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JULY



SECRET AGENT X

THE MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES

THE
GOLDEN
GHOUL

Another Great
SECRET AGENT X
Thriller



The Golden Ghoul

*Complete
Book-Length
Novel*



*Agent "X"
raced on, hard
on the heels of the
death's head.*

By Brant

CHAPTER I

FANGS OF DEATH

NIGHT had invaded the city. In the living room of suite 10B in the Hotel Empire, a dozen powerful electric globes shed searing white light. The doors were locked; the shades were drawn. Gilbert Warnow had ordered it so. Night must not enter here.

There was a certain tenseness in the stale, stagnant air that was almost electric. Though Gilbert Warnow napped in a luxurious lounge chair, it was a sleep that brought no rest, that was often broken by nervous leg twitchings. The anxiety of the past three days and nights showed plainly on the deep lines that crossed his gray face. Three police detectives sat wakeful in chairs about the room, and smoked or idled through the pages of magazines.

Sensational Thriller Based On

Secret Agent "X's" far-flung crime-crushing organization brought him whisperings of a fiend who meted out a death worse than death—a monster who called himself the Ghoul. For this Ghoul made men living prisoners in an amber-colored shroud of their own dead flesh. And even Secret Agent "X," the man of a thousand disguises, a thousand surprises, was checkmated when he pried into the Ghoul's palace



House

The muffled sound of a buzzer was like a stab to the frazzled nerves of Gilbert Warnow. He sprang out of his chair, stood stiffly, unblinking eyes darting about the room.

On his feet at the sound of the buzzer, Detective Malvern spread his hands in a gesture that was intended to pacify Mr. Warnow. "Everything's okeh," he said. "Just somebody at the door."

But Warnow was not to be comforted. He whispered inaudible words, his eyes followed

the somewhat jumpy movements of Detective Malvern as the latter unlocked the door of the living room and crossed a small foyer. Gilbert Warnow's Chinese valet, Ah-Fang, was about to unlock the hall door when Malvern's ham of a hand swept the Oriental to one side.

"I'm tending to this, chink," Malvern said brusquely. He yanked open the door to confront nothing more formidable than a small, square hat box on the door sill. The box was tagged for Mr. Warnow. The corridor was empty.

The Records of Secret Agent "X"

SECRET AGENT "X"

Malvern slammed the door and, carrying the box at arm's length, returned to the living room. Ah-Fang, his inscrutable slits of eyes never leaving the box, followed Malvern soundlessly on slippered feet. An excited clamor arose in the living room as soon as Malvern had entered.

"Get that box out!" Warnow's tight voice snapped. "A bomb—"

Malvern shook his head. "Too light." He regarded the box suspiciously. "You get way back in the corner, Mr. Warnow. We take the risks. That's what we're paid for. Keegan!" he rapped to one of his men. "Cut this cord for me."

But before Keegan could obey, Ah-Fang stepped forward. A gleaming tongue of steel darted from the sleeve of his black silken jacket, and lashed across the cord. Malvern scowled into the broad, yellow face. "What you doin' with that knife, chink?"

Ah-Fang regarded the detective unblinkingly. "Always carry knife for the protection of honorable sir, and own worthless flesh."

Malvern grunted, peeled paper from the box, flipped up the lid and sprang back. Nothing happened. The box seemed to be stuffed with tissue paper. This paper, Malvern gingerly lifted. A curse snarled from his throat. The three detectives and the Chinese, who seemed possessed by insatiable curiosity, pressed around the table and stared into the box.

Resting on a cushion of yellow silk was what appeared to be a life-size mask. It had a hellish, pain-racked appearance—eyelids were sunken yellow veils; cheeks, chin, and nose were the color of amber. A downy mustache fringed the upper lip of a mouth that was distorted by a silent scream.

"What the hell!" gasped Keegan. "Looks like a Halloween false-face."

The lean hand of Ah-Fang darted into the box, explored the surface of the mask to find it hard as stone. His finger grasped the mustache and gave it a vigorous twitch. He raised his eyes to meet Keegan's face.

"Humble opinion that this is face, but not false."

"What the devil are you gettin' at, chink?" Malvern grumbled. Then he called: "Come over here, Mr. Warnow. What is this thing?"

Gilbert Warnow approached hesitatingly and peeped over Ah-Fang's shoulder. "Good God!" he breathed. He struck his eyes with his shaking hand, shutting out the sight. "That—that isn't a mask. That's the *face* of Steven Bainbridge! The Amber Death! That's a warning from the Ghoul. He wants me to know how I'll look after—after—" And Gilbert Warnow dropped into a chair.

"Perhaps," Ah-Fang suggested in his odd, crackling voice, "it is an act of wisdom to take backward glance and learn who sent unpleasant box."

MALVERN sprang to the phone, called the hotel desk, and got in touch with a plainclothes man who had been posted in the hotel lobby. He issued brisk orders for the tracing of the package. He clamped the phone in place, turned, with an oath, and snatched the hideous death mask from the bands of the inquisitive Ah-Fang. Malvern turned the gruesome object over. He could see clearly the marks made by the knife that had been used to peel the hard, amber-like flesh from the bone of the skull. With an exclamation of disgust, he dropped the filthy, dead thing back in the box.

"The Amber Death!" he whispered. "That's what got Ivan Trasker and this—this poor devil, Bainbridge. The job of that damned extortionist, the Golden Ghoul!" He twisted around facing Warnow. The wealthy manufacturer was staring at his own twitching fingers. "How much was the Ghoul trying to stick you for, Mr. Warnow?"

"Seventy-five thousand," Warnow muttered mechanically. "And I can't raise it. God help me! The Ghoul doesn't give enough time. This is my second warning. And it's pay up, or be like—like—" He gestured helplessly toward the box.

"Don't take on like that, sir," said

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

Malvern, almost kindly. "Nothing can get in here, not even a mouse—"

"Gilbert Warnow."

Malvern snapped a glance from one to the other of his fellow detectives. "Who said that?" he demanded.

Out of the air that had suddenly become pregnant with disaster, came a voice.

"Gilbert Warnow!" The voice, disembodied, and mere whisper though it was, was compelling. All eyes turned toward a single point of focus—the radio in the corner. But the pilot-lamp behind the radio dial was not turned on.

"Gilbert Warnow." A third time came the voice. "Does life mean so little to you?"

Warnow was standing upright. His fingers clutched at his own throat. His eyes burned with a feverish light. "Good Lord! *The Ghoul.*"

"You have disobeyed the Golden Ghoul, Gilbert Warnow," the voice sighed. "You had instructions not to call in the police. Yet I know that there are detectives in your room at this very moment. What madness leads you to believe that you can escape the Ghoul? I am all-powerful. My decree is inexorable. There is no escape. You were offered your life for a price. And you have failed to pay. Bolted doors, latched windows, police! Do you think that *I*, who am invulnerable and invisible, care for the police? Die, then, as Bainbridge died, *and within the hour!*"

A hoarse, fear-maddened voice rated from the throat of Gilbert Warnow. "Ghoul! For the love of heaven, wherever you are, listen to me! I *can't* pay! Give me more time!" And Warnow's voice rose to a shriek that filled the room with its terrific cadence. "Time, Ghoul, only a little more time!" He dropped into a chair. He pressed moist palms to his throbbing temples.

"I must be going mad! The Ghoul spoke to me—in this room."

Ah-Fang padded across the room to the radio, thrust his arm behind the console, and pulled it out again. "This foreign devil machine voice of Ghoul."

Malvern ignored the Oriental. "You're perfectly safe, Mr. Warnow." His voice lacked conviction. "Ten stories above the street—"

WARNOW blurted out: "I wish to hell you were all rich! Maybe you'd know what it is to be hounded to death... Get out, all of you! If I'm going to die, I don't want a squad of half-witted police standing about!"

Malvern shook his head. "Sorry. We're here on special orders from Commissioner Foster. We're stayin'. I'm going to call a doctor. Your nerves are shot."

Ah-Fang shuffled toward the door. "Ah-Fang call doctor."

"Ah-Fang'll stay right here!" roared Malvern. "Keegan, get a doctor."

"Please." Warnow stayed the detective. "If you must have a doctor in, get Dr. Luigi on the floor above. He's my friend."

"Okeh." Malvern complied. "Make it Luigi."

Malvern walked over to the radio. "Here, Connelly," he called to the other detective, "take a look at this radio. You know something about them." He pulled out the cabinet from the wall and Connelly ran his hands over the tops of the tubes.

"Must have been the radio. Tubes are warm."

"Was own humble opinion," Ah-Fang volunteered.

Malvern silenced him with a look "Too darn clever, these Chinese!"

Keegan suddenly opened the door to admit a small, well-knit person with dark skin and polished black hair. He carried a small satchel in his hand. He was followed by a broad-shouldered man with graying hair above an impressively high forehead.

"Luigi!" exclaimed Warnow. "Thank heaven you've come!" He rose weakly to his feet and shook hands with the dark-haired doctor. To the broad-shouldered man, he said: "Hello, Gage. Why're you here?"

The man called Gage smiled pleasantly.

SECRET AGENT "X"

"Just dropped in for a chat with the doctor when your call came in. What's the matter with you, man? You look all in."

Warnow wearily shook his head. "No sleep for days. Heard a voice calling me out of empty air—"

Dr. Luigi smiled slightly. "Your nerves are frayed, Warnow. You can't expect to live without sleep." He snapped open his satchel and took out a hypodermic needle. "I am going to give you a little morphine. Then I want you to go to bed and rest."

"Rest! Would you rest when your life hangs by a thread?"

"Yes. I am resting. Relaxing, at any rate."

Warnow's jaw dropped. "Lord! You don't mean—"

The doctor nodded. "I mean I either raise seventy-five thousand dollars, or the Ghoul tries his Amber Death on me." Luigi prepared the hypo with professional dexterity, rolled back Warnow's sleeve, and made the injection.

The broad-shouldered Lionel Gage patted Warnow on the back. "Buck up, old man. I know how you feel. You see," he whispered, "between Wall Street and the Ghoul, I'm pretty well stripped myself."

Warnow would have said something had not Luigi checked him. "Not another word, Warnow. You go to bed. Sleep as long as you can. And remember, the police have tackled racketeers before now. The Ghoul's just a racketeer with a flare for sensation." He got up, and started toward the door. "Come along, Gage. Warnow's got to rest. He'll not get it as long as you are talking Wall Street with him."

Detective Malvern laid a hand on Dr. Luigi's arm. "You mean to tell me the Ghoul has threatened you?"

Luigi nodded with magnificent unconcern. "I'm not worried. You'll get the Ghoul before he gets me."

Having said good night to Warnow, Lionel Gage followed the doctor from the room. Warnow, accompanied by his Chinese valet, started for the bedroom.

"Just a minute, Mr. Warnow." Malvern

held up an arresting hand. "I wouldn't go in there alone with that chink if I were you."

"With Ah-Fang? Nonsense!" Warnow regarded his servant affectionately. "Why, I'd trust him above anyone in the city—even you."

MALVERN shook his head doubtfully. "Well, maybe *you* can trust him—" He pushed ahead of Warnow into the bedroom, crossed rapidly to the bathroom and made a careful search. Not content with that, he looked into Warnow's closet. Ah-Fang had led his master to the bed and was in the act of unlacing Warnow's shoes.

Almost hostilely Warnow glared at Malvern. "Please go," he ordered. "I assure you that I'll be perfectly safe with Ah-Fang. I insist!"

Reluctantly, Malvern crossed the room. At the door, he said: "Remember, we'll be right outside." And with a black look at the Chinese, "Get that, chink?"

Ah-Fang bobbed his head and, as the door closed, continued to assist Warnow to undress.

After a moment, Warnow asked:

"Have you ever heard of a man called 'X'?"

The Chinese shook his head. "Remarkable small name."

"A remarkable person. Most remarkable. Probably, he's the only man in the world who could save me from the Golden Ghoul."

Ah-Fang looked at his employer. "Where I find this man?"

"I—I don't know." Warnow yawned. "Feel sleepy... One never knows where Secret Agent 'X' is. Might be anywhere. Can be anybody." Warnow's eyelids dropped. "I could tell him something that might help. There's a blonde—" Warnow thrust pajama-clad legs beneath satin covers, yawned again. "She doesn't belong here. Seen her somewhere—" Warnow's head sagged. He could scarcely support himself. The drug was rapidly taking hold of him.

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

"Wait!" the Chinese whispered. "Not sleep—yet. Ah-Fang get water." He left the bedside, hurried into the bathroom, and drew a glass of water. He was on his way back when a series of sounds, coming one on top of the other, nearly caused him to drop the glass. There was a metallic snap, a ripping of silk, and a shrill scream of pain and terror mingled in hideous cacophony.

The yellow man sprang into the room and over to the bed. There, Gilbert Warnow writhed in mortal agony. His hands were tearing at his throat. The pillow, upon which Warnow's head rested, had been ripped wide apart. Down from the pillow flurried into the air. Veins on Warnow's neck were swollen. His eyes protruded. Two needles, mounted like fangs in the steel jaws that had snapped from the pillow, were deeply imbedded in his throat.

A hideous change was slowly, inevitably creeping across Warnow's face. His flesh was becoming as yellow as that of his Chinese servant.

The door of the room burst open. Malvern's face was the color of raw dough. "What the hell!" he ripped out. He stamped to the bed and sent the Chinese spinning across the room. He took hold of the jaws of the trap that had been hidden in the pillow and strained them apart. Over his shoulder he shouted frantic orders:

"Get Dr. Luigi! Watch that damned chink. Connelly, call Inspector Burks. Fourth time the Ghoul's struck this week!"

Malvern lifted the trap and stared at it as though he could not believe his own eyes. It looked something like a pair of ice tongs—the long, pointed members so edged that they had cut through the pillow when a central impelling spring had been put to work by a trigger device in the center. Two hypodermic needles were fitted to the points of the tongs, so that when Warnow's head had struck the pillow just above the trigger, the spring had driven the needles up through the pillow and into Warnow's throat.

"The most hellish device I've ever seen!"

gasped Malvern. "Whole damned trap sewed right up inside the pillow. Keegan! Don't stand there like an ape. Get the doctor!"

At the phone in the outer room Connelly could be heard calling Inspector Burks. But Keegan seemed unable to obey the order that had been given him. His eyes were riveted on Warnow. "Good Lord!" he whispered. "*Look at his face!*"

CHAPTER II

CORPSE OF THE LIVING

TERROR was in full command of Gilbert Warnow's bedroom. Like a man fascinated by the eyes of a serpent, Detective Malvern bent over the body on the bed. Keegan, too, though his left hand was clamped over the wrist of Ah-Fang, had eyes but for one thing—the face of the man on the bed.

Warnow's face was undergoing a horrible and inexplicable metamorphosis. His face was screwed into a knot of agonized supplication. Facial muscles were fixed as though death already possessed him. His fingers, which had been working convulsively, no longer moved; rather they seemed to be frozen into gnarled, yellow claws.

Blood no longer colored his flesh. His skin at every tick of the clock became a deeper, more transparent yellow. His eyes were immobile beneath hardening eyelids: yet in his eyes life still burned and pupils stared accusingly at Detective Malvern.

Malvern's fingers passed down the dying man's arm, touched a yellow hand, and recoiled involuntarily. "Good God!" came his husky whisper.

"His hands are hard as rock! Yet he lives! Here I sent Connelly for Inspector Burks. Told him this was murder—but is it murder? No life outside, but beneath that shell—"

Keegan bent forward eagerly. His right hand brushed Warnow's cheek. Had he been watching his charge, he would have noted a crafty expression stealing over the face of Ah-Fang. The Chinese moved with something approaching the speed of light. His right leg

SECRET AGENT "X"



DR. LUIGI

came up in a quick kick to the back of Keegan's knees. Keegan went down in a heap.

The yellow hand of Ah-Fang slipped through his grasp, flattened, and sliced the air in a blow that landed at the base of Detective Malvern's brain. It was a blow that could have killed had it not been checked by the superb muscular control of the yellow man. Malvern staggered forward. His knees encountered the edge of the bed. He pitched forward across the form of Gilbert Warnow. On his knees, Detective Keegan snatched at his automatic. Two shots lanced through the panel of the bedroom door, which had already closed behind the Chinese.

Through the living room into the hall, like a soundless, moving shadow, raced Ah-Fang. Before he reached the door at the end of the hall, a key was in his hand. In another moment, he was inside the room, and a lock clicked behind him.

To watch the movements of Ah-Fang was to witness a transformation almost as startling as that which had occurred in the bedroom of Gilbert Warnow. No sooner had he entered the room than the shuffling gait of an Oriental changed to lengthy strides that devoured the distance between the door and a small dressing table. Already his thin yellow fingers were doing wonders to his face—raking down his cheeks, tearing off pieces of what appeared to be yellow flesh.

Bits of transparent adhesive that held the

eyelids of the man aslant, so as to attain the appearance of a Chinese, were torn away. A glossy black toupee disappeared into a small bag open on the dressing table. A pigment-neutralizing substance was rubbed into his hands, returning them to their natural whiteness.

For a brief interlude, the mirror reflected the man's true face—a smooth, youthful forehead surmounted by brown, wavy hair; eyes that were hypnotic, steely points; lips and chin that were a startling combination of youth and maturity. There was in his entire aspect a certain fearlessness, a deadliness of purpose that marked him as a man far above the average in courage and resourcefulness. It was the real face of the incomparable Secret Agent "X."

EARLY that evening, the real Ah-Fang had been waylaid by a stalwart, rough-looking character who had thrust a peculiarly shaped gun into the Chinese's face. A jet of powerful anesthetizing vapor had shot from that gun.* Ah-Fang had dipped into unconsciousness and had been whisked away in a powerful motor car.

For the stalwart man was none other than Secret Agent "X" concealed behind another of his masterly disguises. No identity was too difficult for him to assume. His special plastic volatile compound could be molded to resemble the contours of any face. His own formulated pigments, clever toupees, face-plates, and other elements of make-up, had enabled him to create for himself the exact replica of the face of Ah-Fang. And when he had mastered the peculiar speech of the Oriental, he had gone to the suite of Gilbert Warnow—Gilbert Warnow, who awaited death at the hand of the fiendishly clever

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: Followers of the "X" chronicles will recall this gas gun as one of the weapons frequently used by the Agent. His dislike for all lethal weapons led him to perfect his harmless anaesthetizing gas. The gas piston itself has an effective range of about twenty feet. The same gas is enclosed in small bombs which the Agent usually carries in his pocket for emergency use.

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

extortionist known as The Golden Ghoul. *

The skilled fingers of Secret Agent "X" produced lightning changes in his face. He dared not lose a second of time in carrying out the daring scheme he had contrived. On turning from the mirror a few minutes later, he had achieved another of his brilliant disguises.

He seemed a heavier man withal, powerfully built and red of face. He had had the audacity to assume the character of Inspector Burks of the Homicide Department, knowing full well that within a short time the real Inspector Burks would enter the Hotel Empire to investigate the living death that had claimed Gilbert Warnow. **

Having removed every trace of his make-up materials from the table, "X" opened the door of the room and stepped into the hall. He nearly bumped into Detective Keegan who was striding down the hall, hand on the butt of the gun in his pocket.

"Inspector Burks!" Keegan exploded. "You got here fast enough."

A puzzled expression, neatly counterfeited, crossed the face of the man who appeared to be Inspector Burks.

"You called me? What about? I just dropped in to see how Warnow was getting along. What's the matter, man? You look like you'd seen a ghost!"

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Secret Agent's ability to assume any type of character and imitate the voice of any man has enabled him to enter many secret places that would otherwise be denied him. His wealth, knowledge of foreign languages, and unequaled ability to defend himself has made him at home in any surrounding. He has many friends among many peoples, and he is the only white man ever to be admitted into the powerful Chinese society known as the Ming Tong. Through Lo Mong Yung, venerable head of the Ming Tong, "X" gains much information not afforded the men who compose the police force.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE: It will be remembered that on a previous occasion recorded in the novel entitled THE SPECTRAL STRANGLER, "X" impersonated Inspector Burks. The Agent possesses such a remarkable memory for detail that once he has mastered an impersonation he can, at a later date, recall each characteristic, facial expression and voice inflection of that person in case circumstance requires him to impersonate that person for a second or third time.

"I have!" Keegan insisted. "I've seen the Ghoul! Warnow's Chinese house-boy must be the Ghoul. He was the only one in the room when Warnow was killed. He must—"

"X" seized the detective's arm. "Warnow killed? You stand there and tell me that the Ghoul got into that locked room with my best men laying for him?" He didn't wait for Keegan's answer but sprang down the hall towards the suite occupied by Gilbert Warnow. "X" had chosen the perilous disguise of Inspector Burks because he wanted to have complete freedom to do as he pleased in Warnow's rooms. There were valuable clues to be collected before members of the police force got a chance at them.

AT the hall door of Warnow's suite, Detective Malvern sat in a chair and held his head. Evidently he had not yet recovered from the effects of the blow "X" had given him. However, he stood up and saluted a little dazedly as "X" brushed past him into the living room. "Stay where you are, Malvern," he ordered. Then crossing to the bedroom door, he twisted the key in the lock.

He turned at once to the radio console through which the voice of the Ghoul had spoken to Warnow. With a tiny pen-flashlight in his hand, he made a hasty inspection of the console. His eyes narrowed as they encountered a small, flat, black package at one end of the cadmium-plated radio chassis. He noted that aerial and ground leads were



AH-FANG

SECRET AGENT "X"

fastened to the black packet and that feed wires led back to the radio set proper. A small timing device was attached to the power line and evidently could be set to turn the set off and on automatically.

The black packet, "X" guessed, was some new sort of short-wave converter that had been attached to the radio set by some one in the Ghoul's organization who had access to Warnow's room. This would have enabled the Ghoul to speak to Warnow through the medium of one of the hundreds of short-wave transmitters located throughout the city.

"X" was in the act of removing the black converter when he noted, at one end of the chassis, a twisted wire hairpin. A close examination led him to believe that it had been used as an improvised screw driver in making the necessary connections to the converter. "X" pocketed the converter in a secret pocket located in the lining of his coat.* Then he went to the bedroom, unlocked the door and stepped inside.

Beside the bed where lay the stiff, yellow form of Warnow, was Dr. Luigi and Detective Connelly. Without a word, as one awestruck by the appearance of Gilbert Warnow, the Secret Agent approached the bed. Warnow's face retained the same rigid, terrified aspect. His eyes were open, but the eyeballs had also turned the yellow of amber and looked dry and brittle.

"Another yellow corpse!" the Secret Agent exclaimed in perfect imitation of Burks' voice. He stretched out his hand and flicked the yellow cheek with his forefinger. It was like snapping a piece of cold china.

Dr. Luigi regarded "X" with dark, serious eyes. "Not a corpse, Inspector. The damnable part of it is that inside that hard, amber shell of a body beats a living heart! Behind that

yellow mask is a living brain! You and I have no conception of the torture through which that living brain is passing. Warnow is entombed alive in his own body! That is what my fellow countryman, Dante, called inferno!"

"Poor devil," the Secret Agent murmured sympathetically.

"And life may go on for hours, even days. There seems to be a sort of stricture in the throat that would prevent him from taking nourishment. Unless he has a better brain than most men, this living death must drive him to madness."

"X" stared at the living corpse a moment longer. Then he said: "Connelly, take Dr. Luigi out of the room. I want to be alone here a moment."

Connelly looked wonderingly at his superior. It was an odd command; but who was he to question the authority of Inspector Burks.

"X's" first action on being left alone with the corpse was to pick up the trap that had been concealed in Warnow's pillow. The movements of "X" were difficult to follow, so rapidly did he work. Time had already ticked along too fast. At any moment, the real Inspector Burks might enter. Inasmuch as there was no possible exit from the bedroom save through the living room, "X" could not hope to escape without encountering the inspector if he came before "X" was through with his investigation.

IT took him but a moment to remove the two hypodermic needles that had been fixed in the jaws of the trap. These he wrapped in a piece of gauze and dropped into a hidden pocket inside his coat. Then he left the room, and locked the door behind him. In the living room were Malvern and Connelly. Dr. Luigi had vanished.

"Malvern," rapped the Secret Agent, "anyone come in to see Warnow?"

"Lionel Gage came in for a while with Dr. Luigi," replied Malvern.

"And the servants?"

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: In the countless garments that comprise the wardrobe of Secret Agent "X," there are many secret pockets so placed as to enable him to carry many pieces of special equipment. Agent "X," about to set forth on one of his perilous undertakings, might be likened to a stage magician who often appears before his audience with as much as thirty pounds of paraphernalia concealed about his person.

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

"Just the hotel chambermaid and that chink who was with Warnow most of the time. The chink gave us the slip. When we get him, we'll learn something. Why, he had every opportunity to plant that trap!"

Malvern was interrupted by a violent crash that emanated from the bedroom where lay the living corpse. "X" and the detective leaped at the same time to collide at the locked door of the bedroom. With Burks' characteristic roar, "X" shouted Malvern out of the way, twisted the key in the lock, and leaped into the room.

The window pane was smashed to bits. "X" saw the legs of a man who was poised on the window sill. He sprang toward the window, fingernails raking the cloth of trouser legs just as the man leaped into space. "X" leaned far over the window ledge in an effort to see the falling body. But there was nothing—nothing ten stories below, except the deserted street.

"Inspector Burks, sir!" shouted Malvern. "Look! It's gone!"

"X" turned. Alert as was his brain, it was impossible for him to comprehend all that had happened in these few minutes. A large canvas sack was on the floor. A seam in the sack was ripped and leaden shot strewed the floor. And on the bed was the impression—only the impression—of a human body. The living corpse had vanished.

Suddenly, "X" sensed something that spelled immediate peril for himself. In the living room, two men were talking—Keegan, and a man whose voice was familiar to "X." How familiar! It was the voice of the real Inspector Burks.

As quickly and as silently as a cat, "X" sprang to the door of the bedroom. With a movement so rapid as to be almost imperceptible, he snatched what appeared to be an ordinary automatic from his pocket. He leaped into the room, faced the man whom he was impersonating so artfully. Inspector Burks cursed and stabbed for his gun. But halfway toward the pocket of his coat, his hand stopped. He knew that Agent "X" had

the drop on him.

In flawless imitation of Burks' voice, Agent "X" said: "Put up your hands, Secret Agent 'X'!"*

CHAPTER III

THE TRAP IS BAITED

THE face of Inspector John Burks purpled. For a moment, he could only splutter an intermingling of oaths and incomplete sentences. "You've got the nerve to point that gun at me and tell me I'm not Burks? Malvern, grab that man, if you don't want to be back on the beat in the morning! Keegan! Connelly! Don't stand there like—like—"

"Malvern," commanded "X," and it was baffling to hear an exact echo of Burks' voice coming from the mouth of another, "take that man's gun. He's Secret Agent 'X.' No one else would have the nerve to stand there and tell me that he is Inspector Burks."

Of the three detectives, not one made a move toward either of the twin inspectors. They were seeing double, and looked it.

"You're going to stand there and let this rank farce go on while the most dangerous man in New York sticks me up with a gun?" roared Burks. "By heaven, I'll prove I'm Burks! Connelly, you ask that damned impersonator what your first name is. He won't know, and I will!"

"X" realized that he was trapped. He hadn't the faintest idea of what Connelly's first name was. He resorted to sheer bluff. He stepped within inches of the inspector and tilted his gun up at Burks' face. "You drop

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: Though under the secret sanction of a high government official in Washington, the nature of "X's" crime-fighting methods, differing radically from those employed by the police, has led Inspector Burks and other police officials to regard "X" as a dangerous criminal. Burks, acquainted with the Agent's ability to impersonate, must have known immediately on confronting the counterpart of himself, that once again he had met Secret Agent "X." It was decidedly to the Agent's advantage, in this instance, to pretend to believe that Burks was Secret Agent "X" in disguise. The element of surprise has been responsible for the success of many offensive and defensive moves of Secret Agent "X."

SECRET AGENT "X"

that gun. Mr. 'X,' " he growled, "or I'll feed you lead!"

A smile started spreading across the broad face of John Burks. "Yeah, well you ought to point that gun of yours lower. That gun of *yours*. Mr. 'X,' doesn't feed anybody lead!" *

Burks' gun-hand, that had been dangling at his side still clenched over his weapon, came up fast. "X" knew in an instant that his gas gun would avail him nothing against Burks; for the inspector was holding his breath.

When the shot from Burks' gun came, "X" swayed but inches to one side, turned, as the bullet tore through his coat sleeve, and falling to the floor on his side, fired a full charge of the anesthetizing vapor straight at the trio of wide-mouthed detectives who stood behind him. Instantly Malvern pitched forward. Burks must have thought for a moment that his shot had gone wild and struck Detective Malvern. But he had little time to think or plant a bullet in Secret Agent "X's" body. "X's" legs swung up in a scissors hold that took Burks at the knees.

Burks collapsed, shouting, grasping frantically at the air. "X" squirmed over, sprang to his feet, and streaked through the door. He came very near to knocking over a uniformed hotel chambermaid who had evidently been listening at the door. Though he had only a fleeting glimpse of the girl's face as he flashed down the hall, that face was indelibly stamped on his memory. He had seen her somewhere before, and she had been wearing something quite different from the uniform of a Hotel Empire chambermaid.

But there was not a moment to lose. That charge from his gas gun could not have rendered both Connelly and Keegan unconscious as well as Malvern. Then there would be Burks to reckon with—Burks who

was doubly dangerous because previous encounters had left him wise to many of the tricks which "X" resorted to.

DOWN the hall, "X" saw the door of an elevator-car sliding open. Behind the glass door of the cage, he could see a squad of men from police headquarters—print men, photographers, and other specialists who had followed on the heels of Inspector Burks. It was then that "X" conceived an audacious little plan. With the real Inspector Burks almost at his heels, "X" leaped into the elevator in the midst of police officials whose promotion would have been immediate could they have knowingly laid their hands on Secret Agent "X."

"Wrong floor," he panted in the voice of John Burks. "Next floor up. Make this thing move, operator!"

The elevator boy slammed the door, pushed the starting lever. The police plied "X" with excited questions, ignoring entirely the fact that Burks or some other member of their own force was frantically thumbing the elevator signal-bell on the floor below.

As the car shot upwards, "X's" hand drove into the pocket of his coat. His fist came out tightly clenched over something. As the operator opened the door, "X" rapped out an order. "Everyone stay in the car a minute,"

The Secret Agent stepped into the hall; but as he did so his right fist shot out, knocking the elevator starting lever to the up position, and at the same time releasing a fragile glass capsule that he held in his hand. As the elevator shot upward, there was scarcely so much as a surprised exclamation from the men within the car.

The glass capsule that "X" had smashed on the floor contained enough harmless anesthetizing vapor to render the men unconscious almost instantly. By now, they were probably at the top of the building where the safety device would stop the elevator. And Agent "X" was comparatively free to pursue his course of investigation.

His first task was to get to Dr. Luigi's

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: Inspector Burks has encountered "X" often enough to know, to his cost, the effects of the Agent's gas gun. However, inasmuch as Burks has often charged "X" with murder and believes him exceedingly dangerous, he must be credited with considerable courage for his attempt to call the Agent's bluff.

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

suite. It was the last place the police would expect to find the man they were hunting. In addition, the suave Italian doctor was an object of intense interest to "X" because of his close association with Gilbert Warnow, and because he was a frequent visitor at the Warnow suite.

Another moment found "X" knocking at the door of the suite of Dr. Luigi. It was located directly above that leased by Gilbert Warnow. It was not Luigi, however, who opened the door. It was the broad-shouldered, gray-headed Lionel Gage.

"Well, Inspector Burks!" Gage puffed the words out with mouthfuls of pipe smoke. He regarded "X" for a moment. "And how is Mr. Warnow making out?"

"Dr. Luigi in?" the Agent inquired, ignoring Gage's question.

Gage shook his mountainous head. "Just stepped out to pick up a friend who was going to discuss a plan—"

"I must see Dr. Luigi," the Secret Agent interrupted. "I'll wait for him here."

Lionel Gage courteously ushered the man whom he supposed to be Burks into the room. When the door had closed, "X" said: "Then Luigi didn't tell you that Warnow had been murdered?"

"Been murd—" Gage's face was blank with astonishment. "Good Lord, no! With your men in the room? It's incredible!"

"X" nodded. "That's the way with the Ghoul. And he's always got by—so far. Strange, though, that Dr. Luigi didn't mention it. Like a medical man. They are habitually reticent"

Scowling, Gage puffed furiously at his pipe. "No doubt but what Warnow's death caused the consternation Luigi exhibited when he returned here. He immediately put on his coat and rushed from the room. I had previously outlined a plan which we hoped would outwit the Ghoul—a rather costly plan, I'm afraid." Gage examined the polished toes of his oxfords.

"Just what was your plan, Mr. Gage?" The Agent inquired.

"I'd rather not divulge it at present." was the reply, "If I did, it might seem that I am attempting to appear heroic. The far-reaching power of this Ghoul infuriates me so that I am tempted to go to any length in an attempt to check him." He took hold of "X's" arm, gripped it, and stared earnestly into "X's" face. "Any length—" his voice dropped to a whisper—"if it costs me my life."

"That is, of course, commendable of you, Gage. And if you are not yet ready to confide in the police, there's no way I can force you to speak. I must urge, however—"

GAGE interrupted with a shake of his mountainous head. "Not yet. I've no doubt that this plan of mine will have publicity soon enough!" A slight shudder passed over his broad shoulders.

Agent "X" glanced about the room. "I suppose that Dr. Luigi, being a medical man, has a private phone?"

Gage nodded, "Right here." He opened the door of a tiny office half filled with a huge desk upon which were two telephones.

"X" nodded his thanks. "I have a call to make," He entered the room and closed the door behind him. He was considerably disappointed at not finding Luigi at home. The doctor's actions had aroused his suspicion. In close contact with Warnow, Luigi might well have had a hand in the crime. With the disappearance of Warnow's body there was no possible way in which to prove that the doctor's hypodermic injection had not been something quite different from morphine. But while the Ghoul's sinister progress remained unchecked, "X" knew that the loss of a single second might be vital.

His chief point of query was not Dr. Luigi, but the girl in the chambermaid's uniform whom he had found listening at the door of Warnow's room. "X" had penetrated her disguise; knew that far from being what she seemed, the girl was a strikingly beautiful blonde known by a number of aliases, one of which was Drew Devon. Famous behind footlights, and in divorce courts, "X" guessed

SECRET AGENT "X"

that Drew Devon concealed behind glamour the fact that she was a dangerous woman; that she figured in more serious enterprises than profitable *affaires du coeur*.

It was probably that she was the blonde woman referred to by Gilbert Warnow just before Luigi's drug had caused him to doze off. "X's" best source of information in regard to Drew Devon would be Betty Dale, the lovely girl reporter of the *Herald* who had assisted "X" in so many of his perilous battles against crime.*

Though he knew his position to be perilous; though he realized that the Ghoul's forces were working in the hotel itself, and might have managed to tap the telephone wires, he felt that information concerning Drew Devon was too important to neglect even for a short time. Accordingly, he called Betty Dale's apartment.

"Miss Dale?" he inquired in a whisper that could not have been heard outside the little room.

"This is Miss Dale speaking," came a clear, beautiful feminine voice. Yet, Pleasant as was that voice, a scowl crept across the forehead of Agent "X." Some sixth sense flashed a warning to his brain. Here was a situation that called for all his amazing powers of rapid lucid thinking. There was something—some almost imperceptible inflection in the girl's voice that sent the blood pounding through his arteries. Betty Dale was in danger. For the woman who was speaking to him at that moment was not Betty Dale.

"Who is speaking, please?" came the feminine voice that so artfully impersonated Betty.

"Impossible to talk now," replied the Agent "Will call you in ten minutes." He forked the receiver and flung from the room. Gage, seated in a chair and puffing at his pipe,

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: Followers of the amazing exploits of Secret Agent "X" doubtless recognize in Betty Dale the name of an old friend. Her character, her beauty, as well as the sincere affection that Betty Dale has for "X" have been sources of inspiration to Secret Agent "X" throughout his career as a public defender.

turned as "X" entered the room, "Can't wait any longer for Luigi," explained "X" nastily, and hurried into the hall.

On the floor below, he could hear Burks' thunderous voice as he evidently attempted to locate the runaway elevator and its unconscious cargo. If Burks stayed on the floor below, there was yet a thin chance of "X" getting clear of the hotel. He thumbed the elevator signal button and, as the car came to a stop, sprang inside. "Basement garage, and no stops!" he rasped out

STANDING as far back in the cage as possible, "X" saw the irate Inspector Burks standing directly in front of the door of the elevator shaft. But evidently the elevator boy was too impressed by the importance of his passenger to take any note of what was going on outside the rapidly descending car.

From the elevator, "X" stepped into the garage. He entered the lavatory and, with a master key which he took from his pocket, locked the door behind him. Never had he moved faster than he did in the next few minutes. Spurred on by the danger which threatened Betty Dale, his fingers fairly flew as he opened a compact make-up kit which he always carried. How the Ghoul had learned of his association with Betty he did not know. But master criminal that the Ghoul was he would naturally try to find his chief opponent's most vulnerable spot and such investigation must have led to Betty.

When he had concluded his makeup job, Agent "X" appeared the very picture of a timid, inoffensive young man. His name, the one under which he had engaged his hideout in the Hotel Empire, was Roscoe Jennings. In another moment he had obtained his car from the hotel garage and was on his way.

As "X" turned into the street, he noted a gleaming touring car in front of the hotel. Two men were alighting—one of them the sleek-haired Dr. Luigi, and the other a swarthy, beetle-browed man known in the empire of finance as Daniel Calvert. Oddly

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

enough, "X" thought, he had last seen Calvert's ugly face on the front page of a sensational tabloid, figuring in a story involving a good deal of scandal and the blonde charmer, Drew Devon.

Ten minutes of fast driving, and "X" was at the door of Betty Dale's apartment. But a moment was required for him to select the correct master key from the collection he always carried. Stealthily, he fitted the key in the lock, opened the door, entered, and closed the door behind him.

A woman started up from in front of a small telephone desk, and regarded "X" with wide, violet eyes. She was tall, statuesque, and garbed in a becoming dark suit. A wealth of platinum blonde hair was arranged in soft waves on her head. Her features were regular, undeniably beautiful.

"What do you mean by this, sir?" she demanded, her voice brittle.

"X" saw that her slender white hand was fingering behind her toward a small, pearl-handled revolver on the phone table. The Agent's gas gun seemed to leap from his pocket. He saw that the only way to deal with this woman was to confront her with immediate, personal danger. His tongue dripped ice as he said:

"Make no mistake. I would not hesitate a second to put a bullet through your brain. Where is Miss Dale?"

Drew Devon leaned carelessly back against the phone desk. She folded lovely hands in front of her, and regarded "X" through veiled eyes. Her lips curved in an alluring smile. "What do you intend to do with me?" she asked. "I should have known better than to pit my tiny strength against you, Secret Agent 'X'!"

"X" STEPPED within inches of the woman. He picked up the pearl-handled revolver from the telephone table and dropped it into his pocket. His gas gun tilted toward Drew Devon's face. "Only once more—where is Miss Dale?"

For a moment Drew Devon's self control deserted her. Her cheeks drained of their natural color. Then her upper lip lifted slightly in an almost imperceptible sneer. Her violet eyes were looking past Agent "X."

Instantly, the Secret Agent sensed danger behind him. He pivoted. With the silence of shadows, three men had entered the room. There was something in the bizarre color selection of their Oriental clothing that suggested that they were men of the Far East. They wore black domino masks through which slant eyes gleamed evilly.

There was a tense moment, void of sound and motion. Then a knife blade in the yellow hand of one of the men flashed into prominence. "X" went into action. A charge from his gas pistol was centered on the face of the foremost Chinese. The man staggered, fell backwards, "X" came to grips with the others. A swinging, upward thrust of a knife and the hilt met the wrist of the Agent's right hand, sending his gun to the floor.

Behind the fury of the hand-to-hand encounter, "X" saw Drew Devon run from the room, "X" caught the wrist of one would-be assassin and gave it a quick twist. The knife clattered to the floor. The Chinese writhed from "X's" grasp, and streaked for the door. "X" tried to follow, saw a shadowy something hurtling through the air toward him. He ducked a split second too late. A small walnut table, thrown from the hands of the remaining Chinese, struck him on the head. For a moment, it seemed that he must lose consciousness. But he mastered the pain, forced aside the mist that swam before his eyes—to find the room empty.

"X" ran into the hall. The Chinese had left as silently as they had come, and had taken their unconscious companion with them. "X" went back into the apartment. On entering the bedroom, he knew that his quick action had frustrated the criminals' plans by a narrow margin. Betty Dale was lying on the bed, bound and gagged, but apparently unharmed.

Her blue eyes searched his face wonderingly as he unknotted the cords that

SECRET AGENT "X"

bound her. He smiled gently, quickly drew the letter "X" in the air with his finger. *

"You!" she gasped, as soon as the gag was out of her mouth.

"Tell me, Betty, what happened? How did that Devon woman get in here?"

Deft fingers unconsciously rearranging her golden hair, Betty hurried her explanation: "She came here about half an hour ago, knocked at the door, and said she had important news for me. Drew Devon is always good for the front page, so I thought myself lucky to get a chance to talk to her. But when she stepped in, a man leaped through the door behind her. He had a gun. Together, they forced me back into this room and tied me up. I knew it was you they were trying to get at. I was afraid for your sake. Then the man said he was going to send three of his 'boys' to pick me up, and he went away, leaving Drew Devon."

Agent "X" smiled a little sadly. "I am afraid that my association with you results in nothing but an untold amount of trouble for you."

Betty sat up on the edge of the bed, placed her small hand impulsively on his arm. "Please, please don't think I mind—not at all, if you're safe. But what does it all mean?"

"Tell me about the man who came with Drew Devon. What was he like?"

"He wore a black mask," the girl told him. "But I would know him anywhere. He was so—so evil-looking. His right eye was turned out so that it didn't match its mate. And I saw that there were only three fingers on his right hand. His skin was yellow, yet I do not think he was a Chinese or Japanese."

"Come into the living room, Betty," the Agent suggested. "Undoubtedly Drew Devon was sent here by the Ghoul."

"The Ghoul!" Betty repeated with a shudder. "The Amber Death?"

"X" nodded. "The Ghoul is no ordinary criminal. The fact is, he is the most—" The Agent paused. Across the living room, he noticed that the light gleamed on some sort of a pin that was partially imbedded in the nap of

the rug. He crossed to it and picked it up. It proved to be a hairpin of the same pattern as the one he had found in Warnow's room. Without a doubt, Drew Devon, in the guise of a chambermaid, had had a hand in preparing Warnow's room for murder.

"X" looked at his watch. It was nearly two A.M. "Betty," he said earnestly, "I must not conceal from you the fact that you are in the deadliest danger. The Ghoul will not make a similar attempt tonight. He is far too clever to repeat his tricks. But if he guessed of the friendship I have for you, he is *certain* of it after this night's work. You must be extremely careful. Stay as near the newspaper office as you possibly can. That will be the safest place for you."

"And you? What are you going to do?" she asked with concern.

"I am going now."

And Betty, who respected the wisdom of this man whose real face she had never seen, made no effort to pry into his affairs.

CHAPTER IV

VOICE OF THE GHOUL

THE following afternoon, three distinguished gentlemen left the impressive portals of the Bankers' Club. They were Lionel Gage; Robert Cass, whose timid appearance and manner of speaking effectively concealed the fact that he was a lion of finance; and eccentric old Elisha Pond, whose generous attitude toward many charities had endeared him to thousands of people. On the lower step of the club building, they paused. The timid-appearing Robert Cass seemed reluctant to leave his companions of the luncheon hour, and loath to discontinue the discussion of the subject of their conversation.

"Then you have not been approached by the Ghoul, Mr. Pond?" Robert Cass inquired as he lighted a fresh cigar.

"Indeed no," replied Elisha Pond with a

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: Never having seen the Agent's true face, "X" has been compelled to devise signals by which Betty Dale may identify him.

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

vigorous shake of his head. "And I assure you that the fiend will be sadly disappointed if he makes a demand on me."

Lionel Gage shook his head dismally. "It's a terrifying business. I doubt if you realize the seriousness of the matter, Mr. Pond. The police are absolutely up against a stone wall. The power of this Ghoul is amazing—almost supernatural! Only this morning, so the papers says, the police, acting

on a tip of some sort, conducted a raid that netted the capture of four men believed to be in the Ghoul's gang. But before they could

reach headquarters, they had not four criminals on their hands, but four corpses! The gang committed suicide by some sort of trick."

"And last night," said Cass, "the police were frustrated in an attempt to save Ramesey Hurst, the radio manufacturer. But the Amber Death was concealed in Hurst's cigarette case. Then there was the Gilbert Warnow affair. I declare—" Cass stopped. His thin fingers clutched at the sleeve of Mr. Pond's coat. "Wasn't that some one calling you?"

Pond bobbed his head in agreement. "Most decidedly—"

"Elisha Pond," a voice interrupted the aged eccentric.

Cass pointed silently at a flashy touring car that was parked in front of the club.



*Malvern went down
under a quick blow*

SECRET AGENT "X"

Though the car was empty, the radio under the dash seemed to be turned on. From the concealed loudspeaker, the sepulchral voice of the Golden Ghoul boomed:

"Elisha Pond. This is the Golden Ghoul calling Elisha Pond."

MEN and women on the sidewalk swarmed around the car, muttering excitedly. They had read of the Ghoul in the papers, and attributed much of what they read to sensational writing. But now they were actually hearing him speak.

"If Elisha Pond is within the range of my voice," the Ghoul continued, "let him be warned. The toll that he must pay for his life is seventy-five thousand dollars. I shall not bother to speak to him again about the matter. However, he may expect instructions through the mail as to how and where this price of his immunity from the Amber Death may be paid." The voice sighed into silence.

A confused Babel of voices arose from the knot of people about the car.

"Whose car is that?... That's the Ghoul's car... Where are the police? Never here when they're needed... Ought to be able to trace the car by the license..."

But the general criticism of the police was entirely uncalled for. Hardly had the voice concluded speaking before a broad-shouldered cop shoved his way through the crowd. But of all the people standing about the flashy car, Elisha Pond seemed to be the least concerned.

"So much mumbo jumbo," he was heard to remark to his companions.

"But Mr. Pond!" exclaimed Cass. "You can't afford to neglect a warning of this kind! It would cost you your life. If you have not thought of yourself, think of the thousands who would miss you."

Elisha Pond snorted.

"Mr. Pond," said Gage seriously, "I consider you a man of great good sense, and courage. There will be a meeting of men, whom I hope are as courageous as you are, at my house tonight. We are going to discuss a

plan that will undoubtedly defeat the purposes of the Ghoul. I would be most happy to have you join us. Say, about ten o'clock?"

Elisha Pond bobbed his head and hurried off. Beneath his apparently aged exterior, a young heart beat high with new hope. Behind his wrinkled face the brain of the most amazing criminologist of our time was hard at work. There was a glint of humor in his brilliant eyes. Little did the Ghoul know, for all his cunning, that in threatening Elisha Pond, he had threatened his arch enemy, Secret Agent "X." *

That morning, Secret Agent "X" had spent in putting his vast crime-fighting machine into operation. Jim Hobart, who directed the operations of a group of private detectives employed by "X," had been ordered to release Ah-Fang, former servant of Gilbert Warnow. Ah-Fang had been held prisoner during the Agent's impersonation of the Chinese valet. "X" believed that Ah-Fang might have had a hand in the murder of Gilbert Warnow, and his instructions to Hobart were to have one of his men shadow the Chinese and record his every movement.

TO Bates, another important cog in the Agent's machine, had fallen the task of investigating the short-wave radio converter that "X" had taken from Warnow's suite.** Bates had been directed to put experts to work to determine the wave of the Ghoul's radio station and if possible learn its location. A scientist in the Bates organization was also to examine the two hypodermic

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: None of the Agent's stock disguises are more important to him than that of Elisha Pond. It is in this name that an inexhaustible fund, subscribed by certain public-spirited wealthy men, is placed at his disposal. From this fund, he obtains money with which to pay the vast army of men and women in his employ. He is free to use the money according to his own judgement.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE: Similar to the Hobart Detective Agency, which "X" secretly commands under the alias of A. J. Martin, is the Bates organization. However, while the Hobart group appears to be an ordinary detective agency, the general public does not know of the Bates group.

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

needles which "X" had removed from the pillow-trap to learn, if possible, what substance they contained.

As he hurried along the street toward one of his hideouts, "X" noticed that the building directly across from the Hotel Empire was made conspicuous by the fact that a large balloon was anchored to its roof. He had noticed several of these balloons in various parts of the city lately. They were moored there, ostensibly, to advertise some little known product, and their surfaces were covered with lettering. But to the alert brain of Agent "X," these balloons, together with the mysterious bag of shot he had found in Warnow's bedroom, formed an important clue as to the means by which the Ghoul performed his amazing kidnappings.

However, he had plans that had to be carried out immediately, foremost of which was to contrive an interview with the dangerous Drew Devon, beautiful, poisonous tool in the hands of the Golden Ghoul.

The apartment house in which Drew Devon lived cast a long shadow by the time Agent "X" arrived. He had taken considerable pains to produce an entirely new make-up. He was the very picture of opulence. Chubby cheeks were traced with a network of tiny red lines that might have indicated high blood pressure brought on by too much good living.

As he alighted from his car, "X" noticed a familiar figure approaching a taxi that was parked in front of his own car. It was the swarthy-faced Daniel Calvert whom he had seen with Dr. Luigi on the previous night. And Calvert had come from the apartment house where Drew Devon lived.

"X" busied himself around his own car, seeming to pay no attention to Calvert. As the wealthy financier got into the cab, "X" distinctly heard him say: "Back to the Great Eastern Bank, driver."

As soon as Calvert's cab had pulled from the curb, "X" entered the building. A few moments later, he was adjusting his tie in front of the door of Drew Devon's fifth-floor apartment. When the beautiful blonde opened

the door, a toothy smile spread across "X's" face. He allowed a dazzling diamond ring to show on the third finger of his left hand. Drew Devon's slight frown disappeared. Here, to all appearances, was the sort of person she thrived upon.

"Miss Devon?" inquired "X" politely.

Drew Devon smiled, nodded, and accepted a visiting card that introduced "X" as Jason Longworth, a name that meant millions in Chicago.

"It is my intention, Miss Devon, to back an entirely new musical revue that a promising young author-composer has brought to my attention. That young man was particularly anxious that no one be selected for the leading part until I offered you the post. Frankly, if I may say so, I realize now the wisdom of my young friend's choice."

"Please step in, Mr. Longworth," Drew Devon invited. "As you probably know, I have rather abruptly, but willfully, terminated my stage career. However," she added with an alluring smile, as she closed the door behind "X," "I am always ready to listen to a new proposition."

Back to the door, "X" made a move that was nothing else than legerdemain. He twisted the key in the lock without Drew Devon knowing it. His voice, which up to now had dripped honey, became flinty. His right hand came out of his pocket holding a bent and twisted hairpin.

"You realize, Miss Devon, that I have only to turn this over to the police together with information as to where I found it, and a very beautiful woman takes her place in the electric chair!"

Most of the pink faded from Drew Devon's pink-and-white complexion. Her eyes widened. "Wh-who are you?" she whispered huskily.

"You have seen my card. I am Jason Longworth, a life-long friend of Gilbert Warnow. I happened quite by accident upon this hairpin. Discreet inquiry led me to believe that it was you who were the instrument of Warnow's death. Be assured

SECRET AGENT "X"

that I will move heaven and earth to see that my friend is avenged. You are a servant of the Ghoul. But I am charitable enough to believe that you are a victim of circumstances. Is my assumption correct?"

DREW DEVON nodded slightly. It was as though she feared some unseen eye might observe her admission.

"Very well," continued the Agent. "I am willing that my knowledge concerning your part in this matter shall forever remain a secret. In addition, I am willing to pay you enough money to leave this country and insure yourself an excellent living elsewhere. Can we do business?"

Drew Devon's poise did not desert her as she crossed the room to a small table. But "X" noticed that her hand trembled slightly as she drew out a chair. "Please sit down, Mr. Longworth. Perhaps we can come to some agreement."

"X" seated himself on the opposite side of the table. He studied the woman's face carefully. Outwardly, she appeared the picture of harassed woman-kind. But beneath the mask—what?

Drew Devon examined her polished nails critically. "I am," she began, "as you say, a victim of circumstances. I would do anything within my power to free myself of the slavery of *him*. But I am afraid—afraid of him I dare not name."

"X" reached inside his pocket and drew out a neat packet of currency. "Would fifty, one thousand dollar bills overcome that fear, Miss Devon?" he asked shrewdly.

Drew Devon started. Perfect as was her control she could not conceal the avaricious gleam in her eyes as they met that stack of bills. She made an attempt to conceal her eagerness in a sudden movement. She picked up a silver cigarette chest, opened it, and passed it to Agent "X." He declined without hesitation. He had sensed beneath Drew Devon's lovely face the guile of a Borgia. Aware of his distrust, she shrugged slightly, selected one of the cigarettes and put it

between her lips.

"So you want me to risk my life—even my sanity—to tell you the name of—of him of whom you speak," she said reflectively.

"X" watched the woman narrowly and saw her do a peculiar thing. Whether in a moment of suppressed excitement, she made a mistake or whether the act was intentional he couldn't tell. But Drew Devon flicked a lighter and applied the flame to the cork tip of the cigarette. She inhaled deeply and allowed feathers of smoke to dribble from her scarlet lips.

"Mr. Longworth, you will probably find the name of the man you are seeking in tonight's paper. If you will read the story which will undoubtedly concern a gentleman by the name of Elisha Pond, you will find *his* true name." She leaned far over the table. Her cigarette returned to her lips. She drew deeply, regarding her companion with a curious gleam in her violet eyes.

Suddenly, it happened. There was a snap like the breaking of a violin string. The cigarette in the woman's lips had disintegrated. A tiny dart, propelled by a coiled spring, had been released from the inside of the cigarette. In a split second it had sprung the short distance between Drew Devon and Agent "X." The dart, at that moment, was deeply imbedded in what appeared to be the cheek of Secret Agent "X." He sprang out of his chair, staggered to one side, and pitched over backwards to the floor. Legs and arms twitched convulsively. Then he lay very still.

An evil smile twitched the lips of Drew Devon. "Now, Mr. Longworth, read this evening's paper—if you can!" She picked up the sheaf of bills from the table and tucked them into the bosom of her dress.

THERE came a knock at the door. From beneath lowered eyelids, Secret Agent "X" watched Drew Devon as she walked across the room. Actually, the dart, which was evidently poisoned, had not touched his flesh. The point of the deadly

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

little missile had entered the plastic material that covered his cheeks, but had come in contact with one of the metal face-plates which he had used to achieve the plump contours of the face of Jason Longworth.

He knew now why Drew Devon had lighted the cork tip of her cigarette. The dart and the spring that propelled it had been concealed within that cigarette. Had "X" smoked the cigarette, he would have lighted the right end. In that case, the poisoned dart would have shot down into his throat.

It was a deadly contrivance worthy of the criminal genius of the Ghoul himself. He watched the beautiful figure of the woman gracefully crossing the room. Hers was the callousness of a master murderer. Was it possible that she was the Ghoul whose infallible schemes and terror tactics were slitting the fattest purses in the city?

Drew Devon opened the door of the room a crack, silently nodded her blonde head, then opened the door to admit a man. She closed the door behind him and locked it. The man who had entered was extremely tall and thin. He was dressed in the height of fashion. The lean hands, visible below the cuffs of his dark coat, were yellow, and "X" noticed that one finger on his right hand was missing.

"You are ready to go with me, Drew?" the man asked in a voice that could be described only as metallic.

"All ready, Bobby. Having transacted a rather neat bit of business. Do you suppose you could manage to have some of the boys dispose of this carrion for me?" She took the arm of the man with the yellow hands and turned him so that he faced the recumbent form of Agent "X."

Without so much as a flutter of an eyelid, "X" regarded the man through the curtain of his eyelashes. The man's face, too, was the yellow of old ivory, but his features were regular and Caucasian. He would have been handsome in an effeminate sort of way, if it hadn't been for his right eye. This eye, turned far out, gave an ugly, inhuman cast to his face. He was obviously an Eurasian.

"Who is he?" demanded the man with the ivory face.

"Jason Longworth," Drew Devon replied. In front of a mirror, she was putting on a rakish looking hat. "A friend of Warnow's who thought I could be persuaded to tell things—things I don't know."

"How did you manage this?" asked Bobby as he approached "X."

"Oh, I've ways of protecting myself." she said lightly. "Is he dead yet?"

The man knelt. With one yellow finger, he peeled back "X's" right eyelid. Had not the Agent been the master of his own nerves that he was, he could not have managed to roll his eyes back under this severe test.

"No," replied he of the yellow hands. "But he is scarcely breathing. Don't you think it would be wise for me to thrust my knife into his throat?" He allowed "X's" eyelid to snap shut.

Drew Devon laughed. "No! Decidedly crude. He won't last much longer. Are we going to Ah-Fang's, or not?"

"With you in a moment." The man called Bobby availed himself of the diamond ring on the finger of Secret Agent "X." and then joined Drew Devon at the door.

No sooner had the couple left the apartment than Secret Agent "X" was on his feet. His photographic memory had recalled the face of the man with Drew Devon. He was known simply as China Bobby and operated a supposedly respectable Chinese-American restaurant—one of the show spots in Chinatown. But "X," who was as familiar with the records of Scotland Yard as he was with the New York police records, knew that China Bobby had obtained the money with which to back his elaborate restaurant by operating a profitable dive in the East End of London. He was an exceedingly dangerous person, if his past history could be believed, and a man crafty enough to be The Ghoul himself.

SECRET AGENT "X"

"X" TOOK but a moment to twitch out the dart that would have spelled his death had it entered his flesh; then he opened the door, and cautiously followed Drew Devon and her half-caste companion.

Dusk had deepened. From the door of the apartment building, he watched them step into a small black sedan. As the car started from the curb, he flung from the apartment and sprinted for his own car. He had the engine turning in a moment, and flashed off down the street following the speck of red light that marked the car of China Bobby. "X" weaved in and out of traffic until he was directly behind the Eurasian. When the black sedan turned into a less traveled side street, "X" was forced to slow down and permit the car ahead to gain on him.

In a poor section of the city, the car pulled to a stop in front of a once pretentious house. But the place was dark now and seemingly deserted. "X" speeded to the end of the block, rounded the corner and came to a stop. He got from the car and walked with apparent unconcern back toward the dark old house that Drew Devon and her companion had entered.

The house exhibited no more outward signs of life than when he had first passed it. But in the shadow of a sagging board fence that separated the house from the adjacent lot, he saw a man. Though there was not sufficient light to recognize the man, "X" believed him to be one of Jim Hobart's sleuths. Drew Devon had stated that they were going to Ah-Fang's place so it was logical to assume that this shadow was the man put on the Oriental's trail by Jim Hobart.

"X" crossed the small, unkempt yard and walked silently around the side of the house. Still no sign of life. Judicious use of his flashlight, however, enabled "X" to find a cellar window that would require little effort to open. With a small jimmy of special chrome-steel, "X" had the window open in a minute.

With the utmost care, he wriggled

backwards through the opening, and dropped soundlessly to the floor. The finger of his flashlight explored the basement—evidently a clearing ground for years of trash accumulation. He picked his way through the litter, climbed the stairs, and found himself in the kitchen.

A panel in the door leading from the kitchen to another part of the house had warped out of place and a narrow line of light shone beneath it. On tip-toe, "X" approached the door and peered through the crack. Squatting on a box behind an old round dining-room table was the man whom "X" had so artfully impersonated the night before. It was Ah-Fang, Warnow's valet. Drew Devon and China Bobby were standing. The woman regarded Ah-Fang through scornful eyes. It was China Bobby who was speaking in his odd, metallic voice:

"You think that I was born yesterday, Ah-Fang?" he demanded angrily. "Why, I wouldn't pay that price for number one *Li Yuen*, let alone that rooster brand of mud you put out!"

"Do not imagine, son of two races, that you can bargain with Ah-Fang," said the Chinese. "You not pay my price, no *Pen Yen*. What is more for persuasion, unless you buy from me, I inform to police."

A laugh hissed in China Bobby's throat. "That's likely! You go to the police! Why, I've half a mind to put a bullet in your thick skull and walk off with every *Fun* of the stuff in the house."

ON the other side of the door, Secret Agent "X" believed that he had run into what promised to be an ordinary underworld squabble. It was evident from the conversation that Ah-Fang operated a depot for smuggled opium. China Bobby, it seemed, had evidently reverted to his old occupation of running an opium den. "X" was about to turn away from his peephole when words from Ah-Fang checked him.

"I do not make reference to your occupation as master of House of Black

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

Smoke, I was thinking of telling police that you serve another—he who calls himself the Ghoul.”

With an oath, China Bobby’s hand drove into his pocket and brought out a blunt-nosed automatic. “Know too much, don’t you, Ah-Fang? Well, there’s a cure for that!”

Drew Devon put a restraining hand on China Bobby’s arm. But the half-caste shook her off angrily. “X” saw a knife slip from Ah-Fang’s sleeve. China Bobby’s gun roared. The knife dropped from the fingers of Ah-Fang; an expression of surprise flashed across his face. He slumped to the floor, a little stream of blood trickling down his forehead.

Again China Bobby laughed. “Come on, Drew. We’ll have to move. The cops—”

Hardly had the half-caste spoken the word before a police whistle blasted just outside the house. With an oath, China Bobby sprang for the door, dragging Drew Devon with him. From his listening-post at the kitchen door, “X” turned. Outside the house came the sound of running feet. The back door was suddenly thrown open and a heavy figure blotted across the doorway. A ray of light glinted against gleaming metal—the silver shield of a policeman.

The cop’s flashlight bit through the gloom, caught the fleeting form of Agent “X” as the latter leaped to the opposite wall of the kitchen.

“Comin’ out of there now, or do they bring you feet first?” growled the cop. The spot from his light danced a little nearer to Secret Agent “X.” Creeping along the wall, eyes locked on the manhunter in the doorway, “X” encountered the sink. His groping finger touched the rusty surface of a tin can. He snatched it up and hurled it against the opposite wall. The policeman’s light followed the clatter. His gun spat lead, shooting at the sound. But almost as soon as the can had left his fingers, “X” leaped toward the door.

A quick kick to the policeman’s wrist and the gun was knocked from the copper’s hand. “X” led a powerful, paralyzing blow to the cop’s solar plexus. The man went down in a

heap. “X” hurdled both the cop, and the steps, landed in the back yard, and sprinted towards the fence. He vaulted over, and ran down the alley.

Behind him another police whistle sounded. There came the roar of a starting motor, followed by two quick shots. Ahead of him, a car speeded by the mouth of the alley. Though he had only a glimpse of that car, he recognized it as the black sedan belonging to China Bobby. There were *two* persons in the front seat. Drew Devon and the Eurasian had escaped.

CHAPTER V SUICIDE PACT

ON his way to a near-by hideout, Secret Agent “X” bought an evening paper from a boy. Tucking it under his arm, he hurried on up a dismal street, entered a red-brick dwelling, and hurried up worn stairs to the second floor to enter a room which he rented under one of his numerous aliases.* He had nearly an hour before it was time for him to go in the guise of Elisha Pond to the special meeting called by Lionel Gage.

From beneath an iron bed, “X” took a small leather-covered case containing a compact short wave transmitter and receiver. He put the case on a table, manipulated various knobs and switches. Using a telegraph key that was incorporated in the transmitter, he called the headquarters of his secret organization directed by Bates. An answering call came almost at once; and “X,” using a code known only to him and Bates, sent this message:

“What have you on record concerning Dr. Claudio Luigi?”

While waiting for Bates to look up the information, “X” spread the evening paper out on his knees. He remembered that Drew

*AUTHOR’S NOTE: Agent “X” has established hideouts in every section of the city to which he may retire to change his disguise or obtain new materials and devices. Because of the constant peril in which he works, it is necessary for him to be on constant lookout for new strategic locations for these mysterious quarters of such vital importance to his methods of procedure.

SECRET AGENT "X"

Devon had told him that he might find the name of the person who was the Ghoul in the evening paper. He could hardly expect a word of truth in the woman's statement. Probably she had no more idea than he who her employer, the Ghoul, really was.

She had been compelled to kill time while waiting for her cigarette to burn down to the point where it would discharge the poison dart. However, the Agent was always thorough.

"X" saw in the paper that once again the Amber Death had struck—this time a wealthy newspaper publisher. As they had rushed his slowly ossifying body to the hospital, the ambulance had been held up by a gang of masked men and the Amber Death victim had been kidnapped. Again the law had been outwitted. Farther down the column was:

GHOUL WARNS ELISHA POND

Knowing most of the details even better than the newspaper men, "X" skimmed over the story. One paragraph, however, attracted his attention. It gave out the startling information that the Ghoul's warning had come from a radio in a parked car owned by Daniel Calvert. Police investigation had shown that a compact short-wave converter had been attached to the car radio. Calvert, who had arrived to take possession of his car some time later, denied any knowledge of the short-wave device.

"X" remembered that at the time, Daniel Calvert must have been in the apartment of Drew Devon. Possibly, Calvert had parked his car in front of the club, and taken a taxi to Drew Devon's apartment just to prevent his being trailed by some newspaper reporter anxious to dig up more about the scandal in which the financier and Drew Devon had been featured. More than likely, one of the Ghoul's men had added that short-wave converter to Calvert's car radio. Still, Calvert was a man who would bear watching. His dealings in Wall Street had been none too clean.

At that moment, the information from Bates came through. Dr. Luigi had been born and educated in Bologna, Italy. He was a specialist in dermatology and had a large practice among wealthy people of the city. Bates further informed "X" that all efforts to locate the Ghoul's headquarters had been fruitless. The extortionist's sinister whisper had passed out into the ether through an ultra-short waved transmitter which permitted great range with a minimum power. All attempts to find out what substance the hypodermic needles, taken from Warnow's room, had contained were also failures.

"X" RETURNED the radio equipment to its hiding place and proceeded at once to assume the disguise of Elisha Pond.

Half an hour later, he alighted at the portecochere of the palatial home of Lionel Gage. It was Gage himself who admitted "X"; for, as Gage explained, he had deemed it wise to dismiss the entire staff of servants for the night. In the magnificent glassed-in conservatory, "X" greeted the six men present—among them the swarthy Daniel Calvert, the suave Dr. Luigi, and the timid Robert Cass. The others were all men whom "X," as Pond, had frequently come in contact with.

When cigars were well lighted, a tall, blond man, hardly out of his forties, stood up. He was Anthony Bernard, whose family had for generations found a fortune in the iron and steel industry. He paced the floor nervously for a few moments, chewing his cigar ragged. "Well," he snapped at last, "what's this wonderful proposition of yours, Gage?"

Lionel Gage's dark eyes turned from Daniel Calvert to Dr. Luigi.

With a vigorous jerk of his shaggy head, Dan Calvert rapped out: "Tell 'em, damnit!" He leaned far forward on the edge of his chair, and glared about the circle of anxious faces.

Gage, nervous and ill at ease, ran a finger around the inside of his collar. "You

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

gentlemen understand that we are all marked men,” he said huskily. “We’ve either been threatened by the Ghoul, or have bank accounts that would prompt one to expect to hear the Ghoul’s voice at any time.”

Bernard’s jaw sagged. The chewed cigar dropped from his mouth unnoticed. He glanced apprehensively into the shadowy corners of the room as though he half expected to hear the Ghoul call him by name.

“We’ve all been threatened,” Daniel Calvert’s unpleasant voice croaked. “Or haven’t we?” he demanded crossly. “I have. Paid, too, like a damned ass! But—” his voice dropped to a crackling whisper—“a man likes to live!”

“I haven’t,” Bernard muttered.

“Haven’t what?” Calvert glared at the younger man. “Sit down, Bernard! Enough to give a man the shakes just watching you pace up and down, and mutter like one in a trance.”

Bernard flushed. “I said I haven’t been warned by the Ghoul.”

Robert Cass jerked a nervous glance at his watch. “This won’t get us anywhere, gentlemen—sitting here bawling at each other. Let’s have the plan. Anything that will trick the Ghoul.”

Calvert snorted. “This plan is *anything*—the last resort. The police are stumped. They can’t swear out a warrant against a voice.

Gage explained his plan:

“The Ghoul will continue his damnable practices just as long as they net him anything. If we don’t pay, we become living corpses—live brains within dead bodies.” He repressed a shudder. “The Ghoul is an infallible power. There is only one escape. Only one way to check the Ghoul’s nefarious scheme before he confiscates most of the wealth of the city, perhaps the wealth of the country. That is *not* to pay the Ghoul a single farthing from here on.”

Anthony Bernard wheeled on Gage. Color had completely drained from his face. “Not pay?” he muttered hoarsely. “Man, are you in your right mind? Cass, Pond, Luigi, all of you—is there a man among you who has not

dreamed of the Amber Death? Good Lord, gentlemen, in my sleep I’ve seen this face—” and his trembling hands raked across his cheeks—“this face reduced to a contorted yellow thing, the face of a living mummy!”

Dr. Luigi got up, laid a restraining band on Bernard’s shoulder. “Get a grip on yourself, Bernard,” he said sternly. “No time to play the coward.”

Bernard’s right hand came up flatly against Luigi’s cheek. The sound of the slap cracked throughout the room. The mark of Bernard’s fingers flamed Luigi’s smooth, dark skin. Daniel Calvert catapulted from his chair. His thick, outthrust arms shoved Bernard back to a chair.

“Sit down, you fool!” he roared.

Panting, pale with anger and shame, Bernard sat down. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Please, gentlemen,” said Dr. Luigi, straining to control his voice, “let us hear the rest of the plan.”

“Yes, the plan! Go on.”

GAGE continued: “It is a plan that requires courage, but for the common good, we must be the ones to defeat the Golden Ghoul. As Bernard has said, the police are helpless to fight this thing they cannot see. This person called Secret Agent “X,” who I am inclined to regard as a myth, has evidently had no better luck than the police.

“Here is my proposition. Tonight, each of us will sign an agreement not to pay one cent of tribute to the Ghoul. This agreement will be published in every paper in the country. Furthermore, to show that we are in earnest, and to deprive the Ghoul of the pleasure of torturing us with his Amber Death, each of us must agree to commit suicide when the Ghoul next makes a demand upon us!”

“You’re crazy!” Bernard leaped to his feet. It was only with considerable effort that he restrained another nervous burst of temper.

“And you believe,” Elisha Pond asked mildly, “that meeting defeat from a handful of men will cause the Ghoul to give up extortion

SECRET AGENT "X"

entirely?"

"That is my belief, Mr. Pond." Gage spread out a sheet of paper on his carved walnut desk. "I have the agreement which I have just outlined. May I have the honor of being the first to sign this declaration of our independence?"

"You may—and be damned!" cried Anthony Bernard. "I'll pay if it lands me in the bread line whenever the Ghoul speaks to me."

"If it would avail us anything to sign," Robert Cass said as if he were giving the question considerable thought. "But death, whether by the Amber Death or by putting a bullet through my own head—" He was seized with a fit of shaking that prevented him from continuing.

"I didn't say anything about a bullet," said Gage as he signed the suicide pact with a flourish. "I have a poison that Dr. Luigi tells me is perfectly painless—even pleasant. One gradually dozes—"

"Anthony Bernard." A cold dispassionate voice echoed throughout the room.

Cass's thin hand seized the sleeve of the Agent's coat. "Look!" He pointed at a heavy radio console at the end of the room. This time, whoever had attached the short-wave converter to Gage's set had made no attempt to conceal the fact that the Ghoul's voice came from the radio. The pilot lamps made a ghostly eye of the airplane dial on the radio.

"Anthony Bernard," repeated the voice, "this is my first warning. It shall be my last. I will give you two days in which to raise seventy-five thousand dollars. If you succeed, I will permit you to live. Fail, and your life is mine."

"Good Lord!" gasped Bernard. "The Ghoul! Two days to live—"

Again came the voice. "Two others are marked for the Amber Death. Elisha Pond, what have you done toward raising the money I demanded? You defied me. You shall be punished. And to him who opposed my strength with his puny will, I give certain death. Lionel Gage, I have spoken to you."

The voice sighed into silence.

A half-mad smile, ghastly in its untimely glee, twisted the lips of Anthony Bernard. "Now, Gage, where's your courage?"

Gage passed a quivering hand over his high, pale forehead. But his jaw was set with deadly determination. His right hand plunged into the pocket of his coat and pulled out a large hypodermic needle.

"Stop him!" shouted "X." With a celerity that belied the aged appearance of Mr. Pond, "X" sprang across the room. He caught Gage by the wrist—too late. Gage had emptied the entire contents of the syringe in the flesh of his neck. His fixed eyes stared at Pond. "All over now," he panted out. "Doesn't take much nerve. Painless—"

A scream of pain retched from Gage's throat. He fell to the floor writhing in agony. His hands clenched and unclenched. Facial muscles contracted in a hideous grimace. *And very, very slowly, a tinge of yellow crept upwards across his face.*

"Look! His face. It's the Amber death!" shouted Cass.

"So that's the *painless* poison!"

"Didn't Luigi give it to him?"

Like an enraged panther, Bernard sprang toward Luigi. "Traitor! You're the Ghoul!"

THE Italian suddenly paled, sidestepped to escape the lunging Bernard.

"Kill Luigi! Kill the Ghoul!"

And suddenly the room was drowned in darkness. Every light in the house seemed to have gone out at once. Men uttered high-pitched, feminine-like screams of terror. The glass roof of the conservatory was smashed to bits. Pieces of broken glass fell in tinkling rain upon the tiled floor. And through the opening in the roof, dark, agile shadows dropped.

Hoarse blasphemies cascaded from the mouth of Daniel Calvert, and mingled with a hideous, pain-ridden shriek.

"*Dio Mio!*" Luigi's voice. "The Amber Death!"

And above the noise of bedlam, the

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

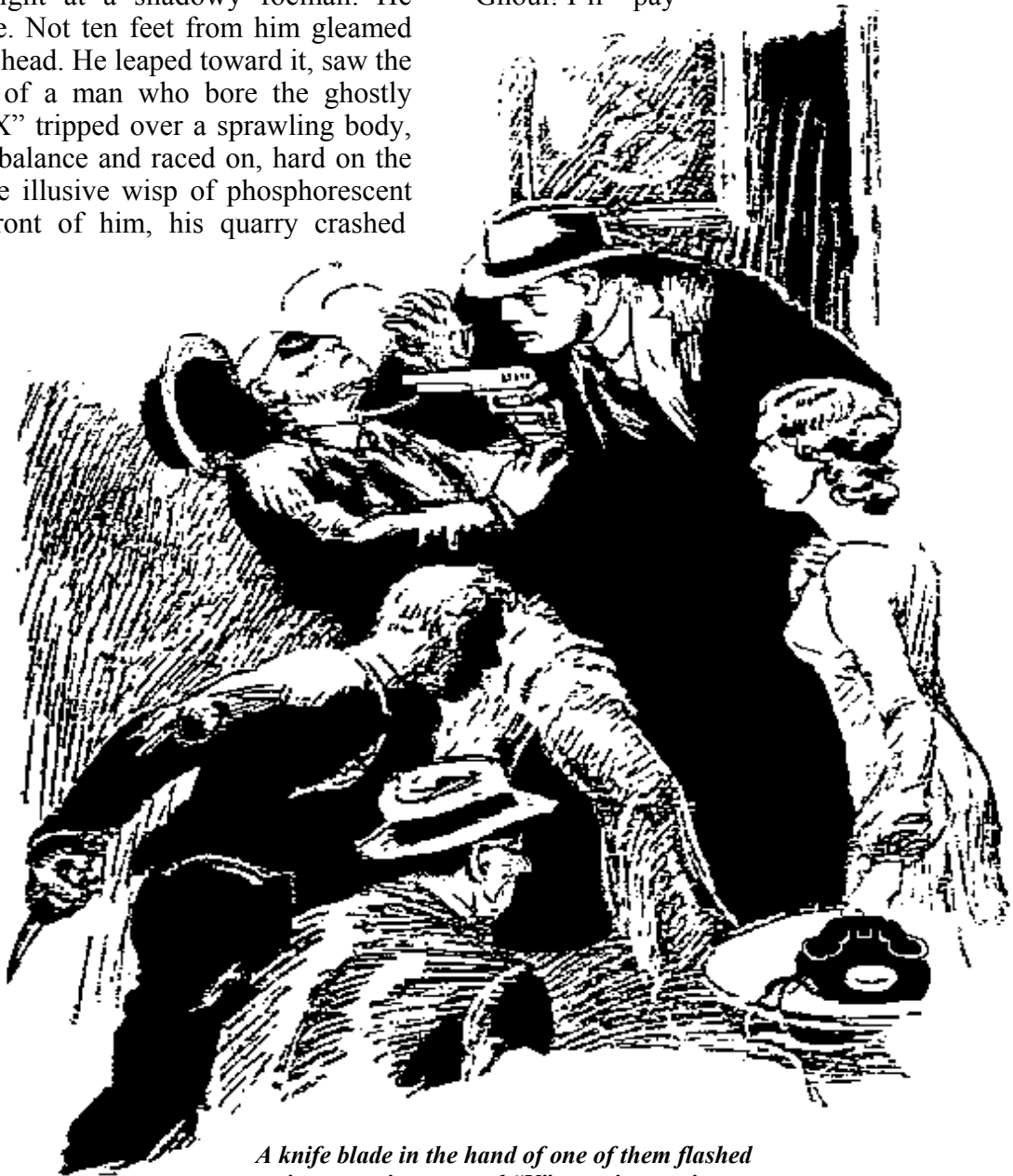
Ghoul's voice whispered orders.

Across the room, "X" saw a gleam of phosphorescent light—a death's-head drawn in luminous paint. The death's head danced around the room. That luminous face—perhaps it marked the Ghoul himself. "X" sprang across the room toward the face of fire, encountered a writhing tangle of arms and legs.

The blade of a knife raked his arm. Thin, clawlike hands dug at his throat. "X" let go with his right at a shadowy foeman. He twisted free. Not ten feet from him gleamed the death's head. He leaped toward it, saw the dark form of a man who bore the ghostly emblem. "X" tripped over a sprawling body, caught his balance and raced on, hard on the heels of the illusive wisp of phosphorescent light. In front of him, his quarry crashed

through French doors, stopped, encountering the wall of the next room. "X's" fingers crooked like the talons of a striking hawk as he seized the creature by the throat. But his man was possessed with the strength of desperation. He twisted and turned in the Agent's grasp. He drove hard, short blows to the Agent's chest. Yet "X" clung to the man with the tenacity of a bulldog.

A faint, gurgling cry from the man he was slowly inevitably choking into insensibility. "Ghoul! I'll—pay—"



A knife blade in the hand of one of them flashed into prominence, and "X" went into action

SECRET AGENT "X"

That agonized cry knifed through the Agent's heart. He had made some mistake. He released his grip, snapped a flashlight from his pocket and played the brilliant ray upon the face of the man he had tried to throttle. It was the terrified face of Anthony Bernard. Even in the light of the flash, he could make out the tracing of the death's head on Bernard's shirt front.

"You, Pond!" gasped Bernard. "You the Ghoul?"

"No—no, Bernard! Where did that mark on your shirt come from?"

"You're crazy! Nothing on my shirt!"

"Look," the Agent commanded. He snapped off the light for a moment.

Bernard gasped. "Why—why how did it get there?"

"Some one marked you so that the Ghoul could find you in the dark," the Agent explained. "Could your valet have marked that shirt?"

"Incredible!" Bernard exploded. "Why, I've had Ho-Yang for years."

"A Chinese! Undoubtedly, Bernard, your valet is in the Ghoul's gang. Had I not chased you out here, you would have been in the Ghoul's power."

"But I was to be given two days to raise the money," Bernard objected.

"X" nodded. "Merely to put you off your guard, I think. The Ghoul has a different method. He does not work as most extortionists do. The Amber Death first. Later, you pay—under the torment of the living death. That is his method."

Though "X" had not noticed it before, the entire house was shrouded in an awful silence. "X" took Bernard by the arm, and dragged him through the French doors and into the conservatory. "X" played his light about the room. The place looked as though it had been struck by a small hurricane. Broken glass covered up-ended furniture and was strewn over the floor. But, as "X" had expected, there were a number of canvas, shot-filled bags lying around the floor. But there was not a single human being in sight.

The Ghoul's work had progressed in its usual efficient manner. The master criminal seemed to be everywhere. His nefarious schemes seemed infallible.

Suddenly "X" snapped out his light. A little gasp from Bernard. "What's the matter?"

"Hush," the Agent cautioned. "The door on the right. It's opening. Quiet now!"

The door creaked. Cautious footsteps padded across the floor. Bernard, his hand on the Agent's arm, was shaking like a leaf. "X" waited until the footsteps came closer. Then the beam of his light sliced through the gloom to center on the frightened face of Robert Cass.

"Cass!" Bernard exploded.

Relief passed over the little man's face. "You there. Bernard! Thought the Ghoul took you along with the others." He hurried over to where "X" and Bernard were standing. "I managed to hide in that closet. Couldn't see much of what went on. Some of the mob climbed back up the ropes to the roof. Others just seemed to disappear."

"X" nodded his head. The bags of shot accounted for those sudden and mysterious disappearances. And he knew from the cries he had heard that Calvert and Luigi had both fallen victims of the Amber Death. Probably, they had been removed to the Ghoul's headquarters. What had been the fate of the others, he did not know.

"Hadn't we better inform the police?" asked Bernard.

"Definitely, no!" the Secret Agent replied. "We must all go to our respective homes at once. I do not trust the police. They have been so successfully defeated in every attempt made against the Ghoul, that I suspect some man, some one high in the police force, is the Ghoul himself!"

This statement was obviously false. While "X" had a theory concerning the identity of the Ghoul, this theory included no one on the police force. But he knew of no other way of convincing Bernard that he should not go to the police. Already a desperate plan was forming in "X's" mind. It was a plan that

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

would endanger Bernard, perhaps, but it was one that might enable "X" to come face to face with the Ghoul.

In his car a few moments later, "X" watched Cass and Bernard drive off in their own cars.

CHAPTER VI

KILLERS FROM THE CLOUDS

THE Agent's car followed that of Bernard unerringly through the streets. Steering with his left hand, his right worked miracles with the plastic material that covered his face. Wrinkles disappeared under his skilled fingers. Features took on an entirely different shape. A black toupee replaced the one which had been a part of his disguise as Elisha Pond.

A few minutes later, "X" stopped his car a short distance behind the parked machine of Anthony Bernard. A glimpse of his face in the rear-vision mirror told "X" that his disguise was perfect. Bernard would never know that the man who was following him to his apartment was the same Elisha Pond who had experienced the Ghoul's raid that night.

Hurrying up the walk that approached the apartment building, "X" just managed to enter the same elevator with Bernard. The latter was obviously worried. His glance hurried around the walls of the ascending cage as though hunting for some avenue of escape in case the Ghoul put in another miraculous appearance.

At the sixth floor, Bernard got out and "X" followed him closely. The Agent, aware that the Ghoul struck at the most surprising times, dared not let the millionaire out of his sight for a moment, even though his movements should arouse Bernard's suspicion.

It was not until Bernard was in the act of fitting his key into the lock of the door, that he seemed to notice "X." He turned quickly, frightened eyes searching the Agent's face. But "X" was not watching Bernard. His eyes were riveted on the brass doorknob of the apartment. On the dull antique finish of the knob there was a tiny spot of reflected light

that gleamed like the eye of a snake at its very center. As Bernard started to reach for the knob "X" sprang forward and knocked Bernard's arm down to his side.

"Be careful, Mr. Bernard!" the Agent cried. "Danger!"

Startled almost beyond speech, Bernard shrank back against the wall. "Who are you?" he muttered feebly.

"That is not important," replied the Agent. "Simply rest assured that I have your interests at heart." Standing to one side, "X" took hold of the doorknob between thumb and forefinger. He turned it slowly, his eye on the tiny hole that centered the knob. As the lock clicked, a needle stabbed halfway out of the knob, and discharged a stream of clear, yellow liquid on the floor.

"Good Lord!" Bernard husked. "Poison! It would have been injected into the palm of my hand!"

"X" knelt, touched a drop of the liquid with his finger, and conveyed it to his nose. He sniffed cautiously.

"Not poison," he corrected slowly. "The Amber Death. Some one in the Ghoul's crowd substituted this trick doorknob for the one that was originally on here. Now, Mr. Bernard, I think you are comparatively safe." The Agent stood up, flung open the door, and followed Bernard into the room. He locked the door from the inside.

"Are you a detective?" asked Bernard.

"X" smiled. "You can regard me as something of the sort."

Bernard dropped into a chair, for his legs seemed too shaky to support him. "The second attempt on my life tonight. Gage. Luigi and Calvert—all fell into the hands of the Ghoul."

"X" REGARDED Bernard critically for a moment. Then he went into the bathroom to return with a glass containing some colorless liquid. "Drink this, Mr. Bernard," he ordered.

Bernard seized the glass and drank half its contents. Almost at once, a marked change

SECRET AGENT "X"

came over his face. His eyes, once wide with terror, began to look drowsy. He tried to stand up. "You—you tried to poison me! I—I—" And he collapsed, unconscious.

The Agent was certain that the Ghoul's next move would be to send somebody for Bernard, who by this time would have been under the influence of the Amber Death had not "X" acted quickly. Such had been the Ghoul's method of procedure in the case of Gilbert Warnow, and others.

"X" picked up Bernard bodily, carried the unconscious millionaire into the bedroom, and stretched him out on the bed. Then, having made sure that the blinds were drawn, he began working on Bernard's face. From his pocket make-up kit, he took yellow pigment and plastic volatile material. He made no actual changes in Bernard's features, but with his plastic material he built up muscles and added lines so as to achieve the appearance that Bernard was in great pain. Then, with the yellow pigment he carefully colored Bernard's face and hands.

The result was that Bernard looked for all the world like a victim of the Ghoul's Amber Death.

"X" turned out all but a single lamp and walked quietly from the apartment.

Having located the stairway, "X" climbed to the top floor of the building and from there into the attic. There he found a ladder reaching up to a trapdoor in the roof. It was on the roof that he took up his vigil.

It was nearly midnight. Far below, the late traffic was hushed beneath a blanket of fog. And above, night and the mist had created a dismal gray void. Neighboring buildings were tall, uncertain shadows. The breeze, "X" noted, blew seaward. It was from the west, then, that he could expect the danger. For Secret Agent "X" was probably the only man in the city who understood how the Ghoul and his gang managed their mysterious entrances and exits.

"X" hid himself behind a fan-tailed ventilator and for perhaps fifteen minutes remained perfectly motionless. Then without

a sound, a man dropped, apparently from the clouds, to land lightly on the flat roof of the building. Though "X" could not see very clearly through the gloom, he knew that a rope extended from the man up to a balloon.

This balloon, "X" had deduced, was what had become known in the world of sports as a jumping-balloon. They had been introduced in Europe some time ago, were considerably smaller than an observation balloon, and were so inflated as to exert slightly less pounds lift than the weight of the persons who intended to travel with them. The balloon-jumper, hanging beneath the bag, had only to jump into the air and the buoyancy afforded by the balloon converted the jump into a gigantic stride that sometimes carried the balloonist a hundred feet in the air.

It was by means of these small balloons that the Ghoul's men had entered Warnow's bedroom, and the conservatory of Gage's house. The true purpose of these balloons, which had been moored throughout the city, was concealed by the fact that each balloon carried some sort of advertising matter.

"X" had guessed from the first that the bags of shot dropped by the Ghoul's balloon jumpers acted as ballast and were dropped whenever it became necessary for the balloon to gain additional lift. He could see similar ballast bags tied to the belt of the man who had just alighted on the roof. Probably, the man had leaped from the roof of a neighboring building.

"X" watched the balloon-jumper fasten the mooring rope of the balloon to the edge of the eaves, saw him drop a coil of rope over the edge of the roof, and commence his descent.

As soon as the man's head had disappeared, "X" hurried over to where the balloon was moored. He saw that a special mooring clasp had been provided—one which resisted the upward pull of the balloon but one which could be released by the slightest horizontal pull on the line which had been dropped over the eaves. The operator had only to stand on the window sill, give his line a quick, outward jerk, and the balloon would

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

be released. A powerful jump, and the man could soar high into the air and possibly cover the distance of a block or so to alight on some neighboring roof.

"X" took a knife from his pocket and quickly sawed through the mooring rope. The line snapped and leaped into the air to disappear in the gray dome above. Then, having made sure that the line over the eaves was made fast, "X" began a hand over hand descent towards the window of Anthony Bernard's apartment four stories below.

HE had climbed down perhaps fifteen feet when he felt a sudden jerk at the line. Looking up, he saw the round silhouette of a man's head leaning gargoyle-like over the eaves. A powerful beam of light drilled down through the darkness, and centered upon the upturned face of Agent "X." A harsh laugh from the man on the roof.

"X" saw the broad blade of a knife flash in the man's hand. He knew that to climb back that fifteen feet before the knife slashed through that line would be impossible. Already, as he swung there, eight or nine stories above the pavement, he could feel the rope vibrating like the strings of a violin beneath the sawing knife of the man on the roof.

There was but one thing to do—and small chance of it succeeding. "X" loosened his grip on the line, dropped like a plummet, felt the rope burn through his fingers. Then came that instant of sickening sensation when the rope became a limp, snaky thing falling with him. The knife had won.

Even in that moment when the primitive fear of falling would have paralyzed another man, "X" kept his head. At the moment that the rope broke, "X's" right arm shot out. His fingers crooked to grasp the steel awning-support that extended out a little way from the wall directly over Bernard's window. For a fraction of a second he hung there, saw the masked man beside Bernard's bed turn, draw a knife and spring toward the window. "X" swung up his legs, kicked forward with all his

strength, and threw himself through the open window.

He landed on his heels, fell over backwards, with the masked assassin on top of him. The killer's knife flashed silver fire in its descent, and was stopped by the Agent's hand when its point was but a fraction of an inch from his throat. With a quick twist, "X" brought his left arm around over the man's head and gave a jerk that threw the killer over on his back.

"X" rolled, following his opponent, and landed with both knees on the man's chest. His thumb pushed sharply between the center knuckles of the man's knife hand. The killer's fingers sprang apart and the knife clattered to the floor.

A single blow from the Agent's fist would have put the man out for a long time; but before he could deal that blow, the second balloon-jumper had dropped a rope, slid down it, and swung through the window. "X" sprang to his feet then dropped almost to his knees as the second man's knife sang its death song over his head to bury its point three inches in the woodwork of the opposite wall.

"X" snatched his gas gun and as the man leaped toward him, jerked the trigger. The gas pistol hissed. A cloud of the powerful anesthetizing vapor blotted across the assassin's black mask. The man received the full concentrated force of the gas and lurched forward to fall a few feet from "X."

But in that brief moment when the gas gun had knocked the second man unconscious, his companion had bolted from the room. "X" could hear the sound of his feet padding down the hall outside the apartment. "X" did not pursue the escaping criminal. He had captured one of the Ghoul's hirelings, and expected to be able to make that man talk.

His first act was to remove the man's mask. Beneath was a narrow, ratlike face with white skin blued about the chin by a stubble of black beard. He recognized the man as Jeff Lucko, who had cut his name in several crime records. He carefully searched the man's pockets. He found a few coins, a deck of

SECRET AGENT "X"

cocaine, and a small bit of cast brass. The last-named article interested him. It appeared to be a tiny hand not more than an inch in length, and he further noted that the little finger had been removed. This little brass hand "X" put into his pocket.

FROM his pocket medical kit, "X" removed a powerful stimulant and a hypodermic syringe. He made an injection of the fluid into Lucko's arm, and while waiting for the man to revive, he contemplated the possible value of the little brass hand. It was obviously a badge or a pass. "X" remembered that China Bobby had had only three fingers on his right hand. It was very probable that "X" would be able to make use of that bit of brass later on.

Jeff Lucko stirred slightly, opened his eyes, and stared up into "X's" face. Then his beady eyes wandered toward the bed. He licked dry lips. "Well?" he challenged.

Agent "X" fixed the man with his strange, magnetic eyes. "Lucko," he said softly, "you're in a spot. I'm the only person who can help you out."

Lucko sat up. "Who the hell are you, mister?"

"The man you tried to kill. My name is of no importance to you. The point is, do I turn you over to the police or will you answer my question?"

Lucko didn't answer. He looked past "X" and twisted a button on his coat.

"You know, Lucko, there's quite a price on the head of anyone associated with the Ghoul—dead or alive. You were caught with the goods. Your jumping-balloon must be moored up on the roof right now. I've only to give you a shot of an effective narcotic, and then call the police."

"You got me wrong, mister." Lucko shook his head. "You're off your nut if you think I killed this guy here."

"A lot of people are going to think you killed Bernard," the Agent lied. "But if you tell me who the Ghoul is and where I can find him, you get an even break to skip the



DREW DEVON

country, and pocket money besides."

"The Ghoul!" Lucko muttered fearfully. "Don't try to get none of that stuff out of me. I don't know nothin'!"

"X" shrugged. "Maybe you don't know who he is, but you can tell me where to find him."

A ghastly grin spread over Lucko's face. "Nix. Get wise, guy. You couldn't worm that dope out of anybody with a hot iron!"

"X" slipped a small black leather case from his pocket and removed a small vial from it.

Lucko, who had been watching every movement the Agent made, said:

"Save that stuff, Mister. I'm fit for the slab right now!"

A puzzled frown flashed across "X's" forehead. His eyes skated down Lucko's coat, and rested upon a telltale vacancy. The button with which Lucko had been toying, was missing. "X" seized Lucko by the shoulders and shook him. "That button! What did you do with that button?"

A sickly grin spread across Lucko's face. "That button? You won't see that again. It was one of the Ghoul's pet tricks. Loaded

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

with enough cyanide to knock over a horse. Don't fool with me. I'm—I'm—" Muscle's of the hood's face tightened, drawing his features into a mask of pain. "I failed... The Ghoul knows everything... He'd have—got me... The Amber Death—livin' hell—"

A convulsive tremor shook his entire body. A sigh rattled in his throat. The man was dead.

More than ever before "X" realized the power of the criminal with whom he battled, it was the power of fear. Lucko had preferred certain doom to living torment of the Amber Death.

So the Ghoul had won another hand. The single trick that "X" had taken had been the saving of Bernard's life—a valuable trick, to be sure, but it took "X" no nearer his goal.

"X" turned to the telephone, picked it up and called police headquarters. In a flawless imitation of Bernard's voice, he said: "Quick! Send somebody to my apartment. There's a man here. He's killed himself... This is Anthony Bernard speaking. I've got to have—" A gurgling sound that to the desk sergeant must have sounded as though Anthony Bernard's conversation had been interrupted by the clutching fingers of a strangler. "X" dropped the phone on the table, confident that his message would bring quick results.

With sure, deft movements, he removed the make-up material from the face of the unconscious Bernard. Then he dragged the millionaire from the bed to the table where the phone had stood, and dropped him on the floor. When the police arrived, it would appear that Bernard had been attacked by some one when he was in the act of phoning the police.

CHAPTER VII

HOUSE OF BLACK SMOKE

SOME time later, in Chinatown, a white man was seen to leave the door of a three-story brick house which contained the offices of the powerful Chinese society, the Ming Tong. This young white man was

dressed in the height of fashion. His pale face bore the unmistakable marks of mild dissipation. But those weak, pale features served only to hide the true face of Secret Agent "X."

"X," because of a great service he had once rendered the Mingmen, was the only white man ever to be admitted into their society. That night he had sought Lo Mong Yung, venerable father of the Tong. He had asked questions and learned something concerning the Eurasian, China Bobby, which would have caused considerable alarm had the same information reached the ears of the city's police and narcotic squads.

Beneath China Bobby's respectable restaurant, "X" had learned, the Eurasian carried on a flourishing opium traffic, making use of strange underground rooms that many years ago had been closed and sealed by the police.

Was China Bobby a member of the Ghoul's gang, or simply a human spider spinning a web to snare the rich and unwary? It was very probable that he was both. Ah-Fang had accused him of serving the Ghoul. Betty Dale had told "X" of the man who had aided Drew Devon in her attempt to kidnap



LIONEL GAGE

SECRET AGENT "X"

Betty; undoubtedly he was China Bobby. The Eurasian's opium den might well serve as a catch-pool for the Ghoul's prospective victims.

Agent "X" proceeded down the street from Ming headquarters to an ornately fronted building, brilliantly lighted even at this late hour. From its plate-glass doors, framed in gilt and gleaming lacquer, came the thin and tinkling strains of flute and moon-lute. An emblazoned sign proclaimed that this was the Chinese-American restaurant operated by China Bobby, late of Limehouse, London. There, wealthy, sensation-seeking patrons and sightseeing tourists gather at all hours of the night to sip tea and scented wines and partake of foods more American than Chinese.

Through these gaudy doors passed Agent "X" to deposit his hat and stick with a smiling Chinese girl who had forsaken the dress and mannerisms of her ancestors for those of her Occidental sisters. A swarthy-faced person with features that were unmistakably Latin, led "X" to a small gilded table at one side of the room.

There, "X" ordered wine, more to be rid of the waiter than for any other reason. He relaxed in his chair and languidly puffed on a cigarette. Outwardly, he appeared the very picture of boredom; but beneath drooping lids, his eyes missed nothing of what went on about him. He scrutinized every one of the restaurant's habitués.

While he was making a pretense at sipping his wine, he saw a young, nervous-acting man push back from his table, whisper a word in the ear of the waiter, then walk toward a door at the rear of the room.

A few minutes later, "X" following the young man's example, pushed open the door at the rear and entered a room into which no light penetrated. For a moment, he stood perfectly still, listening to the sound of approaching footsteps. Suddenly, an ornate, pierced brass lamp above his head was turned on. He found himself confronting the Latin-American who had met him at the door of the restaurant.

"X" uttered a cracked, drunken laugh and put his hand familiarly upon the shoulder of the Latin. "S'funny, every time I open a door in thish place I find you. Your name'sh goin' to be Albert. Now what I want, Albert, ish one lil old pipe and pill to put in it."

The man frowned. "I am sorry, sir. You are laboring under a misapprehension."

"X" WAGGED his head. "No such thing. Just laborin' under a yen to twisht up a few."

"I don't understand you, sir. Perhaps you had better go back—"

"X" clapped the man on the shoulder. "Sure, you gotta be careful. But not with me, no shir! I'm a genuine, bonifie' *Yen Shee Kwoi*," he said using the term for opium smoker which, though Chinese, was familiar to nearly every addict. "Here, maybe, maybe thish lil old thing will put me right with you." He fumbled in the pocket of his vest and brought out the tiny brass three-fingered hand which he had removed from the pocket of Jeff Lucko.

Recognition glimmered in the Latin's eyes. He bowed his head. "Of course, any friend of China Bobby's is welcome. Just follow me."

The man led the way to a door at the end of the hall. He unlocked the door, and pointed to a flight of winding steps that extended down beneath the surface of the earth.

"Here," the Agent thrust a five-dollar bill into the man's hand, "just a lil token of my eshteem, Albert. Happy dreams!" And on seemingly unsteady legs, he began the descent of the stairs. Behind him, the door closed with an ominous clangor.

The circular staircase ended in a stone, arched doorway. There "X" was met by an ivory-faced Chinese wearing American evening clothes. He looked "X" over from head to foot as if trying to determine his worth—in dollars. "X" would have passed the Chinese had not the latter stopped him.

"Just a minute, sir," said the Chinese in perfect English. "You are of course not familiar with our methods. I have never seen

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

you before. You will pay me before entering the dressing room. The price is sixty dollars."

"Oh, sure," replied "X" cheerfully. He pulled out a roll of bills large enough to make even the Chinaman blink. He peeled off the required amount, tossed the bills to the yellow man and stumbled through the door. There he found another Chinese attendant who offered to assist "X" in putting on a suit of embroidered silk pajamas.

"X" cursed the attendant from the room; then, as he staggered across the room, he purposely tripped over the cord of the only lamp in the small dressing-room. He knew that he would be expected to disrobe and put on the pajamas; for the true opium smoker usually spends at least twenty-four hours in his bunk after smoking his two pipes. "X" had feared that he would be watched through some secret opening while he was supposed to be in the act of undressing, and he had certain equipment in the pockets of his clothes that he dared not discard.

Under cover of darkness, he pulled the pajamas on over his clothes and buttoned them tightly around his neck. Since he had apparently entered the place somewhat the worse for drink, this action would not have aroused suspicion had it been discovered. With his knife, he slit the sides of his pajamas so that he could get his gun and other material at a moment's notice.

He had scarcely completed this preparation before the door of the dressing room opened and another attendant entered. This man was a Chinese and wore a plain silk, sack-like garment that reached nearly to his heels. He bowed low before "X," and ushered him through a door into a large circular room.

Never before had Agent "X" seen such a place of beauty put to such a damnable purpose. The ceiling was a low dome formed by branches of a single carved tree, the trunk of which rose like a pillar from the center of the floor. Whether this tree was wrought of wood, metal, or of plaster composition, he could not tell. Bronzing metal in greens and golds tinted the profusion of artificial foliage

that covered the ceiling.

And from the black, overhanging branches, tiny yellow lanterns shed light as pale moonbeams. Twined about the black trunk of the tree was a green dragon similarly wrought. From its nostrils and open mouth, wisps of incense smoke drifted lazily to mingle with the heady perfume of opium.

ABOUT the walls of the room were twenty or more bunks built into the walls. Some were closed off by filmy curtains of lustrous Oriental silk. Others were wide open, revealing the sprawled forms of their occupants. Some were wealthy men known to "X." In a few of the bunks were women, once beautiful but now reduced to frowzy abandonment, twitching in dreams induced by the black smoke.

"X" was led to an open bunk upon which he dropped. The attendant departed. Somewhere in the apartment sounded the dreamy silvery tinkle of a bell. A panel between two bunks directly opposite "X" slid open and closed again behind the svelte figure of a young Chinese girl. From across the room she appeared a creature of fragile, jewel-like beauty.

She busied herself for a moment over a tiny, teakwood table. This table she picked up and brought over to where "X" reclined. He watched her through somnolent eyelids. Hers was a flawless ivory complexion; yet, aside from her slanting eyelids, her features were more Caucasian than Chinese. A dark red poppy nestled in her dusky hair. As she raised her eyes to meet the Agent's face, he noticed that her eyes, instead of the usual sloe-black eyes of her race, were deep blue.

She lighted the smoking-lamp, rolled a bit of opium gum from a box to the needle point of a *yen hok*. This she twirled in the flame of the lamp, watching the blue flame sputter. When the roasting was done, she deftly put the pill of opium into the brass bowl of an ivory-stemmed pipe.

"I have not come to smoke and dream, little flower of Chung Kwoh," the Agent

SECRET AGENT "X"

whispered to her in Cantonese.

The girl continued her occupation, paying no more attention to his whispered words than she did to the groans and nightmare mumblings that droned from the sleepers. But this fact only confirmed what "X" had suspected almost as soon as he had laid eyes on the girl. She was no more Chinese than he was.

He accepted the brass-bowled pipe from her slender fingers, set the bit in his mouth and puffed once or twice, taking care not to allow the poisonous smoke to enter his lungs. He watched the girl narrowly as she prepared the second pill of opium. His hand thrust in under his pajamas and took out the tiny brass hand from his pocket. In a slightly amused voice, he addressed the girl in English. "As I said some moments ago in what should have been your native tongue, I am not here to smoke opium."

The girl jerked, nearly dropping the opium she had been roasting. Her violet eyes regarded "X" questioningly. He allowed opium smoke to dribble through his lips. "I have come with a message for China Bobby."

A shadow of suspicion crossed the woman's ivory face. "He is not in, sir," she replied coldly. "If you do not desire to smoke, I advise you to go and make room for another."

"I must see China Bobby. It is about the man who prevented the removal of Anthony Bernard from his apartment some hours ago."

Cautiously, she said: "If you were one of us, what sign would you give?"

"X" OPENED his hand, disclosing the tiny replica of China Bobby's maimed hand. "This," he said, knowing full well the chances he took. For if this bit of brass was not the pass to China Bobby's headquarters, he would undoubtedly be disclosed as a spy.

"Why did you not show me this in the first place?" she demanded. "Come then. China Bobby is waiting for you."

"X" followed the graceful figure of the

pseudo-Chinese girl across the floor of the opium palace to the ornate sliding panel through which she had entered. Pressing on the eye of a gilded dragon that centered the panel, the girl gained admittance. She led "X" into a narrow corridor the walls of which were hung with heavy silken draperies.

At the end of the corridor, she pushed open a door and bade him enter. "X" walked into a room that was the exact opposite of the Oriental atmosphere which dominated the rest of the building. Here was the latest in modern office furnishings. Evidently, China Bobby took greater pride in his white blood than in his yellow.

The half-caste was seated behind the desk, busily scratching off a note with a modern fountain pen. He did not raise his sleek head at "X's" entrance, but simply waved him to a chromium waiting-chair against the wall of the room. "X" saw that the girl in Chinese costume had not entered the half-caste's office.

An electric signal, somewhere in China Bobby's desk, burred. He extended his pointed forefinger to a small electric switchboard, and pressed a button. A panel in one side of the room opened and closed quickly as a thin, emaciated Chinese with long stringy mustaches entered. China Bobby turned his head.

"Greeting, Yu'an," he said in Cantonese. "What is your business?"

"Master, I have had the privilege of saving thy worthy life this night."

"So?" China Bobby scratched with his pen. "I have killed Ah-Fang when he came seeking your blood."

China Bobby whirled in his chair. "What the devil do you mean?" he broke out in English.

The man addressed as Yu'an replied in halting English. "He came with bared knife. He would have killed you."

China Bobby glanced quickly at "X" and reverted to speaking Cantonese, supposing that "X" would not understand. "I thought him with his ancestors some hours ago."

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

Perhaps my bullet was not blessed with good fortune. Perhaps I only wounded him. What have you done with the carrion?"

Yu'an pointed significantly at the floor with a long forefinger.

China Bobby nodded his head. "You have done well, Yu'an," he replied. He reached into the drawer of his desk, took out a soiled ten dollar bill, and handed it to the Chinese. The man bowed, and retired through the panel by which he had entered. The Eurasian put aside his pen and faced "X." His sensitive nostrils dilated. Because of the fact that his right eye turned far to one side, "X" was scarcely aware that the man was looking at him.

"Who sent you here?" he demanded in his metallic voice.

"The man whose name I dare not speak," replied "X" cryptically. He thrust his hand deep into the slit he had made in his pajamas and grasped the butt of his gas gun. They were alone in the room. Not more than ten feet separated him from the half-caste. It would be a simple matter to overcome the man, force a confession from him, learn the identity of the Ghoul, and quickly conclude the matter.

"And what message did *he* send?" asked China Bobby.

Without the slightest display of muscular effort, "X" tensed himself for a spring that would carry him to China Bobby's desk.

"I was to tell you that Anthony Bernard was saved by the activity of Secret Agent 'X.' 'X' must be sought out, and killed."

"And the Ghoul said that?" a smile flickered across China Bobby's effeminate lips. "How do you know that I am not the Ghoul?"

Now was the moment for action. China Bobby had detected falsehood. Perhaps the half-caste was the Ghoul, contrary as that might be to the conclusions "X" had already drawn. But at the very moment when "X" would have hurled himself upon the Eurasian, China Bobby's hand shot out and touched one of the buttons on his switch board.

Instantly, the steely nerves of Agent "X" received a terrific shock. The metal chair in which he was seated became literally alive with crackling electrical charges. And try as he might, "X" could not break the invisible bonds of current that held him to the chair. He was helpless, racked with pain that was like the thrusts of a thousand needle points. At any moment, the diabolical Eurasian might move the switch, increasing the amperage to a point where "X" would die—die like a common criminal in the death-cell of Sing Sing prison.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GRAVELESS DEAD

FOR a time, the Eurasian grinned with sadistic mirth. Then his voice rose above the hum of the electric current that had caught even the wily Secret Agent in its invisible web.

"These are Chinese police methods, Mr. Detective," China Bobby said. "You must admit they are some improvement over your methods of truth learning. An extremely high voltage at relatively low amperage prevents the current from doing you any serious damage. But always, the current is variable. Will you taste a little more?" He touched the button on his switchboard and the current increased, shooting tingling splinters of fire through "X's" entire body.

The Agent's face was contorted as though the pain was almost unbearable. Actually, he was watching a narrow slot in the wall which had opened when China Bobby had turned on the current. Through the slot, dark eyes watched the captive in the electric chair.

"Now," said China Bobby, "perhaps you will explain how you managed to enter here? Who sent you?"

"X" shook his head. "You're wasting time."

China Bobby laughed and stepped up the torture current another notch. "Now, your name!"

"X" writhed, unable to take his hands from the metal arms of the chair. "Martin Smith," he groaned. "Good Lord, man! Stop it! You're killing me!"

SECRET AGENT "X"

"And who is Martin Smith?" demanded China Bobby.

"Federal agent—narcotics."

China Bobby nodded. "And what becomes of spies, Martin Smith?"

"Get shot," the Agent gasped. "You couldn't do that. Too merciful."

"True," said China Bobby slowly, as though he was considering what more terrible death his sadistic cunning might devise. "We have our stinging ants, always anxious to be put to work. Or perhaps you could be lashed with nettles. That's rather unpleasant. Then, of course there's the Amber Death in which men die to live a brief eternity of mental torment. Or again, I might burn you in that chair." With an evil smile, China Bobby stepped up the current another notch.

"Turn off that current."

A voice had whispered from the walls of the room in which they were seated. The half-caste tuned pale, and jerked his head toward the slot in the wall which "X" had been watching. He murmured something and cut the switch. "X" felt muscles and nerves relax. He stared at the slot in the wall and the glittering eyes behind it. They were the eyes of the Ghoul.

A GAIN came the voice of the Ghoul, this time speaking in Cantonese, obviously with the intent that "X" should not understand.

"That man is lying to you. If he is not the one known as 'The Man of a Thousand Faces'—then he is one of his servants. He would not speak the truth were he to be lashed with scorpions. But if he is the man I think he is, then there is *one* who can make him talk. We shall learn later on. If he were to see *her* in the ant pit, he would talk. But there are other matters that require my attention. Let him be held a prisoner in the cells below. I would have speech with you alone."

"Yes, master," said China Bobby. There was no mistaking the whipped-cur attitude with which he regarded the Ghoul. It seemed to "X" that each of the Ghoul's words had

been a leaden weight descending upon the Agent's shoulders. The Ghoul's insinuations had been unmistakable. By some ruse, he had managed to lure Betty Dale into this devil's den.

Pressing the buttons on his switchboard. China Bobby summoned two men. One of them was the emaciated Yu'an; the other a broad-shouldered, black-haired Irishman addressed as Morgan.

"Take this man to the cells," China Bobby ordered. "Search him first."

Morgan prodded "X" to his feet with the muzzle of his automatic. "No funny business, now," he cautioned.

Yu'an ripped off the pajamas "X" wore, then relieved him of his gas gun. Supposing, no doubt, that it was a regular automatic, the Chinese put the gas pistol in his own pocket. "X's" compact make-up kit, pocket tool-kit master keys, medical kit and other special equipment were laid on top of China Bobby's desk. Then, seizing "X" between them, they dragged him through a doorway and into a short hall that ended in a flight of stone steps descending to a sub-cellar. As they were going down the steps, "X" debated whether or not to try and jump Morgan's gun. He had overpowered armed men many times before. But to hope to be able to quietly knock both Yu'an and Morgan unconscious before they could sound an alarm, was too much. He must not take unnecessary risks. There was more at stake now than before. For Betty Dale had fallen into the power of this master criminal.

The stone steps ended in a veritable catacomb of damp, brick-lined rooms. Iron gratings covered darkened cells—cells which at that moment might have been housing Calvert or some of the others who had been taken from Gage's house that night.

Morgan threw open a door, flung "X" to the damp floor, and slammed the grating. There was the click of a lock and the sound of receding footsteps, as Yu'an and Morgan returned the way they had come.

Though Yu'an's search had seemed thorough, "X" was not entirely stripped of his

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

resources. The Chinese had left him such innocent little devices as a fountain pen and a cigar lighter. Then, in the heels of his shoes were little compartments where he carried a tiny tube of make-up material, a vial of powerful narcotic, and a number of finely tempered tools. The lining of his coat had several accessories that Yu'an had overlooked, sewed into it.

HIS first act was to take the fountain pen from his pocket. It resolved itself into a small but powerful flashlight. With this, he took stock of his surroundings. Cold brick walls and a floor through which moisture was seeping, a wooden bench, nothing more. He approached the door and turned his flashlight on the lock. For a moment, escape seemed impossible.

The lock on the door was a pattern he had seen but a few times in his life. It was an ancient Chinese pin-lock, entirely different from western locks and in some ways superior. It consisted of two separate parts—a socket, and a wedge-shaped piece of flexible steel that fitted into the socket. The shackle, which in this case passed through the iron grill and a ring welded to the door frame, was simply a straight pin. The keyhole was so shaped that only one key could fit it. The key would be so channeled as to pull the wedge-shaped members of the steel together and at the same time force the lock open. There were neither tumblers nor movable cylinders. It was a veritable Waterloo for even a professional lockpick. “X” knew that the tools he carried in the heel of his shoe would be absolutely worthless.

It was then that he remembered a part of his equipment which he was seldom called upon to use. In a moment he had stripped off his coat, torn a strip from the lining, put in his hand, and pulled out a flat little bag of cloth. From the other side of his coat, he pulled out a similar bag. Each bag contained a small quantity of powder of his own compounding, so combined as to render ordinarily dangerous chemicals safe to carry.

“X” tore through the corners of each of the bags. Then he emptied the contents of both bags into the keyhole of the Chinese padlock. He retired to the end of the cell, turned out his flashlight, and waited. Brought into contact with one another, the two chemicals would combine in a complex chemical reaction producing terrific heat. The substance was very similar to that known by welders as thermite.

After perhaps a minute, the entire cell was engulfed in a blaze of dazzling white light that emanated with a hissing sound from the lock of the door. After the flare had subsided, the lock was a white-hot mass of twisted metal. “X” well knew that no tempered steel could withstand such temperature. He picked up the wooden bench and knocked open the grating. Then he stepped out into the dark passage.

He had no time even to examine the neighboring cells under the gleam of his flashlight before he saw a dot of light hurrying down the corridor towards him. “X” stepped aside, flattened himself against the wall. He heard the footsteps of a single man coming toward him. Evidently some one had heard him escaping from the cell. A few feet from “X,” the man came to a stop, staring in awe at the open grating.

“X” sprang toward the man, his cigarette lighter in his hand. The man turned at the sound and stabbed for his gun. But before he could get it out, “X” had pressed a button on the side of the lighter and a fine spray of anesthetizing vapor shot from the lighter. At the same time, he wrenched the man’s automatic from his hand. The Ghoul’s servant staggered, choked on an oath, and fell forward at “X’s” feet. His flashlight crashed to the floor and went out.

“X” turned the beam of his own light on the man’s face. It was the dark-haired, broad-shouldered Morgan. The Secret Agent dragged him back into the cell. There, he made a careful search of the man’s pockets. The search revealed nothing that would be of use to “X” save a bunch of keys. Probably, Morgan was the Ghoul’s jailer.

SECRET AGENT "X"

In another moment, "X" was out of the passage and running toward the stairway. He took the steps two at a time, and came to a stop at the door that lead into China Bobby's office. A moment he hesitated. There was no sound within the office, yet the half-caste might still be at work at his desk. "X" drew the automatic that he had taken from Morgan. He tried the door and found it unlocked. Cautiously, he inched it open.

The room was empty, and on the desk lay the Agent's special equipment that the searching fingers of Yu'an had taken from him. Quickly, he removed the contents of his makeup kit, medical kit, and tool-kit. He thrust the rest of his equipment into his pockets and was putting his amplifying device away when he heard the murmur of voices on the other side of the left-hand wall. He tip-toed across the room, his sound amplifying device in his hand. *

He placed the microphone against the wall and held the box to his ear. Manipulating a rheostat on one side of the box, he clarified the sound and made the words audible. The Ghoul was speaking and evidently to China Bobby:

"That Morgan has failed. Furthermore, our spies believe that last night he tried to get in touch with the police. He is trying to sell out. Inasmuch as we must get rid of him, I intend to use him as a subject of experimentation. Vardson, the chief chemist, has developed a new phase of the Amber Death that does not penetrate so rapidly and hence does not reach the vital organs so quickly. It means better control for us and longer torment for our victims—and more money. You understand, China Bobby?"

"Yes Master," replied the half-caste meekly.

"Then in a few minutes you will send the

man Morgan to the laboratory on some trumped-up errand. Later, we shall see to this girl reporter. From her we may be able to learn something definite regarding the man who stands between us and the wealth of the nation."

CHINA BOBBY started to say something. However, "X" did not listen for more. He sprang back to the steps leading down into the catacombs. Without the aid of his light, he hurried down the steps. As he ran along the narrow tunnel, he flashed from one cell to another, trying to locate the one occupied by the unconscious Morgan.

In two of the cells, he saw nondescript underworld characters chained to the wall, evidently being disciplined for some slight mistake they had made while serving the Ghoul. In another cell, "X" saw the body of Ah-Fang, one-time valet of Gilbert Warnow. He had evidently only suffered a scalp wound from the bullet China Bobby had fired at him that night. Probably, he had come seeking to be revenged on the half-caste only to be murdered by Yu'an.

Entering the cell in which he had been imprisoned for so short a time, "X" knelt beside the unconscious Morgan. For a brief interlude, he studied every angle of the man's face. Then setting up the small mirror that he had taken from his pocket make-up kit, he proceeded, in the uncertain light of his flashlight, to disguise himself as Morgan. In spite of the adverse conditions under which he worked, the effect was marvelous. After he had changed clothes with the gunman he felt that he could pass for Morgan even under the eyes of the Ghoul.

In a corner of the cell, "X" hid as much of his paraphernalia as he possibly could. He retained the automatic which he had taken from Morgan. It was a weapon that would arouse no suspicion in case he was searched. He also loaded a small hypodermic needle with an anesthetizing drug, and concealed the needle in an inner pocket of his coat. Having

* **AUTHOR'S NOTE:** This amplifier resembles a small camera. In the box of this efficient piece of apparatus is a stage of amplification as well as an extremely compact reproducer. The microphone is attached to the box by means of a covered wire lead. A rheostat serves to control the intensity of the sound.

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

slipped a new charging cylinder into the anesthetizing gas chamber of his lighter, he considered himself prepared to meet the Ghoul.

"X" had already deduced something of the process by which the Ghoul turned men into hideous, living mummies. He knew that certain aldehydes, particularly formaldehyde, produce peculiar changes in the proteins of the human body. That formic acid played some part in the preparation of the mysterious chemical compound the Ghoul employed, had been indicated by China Bobby's reference to stinging ants and nettles. Both were natural sources of that acid. "X" believed that the Ghoul's Amber Death simply enabled him to change the colloidal protein on the human body into synthetic amber. The Ghoul embalmed his victims alive. *

It was as he hurried up the steps leading from the Ghoul's prison cells that his disguise was compelled to undergo its severest test. A beam of light in the hands of a man at the top of the steps flashed directly into his eyes. "X" stopped, and steeled his nerves for the ordeal that was to come. For he had seen Morgan only twice, and heard him speak once.

"Morgan!" China Bobby's cold metallic voice sounded hollow as he shouted down the stairs. "What have you been doing down there?"

"Oh, it was that dick we took in, sir," the Agent explained, relying on his memory to recall the voice and manner of speaking of the man he represented.

"What's the matter with him?"

"He was making all kinds of a fuss. So I conked him on the head, and he'll be out for a bit of a nap."

* **AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Though a clever chemist, "X" has never been able to learn the complete formula for the Amber Death. He compares it, however, to the secret embalming method used by the Russians in embalming the body of Lenin, their national hero. As the reader may know, the body of Lenin is preserved because some colloid-chemical reaction has converted it into solid amber. "X" explained it to me that the Amber Death is, strictly speaking, not a poison, but an agent for promoting a definite chemical change within the body.

China Bobby stood aside to permit "X" to enter the office. He followed the Secret Agent, closing the door behind him. "The Ghoul," China Bobby said, "places a good deal of trust in you, Morgan."

"Glad to hear that," replied "X."

"As you probably have heard, we are going to kidnap the mayor shortly, and force him to appeal to the people of the city for a huge sum of money to be paid to the Ghoul for his release. You understand what *kind* of release!" China Bobby chuckled. "The Ghoul wants to see you."

"X'S" jaw dropped. He simulated surprise. "Y-you mean I am to meet *him* face to face?" But while he had spoken to the half-caste, his mind considered this new enterprise of the Ghoul. Kidnap the mayor. Then Mayor Grauman would be subjected to the Amber Death.

China Bobby smiled. "I cannot say as to that," he replied. "But come with me. I will show you to the laboratory." China Bobby touched a button on his desk. One of the many sliding doors in the room opened. He led "X" through this and down a labyrinthian corridor, to stop in front of a steel door. There was a Chinese dragon lacquered on the center of the door. The half-caste said: "You have only to press the eye of the dragon and you will be in the laboratory." He turned and retraced his steps.

Without hesitation, "X" pressed the dragon's eye. Immediately, the lights in the passage went out. The entire floor seemed to tremble beneath him and move down so gradually that he was scarcely conscious of it. A panel flipped open in front of him, and he faced a brilliantly lighted room. Boldly he stepped into the room and the panel closed behind him. In amazement that his masterly control could not disguise, "X" stared about the room. And in a row along the wall, the graveless dead stared back at him.

A veritable museum of accursed art! A silent hell. The laboratory of Satan himself.

SECRET AGENT "X"

Daniel Calvert, Lionel Gage, Dr. Luigi, Gilbert Warnow and others who had mysteriously disappeared in the last few days—all were there, standing erect, their stiffened bodies yellow shells of amber. And inside those hardened bodies, they lived and knew the torture of the damned. But aside from himself, "X" saw no other truly living thing within the room. On shelves and in cabinets about the room were rows of chemicals and apparatus.

As "X" looked about the room, a cabinet against the wall swung back, revealing a doorway. A man dressed in a surgeon's white gown entered the room to be followed by six vicious-faced men of both yellow and white races.

"X" recognized the man in white. He was Dr. Vardson, a scientist and medical man who had recently been deprived of his license to practice. Probably Vardson was responsible for the development of the Amber Death.

Although he knew the scientist, "X" asked timidly of the man in white:

"Are you the Ghoul?"

A MAD cackle of a laugh broke from the scientist's lips. "No, I am not the Ghoul!"

"Are you concerned about my presence, Morgan?" the cold, inhuman whisper of the Ghoul breathed from empty air. "Know then that I am always with you. Nothing that you do, or have done, has escaped my notice."

"X's" eyes roamed around the chamber. Between a pair of powerful electric lamps in the ceiling, he saw the conical diaphragm of an ordinary radio speaker. Through this the Ghoul spoke. "X" realized the seriousness of the position in which he had placed himself. Hoping to meet the Ghoul face to face, he had been willing to risk meeting even the Amber Death. But the Ghoul, always shrewd, always cunning, took no personal risks. He remained the disembodied voice, the invisible presence. "X" was not in the hands of the master criminal, but in the hands of his paid

assassins.

"Morgan," said the Ghoul, "we have developed a new phase of the Amber Death—a milder form that will give us better control. So many of our victims have died from the Amber Death before we had a chance to give them a thorough milking. It is my intention that we shall kidnap the mayor, keep him under the influence of the Amber Death, and make the city pay for his release—his release from life, that is. It will be my master stroke. We will gut the treasury of the city. You understand?"

"X" shook his head. He knew that the Ghoul was simply trying to distract his attention from the fact that the pack of criminals was slowly forming a circle about him. "Don't get much of this," he said, stalling for time. "How can you get money from these rich slobs after you've given them the Amber Death?"

The Ghoul laughed. A note of pride crept into his whispering voice as he said: "Few understand that. The common extortionist threatens his victims with death, if they do not pay. But I have learned that men will pay money to be allowed to die—when one makes the burden of life more terrible than any conception of death! The secret is combining life with death. The statues you see around the room are living brains within dead shells. Even you must understand the torture of living within a sarcophagus of your flesh!"

Like wolves circling the dying fire, hungry eyes on the hunter they will tear to shreds, the Ghoul's murderers moved restlessly about Secret Agent "X."

"You will notice," the Ghoul went on, "that the right hands of all these living statues are as yet unaffected by the Amber Death. This enables them to write orders of my own dictation and sign them with their names. Such orders direct the payment of money and negotiable securities to my own agents. Each time they pay, they are promised release from life. But eventually, the creeping Amber Death claims them all."

Out of the corner of his eye, "X" watched

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

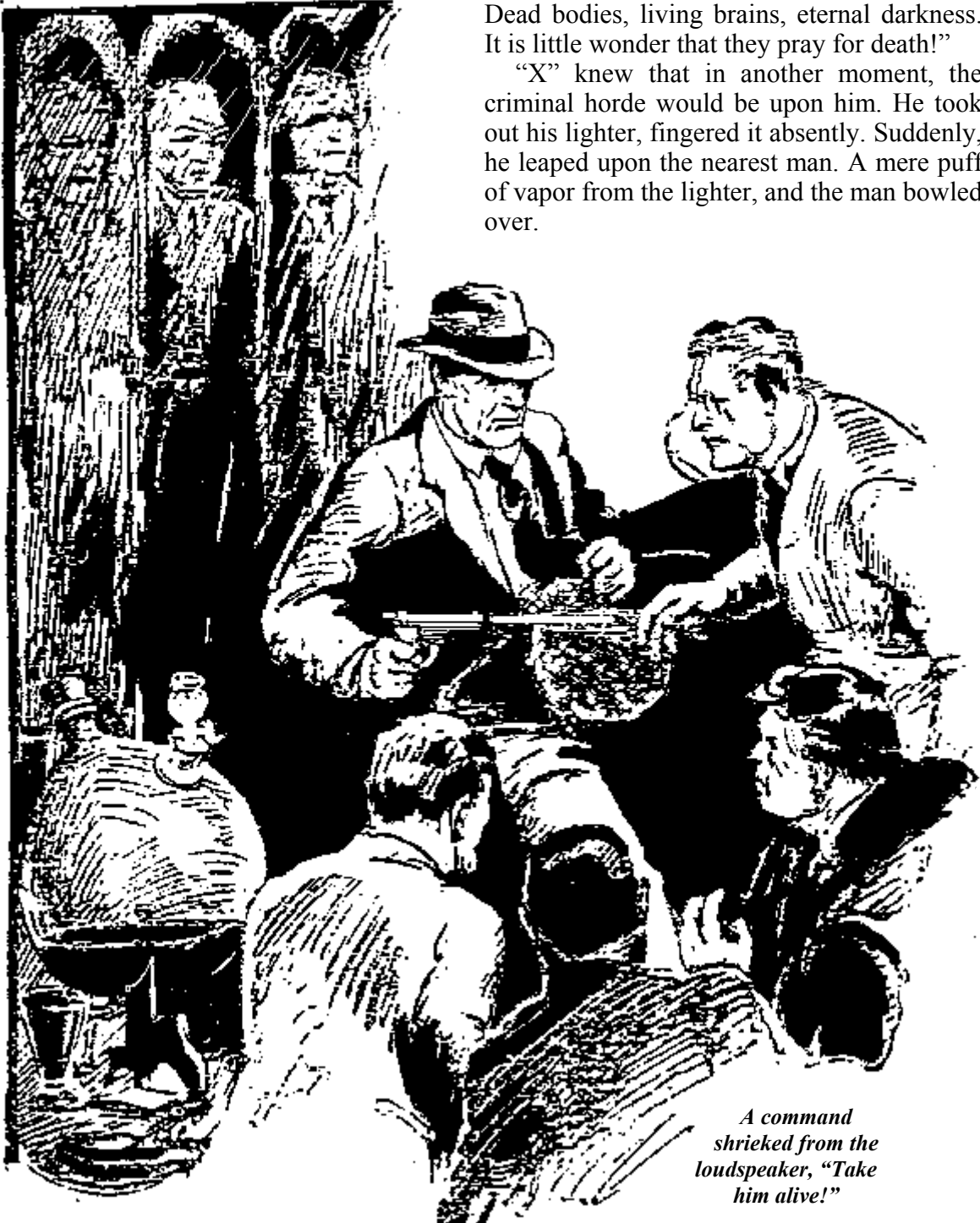
the men who were closing in on him. He could see that they did not relish the prospect of meeting the broad-shouldered Morgan in open fighting. Yet they feared the Ghoul above everything else, and they would obey him.

"Why don't your victims hear what you've

just said to me and refuse to pay, knowing that you have no intention of living up to your promise?" asked "X." His right hand was in his pocket, fingering with his cigarette lighter.

Again the Ghoul laughed. "Their torture is increased by the fact that I have carefully sealed their ears. They hear only when I desire to speak with them. And they are blind. Dead bodies, living brains, eternal darkness. It is little wonder that they pray for death!"

"X" knew that in another moment, the criminal horde would be upon him. He took out his lighter, fingered it absently. Suddenly, he leaped upon the nearest man. A mere puff of vapor from the lighter, and the man bowled over.



*A command
shrieked from the
loudspeaker, "Take
him alive!"*

SECRET AGENT "X"

A command shrieked from the loudspeaker in the ceiling. "Take him alive!"

A horde of yellow and white humanity suddenly descended upon "X." He snapped out the automatic he had taken from Morgan. Much as he disliked lethal weapons, he shot quickly and accurately. His first bullet crashed through the thigh of an ugly Chinese. He twisted in the grasp of thin, steely hands, dealt powerful blows with his left fist, tried to wrench his right arm free from the hold of another man in order to get in more telling shots.

And mingling in the general turmoil, behind the line of danger, "X" glimpsed another figure—a man whom he had not seen in the room before—a man whose entire head was swathed in a yellow veil that concealed his features. He saw, too, even as he fell to the floor, a tiny, round black button fastened to the lapel of the veiled man. And the veiled man's hands—one was white, and the other the sickly yellow of the Amber Death! The mystery of the Ghoul was solved—too late?

For at that moment, a sharp pain knifed through "X's" left leg. The Ghoul's voice came again—not from the speaker in the ceiling but from the man with the yellow veil.

"Vardson, you fool!" The Ghoul shouted. "You've used the wrong needle! That one contained the old form of the Amber Death—not the new! You've made a mistake. Morgan may die before we can complete our experiment!"

A strange numbness was creeping over "X's" body. His blows were becoming less effective. There was cold pain in his left leg as though muscles were gradually knotting. Many times in his career he had knocked at the door of death. But now the door had opened. The Amber Death, the death that was worse than death, was upon him. Minutes marched, approaching that time when he would no longer be a man, no longer Secret Agent "X," but a helpless, living, yellow mummy.

CHAPTER IX

ANGER BELOW

HIDDEN behind his minions, the Ghoul shouted his orders. "Clear the room. To the cells with Vardson. He shall taste torture! Put Morgan in the second laboratory! Go—all of you!"

"X" felt himself dragged across the room. A door sprang open, and he was thrown to the floor. The door closed. He could hear men running before the furious commands of the Ghoul; could hear the screams of the half-mad Vardson as he was dragged to the place of his punishment. Then, all was silent.

"X" stared about him. This second laboratory was smaller than the other. At one end he saw the black panel of a radio transmitter. Evidently, it was from here that the Ghoul's warning messages originated. He saw, too, apparatus for transcribing phonograph records. Experimental chemical and electrical apparatus littered the room. Shelves were laden with drugs and chemicals. It was toward these shelves that "X" looked for some tiny ray of hope.

With a mighty effort, he dragged himself to his feet. The pain of the contracting muscles in his left leg would have been unbearable to the average man. He limped to the shelves that lined the wall. His feverish eyes devoured the labels one by one and paused on a small vial of adrenaline. Rummaging in a drawer with hands that were already unfeeling, he found a hypodermic needle. Hastily, he filled the syringe, rolled back his sleeve, and made the injection. Almost instantly, the natural stimulant began to take effect. But it could not halt the creeping death.

He only hoped that it would give him fifteen minutes' strength before the final rigor set in. In that time, he must find the Ghoul.

But he was without a weapon. He had lost Morgan's automatic in the battle in the laboratory. He was looking about the room for some sort of an instrument that would spell death for the Ghoul, when a sound at the other end of the laboratory caused him to turn

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

around.

A door flung open and he saw the slight, lovely figure of a woman running toward him. It was the blue-eyed, pseudo-Chinese girl who served in China Bobby's dope den. She stopped five feet from him and stared, wide-eyed with horror. "Bill, darling!" With a sob, she flung herself into his arms and clung passionately to him. "I heard that the Ghoul no longer trusted you," she sobbed out. "I was afraid—afraid he might use the Amber Death—your hands—already yellow!"

She turned from the Secret Agent. "Don't worry. There's a way out! You have to oxydize the chemical producing the Amber Death. If you get it in time, everything will be all right. That's how they prevent the Amber Death from reaching the extortion victim's right hand." She fairly flew around the room, dumping chemicals into a glass beaker. "Watch the door, Bill. I'm through with the Ghoul! If he comes in here, kill him!"

The strange, unexpected entrance of the girl could be explained only by the fact that Bill Morgan was evidently some one who was very dear to her.

As soon as she had entered the room, "X" recognized her voice. In fact, he had suspected from the very first that she was Drew Devon so disguised as to lend Oriental atmosphere to the opium palace and at the same time enable the Ghoul to have a person he trusted watching over the opium den at all times.

"X" watched Drew Devon work. She was mixing a strange concoction. He knew that if she failed in her efforts to halt the creeping death, he would have not only lost his life but also the chance of ridding the earth of the Ghoul. He looked down at his hand. The flesh was faintly tinged with yellow. He knocked the back of his hand against the edge of the work table. It rapped out like a wooden thing and there was no feeling in it.

Pale beneath the yellow paint she wore on her face, Drew Devon turned toward him. She filled a huge hypodermic syringe with the pinkish fluid from the beaker. She peeled

back both sleeves of his coat, jabbed the needle into his flesh, and pumped the pinkish liquid into his blood stream.

"The other arm, quickly," she whispered. And again the needle went home.

A **TINGLING** sensation raced through "X's" body. But he had yet to regain his old strength. Drew Devon hurried back to the shelves, filled a clean beaker with liquid from a bottle, and handed it to him. "Drink this," she commanded.

He took the beaker and drank gratefully. It had contained some stimulant not altogether unfamiliar to "X."

"Feeling better?" she asked with a smile.

"A lot," "X" replied. Already the stiffness had passed from his legs and arms. "Where'd you learn—"

"Vardson taught me," she said quickly. "I've helped him in the laboratory. But we mustn't stay here."

"Right! I'm goin' back after that damned Ghoul!"

Drew Devon seized both of his arms. "Bill! You can't! Come, we'll go to my room, until I can plan a way for us to escape. You can't match wits with the Ghoul! Oh, I've risked everything to save you. I can't lose you now. Next time, he might throw you into the ant pit as he has Vardson. Come quickly!"

Holding him by the hand, Drew Devon led him through a door, and into a hall. At the end of the hall and down a short flight of steps, she stopped in front of the door of her room. Taking a key from the pocket of her Oriental garb, she unlocked the door.

It was a small room, but comfortably furnished. She forced "X" to sit down into a chair. Going to a table, she selected a cigarette, lighted it, and regarded him through half-closed eyes for a few minutes. Suddenly, she got up, crossed the room and kissed him impulsively. She sat down on the arm of the chair and dropped her arm over his shoulder. Her face close to his she whispered dreamily:

"Don't know why I love you. Bill. Don't know why I staked everything on saving

SECRET AGENT "X"

you."

"X" looked into the lovely face and frowned. "Love me as much as you did that rich slob of a Calvert?" he demanded.

Drew Devon recoiled from him, stood up. "Bill! Jealous, after all I've done for you? You know I hated Calvert. I had some old letters he'd written me. I was trying to collect five grand on them, and he wouldn't come across. The piker! Satisfied?"

"X" shook his head. "Not yet, Drew."

The girl's yellow-tinted forehead crimped into a tight frown. For a moment, fury possessed her to such an extent that she could not speak. When she had found her tongue, she spoke in an icy whisper: "So, I am Drew, am I? An error on your part! So I save the man I think to be Bill Morgan, and he calls me Drew—a name he has never known me by! Now, I know you—Secret Agent 'X'!"

WITH the speed of a striking snake, her hand darted inside her garment and reappeared with a small, black automatic. The pistol cracked almost as soon as she had drawn it. But at the first movement of the girl toward the hiding place of the weapon, "X" had leaped to his feet.

He swerved slightly to the right and the shot spent itself on the wall behind him. She had no time to pull the trigger again before "X" had seized the gun and twisted it from her hand. He turned the muzzle toward her.

"Tell me where Betty Dale is!" he demanded.

For a moment, Drew Devon's eyes were riveted in terror on the gun in the Agent's hands. Then a smile curved her lips. "I do not think Secret Agent 'X' would kill a woman. I am taking advantage of your gallantry."

"X's" left hand sought the pocket of his coat, and flashed out again. The hypodermic needle, which he had filled previous to his impersonation of Morgan, stabbed into the woman's arm. A shrill cry of terror died in her throat as she fell forward into "X's" arms.

He carried her to a little closet at one side

of the room, and placed her on the floor. He removed the black wig the woman wore and slipped it into his pocket. Then he took a pair of Oriental pajamas, similar to the ones Drew Devon wore, from a clothes hanger in the closet. These he concealed under his coat.

He turned next to the woman's dressing table. Removing the small tube of plastic volatile material from the heel of his left shoe, he lost no time in making slight but effective alterations in his make-up. He added deep lines in his cheeks, a crook in his nose, and removed the black wig which had been part of his Morgan disguise. Then armed with the little automatic he had taken from Drew Devon, he opened the door and stepped into the hall.

"X" knew that he would have to go down into the prison cells on the floor below. It was there that he must first look for Betty Dale. At the end of the hall, instead of opening the door that led into the second laboratory, he turned to the door at his left. This door yielded when he used one of the keys that he had removed from Morgan's pockets. Down another short hall he came to what appeared to be a blank wall.

A careful search under the beam of his flashlight revealed a tiny black button near the base of the panel. He knew that this was a door leading into China Bobby's office—the connecting link between the half-caste's dope den and the underground realm of the Ghoul. Without further hesitation he pressed the button. An electric signal burred; the panel slid back.

The office of China Bobby was empty. "X" went to the half-caste's desk and examined the switchboard that he had seen China Bobby use. It was covered with perhaps a dozen different buttons, each one marked with a letter. He had to take a chance on the button marked "C" opening the door into the cells in which the Ghoul kept his prisoners. At a touch of the button, another panel slid back and "X" recognized the dark stone stairway that led to the catacombs below.

As he hurried through the door, a sharp

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

clicking sound behind him stopped him. He shot a glance over his shoulder, but saw no one in the office.

"X" ran down the steps. That clicking sound had worried him. It might be some sort of a signal that would send a troupe of the Ghoul's men hard on his heels.

As he entered the row of cells, the stale air was knifed by a giggling shriek of stark madness. From directly ahead of him the cry had come. He hurried forward, flashlight darting from one cell to another. Suddenly, he stopped. Yawning in the floor, in front of him, was a pit covered with an iron grating set in the floor. "X" sent his light beam down into the opening, revealing a scene of revolting horror.

In the pit, the mad scientist, Vardson, ripped his garments from his back; tore at his own flesh with his fingernails. The man was a raving maniac—a product of the Ghoul's torture. The floor of the pit was like a single moving, red shadow. Stinging ants! Vardson's body teemed with noxious, stinging little lives. A myriad of tiny legs scurried across his face, into his eyes.

THAT such might be the fate of Betty Dale spurred "X" into action. Vardson was beyond help. But Betty—

He stopped only long enough in the cell where he had left the unconscious Morgan to regain his special equipment. Then he was out into the narrow passage again, the searching beam of his light darting from one cell to another.

As the passage branched abruptly to the right, "X" came upon a little cell apart from the others. Through the iron grating, he saw the form of a woman extended at full length on the wooden bench. It was Betty. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing heavily. She must have been drugged, for without the assistance of narcotics no one could have slept within the range of the tortured Vardson's screaming voice.

With feverish haste, he unlocked the cell door with one of Morgan's keys. Under the

light of his flash, he searched his pockets and laid out strips of transparent adhesive, makeup material, yellow pigment, and the wig and pajamas he had taken from Drew Devon. He knelt beside the sleeping girl. His fingers worked quickly and skillfully.

With the transparent adhesive tape, he stretched the flesh around the girl's eyelids so that her eyes attained the slanting appearance of a Chinese. Then he spread on plastic volatile material and yellow pigment over Betty's face. And when he had completed his task, Betty looked the exact counterpart of Drew Devon when the latter was disguised for service in the opium den. He completed the disguise by putting the black wig over Betty's blonde curls.

Then he gave her a stimulating hypodermic that brought her out of unconsciousness in a few seconds. The girl sat up, stared about her with terror-filled eyes. She met the strange face of the man who had worked miracles with her appearance. Her lips formed the unuttered question:

"Who?"

"X" smiled reassuringly. "Don't you know me, Betty?" He drew the letter "X" on the bench.

She gasped. "How did you get here?"

"Tell you later," he said. Picking up his pocket mirror, he held it before her face. "While you're getting used to being a pretty Chinese lass, you can tell me by what trick the Ghoul brought *you* here."

She stared for a moment in astonishment at her new features. Then: "I received a call from a man whom I thought was the city editor. He told me to go over to China Bobby's restaurant, that another reporter would meet me there. It was a woman I had never seen before who met me. It must have been one of the Ghoul's gang, because she led me back through a door and into a room where there was a man with a golden veil over his face. He asked me all sorts of questions about you. I didn't say anything. He said something about putting me with the ants or something like that. Some one carried me

SECRET AGENT "X"

down here. I was drugged. I don't remember anything else."

The Agent's eyes burned with fury as he thought of what might have happened to Betty. "Just the kind of a trick the Ghoul would try," he said. "Do you remember Drew Devon? Think you can impersonate her? You've *got* to. You *must* get out of this rotten hole."

"But you? What will happen to you?"

KNOWING the generous nature of the girl, "X" knew that she valued his safety above her own. If he was to persuade her to leave him in this moment of great danger, he knew that he would have to give her some responsibility outside the Ghoul's headquarters. "My work is not yet completed here," he told her. "Your task is to warn the mayor."

"The mayor!" she exclaimed. "You mean the Ghoul might use his Amber Death on the mayor?"

"X" nodded. "And if the Ghoul succeeds in his plan, who knows but what he will next turn his eyes toward Washington! But you must hurry. You'll have to put on these Oriental pajamas to make your disguise complete. Quickly, now. Everything depends upon the speed with which we act. If you stay here, the least the Ghoul will do is torture you in an attempt to gain some information."

Betty needed no urging. She had already slipped out of her dress, and was putting on the pajamas. She had scarcely fastened the jacket of the garment when a whispering sound broke through the darkness. It was the voice of the Ghoul. It seemed to be coming from the hall right outside the cell.

"Spy, do you presume that at this very moment I am not watching you?"

Betty uttered a frightened little gasp. She clutched the Agent's arm. "What was that?" she whispered.

"The Ghoul," he replied softly, "has loudspeakers located everywhere in this place. He isn't watching. He can see no better through this gloom than we can. It's the

colossal egoism of the man. He must have seen me enter this prison from that peephole he has in the wall of the office."

"But if he knows you're down here, why doesn't he send some one after you?"

"X" did not answer that question. He knew that that was exactly what the Ghoul would do, or had already done. His mind was busy, trying to see a way out of their difficulty. He took Betty by the arm and led her through the door of the cell. He turned out his flashlight and handed it to her. "Don't use it until you leave me," he said. "We'll work as far toward the steps as we can. Don't trip over that grating in the floor."

A low moaning sound came up from beneath their very feet. Then the stagnant air was rent by an hysterical laugh. Vardson, in the ant pit.

Betty clung closely to the Agent as he piloted her through the darkness. "Leave you? Do you think I could leave you—now?" came her tremulous whisper. But the element of concern for the Agent in her voice dominated any indication of personal fear.

"X's" heart was pounding like a triphammer. For all he knew, the darkness shrouded some diabolical trick of the Ghoul. His arm encircled Betty's shoulders. For a moment, he held her with fierce tenderness. Then reason mastered sentiment. He pressed Drew Devon's automatic into her hand. "Shoot to kill, if you have to," he told her as they moved slowly up the passage. "In this same direction, you'll find a flight of steps leading out of here. If the door at the top isn't open, you'll find a little black button right at the bottom of the door. Press it. Once in China Bobby's office, you'll have to experiment with the switchboard to find the button that opens the front door leading into the opium den. Don't worry. I'll probably be right behind you."

Again the Ghoul's voice whispered along the corridor. "Spy, Secret Agent 'X,' or whoever you are, my eyes are upon you. My hand is lifted to strike!"

Betty tied to suppress a shudder.

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

"Be brave, Betty," the Agent whispered. "He may try some sort of a trick. But remember, you are Drew Devon. If we are cornered, you must pretend to struggle with me. You must cry out that I am Secret Agent 'X.'"

A little sob broke from Betty's lips. "No—no! I will never do that! Not for all the mayors and presidents!"

"X" STOPPED, seized the girl's shoulders, and held her tightly. "Betty!" he whispered sternly. "And I always thought that I could rely upon you! You must do exactly as I tell you if the Ghoul's men come. It will give you an opportunity to get through the lines. Your disguise is perfect. In the part of Drew Devon, you cannot do otherwise than denounce me. And remember, when you reach China Bobby's office, I will be right behind you!"

"But you can't hope to escape!"

"I *can* escape only if you play your part. Hush!... There's some one coming up the passage behind... Remember your part... struggle, cry out that I am Secret Agent 'X'... Wait—"

Breathless, they listened in the darkness. Soft, padded footsteps sounded behind them. And in front of them, the rasp of a door opening. Husky whisperings. They were between two squads of the Ghoul's men.

Suddenly, a barrage of light-beams shot through the darkness in front of them, and from behind, men came running. "X" turned and seized Betty with his left arm. His right hand closed gently but realistically over her throat. She struggled, kicking and screaming. "Help! This man is Secret Agent 'X.' Help!" she cried.

And as the twin squads bore upon them, "X" pushed Betty from him and toward the door. He turned to meet his foremost foe, knowing that the man would not dare use his gun for fear of hitting the girl he supposed to be Drew Devon. "X's" fist smashed into the man's jaw, sent him reeling backwards.

The agent ducked under a descending

knife, seized the man by the waist, picked him up bodily, and threw him back over his shoulder. As he fought with silent fury, he saw a bright flash of color move through the criminal band, and streak toward the steps. Betty had played her part well. She was on the way to safety.

But with the girl gone, "X" knew the criminals would not hesitate to use firearms. Though he wore a bullet proof vest, he knew that at such close range he could not hope that vulnerable parts of his body would escape the flying shot. But he had prepared for that crucial moment. Beating back his nearest opponents with Herculean blows of his left fist, his right hand plunged into his pocket and closed upon a little glass capsule that had been enclosed in his medical kit.

He took a deep breath, sprung aside to avoid a knife-thrust, and dropped the fragile glass bubble on the floor of the passage. There was a sharp *pop* and instantly a cloud of gray vapor rose from the floor. A man directly in front of "X" spilled forward on his face. "X" hurdled him; brushed aside another staggering, choking man; drove his fist into the surprised face of another, and he was free. He ran up the passage, pounded up the stone stairway, and sprang into China Bobby's office.

The half-caste was there, his back toward "X." He was holding Betty by the arms, evidently thoroughly convinced that she was Drew Devon.

"But, Drew," China Bobby insisted, "you can't go out in the streets in broad daylight in the outfit of a Chinese girl. It might lead the police to investigate these cellars."

Betty, over the Eurasian's shoulders, saw "X" as he stealthily approached. Perhaps China Bobby saw the anxiety in the girl's eyes, for he immediately released her, turned, and snatched at the gun in his coat pocket. But as China Bobby turned, "X" leaped. All the strength of his lean, hard body was behind that long upper-cut that landed on the point of the Eurasian's chin. China Bobby hardly had time to utter a groan as he fell to the floor.

SECRET AGENT "X"

"X" seized him under the arms and dragged him to a little curtained closet. It would not do for the Ghoul to look through the peek-hole and see his chief lieutenant laid out on the floor. Then "X" joined Betty at the desk. With his finger, the Agent pressed the switch button marked "F." This, he believed, was the switch operating the front door of the office. As the panel slid back, he saw that his conjecture had been correct; beyond was the beautiful yet terrible temple of the black smoke. Some of the silk-curtained bunks were still occupied by dreaming addicts. "X" led Betty across the room, into the entryway, and up the spiral staircase to the rear door of the restaurant.

Looking out through the door of the restaurant, "X" saw that China Bobby's legitimate employees were busily engaged in preparing the restaurant for the evening.

"Go at once to the mayor and warn him," the agent whispered in Betty's ear. "But do not go to the police. A police raid at such a time would ruin all my plans. The Ghoul would escape."

"You're not coming with me?" she said, a look of dismay passing over her ivory-tinted face.

"X" shook his head. "My task has only begun." And, as he watched Betty hurrying toward the door, he looked through the plate glass front of the building. It was evening. He had, then, spent over twelve hours in the catacombs beneath China Bobby's restaurant.

CHAPTER X

THRONE OF THE GHOUL

"X" HURRIEDLY retraced his steps to China Bobby's office. Slipping into the closet where he had concealed the Eurasian, he stood his pocket mirror against the wall and began working on the most difficult disguise he had ever attempted. For a man of "X's" ability, the features and flesh tints of China Bobby were not difficult to duplicate; but there were two physical defects in China Bobby's appearance that it was almost impossible for

anyone to imitate—the missing finger on his right hand, and the fact that some muscular trouble had turned one of his eyes far to the right.

Yet, even as he worked, molding plastic material on his face to resemble the contours of the Eurasian's face, a plan suggested itself to "X" by which he could overcome one of those difficulties. It would be painful, and perilous, but without attempting it, he could not hope to succeed in impersonating China Bobby.

Having changed clothes with the Eurasian, "X" slicked down the hair of his black toupee so that it resembled the polished hair of the half-caste. Then he made an injection of a harmless narcotic in China Bobby's arm—enough of the drug to keep the man unconscious for eight hours or more. He pocketed the Eurasian's gun and immediately left the office.

He had little fear of being apprehended in the dark passages that honeycombed the basement floor below. Instinctively, he groped his way through the gloom, returning to the second laboratory by the same route he and Drew Devon had used in leaving it. He found the laboratory empty. In fact, the entire building had sunk into a silence that somehow foreboded disaster.

In the laboratory, he procured a length of thin, copper wire, a small dry cell, an induction coil, and a tiny push-button switch. He worked one wire lead under the plastic volatile material that covered his face. The end of the wire he fastened above an important nerve center near his right eye. Having completed the circuit, he concealed all wires under his coat and pocketed battery, induction coil, and switch. His right hand, thrust into his pocket, operated the little switch for making and breaking the circuit.

He then approached a cabinet, the glass front of which would mirror his face. Pressing the switch, something happened that would have appeared nothing short of miraculous when observed by a person unacquainted with artificial stimulus of nerve centers of the

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

body. "X's" right eye jerked sharply to the right and remained fixed in that position as long as his finger depressed the switch. His left eye was free to move in any direction. It was extremely unpleasant and interfered with his vision, but he knew he had only to lift his finger from the switch and his eye would return to its normal position.

He had scarcely completed his preparation before the whispering voice of the Ghoul sounded within the room. "All will come to my room at once. Important instructions."

"X" swung into the hall. He had not the slightest idea where the Ghoul's room was, and he feared that failing to find it, he would be apprehended at once. As he hurried along the corridor, he almost bumped into the sinister Chinese known as Yu'an. Instantly, "X" depressed the switch in his pocket that sent the artificial stimulus to his right eye. Imitating the metallic voice of China Bobby, he said in Cantonese: "The master summons us, Yu'an."

"And he is possessed by anger at the failure of his plan to take the spy," replied Yu'an. "Many men have been tracked in the prison cells below." He bowed slightly and stepped aside for the man whom he supposed to be China Bobby to go ahead. For a moment, "X" feared that he made a serious error. China Bobby was the Ghoul's lieutenant. Perhaps China Bobby alone knew the exact location of the Ghoul's chamber.

"X" **SHOOK** his head and motioned Yu'an to go ahead. "This night it is I who am your humble servant, Yu'an. For have you not saved my unworthy flesh from the assassin's knife in killing the vengeful Ah-Fang?"

Yu'an bowed and to "X's" immense relief, accepted the honor of leading the way to the Ghoul's chamber.

They entered the central office of China Bobby. One of the panels was wide open. They entered to find a company of perhaps a score of men already assembled. They were men of the East and West, dangerous men

who had police records. Walls and ceiling of the room were covered with bright gilt. Gold-painted armchairs were arranged facing a golden dais. Kneeling motionless at the foot of the dais were two gorgeously robed Chinese girls, each holding a bowl of green Chinese porcelain from which wisps of fragrant incense mounted toward the ceiling. A veritable curtain of gray mist, probably produced by some chemical reaction taking place beneath the dais, partially concealed a golden throne-like chair on the dais.

Somewhere, a gong sounded a low, vibrant note. The mist thickened, became almost impenetrable; but behind it, "X" noticed some slight movement waved the mist curtain. Perhaps a door had opened to admit the Ghoul.

A white man next to "X" whispered an oath. "Look!"

The mist cleared away, and seated on the golden chair was a man. A robe of yellow silk draped his shoulders and fell to his feet. A skull cap of the same material, topped with the coral bead of a mandarin, covered his head. The yellow veil that "X" had seen before dropped from the cap and covered his face.

For a moment of awful silence, the hidden eyes behind the veil seemed to be upon the men at the foot of the dais. Then, from behind the veil came the whispering voice of the Ghoul:

"China Bobby, stand up."

"X" calmly obeyed. He was confident of himself. He had purposely chosen to impersonate China Bobby because the Eurasian's defective eye made such an impersonation seem nothing short of impossible.

"Did anyone pass through your office after I sent the men down into the catacombs to look for a spy?"

"No, master," replied "X"

"Very well. Since there are only two ways to leave these headquarters and one of them is known only to me, the spy must still be here. It is of no matter. He shall not escape."

SECRET AGENT "X"

One of the white men, bolder than the others, spoke up. "If that spy you talk about was the guy known as Secret Agent 'X,' there'll be matter enough."

"Silence. Cramer!" commanded the Ghoul. "I have called you men here for final instructions. As you know, the hour of my master stroke draws near. Tonight, you will proceed to the country home of the mayor. You will bring him alive to this place. Yu'an shall be in charge of the expedition. All arrangements have been made. Balloons have been moored at convenient spots. There will be fog, and positively no excuse for failure! You understand?"

"Nope." It was the man called Cramer who spoke. "I'll be damned if I see how you're goin' to get at the mayor. He's been scared to death somebody will bump him with the Amber Death. He's got bodyguards and all sorts of 'lectrical stuff strung around his place. Too damned much risk."

"Cramer," the Ghoul whispered, "I do not like your attitude."

"Nor me yours. This whole gang of yellow-bellies is scared of you and your fake tricks. It's a neat little old racket for you, but where do we come in? Your pay's too thin. You keep all the big sugar for yourself. We take all the risks. You sit there and push buttons. Never show your face."

The Ghoul waited until Cramer had finished. He leaned far forward in his chair. "Would you like to see my face, knowing that to look into my eyes means certain death?"

"Hooey!" Cramer turned around and looked at his companions. "Any of youse got the guts to oust this guy? He's got most of the swag hid around here somewhere. Must be more'n a million bucks!"

Not a man stirred. "Cramer!" commanded the Ghoul. "Look at me!"

THE man turned his head and confronted the Ghoul boldly. From beneath the yellow robe, a thin, yellow hand moved. With tantalizing slowness, that hand crawled up toward the yellow veil. The

members of the gang were breathless. Some of them turned their eyes away as if they believed that the Ghoul could really kill with a glance.

Slowly, the thin fingers peeled back the veil. A gasp of stark terror breathed from the lips of every man in the room. For the face of the Ghoul was a yellow, dead thing with living eyes behind slanting lids. A round bullet hole had tunneled the creature's forehead. It was unmistakably the face of Ah-Fang, Gilbert Warnow's Chinese valet.

A hoarse cry ripped from the throat of Cramer. He sprang half out of his chair, uttered a strangled oath, and pitched forward on the floor.

The veil dropped over the hideous face of Ah-Fang. Yet "X" was not deceived. He had detected a movement of the Ghoul's left hand beneath the silken robe. Almost at the same time, he had seen a hidden needle snap out of the arm of Cramer's chair, and enter the gangman's arm. Doubtless this needle had been poisoned. Probably a similar needle was in the arm of every chair in the room and each controlled by some sort of push button on the Ghoul's chair.

"Now," said the Ghoul, and his whisper did not hide the note of triumph in his voice, "there will be no more disobedience. Go all of you. From now on, Yu'an, who thought he killed me, is in command."

The gong boomed hollowly again. Smoke fumed up from the dais and enveloped the form of the Ghoul. One by one the men filed from the room, and close behind Yu'an walked Secret Agent "X."

So Yu'an had thought he had killed Ah-Fang. Surely, thought "X," the Chinese had more intelligence than to believe that Ah-Fang had come to life again. Was it possible that the Ghoul had made a death-mask from the flesh of Ah-Fang's face and had actually worn it to further the horror-hold he had upon his men? If so, then the Ghoul had earned his name. "X" had seen the fleshy death-mask that had been sent to Warnow. It had been mummified, turned to solid synthetic amber

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

by the Ghoul's deadly chemical weapon. It was probable that he made the mask he wore in a similar manner from the flesh of Ah-Fang.

But he had no time to cogitate on the subject at that moment. The Chinese, Yu'an, was in China Bobby's office passing out weapons to the men who were to assist in kidnapping the mayor. As "X" entered the office, Yu'an approached him, handed him a knife, and whispered: "It is with great joy that I learn that you, my friend, are to accompany me on this expedition of great danger."

"X" bowed in silence, accepted the knife, and tucked it into his sleeve. He had already resolved that Yu'an's joy should be short-lived indeed.

CHAPTER XI

THE MASTER STROKE

FOG hung heavy over the suburban estate of Mayor Grauman. Its vaporous tentacles twined around the chimneys that stood up from the slate roof like so many little minarets. Behind the fifteen-foot wall that surrounded the house, the mayor had sought sanctuary after a week of tiresome official duties. That wall was topped with a complicated network of wires that were connected with burglar alarms. Yet he must have known that no wall, no alarm had yet been devised that was proof against the Ghoul.

That night, there was no sense of security in the mayor's heart. The Ghoul had promised to strike. Only once had he failed.

On the last stroke of midnight, the iron gates that surrounded the mayor's grounds swung open. A big car whisked through to the highway and the gates clanged shut behind it. The car had not proceeded along the road more than a quarter of a mile before its lone occupant saw a blur of headlights through the fog directly ahead. He touched his light switch once, twice—a little signal that had been worked out beforehand.

Then he braked his car alongside of three others that were parked on the shoulder of the

road. He got out. Headlights shone on the visor of the man's cap. He was the mayor's own chauffeur.

Behind the wheel of the foremost car, a thin, yellow face with long, drooping mustaches gleamed with faint ivory luminosity in the light from the car's dashboard. It was the face of Yu'an, the Ghoul's henchman.

The chauffeur saluted. "The mayor has been warned. A guard of state police is on its way. Within fifteen minutes they will be on hand to take him back to the city where he will be kept in the prison for safety's sake."

Yu'an's eyes became mere slits. "Who warned him?" he asked.

"A Chinese woman," replied the chauffeur. "She came here wearing a pair of embroidered pajamas. She delivered the warning to the mayor's two bodyguards."

An almost imperceptible smile flitted across the yellow face of the man beside Yu'an—the man who looked like China Bobby. Betty Dale had succeeded in warning the mayor. "X" could only hope that this warning would prevent the Ghoul's plan from being put into effect. But in another moment, he was disappointed. Yu'an told the chauffeur that they would strike at once.

The men got from the car, and Yu'an divided them into four parties—three groups of three men and the fourth group composed of the remaining members of the gang. This fourth group was detailed to waylay the police. The other three groups were to go at once to three strategic points where jumping-balloons had been brought and moored under cover of darkness.

Agent "X," in the disguise of China Bobby, was one of the three in the group led by Yu'an. Beside the thin-faced Chinese, "X" trotted toward the knoll at the east side of the wall surrounding the mayor's grounds. There, faintly visible in the gray sky, a dark, round shape tugged at its moorings and swayed in the night breeze. It was a jumping-balloon.

"As soon as I have landed on the other side of the wall," Yu'an said to "X" and the third

SECRET AGENT "X"

man, "you will both be ready to meet me at the other side of the estate. Because of the strong wind, I will be able to jump only in one direction." Yu'an was fastening the line from the jumping-balloon to the leather harness about his waist. To this harness were fastened canvas bags of shot which would be dropped when Yu'an laid hands on the mayor. These bags compensated for the weight of the second man when the jump was being made.

"When I return with the mayor," Yu'an explained to the Secret Agent, "you, my friend, will fire this flare pistol." He thrust into "X's" hands a pistol with a hard rubber butt and a thin metal barrel. "It will be a signal for the car to drive to the spot of my landing."

"X" was standing close to the Chinese. His right hand gripped the knife that was thrust up inside his sleeve. His nerves and muscles were tense, ready for the instant when everything depended upon his quick and accurate movements. Yu'an flexed his knees, testing the buoyancy of the balloon. A strange, eerie note, like the cry of an owl, tocsined across the sky.

"The signal," whispered the Chinese. "The other balloons are ready." He answered the signal with a similar cry. His knees flexed until he was almost squatting on the ground.

SUDDENLY, he sprang into the air. At exactly the same moment, Agent "X's" knife flicked across the cord that held the ballast bags. As Yu'an shot into the air, "X" dropped his knife and seized the Chinaman's harness. Adding the force of his own leap to that of Yu'an, the balloon shot up through the damp, swirling gray fog.

"X" saw Yu'an's thin fingers whip out a knife. He saw the keen blade flash downward. "X" let go with his right hand and caught Yu'an's knife wrist firmly in his own grasp. The Chinese wriggled like an eel, trying to break that hold, trying to shake the Agent off. Sixty feet below, as the balloon gained the peak of the parabola which it traveled, the roof of the mayor's house bulked darkly

against the mist-enshrouded earth. And at the end of the rope of the now descending balloon, "X" and the Chinese fought their silent battle. "X's" legs scissored about the knees of Yu'an. His ankles crossed and locked into place.

For a split second, he released his grip on the man's harness to swing his left arm up around Yu'an's neck. He strained upward until his full weight was upon the Chinaman's shoulders. He wrenched the knife from Yu'an's hand, only to have the Chinese yank an automatic from his pocket. The gun came up quickly. "X" drove a short hard blow at the side of the Chinaman's head—a blow that did not land. The gun in Yu'an's hand—was it an automatic, or the Agent's own gas gun? If it was the former, he could not hope to escape the shot, for the barrel was pointed straight at his head.

Suddenly, the slanting roof of the house became something more than a mere dark blot. "X" was evidently of much lighter build than the mayor, and the lack of ballast had permitted the balloon to travel farther than had been planned.

"X" sent another blow to Yu'an's head. The pistol blew just as they bumped lightly against the roof and started sliding down toward the eaves. The anesthetizing vapor hissed into the Agent's face, but he had been prepared, had held his breath. But the Chinese, knowing nothing about the weapon in his hand, had not been prepared. The cloud of gas dissipated; but, even so, it was of sufficient power to knock out the unwary Chinese. The gas gun dropped from his fingers, slid down the slates, and fell over the eaves.

"X's" foot encountered the edge of a small skylight that evidently opened into the attic of the mayor's home. Still clinging to the harness about the Chinaman, he maneuvered his foot so that they might slide farther down the roof to a point where they were stopped by one of many chimneys that sprouted from the roof.

Loosening the line at Yu'an's belt, "X"

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

moored the balloon to the chimney. With his pocketknife, he cut the Chinese away from the harness and propped him against the chimney to prevent him from rolling off the roof. What became of Yu'an when he at length awoke was no affair of Secret Agent "X." The Chinese would not have the jumping-balloon to aid him, for "X" had already planned how he would use the balloon in his scheme to save the mayor. For the mayor would be kidnapped that night, but not by the Ghoul if "X" had anything to say about it.

Aided by the traction afforded him by his rubber-soled shoes, "X" crept slowly back up the slates toward the skylight. Catching the frame of the skylight, he extended himself full length on the roof. With a special chrome-steel jimmy, which he took from his pocket, he worked the inner latch of the skylight loose and swung the cover back on its hinges. He crawled up so that he could seat himself on the edge of the opening. Since he had given his flashlight to Betty, he had no way of knowing what lay below.

He snaked his body through the opening, caught the edge of the skylight frame with his fingers, dangled there a moment, and dropped. His feet struck something that instantly gave way in a crackling, splintering smash that must have been audible through the house. The attic of the mayor's house had not been floored, and "X's" weight had been too much for the plaster. He picked himself up from a mess of broken plaster and splintered lath. He had no idea where he was.

The room was blackness itself. He stumbled forward and encountered a wall. Groping along the wall, he came to a door frame. His fingers closed over the doorknob. He gave it a twist, flung the door wide, and stepped into a hall.

As "X" moved down the hall toward the stairway, a pistol shot rang out through the night. From the foot of the stairs came a cry of terror. As "X" bounded down the stairs, he saw a man stagger across the hall, tearing at the hilt of a knife that protruded from his

chest. The front door was standing wide, and on the veranda, two of the Ghoul's cutthroats, who had evidently cleared the wall with their Jumping-balloons, were struggling with one of the mayor's bodyguards.

"X" was about to go to the assistance of the guard when a heavily-built, gray-haired man ran through the door and into the hall. It was the mayor. There was a revolver in his hand, and before the Agent could make a move to stop him, the mayor turned his gun on "X" and fired. The bullet whined above the Agent's head. "X" leaped upon the mayor before he could shoot again and twisted the revolver from his hand.

"Quiet!" "X" hissed. "Your safety depends upon speed and quiet."

"It's a trap!" shouted the mayor at the top of his lungs. "You're not a policeman. You're the Ghoul. A Chine—"

The mayor's sentence choked off.

"X's" hand had darted from his pocket. His cigarette lighter spat its last charge of gas straight into the mayor's face. The man tottered forward, fell across the Agent's shoulders. "X" lifted him bodily, and started up the stairs. If the mayor's bodyguard could hold off the Ghoul's other jumping-balloonists, "X" hoped to be able to clear the mayor's grounds and take the mayor to a place of safety.

IN the hall, "X" pressed on the light and found the attic steps without difficulty. How he was going to get the mayor up on the roof where the jumping-balloon was moored, he did not know. He hoped to find some sort of a ladder that would reach the skylight. But in this he was disappointed.

The attic was empty save for a couple of old trunks resting across the joists. There was, however, a gable jutting out from the steeply slanting roof. "X" walked across the joists and entered the gable. He unlatched and opened the casement window that centered it. Looking down, he saw that there was perhaps five feet of roof between the casement and the eaves—a narrow enough margin when a man

SECRET AGENT "X"

starts slipping down the slates of a steeply inclining roof.

But "X" had no intention of slipping. In a moment he had removed his belt from the loops of his trousers and fastened it beneath the mayor's arms. This gave him a good handle by which to hold the man.

"X" stepped over the sill, holding to the window frame with one hand and dragging the mayor with the other. In this precarious position, he shifted his grip to the edge of the gable roof. With infinite care, he worked the mayor out onto the roof. Then he began his perilous ascent, keeping close to the gable.

Gaining the ridgepole of the house, "X" saw that the chimney to which he had moored the balloon was directly below him and opposite the gable. He had nothing to do but release his grip on the ridgepole and slide down until the base of the chimney stopped him.

Yu'an was still there, huddled against the chimney. "X" strapped the harness he had removed from the Chinese to the mayor. Then he attached the mooring line of the balloon to the harness. Still holding to the belt beneath the mayor's arms, he released the balloon from the chimney. The upward pull of the bag enabled him to hoist the mayor to his shoulders without difficulty. He then stepped far enough to one side so that he could clear the chimney and poised himself for the leap.

From his vantage point, "X" could see that the Ghoul's men had encountered the state police. He could hear the sound of machine-gun fire. A sudden gust of wind tugging at the bag, caused "X" to lurch forward. He kicked out. The balloon climbed into the air. But that moment of off-balance had spoiled his jump. The ground was coming up to meet him faster than he had anticipated. He jerked his legs up to avoid the wall, but as the balloon settled, "X" felt his back brush the wires at the top of the wall.

Instantly, the burglar alarm system raised a mad clangor of gongs. Floodlights, connected with the circuit, blazed through the misty dark. A beam struck "X" full in the face as he

settled to the ground. Somewhere, close at hand, a shadowy form moved. "X" kicked out with all his strength in an effort to send the balloon once more climbing into the sky. But at that moment, strong arms locked about his legs. He made an effort to release the mayor. But before he could do this, a horde of men poured from the bushes and threw themselves upon him. Gleaming in the beam of a floodlight, "X" saw the golden veil of the Ghoul himself.

CHAPTER XII

BETRAYED

HOPELESSLY outnumbered, Secret Agent "X" resorted to strategy as the only way out. There was much to explain that seemed inexplicable if he was to clear himself in the eyes of the Ghoul. He stopped struggling and shouted: "Master, what is the meaning of this? Is this my reward for carrying out your orders?"

"Let him up," the Ghoul ordered, "but keep him covered with your guns."

The weight of many men lifted the form of Agent "X." He was permitted to stand up, but so closely was he hemmed in by a ring of threatening automatics that he could not hope to escape. With his own hands, the Ghoul cut the mayor free from the jumping-balloon. Then a man stepped forward at an order from the veiled fiend and linked "X's" left wrist to his own by means of handcuffs.

But "X's" right hand was free to press the switch in his coat pocket. Instantly, he had the nauseating sensation of feeling his right eye twist sharply to the right as the artificial stimulus was applied.

"Now," said the Ghoul, sternly, "you will tell me, China Bobby, why you acted in this way. My plans were perfect. The state police were entirely at the mercy of our machine guns. But Raymonds, who accompanied you and Yu'an tells me that you cut the ballast bags and leaped over the wall with Yu'an."

There had been a witness to "X's" action and there was no use denying what he had

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

done. "Perfectly true, master," the Agent replied, "and I admit that I was partially at fault. Yu'an had planned to cheat you. He confided as much to me. In fact, I was admitted into a plan by which Yu'an and I were to kidnap the mayor and share the ransom we obtained. But at the last moment, I could not double-cross you."

"Why?" demanded the Ghoul. "I have never shown you any great kindness, have I?"

Keen judge of human nature that he was, "X" knew that the Ghoul was vain about his power and cruelty. He hung his head. "No," he admitted, "I did not dare be false to you. I am afraid of you. That is why at the last moment, I decided to carry out your instructions."

"And where is Yu'an?" asked the Ghoul.

"With his ancestors," the Agent lied. "I put a knife in his throat."

"You will be conducted back to headquarters," said the Ghoul. "As I drive back to the city, I shall consider what you have done." And the Ghoul stalked majestically toward the road. Two Chinese, who followed him, carried the unconscious mayor between them.

"X" was closely guarded by the gang and forced into a waiting car. Of that long drive back to the city, he remembered little. His companions were silent the entire distance, but the threatening eyes of their automatics never left him. "X" thought he had never worked harder to snare a criminal; yet time after time he had been outwitted by the Ghoul.

The car pulled up at what appeared to be the rear door of China Bobby's restaurant. "X" was forced to get out of the car by goading guns. He was dragged through the door and down a flight of steps that ended in a passage leading to China Bobby's office.

A few minutes later, the Ghoul appeared through a sliding door. Evidently, he had put the mayor in a place of safe keeping, and was determined to settle with the man he believed to be China Bobby.

"I have considered your story carefully,"

said the Ghoul, addressing the Agent, "and it is a plausible one. However, before you are released, I would like to ask one—"

But the Ghoul's sentence was interrupted by the opening of a sliding panel. Staggering through the door, her blonde hair disheveled, was Drew Devon. The Ghoul wheeled on her. "Where have you been?" he demanded.

She shook her head. "I was drugged by some one. Where's Bill Morgan? Bill Morgan is Secret Agent 'X'!"

The Ghoul laughed. "Then Secret Agent 'X' is dead! I killed Morgan with the Amber Death."

DREW DEVON'S mouth was bitter. "Conceited beast!" she snapped at the Ghoul. "He isn't dead. He escaped the Amber Death. For all your brilliance, he might be in the room right now!"

The man who was linked to "X" by means of handcuffs, said: "Master, it might be wise to ask the lady why, if she was drugged, she was yet able to leave this place and warn the mayor of an attempt to kidnap him."

The Ghoul's thin hand shot out and caught the girl by the wrist. "You did that?"

For a moment, scorn was displaced by terror in the girl's eyes. "No—no. I swear I didn't. I was unconscious in my room all the time."

Another man spoke up. "That couldn't be. The mayor's chauffeur distinctly described the woman who warned the mayor. We all heard him. It could have only been one person—that woman."

Drew Devon screamed her denial. "It isn't true! It must have been some trick of Secret Agent 'X.'" If he could impersonate Bill Morgan so that I would risk everything to save—" She checked herself with lip-biting.

"So," said the Ghoul softly, "you saved Morgan, or 'X,' or whatever his name is. You saved him from the Amber Death after I commanded that he die. My dear lady, you shall know the maddening torment of the ant pit! When that beautiful body of yours is teeming with tiny, tormenting devils, you will

SECRET AGENT "X"

understand the folly of trying to thwart my unalterable commands. Fun-Lo! Gordon! Chang! Take her away to the ant pit!"

Three men sprang forward to do the Ghoul's bidding. In the mind of Secret Agent "X" a battle was raging. It was within his power to check this brutal act. But at what a price? It might mean exposing himself, jeopardizing the progress he had made. Was Drew Devon worth that much? She was a murderess. But no crime deserved the torment of the ant pit. And though she had saved him unknowingly, "X" knew that he would have now been a dead, amber husk had it not been for Drew Devon.

He had long ago resolved that it must never be said that the Man of a Thousand Faces was ungrateful. He had hit upon a plan for gaining time—a ruse that might prevent the Ghoul from carrying out his despicable plan of torturing Drew Devon. He held up his right hand in an arresting gesture. "Stop!" he cried. "Before you sentence this woman to the fate she justly deserves, it might be well to question her concerning Secret Agent 'X.' Undoubtedly, if she warned the mayor she is one of his agents."

A remarkable change came over the face of Drew Devon. A look of cunning crept into her eyes. Hate distorted her features until she was as hideous as a vampire. She pointed a trembling finger at the Agent. "Look at his hand!" she screamed. "He has all his fingers! That man isn't China Bobby! He's Secret Agent 'X'!"

But hardly were the words out of her mouth before "X" had gone into action. A trick he had learned from a Hindu fakir, of compressing the joints of his hands, enabled him to slip free from the handcuffs that linked him with the Ghoul's man. He sprang backward across the room.

Like magic, two guns appeared in his hands—one the revolver he had taken from the mayor, and the other the flare-pistol that Yu'an had given him to use as a signal when the mayor was captured. Those guns swept the company of men before him.

"The first man to move, dies!" he shouted.

Behind his group of menials, the Ghoul shouted: "Knife him! After him, all of you!"

TO a man, the killers moved, surging forward like a human tide of destruction. The arch-enemy of their kind stood before them; their knives were thirsty for his blood. Infrequently did Agent "X" use lethal weapons, but no man knew better how to use a revolver than he did. Two of the foremost killers were dropped at the Agent's feet by two well-placed shots. Another tripped over a fallen companion and fell upon his own knife. A fourth fired an automatic at close range, the slug landing squarely over the Agent's heart.

"X" dropped to one knee. His bullet-proof vest, of finest manganese steel, had stopped the lead. But the impact alone was enough to knock him down. "X" fired again, sprang to his feet and aside to avoid the thrust of a Chinese knife. The butt of the flare pistol in his hand, laid open the head of another man. Shooting carefully, and hacking with the gun in his left hand, he fought through the mob.

Behind the fury of the hand-to-hand encounter, "X" saw a flash of yellow silk. The Ghoul! The Ghoul was escaping through an open door at the rear of the room. The flare pistol in "X's" left hand swung up, pointed at the silken draperies that curtained the door of the closet in which he had concealed the unconscious China Bobby. He pulled the trigger. A faint pop and a red ball of fire shot from the gun and burnt through the silk curtains. Instantly, flames licked upward.

"Fire!" shouted "X," at the same moment sending his last revolver shot at his nearest opponent. To that moment of panic caused by the threat of fire, "X" owed much. Inasmuch as the room was virtually fireproof, no serious damage could be expected from the flaming curtains. But it caused a moment's confusion—one precious second when "X" sprang through the door through which the Ghoul had disappeared.

He ran into the passage, found the tiny

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

button that operated the panel, and pressed it. The steel door slipped smoothly into place. Above the Agent's head, an electric lamp glowed. Holding the flare pistol, which he had effectively used but a moment ago, by its hard rubber butt, he knocked out the lamp. As the metal barrel crossed the elements of the bulb, there was a flash of blue flame, then instantaneous blackness. "X" knew that in one stroke he had captured the Ghoul's mob; for in shorting the electrical circuit he had thrown the electrical mechanism that operated all the doors leading from the office, out of order. There was no way out for Drew Devon and the horde of killers.

Swiftly and silently, "X" moved down the dark corridor, stopping occasionally to listen to the whisper of footsteps ahead of him. Suddenly, a tiny spot of light shone on what appeared to be a blank wall in front of him. He saw the hand of the Ghoul holding a flashlight and turning the key in the lock of a door. The door opened and closed behind the Ghoul before "X" had a chance to follow. As he approached on tiptoe, a faint hissing sound came out of the darkness. It was a steady hiss like the escape of—

And in another moment, he knew it *was* gas—poisonous chlorine. He could feel its sting in his eyes and smell its acrid odor. "X" knew that the Ghoul, believing that "X" had in some way managed to inform the police of the gang's headquarters, was deserting his men and burning his bridges behind him. This was his own secret exit, and the quantities of poison gas hissing into the passage had been prepared for just such an emergency.

AGENT "X" held his breath and closed his eyes against the poisonous, stinging vapor. The fingers of his right hand groped across the panel, searching the keyhole. His right hand fingered the bunch of master keys in his pocket. Without a light, it was impossible for him to pick out the exact key that would unlock the door. Finding the keyhole, he tried them one at a time. His lungs were aching; his heart throbbing at his

temples. Yet to breathe was to die. At last he found a key that scraped through the eye of the lock. Just as he turned the key, a dull boom sounded hollowly throughout the cellars.

"X" threw open the door and stepped into a lighted room. Evidently this part of the catacombs was on a different lighting circuit than the rest. A ghostly wisp of yellow-green gas followed him into the room. He wanted to cough but dared not. He stepped into the next room. It appeared empty until "X" saw, beneath the yellow silk curtains that draped a doorway, the shoes and trousered legs of a man. Cautiously, he approached. He lifted the yellow curtains. The face of the man on the floor was covered with a yellow silk veil.

Revolver in hand, "X" knelt beside the still form. With the tips of his fingers, he lifted the yellow veil. Beneath was the chubby, red face of unconscious Mayor Grauman.

"Neatly trapped, Agent 'X,'" came the Ghoul's cold whisper.

"X" looked up quickly. Standing directly in front of a screen of Oriental design, was the Ghoul—the Ghoul without his silk mask, with only the hideous death-mask of Ah-Fang covering his real features. The automatic held in his unflinching fingers was directed at the Agent's heart.

"I knew," the Ghoul whispered, "that curiosity concerning my identity would prompt you to look beneath the veil that covered the mayor's face. That is why I placed him there as a decoy when I heard you had managed to gain entrance here in spite of my poison gas. In fact, now that the game is over, I think you must admit that I have outplayed you in every hand."

"True," the Secret Agent admitted. "Much as I hate to spoil your good opinion of yourself, I can't resist telling you that I've known your identity for several hours. I was sure of my deduction when, in the guise of Morgan, I fell into your hands in the laboratory. Though your voice came from a reproducer in the ceiling, you were there in person with Vardson and the others. In fact, I

SECRET AGENT "X"

might go so far as to say you took an active part in most of the crimes.

"In the laboratory, you were one of those living-dead men ranged along the wall. It is not difficult to fake the Amber Death when you have stained your skin the proper hue. A little lapel-button microphone enabled you to speak through the reproducer in the ceiling, though you were actually in the room. When I attacked your men, you took advantage of the confusion, stepped from the wall and dropped the yellow veil over your face.

"Your actual presence spurred the men to action, just as it did tonight at the mayor's place. Phonograph records of your voice were used for all the Ghoul radio warnings in order that you might be busy elsewhere—busy shifting suspicion from your own shoulders, busy planning new murders in the very presence of the men you intended to murder."

A chuckle sounded behind the Ghoul's mask of mummified flesh. "No one will ever know the truth, Yu'an and Vardson alone knew my true identity. Vardson is beyond sane speech. You say that your knife found Yu'an's throat. Not five minutes ago, I pressed an igniter that fired a charge which will result in the destruction of both laboratories and the Amber Death victims. The formula for the Amber Death will be destroyed. Only Vardson knew it. I have over a million dollars in cash and securities—the reward of my efforts. I have only to step through the rear door of this room, climb steps, and enter a garage where my car is waiting."

Carried away with praise of himself, the Ghoul did not notice that "X" had shifted his empty revolver into the palm of his hand. With a sudden movement, he flung the weapon at the Ghoul's head. The Ghoul ducked to one side, fired a shot that took "X" in the chest. But again the bullet-proof vest saved him. As he leaped, hands extended for the killer's throat, the Ghoul fired again—this time, at the Agent's head.

"X" ducked too late to avoid the shot entirely. It grazed the side of his head, dashed

blinking red and yellow lights before his eyes, sent blood trickling into his eyes to blind him. Yet he had reached the Ghoul's gun-hand and clung to it desperately, keeping the automatic turned away from himself.

For a moment, they were locked together, the Ghoul striving to break away from the Agent's hold, and "X" battling to save himself from oblivion. With an unexpected twist of the wrist, "X" disarmed the Ghoul. The automatic clattered to the floor. But in making that desperate attempt, "X" had thrown himself slightly off balance. The Ghoul lunged forward, throwing "X" to the ground.

The shock of the fall seemed to clear "X's" vision. He seized the Ghoul's throat in his right hand. His left came up instinctively to lock over the Ghoul's wrist. For in the Ghoul's hand was something sharp and shiny. Not a knife, but a large hypodermic needle!

"The Amber Death," the Ghoul gasped out. "One more charge of the Amber Death... All yours!" And slowly but surely his hand bent forward, the needle seeking the flesh of the Agent's wrist.

Suddenly, "X's" knees came up, lifting his assailant. Then he straightened, all the strength of his body behind a kick that sent the Ghoul heels-over-head across the room. "X" was up in a second. His right hand swept up the Ghoul's automatic from the floor. The Ghoul, completely winded by his fall, attempted to get up, couldn't, and fell back to the floor.

Covering the man with the automatic, "X" seized him by the collar, picked him up, and threw him into a chair. As he did so, he noticed that the chair was one of those peculiar metal chairs similar to the one in which he had sat in China Bobby's office. He saw that a covered cable led from the chair to a generator at the side of the room. Evidently, the Ghoul had used this contraption to torture the truth out of some one. It was a very good idea, the Agent decided.

"X" sprang to the generator and threw over the starting switch. The hum of the generator

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

was drowned out by a shriek of pain and terror from the Ghoul. "X" cut the current slightly. For a moment, he watched the Ghoul writhing in an effort to drag himself from the chair. Then he said softly:

"Let me know when you are ready to sign a full confession. For every moment you delay. I shall step up the current another notch!"

CHAPTER XIII

DEATH-MASK OF AH-FANG

EARLY morning sunbeams slanted through the mist rising from the streets of Chinatown when the wail of police-car sirens died in front of the gilt and lacquered front of China Bobby's restaurant.

"Looks like a phony tip, Inspector," said a plainclothes man to Inspector Burks as they swung from one of the cars.

Burks glowered at the gleaming front of the restaurant. "If it is, I'll hang the man who gave it by the ears," he growled. Then sighting the lovely form of a young girl who had just stepped from a small roadster parked behind one of the squad cars, he called: "Say, Miss Dale, you're sure that mysterious telephone call that tipped you off said this was the joint?"

"Certain of it, Inspector Burks," replied Betty Dale in her crisp, businesslike voice. She approached the plate-glass front of the restaurant and looked in. Walking beside her was a cheerful, redheaded youth with note book and pencil poised as though he could hardly wait for a big news story to break.

"You two step back, now," ordered Burks. "We're going to break in here if we can't raise the proprietor. Say, Reardon," he called to one of his subordinates, "you know Chinatown from the sewers on up. Isn't this about where that dope joint used to be back in tong-war days?"

The elderly Reardon nodded. "Used to be known as Hong-Po's catacombs. Cellars and tunnels extended for about a block. But in the last big raid. we sealed up all the catacombs."

"Wouldn't take much to open 'em again," said Burks. He shouted brisk orders to his men, and five minutes later the police were pouring into the restaurant.

"Everything looks on the up-an'-up," one of the detectives was heard to whisper, "and will Burks' ears be red when he gets climbed for raidin' a legitimate joint!"

"Look here, Inspector Burks!" Betty Dale called excitedly. As if entirely by accident she had located the door at the rear of the restaurant that led down into the opium den.

"Thunderation!" roared Detective Reardon. "I remember that circular staircase! I went down there in a raid once. This *is* Hong-Po's old place. Somethin' in that tip after all, Inspector. I can smell the stinkin' black stuff clear up here!"

"Watch things up, men!" Burks warned. "Maybe this is just a bootleg dope joint. And maybe the tip was okeh when this guy told Miss Dale we'd find the Ghoul here!"

Down the winding staircase, and the squad trooped through the passage that opened on still a larger room. Police searchlights cleaved the tar blackness and gleamed on green and gilt. Light reflected from the baleful eyes of the dragon twining the huge artificial tree; it found here and there, in curtained bunks, the opium sleepers.

"Dope de luxe!" exclaimed Reardon. "This outdoes anything Hong-Po ever put across. Now if the rest of the place was open, there'd be a door over here—" He approached the panel decorated with the lacquered dragon. His keen eyes found the switch-button that centered the eye of the monster. He gave it a push. Nothing happened.

"Looks like somebody put the machinery on the fritz," said Burks. "Malvern, get the acetylene torch and cut through this steel panel."

Reardon's ear was pressed to the door. "Take it easy, inspector," he cautioned. "I can hear people moving around in there. Maybe they won't be in such a sweet temper as the smoky lads in the bunks."

"Be in a damn sight worse temper when we

SECRET AGENT "X"

get hold of them," Burks growled. He watched the hissing torch as it knifed through the steel. "That's got it!" The heated panel fell back with a dismal clang. "Let's go, boys!"

A GAIN, through smoky blackness, the searchlights cut—this time to find bleary-eyed gunmen huddling in the corners of what had been China Bobby's office. A few nervous shots rattled out, but a police Tommy-gun, by way of warning, raked one of the walls high above the heads of the hoods.

"Round them up!" ordered Burks. "We want that girl, too." He kicked through a black charred film that had once been a silk curtain. On the floor of a little closet, he found the yellow-skinned man whom he recognized as China Bobby. He knelt beside the man. "Not dead," he muttered. "Seems to be taking a quiet snooze. Looks like the work of some guy I've met before. Suppose this half-breed's the Ghoul. Reardon?"

The old detective shook his head. "Can't say. We haven't gone halfway through this joint yet. There used to be a sort of dungeon down below that Hong-Po used. Better get that acetylene torch busy again. This room was a sort of center to a spider-web formation of rooms and passages."

But it was only after two hours of arduous labor that the secrets of the catacombs were completely revealed. What had been the Ghoul's laboratories was a mass of wreckage. The explosion had buckled the walls. A yellow, amber-like hand jutting out from a pile of debris told Burks that beneath were bodies made hideous by the Amber Death.

It was the inquisitiveness of the redheaded reporter who accompanied Betty Dale that led the police to find the secret passage that led to the scene of the Ghoul's last stand. And to all appearances, the redheaded youth came very near being asphyxiated by the chlorine fumes that lingered in the passage. Burks, Malvern, and six others ventured up the passage after gas masks had been put on. Though Burks did not notice it at the time, he might have seen

that one of his masked followers was the ever-curious redheaded reporter.

"Who's that over in the corner?" shouted Burks. He pointed to a fleshy form in the corner—a man who exhibited signs of life in an effort to wriggle from his bonds and talk through his gag. "The mayor, by all that's holy! Give Mayor Grauman a hand, one of you fellows. I'm going—" As Burks stepped through the door of the next room, words failed him. Seated in a metal chair in the center of the room was the figure of a man. His contorted yellow face resembled nothing so much as the carved visage of an ugly Chinese joss. He sat perfectly still.

"A Chink!" gasped one of the detectives. "Looks like that Ah-Fang you've been sendin' Keegan lookin' all over town for!"

"Yes, Burks," said the redheaded reporter, "looks as though for once you were right."

"What'd you mean, 'for once'?" Burks sprang across to the chair and snatched up a piece of paper that lay in the lap of the unconscious man. As his eyes skated down the paper, he read:

I am the Ghoul. I freely confess to all the crimes of murder and extortion in which the Amber Death played so important a part.

Burks mumbled an oath. "And it's signed—good Lord!" Burks wiped a hand over his forehead. "And it was reported that he committed suicide in his own home after receiving a warning from the Ghoul!"

THE redheaded reporter had been looking over Burks' shoulder at the note. "I suppose a fellow could easily fake the Amber Death by injecting some harmless yellow dye beneath the flesh of his face. Probably, he switched needles and used one containing dye instead of the one containing poison that Luigi gave him. Then under cover of darkness, he got away with his men and their captives, knowing that if he was reported dead, no suspicion—"

Burks brushed the reporter to one side and

THE GOLDEN GHOUL

snatched the mask of yellow, mummified flesh away from the real face of the Ghoul—a virile face with an impressively high forehead surmounted by gray hair. It was the face of Lionel Gage. He seemed to have been plunged into a doped sleep.

“We should have known,” said the reporter softly. “There wasn’t any sense to the Ghoul kidnapping Lionel Gage because Gage was broke. Gage admitted as much—told Warnow so in the presence of Malvern. He said Wall Street had stripped him. Yet he continued to live pretty much as he did before. Where did he get the money? Why, from this extortion scheme! And when everybody else could talk only of the Ghoul’s fiendishness, Gage kept emphasizing the Ghoul’s *power*. He carried vanity, which was the keynote of his character as the Ghoul, into his respectable side of life. He wanted everyone to realize what a master-mind the Ghoul was. Why? Because he was the Ghoul.”

“Yeah,” Burks agreed. “And Gage kidnapped himself, even gave himself a fake shot of the Amber Death to avoid suspicion. Why, he spent years in China. Knew the ropes.” Burks paused. “Say, for a reporter you know a—”

He was interrupted by a faint click. The room was plunged into complete darkness.

“Who turned out those lights!” Burks wheeled around and stood motionless, staring into the darkness. On the wall, directly in front of him, was a steady glow of weird light—a letter “X” drawn in phosphorescent paint on the wall.

Burks’ flashlight cut through the darkness and wheeled from one startled face to another. With an oath, he was gone, racing up the passage through which they had come. He burst into what had been China Bobby’s office. His eyes were fairly popping from his head as he looked about the room where the police were busily at work.

“Where’s that redheaded guy? Miss Dale, who was that reporter who came with you?”

Betty stared innocently at the inspector. “Why, that was Jim Collins of the *Herald*.”

“Collins, my eye! That was Secret Agent ‘X.’ And this time, I’ve got him. He couldn’t get through here without some of my boys seeing him!” And Burks bounded toward the door that led back through the opium den.

But he might have saved his energy. For the redheaded reporter had availed himself of the emergency exit prepared by the Ghoul. He had hurried in the opposite direction from that taken by Burks and was, at that moment, driving somewhat recklessly down the narrow streets of Chinatown in the Ghoul’s own car.

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