a face that was heavy without fatness. His bristling hair was almost white, not gray with age, but blond. He stared fixedly at Wentworth.

“Oh,” said Kirkpatrick, “you have not met Inspector Barton. Inspector, my deputy, Shane Penrose.” Their nods were equally curt. Penrose turned back to Kirkpatrick.

“I tuned in on that telephone conversation of yours as per your orders,” he said. “Why in the hell don't you arrest that guy, Wentworth? You've had proof forty times over that he's the *Spider*.”

Kirkpatrick waved a weary hand. “I know how you feel about that,” he said. “But this is scarcely the time to fight that battle again, with these crooks looting and killing right and left. Besides, regardless of how many suspicious circumstances there are, you know there has been no actual proof that Wentworth is the *Spider*. Anonymous calls can't convict a man.”

Penrose strode forward. He was ponderous, but his movements were quick. He slapped a palm on the desk. “Kirkpatrick,” he said, “I'm telling you the *Spider* is behind all this new crime in the city. He's the guy we've got to catch if we're going to stop this looting business.”

Wentworth turned to a chair and lolled in it, crossing his knees. “You seem frightf'ly positive, Mr. Penrose. Any reasons for it?”

Penrose's turn was like a boxer's. He shot out a fist with a pointed index finger. Kirkpatrick's cool voice drawled between them before he could answer.

“Penrose has a sort of private feud with the *Spider*. Every time he and I think we've just about got a criminal, and he slips out of our hands, the *Spider* catches him and all we have for our pains is a corpse with the red seal of the *Spider* on his forehead. It's handy, but naturally,” he laughed, “this upsets Mr. Penrose.”

Penrose whirled back to Kirkpatrick, flung his hand in a violent gesture, a square hand with knotty fingers. “Laugh at it if you like, and just as long as you do, the *Spider* is going to make us the laughing stock of the city!” Red-faced and angry, he stalked from the office.

Wentworth got slowly to his feet. Facing Kirkpatrick, he spoke of that subject which was for the moment uppermost in the minds of each.

“I have received no new threat,” he said, “against Nita's life. Somehow I do not believe the Tarantula would strike against her without seizing the opportunity to mock at and torture me. He would love the chance to gloat.”

Kirkpatrick regarded him steadily. “I hope you're right,” he said solemnly.

Circles were smudged beneath Kirkpatrick's eyes. There were lines about his mouth that even the militant points of his mustache could not disguise. He reached into the top drawer of his desk and tossed out a sheaf of papers. “Here are the lists from the telephone and electric companies of all employees who

have access to the maps.”

Wentworth picked them up slowly, his eyes still fixed on his friend's face. “I appreciate your confidence,” he said, “more than I can tell you, Stanley.” With a small gesture of his hand he seemed to dismiss the idea. He caught up a chair, pulled it forward and sat down across the desk from Kirkpatrick. As he skimmed through the pages, his voice became brisk.

“There are several hundred names here,” he said. “If you agree, Stanley, I think we should have your men check over the entire list for possible suspects, get history, financial standing, personal data on all of them.”

Kirkpatrick nodded.

“And another thing,” said Wentworth, “I suggest that the wires are being cut by men who operate in a truck disguised as a repair wagon of one of these companies. Let's put a tail on every one of those wagons and give orders to patrolmen that every wagon not being followed by your men shall be seized.”

Kirkpatrick agreed and threw his entire force into the search. But days dragged by without any new attack by the Tarantula. Kirkpatrick's appearance of strain increased. Thin lines of apprehension etched themselves into Wentworth's face, showing even through the disguise.

The night of the reception at the home of Tamara Lamaris found him grim and burning-eyed. Ram Singh and Reardon had arrived in London and, since he had not heard from them, Wentworth knew the daily calls from Nita were continuing. He feared to communicate again with Ram Singh lest he betray a connection between the false Wentworth and the real.

Swiftly he dressed in dinner clothes, made a precise adjustment of his tie, descended to the lobby and left for the Park Avenue home of Tamara Lamaris.

Every effort to check the Tarantula so far had proved futile. Tonight he and Kirkpatrick must discover some lead, or... But there must be no “or.” They *must*!

Resolutely he thrust all thought of failure from his mind, masked his worries behind a smiling face. It was a debonair suave man-of-the-world without a care except the pleasant destruction of hours that bowed above the lovely white hand of Tamara Lamaris.

“I'm afraid I'm a little late,” he said. “Is the commissioner here before me?”

Tamara reproved him with a glance, a toss of her flame red head. “Is that a proper greeting?” she demanded.

Wentworth laughed. “Forgive me this once, won't you... Tamara?”

He stepped back a pace and surveyed her, resplendent in a close gown of green sequins and she waved a fan of green plumes before her face, dropped her eyes in mock coquetry.

“Oh Inspector,” she said, and sighed, “you Englishmen....”

They laughed together, Wentworth offered his arm, and they strolled across the already well filled room, the center of curious gazes. “But seriously... Tamara, much as I hate to intrude business upon so pleasant an occasion, Kirkpatrick's presence is important.”

“Important?” She turned frank green eyes to his. “I’m sorry,” she said, “or I would not have joked about it. Commissioner Kirkpatrick phoned a short while ago and said it would be impossible for him to come this evening. He asked for you, said you had left your hotel. I offered to have you call, but he said it would be impossible to wait.”

Wentworth stared at her blankly, swiftly hid his surprise beneath a shrug. “Doubtless something unexpected turned up.” His eyes grew bantering. “The life of a policeman always interferes with his”—a bow—“greatest pleasure. That is the case now. I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to excuse me.”

The woman turned squarely to face him. “But this is impossible,” she said. “These people are here expressly to meet you.”

But Wentworth already was on the way to the door. “I’ll see you later,” he called back. “If I may use your phone ...”

He did not wait for a response, but went to the instrument in the hall. He called Kirkpatrick’s home, but drew a blank there. At the office he succeeded only in getting Penrose.

“Yeah, I know about it,” Penrose growled, “he left word to tell you that dame Elsie Thompson had phoned again and offered him evidence. He said he was sure she was mixed up with the Tarantula, but she insisted he come alone to some dump or other to get the evidence. He wouldn’t tell me where he was going. I put a tail on him and Kirkpatrick discovered the man and sent him back. That’s all I know.”

“It’s plenty,” rasped Wentworth. “As sure as you’re living, Kirkpatrick’s work has been bothering the Tarantula and he’s going to remove him. In God’s name, throw every man you’ve got on the job of tracing Kirkpatrick!”

Penrose’s voice rasped into the receiver. “Listen, John Bull,” he said, “get this in your bean. I’m running this police department while Kirkpatrick’s not here. You’re not. When I need your help I’ll ask for it.”

Wentworth’s eyes glinted, but his voice was calm. “For heaven’s sake, man,” he urged, “forget the personal element in this. Kirkpatrick’s life is at stake, I tell you. Take any action you like, but do something right away.”

Penrose was stubborn. “I’m running the police department,” he reiterated, “and—”

“Yes, you’re running the police department,” Wentworth broke in, “and you’re responsible. But I’m warning you, if anything happens to Kirkpatrick as a result of your pig-headedness, you’ll answer to me for it—personally!”

He hung up on Penrose’s shouting anger, strode swiftly to the street. He signaled a taxi, then abruptly whirled and stared down the thronged, two-lane avenue. Was it his imagination, or were the lights dimmer?

As he watched with narrowed eyes, the lights flickered and paled until they were only small yellow gleams in the blackness of the night. There was a moment of utter silence, broken only by the swish of passing cars. Then, from the house behind him, from passing couples on the pavement, came a rising murmur of startled excitement. The taxi driver Wentworth had hailed cursed fearfully. He knew, they all knew, what those dimming lights meant. The Tarantula had struck again!

CHAPTER TEN Flaming Loot

The Tarantula had struck again! Fifteen minutes before Wentworth saw the lights dim, a red electric company truck, loaded with repair equipment and bearing the regular insignia of the company, had rolled slowly down Madison Avenue. Upon it two men lounged carelessly, the driver and a helper. It turned into a side street, halted, and the men got down with the slow, time-killing motion of men who are working on somebody else's time. They took down a red stand made of pipes, set it about a manhole, and removed the lid.

On the corner was a bank, a branch of a powerful and wealthy institution. On its side was a large red box surmounted by a bell, labeled "Burglar Alarm." Stout iron bars covered its window; the doors were massive, steel with an embossed bronze covering. And within, lights burned, and two watchmen made regular rounds.

In the street outside the two electrical workers descended into the manhole. Down Madison Avenue a heavy sedan rolled, shades low. From the opposite direction came a light roadster, its top down, a man in a sporty gray fedora at the wheel a second, equally sporting young man at his side. On the crosstown street on which the electric truck was parked, another curtained sedan rolled slowly.

Moving with the precision of barrage fire, the three converged on the bank together.

Meanwhile on Madison, a policeman alighted from a small roadster, turned to his companion. "You keep an eye out, I'm going to see what these linesmen are doing now. It's too near the bank to suit me."

"Boloney!" said his companion. "Every time that truck has stopped today, you've had to go up and peep over their shoulders."

"Yeah, well that's our job," the first cop growled back.

He slid his hands into his coat pockets. There was a slit in the right-hand one, and through that his fingers touched the butt of his gun. His walk was casual, yet there was an alertness about him that betrayed his excitement to the gray-hatted men in the sport roadster, which turned into the street just then. The policeman reached the stand about the manhole, peered down into the lighted pit.

"Aren't you boys working pretty late?" he asked.

One of the workmen below grinned up at him. "There ain't no end to this job," he said.

A pistol spat from the night. The patrolman straightened, a cry gasping in his throat, a startled expression on his face. His hand went to the small of his back, his head flung backward and he collapsed in a huddle on the pavement.

The second policeman in the car started at the sound of the shot, jerked his gun from its holster. A footstep rasped beside him and he whirled, revolver leaping up. That was his last movement. A pistol exploded two inches from his head. The slug slammed him to the seat. He did not stir.

The two gray-hatted men who had fired, killing the two policemen, darted back to the roadster. They flung open the rumble seat and a mounted machine gun rose behind a shield of steel.

The two sedans braked to a halt before the bank at the same instant. A dozen men sprang from them.

Instantly, the sedans raced away. The linesmen climbed from the manhole, unreeling wire toward the door of the bank at a fast run.

From the electric truck four men seized and lifted a heavy piece of machinery. They staggered with it to the door of the bank. All was in readiness there. Working swiftly, electricians attached wires to the machinery; another man slipped on a headgear like a medieval helmet, colored glass for eyeholes. He thrust forward a tube, and a blue-hot flame bit into that massive door of steel and bronze.

In the same instant all lights of the area went dim. That powerful torch was draining the main feed wire of the district. And a mile away on Park Avenue, Wentworth, hailing a taxi, stiffened to attention, watching the lights fade, and knew the Tarantula was busy.

The bank's doors withstood only a few seconds of that intolerably hot flame. The lock, carved completely out, clanked to the floor, and four crouching men poured gun fire through the opening.

From within other guns blazed. The two watchmen were returning their fire. The metal doors swung outward. Still the alarm at the side of the bank did not sound, nor was there any indication of police interference. The Tarantula's men had done their work well. The alarms were useless, their wires cut.

The street was in pandemonium; people fled shouting or raced in silent fear through darkened streets. The machine gun mounted on the back of the roadster coughed and chattered, and frantic cars detoured. In all that darkened area people fled, panic stricken, seeking the light.

At the door of the bank, no more bullets came from within. The two guards were stretched dead upon the floor, their bodies struck a dozen times by the raiders' bullets. The Tarantula's men thrust in, lugging their machinery, reached the door of the vault, and once more the hooded man knelt before it like some gargoyle figure out of a demon-ridden past. From the tool in his hands once more that sharp tongue of fire licked out, and before its kiss the steel melted away.

The vault was of tempered steel, built to withstand ordinary torches, but never before had the genius of the underworld contrived a portable transformer which could produce so hot a flame. The safe resisted scarcely longer than had the massive doors of the bank.

The instant they swung open, the torchman and four others seized the transformer and darted to the street. A convoy of armed men surrounded them. They reached the door. From the walk opposite a lone policeman's gun spoke. The muzzle of the roadster's machine gun swept around; it chattered and cackled with a fiendish glee.

The police gun did not speak again. The transformer was loaded into the electric truck and it rolled away.

The two sedans already had disappeared. Those who had carried the transformer ducked into the manhole where the electricians had worked, and scarcely had they disappeared when others from the bank rushed out carrying bags of gold and money from the vault. One by one they popped into the manhole, and the last men dragged down the cover into place behind them.

Of all that crew of robbers, only that single car remained visible, an innocent-seeming auto with two neatly dressed men, without weapons now except for that masked and secret tool of death folded into the rumble seat.

Dim in the distance, the first police sirens growled into life. From the fringes of the darkened district

alarms had sped. But they could not designate the exact spot where the Tarantula had struck. As police cars filtered into the area, they would pick up clues from the fleeing people, news of the chattering guns, of the death cries of men. And finally they would find the bank, empty except for the dead.

The driver of the machine-gun roadster pulled down the brim of his light gray fedora. He smiled evilly and drove leisurely away, minutes ahead of those frantic, questing police.

“The Tarantula sure knows his stuff,” he chuckled to his companion.

CHAPTER ELEVEN Empty, Save For the Dead

Before the home of Tamara Lamaris, Wentworth darted through the panic of the pedestrians, sprang for the taxi he had signaled. The driver ground into gear, lunged away before Wentworth could grab a hold, fleeing in fear with the rest from the scene of the Tarantula crime.

Wentworth plunged to the middle of the street. A private car swerved past him, darted on with a deep roaring motor. Savagely Wentworth grabbed out a gun, stood squarely in the path of a taxi. The car raced straight for him, blinding headlights glaring. Wentworth swayed aside just in time. Every driver on the avenue seemed suddenly to have gone mad. They were mad, Wentworth thought bitterly, mad with fear!

Desperately he ran down the street, seeking a car. He saw a man run from a building to an auto at the curb. Before he could start, Wentworth was on the runningboard, gun leveled.

“Outside,” he ordered.

The man stared, mouth gaping, words stuttering from his lips.

“Get out, damn you!” Wentworth ordered. The man spilled out, stumbled and fell to his knees. Before he was up, Wentworth had prodded the stubbornly cold motor to life, whirled around the corner toward Madison. He did not know what loot the Tarantula sought, but he conjectured a bank. And there were a number of them on Madison.

He spun into Madison, skating half across its width on shrieking tires, righted the swaying car with a wrench, and roared down the street.

A constant stream of cars poured at top speed in the opposite direction. A taxi took a corner on two wheels, rammed another head-on with fearful concussion. Two other autos locked wheels. Their drivers wrenched frantically, trying to get free. Behind them horns grated and squealed. A trumpet horn sounded endlessly its polite *ta-te-ta-ta*. These things Wentworth saw with a half glance as, low over the wheel, he jockeyed the coupe at top speed down Madison.

Far ahead now he could hear the rattle and cough of a machine gun, hear pistols blasting. But suddenly, as he raced on, the sounds of battle ceased. All was silent except for the bellow of his own racing motor. The street now was clear of cars.

A man lying dead on the walk, his white face catching a gleam from the headlights, was Wentworth's first warning that he neared the scene of the Tarantula's attack. Bullet-shattered windows glinted silver on the sidewalk, then the gaping doors of the bank sprang into view. Wentworth slapped on brakes with such force that the car did a half turn and skated to a halt, almost nose on to the curbing.

Wentworth plunged out with drawn gun, peering, listening. Here was not even the clatter of fleeing cars; here was only silence, and death.

Wentworth raced to the corner, peered around it. Here, too, was death. A policeman slain in his auto, another crumpled in the middle of the street. Wentworth heard distantly now the wail of police sirens and went heavily back to the car. Nothing to be gained by racing madly through the traffic-cluttered streets. The police could do that better than he.

Nothing could be gained either by dashing into that bank with its blank, gaping doors like the mouth of a hideously surprised man. He would only lay himself open to the bullets of police, racing up in wild excitement too late to do anything but blunder—and bury the dead.

He went back and climbed into the coupe, sat there and waited until the sirens' wail became a scream; until foot-pounding cops dashed up to him and thrust guns in his face; until the wide-shouldered Penrose stuck his heavy face in, recognized "Inspector Barton" with a grunt, and caned off the police.

"Where's Kirkpatrick?" Wentworth snapped at him.

Penrose had lost some of his stubbornness, but none of his pig-headed belligerency. "How the hell do I know?" he growled back and whirled to direct the hurried search of his men.

Wentworth climbed from the car and strode over after him. "I'll show you the way they went," he said.

Penrose whirled toward him. "I'll bet you will," he spat out "I want to know how the hell you got here ahead of us. I believe you're mixed up with that gang."

"Your acumen does you credit," said Wentworth, smiling. "I'd been wondering how long it would take you to find out that I was the Tarantula."

Penrose snarled and pounded off, moving his heavy, broad body with the singular alertness that characterized all his actions.

"If you're afraid to go yourself," Wentworth called after him, "you might at least give me a few men to follow up the gang."

That brought Penrose stamping back, fists clenched at his sides. "One more crack like that," he said, "and you're going to land in jail."

"I scarcely think so," Wentworth told him. "There's the little matter of diplomatic courtesy with Scotland Yard. Now listen, Penrose, I'm aware that you dislike me, that you feel slighted because I was called into conference by Kirkpatrick instead of yourself. But if you've got one grain of sense left in that blockhead of yours, realize that I'm at least trying to do the same thing you are, catch the Tarantula."

Penrose sputtered, actually too angry to get out words, but Wentworth cut even that short. "Your men found no autos escaping, did they?"

Penrose growled a negative.

"And they won't," Wentworth said. "Their autos were gone before you got the alarm. I am convinced the Tarantula's men escaped this time through the tunnels beneath the street. They know the wiring

systems of the city. Those wires go through tunnels. The chances are they know those tunnels, too. If you don't want to investigate that possibility yourself, give me a couple of men and I will."

Glittering small eyes glared into Wentworth's. There was fury and hate there, but also there was an uncertainty. "I'll settle with you later," he snarled.

"That's fine," said Wentworth. "I've got a little account to settle with you anyway over failing to protect Kirkpatrick. But later. Now, give me men."

Penrose turned his back on Wentworth. "Donahue!" he howled. "Schwartz! O'Flaherty!" Three men came pounding toward him. "This is Inspector Barton of Scotland Yard," there was a sneer in his words. "He thinks he knows how the gangsters got away. Go with him." He stalked off.

Wentworth looked at the three men individually, his face determined and set, showing in the reflected glare of many headlights. His clipped voice was sharp, commanding, and, as always when Wentworth used those tones, he got obedience. There was a compelling power about the man, a vital force that men of action recognized. Here was a leader. When he chose to lead, others followed readily. Now he sized up the three before him, had each identify himself in turn.

"All right," he said briefly. "Listen, Donohue, Schwartz, O'Flaherty! I have reason to believe these crooks escaped through the tunnels beneath the city. I do not know these tunnels. There are wires on every side. If you touch the wrong one, you die. Beneath the streets we may meet gunmen who have killed a half dozen men tonight. They'll be working in territory they know. We won't. I want instant, and immediate obedience. Those are my reasons for it. Understand?"

He looked at each man individually and each nodded as he met his eyes. "Follow me," said Wentworth.

He turned and strode to the spot where the policeman lay dead in the middle of the street beside the manhole.

"Take that cover off," he ordered.

CHAPTER TWELVE Beneath City Streets

The policeman who had identified himself as Donohue bent swiftly over, dug his fingers into the lock holes of the cover and strained upward. His back arched. His neck corded. The cover stirred slightly, but did not lift.

"Schwartz," barked Wentworth, "fire ax from the bank."

The cop darted away, panted back with the ax. With its hooked point they lifted the cover until they could get their fingers under its edge and heave it to one side. The three straightened then and faced Wentworth.

"The fact that this cover was unlocked proves we are right," Wentworth told them. "The gangsters undoubtedly went this way. O'Flaherty, let me have your light." He held out his hand and received the long-barreled powerful hand torch that was police equipment. He smiled briefly into the faces of the three men, and once more said, "Follow me."

He sat on the edge of the hole, his legs dangling inside and threw the beam downward. He thrust the light

inside his coat, caught the edge with his hands, hung and dropped. He held the light so the three policemen could follow, flashed it upon the batteries of wires on all sides. Certain ones of them had been cut.

“Further proof,” said Wentworth.

They were in a room about six feet by seven, hollowed out beneath the street. At its end a pipe perhaps three feet high opened a round black mouth. On this Wentworth focused the light. He went toward it swiftly, dropped to all fours and crawled, the men trailing behind him. Fifteen feet of this, and the pipe became larger so it was possible to move at a crouch. The pipe sloped sharply downward. Wentworth halted.

“Go carefully,” he called back, his voice booming in the tunnel, “but do not hold to any of the wires. Some are charged. Any one might kill you.”

Slowly then he moved downward. His light, probing ahead, found the end of the tube, revealed a larger cavern below. He reached the end, flashed his light. There was a damp, fetid smell. Water glistened below. They were looking down into one of the main sewers of the city. There were narrow walks on either side of the sluggish stream. Slime dripped from the walls, and moving twin points of light that were rat's eyes gave back the glitter of his hand torch.

The nearest walk was four feet to one side of the pipe in which they crouched, the conduit through which the wires ran opening in the middle of the arched roof. Wentworth sat down, feet dangling. Donohue thrust up behind him.

“Focus your light,” Wentworth said. “I’m going to try to swing and throw myself so I land on that ledge. If I slip, I’m going to get rather unpleasantly wet.” He laughed lightly and Donohue echoed it. It reverberated hollowly down the length of the sewer and abruptly Donohue stopped. “Jeez,” he said, “I don’t like the sound of that.”

Wentworth turned about then, placing his hands on the bottom of the pipe and slowly lowered himself until he hung at arms' length. The end of the pipe was slimy, and his fingers slipped on the wet surface. Clinging with all his strength he began to swing slowly from side to side.

With each movement his hold on the edge of the pipe became more difficult to maintain. With a final effort he launched himself through the air, his feet struck the walkway and he teetered precariously, swinging his arms in wild circles. His back arched. He leaned out over the scummy stream. Finally he recovered his balance and stood panting on the narrow walk. He focused his light.

“All right, Donohue,” he called calmly. Without hesitation, the patrolman did as Wentworth had, and when he flung himself through the air, Wentworth seized his hands and pulled him to safety. O’Flaherty slipped waist deep into the sewage, but Schwartz managed the maneuver with only a wet foot. Then with O’Flaherty squashing along in the rear, cursing under his breath, the four pushed on, Wentworth, as always, in the lead.

Smaller sewers opened at frequent intervals, pouring filth sluggishly from pipes, and once, at the junction of another main sewer, they were forced to pause until Wentworth's questing light picked out a damp footstep that pointed them the way. On and on for what seemed hours they threaded the tunnels beneath the city, twice pushing into pipes that ended in apertures too small for human exit and being forced to retrace their steps.

At long last they found an iron ladderway that led upward into an open tunnel where they could walk nearly erect. Through it echoed a distant rumble and roar that Wentworth instantly identified as a subway train. The tube led them, after two wide turns, to the tracks.

Along the rails, they made their way, squeezing aside as a local pounded by, to a station platform, where waiting throngs eyed their disheveled and slimy clothing with curious eyes.

This then was the end of the trail. They had come from Madison Avenue near Thirty-Fourth street to the Twenty-Third street station of the East Side subway. Wearily Wentworth led the men to the street above, and a reluctant cab driver carried them to headquarters and Penrose.

Wentworth took the three before the deputy commissioner and made a concise report of what they had found. "There isn't much doubt," he concluded, "that this is the way they escaped."

"What do you want me to do about it?" Penrose growled. "Post cops in the sewers to watch for them?"

Wentworth smiled grimly, turned his back and faced the three men, thanked each of them by name. "I'll pay the cleaning bills," he said with a quick smile, and the men grinned back at him. "Dismissed," he clipped out and faced Penrose again.

"I want to compliment you on the morale of the department," he said, "but I doubt you have anything to do with it."

But Penrose, apparently, would not be angry. His heavy face creased into a satisfied smile. "While you were chasing rats in the sewers," he said, "I've been doing good work." He reached into his drawer and laid on the desk a silver-mounted and pearl-handled revolver. "We found that in the bank," he said. "Can you guess who it belongs to?"

"Is it Professor Johnson Hague or Big Tim Lally?" Wentworth asked casually.

Penrose started to his feet, his mouth sagging. For moments his mouth opened and closed like a goldfish tipping air on the surface of a bowl. When he finally got out sound it was a roar. "By God, you must be a member of the gang! How did you know that?"

Wentworth waved a hand. "The processes of deduction, my dear Penrose, might be a trifle difficult for you to follow. I prefer to remain mysterious. But you haven't told me to which of the two gentlemen in question the gun belonged."

Penrose still glared, but he was too surprised to continue his tirade. "Lally," he got out.

"Then take my advice," said Wentworth, "and follow Professor Hague."

Penrose sat down slowly, his heavy face working. It finally twisted into the semblance of a smile. "Here's another little item of information, Mr. Inspector from Scotland Yard. I learned that Lally was at the same party you were going to tonight, and he left just about ten minutes before you did. Got a phone call, he said. Now isn't that funny as hell?"

Wentworth flipped open his platinum cigarette case and extracted a cigarette, tapped it against his thumb nail.

"And what does Lally's departure in answer to a phone call signify?" He flicked flame to his lighter,

puffed at the cigarette.

Penrose's broad face was frowning. "You know well as I do," he growled. "It means he ain't got no alibi. He can't prove he wasn't at the scene and dropped this here revolver."

"Neither could I prove an alibi," Wentworth pointed out.

Penrose leaned across the desk. "I know that," he said softly. "But you have got an alibi for the second holdup tonight."

"The second holdup!"

Wentworth held the cigarette rigidly. Its thin thread of smoke made an unwavering column.

"Yes," Penrose admitted grudgingly, as if that was something he hadn't intended to reveal. "The Tarantula knocked over another bank a little while after the first and in another part of town. Both had a load of dough, too. This damned Tarantula seems to know just where to hit."

"Two banks robbed," muttered Wentworth, "the same night that Kirkpatrick goes to a mysterious engagement and fails to return. Have you started a search for him?"

"Yes," Penrose was sullen.

"When?"

"What the hell difference does it make?" Wentworth's smile was acid. "I thought so. You didn't do a damned thing until the second holdup frightened you, isn't that it?"

"That's my business," Penrose snapped.

Wentworth walked up to the desk and tapped it with a rigid forefinger. "And mine also," he said sternly. "Kirkpatrick is my friend. I warned you I'd hold you accountable, and I will."

Penrose slammed belligerently to his feet. His chair caromed against the wall and smashed to the floor. A policeman thrust in a startled face.

"Get out!" Penrose roared at him. The door clapped shut. He circled his desk on his wary boxer's feet, great shoulders rolling. Small eyes glittering in his flat, wide face, he glowed up at Wentworth and, despite his lesser height, seemed the more powerful man.

"Any time you say, Mister Inspector," he snarled. "Any time. Until then, stay out of my office, see? And stay out of headquarters. There's a leak here somewhere and I think you're it!"

There was an ugly light deep in Wentworth's eyes. He had patience for all human faults except inefficiency in high places.

"There's something rotten here," he admitted, then wrinkled his nose. "I think you're it!"

"Damn you!" Penrose roared out. "Damn you, I'll smash your face for that!" But his clenched fist did not strike again. The light in Wentworth's gray eyes was like the glint of a sword point.

“This is not the time for it, Penrose,” said Wentworth softly. “When the time is ripe, I’ll be glad to oblige you. And—” his voice rasped suddenly—“if Kirkpatrick hasn’t been found by then, come prepared to kill me. That’s the only way you’ll survive that meeting.”

Penrose’s pig eyes got wide. “That... that’s a threat!” he stammered out.

Wentworth bowed stiffly. “Quite right,” he said, and strode from the office.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN Hairy Hands

Outside Wentworth glanced at the white gold dial of his watch, saw that the hands stood at three minutes to twelve. It was late, but not too late to return to the reception of Tamara Lamaris. Ten minutes to change at the Waldorf, ten more for a taxi....

At precisely twelve-seventeen, Wentworth his bleached hair glinting blandly in subdued lights, his made-up face seeming even more sallow in artificial illumination, was bending again over the hand of Tamara Lamaris. She placed her other hand in his also.

“It was really nice of you to remember your promise after all that has happened,” she smiled.

Wentworth looked at her slowly, from head of flame, over the shimmering green of her dress that seemed part of her, an actual soft iridescent skin like a gorgeous snake—but Tamara’s flesh would be warm!—down to the shapely small ankles, the high-arched feet in slippers of dull red.

“Nice?” he repeated softly. “Nice to myself!” She laughed in her low throaty laughter that would have seemed almost masculine in its depth, if a man could utter such seductive, soft sounds.

“It is a pity such men as you must die,” she told him, “and all policemen die someday, don’t they?”

Wentworth frowned. “You have to mention death,” he complained, “and remind me of duty.” He sighed. “Well, you’ll suffer for it. I must straightway turn to business. Is Lally here?”

She nodded slowly, eyes intent. “Is your business with him?”

Wentworth shook his head. “Come along and find out.” He offered her his arm.

They passed through crowded rooms. A grave-faced youth sat cross-legged in a chair, thumbing a guitar with a muscular hand, and sang bawdily to its uncertain accompaniment. Five women stood about him with intertwined arms and giggled.

Tamara’s green eyes flashed at the man. Wentworth looked, too. The youth was familiar. He noticed then that he’d lost a thumb off his left hand and memory flooded back. This was Russell Daliot, one of those who had met with Tamara in the theatre the night of the Tarantula’s first raid. Wentworth turned veiled, curious eyes on Tamara. What was the connection between these two, he wondered.

They moved on.

Wentworth, leading his partner deftly, brought up presently before the skillfully tailored paunch of Big Tim Lally. His whole person was polished, from the nacent baldness of his red, sloping forehead, to the tips of his patent leather shoes. His voice was polished, too—with oil.

“Inspector Barton,” Lally bowed with extreme unction, his murmuring tones like a moist-palmed caress. Wentworth surveyed him through expressionless eyes.

“You'd better surrender to Deputy Commissioner Penrose right away,” Wentworth told him in conversational tones. “He found your gun in a bank the Tarantula robbed tonight.”

Lally jerked erect, his mouth gaping, his vague eyes popping with surprise.

“My... gun?”

Wentworth heard Tamara exclaim, too, but did not turn. He nodded. “Yes, a pretty, rather useless thing, all plate and mother of pearl. And Penrose told me you didn't have an alibi.”

“But... but...” Lally mopped his reddened forehead with an ample silk handkerchief held in a fat-padded, heavy hand.

Wentworth offered his arm to Tamara. “Now,” he said calmly, “let's go have a little chat with Professor Hague.”

The green eyes that regarded him were slightly puzzled. She glanced toward the beet- countenanced Lally. “I think the Inspector gave you straight dope,” she said, then took Wentworth's arm and walked off with him. “Now what could you possibly accomplish by scaring that man to death?” she asked slowly.

Wentworth grinned, but did not answer. He had satisfied himself that Lally lacked the mentality to direct the Tarantula's gang. He might be a tool connected with it, but Wentworth doubted even that. Penrose's clue was obviously a plant to turn suspicion from some one. And Professor Hague.... Wentworth had learned that the gray-faced scientist was making a study of electrical systems. That would undoubtedly include the mapping of New York's underground conduits!

Skillfully he led Tamara back through her guests. Professor Hague came into view. Scarcely taller than Tamara's five feet five, he held an amber drink.

He lifted it, and the color made his gray face doubly pale, deadened his mouse-colored hair. Everything about the man was neutral toned— except his eyes. They were black, and behind thick glasses, rarely blinked. They did not blink as they met Wentworth's keen gray gaze. He set down the amber glass and shook hands as Tamara murmured, “Inspector Rupert Barton of Scotland Yard.”

Wentworth had difficulty concealing disgust at touch of that hand. It was cold and his fingers, gripping it, were conscious of wiry hair. The backs were alive with it, black and thick, so virile it seemed to crawl.

He plunged into conversation. “Professor, you are studying the wiring system of the city, I believe.”

Hague nodded, his oddly staring black eyes unwavering.

“Have you any theories as to how these robberies might be prevented?”

Hague raised one shoulder in a slight shrug. “The wires are poorly organized,” he said, speaking in a voice that, while masculine enough, had a slightly womanish quality. Wentworth, listening to it acutely, did not like it.... “I've been toying with an idea,” Hague went on, twirling the amber-filled glass between tapered fingers, “an idea of rigging the wires so that the touch of a wire cutter—without proper

preparation—would cause a short circuit blast. But I've discarded it. Obviously the Tarantula and his men know the system thoroughly, they could make those 'proper preparations.' The only suggestion I have—" his chuckle, low, throaty, and again startlingly feminine in its overtones—"is to catch the Tarantula!"

Wentworth nodded. "I'm going to."

Hague's black eyes regarded him fixedly. "I wish you luck," he said without warmth.

Wentworth bowed and walked on with Tamara, frowning. Her exquisite hand was light on his arm. Her long green eyes sought his.

"And now," she said, "which other suspect do you want to talk with?"

Wentworth smiled absently, his eyes preoccupied. "Our friend, Peter MacPherson, must be about."

This time it was she who guided him through the growing congestion in the rooms, till they finally located the sour-faced Scot. He drew down his beetling brows as they stopped before him.

"It's all evening I've been waiting to see you," MacPherson's burr was thick. "If Scotland Yarrd pays you a salary, and if our city has to foot the bill for you to come herrre, I'm going to write a letter aboot it to the *Times*."

Wentworth eyed the man keenly. Was he drunk, or acting cleverly? It seemed impossible that a man of his important position could behave as foolishly as had MacPherson, first in Kirkpatrick's office and now, downing Tamara's excellent amber drinks.

"Yes, Mr. MacPherson," Wentworth said slowly, "both items of your arraignment are true, but even if I seem to be gadding about, actually I am on the trail of the Tarantula."

MacPherson sputtered. "Tarantula! Tarrantula! Another damned *Spider*! This town is overrun with the vermin. If I were police commissioner, I'd exterm—exterm—I'd kill every damned one of them!"

His eyes were owlsh. His incongruous hand with its sandy-haired back was wrapped completely around a glass.

"Yes, sir, I would!" He nodded his head. Wentworth shook his head slowly. If the man was acting, he was quite clever enough to be the Tarantula several times over. He strolled away with Tamara, MacPherson's drink-thickened burr buzzing after them.

Wentworth spent the better part of that night roving Tamara's luxurious apartment, apparently getting thoroughly drunk, but actually watching closely every person in the house. Hague and a girl, all amber like the drinks; Tamara of the green eyes and hair of flame; that splendid young animal of a man Dalot, who played the guitar with a thumbless hand. But he learned nothing more than his first casual survey had shown. Lally had got hold of his lawyer and gone down to headquarters. Hague stayed on and continued to drink until the girl in amber began to weaken at the pace he set. Then he smiled at her thinly and took her home. MacPherson had passed out, apparently.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN Panic!

The next morning at nine, Wentworth presented himself at the offices of the electric company with a note he had got from Tamara, permitting him to inspect detailed wire maps.

From these, he picked out a dozen spots that seemed to him to control lights, alarms and phones in vital sectors, spots where controlling wires converged at one point so all could be cut at one time.

He rented a car and set out to patrol these dozen points, ranging from Broadway and Maiden Lane, near the lower tip of Manhattan Island, to St. Nicholas and 110th street, half way up its length. North of that, Wentworth doubted there was anything rich enough to lure the Tarantula.

He sent the rented Ford roadster in a swift sweep up the express highway that strode on stilts along the west side, up curving Riverside Drive, cut across 110th. He passed a bank. Before it there stretched a long double line of people, shoulders hunched against the cold.

A dumpy woman waved a bankbook in the air, exclaiming to a white-haired man who stood stolidly with shoulders drooping. Her words seemed to become visible in puffs of white frost- vapor from her mouth. A fellow with a black, stringy beard mounted a soap box and harangued about "the bosses" until a blue-coated cop sauntered up with a lifted, pugnacious chin and growled, "Move on." Wentworth stewed to the curbing by the cop, flashed his credentials.

"What's the trouble?" he demanded.

"The Tarantula," the cop said laconically. "His last two robberies broke an insurance company. Can't say as I blame the depositors much." He rubbed a speculative hand along a blue-shaven jaw. "Phoned my wife to get ours out as soon as I heard the news."

Wentworth nodded somberly, eyeing the line. The cop had "phoned his wife." So had many other men apparently. Every moment the line lengthened. Gesticulating women and excited men grabbed and quarreled over places. As he watched, a bank guard in a gray uniform barred the passage of more into the building, shouldered shut the doors. A black-lettered sign was hung on the glass.

"Closed—This bank is in the hands of the state examiners, called in by the Board of Directors to conserve assets."

Wentworth started the car with a lurch as the crowd began to howl at the closed doors. Someone threw a stone, and a window smashed. A woman, gashed by a fragment, screamed. The policeman charged into the crowd, reached over the heads of two men and cracked a third with his stick. Another cop dashed to an alarm box, jerked it open. The reserves would make a siren-heralded dash.

Wentworth sped on. Nothing he could do here. Three blocks away was another bank, a branch of the one the Tarantula had robbed the night before. Before it excited depositors clustered also. An armored truck drew up and men stood with leveled revolvers while others lugged boxes of money across the walk. Wentworth shook his head. That would be vain, too.

A boy screamed an extra and Wentworth signaled him.

TARANTULA'S RAIDS SHUT BANKS

Wentworth skimmed through headlines. Both banks the Tarantula had struck the night before had been insured with one company against robbery. The company had made good the losses then suspended further payments. Runs were on at nearly every bank in town. Bankers issued reassuring statements,

saying there was ample cash on hand, that the insurance company was sound and merely wished a chance to straighten its accounts. Front page editorials urged the depositors to have faith, demanded the police instantly capture the Tarantula.

Wentworth read on:

BANKS WATCHED BY ROOSEVELT

President Keeps Touch

With New York Crisis by Telephone

Wentworth's face was grim, the line of his jaw lean. For he knew that the crisis would soon become chaos, despite Roosevelt and the police and the remaining statements of the bankers. The Tarantula had the city by the throat. The millions he had taken had made a painful dent in the bank's reserves, and now that the insurance companies were failing, there was nothing to guarantee the people's money. Banks collapsing here would shake others throughout the country. This was the nation's financial capital. If it fell, the nation fell with it. Well might President Roosevelt "keep an eye" on the bank crisis here.

With coldly shining eyes, Wentworth resigned his patrol, going from danger point to danger point on his mental map of the wiring. All day long he watched depositors rioting about closing banks, watched police, more than half in sympathy with the people, forced to charge in with flying clubs to turn aside raids. And no clue developed. He found no gleam of hope in all his long patrol. No gleam of hope until late in the afternoon, driving down Sixth Avenue, beneath the slam-banging elevated....

Wentworth's left hand tightened on the steering wheel. His right dropped down and slapped the gear-shift into neutral, fingered it back into low gear as he idled up to a red light at Ninth Street. Just ahead where Eighth Street right-angled into Sixth and slanted off on the other side as Greenwich Avenue, an electric company truck was parked directly beside one of the manholes which opened on a danger point. The light turned green and Wentworth coasted on past the truck, turned into a parking yard just below Eighth and walked slowly back to a lunch wagon on the corner where Greenwich forked off.

He slid into a booth beside a window, ordered a steak sandwich and coffee. It was drawing close to the evening rush hour. In twenty minutes subways and thrashing elevated would be jammed. He frowned and watched the men on the electric truck. They moved leisurely, stopping to light cigarettes before they unlocked and lifted the manhole cover. Only one climbed slowly down the red ladder they thrust into the tunnel below, a youngish, wiry chap with a greasy cap dragged over his right eye, a heavy leather jacket about his ears.

Wentworth told himself it was all foolish. They would not be attempting an attack on a bank in the rush hour. It would be suicide. They couldn't kill off the whole street full of witnesses. Yet this was one of the danger points ...

Peering about, he located the police car that was trailing the truck, parked some little distance down the street.

The waitress slammed down the plate before him, slopped coffee into his saucer and gave him a gold-toothed grin. She raised a hand coquettishly to lifeless, hennaed hair. "Anything else, sir?"

Wentworth shook his head and turned back to the truck. The heavy smell of hot grease rose from the steak sandwich. He glanced at it, picked up half and munched, waiting the linesmen. Only one went

beneath the street. The other stayed by the truck, a nonchalantly held red flag signaling the open manhole.

Finally the workman crawled up the ladder and the two reloaded their apparatus. Wentworth left half the steak and all the coffee, paid his check and hurried to his car. He still told himself it was foolish, a ridiculous supposition that these linesmen had done anything to wires beneath the street. Still, timing devices were easily possible.

A wire, for instance, might be attached to the street light cable. That wire half an hour later, might set off a bomb; it might be attached to a filament that would melt cables in two when current sizzled through it....

Wentworth followed the police car that followed the truck. It worked a leisurely way through thickening traffic, bluffed through tight jams in the way truck drivers have. Finally it turned into the electric company garage. There Wentworth parked and waited, eyeing each man who left the shop.

He was waiting for the man who had gone down into the manhole. Many men came out, walking heavily with heads bowed into the cold wind. When the man he sought came out, jumped into a rattletrap Chevrolet and gassed it around a corner on two wheels, Wentworth trailed.

The swift winter dusk was falling. A biting wind pushed Wentworth's Ford on the nose, slid around the windshield and gnawed at his face. A few bewildered snowflakes blundered into the funnel of the headlights.

No lolling back in the seat to follow this man. He was making time, slamming the Chevrolet along like a ten-ton truck, crashing through traffic on sheer nerve. Wentworth, sitting tensely behind his wheel, writhing through behind him, began to smile thinly. The trail looked better. This man had idled back to the garage. Now that he was away from there, he was racing. His eyes were grim. If Kirkpatrick and Nita were to live, he must find a trail quickly.

Into Eleventh Avenue the chase led, rattling along beside a crawling freight train, cutting short across its nose and nicking into Forty-First, slanting west. That meant the elevated highway, southward. Wentworth was forced to shoot on to Forty-Second to get around the locomotive. He took the highway a good two blocks behind, jouncing over the hillocked cobbles at the entrance to the upward ramp, holding himself to the seat by main strength.

The Ford scooted up the ramp. Through the scattering white flakes, Wentworth spotted his man by his swift, reckless cutting in and out through traffic, toed the accelerator to the floor and let the Ford roar down the center of the three-laned road. A police whistle got excited behind him. A glance in the rear-vision mirror showed a belted, putteed cop running to his parked motorcycle. A signboard flashed by. Speed limit, thirty five miles. Wentworth's cold-stiffened lips twisted again. The speedometer read seventy.

The Chevrolet ahead slithered around a sharp turn, rear swinging wild. Wentworth circled a droning Packard to his left, wrenched to dodge a slow-moving Buick and slammed into the curve with the speedometer still at seventy. Jammed brakes, shrieking tires. Another wrench and the Ford, swaying madly, took the gas and jackrabbited ahead. The Chevrolet ducked into a ramp, slanting to West street at Nineteenth. Wentworth swooped behind him, the siren of the motorcycle dinning in his ears. His credentials would calm the policeman, but it would lose him his quarry. He couldn't wait.

He heard the Chevrolet's brakes take hold with a squeal, saw it U-whirl back toward Twenty-Third. He stood on the brake pedal, shot east across Nineteenth. The siren's whine was muffled, then lost entirely as Wentworth swung north, took the next corner west again and, cutting his mad speed, loafed at

twenty back into West street and picked up the Chevrolet's tail light sliding onto the Hoboken ferry. A whistle blew then and Wentworth kicked the accelerator again, palmed the horn and held it squawking as he made a dash for it.

The chains were clanking as they lifted the draw. Wentworth slid by a wildly waving guard, bumped over six inches of black water and slowed to a halt with his fenders rubbing the Chevie's. The linesman was crawling slowly out, grinning beneath his cocky, greasy cap.

"What's your hurry?" he asked.

Wentworth grinned back. "Jeez," he said, "I just got a hankering to let the old boat out—*you* know how it is, and then that cop got on my tail." He shrugged, his grin widened and he peered back through the thickening snow to see the motorcycle cop jerk to a halt as the ferry cleared the slip. A ferry man pounded up to Wentworth.

"What the hell ..." he roared.

The linesman sidled away. Wentworth turned to meet the man, argued with him till the Chevie's driver had disappeared, then took the man by the arm and led him toward the cabin. He showed his police credentials. The man's bluster evaporated.

"I'm going off the boat on foot," Wentworth told him. "I want you to drive that car of mine off and take care of the police when that motorcycle cop gets on the phone."

The man backed off. "Ixnay," he said, "I ain't wanting to get mixed up in this business."

Wentworth caught his hand and crisp paper crackled between their palms. Wentworth grinned at him.

"I could get hard about it, but maybe ..." "Okay, okay," the boat man sliced the air with the edge of his hand. "That makes it different."

Wentworth was the first person off the boat. He walked swiftly ahead, got a cab and took up the chase when the linesman drove off. The man had calmed down now. Apparently Wentworth's close shave had had a sobering effect, or the need of haste was gone.

He drove without loss of time, however, straight out Jersey's express highway that stretched ninety miles to Camden, but turned off at the Newark airport, an acres-huge plot of ground full of lights blinking red and green around the close spiraling of wind-blown snow. Wentworth had his taxi close up. The Chevrolet parked, its driver got out with a grip, ran toward a plane in the line, its motor idling. Wentworth leaped out and sprinted after him, coat tails flapping against his calves.

As he raced, he dug under his arm and snaked out his gun. When the man stopped to buckle into parachute harness, Wentworth would get his chance. He was a hundred and fifty yards away. The man twisted, glimpsed Wentworth. He sprang to the wing, legged into the forward seat. A gun glinted in his hand.

Instantly the motor of the plane revved up. The snow blew toward its nose. Already it was pointed into the wind, ready for the take-off. It began to trundle forward, the propeller clawing the cold air for momentum!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN The Spider Spins

Wentworth was less than fifty yards now from the slowly moving plane. Head flung back, legs thrusting like pistons, he sprinted like the champion he was. Wentworth could shade ten seconds for a hundred yards. But with an overcoat flopping about him, and the knifing wind in his face....

Orange flame lanced from the forward cockpit of the plane. Wentworth's own gun was ready, but he did not fire. He wanted that man alive. Again the gun ahead blazed and lead plucked at his coat. The plane was picking up speed. Wentworth swerved in his stride, dived headforemost and landed on its tail. An instant later, it would have lifted, and seconds later the ship would skim free of earth. Wentworth's calculated leap jammed the controls.

In imminent danger of a crackup, the pilot cut the throttle, fought his wobbling plane. The linesman reared up in front of him, thrust the gun against his head, yelling. The flier threw a gesticulating hand backward. In that instant the plane tilted dangerously. Wentworth threw himself clear. The ship dug a wing into the earth, did a cartwheeling ground loop.

Wentworth plunged forward even as the motor choked its bellow. The plane flopped over on its back. The pilot hung in his straps, but the linesman tumbled out. Struggling to get to his feet, he flung out the gun, thrusting it almost pointblank toward Wentworth. He was not quick enough. Wentworth lashed out with his own pistol, caught the man's wrist. The gun thumped to the frozen ground.

Across the field sirens moaned. The crash wagon, with blinking red eyes, banged toward them. One-eyed motorcycles spurted past it. Wentworth caught the man by the collar and, yanking him to his feet, jabbed a gun into the small of his back. A swift, but thorough frisking found no more weapons. Grimly then, Wentworth awaited the field officials.

His credentials satisfied the police. A check put a grin back on the face of the pilot, and Wentworth herded his prisoner toward the administration building. He turned him over to a cop there, but kept his own gun leveled while he put through a hurry call for Penrose. There was no doubt in Wentworth's mind now that the linesman was a henchman of the Tarantula, a man whose capture might mean much. But even more important at that moment was the necessity of warning Penrose of impending trouble in the neighborhood where this man had worked. In view of the man's attempted flight, there could be no doubting the accuracy of his own wild guess—a time mechanism attached to electric cables beneath the street!

Wentworth had trouble getting Penrose, but finally the deputy commissioner's voice rasped over the wire.

"This is Barton," Wentworth said swiftly. "There's going to be another Tarantula robbery somewhere about Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue. You can ..."

"So there's going to be, eh?" Penrose snarled into the midst of the words. "Are you trying to pull a crude joke, Barton, or are you trying to alibi yourself? That robbery was pulled off an hour ago, and at least forty people got bumped off!"

"Forty, good God!" For an instant the news stunned Wentworth. "I called as soon as I could," he said slowly. "I was trailing ..."

"Oh, sure," Penrose broke in again. "Don't let a little thing like forty lives interfere with an important thing

like trailing. Listen, Barton, I'll be damned if I don't believe you're in cahoots with that gang. You knew too damned much about how they worked that last raid, and now you phone too late. Are you trying to make me think you're okay, by calling too late?"

Penrose was fairly howling with anger. Wentworth opened his mouth twice to interrupt, but finally hung up. No use telling the deputy that he had at last succeeded in capturing a member of the Tarantula's gang!

He slammed out of the booth, his mouth twisted in a savage grin. He seized the manacled hands of his prisoner, nodded to the cop and roughed the linesman out of the building into a waiting taxi.

"My bag!" cried the linesman. The cop tossed it in.

"Head for New York," Wentworth ordered. "Holland tunnel."

He booted the linesman into the cab, sat on a kick seat facing him with a leveled gun in his hand... and said nothing. There was a ruthless ferocity on his face. Lights along the express highway threw crooked shadows across it. His eyes gleamed. Forty dead!

He leaned forward and deliberately crashed his left fist into the prisoner's face.

The man moaned, whimpered. "Jeez! Why'd you do that? You ruined my nose... Jeez!"

Wentworth raised his fist again. The linesman winced.

"Cripes, don't do that!"

He took another glancing blow on the cheek, beat his manacled hands upon his knees. He slumped down further in the corner, eyes rolling up. The cab slid to a halt.

"Lookit here," the driver protested, "you can't do that in my cab, cop or no cop."

Wentworth's gun persuaded him. The cab rolled on, the driver keeping his eyes steadily on the snow-barred road, fearful even to stare into the mirror that reflected that gloomy back seat. The prisoner sat up feebly.

"You ain't no cop!" he quavered. "You come from *them*!"

A chuckle bubbled from Wentworth's lips. The cab slanted down off the highway, hacked through thick traffic, ducked into the crashing fury of the Holland traffic tube beneath the Hudson. The roar of the ventilators, the drumming of auto exhausts, drowned all other sound. Wentworth raised the gun and pointed it directly at the man's stomach. The fellow doubled over as if shot, lifted a bloody, pleading face. They darted out of the tube into snow-sprinkled darkness again.

"North," Wentworth ordered. "Take the express highway."

"Jeez," half sobbed the manacled man. "That ain't the way to police headquarters."

Then for the first time Wentworth spoke to him. He said, "You're telling me!" and his grin was mocking.

"But I never failed them," the man babbled. "I did just what they said and when my job was done I cut and run like hell."

Wentworth leaned forward. “Who do you mean by *they*?”

His prisoner cowered back on his seat. “Oh, Lord, I done it now. I done it now!”

“You have,” Wentworth said grimly. “You’ve admitted you’re a member of the Tarantula’s gang, and that means death. I shouldn’t be surprised if the police killed you without ever letting you go to trial. They wouldn’t need to tell anybody they’d taken a prisoner.”

The man whimpered and rocked slowly backward and forward. A dribble of blood trickled from his smashed nose. “Oh, Lord, I done it now,” he moaned again.

Abruptly he stopped his rocking. “Where’s my bag?” he demanded.

Wentworth jerked his head sideways, indicating the floor.

“I’ll give you all of it to let me go free,” the man whispered with sudden intensity. “There’s fifteen grand in that bag.”

“You’ll give it to me!” jeered Wentworth. “Man, I got it!”

“You can’t take it!” It was a cry, but there was no belief in it. Wentworth only laughed.

“Listen,” the man leaned forward again, lifted his manacled hands. “I’ll get you fifteen grand more if you’ll let me go. I can get it.” Words spilled out. “They owe it to me. They were sending it to me when I got away. They’ll let me have it. Honest, I’m not fooling....”

Wentworth looked at him fixedly. “Fifteen more would be thirty thousand,” he muttered.

The prisoner’s voice took on life. “Thirty thousand is a lot of dough,” he said eagerly. “Cripes, what I could do with thirty thousand!”

“And all I got to do is turn you loose, huh?” “Yeah, that’s all.” Hope breathed in the man’s tones. His eyes were bright.

Revulsion was strong in Wentworth’s breast. This man had assisted in the murder of forty human beings for the sake of money. Thirty thousand dollars. That meant—a grim twist of his mouth made his prisoner shrink back in his seat with a little moan—that meant \$800 a head. The Tarantula paid well for murder....

Wentworth said slowly, “That’s a deal. How do we get the other fifteen grand?”

“Take me somewhere and let me phone,” the man’s words poured out in a stumbling stream. “They’ll bring it to me when I tell them how I need it.”

“Yeah, and rub me out when they get there!” “Then I won’t tell them why I need it. I’ll just tell them to bring it, and ...”

“Okay, okay,” growled Wentworth, “we’ll see how it works.” He barked over his shoulder at the taxi driver. “Hit west on Forty-second. Find a phone booth.”

While the cab’s tires purred on the temporary steel ramp that slanted to the street at 38th street,

Wentworth opened the bag and in the uncertain light counted the money. "Fifteen grand is right," he grunted.

The cab jounced over rough cobbles and headed west, braked to a quick stop beside a small drug store. Wentworth paid him off. "And keep your mug shut, see?" he told the driver, flashing a badge.

The chauffeur grinned crookedly. "I been driving for ten years, Mac. I want to keep on." He shot the cab away.

Wentworth, carrying the bag of money tucked greedily under his arm, stopped in the shadows and unlocked one handcuff, let the prisoner thrust the other hand and manacle into his pocket. He gave him a handkerchief to daub at his face and walked with him into the store.

They wedged together into a phone booth and Wentworth listened. His prisoner called the Doctor's Exchange and asked where he could locate Dr. Fauquier. He called the number they gave him and was told the doctor had just left. "Try Fenwick 3-9748." And then finally the call went through. The prisoner asked again for Dr. Fauquier, then talked excitedly.

"Listen, Hague," he spilled out, "I got to have that other fifteen grand. Yeah, I know it ain't due...."

Hague! Wentworth's eyes were pinpoints as he eased out of the booth and stood waiting until the man, mopping his gashed forehead gingerly, came out and looked up sourly at his captor.

"What's Hague look like?" Wentworth demanded.

The man took his hand away from his forehead. "Listen," he rasped, "you're getting your dough, and that's all. I ain't squealing."

Wentworth glowered at him in his best police manner, but finally shrugged. "Okay," he said. "Now listen, I'm sliding out of here, but I'm going to be watching you. When you get that dough, you walk up the street, any sort of way. If any of that gang follows you, I'm going to put a bullet in you, see? I ain't walking onto no spot for thirty grand, nor three hundred."

Fright shadows returned to the man's eyes. "Jeez," he said, "I ain't the boss of the gang. If they want to put a tail on me ..."

Wentworth grinned crookedly. "It's okay by me," he said softly. "I'd rather put a bullet in you anyhow. You might open that trap of yours ..."

"I'll keep 'em away!" the man promised frantically. "I'll keep 'em away."

"You better!" Wentworth backed away from him and slipped out a side door. He found a red-and-black cab and gave the driver five dollars. "Park across from that drug store, with your flag down," he said. "Pretty soon a car's going to come along, and some men will go into that drug store and come out with another man. Follow them. I'll be following you in another cab."

The driver leered. "For five bucks? Not me, mister. That sounds like gang stuff to me."

Wentworth looked at him steadily. "I was going to say if they got rough to drop it. If you want to stick with it, regardless, I'll give you fifty."

“Yeah?” the driver was unshaven, his eyes suspicious beneath a broken-rimmed cap.

“Yes,” said Wentworth. He drew out the fifty dollar bill and held it in the light. The driver licked his lips nervously. “Okay,” he said and grabbed for the money.

“Not so fast,” said Wentworth softly. He held the money where the driver could see it, but not reach it. “Just remember I’m on your tail and—” he touched his side overcoat pocket—“don’t try to skip out on me.” He handed over the bill.

The driver touched his cap. “Okay, Lieutenant.”

Wentworth drifted backward into shadows. The snow had stopped now. The pavement was wet with it, reflecting lights in long shimmering lines. The air grew colder. Wentworth found an orange taxi—the first had been red-and-black— and parked it two blocks away, around a corner.

Watching, he shivered in the shadow of a doorway. Within five minutes a powerful gray sedan drew up before the drug store and two men, one wearing a white felt hat, went in. In a minute they were out with a third man, walking stiffly between them. They got in the sedan, pulled away. The red-and-black taxi jerked into motion.

Wentworth climbed into the orange cab and ordered, “Follow the red-and-black.”

They got going. The sedan did tricks. It roped along slowly, spun a corner with its motor roaring into sudden speed. Wentworth sent his own cab to the right a block behind, and they caught the sedan flashing into a skidding left turn and trailed casually along. The red-and-black held to the trail, passed Wentworth’s orange at forty- five.

They kept that up for thirty city blocks, the gray sedan doubling and turning, crashing red lights, turning about in thick cross-street traffic, trying to jam the red-and-black to the curb and gun out the driver. But that unshaven, City-wise cabbie was too wary. Finally, the gray sedan raced uptown to the ramp where Fourth avenue becomes Park, headed for the viaduct for vehicles which weaves through the Grand Central Station building itself and lets cars out into Park Avenue proper.

Wentworth’s driver got stopped by the last light before the viaduct. The sedan and the red and black cab swung into the right-angled drive through the station building. And a moment later, the sedan came scampering back through the downtown passage alone, having somehow dodged the red-and-black in making a complete circuit of the station building.

The sedan cut to its right into a one-way street, and Wentworth sent his driver after it.

A red-and-black had been trailing. Now an orange followed, leisurely. The men in the sedan ahead were evidently satisfied they had lost their shadow. They turned at normal speed down Fifth Avenue, crossed town in the thirties, wove up Eleventh Avenue to Seventy-second and coasted into Riverside Drive, turned up a side street in the Nineties and parked.

Wentworth’s cab muttered past. He saw three men with another in their midst enter an apartment building.

“Turn the corner and park,” he ordered.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN Spider Bait

From the compact kit beneath his arm the *Spider* took a few simple make-up articles, a black pencil, powder to gray his hair. Five minutes later he got out, paid the driver, then took a \$500 bill from his pocket and tore it in two, while the driver watched with staring eyes.

Wentworth gave half the \$500 bill to the driver with some detailed instructions, put the other half of the bill in an envelope, pocketed it, and walked away.

As he walked, the youth went out of his shoulders and out of his step, and an old man slow-footed down the hill toward the apartment where the men had disappeared. An expensive felt hat had been left behind in the taxi, and on his grayed locks reposed a battered hat from his pocket. His topcoat was reversible. It had been gray herringbone, now it was black and a distortion of one shoulder made it a sad misfit.

There was no resemblance between the belligerent cop who had seized a man at Newark airport and this shambling, but dignified-seeming old man.

He entered the apartment house where the Tarantula's men had gone, his heart thumping in slow, long pulses in his temples. It was not that he was going into battle against long odds. The *Spider* was used to such battles for high stakes. It was the thought that, possibly somewhere in this building, Kirkpatrick, or—or Nita might be held prisoner. Lord, how long it had been since last her blue eyes had smiled into his! How long...

Wentworth choked, shook his shoulders. He must not allow himself to think of that. Emotion slowed the brain, cut down the split-second reactions and coordination upon which the *Spiders* so often was forced to depend for life and victory over the underworld. One precaution he took. After surveying the name cards and selecting one, after entering the elevator and telling the operator "three," he took his hat and held it in both hands before him. And into a strap in its high crown, he slid a revolver.

He got off at the third floor, walked along the hall until the elevator had gone down, then concealed himself in a dark corner and waited, watching the indicator above the door which showed the location of the elevator. Five minutes later, Wentworth saw the elevator rise to the seventh floor. When it came down, he spotted three men in the cage, and one wore a white hat. The linesman was not with them.

As soon as the car was out of sight, Wentworth went swiftly upstairs to the seventh floor. There were four apartment doors and he rang each bell in turn mumbling a name when a woman came to the door of the first, being scooted by a maid in a second, and failing to get any answer at the third. He slid his hand again to the toolkit beneath his arm and extracted a lockpick, took out also a black mask that hid his entire face, the mask of the *Spider*.

The door did not resist a minute. Wentworth entered slowly, gun in hand. The stab of a small pencil flashlight revealed a room furnished in installment-store style. The air was close and hot with steam radiators. There was a faint smell of paint. Wentworth went swiftly through a living room, dining room, a kitchen—where he halted suddenly, muscles tensing.

He stood motionless, listening. The sound came from the bathroom, a hoarse, rasping breathing. It shut off suddenly, and there came a tapping, frantic and panicky. Then again the panting respirations. Wentworth kicked the door open, pocketed his gun and sprang into the room.

From the shower curtain rod a man was being hanged, a man with a battered nose, the linesman he had captured at the airport!

Wentworth lifted him, loosened the rope, let the man sag to the floor. He had fainted. A splash of water remedied that. The man's eyes blinked open, words creaked painfully from his throat.

“Who-are-you?”

Wentworth regarded him unwaveringly. He was bitterly disappointed. He had hoped to find here Nita, or at least Kirkpatrick, and some clue to the identity of the Tarantula or his whereabouts. Instead there was only this small-time crook he might have questioned before.

Again the man gasped, “Who are you?” “What do you care?” Wentworth asked. “I saved your life. Now I want payment.” His voice was mocking, brittle.

“Jeez!” the man gulped painfully, rolling his head, got out more words. “I ain't got no money.

I—I ...”

Wentworth crouched beside him, the noose in his hands. “I don't want money,” he said softly. “I want information.”

As often before, his blank, masked face, the slitted hard eyes, struck terror to the criminal heart.

“But who—who—”

Wentworth rose swiftly from beside the man, crossed to the door and slid the cigarette lighter from his pocket. Its base touched the door for an instant and when it had been removed, a vermilion spot glowed there like a drop of blood, a vermilion spot that had hairy, venomous legs— the Seal of the *Spider*!

The man on the floor struggled to a sitting position, stared at the spot. He swallowed loudly.

“The *Spider*!” It was a cry.

Wentworth went back to him slowly, the noose in his hands. He tossed the rope about the man's throat, tightened it a little.

“You killed forty people tonight,” said the *Spider* softly. “You should die.... ”

“But you took me down,” the man protested hoarsely.

“I want information,” Wentworth pulled on the rope with his fingers, and the man leaned forward frantically, easing the strain. “Talk, and you live. Refuse, and ...” again he tugged at the rope.

“I'll talk, I'll talk!” the man gasped. “What do you want ...”

Wentworth stiffened abruptly. He had felt a slight motion in the close, unventilated air of the apartment. Someone had entered, someone of the Tarantula's men. Wentworth did not move from his crouch beside the man on the floor. Instead he placed both hands where they could be seen from the door behind him, placed his gun at a distance on the tile floor, and waited.

Forty lives had been sacrificed this night while he trailed this man, and at the end had been only an empty apartment. He knew this man before him had little information. He was one of the lesser workers of the gang. Those who came now might be higher up in the chain.... He did not think they would kill the *Spider*. They would save him for the Tarantula.

So Wentworth waited, gun at a distance from his hand, risked a shot in the back, and spoke softly to the man in the noose.

“Quickly,” he said, “I have little time. The name of the man who first approached you!”

“Wiggard,” gasped his prisoner.

“Know where to find him?” The man shook his head silently. “Always called Doctor's Exchange, asked for Dr. Fauquier, got a number to call, talked to a guy named Hague.... ”

“Ever see him?”

The head shook slowly in the noose. Then the eyes bulged, staring in fright over Wentworth's shoulder.

“Oh, God ...” he moaned.

“Just hold that,” a voice behind Wentworth was sharp. “Raise your hands. That's it. Now turn around, and turn**slow**.”

Wentworth did as he ordered, faced about, eyes expressionless behind the slits of his mask. Three men were in the doorway. The one in front held a leveled gun. He wore a pinch-waisted blue coat. Gray spats graced his shoes, a white felt drooped a jaunty brim over the right eye. His face was thin, skin taut across the cheek bones, and the eyes were the flat, fishy eyes of a man who kills, coldly and without feeling.

“Well, well,” he said slowly. “Now what have we here in the pretty little mask?”

Behind Wentworth the man he had saved from hanging gasped out words. “It's the *Spider*,” he got out. “The *Spider*! I knew you was coming back, and I was holding him till you got here. Honest to God! You tell the Tarantula that, and he'll turn me loose. Honest, I ...”

“Shut up,” said the cold-eyed man in the white hat. He said it without emphasis, but the pleading voice choked off instantly. “The *Spider*, eh? With that kid's mask on? Nuts.”

“Look on the door,” said one of the men behind. He had a fat voice, and his face was rosy and padded. He wheezed out the words.

Cold Eyes said, “Okay, pull your rod.” And when two more guns were covering the *Spider*, he took a swift glance at the door, glimpsed that venomous red seal. Nervousness crept into the motions of his hands then. They shook slightly. A nerve twitched in his upper lip on the left side. It twitched and was still, twitched again. Wentworth said nothing at all. He stood with elevated hands, staring fixedly through the slits. Cold Eyes licked his upper lip.

“One of you scout through the apartment,” he said hoarsely, cleared his throat. When he spoke again, there was a higher pitch to his voice. “It ain't like this guy to walk into a trap without a back door out.”

Fat Boy walked away, his footsteps heavy on bare floors. The feet moved slowly, a little reluctantly.

Cold Eyes stooped and left handed, snaked the gun up from the floor.

“Come out of that,” he ordered Wentworth. And as the *Spider* moved calmly forward, he backed away, keeping always six feet or more between them, the gun ready. “Hang Sethol up again,” he grated to the man who remained in the hall with leveled pistol. “And hang him high this time.”

There was a choked cry from the bathroom. Wentworth walked slowly after Cold Eyes, ugly light deep in his eyes. The hanging of Sethol was just enough. But when police found that hanged man and the seal of the *Spider* on the door... The frightened protests of Sethol were cut off suddenly, and the third man came back into the room, his lips lifting evilly from wolf teeth. It was meant for a smile.

“He's hanging high,” he said dryly.

Fat Boy's heavy feet came back. “There ain't nobody in here,” he said. “I looked the whole damned place over.”

Cold Eyes was still nervous. “I don't like it anyway,” he said. “Lucky I got suspicious of this old boy the elevator operator was telling us about.” He stared at the mask, licked his lip again. “Take off that mask,” he ordered.

Wentworth lowered his hands slowly. The gun was in his hat if he wanted it. He could pretend he had knocked his hat off accidentally, grab it and the gun, be out of this fix in a moment....

Instead he unfastened the mask and took it off. His face was the face of an old man, creased about the mouth, lined about the eyes.

“Cripes, he's old!” said Cold Eyes. “Okay, now let's get out of here. Listen, *Spider*, one of us is going to be on each side of you and one behind. And all of us will have our guns ready. Don't try no funny business, *Spider*. We want to take you alive to the Tarantula, but”—the fishy eyes got more shallow, the nerve twitched in his upper lip—“it ain't necessary to take you—alive.”

Wentworth still answered nothing.

“Jeez,” Fat Boy wheezed. “Why don't he talk?”

“Maybe he ain't got nothing to say,” Cold Eyes jeered. He prodded the gun barrel into Wentworth's belly, but scarcely dented the muscle. “Cripes, he's hard for an old one.” He patted expertly over the *Spider* for weapons, but missed that gun in his hat, and he missed that compact tool kit beneath his arm. The coat was built so that they'd always miss that, unless they stripped him. It was padded so that the kit seemed part of his hard-muscled body.

The search over, Fat Boy took Wentworth by one arm, Wolf Teeth by the other, and Cold Eyes walked behind with a ready gun.

“I think,” he said, “the Tarantula will be tickled to death to see you.” His laughter rasped. “Tickled to death!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN Face to Face

With three guns pointed at him and two men gripping his arms, Wentworth strolled casually to the gray

sedan. He was thrust into the front seat- beside Fat Boy who did the driving. The other two sat behind with drawn guns.

They went silently along for a few blocks, then Cold Eyes stepped into a drugstore for five minutes.

“The Tarantula says he'll be delighted to welcome you to his humble quarters,” he told Wentworth on his return. He drew from his pocket a pair of “snatch” glasses, spectacles with smoked lenses through which it was impossible to see, with side strips that fitted snugly against the face. He leaned forward and adjusted these on Wentworth.

A simple matter for the *Spider* to seize those wrists, yank the man toward him as a shield, and grab that gun in his hat. But he submitted calmly to the glasses. It would do no good to strike now, to take command of these three hirelings. He must first let them guide him to the Tarantula's lair. Once there, he would take his chances as they came. One thing he knew. This time he must not fail!

So Wentworth submitted. Half an hour later, after many turning and twistings, which Wentworth knew were intended to confuse him, the gray sedan halted and he was led with guns ever prodding his ribs through a court that echoed; upstairs and through a door that creaked into a musty hall; then up more creaking stairs, through a door into a room.

As they entered, one of his guards snatched off Wentworth's hat. “Jeez!” Fat Boy breathed. “This guy had a gun in his hat all the time. Guess he just didn't get a chance to use it.” He laughed wheezingly. “Guess we was too smart for him, huh?”

Wentworth's mouth twitched wryly.

“What's that?” a sharp voice demanded ahead of him.

Fat Boy drew a stuttering breath. “I just found a gun in this guy's hat,” he said.

Wentworth lifted his mouth corners in a conventional smile and bowed formally from the waist.

“Haven't we met before, Tarantula?”

A chuckle answered him. “Take the glasses off,” said the voice that Wentworth had heard many times over the phone. A hand that shook slightly removed the spectacles.

For an instant light dazzled Wentworth's eyes; then he made out before him a long heavy table over which a low shaded lamp funneled white glare. Behind that lamp he saw the white bosom of a formal shirt, the satin gleam of lapels... and the hands of the Tarantula. They were folded calmly beneath the lamp, tapered, sensuous fingers resting tip against tip, corpse- white, with black hair on their backs that seemed to crawl with individual life.

Wentworth saw the shirt bosom lean forward. “I didn't know this was to be a formal occasion,” he said mockingly. “You'll have to pardon my clothing.”

The Tarantula's voice was sharp.

“This is not the *Spider*,” his voice clipped out. “What is this?”

The man called Cold Eyes spoke up from just behind Wentworth. “We were executing Sethol the way

you told us. When we go away this guy slips in and cuts him down. He was pumping Sethol about you when we walked in on him. Sethol said this guy's the *Spider* and his seal was on the door, a little red seal like a *Spider*."

There was silence in the room for two full minutes, silence that was thick and perilous. Then one of those hairy hands turned the light so its glare struck directly into Wentworth's face.

"Five feet eleven," said the Tarantula softly. "Weight 175 or 80. Carriage might very well be erect. Eyes, gray. Lips firm and straight. Ears long and close to the head, tops on a level with the eyes.

"Strange as it may seem, the description I have just given is that of Richard Wentworth and it fits precisely.

However, I have a way to know definitely whether you are Wentworth or some impostor seeking to muscle in on our enterprise." The Tarantula's voice crackled in sudden command. "Tie his hands behind him."

Wentworth had just time to swell his wrists against the bands when his arms were wrenched back and ropes bit into them.

"Fine," said the Tarantula softly. One of the hairy hands held a gun now. "Now, Mr. *Spider*, or whatever your name is, you will kindly go where I indicate."

The Tarantula rose, and walked slowly toward Wentworth, who saw now that a black hood hid the Tarantula's head as well as his face. Shadows hid even the color of the eyes. The figure was smallish, not above five feet five. Over formal evening dress the Tarantula wore a robe like a judge—or an executioner—draping from shoulders to floor. Not much chance to locate an identifying feature except for those corpse-like hands with their crawling black hair.

If that hair were sandy-colored instead of black those hands and figure might be MacPherson's. Put an amber colored drink in one of those hands and the Tarantula might be Professor Hague. Both had the necessary knowledge; both had the requisite intelligence.

Wentworth, arms bound, walked stolidly ahead of the Tarantula through a door that revealed a dimly lighted room. Hands seized Wentworth's shoulders, forced him backward into a chair. Ropes bound his ankles, looped about his already pinioned arms, and secured them to the chair back.

"You may go," the Tarantula said softly, and the door clicked shut. The two were left alone in the dimly lighted room.

It was a queer room. Its walls, without openings, were hung in gray velvet. It was empty of all furnishings save the chair upon which Wentworth sat and, in the far corner, an iron beam that ran up the wall and out upon the ceiling—an iron beam fitted with pulleys and a rope with a noose dangling from the end.

"Do you recognize my little gibbet, *Spider*?" the Tarantula asked softly. "You know its usage, don't you?" Chuckling laughter bubbled out. "My drawing showed you that, eh, *Spider*?"

That drawing, the one that had sent cold fear through Wentworth's veins, a drawing of Nita, hanging!

"Your drawing meant something else to me," the *Spider* said softly. Behind him he strained at his ropes. Swelling his wrist had saved a fraction of an inch. Not much, but with effort and time...

“Yes?” queried the Tarantula. “That drawing is a foretaste of your own doom!”

The Tarantula laughed at that, too, but Wentworth had not spoken in threatening tones. His voice had been calm as if he stated only facts. The laughter was not convincing. The Tarantula seemed to realize, and grew vicious.

“I had planned to substitute yourself on that gibbet in actuality,” the words spat out so vehemently the black mask quivered. “I know all your plans. I knew when you returned and your disguise. At any time I could have killed you, but...”

“So you tapped the police phones, did you, Tarantula?” Wentworth cut in. “I wondered if you'd think of that.”

The vehement voice of the Tarantula broke with anger, grew high. “Think of it! Why you—” Abruptly the voice checked, and for moments there was silence. Then the Tarantula laughed!

“Very clever, O *Spider*, but you shall not goad me into forgetting my purpose. You shall live, *Spider*, until my biggest raid. Then I shall shoot you with a police gun and leave you to take the blame for the Tarantula's crimes.

“Our mutual friend, Penrose, is very anxious to accuse you, *Spider*, and I—I am not anxious to have both the honor and the money. I will take the money.”

The taunting voice ceased and for a full moment there was silence in the room. Wentworth stopped working at his ropes for a moment, lest their creaking become audible. His lips were mocking.

“I appreciate the—honor you bestow, vermin.” he said lightly. “I would appreciate it more if it did not confuse your identity with mine.”

“Doubtless,” murmured the Tarantula, “but we must get about proving your identity. I no longer need Nita since she has lured you into my trap. So ...”

Wentworth felt throbbing rage, felt the thin white scar on his right temple grow red and angry. He had been fighting to spare Nita, fighting for time to work on the ropes.

“Just what is it that you want, Tarantula?” he demanded, forcing his voice to calmness.

The Tarantula had reached the gray curtains. Wentworth's words brought the masked face about. “Ah, you admit your identity!”

Wentworth's face was rigid. “I haven't denied it.”

The Tarantula turned to him. “That is true. I was the one to deny it.” Patent leather shoes gleamed beneath the long black robe as the Tarantula paced toward Wentworth. “You are a man of discernment, my dear *Spider*. You see that I want something.”

Wentworth's eyes glittered coldly. He said nothing.

“What I want is this. There are three men whose intelligence thwarts me. There was Kirkpatrick, whom I have. Another, yourself. As you see, I have you. And the third—the third is Roberts, president of the

Board of Aldermen. A very shrewd and honest man, who in addition to an armed guard, a steel vest and an armored car, seems to have a charmed life. I am afraid Roberts will have Penrose removed and substitute an intelligent man in his place.

“Now this is the plan, *Spider*. Promise me to kill Roberts and to leave the country permanently and I will restore Nita to you.”

Pain stabbed Wentworth. But his cold eyes never wavered from the Tarantula's. “You know that is impossible,” he said quietly.

The Tarantula shrugged, shoulders lifting the black robe. “I'm afraid I can't see why. You have killed many men. What does one more matter?”

Wentworth's lips clipped off words like sword blades.

“I kill only vermin such as yourself.”

The Tarantula laughed. “Stout fellah! But I think that after you have seen my little demonstration you will change your attitude.”

Wentworth's jaw was clenched until the muscles bulged. “There are some things, Tarantula,” he said, “that nothing on earth could force me to do. One of those things is kill an innocent man. Another is to do anything that might assist your plans!

“I want you to know that if I had not been able to fight you better by appearing to sail from this country, neither your threats, nor the actual death of Nita van Sloan could have forced me to go.”

The Tarantula continued to regard him through the slits of his mask. “We'll see.” The robed figure moved across the room again, ducked under the gray drapes. Wentworth yanked at his bonds. They did not yield. The curtains were thrust aside again, and Nita van Sloan stood there—and behind her was the leering black mask of the Tarantula.

Nita's eyes leaped to Wentworth, but she gave no indication that she recognized him. She did not know the *Spider's* plans, nor did she know whether or not he had identified himself. And though she knew those gray eyes that met hers so lovingly, though she would have known them anywhere, she gave Wentworth only a casual glance and turned back to the Tarantula.

Laughter bubbled from behind the mask. “Very clever, my dear. Very clever indeed. You don't know whether Wentworth wants you to recognize him, so you don't.”

Wentworth's jaw was still tightly clamped. His face was pale. Torture for Nita was ahead. Torture he would be forced to witness. Duty and love, and love must die!

“Nita, darling,” he said, “I have admitted my identity.”

The girl jerked her head about and smiled bravely. Her face was pale from long confinement. Dark circles beneath her eyes made them more vivid. She held herself proudly, though her arms were bound behind her. “It's good to see you again, Dick,” she said.

Wentworth smiled quietly. “Yes, Nita.”

“What's this animal up to now?” Nita's voice was scorn itself.

The Tarantula's laughter bubbled over again. “Just this, my dear. Your Dick is proving a bit stubborn. I want him to do a very simple thing for me—remove a troublesome man. He refuses, so—.”

“So you're going to torture me to force Dick to act,” Nita broke in. There was courage in her voice. “I tell you in advance,” she said. “It won't do any good.” Her head rose proudly. “I wouldn't have it otherwise.”

The Tarantula looked from one to the other. “You may be right, but I always find it wise in such matters to experiment. He knows you are no longer useful to me. He knows you must die. Death of a loved one a man can face. But sometimes his resolution weakens before the actuality of—torture.”

The Tarantula reached up and caught the noose that dangled from the gibbet, seized Nita by the shoulder and dropped the rope about her neck. Wentworth strained at his bonds, but they had been well tied. They would not give. The noose drew tight about Nita's soft white throat!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN The Pit of Bayonets

The Tarantula swiftly tightened the noose about Nita's throat, but left her room to breathe. Standing behind her with the rope cleverly rigged so that little effort was required to lift considerable weight, he peered past Nita's head with its clustering brown wealth of curls into Wentworth's eyes.

“Shall I pull the rope, *Spider*, or will you kill Roberts for me?”

Wentworth's teeth were ground together. His shoulders swelled. His hands fought frantically against the ropes. Time he must have. Time....

His eyes were riveted on Nita's face. Her blue eyes met his with an effort at calmness, but Wentworth could see the haunting fear that forced itself into them.

“Make up your mind,” the Tarantula urged, voice sharpening. “Time grows short.”

Tentatively he tugged at the rope. The noose wrinkled the white flesh of Nita's throat. Wentworth saw her try to swallow and fail, saw her mouth open for breath. Then Nita did a courageous thing. She lifted her feet from the floor, throwing her entire weight upon the rope, seeking immediate death to prevent torture—to save Wentworth from a decision that, either way, would torture him all his days.

The Tarantula cursed, paid out rope and allowed Nita to crumple to the floor. It was not part of his plan to let her die easily. Her death, he knew, would remove his last hold upon the *Spider*.

Wentworth bit back words that raged on his lips. His struggling hands had gained a fraction of an inch leeway from the bonds! If he could only stall off the Tarantula's torture a few moments more....

The Tarantula's chuckling laughter was the only sound in the room. “Very good, Nita. But the rope works just as well when you are lying on the floor,” and slowly once more he pulled it tight, not heavily, not savagely, but with a feline cruelty that tightened the noose just enough to half strangle Nita. It pulled her pretty head up from the floor, bit into her flesh.

Resolutely Nita made no effort to ease the strain, let her full weight sag against the rope.

“Wait!” gasped out Wentworth, fighting for time. “Wait!”

“Yes?” The hand did not ease the tension on the noose as the Tarantula turned toward him, slitted eyes glinting.

“Give me time,” cried Wentworth, “—time to think!”

His eyes were riveted on Nita's face. It was growing dark with congested blood. Her eyes were closed, her mouth open, and he could hear no sound of breathing.

The Tarantula did not relax the rope. The robed body leaned back against Nita's weight.

“Sorry,” came the casual voice from behind the mask, “I can't give you any time.” The voice crackled. “Decide now!”

Wentworth was fighting two battles; one against the bonds—which in time he would win; one in his heart—Nita against his promise to kill.

One innocent life against another, and Nita, Nita was dying!

The noose did not loosen. The Tarantula's body still leaned against its pull. That loved face was bluish now with suffocation. Her tongue forced itself out between clenched teeth.

Wentworth tossed his body in the chair, thrust out elbows as if already the ropes were free. The Tarantula uttered a startled exclamation, released the ropes and sprang toward Wentworth, a gun flashing out from beneath the black robe. In his heart the *Spider* cried, “Thank God!”

Nita sagged to the floor as the noose fell limp. Breath hissed from the girl's suffocating lungs. She stirred feebly.

Wentworth flung himself forward on his feet, lifting the chair from the floor. He whirled so the legs struck out savagely at the Tarantula. The robed figure dodged aside, the sun glinted, the edged voice barked out, “Get back, Wentworth, or I'll shoot.”

“Shoot and be damned to you!” cried Wentworth.

“I'll shoot... Nita,” the Tarantula cried. Without warning a buzzer rasped in the room. The Tarantula whirled toward the gray curtains, and in that instant Wentworth threw all his strength upon one straining wrist. Slowly at first, then with a tearing of flesh, his hand pulled free from the ropes. He sprang toward the Tarantula, though still crouched awkwardly in his ropes against the chair.

The Tarantula whirled. Wentworth's fist struck over the heart. The Tarantula reeled back, flung up the gun, and—the lights went out.

Wentworth dropped to the floor, and an orange lance of flame stabbed the spot where he had stood. Distantly now came shouts and cries of fright. Gruff men's voices rang out, a riot gun blasted, and the stuttering savage voice of a machine gun burst out. Once more the Tarantula's gun spoke, and then again, pointed straight at the floor where Wentworth lay. An ax crashed against the door of the room itself. The gun fell silent.

Again and again the ax smashed, biting into metal and wood. Men's feet stumbled into the room. The velvet curtain ripped, and a hand torch flung its broad ray of light into the darkness. Wentworth thrust himself up with his one free hand, struggled to get on his feet, looking like some awkward turtle with his heavy chair.

"What the hell," he heard a man's voice, and blinking into the glare of the light he saw it glint upon brass buttons.

"I'm Inspector Barton," Wentworth said. "Get me out of this quick. One of you get to Miss van Sloan over there and resuscitate her. She's been strangled."

The light left him and swept the room, found the iron gibbet with its dangling noose. The noose was empty. The room was empty, except for Wentworth and the policeman with the light. The Tarantula and Nita were gone!

"There ain't nobody in here," the cop said. "Behind the curtains, doors!" Wentworth snapped out.

The cop bounded across the room. Gray velvet rippled. Nothing there. Around the whole room, the policeman went, tearing down the drapes. Except for the door through which he had hacked a way, there was no opening in the walls.

"There's a door there," Wentworth declared grimly "The Tarantula went out it, and Miss van Sloan is with him. Here, cut me loose!"

The cop crossed to his side, used the ax to saw through the ropes. As he worked he laughed grimly. "There's two bullet holes in the bottom of this chair," he said. "Looks like somebody tried to burn the seat of your pants."

Wentworth voice was grim. "The Tarantula shot at me three times. I dropped under the first one, then rolled over so the chair shielded me."

The ropes fell away and he tossed the chair aside, sprang up, grabbed the ax. He was across the room in a bound, hacking savagely at the walls. A panel of wood split beneath his assault, revealed plaster. He attacked the second panel and that, too, showed no opening. A third blow bounced back with a ring of steel. The edge of the ax was chipped.

Wentworth pried at the wood with the blade, stripped it away and revealed a door like a safety deposit vault. He tossed the ax to the floor. It was useless now. His hand slid beneath his arm to the tool kit that still nestled there. Swiftly he extracted two small vials and finding the slit along the top of the door he poured part of their contents into it, dribbled some of it down across the face of the barrier.

"Stand clear," he sang out, "there's going to be an explosion."

The cop darted through the door he had hacked open, leaving the room in blackness. Wentworth touched a match to the wet place across the door, leaped after the policeman. He caught the edge of the door and swung through just as a terrific detonation ripped out behind him. A blast of air like the discharge of a cannon cycloned past. Within the room of the gibbet there was a heavy thud. Wentworth snatched the policeman's light, darted back.

The secret door lay twisted and torn on the floor. Wentworth leaped over it, sprang into the dark space beyond. His light revealed a room. This had been Nita's prison. On the far side a panel of wood swung

open, disclosing a passageway. He raced to it, plunged into narrow stairs. Down and down the steps spiraled. Wentworth took them three at a time, one hand pressing lightly against the wall for balance.

The air became dank and stale. A wet chill bit through his clothing. Still the stairs led downward. Then Wentworth checked in mid-leap, stopping himself with that hand pressed against the wall, flung frantically backward so that he sprawled on the dank stairs. A pit yawned at his feet, a pit of bayonets fixed with their points up! Another step and he would have flung himself to instant death upon those hungry needle blades!

Wentworth crouched and flung the beam of light ahead. For twenty feet the pit extended and there seemed no way over it. He flashed his light upward. There hung the flooring that had covered the pit. It was suspended on ropes, and these ran over pulleys that operated it from the opposite end. There was no ledge on either side, apparently the ropes had been the floor's sole support.

He swept the strip of boards with his light. Along each side there was a narrow space, less than an inch wide, between the wood and the wall.

Wentworth thrust the light into his coat so that its beam slanted obliquely the length of the passageway. He sprang up and caught the end of the flooring, worked to one side and wriggled his fingers into the narrow crack between it and the wall. He could not force his hand through far enough to get a full hold, only the ends of his fingers gripped the flooring. Below, the bayonets thrust up their thirsty points. Twenty feet! It looked like twenty miles. Wentworth's jaw locked grimly. This was the only way. He swung out over the pit.

Each hand must be worked into that narrow crack each time he slid it along a few inches. He advanced his right hand six inches while he clung with the aching fingers of his left. He wriggled the right hand as far into the crack as possible, pulled the left up against it, then repeated.

Slow work, slow tendon-tearing, strength-sapping work. Wentworth's breath gasped through locked teeth. Feeling fled from his fingers, left them numb and aching. Still he fought on over the yawning pit of bayonets. Right hand six inches, strain and tug, left hand up beside it, right—left—right—left. Then, at long last, fingers seeming torn from his hands, a weak swing, a fumbling leap. His feet struck the far edge of the pit, slipped. He arched backwards, over the bayonets!

Wentworth swung his arms wildly. One hand brushed the wall, reeled, pitched forward on his face. For seconds he lay there panting, then scrambled up and raced on.

The pit of bayonets was past, but valuably time had been lost.

He ran with heaving chest. Another fifty feet, and the light stabbing ahead of him struck a closed door. He flung his weight against it, bounced back, reeling. The door did not even shiver. Once more with fingers that were like sticks Wentworth brought out his two small vials. He allowed a little of the liquids to pour into the crack above the door. It was a desperate chance. The explosive was terrifically powerful, and in this narrow passage he had no way of dodging the blast.

He laid a long trail as a fuse down the entire length of the door, struck a match to it and sprinted back to the pit, dropped over its edge and hung by his tortured hands. Scarcely had he taken his position when the explosion came.

Fan of hot rushing air! Concussion like a blow on the head! Deafening sound! Wentworth was half stunned as the blast swept through the tunnel. One hand tore loose from its grip on the edge, and he hung

perilously over the bed of bayonet points. There was a creak overhead, another. Wentworth's light was gone, but he knew what those sounds meant. The ropes that alone supported the flooring over his head had been torn loose by the explosion!

Desperately Wentworth seized the damp slippery flooring, muscled himself upward until he got his elbows over the top. Another creek of the heavy flooring above his head! With a frantic heave, Wentworth dragged his body clear of the opening and rolled. Air gushed past him, a slamming crash! The flooring had fallen, missing Wentworth by inches.

He thrust to his feet, bolted for the door that he had blasted. Dim light from beyond showed it sagging on one hinge. Wentworth, with a single wrench, pulled it loose and ducked through. He was in the cluttered cellar of a building.

Ladderlike stairs climbed the far wall. Wentworth plunged toward them, swarmed up and found himself in a vacant house. He pounded forward, out into the street.

At the corner was a swirling crowd, all peering curiously the other way. Nearby was an orange cab, but the street was empty of other cars. Wentworth raced toward the cab. No one was in it. He ran on to the crowd.

"Did you see anybody come out of that house down there?" he demanded catching a man by the shoulder.

The man looked blankly into his eyes. "What house?"

Swiftly Wentworth asked a dozen more in the crowd and finally found a woman who had seen six people leave in a gray sedan—ten minutes before.

Wentworth raced back to the house where the tunnel ended, slammed through the door and bumped chest to chest into the bulky-shouldered Penrose. The deputy commissioner's hand shot out, seized Wentworth's shoulder.

"Thought you'd get away, eh?"

"I'm Inspector Barton," Wentworth said hurriedly. He poured out words. "Six people got away in a gray sedan. Let's broadcast right away. It's ten minutes since they left, but we may pick them up. The Tarantula and Nita van Sloan in the car. Kirkpatrick may be, too."

Penrose's glittering small eyes stared hostilely from his broad face. He made no move to do as Wentworth demanded, nor did the grip of his fingers weaken.

"So you're Barton, are you? Got your credentials?"

Wentworth bit out a single bitter curse. He stooped, turned up his trouser leg, revealed there the badge of Scotland Yard.

Penrose grunted in obvious disappointment. "All right," he said, "we'll get out that broadcast. But I want to see you at headquarters." He turned to a cop at his side. "Cohen, stay with this man and see that he comes to headquarters."

The cop saluted. Wentworth stared into Penrose's face. "What's up?" he asked quietly. Penrose

grinned, but made no direct reply.

“I’ll be seeing you,” he said, and stumped out of the building.

CHAPTER NINETEEN Jail for the Spider

Wentworth watched him go with narrowed eyes. He glanced at the officer assigned to watch him, then he, too, left the building and walked slowly up to the orange taxi at the corner. The driver grinned at him.

“Did I do O.K.?” he asked. “You said wait an hour and call police, or follow you if you came out with some other guys and send the cops wherever they took you.”

“You did just right.” Wentworth nodded. “But if you’d followed that gray sedan from here instead of coming to the door and looking for your five hundred, I’d have given you ten thousand.”

The driver’s face went blank. He jerked a glance up the street. “Jeez,” he said. “I never figgered they’d get through the police.”

Wentworth smiled wearily. He took an envelope from his pocket, borrowed a pencil, and scrawled words in Hindustani across its cover.

“What’s that?” demanded officer Cohen suspiciously.

Wentworth grinned at him. “That’s a report to Scotland Yard,” he said.

Cohen’s thin face was dubious. “I don’t know as I ought to let you send that,” he said.

“Listen,” Wentworth snapped, “your orders are to see that I get back to headquarters. As long as I get to headquarters, you’ve got nothing to do with my movements, and you’ll keep that long nose out of my business, see?”

“Oh, is that so?”

Wentworth looked the policeman in the eye. “It is.”

The policeman tried to stare him down but failed, shuffled feet and looked away. He said nothing more and Wentworth gave the envelope with its scrawled words, English transliteration of Hindustani characters, to the driver, gave him the other half of the five hundred dollar bill he had promised and added another hundred dollars. “Get that to a cable office right away.”

The driver grinned at him, looked at the cop with contemptuous eyes, and shot the cab away.

For two hours then Wentworth, in another cab, cruised about the city seeking some trace of the Tarantula and Nita—and allowing ample time for his cable message to be sent without interference from Penrose.

Newspaper boys were screaming the police raid on the Tarantula’s headquarters, the facts of the escape. Soldiers with bayoneted guns were on guard at every bank they passed, and Wentworth, buying a paper, found that Governor Lehman of New York was prepared to put the city under martial law at the first evidence of a new attack by the Tarantula.

President Roosevelt had closed every bank in the city to prevent their being bankrupted by the panicky runs which had filled the streets with frightened depositors. As a precaution against the Tarantula, the money was being transported by armed convoys surrounded by an entire troop of cavalry to some secret central depository in the city.

At several points companies of militia were stationed with armored trucks which would rush to any threatened area at the first news of a raid by the Tarantula.

Wentworth, reading the details of the city's preparation to battle the Tarantula and his gang, was not reassured. There were loopholes in the preparations.

Finally Wentworth ordered his cab to police headquarters and confronted Penrose. "If you'll call off your watchdog long enough," he said, "I want to get rid of this makeup. It's not especially pleasant."

Penrose nodded affably, and directed Wentworth to a small private lavatory which adjoined his office. Wentworth secured the door, speedily creamed off the make-up of the old man which he had assumed to pursue the Tarantula, and with a few deft touches restored that of Inspector Barton. He still wore the small rubber discs that plumped his cheeks, the wax that distorted his nostrils. These were part of the Barton makeup. It was necessary to wash his hair to remove the traces of the powder he had combed into his locks. But it was swiftly done, and within ten minutes Wentworth emerged in his former character of Inspector Barton of Scotland Yard.

He dropped into a chair and surveyed Penrose with veiled eyes. "I gathered," he said, "that you wished to see me about something or other."

Penrose, seated behind his desk, knotty fingers upon its top, glowered at Wentworth. He began to speak with careful slowness that indicated he had planned in detail what he was to say.

"I have just about decided," he said, "that the *Spider* and the Tarantula are the same person. Their names are alike and we know from what this Elsie Thompson phoned Kirkpatrick that the *Spider* is back in town."

Wentworth drew a cigarette from his platinum case and lighted it. "You seem to forget," he pointed out, "that it was Elsie Thompson who helped put Kirkpatrick in the Tarantula's power. If the Tarantula were the *Spider*, it scarcely seems that anyone connected with him would have tipped you off."

Penrose seemed to hear this joyfully. There was an exuberance about his small, pursed mouth. "It's my theory," he said, "that this Elsie Thompson started to do the *Spider* in and is helping him only when she is forced to. Another thing which points to the *Spider* is the fact that we found a linesman who turned off the lights for that last raid, a fellow named Sethol, hanged in an apartment house up near Riverside Drive with the seal of the *Spider* on the door. If that doesn't prove the *Spider* guilty, I don't know what does!"

Wentworth leaned forward, gesturing with his cigarette. "That's absolutely ridiculous," he said, "to me that indicates very clearly that the *Spider* is fighting the Tarantula."

"Oh, it does, does it?" Penrose growled. But instead of rancor there was an increased exuberance that marked his small glittering eyes and heavy stolid face. "That's what I'd expect you to say." He touched a button on his desk, and a policeman opened the door.

"Bring me a basin of water, soap, a wash rag and a towel," said Penrose.

Wentworth frowned at him. "What is this, a minstrel show?" he asked.

Penrose chuckled. "Well, it's something like a show, at any rate," he said with satisfaction.

The policeman brought in the basin of water and set it on the desk. "Now call a couple more men in here," Penrose ordered, and when they had arrived he leaned across the desk with a complacent smile on his face.

"I've had a tip" he said, "that you're Wentworth in disguise—that is, the *Spider*. Every word you say confirms this, and when I saw how completely you assumed the makeup of an old man to hunt, as you said, the Tarantula, I began to think perhaps it was true. I phoned Scotland Yard a little while ago, but they could give out no information, even to us, about any Inspector Barton, and that sounds damned funny. If you are Barton," Penrose grinned, "I can't do anything to you. Diplomatic courtesy, as you pointed out. But even if you are Barton, you can't object to washing your face."

Wentworth rose slowly. "This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," he said. He was thinking swiftly. If his disguise were penetrated, his identity as Wentworth revealed, nothing on earth could save him. It was fortunate that Scotland Yard had so valued his services in the past that they had given him the fictitious title of Inspector Barton and promised not to give out any information about him to anyone at all, including the police of the world.

It had saved him before. Now it had balked Penrose in that one particular. But if his makeup were removed....

Wentworth stalled. "This is absolutely silly," he said. "You know that I just removed the makeup of that old man a few minutes ago. How could I put on another one?"

"I'm sorry, Inspector, if this inconveniences you," said Penrose firmly. "But I insist that you wash your face and clear up some little uncertainty that has arisen in my mind."

"This is outrageous," Wentworth declared. "I will not tolerate such an imposition, such a reflection upon my integrity. Scotland Yard shall hear about this, and so shall Kirkpatrick."

"If Kirkpatrick ever comes back," said Penrose softly. "Will you wash your face, or shall I have it washed for you?"

Wentworth looked about him at the three police. Apparently they had been told in advance what was intended, and there was no amusement in their faces. Their grim eyes were fixed upon Wentworth, and their guns were conspicuous in their holsters.

"Very well," said Wentworth. "I'll do this, but I'm warning you that you'll live to regret it, Penrose."

"Sure," Penrose agreed, "sure. Now wash your face."

Wentworth walked slowly forward to the desk, dipped the washrag into the water. "Now then, watch closely," he said.

He scrubbed his face with the lathered washrag. He did a thorough job of it, rinsed his face in the basin, mopped it dry with the towel. Penrose was leaning forward excitedly above the desk, staring. Wentworth lowered the towel, and the unchanged, indignant face of Inspector Barton stared hostilely into Penrose's

gaze.

Penrose's mouth gaped open. "Lord!" he said, "it didn't come off."

"I hope you're satisfied now," said Wentworth severely. "I'll see that you hear about this from Washington."

Inwardly Wentworth was congratulating himself upon having recently substituted waterproof makeup in all his kits. More than once he had been forced to plunge into water in various adventures of his, and he had taken that precaution against the betrayal of his identity. It had served him well. He caught up his hat and stalked toward the door.

"Now perhaps," he said, "you will turn your attention to catching the real Tarantula." He opened the door.

"Wait!" snapped Penrose.

Wentworth turned.

"It just occurred to me," said Penrose, "speaking of shows, that actors and actresses use cold cream to remove makeup—"

"Dashed if I'll submit to another such indignity!" Wentworth exclaimed, and started from the room.

"Seize him!" Penrose barked.

The three policemen sprang upon Wentworth, wrenched him about and thrust him back into the office. Wentworth railed in his traditionally English manner, but without effect. A large jar of cold cream was brought in and one of the policemen crudely but effectively massaged his face.

With the cream came off also the surface makeup, all the sallow paint that Wentworth had applied to his face, but certain other articles of makeup remained. There were tiny disks of rubber in his cheeks, there were hits of wax in his nostrils which dilated them—and he had reshaped his eyebrows to remove the quizzical points that were typical of Wentworth.

Certainly he was no longer Inspector Barton, except for the bright blond hair. But certainly also he was not Wentworth.

Penrose glowered at him. "That takes care of you," he said, "Mr. *Spider*."

Wentworth smiled calmly at him. "You have removed Inspector Barton," he said. "I had found it necessary to assume that because of certain criminals in your country whom I did not wish to identify me. I am actually from Scotland Yard. My name is Richards. You can confirm that by phoning the Yard, and letting me speak with them."

Penrose shook his head obstinately. "You're Wentworth. There's something about you that ain't quite like him, but you're the man, all right. I can't prove it, yet. I ain't got nothing to prove you're the Tarantula. But I'm going to hold you in jail, together with a couple of other birds, and see if the Tarantula doesn't stop working while you're there."

"This is ridiculous, Penrose," Wentworth snapped. "Just phone the Yard and they'll tell you who I am."

Wentworth had a shrewd plan in mind; his friend, Inspector Ferguson, had a keen mind. If Wentworth asked him over the phone to identify him as Richards, the Inspector would do it. But Penrose waved aside his protests.

Wentworth leaned forward, pounded a fist into his palm. “Who,” he demanded, “found the Tarantula's hideout the only time it was found? I did. I had that taxicab driver trail me and phone you to come. That is the only time you have come near catching the Tarantula. If you lock me up, Miss van Sloan will die, Kirkpatrick will be killed, and not all the precautions that the soldiers and you together can take will prevent the Tarantula from looting the city of its wealth.”

Penrose sneered. “Hate yourself, don't you?”

Wentworth straightened. “I'm telling you facts. Do you want to take upon yourself the responsibility for these lives and that money?”

Penrose straightened, too, his short heavy body tense. “Sure I'll take it,” he said. “And I'll take it a lot more gladly with you in jail, along with a couple of other birds I know.”

Wentworth shook his head, his face contemptuous. He had a very definite clue now to the Tarantula. But he would have to work on it himself. Penrose would only bungle and allow the gang to escape.

“Who are these other two birds as you call them?” he asked.

A self-satisfied grin spread over Penrose's face. “They'll be here any minute now ” he said. A buzzer sounded. “Ah, here they are now. Come in!” he bellowed.

The door opened and police thrust into the office, the corpulent, polished Big Tim Lally and Professor Hague of the gray face and the tapering, hairy hands.

“What is the meaning of this?” blustered Lally.

“It means,” said Penrose, blustering back, “that you three are suspected of being the Tarantula. You will be held secretly, without being allowed to communicate with anyone, until I can make sure which of you it is.”

CHAPTER TWENTY The Hanging of Nita

Nita van Sloan had kept her gaze on Wentworth's face as the rope bit into her throat, and his suffering eyes had been the last thing she saw as darkness closed upon her. Then the rope relaxed, and she had struggled back to consciousness.

She heard noise and confusion as from a great distance, heard shots, shouts. Then blackness settled over the room. She felt herself lifted as if with great difficulty and half dragged across the floor. Draperies brushed her face, a door swung heavily shut.

“Here,” she heard the Tarantula's panting voice. “Take this girl and carry her to the car. I don't know whether I killed the *Spider* or not. I shot him three times. If he's still alive, the girl will prove useful.”

Nita pulled herself back to consciousness. Dick shot! She started to struggle vigorously, screamed.

Close walls clapped the sound back at her, smothered it. A man growled harshly. “Do that again and I’ll slug you!”

She was tossed to his shoulder, and a long descent down many stairs began. She screamed again, “Downstairs, Dick!”

A violent blow caught her on the head, sent dazzling lights, then darkness swooping upon her brain.

When consciousness returned to her a second time, she was being jolted on the floor of a car. It seemed to continue for hours, then she was hustled, only half aware of her surroundings into an unlighted house, dumped upon a hard cot.

Dimly she heard the voice she recognized as the Tarantula’s swearing, “Your friend, the *Spider*, chased us out of comfortable quarters,” it said harshly. “You’ll have to suffer the consequences along with the rest of us. I’m afraid this room won’t be up to your tastes in luxuries.”

Long days dragged past, days in which, though she did not know it, Wentworth was helpless in a police cell. The Tarantula was waiting. On the rare occasions when the hooded, robed figure thrust into Nita’s room, worry was in the voice that issued from behind the mask.

“Your friend the *Spider* has disappeared,” the voice that tried hard to gloat stated. “Either I shot him to death, in which case I have nothing to worry about, or he has run away from the Tarantula.”

Nita’s haggard blue eyes were scornful. “Run away from you!” She threw back her lovely head and laughed. “I think both your theories are wrong. He has found he can work better if he works secretly. That is why you can’t find him. Is that why you are afraid to loot any more banks?”

The hooded, robed figure was like an executioner’s. The slitted eyes gleamed. They were shadowed so it was impossible to tell their color. “No, darling,” said the Tarantula softly, “I’m just waiting until the government very kindly has assisted me by moving all the money in the city into one bank. They think they can guard it better that way. Guard it!” The hooded head was thrown back in genuine laughter.

“Not all the armies and navies of the world could prevent me from taking the money. And as for the *Spider*—” the voice grew firm—“he is either dead or in hiding. At least police will cooperate with him no longer. I had them informed that Inspector Barton was really the *Spider*.”

Nita’s arms were still held by handcuffs behind her, but the wristlets were padded to prevent them from galling. She got up and paced back and forth across the narrow, windowless room. She had been given an ill-fitting cheap little wash dress, but her proud carriage made even its gaudy colors seem glamorous.

“Worried, dear?” asked the Tarantula. “Well, you have reason to be. The moment I am convinced the *Spider* is dead, it will be necessary for me to remove you, too.”

The girl’s shoulders lifted in a listless shrug. “If Dick is dead, I do not care to live anyway,” she said levelly.

A distant buzzer sounded, and the Tarantula let out an exclamation. He ducked from the room, pulling at the door. Nita ran on soundless feet after the robed figure, thrust her foot into the opening of the slamming door. It was heavy and inflicted a painful blow. Nita bit her lips to choke back a cry of pain—but the door with its spring lock did not close. Nita stole out.

She was in a dark hallway. No one was in sight. Nita drifted soundlessly to her right, saw a wall panel open a crack. A secret escape passage! She slipped into it, kicking the panel shut behind her. A light clicked on over her head, apparently operated by the closing door, and she found herself in a small, luxuriously furnished room. It had no other exit than the one by which she had entered. Nita whirled back toward the door, heard footsteps. She was trapped!

Her eyes swept swiftly over the room, and she let out a little gasp of hope. By a chaise lounge on the far side of the room was a French phone. Nita raced to it, turned her back and lifted the phone off its cradle with her manacled hands, then she lay down on the chaise, pressed her ear to the earpiece and could talk into the transmitter.

Seconds of clicking silence passed. Nita's breath quickened, her eyes fixed on the door. If only the Tarantula would stay out of the room for a few moments.... Finally the operator answered, and Nita hurriedly gave the police number, saying, "Emergency," to speed the call through.

In seconds a gruff voice answered.

"This is Nita van Sloan," she said swiftly, "I am a prisoner in the Tarantula's headquarters. The phone number here is Chelsea 7-0965. Tell Inspector Barton or the commissioner right away, I ..." And suddenly the door swung open and the Tarantula's eyes glared at her from the slits of the hood. Nita poured out words in a frenzy of haste. "Can't you get hold of Mr. Wentworth? No, no, I don't know where to reach him, I ..."

The Tarantula wrenched the phone from her with such force that it was ripped from its wires, slapped her heavily in the face.

"You little tramp!" the voice came out muffled from behind the mask.

Nita dropped her head as if in despair, one cheek reddening from the blow. "Oh, you're right, you're right," she moaned. "Dick has disappeared. I tried to get him through his apartment, but they didn't know...."

"You're lying," there was a small break in the Tarantula's voice.

"No, no, it's true. Dick has run away. Oh, how could he do such a thing! How could he...."

"Shut up," said the Tarantula. "You're not fooling me." The Tarantula dashed across the room, flung open the door. "The police are coming. We'll have to clear out of here, too, at once! This little tart phoned them. You know what to do."

The robed figure whirled at the door, strode back to Nita, stood glaring down at her an instant. "For this," the Tarantula said, "you die, even if I lost your valued services in trapping the *Spider*. Kirkpatrick will have to take his place and die in my big raid to take the blame for the crimes. It's not as good. My build-up has been for the *Spider*. But it will have to serve. The public is ready to believe anything about a man in a high office."

A noose appeared from under the Tarantula's robe, snaked over Nita's head before she could move to prevent it. The Tarantula ran across the room, dragged the rope over a closet and door and threw full weight upon it. Nita, strangling, her hands helpless behind her, ran toward the door. She did not want to die now that police were on their way. The Tarantula hauled in the rope too swiftly for her rush to save her. Nita felt herself lifted, strangling.

She fought for breath, kicked out frantically. The Tarantula eased the rope until her toes just touched the floor, until by desperate effort, Nita could ease the strain of the noose about her throat. The rope was fastened that way.

The Tarantula stood before her, gloating as Nita fought to save herself.

“You want to live now, eh, my dear?” the voice chuckled. “Well, it will do you no good. Even if the police come here, they won't be able to find you in this secret room. And there is planted beneath this building a powerful bomb which will go off precisely five minutes after the lights go out.”

As the Tarantula spoke, the lights went out. Nita, through the drumming blood in her ears, heard swift feet cross the floor, heard the door close. She fought the noose. Five minutes.... If she could keep from strangling that long, there would be the bomb. Dear God, if Dick only knew....

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE Spider to the Rescue

Faced with Lally and Hague, in Penrose's office, Wentworth made no further protest against the deputy commissioner's intention of imprisoning him. Lally blustered on and Professor Hague added his dignified complaint. But the three of them were locked in isolated cells and a guard took up his slow, vigilant patrol before them. Regularly once each day Penrose came to inform them gloatingly that since their imprisonment the crimes of the Tarantula had ceased.

“One of you is guilty,” he said finally on the fifth day. “The fact that the raids have stopped proves it.”

“Or else,” said Wentworth dryly, “it proves the Tarantula is waiting until all the money is put together in one place before he strikes.”

Penrose glared at him. “That's what the president and the bankers are afraid of, according to the newspapers. Is that what you instructed your men to do, Mr. Tarantula?”

“If I may permit myself some peculiarly apt American slang,” said Wentworth, “nuts to you.”

Penrose snorted and left. The guard resumed his slow pacing.

Hague called to Wentworth. “How long do you suppose this fool is going to keep us here? I haven't even been able to get a lawyer.”

“I'm leaving today,” Wentworth replied. The guard spun toward him. He was tall and gangling. A bleak nose crowded watery blue eyes that seemed to protrude as he stared at Wentworth. “The hell you say!” he growled.

Wentworth smiled at him. “Yes. The real Wentworth is coming in on the *Brem* today. He knows I am imprisoned, and he is a fair man. He would not let another be locked up in his place.”

“Baloney,” said the guard. “You're Wentworth; you're the *Spider*!”

Wentworth's smile was confident. “As I told your estimable chief, I am Richards of Scotland Yard.”

The guard walked argumentatively toward the cell. “Now listen, ...” he began.

“You know,” Wentworth interrupted, “I like that American phrase.”

“What d'yuh mean?” demanded the guard. “Nuts to you,” said Wentworth, and strolled to a seat on his hard cot.

Two hours later Penrose came excitedly down the long corridor, followed by the calm-faced Ram Singh and Reardon in disguise as Wentworth. Penrose fairly puffed up to Wentworth's cell. “I'm sorry as the devil about this, Richards,” he said. “I hope you'll understand that I've been only trying to do my duty as I saw it.”

“The trouble with you,” said Wentworth calmly, watching Penrose, important in brass-buttoned blue, unlock the cell, “—the trouble is that you see only what you want to see, Penrose, and what you want to see is dashed stupid.”

The door clanged open, and Wentworth strode out.

“Dashed white of you, Wentworth,” he said grasping Reardon's hand. “I was telling this belly guard here you'd do precisely this as soon as you landed. If Kirkpatrick had been here this never would have happened.”

“I came as soon as I got your cable,” Reardon turned and strolled off, arm linked with the real Wentworth, while Penrose tagged remorsefully along at their heels.

They climbed the stairs to the main hall of Police Headquarters. Without warning, a policeman flung open a door. “Commissioner!” he yelled. “A dame on the phone says she's Nita van Sloan, and ...”

Wentworth spun through the door ahead of Penrose, snatched up the receiver, heard Nita cry out:

“The phone number here is Chelsea 7-0965. Tell Inspector Barton or the commissioner right away. I ...” Her voice broke suddenly, became desperate. “Can't you get hold of Mr. Wentworth? No, no, I don't know where to reach him. I ...”

Crashing noise came over the wire, then silence, Wentworth flashed up and down on the receiver hook. “Have that call traced at once,” he snapped.

He whirled toward Penrose, his voice crackling. “That was Nita van Sloan. She's bound to have been calling from the hideout of the Tarantula. I've ordered the call traced. As soon as you find out where it is, rush men there.”

Penrose was too startled, too recently humiliated, to bristle his usual protest against orders. He nodded, and Wentworth dashed to the door, Ram Singh and Reardon behind him. At the curb, Wentworth signaled a cab, spun toward Ram Singh, spitting out Hindustani words. Ram Singh's eyes glittered. His hands slid beneath his coat drew out a small kit—a duplicate of the one police had seized from Wentworth—and handed it over. He gave Wentworth a gun and a wallet of money also.

“You stay here,” Wentworth snapped at Reardon, “you and Ram Singh. I know the district from which that call came. I think I can get there ahead of police. You stay here and find out definitely where the house is. I'll get to the neighborhood, phone you—”

“I got you!” said Reardon.

Wentworth leaped to the cab. "Get going, north! Wide open," he shouted and flashed a badge from his kit. The taxi jerked into startled speed.

Wentworth, sitting tensely forward on the seat, peered ahead through the darkening streets and watched traffic lights. Rapidly he strapped the kit beneath his arm, checked it over, drew out a cigarette lighter with his *Spiderseals* in its base, tested the gun. He thrust a mask into his topcoat pocket. He was going into action, and tonight he would go as the *Spider*.

He knew the Tarantula feared no one in the world as he did the *Spider*, and he was fighting against desperate odds. The second's advantage he might gain by frightening his enemy, reappearing as the *Spider* after a long absence, might mean the difference between life and death for Nita and himself, the difference between salvation of the city and its utter ruin.

The light turned red as they reached an eastbound street. "Crash that light," Wentworth ordered. "Turn west." They raced across town, shot over Broadway, raced on across Sixth and Seventh Avenues. Wentworth was in a fever of anxiety.

"North again," he ordered as the cab struck Hudson, then: "That corner drug store."

He slammed into it, grabbed the phone and called headquarters, got Reardon.

"West Twenty-first," said Reardon, and he barked out a number.

The phone went dead in Wentworth's hands. In the same instant lights flickered out in the store. The druggist shouted in alarm. A woman screamed. "The Tarantula!"

Wentworth darted the length of the store, crashed out the door. Traffic lights were out now, all lights were out. The mad panic the Tarantula's raids always brought reigned everywhere.

The taxi driver turned a startled face as Wentworth leaped into the cab. "Listen," he said, "the Tarantula is getting busy again. They'll shoot everything in sight!"

"Not this time," Wentworth said grimly. "They're on the run. Get me to Twenty-first street in nothing flat."

"Cripes, boss, I—"

Wentworth jabbed a gun against the driver's neck. "Get north, damn you, or I'll blow the head off your shoulders!"

The taxi reached Twenty-first street in a little over nothing flat, whirled west at Wentworth's command, skidded to a halt before the address Reardon had given. Wentworth leaped out while the car still moved and instantly the driver shot it forward again. Wentworth cursed, but let him go.

Slipping on his mask, he bounded across the pavement. Two more leaps, and he was up the steps. His shoulder struck the door. It splintered, crashed inward, red flame lanced from the dark hall. Wentworth's gun answered. A coughing scream tore out. A body fell.

Wentworth's eyes were gimlets behind the slits of his mask. He pounded in, his pencil light stabbing a thin ray through the hall. No one in sight, no one but the body of the man who had tried to stop him.

Wentworth raced like a whirlwind through the first floor, found a phone. But it had not been wrenched from its wires, and Wentworth knew from the sound of the one Nita had talked over that had been torn loose.

Down on his knees he went, followed the wires of the phone; they pierced the floor. Downstairs he raced, took up the wires again. They slanted across the basement, through an outer wall. There was a small window giving onto the back yard. Wentworth squirmed through. Wires ran up the side of the house. Wentworth went up them hand over hand, crawled through a window that he smashed with his elbow. The wires crossed a room, went through the baseboard. Wentworth slammed to the hall, into the next room. The wires did not exit there.

Wentworth did not hesitate an instant. That meant a secret room such as in that other hideout of the Tarantula.

He whirled out into the hall again. His light found a fire ax in a glass case against the wall. He smashed the glass, whirled the ax above his head and struck it into the wall. Plaster rained to the floor. Again he struck. Wood splintered.

He was slashing like a demon now.

The ax was one continual whirl of glinting light, reflected from the flashlight he had dropped to the floor. A narrow segment of wood crashed through. Wentworth snatched up the light, shot its beam through the hole, and saw Nita, Nita hanging with a rope biting into the tender white of her throat!

“Courage, Nita!” shouted Wentworth. He saw that she was struggling on tip-toes to loosen the noose. “One minute now.”

The ax whirled again. If it had been fast before, it was a blur of light now. The hole he had hacked widened with dragging slowness. Plaster and wood gripped the ax, impeded its withdrawal. Desperately Wentworth hacked on. His breath was panting, his hands numb with the furious jarring of the ax.

The street was filled now with shrieking sirens, the shouts of police. Heavy feet pounded below. Wentworth slammed the ax again and again into the wall, wrenched it free a final time and wedged himself into the narrow hole he had made.

Jagged splinters held him back. Wentworth seized the wall with his hands, forced himself through, felt clothing and flesh tear. He pitched forward into the room. He sprang up, jumped to Nita's side and lifted her free of that hideous noose. She could not stand, and he laid her on the floor, knelt over her, pillowing her curl-clustered head on his lap. The pencil light in the hall still threw in dim illumination, made grotesque shadows.

“Nita darling,” cried Wentworth, “Nita, Nita!” The girl was breathing heavily, air rasping in her throat. She fought to speak.

“Not now,” said Wentworth, “Wait.”

Nita shook her head. “Bomb!” she flashed out finally. “Bomb under building, five minutes after lights out.”

A bomb under the building! Set to explode five minutes after the lights went out! Wentworth had raced blocks since then, traced down a wire, hacked his way through a wall. No more than seconds could

remain.

“Oh, Dick,” gasped Nita. “Hurry, hurry!” A flashlight bathed them in white glare, a flashlight like a baleful eye glaring through the hole that Wentworth had hacked.

“Dick and Nita,” jeered a voice. “Dick Wentworth in person. The *Spider*!”

It was Penrose's voice, gloating. Wentworth picked up Nita, whirled toward the opening.

“That was a neat trick of yours,” Penrose went on, “having somebody disguised like Wentworth come and get you out of jail, Mr. Barton—Richards—Wentworth—*Spider*.”

“One side, Penrose,” Wentworth bit out. “There's a bomb under this building. It's due to explode any second.”

Penrose laughed, blocking that only exit with gun and light. “That trick won't work, Mr. *Spider*, you just wait there until a man that can get through this hole, comes and takes you prisoner.”

“But the bomb!” Wentworth cried.

“Bomb?” said Penrose, grinning. “Baloney!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO Nita's Sacrifice

Wentworth let Nita's feet touch the floor. His hand, behind her, caught out his gun. It was his one chance. Penrose was holding the flashlight level, its three-battery base directly behind the lens. A straight shot would smash the light, but would not wound Penrose. A desperate chance, but the only way his and their lives could be saved.

Wentworth snapped up the gun and fired in the same motion. The light smashed out. Penrose's cry was half a scream, but he didn't sound hurt. Wentworth plunged to the opening. He thrust an arm through, seized Penrose's tunic and jerked him forward. His right fist caught the deputy commissioner's chin, and the man's weight sagged. Wentworth squirmed out the opening.

“Nita,” he called, “can you—”

“I'm here,” she gasped by his side, and with Wentworth's help she, too, wriggled out. Wentworth caught up Penrose's bulky body, heaved it across his shoulder, caught Nita up in his other arm and, reeling beneath their double weight, raced down the stairs. His feet beat heavy time on the treads. Their sound was to him like the racing seconds of time, any one of which might explode a bomb beneath the house, blow them all to extinction.

“Clear the house!” he shouted as he ran. “Bomb! Clear the house! Bomb! Clear the house!”

Below him he heard startled shouts, then slapping feet as men raced from the building. Wentworth stumbled, reeled and almost fell. He jabbed Penrose against a wall, caught his balance, pounded on through the darkness. He was down one flight now, panting along the hall. With this heavyweight his best pace was a shuffling trot. He whirled another corner, down again. His breath rasped.

The spattered lights of auto lamps showed through the broken front door. Toward it he shuffled,

gasping, cleared the final steps and reeled out into the open. He staggered, but lurched heavily forward toward the scant protection offered by a parked auto.

The sky seemed to collapse about his ears. A rush of air hurled him flat with Nita and Penrose. Then an earshattering explosion struck over them. Dazzling white and red filled the world. First a thunderous clap, then a rumbling beat, then a vast unbroken silence.

It lasted for seconds. The spattering rain of debris broke it. Fragments beat upon houses, street and cars.

Men shouted, and the sound was muted by deafened eardrums.

Wentworth ripped off his mask, staggered to his feet. He left Penrose lying, caught up Nita. Staggering, stumbling like a drunken man, he weaved an uncertain way along the street. His feet seemed weighted. Not a man was in sight. The wrecks of two automobiles were tumbled on their sides. Behind them, the house of the Tarantula had disappeared. A jagged hole gaped where it had stood.

On Wentworth fought his way, muttering broken words in Nita's ear. He turned a corner. The street was thick with police cars, parked almost fender to fender. Wentworth made his way to the nearest one, placed Nita in the seat. With fumbling hands, he started the motor. He jerked the car backward, swung it in a skidding whirl and shot off into the black night.

Behind him now came shouts and the frantic bleating of police whistles. Cold air knifed through past temples, clearing his head, bracing him like strong liquor. Beside him on the seat Nita stirred, sat erect and looked about her. She tried to speak. But wind snatched the words from her mouth; the roar of the motor drowned them out.

Wentworth, low over the wheel, sent the car skidding and sliding around the corners, finally lost the disorganized and half-hearted pursuit that had started. He cut then the frantic speed, but still hurled swiftly through darkened streets. Finally he turned and parked in a dark alley.

Wentworth turned to Nita then, dug implements from the kit beneath his arm and went to work on the handcuffs. The padding that the Tarantula had placed there made it a simple job. He ripped that out, thrust a slender piece of steel into the opening where the ratchet was, lifting the catch that held it in place. Then he would squeeze the cuff shut another notch, hold the steel in place, and remove the manacles from Nita's wrists.

Desperately Wentworth longed to take Nita in his arms to console her for the pain and privation she had been forced to undergo. Desperately Nita longed for that consolation. But both knew there was stern danger and peril ahead. Swift work must be done if they were to snare the Tarantula and avert the fearful threat to the city and nation. As always, their personal desires and feelings must wait upon the *Spider's* ruthless crusades.

Nita's words were not thanks to Dick, not happiness at their being together again, but rapid information. "The Tarantula," she said, "is only waiting for all the money to be centralized before he strikes again and for the last time. He says he has ways of beating even the guards of soldiers."

"I guessed that," said Wentworth, words crackling as he worked on the handcuffs. "The money must be moved now. If I were he I would strike tonight while Penrose is absorbed in chasing me. I think, Nita, the Tarantula will not be less keen than myself. So far he has proved smarter."

“This is what we must do. We will steal a plane, steal because Penrose will put a guard upon all the airports. You must cruise over the city. Do not watch where the lights go out, but when they grow dim as if the current was being drained off, fire a signal rocket toward the part of town where that is happening. That will be where the Tarantula is striking.

“The government has kept secret the exact place where the money is being accumulated. They have guards about three such places. One is in Harlem, one on the top floors of the Empire State Building, one at the lower end of the Island, the Federal Reserve Bank.

“I do not doubt that the Tarantula knows the exact spot where the money is being accumulated. With his marvelous facilities for tapping wires, there is little doubt he would learn the truth. There,” he finished, removing the cuffs. “I’m going to see if there isn’t a coat in this car for you.”

His own topcoat had been left behind, discarded as he hacked at the wall. He clambered out, jerked open the back of the car. There were two raincoats there, and one of these with his suit coat, he gave to Nita, while he donned the other raincoat. The wind was bitter cold. Crystalline snow was filtering down as they swung out of the alley, headed for a ferry and a New Jersey airport.

“Do you know who the Tarantula is or what he looks like?” Wentworth asked as they rolled on the ferry.

Nita thought a while in silence. “I only know,” she said, “those hairy hands and his immense strength. He lifted me once with one arm as if I were a child.” She frowned. “And yet I have an impression that when we were together in that other hideout and he carried me off that I was dragged, not carried. But I was only half conscious then, and ...”

“Thanks,” said Wentworth softly, “you’ve helped a lot.”

Wentworth sped off the ferry, but did not go to one of the large air fields. Instead, he selected a small one farther inland, where it proved a simple matter to steal up and overcome the lone guard. That done, he located signal flares and warm clothing, buckled Nita into parachute harness, and watched her take off into the face of the wind-driven snow.

Then he turned back to the hangar and placed money, much more than enough to pay for the plane, beside the bound caretaker. He left the police car there and took the man’s own machine back to New York. He raced, bundled in a coat with high-turned collar that concealed his face, to a Ninth Avenue elevated station at Houston street. He must get in touch with Penrose, yet he must talk over a phone from which he could watch the sky for Nita’s signal. Up the stairs to the elevated station he hastened, paid his fare, and on the southbound platform found a telephone booth from which he could see a large portion of the sky over New York City.

He called police headquarters, got Penrose’s snarling voice in a few seconds. Wentworth’s lips lifted in a mocking grin.

“This is Richards, Penrose. I am sure the Tarantula will strike tonight.”

“Will strike?” shouted Penrose’s voice. “He already has struck. Every policeman in town and all the reserves of soldiers have been rushed to Harlem. The lights are out up there; the phones are dead; gunmen are shooting from windows and autos!”

“Did you say the lights were out?” Wentworth asked swiftly.

“Yes, out.”

“Not just turning yellow, but actually out?” Wentworth insisted.

“Yes, damn it, out!” roared Penrose. “And you’re just pulling your old trick of calling too late to do any good, to build up an alibi for yourself.”

Wentworth ignored that. “For God’s sake, man, call in all your forces! Have them ready to rush to another part of town at an instant’s notice. That Harlem business is just a trick of the Tarantula to pull your forces away from the real object of his attack. When the Tarantula actually strikes, the lights don’t go out, they only turn dim. I have a plane over the town right now which will signal when the lights go dim and the Tarantula really strikes.”

Penrose’s voice was heavy with suspicion. “Do you think I’m as dumb as that?” he demanded. “Think I’d call in all my policemen at your say-so and give the Tarantula a chance to loot the city without a single cop to prevent him? You must think I’m getting crazy.”

Wentworth snapped at him, “You are crazy. For God’s sake, man, can’t I pound any sense into your head? I tell you this is all a trick. The Tarantula has created this disturbance in Harlem, started a riot, just to pull your men away from the real object of his attack. I wouldn’t call you if I could fight the whole Tarantula gang singlehanded, but I can’t. You must listen, and—”

Heavy feet pounding across the platform cut his words short. He slammed up the receiver. Now he knew the purpose of Penrose’s slow, argumentative words. He had held him until men could trace the phone call and send the radio patrol to capture him.

Wentworth darted from the booth. Four policemen were within a few feet of him, guns leveled. But Wentworth could still escape. He could leap behind the telephone booth, over the railing, slide down a steel pillar. On the verge of leaping, his eyes caught a red flare in the skies, saw a signal rocket spurt toward the southern tip of the island.

Nita’s signal! The Federal Reserve Bank was there! The Tarantula had struck!

Wentworth jabbed his hand upward, pointing at the signal. Police closed in, ignoring that. “Watch him, men! He’s tricky,” growled the leader.

Even then, Wentworth might have escaped. The men were too close to him, walking too closely together. A leap at the leader, a quick thrust, and they would all tangle in a heap on the floor, leaving a way to escape down the elevated pillars still open.

But as he was in the act of leaping, new light from the sky caught his eye and struck him motionless, his face distorted with horror. The light was the lurid, angry blaze of a plane in flames!

It was plunging swiftly down, whirling, long red tongues of fire licking back behind it, a flaming comet dicing out of control toward the earth. And Wentworth, hands clenched at his sides, staring up into the heavens, stood rigidly, while the police clamped hands upon his shoulders; stood without protest while they searched him roughly and took his gun—clamped handcuffs upon his wrists.

Nita, brave darling Nita, had plunged to her death in a flame-wrapped plane!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE Spider vs. Tarantula

Wentworth was insensible to the hostile hands that roughed him down the elevated stairs. He moved mechanically, without feeling. His heart was a vast, dull ache. In his brain was a thought that he refused to visualize. Nita dead! Nita killed in a fury of flames, shot down probably by the ripping, tearing slugs of machine guns.

Slowly a white rage replaced that numbness in his breast. A cold tide of anger flooded over him. In his brain was only one cry, that if Nita had died, she should not have died in vain. The Tarantula and all his murderous crew should die also—or the *Spider* himself would perish.

As his anger mounted, Wentworth took himself in rigid control. He continued to move like an automaton, feet shambling, shoulders slouched, chin upon his breast. He was thrust into a two-seater radio patrol car, one man beside him, another hanging on the runningboard with a leveled gun. Wentworth went docilely enough, but his mind was working now.

When he had unlocked Nita's handcuffs he had dropped into his trouser pocket the slim piece of steel with which he had worked. Police, taking his gun, had missed that, and Wentworth moved his manacled hands until he felt it through the cloth of his trousers. Its corners were sharp. Wentworth pressed the cloth against one until the point came through the pocket and cloth of his trousers—And he had in his hand the key to the handcuffs.

His shoulders slumped forward to conceal what he was doing, as he slid the tiny piece of steel into the opening where the adjustable ratchet held the cuffs together. Manipulating it as he had when he freed Nita, he worked the cuff off one wrist. He did not wait to release his other hand, but clenched the bracelet in his free fist. With one movement he smashed the cuff against the jaw of the patrolman to his left, and with the other hand seized the gun that was leveled at him by the man on the runningboard.

The car ran wild. Wentworth kicked the gear shift into neutral and its speed dwindled. He thrust the man on the runningboard, striking again with the cuff and the cop sprawled to the street, shouting.

The auto was barely crawling now. Wentworth tumbled the unconscious driver to the street, then flung behind the wheel, jerked the car into gear, and stamped the accelerator to the floor.

The machine lunged forward like a wild thing, took a corner on two squealing tires and Wentworth was away, racing south like a madman.

He did not bother to shake off the police who, in a second car, whined a siren at his heels. He only jerked the throttle wider, depended on his superior mastery of the car, his greater courage, to escape. And, slowly at first, then more rapidly, he drew away from the pursuing car. Slamming through half-deserted streets, he raced to fight the Tarantula.

Long before he reached the battle scene, the heavy coughing of machine guns dominated even the roar of his motor. He cut across town, skidded swaying into Broadway and raced south again. The Federal Reserve Bank, focal point of the Tarantula's attack, was not more than a half mile away.

All about him was darkness except at a point far ahead, where three sets of headlights sent their blinding glare up Broadway. The headlights did not advance, and racing nearer, Wentworth made out above them the pale flickering tongues of flame that marked the muzzles of death-spitting machine guns.

Bullets began to plunk into his car, to smash holes in the windshield. Wentworth pivoted left into the shelter of buildings. The bodies of soldiers littered Broadway headlights streaming fantastic shadows about their death-distorted forms. Here and there lay a stiff, blue-coated policeman. Wentworth slammed on brakes, climbed out and from the shadows a half dozen men came slowly forward, the remnants of those who had guarded the wealth of the city.

Wentworth circled his car, jerked open the back, and fished out a half dozen hand grenades, standard equipment for all radio cars since the Tarantula had come to harry New York. He dropped two into his pockets, held one and gave two to the nearest soldier.

He glanced over the men. They were stalwart, but lacked leadership. A leader had come now....

"No use trying to go through the streets," Wentworth said. "Those are heavy machine guns from the sound of them. Even armored cars wouldn't be proof against them. The city's entire reserve force is in Harlem. It will take them twenty minutes at top speed to get here, even after they learn that attack uptown is a sham."

One of the policemen stepped forward and saluted. "Where to, sir?" he asked.

Wentworth's grim eyes swung to the man. "Donohue?" he exclaimed. "Good lad. O'Flaherty's here, and Schwartz?"

O'Flaherty's long-nosed face showed behind Donohue. "Schwartz is dead," he said quietly.

"It's through the sewers again," Wentworth told them.

Donohue shook his head. "We remember what you did, sir, and have already tried to open a manhole. We couldn't get it open."

"No?" Wentworth grinned. "Show me the manhole."

They pointed.

"Stand clear," Wentworth ordered. He jerked the pin from a grenade, tossed it with a practiced overhead swing. There was a tearing concussion, and where the manhole had been was a gaping hole.

Wentworth looked at the man. "This probably means death," he said. "But at least we'll get a few of them." He stooped and picked up a pistol and ammunition from a fallen policeman, straightened with the gun in his hand.

"Follow me," he rasped, and raced to the manhole.

With a borrowed flashlight he led the way south through wirelined tunnels, crawling, crouching, wriggling on his belly, walking half erect again. A gun blazed ahead in the black darkness, and behind Wentworth a man gasped, "God!"

Wentworth's pistol roared, deafening in the narrow tunnel. The gun ahead did not fire again. Wentworth pounded on in a crouch. He halted sharply, gun flying up again. He checked it, went forward with a grim face. Two men lay prone on the floor. One was dead. The other had wide shoulders, an intelligent head which Wentworth thought he recognized. He turned the man over.

“Kirkpatrick!” he gasped. “In God's name, man!” He dropped beside him tore loose a gag and ripped off the ropes that bound him.

“Thank the Lord you've come,” Kirkpatrick said hoarsely. He reeled to his feet, massaging rope-chafed wrists. “I've been wondering when you'd manage to rescue me.”

“Rescue!” Wentworth's voice was a sharp bark of laughter. “It's a massacre. Every cop and soldier on guard at the Federal Reserve have been killed except these six—five now. That one shot killed a man.”

“Not killed, sir,” came Donohue's sharp voice. “Just caught me in the shoulder.”

“Good,” said Wentworth. He turned back to Kirkpatrick and explained the Tarantula's feint in Harlem. “That dumb deputy of yours, Penrose, has sent every man in the city up there after I warned him it was all a trick.”

“Then it's we eight,” said Kirkpatrick slowly, “against the entire Tarantula gang?”

“Yes,” said Wentworth.

Kirkpatrick stooped and caught up the gun of the man Wentworth had killed. “Lead on, Dick,” he said. “They planted me here during the raid. I was supposed to be taken to the bank and killed there, to take the rap for all these robberies.”

Wentworth nodded. “The Tarantula picked me first for that honor. You're the substitute.” He pushed on, and the seven trailed, walking almost erect now in a larger tunnel.

The sound of firing became louder, and presently fresh air fanned into the dark tunnel through which they walked. Wentworth led the way more slowly, spotted an open manhole overhead—a round gray spot amid blackness. He crept up an iron ladder.

“Let me go first, sir,” pleaded Donohue's low voice.

“I'm wounded anyway. If they get me, it won't matter so much.”

Wentworth laughed shortly. “If they get me, it doesn't matter at all!”

He peered out of the hole. No guards about. Only the backs of three trucks that carried heavy shields of armor. Two had machine guns that blasted up Broadway. They had penetrated the Tarantula's lines!

“Stay here,” Wentworth ordered. He crawled out, gun in one hand, bomb in the other, moved on his belly to the curb and snaked on.

Wentworth's eyes were fixed on the nearest trucks. Heavy firing came from beyond them now. Apparently the troops had been recalled from their mad dash to Harlem. But Wentworth doubted if they would avail against those heavy, chattering guns.

A man on one of the trucks turned, saw Wentworth's creeping figure throw up a gun. Wentworth's pistol spat, and the man plunged headlong to the street.

But the alarm had been given. Others, whirled now. Wentworth raised one arm. His other hand flew back and a grenade arched through the air. The men shouted and ran, leaping from the trucks. Too late!

The grenade let go with a tearing blast, hurling bodies in a bloody welter to the street, wrecking one gun truck, jamming the other.

From beyond the trucks came a cheer, a shrill whistle.

Wentworth sprang up and raced back to the manhole. Kirkpatrick already was climbing out, the others behind.

“The troops are here,” Wentworth reported. “Let's get on with our work.”

Around the corner at a dead run he led his small band. But the streets were deserted before them. Not a man of all the Tarantula's crew showed a head. They found a police motorcycle, its two occupants dead. Wentworth pulled the bodies out, forked the saddle. Kirkpatrick piled into the sidecar.

“Get to cover,” Wentworth ordered to the men. “Soldiers and police will be here in a moment. They might shoot you by mistake.”

He kicked the engine to life, roared full speed down Broadway.

At the side street where the Federal Reserve Bank stood, Wentworth paused a moment, turned the spotlight. The doors of the bank gaped, its steps studded with dead. A yawning pit marked where a bomb had been thrown. Near at hand, a dozen of the Tarantula's gang sprawled dead about a manhole as if they had been slain racing toward its safety. No use going down that street. The Tarantula had looted and fled. Fled? Yes, but where?

On down Broadway Wentworth raced the motorcycle. Kirkpatrick shouted above the stutter of the motor. “I've got this machine gun working.”

Wentworth nodded, sped on.

Ahead he saw dim figures on the sea wall at Battery Park, which covered the southernmost tip of Manhattan. As he watched, they clambered over the edge, out of sight.

Wentworth bounded the motorcycle over the curbing, raced along the walkways of the Park, slammed up to the stringpiece along the sea wall.

Out there in the darkness, a seaplane's motor roared into life. Kirkpatrick opened fire with the machine gun. Wentworth leaped clear and snatched out one of the two grenades that remained, balanced it on his palm and let go. The seaplane vanished in a burst of red and white fire.

Wentworth whirled back to the motorcycle. Kirkpatrick was slumped over the machine gun. As Wentworth turned, he raised his hand weakly. “I'll be okay,” he said. “Get the Tarantula. Couldn't all—get away—in planes.”

“Right,” jerked out Wentworth. He whirled and sprinted along the Battery wall, rounded the circular building which housed the aquarium. Help would come soon for Kirkpatrick, and seconds were precious if he were to catch the Tarantula and recover the city's stolen wealth.

No question now of saving Nita. She was dead. But the Tarantula had got away with all the city's gold and cash. The news of that loss would rock the nation, increase the rioting that already threatened revolution. And only the *Spider* working alone, could prevent final, grim calamity. He alone had any grasp

of the situation; he alone knew the Tarantula. He threw back his head and sprinted on.

The city's prize fireboat, the John Purroy Mitchel, should be docked just beyond the aquarium. It was fast, and steam was always up. He whirled around the building to the city dock. The fire boat was gone!

Wentworth stood motionless on the wharf, looking out over black waters. Somewhere out there the Tarantula must have fled, in the city's most powerful fireboat—leaving scores of dead and taking with him a fifth of the nation's wealth.

And Wentworth had no better than a rowboat for pursuit!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR The Tarantula's Yacht

Wentworth's eyes scanned the dark river. He was desperate. Somehow, single-handed, he must find and catch the Tarantula.

If the Tarantula got away with the gold, revolution would raise its bloody venomous head on the morrow. The nation would rock on its foundations.

Once more Wentworth's keen eyes swept the river. No sign of any fast boat, no sign of another plane. Yet those machine gunners he had killed on the trucks must have had some method for escape, some such swift craft as that seaplane which he and Kirkpatrick had blown to pieces. Naturally it would be further north than the Battery, more convenient for their escape.

Wentworth ran northward along the docks, peering into the dark strips of water visible now and then between the high warehouses that covered almost the entire waterfront. He was using a steady, jogging run that carried him swiftly, but which he could keep up for miles.

Where Liberty Street ran down to the water, he found what he sought behind a broken fence heading a slimed moored seaplane. Wentworth clambered through the break in the fence. A gun spat from the plane. The bullet plumped into wood beside his head, and Wentworth's gun snaked out and spat. A dark figure reared from the cockpit of the plane, plunged into the black water.

Wentworth climbed swiftly around the edges of the pier, hauled in the plane by the rope which secured it. He clambered to a wing, swarmed over that into the cockpit, touched the familiar levers and jabbed the compression starter.

A whistling whine, a jerking start of the propeller, and the motor roared. Seconds later Wentworth was streaking down the slip. He burst out onto the bosom of the river and jerked the ship free of the water, circled in a slow climb. The seaplane sped him back over Manhattan Island. His teeth were chattering with cold, his body trembling, but he was scarcely conscious of it. He peered downward, scanning the gleaming waters that girded Manhattan. Down the East River a speed boat raced. Behind it he made out the rippling white wake.

The boat had swung off from the shoreline of Manhattan, two others behind it, and was steering a course for the open sea. He spotted the fire boat also, drifting aimlessly, apparently loosed only to prevent pursuit. In those three motorboats would be the raiders who had left first. The planes were for the last guard, those left behind to delay the troops and make sure the Tarantula and his gang escaped.

Wentworth swung the plane and trailed. The boats were making forty knots or better. They rounded

Governor's Island and, with Wentworth swinging in wide circles as he watched, they spurred up to a rakish yacht, long and black on the water, that was steaming slowly through the channel. One by one the boats ran alongside. Men scrambled up the sides of the yacht. A derrick boom swung over the side, hauled up many heavy bags in a net.

Wentworth nosed down as the yacht picked up speed, leaving the fast motorboats adrift. He knew he would have no trouble in landing beside the boat and getting aboard. They would take him for a gangster. But what could he, single-handed, do against the Tarantula's many?

Abruptly he made up his mind, slanted the plane in a long smooth dive for Governor's Island, took the water and taxied to the ferry slip. He pulled out his gun and fired three shots into the air. Soldiers came running.

Wentworth megaphoned his hands. "A yacht!" he shouted. "Steaming out into the channel now. Tarantula and all gang aboard."

The soldiers shouted back. "We'll blow her out of the water."

"No!" Wentworth shouted back. "All the gold is aboard. All the money in the city. Phone Mitchell Field and the Coast Guard."

He whirled the plane, sent it skittering out over the water and up again in lone pursuit of the yacht.

The cold was bitter now. It numbed Wentworth's face and hands. He pushed on. The yacht was making amazing time, cutting the water at better than thirty knots, black smoke pouring from her rakish stack.

Help was on the way, but Wentworth knew the yacht would be too fast for coast-guard boats.

Only planes could overtake her, and planes would hesitate to use bombs, lest they destroy the wealth which somehow must be recovered. Paper money could be reprinted, but the gold would be scattered throughout the harbor. No replacing that—and most of the city's wealth had been transferred into gold by the government to restore the confidence of the people and avert the vast catastrophe that threatened. No it was still up to the *Spider*, single-handed....

Impossible? Wentworth did not know or care. Nita must be avenged, the gold recovered. If the *Spider* died in doing that, it did not matter. Lips smiling grimly, Wentworth reloaded his pistol, put his plane again into a long dive and took the water ahead of the yacht. While it sped toward him he taxied swiftly to keep pace, veering closer and closer. The yacht checked speed; the water that curled from its prow made a smaller wave; and finally Wentworth, clambering down from the cockpit, grasped a rope and was hauled aboard.

He caught the railing, sprang aboard and snatched out the one remaining hand grenade, brandishing the pistol in his free hand.

"I am the *Spider*...." he shouted. "I have pulled the pin from this hand grenade. If you shoot me, it means death for all."

White-faced men retreated before him. "Not too far," said Wentworth. "Stay there. Now, where is the Tarantula?"

A soft voice chuckled into the silence that fell then upon the yacht. "Welcome aboard, *Spider*. Now the

family party is complete. Nita is here, too.”

Nita, here too! The words half stunned Wentworth, for he had seen Nita plunge to her death in the flaming plane. True, she had had a parachute....

“No, she is not dead,” the Tarantula spoke again. “It is true we shot down her plane, but you thoughtfully had prepared her with a parachute. She fell so near the yacht it seemed a shame to let her drown when I could dispose of her so much more pleasantly. You've interrupted that as usual.... Also Nita once more gives me an ace in the hole, a check on you. And our friends the coast guard and the aviation corps will be too gallant to bomb into oblivion a yacht that carries Nita van Sloan... not to mention a good portion of the nation's gold.

“The army base has already radioed us to surrender under pain of turning loose the big guns of Governor's Island. I told them of the gold—and your Nita. I also told them there was enough explosive aboard to scatter the ship—and the gold—over the whole harbor. That is why the guns have not spoken. That is why your little hand grenade caused more alarm than it should have among my stalwart men.”

Wentworth's gun spoke sharply and a man who had crept too near died. His eyes probed the darkness about him, searched the cabins that lined the deck.

“Come, *Spider*,” the Tarantula said, “Toss your bomb overboard. It's true I cannot shoot you lest you blow us up with you. But you can't remain forever alert, and the moment you relax for an instant we'll get you.”

Wentworth threw back his head and laughed. “Fine words, Tarantula, but I do not think you, or any of these gentlemen, care to die as you would if this grenade let go.” He laughed again, and the sound was not pleasant.

“I'll trouble you, Tarantula, to turn the yacht back to Governor's Island and surrender. Otherwise—” and he walked slowly forward, the circle of men widening before him. He stepped inside the cabin, and the Tarantula, black robed and hooded as always stood before him in the white circle of an overhead light. “Otherwise,” Wentworth repeated, “I'll be forced to lift my fingers from this little lever on the bomb.” And he held the grenade up before him, held it between the thumb and fingers of his left hand—released his fingers the fraction of an inch so that the lever rose with them.

“Ah, but then,” the Tarantula gestured with a hairy hand, and Wentworth saw that it lacked a thumb, “—then you would die too. And I do not think you want to die, now.”

A sharp order, and Nita was thrust into the room. “I do not think that you want Nita to die— that way.”

Wentworth's eyes glittered. He was watching the Tarantula closely, and that masked gaze was fixed above the *Spider's* shoulder on a spot high up on the wall.

“Nita,” said Wentworth softly, “come here, dear.”

Nita crossed to him swiftly, and Wentworth's voice dropped to a whisper that only she could hear. “What is the Tarantula looking at over my shoulder?”

Nita looked at the hooded face, looked at the wall.

“A clock,” she said quietly.

The Tarantula caught the significance of the whispers and Nita's movements, turned eyes away. "I'll give you until I count ten to surrender," the mocking voice said.

"*One ...*" The Tarantula began.

Wentworth said grimly, "And what are you going to do when you have counted ten?"

"*Two...*" The Tarantula's eyes strayed again to the clock.

Wentworth was thinking furiously. Some trickery was under way here. The *Spider's* mind flashed back to the scene of the yacht from the air. There had been no boats anywhere near. He thought back-further.

"*Three...*"

The dead littering the street, the dozen men of the Tarantula sprawled about a closed manhole. He shook his head sharply. No, the answer was not on shore, but here.

"*Four ...*"

Wentworth's eyes were sharp on the robed figure before him. Tension was apparent in the body, and there was a shrill strain in the voice. The counting was more rapid.

"*Five...*"

The Tarantula was getting ready to spring! Wentworth saw it in the slight crouching of the legs, in the stooping shoulders. But somehow, there was no threat of attack in the eyes behind that hood. They were fixed on the clock.

"*Six!*"

The Tarantula sprang, but not toward Wentworth. The robed figure went through the door like a flash, poised an instant on the rail, the robe fluttering in the biting night wind.

Wentworth's pistol swung upward, spat flame. But even as it discharged, the Tarantula had disappeared, arching out in a perfect dive toward the icy waters!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE Pandemonium!

For an instant, Wentworth stood transfixed, staring. Then the blood drained from his face. He caught Nita about the waist and dropping his gun, plunged toward the door.

"Abandon ship!" he shouted. "She's doomed!"

He swung Nita to the rail. "Dive!" he told her. "Dive deep, and swim fast!"

Nita cleaved the air in a swift, straight dive, and Wentworth plunged behind her, still clinging to the grenade. The frigid water cut like razors of ice, sent instantaneous stabs of pain through Wentworth's body. He checked his dive, spurted to the surface. He thrust high from the water, keen eyes searching for the Tarantula.

He caught sight of a white froth of water ahead, a head and shoulders ripping the sea in a powerful crawl. Wentworth thrust the grenade into his trouser pocket where the tight cloth held the lever down, skinned out of his coat and shoes.

Nita's head broke through the water a short distance away.

“All right?” Wentworth called.

“Y-y-yes,” chattered Nita.

“Then dive again, and swim on.” Wentworth was free of clinging garments now. He flung himself forward in a crawl as strong and swift as that of the Tarantula's. Swinging his head about to catch breath, he glimpsed the ship. Men were running about like lunatics, trying to lower boats.

Wentworth sprinted on. The furious action chased some of the numbness from his limbs. He tossed up his head, searched for the Tarantula. Then he spotted something he had not detected before, a small, low boat in which a single man stood erect. Wentworth made out his bulk against the brightening sky—the bushy head and wide, heavy shoulders of Wiggard!

As Wentworth stared, still swimming on, he saw Wiggard stoop and haul the Tarantula from the water. The Tarantula spun about, a gun glinting. Fire spat from it, and lead gouged the water beside Wentworth. The *Spider* dived and swam frantically forward. He heard the beating vibration of the motor nearing, turned sharply upward.

As he rose, he dug into his trouser pocket, fished out the grenade. It was watertight, made to withstand long soaking in the rain. He burst the surface, spotted the boat not thirty feet away, wrenched back his arm and heaved. He dived again instantly.

The concussion of the blast shook him even below the surface. Then, like an echo of the first explosion, an overwhelming convulsion shuddered through the water. Wentworth felt that two huge hammers had struck simultaneously on each side of his head. Feebly he fought his way to the surface of the freezing water, stared about. The launch had disappeared, and with it had died the Tarantula and Wiggard.

Wreckage rained upon the water. The surface churned and swirled about him. He peered back. The yacht also had vanished, blown to bits by the huge mine the Tarantula had planted in her.

“Nita!” Wentworth shouted. “Nita!”

If there had been gold aboard, it was scattered over the entire harbor. But where was Nita?

A weak hail answered him from his left. Throwing himself forward, Wentworth swam frantically toward the sound, found Nita clinging, almost exhausted, to a heavy spar. Her teeth chattered, and she was half-dazed from the concussion of the explosion aboard the yacht.

Wentworth looked about. From all directions, red and green lights showed boats racing head-on for the scene of the wreck. In fifteen minutes Wentworth and Nita had been fished out by a coast guard patrol boat.

Nita was rushed into the cabin, fed hot liquor and wrapped in warm blankets. Wentworth, shaking with cold, his lips and hands blue, resisted efforts to doctor him.

“Where's the skipper?” he demanded. “You'll die of pneumonia,” a sailor urged. “Get inside, I'll call him.”

Wentworth shook his head stubbornly, insisted. The sailor shrugged, escorted him to the bridge. The *Spider's* teeth were chattering so that he could not speak intelligibly; with an effort, he checked the trembling.

“It's imperative we get back to land at once,” he said.

“I'm searching for survivors,” the skipper told him, his weathered face frowning.

“There are other boats,” Wentworth insisted. “I must get to shore at once.” He fixed the officer's dark eyes unwaveringly. “I am Richard Wentworth,” he said. “I have police powers. I know they aren't in force here. But I assure you it is absolutely necessary to get ashore.”

The skipper eyed him, started to shake his head. Wentworth's eyes flamed, but he spoke quietly. “It's not often I say or do a thing like this,” he said. “But I'm telling you that if you don't get back to shore and get there as fast as this boat can move, you're through with the service.”

Anger eared in the man's face. “I'll see you in hell!”

“Or yourself,” Wentworth flashed. He snatched the pistol from the man's belt. “Order this boat to shore, or—”

The captain's face was twisted with anger, his eyes as cold and furious as Wentworth's. But he bowed before the muzzle of death. He changed the course to shore.

“The instant we land,” he said, “I'll see to it that you're put in irons, and ...”

“To do that,” said Wentworth, “you'll have to communicate with superiors and that's what I want. When you get them, tell them to send the arresting squad to the corner of Broadway and Pine street. And tell them to send an entire company of men to do it.”

Still trembling with cold, pain stabbing his muscles and chest, Wentworth stayed beside the skipper, held a gun on him until the boat docked at the Battery. There he exacted a reluctant promise that the captain would have a company of soldiers rushed to Broadway and Pine, but meantime would not interfere. Then Wentworth sprang ashore, ran up the seawall.

The motorcycle he had used before was still there, but Kirkpatrick was gone. Wentworth leaped into the machine, sent it sputtering up Broadway to the corner he had designated. He slowed it to a halt. The dead of the Tarantula's gang still lay sprawled about the manhole. Wentworth sat upon the cover until soldiers came. The coast guard officer was with them.

“Now what the hell is this all about?” he demanded.

Wentworth got up slowly. “Open this manhole,” he said, “and I'll show you.”

The skipper stared at him, then with a grim smile ordered the cover removed. “I'm curious enough to go through with this thing, just to please you,” he said.

Wentworth smiled despite the chattering cold. He watched, while the manhole cover was lifted, borrowed a hand torch then and focused its beam downward. The Coast Guard officer peered down, too.

The tunnel beneath was filed with canvas bags, heaped and sprawled one upon another. One had torn open, and from its ripped side spilled gold coins. The officer stared wide-eyed into Wentworth's smiling face.

"It's gold!" he stammered.

Wentworth nodded. "This is the gold—all of it—that the Tarantula stole from the Federal Reserve Bank tonight," he said.

It was two days later that Wentworth and Nita, leaving the hospital where Kirkpatrick was recuperating from a chest wound, rode uptown in the Lancia with Jackson at the wheel and Ram Singh, his dark face inscrutable as always, beside him.

"But where are we going?" Nita demanded. "First we are going to call on the widow Penrose," said Wentworth. "I want to do something for her. In the end her husband died a hero in the battle downtown, trying to wipe out his mistakes. I want to set at rest the rumors that he was the Tarantula."

"Penrose the Tarantula!" Nita gasped. "Just a rumor," Wentworth smiled. "The Tarantula who died on the yacht—only a part-time Tarantula, it's true—was one Russell Daliot, a thumbless lad with a predilection for a guitar and foolish songs. You remember we met him at the theater the night of the first raid. He was the Tarantula who lifted you so easily, as you told me. He had very muscular arms ..."

Nita's blue eyes were cold. "He got what he deserved. But, Dick, you've been putting off telling me how you guessed where the gold was. I thought it had been blown up, thought your grenade had jarred the explosives aboard the ship or something ..."

Wentworth smiled, patted her hand, raised it to his lips. "It was really simple enough, Nita. Daliot kept looking at the clock. There were no boats near. I had seen that from the plane. Yet he expected something. When he jumped overboard, I knew what it was. The explosives he had mentioned were a bomb to blow up the yacht!

"Now I knew the Tarantula wasn't going to blow up all that gold after working so hard to get it, and I had been suspicious of this escape in a yacht all along. A yacht is a slow thing at best, and easily overtaken. Why then, would the Tarantula, surely a super-intelligent crook, choose that way to escape?

"The answer was that the Tarantula hadn't. When I knew that, I knew the gold was still ashore, hidden somewhere, and the first thing that I thought of was the tunnels the Tarantula knew so well. It would be a simple matter to cache the gold there, and remove it through the tunnels without ever having to show himself on the surface."

Nita was still frowning. "But I don't see how you found the exact spot so easily."

Wentworth took out cigarettes, lit one for Nita and himself. His eyebrows were quizzical. "The Tarantula did that for me," he explained. "Apparently the gold was loaded into a coal truck the police found later for transportation to the dock. When it was all loaded, the Tarantula simply machine-gunned all the men who had helped him, then slid the gold down a coal slide into the manhole.

“It was easy enough for him to get away with that. You know that each crew of the Tarantulas men had a specific job. When they finished that, they left for the yacht. The gold carriers were the last to leave, except for the rear guard of machine gunners, and they were too far away to see what was happening.

“The Tarantula then took a boat, already loaded with fake gold in bags, I imagine, and raced that to the yacht. He loaded the fake gold aboard, planning to slip overboard to the boat Wiggard had waiting, and to blow up the yacht and every last member of his gang. He wouldn't have to split the gold then, and there would be no one left to accuse him.”

The Lancia swung out of the line of traffic, drew up in front of an apartment house. “Here's where you get out, Nita,” Wentworth said. “I want you to see Mrs. Penrose and tell her of the trust fund I'm setting up for her.”

“But you?”

“I'll see you later. Jenkyns is fixing us one of those inimitable midnight lunches, and meantime—” he grinned but there was little humor in his eyes—“meantime I'm going to call on the real brain of the gang—the other Tarantula!”

Wentworth tipped his hat, reentered the Lancia and left Nita staring after him. He ordered Jackson to take him to a Park Avenue address, where he alighted and, smiling at Ram Singh, said, “I'll leave the door unlocked.”

Then he went alone into the luxurious building.

When the elevator had left him, Wentworth did not ring a bell. He took out a lockpick and unfastened a door, slipped inside. He removed coat and hat, and his hair was blond. Two touches for cheek plumpers, wax to his nostrils, and he was Inspector Barton.

He strolled casually down a hall.

“What are you doing here?” a voice demanded, a woman's voice.

Wentworth turned slowly, raised his eyebrows. A blonde young woman stood there with a leveled gun.

“Sorry,” said Wentworth, “I don't believe I know you.”

But he did know her. It was the girl he had burst in on when he was first boarding Reardon, the girl who had pointed a gun at him in the theater, who had led Kirkpatrick into a trap....

“What are you doing here?” the girl demanded again.

“I just dropped in to see an old friend of mine,” said Wentworth slowly. Then the drapes behind the girl parted and another woman strolled in, a woman in shimmering green with bare, splendid arms, with hair of flame, with long green eyes that saluted his—Tamara Lamaris.

“Ah, Inspector Barton,” she said.

Wentworth bowed. “Ah Madame Tarantula.” The green eyes widened, then narrowed, glinting. “The Tarantula died on the yacht.”

Wentworth nodded. "One Tarantula died on the yacht. The one with no thumb on one hand, the one who lifted Nita easily with one arm— Russel Dalot in fact—but not the Tarantula who tried to hang Nita while I was bound to a chair."

Tamara stared at him fixedly. "I see. It was your punch, your punch that struck me in the chest, that betrayed me."

"Perfect, Tamara," Wentworth murmured, bowing, "that punch in the-er-a-chest revealed you as a woman. There could be no woman except yourself with the brain and knowledge to do the job. Then, too, the Tarantula's occasional lack of strength—and your mapwork. They talked, too."

"I see," said Tamara. Her voice was the calm, chuckling voice of the Tarantula. "And my hands?"

"A simple trick," said Wentworth, "though rarely used. The skin from a corpse's hands, tanned like glove leather. The hair could be either natural or fastened on. After one glance, I knew that skin was not natural. It had the peculiar whiteness that only tanned human skin acquires. So, my dear, I looked for someone who did not have hairy hands. And I could only think of yours. They are beautiful."

Tamara Lamaris for once did not acknowledge a compliment. She was pale, but composed. "Elsie," she said. "This man is the *Spider*, the man who killed your lover. You have been longing to shoot him ..."

Elsie Thompson's blue eyes became like twin flames. Her lovely mouth thinned. She pointed the gun.

"Reardon is not dead," said Wentworth quietly. "I will give him to you presently, but first we must settle with this woman. She hanged Jack's father. She is a murderess a hundred times over. She tortured the woman I love. She sent to their death on a mined yacht the men who had worked to give her millions. And Elsie, you have a score to settle. You nearly lured Kirkpatrick to his death. You assisted, by removing him from the head of the police, in the murder of men.

"I think, Elsie, that you could wipe out most of that score, by.... "

Elsie stood with the gun wavering from Wentworth to her.

"But how," she gasped, "how can I know that you tell the truth! One of you is lying."

"He lies!" said Tamara, stabbing one of her white hands at Wentworth. The girl still stared at her.

"Many funny things have happened," she said, "lots of things I haven't been able to understand. I didn't know that this was a trap for Kirkpatrick. I really wanted to tell him about the *Spider*... But Kirkpatrick never came—"

"Yes!" Elsie pointed at Wentworth. "He must be telling the truth!"

Tamara's voice was soft. "My dear," she said, "you are distraught and nervous. You are grieved by the death of Jack, your sweetheart." As she spoke, she moved slowly toward the girl. There was a vast calm in her voice. Her green eyes were deep and sympathetic. Elsie seemed lulled.

Then Tamara moved sharply. She seized Elsie's gun wrist. There was a moment of tense struggle, as feminine bodies strained in distorted postures, a head of flame against a head of gold. For a moment only it continued. Then Elsie broke free. She was a farm-reared girl, and strong. She leaped clear, thrust out the gun—and fired!

Tamara took a small step backward. She looked down at her figure, gorgeous in the shimmering green she had worn so long ago. There was a spot of blood upon its breast, blood that spread as she looked, her flame head bowed. She smiled.

“It... is... just,” she said, and wilted to the floor. “*Spider...*” Her green eyes turned up, seemed not to see Wentworth and the girl. Her voice rose suddenly to a shriek. “*Spider, you win!*”

Wentworth looked down at her, and in his eyes there was no pity.

“Jack,” he called, “you may come out now. Your gun won't be needed.”

And Jack Reardon came out from behind a curtain back of Wentworth, a gun in his hand.

“But Elsie, Elsie killed her!” he cried. The girl sobbed, her head on Reardon's chest. Wentworth took her gun, wiped it clean of fingerprints, and placed it beside Tamara. He put his hand to his vest pocket, took from it a cigarette lighter and, walking across, stopped over the body of resplendent Tamara Lamaris. When he straightened, the vermilion seal of the *Spider* glowed on her pale, white forehead, dimming even the glory of her head of flame.

“The *Spider* killed her,” he said softly. His mouth twisted into a wry smile. “Your crimes are expiated. Go and sin no more.”

THE END



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