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SECRET AGENT X

G-MAN ACTION ADVENTURES

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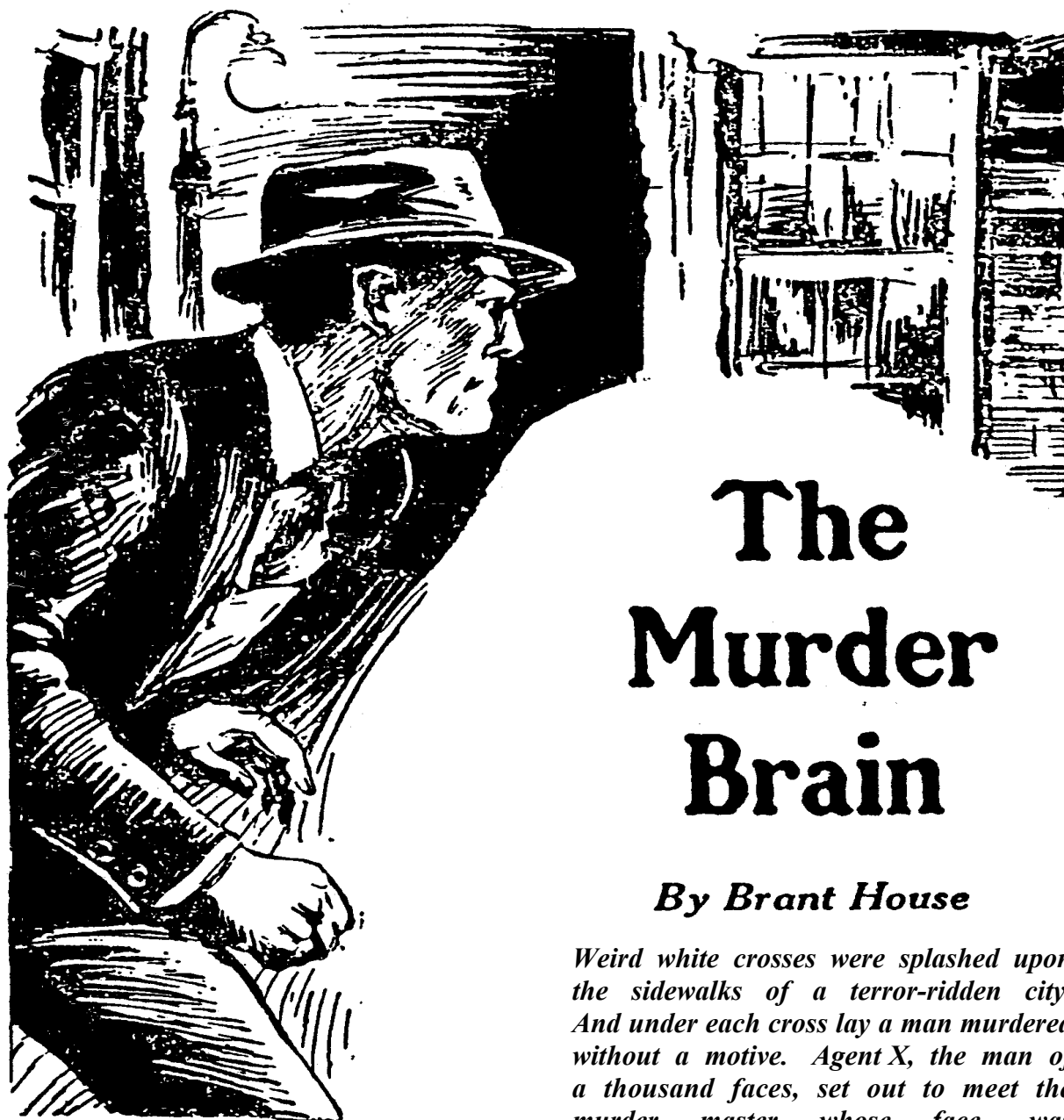
THE MURDER BRAIN

Gripping "Secret Agent X" Novel

By **BRANT HOUSE**

REDHEADED DECOY

"G-Man" Yarn By **DON CAMERON**



The Murder Brain

By Brant House

Weird white crosses were splashed upon the sidewalks of a terror-ridden city. And under each cross lay a man murdered without a motive. Agent X, the man of a thousand faces, set out to meet the murder master whose face was known only to the dead.

CHAPTER I

MURDER EPIDEMIC

IT wasn't a pleasant room. A filmy light-globe wired into an old, brass gas fixture lent a nauseous shade to the blue-kalsomined walls. An iron bedstead shed enamel as a birch tree does its bark. There was a telephone on a table of woven fiber.

At the table, a man faced the wall, oblivious to its ugliness, he pulled the

phone up under his jutting chin and called Rector 2-3520 in a voice that was crisply impatient. Three fingers of his right hand tap-danced on the table top. Foley Square and the United States Court House were thirty long seconds away, even for a man with the magic of the telephone at his command.

"Jackson speaking," said the man in the dingy room at last. "I must speak to



*Gripping
"Secret Agent X"
novel*

Special Agent Weston immediately."

He finger-danced some more, squirmed restlessly in the hard-bottomed chair. Then his voice lashed out at the transmitter:

"Jackson to report. I leave immediately for Bedford Street to meet Agent Parker at the corner of Commerce. Another white-cross killing has been scheduled."

G-man Henry Jackson clamped the receiver to its hook and pushed the phone away from him. As he did so, the polished metal shell of the transmitter caught a black and

particularly ominous reflection. The reflection was that of a man. Either the nickel shell of the phone was distorting the image a great deal, or this man was about as large a specimen as Jackson had ever encountered.

Enormous square shoulders seemed on the point of pushing through his black coat. He wore no hat. Only his unruly black hair prevented his head from being a complete cube. His jaw resembled the foremost portion of a steam-shovel. The stem of a square-bowled pipe parted the level line of his lips. The rest of his face was hidden by a black mask.

It was remarkable how perfectly relaxed G-man Jackson appeared to be. It was even more remarkable how quickly his lax fingers snatched up at his under-arm gun. But he was just not quite quick enough.

The cube-headed man was standing exactly in the center of the door behind Jackson. He had not stirred a muscle. But some one else had, and Jackson had never in his life encountered anything like the muscles of the slender hand and arm that shot over his shoulder to seize his gun-wrist.

Jackson shook his head, a habit he had when he found himself in a bad spot. Two men had slipped into the room while he had been phoning—the masked man who looked as though he had been constructed with the aid of a steel square, and this slighter person whose body seemed a curious combination of the irresistible force and the immovable object. No small part of this second intruder's power lay in the depths of his gray eyes. His eyes didn't stare; they anchored the G-man's attention to such an extent that several seconds clicked by before Jackson noticed that the man's face consisted of something besides eyes.

It took the G-man just a little off balance, that face of the man with the

gray eyes. The cheeks looked hollow and pale. The chin receded slightly. The thin lips spoke only with their corners:

"Nix on the roscoe, G-man."

The black-masked man loomed larger in the nickel shell of the phone. His square-ended fingers went inside the G-man's coat, produced the gun Jackson would have given a year of his life to reach. Then the gray-eyed one's grip relaxed, and Jackson turned slowly to face his two unwelcomed visitors.

THE gray-eyed man held a gun that closely resembled a heavy automatic. The masked man had carelessly tossed the G-man's gun aside.

There was nothing formidable about the masked intruder except his size, and even that was somehow dwarfed by the cyclonic energy that seemed stored in the lean length of his companion. Having felt the latter's muscles once, Jackson regarded the man with an infinite amount of respect. Still, he managed a brazen:

"What the hell do you call this?"

"The phone," the gray-eyed man snagged from the corner of his mouth, "should be so that you could keep an eye on the door. Remember that in the future."

Jackson worked his lips into a grin. "Consoling to know I'm to have a future."

The gray-eyed one laughed queerly. "I didn't say whether the lesson was intended for your use in this world or another one. My guess is that here is where you fade out of the picture."

The black gun in Gray-eyes' hand tilted up a little, and Jackson was painfully conscious of its steely stare. Yet those who serve the Department of Justice receive much tempering in the fire of danger. Jackson knew suddenly that he was going to try to jump that gun.

The G-man hurled himself straight at the man with the gun, but its owner wasn't a tangible opponent. There was suddenly nothing in the world for Jackson but a cloud of vapor that spurted from the weapon and blotted out everything before the G-man's eyes. Jackson fell forward into the waiting arms of the man whose face belonged to some underworld rat, but whose eyes were those of Secret Agent X.*

"Take his legs, Bates," Agent X said sharply to the man in the black mask. We haven't a second to throw away. I am afraid I lost too much time already, talking to Jackson; but I wanted to make sure of his voice."

"Right," clipped Bates. He dropped his pipe into the palm of his hand and assisted the Agent in carrying Jackson into the adjoining bathroom. Then the door was closed on X and the G-man.

Harvey Bates, the Secret Agent's trusted lieutenant, knew that when the

door opened again, the white-faced underworld rat, who had accompanied him to the G-man's hideout, would exist only in memory. Agent X would become another personality, a man with a new face and a new voice.

Never would Harvey Bates cease to marvel at the impersonations of his chief. Never would he stop wondering about the true appearance of this man of mystery. Yet for all his natural curiosity, an almost reverential respect for his employer prevented Bates from asking questions. He was satisfied with knowing that Agent X had but one objective—to carry the war against crime to its just conclusion or to die in the attempt.

After an incredibly short interval, G-man Henry Jackson stepped from the bathroom. Anyone of average perception would have supposed that the man wearing Jackson's clothes, Jackson's features, and speaking with Jackson's voice, was G-man Jackson. Even Bates, who had seen such transformations many times before, could not suppress a gasp of astonishment at the new appearance of Secret Agent X. A faint flicker of amusement lighted the piercing eyes of Agent X. Then it was gone, and the eyes were once more the windows of a keen, cool-thinking brain.

"You will remain here," said Agent X, speaking in Henry Jackson's voice. "When Jackson regains consciousness, pump him for every bit of information you can get. Find out where he got his tip on this scheduled killing. Find out, if you can, just what these white-cross killings mean. There's an epidemic of them, and I don't mind admitting that

**AUTHOR'S NOTE: Followers of Agent X know that he has evolved impersonation to the point of perfection. A plastic volatile material of his own composition enables him to adopt the features of any man. Yet even this and other special makeup devices would be of little use without the masterful dramatic powers of the man himself. Keen perception of detail make him "The Man of a Thousand Faces." Though he is an enemy's most dreaded foe, he seldom resorts to lethal weapons, preferring his gas pistol loaded with a powerful anaesthetic to revolver or automatic.*

I'm in the dark as to the motive."

"You sir?" Bates asked.

Used to interpreting Bates' laconic speech, X answered as he went through the door: "I'm keeping Jackson's appointment for him, at the corner of Commerce and Bedford."

A TAXI rolled with slow uncertainty up Bedford Street. The fare, a man in a silk hat, leaned forward and craned his white-scarfed neck as if in an effort to find some familiar building. At last, he impatiently ordered the driver to a halt, got out, paid his fare, and continued up the street on foot.

A shabbily-dressed man shuffled along the street toward the man in the top-hat, who stopped him and asked pleasantly: "Could you tell me where J. O. Smith resides? I am looking for Mr. Smith and have no more definite address than Bedford Street."

The shabby man all but snickered. Possibly he was drunk. He pointed toward the next corner. "You'll find what you're lookin' for right up there."

The man in the silk hat thanked the other and continued toward the corner. The shabby man turned and cat-footed along behind him. When the man in the topper was almost at the corner, the shabby fellow uttered a shrill whistle.

Men came out of the shadow. Men seemed to grow out of the pavement. The silk-hatted man stopped, turned dazedly about. "What do you want?" he demanded firmly.

Yellow light from the street lamp, mirrored in gun steel, spoke more eloquently than words. These men were killers. The night was suddenly

hideous with their murderous racket. Gun flame flared on the white face of the man who was their prey. The man who had worn the silk hat spun around on one foot, his arms jerking up toward his chest. Then he slithered to the pavement and twitched beneath a second barrage of lead. These men made sure.

Two of the killers knelt beside the victim a moment, reached across the sprawled body. Then one crawled around the body once, sprang up, and threw something white into the gutter. Just as he rejoined his fellow murderers, a car squealed around the corner on two wheels. A searchlight beam fingered toward the huddle of gunmen. One of the killers shot out the lamp. Before the echo of the shot was lost, some one uttered a hoarse cry: "Feds!"

Two men sprang from the car. A panicky flurry of lead from the killers, as they scrambled in retreat up the alley, smashed into the G-men's car. The foremost of the two men winced, clutched at his arm. "Nicked me, Jackson," he said, tensely. "We're not too late to give them what it takes."

"Okay, Parker!" It was the voice of Jackson, but it came from the lips of Secret Agent X. He sprinted ahead of Parker to the entrance of the alley. The whine of shots greeted him. He sprang back against a wall, dragging Parker with him.

Somewhere, police whistles were shrieking frantically. He could see the band of killers halfway down the alley. They had stopped, and the reason was apparent a moment later.

At the opposite end of the alley, a

car had drawn up. A machine gun voiced a preliminary stutter. More Feds. Special Agent Weston had sent reinforcements, acting on Henry Jackson's report.

Agent X gripped Parker's arm. "Hell's going to bust. We're going to be on the receiving end of things. There's only one way out for the rats—right through us."

Across the alley from where they crouched, some shadow-shrouded person stumbled into an ash barrel. Parker's wound must have been giving him fits, for he shot, indiscriminately and without warning, at the sound. Parker's shots drew fire. Between two ash cans, a yellow, pinched face was flared by the flame from the muzzle of an automatic.

Parker jerked forward, tearing himself madly from the Agent's fingers, stretched to detain him. Parker pitched face down to the alley pavement. The toes of his shoes made ugly, scratching sounds as his legs twitched convulsively.

X sent one glance up the alley. The killers were coming in his direction on the run, lashed into a stampede by machine gun slugs that rattled and ricocheted through the night. X crouched, sprang to Parker's side and flattened himself beside the G-man. Parker's breath was coming in crackling gasps. He was trying to talk, garbling something about, "Get Lewey Cassino."

A lead slug mashed the brick, scant inches from X's head. X flopped toward the ash cans where he had seen the lean face of the gunman who had pumped lead into Parker. He wormed

his way between the cans, stopped, peered out into the alley. The gunmen were covering themselves well, scattering in a sort of guerrilla warfare maneuver. They would shoot it out with the reinforcement of Feds Weston had sent out.

A long sigh rustled somewhere in the dark cranny behind the ash cans. X hauled himself farther back into the shadows and planted his hand squarely in the middle of a heaving chest. Hot fingers groped and hooked over X's wrist.

"The Feds," a voice whispered. "Tell Squid and the Brain I got a Fed before he—he—" A short, hacking cough racked the chest beneath X's hand. Then came the quivering breath of a dying man.

His eyes more used to the gloom. X saw that he and Parker's killer were back against the foundation of a building. A swinging coal-cellar door was within a few feet of the dying man's feet. A slight opening at the bottom of the door told X that it was not hooked. He reached out and pulled the door open. Already, in his alert mind, a brilliant plan was forming.

He inched through the opening in the basement of the building, found a footing on top of the coal, seized the gunman's legs, and dragged the man in after him. Any sound he made was masked by the gun battle in the alley and street outside.

THE AGENT pulled out his compact flashlight and turned it on the face of the man who had run into one of Parker's flying slugs. The face was narrow, the cheeks and chin all

one sickly shade of yellow. Blood fringed the full, sensuous lips. The squinting eyes stared glassily into the light without wincing. Dying, this man was as any other to Agent X, and he could look upon him only with compassion. Living, he would have hounded him to the edge of the earth; for Lewey Cassino was a desperado long wanted by the government men. He had packed a gun for Wolf Hollis, until federal men removed Hollis from the Public Enemy list.

X propped his flashlight up between chunks of coal, got out his compact makeup kit, and set to work. He had met Lewey Cassino once before. He knew some of the gunman's characteristics. Of Lewey's present connections, he knew nothing except that he was a member of a band of ruthless killers who marked their victims in a peculiar fashion. As Lewey Cassino, Agent X might learn much of the scheme behind what the newspapers called the white-cross killings. As Lewey Cassino, he would be on the inside of a murder machine that was rolling on and on like a juggernaut, killing without apparent motive.

Moments later, when the crackle of gun-fire became less incessant, X crawled from his hiding-place, the living replica of the dead man he had left in the basement. He must hurry on where Lewey had left off, but with an entirely different objective.

X took in the situation at a glance. Three gunmen were backing in his direction, exchanging a few wild, scattered shots with the hunting Feds. At the end of the alley, a car was ready,

purring softly, waiting to carry the killers to safety. When that car left, it must carry Agent X with it—into the criminal hideout itself.

It was the most dangerous impersonation he had ever attempted, for Lewey Cassino was to have been shot on sight by the G-men. And if his disguise failed, he could hope for no mercy from the criminals. But it would not fail. The most convincing part of his makeup was yet to be added. X pulled from his pocket the automatic he had taken from Lewey Cassino. He pressed the muzzle against the fleshy part of his arm and pulled the trigger.

Agent X reeled directly into one of the three gunmen, hands clutched at him. A rusty voice whispered:

"Lewey, old pal! They got you?"

"Damn near it!" X gasped. The pain of the self-inflicted wound lent a convincing quiver to his voice. "Give us a hand, quick!"

"Sure. Lewey," said the gunman. "Never went back on a pal yet. That's Squid's car out there. Hang on, pal!" He seized X about the waist and half carried him to the waiting car.

After the last shot had been fired in the direction of the zig-zagging car that was carrying Agent X and four criminals away from the scene of slaughter, Federal men under the direction of Special Agent Weston, took stock. Besides Parker, two other G-men were dead. Another was in a screaming ambulance racing with death. Others had minor wounds.

Two of the criminals had fallen. The rest had escaped, either in the car or on foot. Two criminals against possibly four gallant government men.

Weston shook his sandy head gravely. Too high a price had been paid for two rats' skins.

Weston went around to Bedford Street, where a knot of morbid onlookers were being held back by city police. Weston knew in advance what he would find in the center of that group of people—the body of a man, crossed out, in the literal sense of the term. For the man in the silk hat had carried half a dozen slugs with him to the pavement.

Entirely surrounding the body, was a circle, hastily drawn in white paint by means of a small tennis-court marker which the police found in the gutter. A white cross was drawn in the same manner through the center of the circle and, consequently, across the body of the man.

Another white cross killing. Here was the sign of sudden death, frequently applied by the City Safety Council to mark the spot of a motor tragedy. But here the sign was employed to mark sudden death at the hands of a maniac-mob—an epidemic of murder.

"It's Randolph Corlears, the mouthpiece," a policeman said to Weston. "He recently went into partnership with Charles McAdam—a criminal law firm, it was. When they bump mouthpieces, it looks like the old gang-war to me."

Weston shook his head. "That's a good theory, but it don't apply to other white-cross killings. It's as though some one had loosed a whole asylum full of criminally insane on the streets of New York and instilled a single monomania into the whole gang."

Weston's face was grim and haggard. "And that is just about as unsound a theory as yours, officer."

CHAPTER II

UNDERCOVER GAMBLE

A ONE-TIME speakeasy in an East Side basement, because of its fortifications, was admirably suited to the purposes of Mr. Murphy. Men who came to see Mr. Murphy—called "Squid" because there was something reminiscent of a devilfish's tentacles about Murphy's lean arms and continually squirming fingers—frequently needed the protection of steel doors and hidden traps.

Watching Squid Murphy pace the floor, was a woman. She was blonde, her hair clipped and combed as a man's. She wore a sleazy, cheap imitation of a dress some movie queen had introduced two years ago. She chain-smoked cigarettes and ground them out on the floor with the toe of a badly cracked gilt slipper. Her name was Sally Vergane. She had been a queen in her own right—gun-toting moll of the infamous Wolf Hollis.

Squid Murphy swung on the woman suddenly, took her rounded chin in his lean fingers, and rocked her head gently back and forth. His fishy eyes seemed to see straight through her.

"Cut it," he said hoarsely. "Cut looking at me like that. I got enough on my mind, without you starin' me into the bughouse."

"What mind?" Sally Vergane sneered. "If Wolf Hollis was alive and

runnin' this outfit, he'd be out there with the punks, takin' the same dangers they're takin'."

"And getting hisself rubbed out, don't forget," said Squid. "Besides, I ain't runnin' this mob. I got to answer to the Brain. The answer's got to be good. If the boys don't plug this Corlears guy and do a swell job of it, the Brain loses his hundred grand, we miss our cut, and the Brain gives me hell."

Squid Murphy's normally dark face paled at the thought. "Are you nuts? Sometimes, I guess you are. Listen, when the Brain stepped in where Wolf Hollis got off, and took over the runnin' of this gang, I told him I didn't like the idea of me never seein' him. I don't like guys who prowl around in the dark. I had a flashlight, see? Next time he showed up, turnin' the lights off as he came, I put the flashlight on him. What I saw gave me the creeps. He had on a black hood that covered his whole head and face. He had eyes like the Devil himself—just slanting slots in the black cloth. He had a silenced gun in each hand—"

Lights in the room snapped out. There was something ominous in even the pop of the switch, something that choked Murphy into silence and forced a small scream from Sally Vergane as she threw herself into Murphy's arms.

"Shut up!" Murphy snapped. "It's the Brain."

A door squeaked open. A voice that was a thick and muffled monotone said: "Randolph Corlears is dead."

Murphy sighed audibly. "Sure boss," he bragged. "Didn't I say I'd bring it off okay?"

"You did," boomed the Brain, "and you're a damned liar. It wasn't okay. Two seconds after the job was done, the place was swarming with federal men. There's a leak in your organization, Murphy. I hold you responsible. You'll kill the man who squawked to the G-men or I'll fire you. Know the way I fire a man?"

"Uh huh," grunted Murphy from a dry mouth.

"In a box with six handles. That's the only way, Murphy."

Footsteps in the darkness were followed by the closing of a door and the click of a light switch. In the light, Squid Murphy looked down into Sally Vergane's face. The girls rouged lips curled insolently. "Who powdered your puss, Squid?" For Murphy looked as though he was quite ready to be shipped in the Brain's six-handled box.

Murphy pushed the girl away from him. She put a cigarette in her lips, where it quivered, unlighted.

"Sometimes," she said, in a far-away voice, "that Brain reminds me of Wolf Hollis; when he gets mad like that, I mean."

"Nuts!" Murphy croaked. "The Feds cornered Hollis in an up-state farmhouse. After they'd shot the joint full of holes and tossed tear gas, Wolf set the dump on fire. Must have figured he'd rather burn with his own matches than in the chair."

"Still," Sally said. "I feel sometimes like Wolf is near me. But he's got to be dead, or he'd come to me; wouldn't he, Squid?"

THE door of the basement room banged open. Four men came in,

with a fifth who was half supported by one of the others. Squid Murphy slid his hands into his pockets where his fingers squirmed. His mouth became all but lipless. He looked the men up and down.

"Feds," he said slowly. "You had to run in with the Feds. You got Corlears and then, because things weren't excitin' enough for you, you yells for the Feds. Where'n hell's the rest of you?"

One of the gunmen walked over to the table and tossed down his gun. His hands were a little shaky. "Don't try to be funny, Squid. Somebody passed the Feds a tip-off. They were out after Lefty and Lewey. Now they'll be gunning for the whole mob, 'cause at least two of the G-boys got shot to hell. Couple of our gang got it. The rest is comin' back here—if they can get back."

"Lefty!" rapped Squid Murphy.

The big, blond, dish-faced rodman who supported the wounded Agent X, blinked at Squid Murphy. Murphy went over and seized Agent X by the collar. X rolled his eyelids back a little and stared blankly at Murphy.

"Lewey Cassino!" Murphy sneered. "Wolf Hollis' right-hand man, and you collect lead from one of Uncle Sam's boy scouts. Losin' your grip, fella."

X managed a sickly grin. "I sent the Fed who plugged me all the way, though. That's something, Squid."

Murphy took out his right hand and jammed a thumb into the ribs of the man called Lefty. "You get the hell out of here with your colicky baby. What'd you bring him here for? I said any of you worms that got stepped on by the

Feds, stayed on the spot.

Lefty rasped: "Lewey ain't dyin'. He needs a doc. What if I'd left him there and the Feds had worked him over and he had squawked?"

Murphy's eyes narrowed. "Maybe he's squawked already. Somebody has." He seized X by the throat and squeezed until the Agent choked out a plea for mercy. Squid laughed. "He wouldn't have the guts to squeal with the Brain runnin' things. You get him out of here, Lefty. Get him a doc. If he checks in, that's okay. But you can't leave him here and no doc in. The rest of you guys," Murphy swung on the other three gunmen, "I gotta give you hell."

As he leaned heavily on Lefty and groaned along up the dark stone steps to the dingy street outside, an ironic smile twisted the lips of Secret Agent X. So far so good. His impersonation of Lewey Cassino had passed Squid Murphy's careful scrutiny. The slight wound in his arm precluded any idea that his apparent agony was not genuine.

He had learned that Squid Murphy's gang consisted of the old Wolf Hollis crowd, to which had been added a number of young punks who were getting a kick out of killing. The G-men were out to mop up the remains of the Hollis crowd. Possibly the federal agents knew as little about the motive behind the white-cross murders as did Agent X.

But because he had passed Squid Murphy, was not reason to believe that smooth sailing lay ahead. Lefty Laughlin, who was at the moment struggling to get X into a car, was

obviously Lewey Cassino's best friend. Friendship in the underworld usually had an eggshell thinness, but even so, Lefty probably knew much of Lewey Cassino that X didn't know. The tiniest slip might give the Secret Agent away.

About seven blocks from where X had been introduced to Squid Murphy, Lefty Laughlin had a bed behind a door that could be locked. He carried X up a flight of narrow stairs that light and broom had never invaded, stretched X out on the bed, and pulled off the Agent's shoes. Fists on hips, Lefty regarded X solemnly. "You got to have a doc."

X rolled his head on a pillow that crackled with the straw inside it. "I'm doin' fine," he insisted. Here was another danger. Members of the medical profession the country over knew how to identify Agent X. There was an old shrapnel wound, which he had received during the war, which had left a scar that had taken the form of a jagged letter "X".*

"I said you was goin' to have a doc." Lefty reached over and took the automatic from X's pocket. "Just in case you try something screwy," he said as he left the room.

Then would have been a good time to beat a hasty retreat, but it was such situations that Agent X enjoyed most. Furthermore, he was determined to stop the white-cross killings. That couldn't be accomplished by

running away.

Less than five minutes elapsed before the door of the room opened. X's eyes were closed. He was groaning and rolling around on the bed, muttering as though in delirium. He recognized Lefty's voice, as the latter indicated the patient. And he recognized something else—a rank, strangling odor of pipe tobacco of nauseating strength. Agent X knew of but one man who smoked such tobacco and still miraculously kept his health. The smoke had to be from Dr. Stuart Ormand's pipe. Through lowered lids, X stole a glance at the man with the foul-smelling, underslung pipe.

Dr. Ormand was six feet of man in his prime. He had a well-developed, determined jaw, square teeth, and steady, courageous eyes behind glistening, rimless glasses. His hair was a rippling of silver. Not only was Dr. Stuart Ormand a capable, conscientious physician, but he was a criminal psychologist and amateur detective of no mean reputation. His book, "Potential Murderers," which dealt with the type of persons who, given motive and opportunity, commit murder, was supplementary reading in police schools. Had Lefty Laughlin searched all over Manhattan, he couldn't have found a physician less apt to help a wounded criminal, than Dr. Stuart Ormand.

Ormand was clever. He was cool. If he discovered the fact that the man on the bed was not Lewey Cassino, he would know what to do. If he discovered that X was not nearly so bad off as he appeared to be, he would very probably reveal this deception to

**AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Agent's methods of investigation differ so widely from the orthodox routine of the police department, that the police of New York believe him to be a desperate criminal. Inspector Burks, of the Homicide Department, has even slated the Agent for murder.*

Lefty. Whatever happened, Agent X was in a bad spot.

But when the blow-up came, what would happen to Dr. Ormand? Without regard for his own predicament, the Agent's chief concern was to see the doctor safely through trouble. For there wasn't a chance in the world that this bulldog of a medico would submit to any of Laughlin's bullying.

CHAPTER III

G-GUN SERENADE

THOUGH he was a man of infinite patience, Harvey Bates was also a man of action. His instructions, from Agent X, had been to obtain what information he could from the unconscious G-man, Jackson. Inasmuch as the effect of a dose of X's gas sometimes required hours to wear off, it looked very much as though Bates' immediate future was to be filled chiefly with pipe smoke and waiting.

He removed the mask he had worn on entering the G-man's room, mopped his large, wholesome face with his handkerchief, and sat down. Presently it occurred to him that he might serve his chief by snooping about a little.

There was almost nothing in the room to connect it with an agent of Uncle Sam, for Jackson was a careful man and an intelligent investigator. Except for the far-flung secret organization which X operated through Harvey Bates, the Agent would probably never have known that a G-man named Jackson was getting tips in

regard to scheduled white-cross killings.

But when Bates searched a wallet that X had left beside the G-man, he discovered a slip of pasteboard on which Jackson had recorded the tip. Information, Jackson had scribbled, told that Randolph Corlears was to have been the victim and also the approximate time and place in which the murder was to occur. Most of this information Bates had overheard when Jackson was reporting to his chief. But at the top of the pasteboard card was a telephone number which had obviously been written some time before the other information, judging by the way the penciling was smudged. Was it possible that this telephone number was the source of Jackson's information? Decidedly, it was a hunch worth working on.

Bates went from the bathroom to the phone and called a number which was listed in no telephone directory, in order that its absolute secrecy might be assured. In a few seconds he was talking with one of his own operatives. Bates asked for information relating to the telephone number the G-man had written on the cardboard. When he had that information, Bates leaned back in his chair, stuffed his pipe with extreme care, and lighted it deliberately. Here was a mystery, indeed.

The phone number on the G-man's memorandum was that of a woman who had been making history in the tabloids lately. Pamela Dean was the particular passion of enough wealthy business men to make front-page news seven days out of the week. About the only Government Agent who might have been able to afford Pamela Dean's

charming company was the director of the mint, Bates decided, and G-man Henry Jackson's salary was rather lean, considering the dangers his duties compelled him to face. It looked very much as though Bates' hunch was founded on fact. Though the connection between a Gold Coast pet and the underworld was just a bit hazy.

Nevertheless, Bates decided to pay a call on Pamela Dean. Bates secured the gold Department of Justice badge from Jackson's wallet, locked the G-man in the bathroom, and left the dingy room to taxi to the west end of town, where Pamela Dean's apartment overlooked the river.

A French maid was eloquent in regard to Miss Dean's absence, but the gold badge Bates had appropriated worked its magic. He was permitted to wait for forty-five minutes before Pamela Dean appeared.

She was breath-taking. The blue stuff of which her gown was fashioned, had been particularly created to match her eyes. Her skin had a dark, warm flush. Her hair was a deep brown and wavy. Her lips bore a warmer welcome than Bates had any reason to expect, and when he grasped her outstretched hand, he was painfully conscious of the immensity of his own powerful digits.

"Any friend of Mr. Jackson is a friend of mine," she said generously, in a voice that would have guaranteed her radio appeal even in the absence of television.

The French maid brought cocktails. Bates tasted his and set it aside. Here was a situation which Agent X would have met magnificently, but which Bates feared greatly he might fumble.

He felt that Pamela Dean's blue eyes fronted a brain that could think circles around his. There was not a particle of use in his edging into the subject foremost in his mind.

"Gave my friend, Jackson, a tip tonight?" he boomed.

Pamela Dean pursed her lips and examined polished finger nails. "About what?" she asked guardedly.

"Mr. Corlears' scheduled death," Bates plunged—too deeply, he realized in another moment. For the girl was back with:

"And were you in time to prevent this—this horrible tragedy?"

And that was a question best detoured. "Your tips have always been useful," he said. "Wonder if you've got more?"

Pamela Dean stood up, took graceful steps to the window, seemed to meditate upon the darkness and the flicker of distant lights, returned, and lighted a cigarette.

"You realize that I am in a position of grave danger," she said. "Yet I have voluntarily given you information which has been useful to you. Mr. Jackson has been fair enough in promising that he would not attempt to learn the source of that information. He was simply satisfied with its authenticity, as you must be. Yes, I have more information, not fully developed at this time."

She paused, her eyes seemed to fathom the unfathomable. "The sign of sudden death hovers over the business house directed by Aaron Malthus. It is utterly impossible for me to elaborate on that statement, for the simple reason that I know nothing further." She

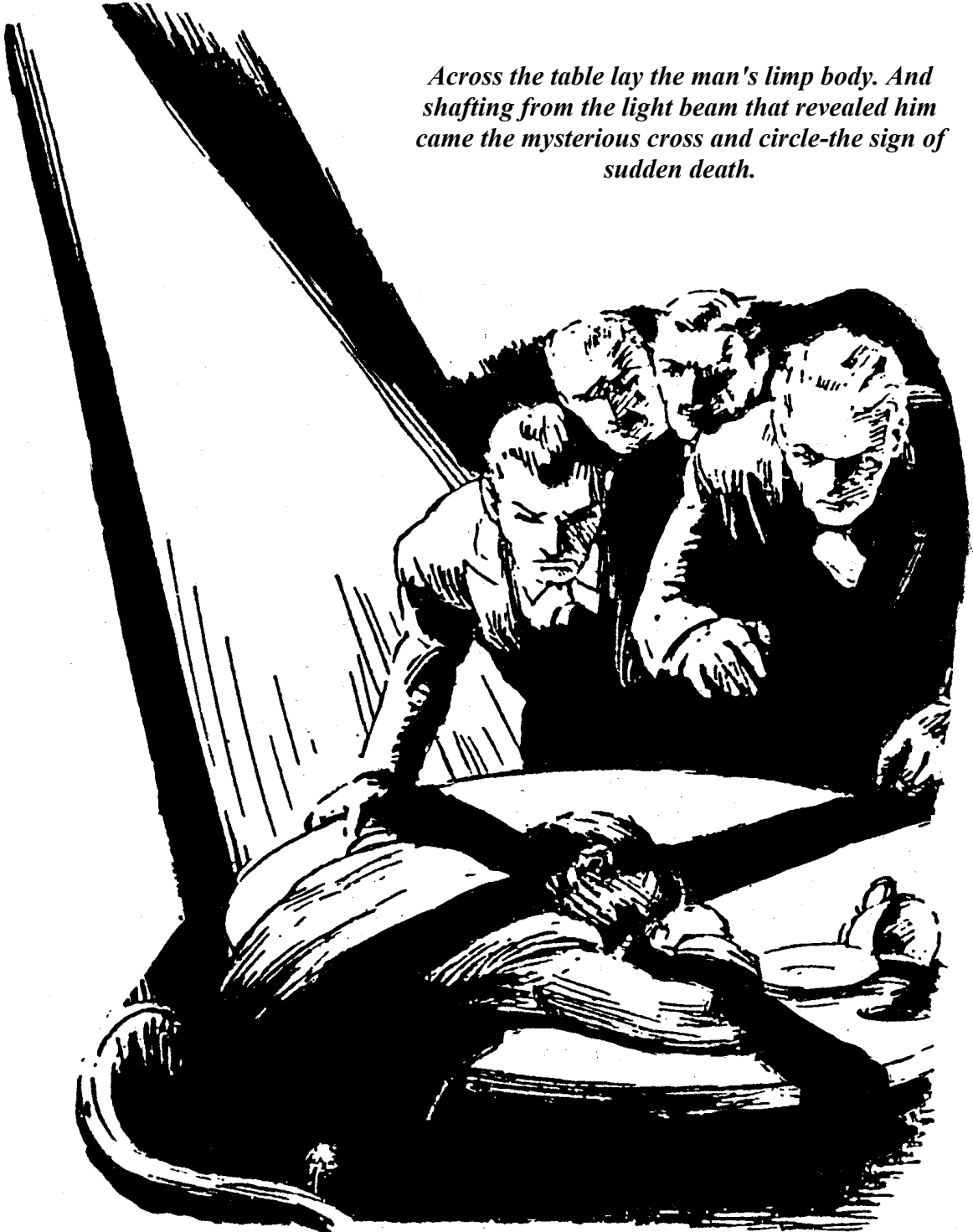
smiled quickly. "It may help you, if you make the most of it. I promise more news just as soon as I can obtain it. Trust me, as I have trusted you."

And Harvey Bates left the apartment filled with the desire to trust Pamela

Dean to the fullest; and at the same time, he was troubled by a wholly inexplicable something.

Perhaps that something was the deadly scrutiny of the eye of an automatic which appeared in a slightly

Across the table lay the man's limp body. And shafting from the light beam that revealed him came the mysterious cross and circle-the sign of sudden death.



raised window on the ground floor of the building as Bates wandered out on the sidewalk.

AGENT X came out of his faked delirium, to lie on his back and stare, dull-eyed, at Dr. Stuart Ormand. The doctor folded his arms, contentedly inhaled the poisonous fumes from his pipe, and challenged Lefty Laughlin with his eyes.

The dish-faced Laughlin was standing near the bed, his automatic in his hand. "You're goin' to get busy on my pal, Doc. You're goin' to fix up that wound of his or get one in your own belly—which you won't get over in a hurry."

Dr. Ormand laughed coolly. "Do you know what I think? I think, if I may resort to the vernacular, that you are some sort of a punk. I haven't any intention of aiding your companion, even though it were a matter of life and death, which it isn't."

Agent X reached up toward Laughlin's gun. "Let me plug the guy, Lefty," he said. But his ruse to get hold of Lefty's gun didn't work. Lefty backstepped. Teeth on edge, he said:

"You got any idea who we are, Doc?"

Ormand nodded. "You are Lefty Laughlin. The man on the bed is Lewey Cassino. Both of you gentlemen were formerly associated with Wolf Hollis; probably the only reason why you are now considered public enemies. I don't think you're quite that important."

X sat on the edge of the bed and jammed his feet into his shoes. "I'm goin' to croak that guy, Lefty," he

declared. "I like to be respected."

There came a rapid tattoo of knuckles on the door of the room. Dr. Ormand smiled. "The law, no doubt."

"No doubt!" Lefty jeered. "Happens to be one of Squid Murphy's boys."

He backed to the door, so that he could keep an eye on Ormand. He unlatched the door and pulled it open. One of the younger toughs X had seen in Murphy's place, came into the room. He was out of breath and pale.

"Lam," he jerked at Lefty. "It's that damned leak again. This joint is surrounded by Feds again. We got a chance over the roof, but—" He looked at Ormand, who seemed bent on smoking out everybody in the building. "What's that?" the tough asked nodding at Ormand.

Lefty didn't answer. He swung on Agent X. "Can you stagger along, pal? We gotta move. You get that, or has that slug scrambled the old brain! G-men outside, see?"

X nodded. "I'll make out okay. We sock this doc and leave him here."

"Like hell!" Lefty snarled. "He goes along for our protection. The G-men shoot, but not if there's a chance of hitting somebody on their side of the fence." He got at the back of Dr. Ormand and jabbed his gun into his spine. "Pocket that stove, Doc. That soft coal you smoke makes me dizzy."

The young hood grabbed the pipe and jammed it into the doctor's pocket. "You're a sap, Lefty," he said, and brought out a gun from Ormand's pocket, a gun which the doctor would surely have drawn had he been permitted to pocket his pipe himself.

They left the room, the young tough

in the lead, then Agent X, walking unsteadily. Lefty and his hostage brought up the rear. They started toward the stair. The young tough stopped, turned around, his face was white. A creak of the steps had warned him that the federal agents had entered the building. The young tough darted around his companions, and led toward the end of the hall. There was a window there that opened on well-soaped grooves. They clanked out on a fire escape.

"Try anything funny, Doc," Lefty warned, "and from here on you're just a grease spot on the alley pavement." To X he said: "Step on it, Lewey."

X faked a groan and stumbled up a flight of iron skeleton steps to a small platform. A simple iron ladder extended to the attic windows. This was evidently loose in its staples, for the young tough was sliding it up two feet farther to hang its hooked upper extremities over the eaves.

The wound in X's arm had stopped bleeding. He had taken particular pains to inflict it in such a spot that it would not hamper his movements. Still, he climbed the swaying iron ladder using one arm only. If fortune permitted him to carry his impersonation further, he did not want to do anything that would arouse suspicion in the future.

They gained the roof, where asphalt surfacing absorbed every light ray, and the starry sky hung oppressively low. They moved toward the western edge of the roof, Lefty goading the doctor on and whispering threats. The young tough was keyed up with hop. He heard the squeak of an opening skylight even before Agent X realized

that some one in the building had divined their route of escape.

As the skylight bobbed up, the young tough swung around with a vicious oath. Over the sill of the skylight, a G-man whipped out a shot. The young tough kicked out, landed a heel somewhere in the Fed's face. The G-man doubled over backwards and thumped and rolled down the steps. The skylight covering fell back. Up through the opening came a warning cry. G-men on the floor below heard their companion's shot.

The young tough cursed, pivoted, and caught X by the coat front. "Lewey, you and me have got to swing that fire-escape ladder up here on the roof. We'll use it to bridge the gap to the next building. If we can hold back the Feds until the ladder is in place, we got a clean getaway. You, Lefty, stand that guy near the skylight. When the Feds start up those steps give the guy the works and dump him through the opening."

IT was good strategy, X realized. The body of Dr. Ormand, for the doctor would surely be a corpse by the time Lefty "gave him the works," would fill the narrow stairway and demand immediate attention from the Feds. Even a ten-second delay might mean the difference between safety and a hazardous battle with the G-men. But it was the sort of strategy X could not permit.

X turned with surprising speed, seized Lefty's gun. "Gimme that, pal. I don't like the way this doe parts his hair. If there's goin' to be any bumping to do, I ought to do it. With one arm I

won't be any use movin' that ladder."

"Lewey's right," the young tough said. And Laughlin relinquished his gun to Agent X. Lefty and the other crook started back for the fire-escape ladder. X drove the muzzle of Lefty's automatic into the doctor's midsection and pushed him back so that his heels struck the edge of the skylight.

"You're a sap. Cassino," whispered Dr. Ormand. "You can't get by with anything like this."

"Shut up, Ormand!"

"You know me?"

"Who don't? Everybody but Lefty. He would pick a guy like you. When I tilt this gat toward the sky and let it blow, you jump back down the skylight. Do you get it? I'm not exactly what I seem to be."

"What's this? Sort of a death-bed conversion, Cassino?"

"Never mind. You're not going to get killed. I'm letting you off. In return, you can delay the G-men by feeding them a line." For X still hoped that by sticking with Lefty Laughlin, he would eventually get inside information regarding the white-cross killings.

But at the very moment when the federal men could be heard running along the hall below, Dr. Ormand went into action. His left hand shot out to X's gun-wrist. His right rammed in just below X's ribs. It was a good punch. It had steam and surprise.

X staggered back a step. Ormand got the automatic, but before he could turn the gun around, X's right hand had brushed upwards to a vest pocket, curled into a fist, and lashed out toward Dr. Ormand's face. He pulled the punch short and at the same time

flicked a secret catch on the cigarette lighter he had procured from his pocket.*

G-men were at the foot of the narrow steps leading to the skylight, and in another moment, so was Dr. Ormand. The anaesthetizing gas took immediate effect. A gentle push was all that was required to topple him over the edge of the skylight.

X turned around, lost a precious second trying to see where Lefty and the other crook had gone. Apparently they had either deserted him entirely or supposed he knew the route they intended to take, for they were nowhere in sight.

A G-man had evidently hurdled the form of the unconscious doctor and was running up the steps. It was only a matter of seconds before the roof would be swarming with federal agents, any one of whom would have found a fine feather for his cap if he could bring back Lewey Cassino dead. And there wasn't a chance in the world of X convincing these manhunters that he was not Public Enemy Cassino.

CHAPTER IV

HIDDEN DEATH

AG-MAN bobbed through the opening in the roof. As X legged toward the eaves he shot a glance over his shoulder in time to catch the full

**AUTHOR'S NOTE: This cigarette lighter is one of the Agent's most surprising weapons. There is a compartment in it which holds a single cartridge of his anesthetizing gas.*

effect of the G-man's flashlight beam.

"It's Cassino!" shouted the Fed, and opened up with his automatic.

X zigzagged to the left and got a fan-tail ventilator between himself and his pursuers. The G-man sieved the sheet-metal of the ventilator with bullets. Still he saw the man he supposed to be Cassino covering the roof like a rabbit.

The G-man broke into a run, two of his companions directly behind him. The Feds were sure of their quarry, for the running man was dashing toward the edge of the building. Either the supposed Cassino would fall three stories to the ground below, or lose his nerve in the last minute.

Between the buildings was a gap of twelve feet, possibly more. There was no way that the Agent could estimate the distance in the dark. He knew only that when his toes touched the eaves trough he would jump with every ounce of strength he could goad from his muscles.

Sheet metal drummed beneath his shoes. The eaves—he must jump, perhaps into eternity. He hurled himself forward into mid-air that shrilled in his ears no less keenly than the bullets which followed him. His right toe caught the eaves trough of the second building. He lost balance and, for a moment, all sense of direction; every route seemed to lead downward into a bottomless pit. His body smacked flat against the flat roof surface of the second building.

He gulped in breath, dragged his dangling legs out of emptiness, regained his feet, and raced across the roof, entirely at a loss as to what he

should do next. He scurried for a skylight that loomed as large as a tent. Behind it, he had a moment's security in which to plot his future course.

The G-man who had first gained the skylight, after X had thrown Dr. Ormand down the stair, came to the edge of the roof. He must have decided that if a rat like Lewey Cassino could make such a jump, he, too, could make it. But his leap was poorly timed. It was but a matter of luck that fingers of his air-thrashing arms hooked over the eaves of the next building.

The other G-men came to a stop at the edge of the roof to stare in horror at their kicking companion who swung from the eaves of the building across the way. Forgotten, for the moment, was Lewey Cassino.

"Hang on, Dick!" called one of the men. "We'll give you a hand." He swung his flashlight around, spotted the iron ladder which was bridged the space between the two buildings. He ran to it, moved it along until it all but touched the fingers of the hanging man. Then he crossed to the other building, his companion following to give assistance to the man who hung on the eaves.

Glass smashed and tinkled frostily. The G-man's attention was instantly shifted toward the skylight where the supposed Lewey Cassino had disappeared.

The Fed called something to his buddies and then sprinted toward the skylight. A large section of the glass had been kicked out, and, somewhere in the darkness below, the G-man could hear heavy footsteps pounding along the hallway.

The G-man dropped through the opening in the skylight, struck the floor of the hall below. He required a second before his eyes became used to the greater darkness. Then he spotted the stair rail, ran to it, and down the first flight of steps. At the second landing, he leaned over the rail to see a man running down the hall below. The G-man vaulted the stair railing, dropped into the hall, to land within a yard of his quarry. His long arms sprang out straight to collar his man.

But the man he had collared jerked around, roared: "What the hell!" He sent a jolting left into the G-man's middle that flattened the Fed against the wall. The G-man took a long breath, when he could, and blinked at the man he had been pursuing—a man with a round, red face that mirrored an irate expression.

"Aren't you Inspector John Burks of the City Homicide Department?" asked the G-man, a bit lamely.

"Am I?" roared the red-faced person. "You've got me there, brother. For a moment I thought I was a tackling dummy. You make a practice of dropping from ceilings and trying to neck everybody you meet?"

The G-man fumbled in his pocket, produced his gold badge and flashed it.

"Sorry, Inspector. A man just broke through the skylight on the roof and ran down these steps. There was only one man in sight. You just happened to be that man. I'm looking for Lewey Cassino."

"Cassino?" bellowed the inspector. "Why didn't you say so? I'd like to lay my hands on him myself. Where'd he go?"

"He vanished."

"Can't be done," the red-faced man interrupted. "If you can get men to guard the back door, I'll take the front. Nobody passed me in the hall, and nobody is going to pass me at the front door. If Cassino is alive, he's in this building."

There was no deceit in what the red-faced man had said. He, and he alone, knew that Lewey Cassino was dead, lying in some one's coal cellar. For the red-faced man whom the federal agent had addressed as Inspector Burks was none other than Secret Agent X.*

THE time required for the G-men to rescue their companion had been sufficient for Agent X to make a hasty change in his makeup while hiding behind the skylight. The impersonation of Burks was one which he could manage from memory and which offered him comparative safety. It was true that his makeup would not have withstood close scrutiny, for he had adopted it in great haste. But there was no reason for the G-man to examine him closely.

Instead of mounting guard at the door of the building, Agent X walked briskly off into the night. So far, the impersonation of Lewey Cassino had resulted only in constant trouble for him. He had resolved to drop it for the time being, for he had lost all track of Lefty Laughlin and his white-faced

**AUTHOR'S NOTE: Agent X has so frequently impersonated Inspector Burks that he can adopt the inspector's features at will, working from memory, even though he is in the dark at the time.*

companion. As far as the mysterious killings which were marked by a circle and cross, were concerned, X was exactly in the same position he had been in at the start of the investigation.

Why should men be gunned down without apparent discrimination? Why, above all, should the victims be literally crossed out by white paint, drawn in a design used by members of the Safety Council to designate fatal automobile accidents? On the face of it, it appeared that some one person was possessed with a vengeful monomania—a person who had lost a loved one in a motor accident and was determined to square accounts by dealing death right and left.

But some one person wasn't doing the killing. These unfortunate victims of the sign of sudden death were set upon by mobs of gunmen. Vengeance of the mob type had to have some sort of motive. And here there seemed no sort of motive, whatsoever.

OBLIVIOUS to the fact that he was being sighted by killers over a gun that rested on the window-sill of the apartment house where Pamela Dean lived, Harvey Bates paused a moment to rekindle his pipe. The head of his match, however, never touched the side of its box. Out of the night came a short, sharp, woman's scream.

Harvey Bates dropped the match and sprinted toward the corner of the apartment building from whence the cry came. The sound of his heavy shoes on the pavement muffled the plop of a silenced gun, but not the mosquito-buzz of the bullet. Bates didn't turn around. He knew he was

being shot at, but also knew the wisdom of not pausing to discover from whence that shot came, and thus probably making a corpse of himself. He zigzagged toward the opening of an alley, where there was the sound of a scuffle.

A woman was punching and kicking at a man who was doing his best to detain her and muffle her cries. As Bates waded into the war, the man released the woman, flashed a knife, and sprang at Bates. It was too dark in the alley to see anything but the ominous flash of the knife. Bates caught the man's wrist as the knife plunged downward, employed a deft twist that Agent X had taught him, and heard the knife clank to the pavement.

The man, perhaps for the first time, took a good look at the silhouette of Harvey Bates. Only fear could have given him the strength to break Bates' grip. Then he wheeled around and raced up the alley.

Bates would have pursued the man, had it not been for the two small hands that clutched at his coat and the familiar ring of the feminine voice that was thanking him.

"Miss Dale!" gasped Bates. He took the girl's arm and hurried her back to the sidewalk where lamplight enabled him to see a sweet, girlish face, flushed prettily from the struggle, and framed by unruly golden hair.

Bates' immediate task was apparent. Betty Dale, girl reporter on the *Herald*, was a far closer friend to Agent X than even Bates. Bates knew, from previous adventures, that the Secret Agent would have given up his own life rather than have any harm come to

Betty. Therefore, Bates argued, his first duty toward X was to get Betty Dale to a place of safety at once.

"Harvey Bates!" exclaimed the girl delightedly. "I—"

"No time," he clipped. His grip on her arm tightened, and he hurried her possessively off down the street, put her in his car, and drove for three blocks before uttering a word.

"Is this a kidnapping?" Betty demanded. "I was on the threshold of the greatest human-interest story of my short and eventful career. Where's the fire?"

Bates jerked his head. "Back there."

Betty sighed. There were times when a little third-degreeing of Harvey Bates would have been justifiable. "All right. If you won't, I will. I've been trying to follow Sally Vergane. Remember—Wolf Hollis' old girl friend? There's a heart tug in every word she utters, if she ever utters anything I can print. I lost her trail half a dozen times this evening, then actually saw her enter that apartment back there, by the side door. I was on the point of following, when that gorilla came at me. If you're not busy, suppose we go back and you help me find Sally?"

"Busy," said Bates.

"Doing what?"

"Getting you to your flat. Then, maybe, go back for the murderer."

"Whose murderer?"

"Mine, almost." And Bates lapsed into the silence he had reluctantly left. Ten minutes later, he drew up in front of the apartment house where Betty Dale lived.

There was a man in Betty's apartment. He was sitting in a chair,

facing the door. The girl jerked back in surprise and stood poised on toe-tips a second.

"Why, Inspector Burks!" she gasped.*

BATES pushed his big, protecting body in front of the girl and measured the red-faced man in the chair. The inspector stood up, uttered a short, whimsical laugh, such as no one had ever heard from the lips of Inspector Burks. Betty Dale peered around Bates, an odd, expectant light in her merry blue eyes. Fingers of the red-faced man crossed to form a letter "X," one of the secret signs X had arranged to use in identifying himself to Betty.

"You!" Relief and sheer joy combined in the single word as Betty crowded past Bates into the room. No less surprised than Betty, Bates came through the doorway and closed the panel behind him. Agent X clasped both of Betty's hands. His gray eyes smiled warmly.

"I've a job for you," he said.

"I'm glad. What is it?"

"I'd like you to get next to Sally Vergane. What's so surprising about that?"

Betty looked at Harvey Bates. "I was trying to get next to Sally Vergane, but he wouldn't let me."

"By the way, Bates," X said, mildly

**AUTHOR'S NOTE: Though Betty Dale is a police reporter, she has every reason to feel uneasy when some member of the police force pays particular attention to her. Betty Dale is the only living person to have seen the real face of Secret Agent X, and she lives in constant fear of the fact that some day police may learn of her connection with X and attempt to force her to betray the Agent into their hands.*

reproachful. "where is G-man Henry Jackson?"

"Same place—locked up. Been working on a lead I got from him." And, thrifty with words, Bates told how he had gone to Pamela Dean's and obtained information regarding the scheduled murder in the firm headed by Aaron Malthus. Then he told of Betty's plight and the silenced bullet that some one had tried to plant in his back.

"Aaron Malthus," X muttered. "Again, there's nothing consistent about the murder mob's choice of victims. Some have money; some haven't. Aaron Malthus is one for the 'haven't' side. He, and several others, are engaged in an investment business that happens to be in a bad way. 'Queer.'"

"But what about Sally Vergane?" Betty asked. "Why should she be going into a ritzy apartment building like that? What's the connection?"

X sighed. "Certainly not enough answers to go around, are there?"

"Better get back to my post, sir?" Bates queried.

X nodded. "And before you go, just give me Jackson's badge and credentials. I may want to use them later. Keep Jackson under dope. Keep an eye on the Dean flame without getting yourself scorched by any more silenced bullets. You did a good job tonight."

Bates flushed, became interested in the toes of his shoes, and clumsily left the room.

"What are you going to do?"

"There's only one move for me—go to Aaron Malthus. I'll have to hang

around his place as a plumber or something until I get a chance to step into his shoes."

Betty paled. "You mean that, knowing that the white cross is threatening Malthus, you—you'd impersonate him?"

X slipped an arm around the girl's shoulders. "Now, Betty," he said with a smile, "it's rather a necessary risk; don't you see? There's not a single other angle to work from."

"All right," said Betty meekly. She had long since leaned that X's will was unalterable. "Then you want me to work on the Sally Vergane angle?"

"If you can do so in safety, Betty. If you could meet her in some public place and just pump her, as though you were getting a newspaper story. Watch out for anything she may say about Wolf Hollis. The man is officially dead. Still, I wonder."

"So do I. That charred body found in the house Hollis burned down over his ears—it was identified as Hollis' simply by the ring on the finger of the corpse. There might have been some one else in the house with Hollis."

X nodded. He liked watching the girl's intelligent, expressive face; he liked hearing her talk. But there would be time for all that later on, he hoped. He kissed her gently. "Take care of yourself," he whispered, and hurriedly left the apartment.

There was work to be done. Aaron Malthus, or some member of his company, was in danger. It was up to X to discover who was actually threatened by the insidious sign of death. Then, if he could shift the danger to his own capable shoulders by

stepping into the threatened man's shoes, the Brain, Squid Murphy, or whoever headed the maniac murder-group would find a more worthy opponent when it came time to cross out another victim.

CHAPTER V

DEATH BARGAINS

THE following evening, Squid Murphy sidled into a booth in an untidy ravioli restaurant. On the other side of the table, her heels hooked on the round of a chair, was Sally Vergane. The thick platter of food in front of her was untouched.

Squid watched her with fishy eyes. "How come you don't eat when you're out with me?" he demanded unpleasantly.

Sally smiled hatefully. "Maybe it's because I'm so nuts about you I lose my appetite."

"It's as good food as Wolf Hollis ever fed you, ain't it?"

Sally's eyelids drooped wearily. "Yeah—the grub's as good... What you been doin', Squid?"

Murphy plucked a cigarette and played with it between squirming fingers. "Linin' up the job for the Brain."

"But you got no line on the Brain, himself, have you?"

Murphy massaged his jaw and shook his head. "Why should I? Ain't I satisfied? It's good for the bank account to do as the Brain says. Good for the health, too."

Sally leaned across the table. Her

blue eyes burned brightly, earnestly. "Listen, Squid, you gotta do something for me. I got a notion who the Brain is. You gotta find out for sure. It's burnin' me up, see? I think the Brain is Wolf Hollis. And if he is, and he don't come around to me any more, he's got a new girl. Wolf Hollis always had to have a girl. He was no good without one. It's killing me, just thinking of it. I love that guy, Squid. Even if he's got another girl, I'd love him. I just want to know."

Squid laughed. "Wolf Hollis is neckin' angels, if anybody. He's dead. I watched the house burn where they cornered him. When the Feds say a guy is dead, he's dead."

"All right. If the Brain isn't Wolf Hollis, how'd he get at the head of this mob? A guy without a name, who never shows his face, couldn't just come and say he was goin' to boss the toughest mob in town."

"I get you," Squid agreed. "Tell you something—the Brain was a friend of Wolf Hollis. The Brain's got a slip of paper with a note from Hollis, saying that if anything happened to Wolf, the Brain was to take things over. That satisfied me and the boys. It's good enough for—"

Squid touched Sally's hand and nodded toward the door. "Here's where I get off, kid. See that blonde who came in the door?" Sally mirrored the doorway in a cheap vanity and nodded. "Well," Murphy continued. "she's a sob sister from the *Herald*. She's been trailin' you lately. Money says she wants a heart throb from you for her paper. Don't give no reporter the lifted snoot. They'll get suspicious.

Act down and out and glad to grieve for Wolf Hollis, but watch your step. This *Herald* kid has a brain in that bonnet."

And as Betty Dale started down the aisle between the restaurant booths, Squid Murphy slipped out unseen...

AARON MALTHUS sat in his study awaiting dinner guests. He was a dark man, gray-templed, and with lumpy features. His leathery eyelids were nearly closed; yet he was not relaxed. His jaw muscles worked like an irregular pulse. Before the dark curtain of his mind a plain, oak chair equipped with straps and electrodes, and a curious metal cap persisted in harnessing his attention. Perhaps Aaron Malthus had never fully realized before that he was a murderer.

French windows opened a mere crack. A black-gloved hand slid through the opening and along the wall to press a light switch. In utter blackness, Malthus gasped a breath that whistled between clenched teeth. The French windows opened and closed.

"I am here, Mr. Malthus," said a muffled voice.

"Who—the Brain?" gasped Malthus. He jerked his chair around so that he could face the origin of the voice.

"Yes." said a muffled voice. "You have been trying to contact me through Murphy. So I am here. What is it you want?"

"I—I can't go through with this—this awful thing!" Malthus sobbed out. "You've got to stop it!"

"No, I fail to understand."

"Then, whether you understand or not, the deal is off. I'd rather starve."

"It is not as easy as that, Mr. Malthus," the voice continued monotonously. "One may not stop an avalanche with a feather."

"I—I'll be a murderer if this goes on. You must stop it!" Malthus choked. "If you persist. I'll see Ingram tonight. I'll have him cancel the policy. Ingram will be here tonight."

"I see," said the Brain. "Now that you feel like a murderer, Mr. Malthus, has it occurred to you that it is better to feel like a murderer than like a murder victim?"

Silence for a moment—then Malthus' hoarse voice: "Yes, damn it!"

"And you remember, according to the terms of our contract, one-half the proceeds come to me. That being thoroughly understood, I need not remain longer. Good-night."

And in dark silence, the Brain left the way he had come.

Malthus stumbled across the room, peered through the French windows, and saw not a sign of the mysterious visitor.

"After all," he mused, "perhaps two hundred thousand dollars is worth it. At least, the bogey of bankruptcy will stop haunting me."

It was the cuisine of Aaron Malthus' chef, rather than the personality of their host, that made men eager to attend Malthus' bachelor dinners. Shortly after the departure of the Brain, the guests began to arrive. Aaron Malthus greeted Dr. Stuart Ormand with mechanical graciousness. Ormand gave Malthus' hand a vigorous pumping, all the time puffing clouds of

his noxious tobacco smoke into Malthus' face.

Men liked Ormand in spite of his pipe and its sturdy mixture of perique and Algerian tobaccos. Ormand carried his bedside manner into social life, mingling with the guests, showing interest in their most trivial grievances, and seldom talking about himself.

In addition to Dr. Ormand, there was Thomas Ingram, a small, birdlike man who hopped about and made himself noxious by selling things—anything from his own particular brand of cigarettes to a new headache remedy that, in his opinion, far surpassed anything he had yet tried. Thomas Ingram was a successful life-insurance underwriter.

With Ingram came Major Sidney Hatfield, an Australian by birth, who had traveled the world over, played soldier-of-fortune, and was at present in some mysterious way connected with Ingram's insurance firm.

Then there was McAdam, partner of the murdered Corlears; McAdam who was fat and porky-pink; who wore a frozen smile because his mouth was somewhat cramped with excessively large false teeth.

It was to such a dinner that Agent X came, at least as far as the front hall. He wore the disguise that had started his adventure with the sign of sudden death—the impersonation of Henry Jackson, crack agent of the F.B.I.

A servant seated X in a hall chair beside a screen of Chinese metal work and told him that he would ask if Mr. Malthus could see him. X had waited perhaps five minutes when catlike footsteps attracted his attention. The

footsteps ended abruptly, as though their owner were listening intently for some one he feared might have followed him.

Just on the other side of the screen, the cat-footing man stopped. There was the distinct click of a telephone receiver being lifted from its hook, followed by the ratcheting of a telephone dial.

Long silence, and Agent X stood up in order to peer through the intricate piercing in the top of the Chinese screen.

"Hello," a man's voice whispered.

Elbow and shoulder rammed the screen and sent it toppling backwards. The man at the phone had turned at just the wrong moment and had detected the gleam of the Agent's spying eye. The whisperer had moved, quickly and violently, but not quite fast enough to trap Agent X under the fallen screen. X had sprung clear of the screen and now stood facing the whisperer, a man of about thirty-five years of age, blond and handsome except for a badly broken nose. And the man was in the act of drawing a gun.

X sprang across the Chinese screen, met the man's gun wrist with his left hand. A short, chopping blow to the man's biceps left the fingers that held the gun numb and unresisting. X pulled the small automatic from the man's hand and stepped back.

"Now," he said quietly, "what is this?"

The broken-nosed man gulped, reached over and returned the telephone handset to its cradle. He said nothing.

AT that moment, Aaron Malthus, Dr. Ormand and Malthus' other guests trooped into the hall, attracted, evidently, by the clang of the fallen screen. Malthus looked from X to the man with the broken nose. "Birr," he said to the latter, "what does this mean?" Then he addressed X: "You are Mr. Jackson?"

X nodded. "And who, may I ask, is this china-shop bull who goes around wrecking your bric-a-brac and attempting to shoot your callers?"

"Birr, did you attempt to shoot Mr. Jackson? Birr, Mr. Jackson, is my secretary. He has never exhibited any of these strains of insanity before. Nelson Birr, did you hear me addressing you? What does this mean?"

"I heard you," said Birr unpleasantly. "I regret any damage to the Chinese screen. There is a possibility that I acted hastily." He turned to X and stuck out his hand. "May I have my gun? I have a permit to carry such weapons, something which is quite possible you have not."

"True," said X dryly. He returned the gun to Birr. If he was to accomplish his ends, it might be best if he appeared as little like an investigator as possible. He turned to Malthus. "May I see you a moment, Mr. Malthus, alone, if you please."

"Certainly," agreed Malthus. He waved his hand to Birr. His guests had already discreetly retired to the other room.

Agent X took out Jackson's wallet from his own pocket, and also the federal man's badge. Aaron Malthus' dark skin became suddenly pale.

Muscles at the corners of his unpleasant mouth twitched. "F—from the—Department of Justice," he stammered dully.

"Exactly." X returned wallet and badge to his pocket. "I would very much like to attend your dinner party."

"Wh-what for? I mean, of course you're welcome. But really, I've read of these G-men, but never expected to meet one face to face."

It was hardly face to face, X thought as he said: "I do not want to alarm you. Mr. Malthus, but there is the possibility that you are in something of a tight spot."

"You—you mean something might happen—to me?"

"Now, don't alarm yourself in the least." Malthus was heading for a nervous crackup, the Agent thought. "Just permit me to be one of your guests tonight. Is that agreeable?"

"Of course. I—I—" Malthus closed his mouth very tight. Then he waved his hand toward the room where the others had disappeared. X bowed slightly and joined Malthus' guests.

"What is this I hear about you having a run-in with cops and robbers, Dr. Ormand?" inquired Charles McAdam as he seated himself in a chair.

Dr. Ormand's eyes and rimless glasses scintillated in the warm yellow light. "On, nothing at all." He puffed contentedly at his foul, underslung pipe.

"Particularly reticent about the encounter, isn't he?" Ingram twitted. He looked at Major Sidney Hatfield and winked.

"Perhaps he was on the wrong side

of the legal line.” Hatfield boomed jovially. Then he noticed Agent X and stiffened slightly.

Malthus introduced X lamely as “an old friend of my mother,” which, because of the youthful face X wore, probably seemed a bit strange to all present.

X kept an eye on Birr, the secretary. Birr was restless, but it was a more ponderous restlessness than that displayed by the birdlike Ingram.

“Tell us about it, Ormand,” Ingram insisted. Then he begged that X have one of his cigarettes—”positively the finest weed on the market today.”

“Well, I was simply called to the aid of a man who had been wounded,” Ormand explained. “‘Called’ is hardly the word, when you stop to consider that the man who called me was a person known as Lefty Laughlin and the patient was Lewey Cassino.” He slowly and modestly related the encounter he had had the previous night.

Agent X hoped fervently that Ormand did not notice that he, Agent X, carried his left arm a little stiffly because of the self-inflicted wound.

While Ormand was concluding his story, X saw that Birr, the secretary, had again slipped from the room. The Agent turned quietly and reentered the hall, to catch Birr just as the latter was again lifting the phone.

Birr put the phone down as though it weighed a ton. His blond skin flamed.

Then hell broke loose.

THE sound was something like the explosion of a pack of fire-crackers, except that it was louder and

more startling and somehow foreboding. Birr heard the sound, turned pale, and cursed. Agent X heard it and sprang toward the front door. Malthus’ guests heard it and tried to get through the hall door in a body.

Major Hatfield was heard to shout, idiotically enough: “That’s gunfire!”

They trooped out of the house. Malthus brought up the rear, murmuring words that were halfway between prayer and blasphemy. On the front lawn, Agent X looked right and left, and saw a black car sweep around the corner on two wheels. Nelson Birr had his gun out and would have fired at the careening car had not X checked him.

In the street, not far from the approach walk in front of the Malthus house, something showed like a ghost on the pavement—the body of a man, X saw, as he ran up. The corpse was encircled with a ring of white paint. A white cross quartered the circle and passed over the center of the body. There was a gory mess of blood and white paint on the breast of the man’s dinner jacket.

A policeman came up, his whistle shrilling. His call brought another who ran back to the corner call box to contact the homicide department. Agent X showed his, or rather Jackson’s, card to the police officer. The patrolman welcomed the assistance of a federal man, for he admitted that death of this nature was something that had not occurred on his beat before.

X knelt beside the body, looked at it without touching it. The man had been middle-aged, gray, and

respectable-looking. He had dressed carefully, though his dinner kit was a trifle shabby.

"By thunder, Malthus," Ingram exclaimed, "that's your what's-his-name!"

Agent X looked at the faces about him. Ingram was sputtery, Major Hatfield as immobile as a wooden Indian. McAdam was regarding Malthus strangely, and the fixed smile his false teeth made was somehow ghastly at a murder scene. Dr. Ormand was looking on with professional interest, placidly puffing his pipe. Birr was red and white by turns; his fingers seemed trying to squeeze assurance from the little automatic he carried. Aaron Malthus looked as though he sought a nice spot in which to faint.

"Know this man, Malthus?" X demanded.

"He—why, yes—of course I know him. Known him for years."

"Then, why in hell don't you speak up?" demanded one of the cops.

"He's one of my partners," Malthus explained. "His name is John Phelps. And what my firm will do without poor Phelps, I don't know."

"If you ask me," Ingram said, "mine's the firm that will suffer."

A police car pulled to the curb, and Inspector John Burks tramped out, followed by four of his men. Agent X was immediately on his guard, for no one was better acquainted with X's many tricks than Inspector John Burks. X turned his head slightly to watch the approaching police. His attention, however, leaped to the tall man who walked beside Burks. Then X quickly turned his head away. He stood up,

muscles tense, and moved sidewise in Burks' direction.

For the man beside Burks was not of the city police force. Impossible as it might seem, Burks' companion was G-man Henry Jackson, himself.

CHAPTER VI

DEAD MAN'S TRAP

THERE was no immediate explanation of what happened. The Agent's movements were just a little too swift for the human eye to grasp the details. Every muscle in his lithe body seemed to explode in a bombshell of energy that left everyone breathless and baffled.

X turned on G-man Henry Jackson with the savagery of a tiger. His left fist, clutched tightly over something, jabbed for Jackson's body and swerved sharply as though the punch had missed its mark. At the same time, his right hand went to the G-man's collar, seized collar and tie-knot, he dragged Jackson's body forward until their two heads all but touched, then thrust out his jaw and cried: "Got you, faker!"

McAdam pointed a shaky finger at X and the G-man and shouted: "Two of them!"

Burks saw double, too: but knowing of the Agent's mastery in the art of impersonation, he knew that one of the two Jacksons was certainly X.

Jackson tried a punch that X skillfully thwarted and then returned with interest. Burks, and one of his men, stepped in and separated the two. That last punch of the Agent's had not

been without definite purpose. His hard, lean fist had driven all the breath out of Jackson and rendered the G-man speechless. So it was that X got in the first words, spat out furiously in perfect imitation of Jackson's voice:

"Let me get that guy! He's Agent X. He and a big fellow wearing a mask attacked me, laid me out someway, and stole my credentials and badge. The big guy kept me locked up in the bathroom. I'd be there yet, if I hadn't managed to put over a fast one.

Jackson, after catching his breath, said: "That's my story, you crook."

"And you're stuck with it," Jackson's voice echoed from the lips of Agent X. X tore away from the detective and would have started the battle afresh had not Inspector Burks been in the way. Even then, he got a well-concealed chuckle out of landing a hefty blow on the inspector's chest. The detective had X under control again, or thought he did.

"Search the pair of them." Burks ordered. "This guy," indicating Jackson, "just told me the same story in my office. These Feds are good, but they don't know as much about handling Mr. X as I do."

"Don't be so damned sure, inspector," X said. "Turn him over to me, and I'll give you a first-class demonstration of what handling means."

Jackson pointed furiously at X. "That's my suit he's got on. Any credentials you find on him are mine, and don't you believe otherwise. He stole my papers and badge."

And as the search progressed, Jackson forgot to talk. Makeup kit, a

small tool kit, gas gun, and similar equipment, came from the pockets of the suit X was wearing. Jackson even looked as though he thought perhaps he shouldn't have mentioned the stealing of his clothes at all.

Burks asked, "Who stole what credentials and badge, my lad?" and thrust a wallet and a gold button under Jackson's nose. "Those, I'll have you know, I just took out of your pocket. Yet you told me he stole them!"

Jackson was beginning to feel a trifle dizzy. The badge and wallet *were* his. How they had appeared in his pocket, he couldn't quite grasp. Had he thought about that first punch which X had brushed his body, he might have understood. That first punch X had handed out had been for but one purpose—to plant the stolen wallet and badge on their original owner.

Burks took charge of Jackson himself. "Keep a gun on the other guy's head," he warned the detective who had taken charge of X. "One of these boys is Agent X. And Agent X wears some kind of a screwy, bullet-proof vest that's as good as a charmed life, almost. Get them into the house, and I'll damned soon find out which of them is Mr. X."

"I thought, inspector," said Major Hatfield, "that this was a murder investigation."

"Huh?" grunted Burks. "Who d'yah think you are, mister?"

"Er, I happen to be connected with a certain life-insurance company as an investigator, and—" Hatfield began.

"Then you can confine your brilliance to shedding light on the poor widows' sorrows." Burks snapped.

"But," Dr. Ormand objected, "you can't leave a body in the street like that."

"Oh, hello, Ormand," said Burks, with slightly more respect than he deemed necessary in speaking to Hatfield. "The dead man can't run away. Agent X can, as I have good reason to know."

So the entire party was marched back into the Malthus house, where X and Jackson were forced back against the oak paneling of the staircase. X was standing beside the table on which the telephone lay. He contemplated the instrument as a possible weapon. He had never been more thoroughly cleaned out than by the detective who had just frisked him. Things began to take a more serious light.

Of the two "twins," the innocent appeared by far the guiltiest. Inspector Burks approached Jackson, an unpleasant grin on his broad face. He reached up and pinched the end of Jackson's nose. Jackson grunted:

"Ah, grow up, Inspector."

Burke, less sure of himself, applied a finger nail to Jackson's cheek. But he scraped off more skin than makeup. He knew instantly that he had drawn blank; that the other "Jackson" was Agent X. He wheeled on X, started to say something, but stood there, his powerful lower jaw sagging, and blood crowding his cheeks.

SECRET AGENT X held a flat, serviceable automatic in his hand. His gray eyes were mere steely points as they sighted over the weapon. Hands went up, police gun dropped beneath the menace of that gun and the cool-thinking man behind it. A

mocking smile, that seemed especially for Inspector Burke, curved X's lips as he backed from the room and out of the house. Then he wheeled and ran like a hare, to disappear in the shadows.

The mystery man was gone, and Burks knew well enough that X would change his disguise en route, to become just another man among millions.

"But" roared Burks, "where in hell did he get that gun? He was picked clean, yet right under my nose he snatches a gun out of empty air. By damn, the man's clever!"

The only man who was more surprised than Inspector Burks was Agent X, himself. He didn't know where that automatic had come from. He had detected the slight movement of something on the telephone table beside him. He had glanced down and seen a copy of a current magazine which had not been there a moment before. Furthermore, there was a large bulge in the magazine, as though its covers concealed some comparatively large object. Surreptitiously lifting the magazine front, his exploring fingers had closed on an automatic. A piece of paper had been clipped around the butt with a rubber band, and this he did not examine until he was safe in a near-by hideout—one of the many places of sanctuary he maintained throughout the city.

On the paper was written in a scrawl of black ink: "Good luck to the cleverest criminologist of us all."

The brief message was signed with the unmistakable signature of Dr. Stuart Ormand.

Only one conclusion could be drawn

from this note. Dr. Ormand, himself a criminologist, had recognized the fact that Agent X deserved notoriety of another sort than the type city police records gave him.

Flattering as Dr. Ormand's opinion was, X dismissed the matter immediately, turned to his telephone, and called the headquarters of the secret organization maintained for him by Harvey Bates. It was Bates himself who answered, a rather crestfallen Bates who had to tell of how, when he had bent over to give G-man Jackson an additional shot of dope, the G-man had come out of a faked coma and struck Bates on the head. There had been a struggle in which the partially stunned Bates had allowed the G-man to give him the slip.

"Don't worry about that," X said kindly. "I guess there are enough mistakes made in this world for us all to have a share in them."

Bates further reported that Betty Dale had just called up. At the moment, she was getting Sally Vergane's life story over a table at the Milan Cafe.

X hung up, changed his clothes, replenished his pockets with makeup kit and other special devices, and once more adopted the disguise of Lewey Cassino that he had employed on the night before.

He took a taxi to within a block of the cafe Bates had mentioned. He got to the sidewalk, after a cautious look in all directions, pulled his hat well over his eyes, and hurried toward the cafe. As Lewey Cassino, he would not know a moment's safety until he again had the protection of Squid Murphy.

He saw Sally Vergane come out of the cafe. The girl turned, came down the street toward X. She carried her head high and looked neither toward the loafers, who eyed her up and down, nor toward the cars that cruised in close to the gutters of the narrow street. As soon as she had passed, X wheeled and followed her, fell into step beside her, and nipped the elbow of her coat.

"Sally," he whispered, "it's me. Lewey Cassino. I gotta get out of circulation quick. The cops—"

"Don't tell me, sap," she said with frosty quietness. "G-guys have practically camped on my doorsill, askin' for you. We're probably tailed now. Quick! I got a car around the corner."

"That's the stuff, baby." X gave the girl's arm a quick squeeze. She gave him a contemptuous glance and said: "Don't get ideas. I'm doin' this for Wolf Hollis on account of what you was to Wolf."

SALLY opened the door of a wire-wheeled junker, got in, and left the door open for the supposed Lewey. X got in beside her, and she drove recklessly and in silence straight to the old speakeasy that Squid Murphy had remodeled for his own purpose. She steered the junker around back of the building, turned it into a garage with a steel, roller door, got out, and closed the door and locked it.

"You probably got something comin' your way from Squid," she warned him. "Lefty tried to tell him how you held off the G-men while Lefty and Doxie made their getaway. Squid says one man couldn't keep off a

pack of Feds unless he was in cahoots with them some way. Squid thinks you've been singin' to the Feds. So you better think up some Irish balm to hand Squid."

"I'll handle him," X promised. "He ain't the big noise he sounds like."

They went through a system of electrically operated doors until they at last arrived at the sanctum where Squid Murphy's fishy eyes examined them through a shuttered opening before they were admitted.

Sally Vergane walked through the door. Agent X was pulled into the room, with Squid Murphy's fingers clawing at his coat front. Eight of Murphy's mobsmen were in the room. None of them had anything but icy glances for Lewey Cassino.

"Where in hell've you been?" demanded Murphy. He hauled the unresisting Agent so that he could stick his nose up into his face.

"Duckin' the Feds," X explained. "I was tryin' to get back here, but I didn't want to bring a squad of G-men behind me,"

"You don't like G-men, I guess. Not much! How much dough they been payin' you for squealin', rat?"

"Nuts! If I got close enough to a G-man to squeal, it'd be with my last breath. Me squeal? You're nuts!"

Squid Murphy backed away. "We're goin' to find out," he said in a husky voice. Damn near every job we've pulled, there's been a gang of Feds on the scene. When we crossed out John Phelps, there was a Fed in the house where this Phelps guy was goin'. He didn't get a crack at any of the boys, but that was his fault and not yours.

And you got the nerve to come back here to chisel in on the swag. Well, McAdam paid off to the Brain early this evening. We got our share and split it without countin' you in."

So the mob killed for money. They were hired butchers, directed by the Brain. X mentally reviewed the white-cross killings. A few of the victims had been wealthy persons whose fortunes had gone to one or two comparatively poor heirs. Those heirs had evidently split their inheritances with the Brain to pay for murder. But the majority of persons killed had been associated in some sort of business partnership. Usually the business was in a bad way, as in the case of the Corlears and McAdam firm. Many of these partnerships carried heavy life insurance of such nature that when one partner died, the other, or others, collected the insurance.

He remembered what Ingram had said, when the body of John Phelps had been found. Ingram had said that his insurance firm would suffer rather than the company in which Malthus and Phelps had been associated. Then that was why Malthus had been so upset. Malthus had made a deal with the Brain to remove Phelps in order that Malthus could collect the partnership insurance. Malthus was a murderer, and he had acted—

Some of the toughs in the room were taking off their coats. One of them leered at X. "Goin' to get roughed up a little, ain't ya? I'm goin' to like this a lot, smashin' the bones in your body. You always had the notion you were higher up than us, on account of you used to tote a gun for Wolf Hollis. You

always—”

“Shut up!” Squid Murphy snapped.

A hush fell over those within the room. Somewhere, seemingly far away, some one was yelling in a raucous voice.

“Just a newsboy, Squid,” Sally Vergane said.

“Shut up. That’s what I want to hear.” Murphy went to the little, shuttered opening in the door that was nearest to the street. He opened the shutter, and the newsboys voice quavered into the room:

“Ex-tree! Ex-tree! Body of Lewey Cassino found! Read all about it. Extree!”

Squid Murphy slammed the shutter, pivoted, and flattened himself against the door. His face was black with hate. “So!” he said, huskily. “Boys, you know who we got right here in our family circle? No wonder we got G-men on our tail. This guy we thought was Lewey Cassino is Secret Agent X!”

CHAPTER VII

DOUBLE-FACED DOUBLE-CROSS

XCENTERED a ring of guns that had killed often enough before and would certainly kill again. Murphy was behind his men. His words lashed furiously:

“There’s no foolin’ this time, Mr. X. You’re goin’ to die on the spot. To hell with the noise, boys. Burn him down just as if he was Corlears or any of the others. We’ll take our chances with the cops. Let him have it!”

And then, the lights went out.

Simultaneously, there was a withering blast of gun-flame, its orange-red light illuminating a squirming figure on the floor in the center of the killers’ circle.

“The Brain’s here!” whispered Murphy, hoarsely.

“Want me to strike a light, boss?”

“Hell no! He’d shoot you down where you stand. Hold everything. Listen!”

The door opened, and the monotonous voice of the Brain sounded within the smoke-choked room:

“Murphy, you’re finished. This is the last leak. I told you to find the squealer, and you’ve failed. Another of Aaron Malthus’ partners was scheduled to die tonight, as you know. G-men were on tap. They mowed down the rest of your boys like so much wheat. True, four G-men were also killed, but there’s no profit in killing G-men. They got Lefty Laughlin, one of your best men. Either you produce the squealer at once, or I turn on the light, Murphy. You know what that means? Eh? Speak up, before I blast out your remnant of a brain.”

“Turn on the light, Brain,” Murphy said. “Turn on the light, and I’ll show you the squealer. We got him right here. Lewey Cassino—”

“Nonsense!” the Brain interrupted. “Lewey Cassino couldn’t get close enough to a federal man to squeal. He’s wanted for murder.”

“No. Not Lewey Cassino. Cassino is dead. So is this guy.”

“You’re talking like an idiot,” came the voice of the Brain.

And then, from another portion of the room, came the Brain’s voice again in angry monotone: “Who said that?”

Who's using my voice? Don't move, anybody."

And again came that twin voice of the Brain from about the center of the room. "He's over here, you fools. He's Agent X. You may have thought you killed him, but you didn't. He's making a mob of fools out of you. *Don't let him slip.*"

Thus spoke Secret Agent X, in perfect imitation of the Brain's voice, as he moved cautiously through the dark toward the door. He had dropped to the floor on the instant that the real Brain had turned out the lights. Only one of his would-be murderer's bullets had touched him, and it had lodged in his perfect, bullet-proof vest.

In the basement room, all was confusion. The Brain was raging, snapping conflicting orders, for every order he gave was echoed by another order, given by Agent X. And X was moving steadily for the door, all the time ordering the men to remain exactly where they were.

"He'll get through the door!" shouted the Brain. "Stop him. I'm the Brain. He's the impostor."

"Don't mind him, boys!" shouted X. "I'm the Brain. Shoot at the next person who speaks, and shoot to kill!" He reached the door, opened it, slammed it without leaving the room. He flattened himself against the wall near the door, waiting, listening to the chorus of quick-drawn breath.

The Brain said: "Damn you! He's given us the slip. Get through the door. You can catch him yet!"

There was only a moment's hesitation before the whole gang rushed pell-mell through the door.

When the last footstep had died away in the distance, Agent X drew a long breath.

"Brain," he said quietly. "I'm still here, waiting for you. Just you and I alone. Shall we finish it?"

Absolute silence. X took a hesitant step forward. He took out his small flashlight, held it as far from his body as possible, and flashed it. The light drew no gunfire. He fanned the beam around the room. The place was empty and as silent as the grave. Either the Brain had slipped out with his mob or had taken an exit made especially for his own use. Agent X sighed. With the Brain still at large, the white-cross killings might go on and on.

He left the building by the back way. There was one more scheme he might try to trap the Brain. It was exceedingly dangerous. It threatened the very foundation of his organization, for he would deliberately make himself a prospective victim for the Brain's murder machine.

As he hurried from Murphy's hideout, the plan formed completely. Charles McAdam had paid the Brain money for killing McAdam's partner, Corlears. Through partnership-plan life insurance, both the Brain and McAdam had benefited by the murder. Why couldn't McAdam form a second partnership, with the idea of gaining by the same nefarious scheme? Why couldn't Agent X, disguised as McAdam, form such a partnership? Who with? With himself, of course. Agent X would not only impersonate McAdam, but he would also act in the drama as McAdam's partner. And for his partner, what better alias could he

choose than that of Elisha Pond?* Yes, that was the way—a fake firm formed by Elisha Pond and Charles McAdam, with Agent X the sole actor for both roles.

SALLY VERGANE had left Murphy's hideout as soon as she realized that the Brain was on his way. After all, she realized that she had unknowingly brought X into the hideout and feared that the Brain might vent his rage upon her.

Unknown to Sally, she and X had been followed, not by G-men, it is true, but by a golden-haired, persistent little shadow, Betty Dale of the *Herald*. Betty had made it a point to leave the Milan Cafe a few minutes before Sally Vergane had. She had waited just around the corner in her coupé, and had successfully followed Sally and the supposed Lewey Cassino to the hideout.

No sooner had Sally Vergane appeared at the back of the hideout, than Betty Dale was on her trail, and this time, as on one other occasion, Sally Vergane's trail led directly to the apartment house where Pamela Dean lived.

Sally went in the back way. A man stepped from a hiding place in the back entry and grunted a greeting to her. Sally told the man to come up. She wanted to talk with him.

Betty followed the woman and her

bodyguard up the back steps. She watched them approach the door of Pamela Dean's apartment. She watched Sally Vergane produce a key and unlock the door, after which Sally and her pug-faced bodyguard entered the apartment.

Wide-eyed with astonishment, Betty tiptoed toward the apartment door. Either Sally and her companion were contemplating larceny, or the unthinkable was true—this underworld woman, ex-moll of a notorious gangster, was that woman of fortune, Pamela Dean, herself.

Betty listened at the door but could detect no sound. Her heart jumping madly in her throat, she tried the door. It was locked, the key remaining in the lock. She opened her purse and took out a pair of peculiar, needle-nosed pliers. This was an "oustini" such as hotel thieves use to turn keys from the wrong side of the lock. This instrument, a souvenir which Agent X had taken from a petty thief, early in his career, had been of use to the girl reporter before this.

She managed the instrument skillfully, and unlocked the door. In another instant, she found herself cautiously breathing the perfumed atmosphere of Pamela Dean's living room. There was the rumble of voices in the room just beyond.

Betty Dale tiptoed to the door of the bedroom and ventured a peek inside. The pug-faced watchman was there and also Sally Vergane. Or was it Pamela Dean? Actually, she was witnessing a metamorphosis. Sally Vergane had slipped a luxurious, dark-brown wig over her closely cropped

**AUTHOR'S NOTE: One of the Agent's most famous aliases is that of Elisha Pond, aged eccentric and philanthropist. It is in the name of Pond that a large sum of money has been deposited for X's use. Pond, known to dabble in all sorts of business, was the ideal character that X was to adapt in this instance.*

blonde hair. Her dress lay on a chair beside the dressing table. Sally Vergane, wearing the most expensive underthings, was doing things to her plain face with creams and tinted powder.

No doubt about it, Sally Vergane *was* the glamorous Pamela Dean. Sally Vergane was speaking in an odd voice that was a mixture of her own voice and the cultured diction of Pamela Dean.

"I have played this game fairly to its limit," Sally was saying. "I think we have given them something to remember Wolf Hollis by. Our chief difficulty will be in finding some one on whom the Brain can place the blame."

"A fall guy," the pug-faced man said and began wandering aimlessly about the boudoir.

Fearful lest the man's wanderings bring him into the living room, Betty replaced her oustini in her handbag and hurried from the apartment. Sally Vergane was Pamela Dean. This was news that Agent X would value highly. She must phone him at once.

WHILE Betty Dale was excitedly reporting this news to Bates' office, Sally Vergane, perfectly fortified behind the glamorous veneer of Pamela Dean, was in her living room, talking to her watchdog.

"You've been faithful and square to Wolf and me, Twist," Sally said. "We've netted exactly one dozen G-men to date by arranging encounters for them with Murphy's gang at the scenes of the white-cross killings. I'll never rest until I send a whole squad of

them to hell at once. Wolf would like that. He hated the federals. But we're in a dangerous spot now."

The man called Twist nodded. "I'd better get back to my post. You think up something smart." He turned the key in the door, tried to open the door and failed. "Funny," he grunted. "I'm sure I locked that door when we came in."

Sally Vergane was on her feet. She stamped a fluffy, blue mule irritably. "Are you sure? Oh, how could you be so careless!"

"I locked that door, damned sure," growled Twist. "Somebody's been here, that's all."

Sally Vergane's eye roamed about the room and alighted on a scrap of white cloth on the floor. She pounced on it, catlike, and held it aloft. "A woman's handkerchief! I've seen it somewhere. Wait!" Her breast heaved. The fury of hell gleamed in her eyes. "I know! She used it in the restaurant. She must have dropped it from her bag."

"Who?" asked Twist.

"That nosey little blonde reporter with her blue-eyed, baby stare," she said venomously. "She's been here. Then, *she knows*."

Then out of the fury cloud on Sally Vergane's face came a slow, unlovely smile. "Twist, we've got it! The Brain is trying to find out who's been squealing and sending G-men to the scene of the white-cross murders. Perhaps he suspects me—but not for long. The girl, don't you see? Betty Dale can be framed so that the Brain will think that *she* has been peddling the information."

Twist nodded his misshapen head

slowly. "I get it. She's the perfect fall guy."

CHAPTER VIII

KILLER'S MARK

AN uneventful day passed in which X and his staff of operatives gathered much information regarding Charles McAdam, partner of the late Randolph Corlears.

McAdam was an unscrupulous attorney who had several times been on the verge of being removed from the bar. He was a member of a well-known business men's club in which X, as Elisha Pond, had no difficulty in gaining membership. Many other men known to the Agent were members of the same club. Among them were Thomas Ingram, Dr. Ormand, Major Hatfield and Nelson Birr.

How Nelson Birr, private secretary of Aaron Malthus, could afford to belong to a club was a mystery to Agent X. Birr's salary certainly must have been rather slender, for Aaron Malthus had been on the verge of bankruptcy for some time.

That evening, kindly old Elisha Pond checked coat and umbrella at the club and mingled freely with the other members. None would have guessed that this wrinkled, white-haired gentleman of the old school was the feared and notorious Agent X. His eccentricities in the matter of dress would have made Elisha Pond the butt of many a joke, were it not for the fact that his wealth and generosity purchased a vast amount of respect.

Mr. Pond paid particular attention to Charles McAdam, with a definite purpose in mind. When the news broke that a new business partnership of McAdam and Pond had been formed, none of the club members would be greatly surprised. So it was that McAdam seated his pink-porkiness at a table opposite Elisha Pond in the club dining room. For an hour or so, Mr. Pond's shaggy white head was seen close to McAdam's pink scalp. The two were engaged in earnest conversation.

"Wonder what old Pond is up to now?" asked Major Hatfield of Dr. Ormand.

The doctor smoked his pipe and shook his head doubtfully. "If it's a matter of business, Pond better keep his hand on his bank book. McAdam would skin his own brother."

Thomas Ingram, who overheard the conversation, stepped up to say:

"Don't be too sure. McAdam met his match when he met Elisha Pond."

Earnest and confidential as their conversation seemed, Mr. Pond and McAdam discussed nothing more important than a theoretical law problem. X's first task, in forming the fake partnership of McAdam and Pond, was to remove McAdam to some safe spot and keep him prisoner. Then, disguised at one time as McAdam and at another as Pond, he would manage an apparent business deal between the two.

But before he could successfully impersonate McAdam, it was necessary for him to make sure that he was familiar with McAdam's characteristic actions, and especially

with McAdam's handwriting, so that he would be able to sign McAdam's name to a partnership agreement without exciting suspicion.

Not all of the Agent's attention was on McAdam, however. At a table, not far distant, one of the members dined quietly alone. That man was Nelson Birr. And X watched him closely, though covertly.

Nelson Birr concluded his meal at approximately the same time that X and McAdam finished theirs. He opened his wallet and carelessly tossed a bill down as a tip for the waiter. As he closed the wallet, a scrap of paper, hardly an inch square, slipped out and fluttered to the floor. Birr did not notice this, but Agent X did.

As he sauntered from the dining room, still chatting with McAdam, X picked up the paper and thrust it into his pocket.

Later, in the card room, X and McAdam were joined by Dr. Ormand and Thomas Ingram. Dr. Ormand suggested bridge. X declined. "Never play anything but solitaire," he told them. "Ah, there is a young man after my own heart!" He nodded across the room to where Nelson Birr was idly toying with cards at a lonely table.

"A new member," explained Dr. Ormand. "Doesn't seem to make friends or want to. Perhaps you can pull him out of his shell, Pond."

"Perhaps; I'll try," X said. But he walked away from, rather than toward, Nelson Birr's table. In a small reading room off the card room, X took out the slip of paper Birr had dropped and looked at it. It had obviously been torn from the lower right hand corner of a

much folded letter. On the paper were the words... "as my worthy successor."

Beneath this, where a signature should have been, was a small circle of ink centered by a cross. It was the sign of sudden death.

Nelson Birr—silent, friendless Nelson Birr—had dropped the paper bearing the fatal sign. Agent X recalled the man's peculiar actions that night at Malthus' house. He again saw Nelson Birr, mysterious, cagey, armed and ready to shoot. Nelson was not marked by the sign of sudden death; he *carried* it in his pocket. It was imperative that he question Birr at once. It would be no mere catechism, X resolved. Birr would be taken to the Agent's own crime laboratory and there submit his soul to the closest scrutiny that science and the keenest pair of eyes in the city could produce.

X opened his medical kit, which he always carried, and took out a small vial. Then he slipped it into his pocket. It contained chloral hydrate, familiar, quick-acting knockout drops which X employed. Dropped into a highball, the stuff could produce a coma not unlike a drunken sleep. Once Birr had taken the drug, it would be an easy matter for X to get him to his crime laboratory.

THE AGENT entered the card room and proceeded at once to the table where Nelson Birr sat. Birr looked up quizzically, his handsome, blond face flushing slightly. Agent X thrust out his hand. "I believe I have not had the pleasure."

Birr smiled slightly, introduced himself, and shook hands. "And you, of course, are Mr. Pond. I am a secret

admirer of yours, sir. Your philanthropies are most commendable."

"Thank you so much." Agent X sat down, waved Birr into the chair opposite and sighed. "Stuffy place, isn't it?"

Birr raised his eyebrows. "I find it much to my liking."

X chuckled. "Odd, isn't it? I mean, we're all rather old codgers here, with the exception of Ormand. Being a doctor, he finds it to his advantage to cultivate the acquaintance of gentlemen who have one foot in the grave, no doubt... Ever play double solitaire, Mr. Birr?"

Birr shook his head. "Quite a game, isn't it?"

"Oh, quite. Learn it by all means. Suppose you and I go into that small room over there where we can concentrate. I'll teach you in no time."

"Delighted." Birr stood up. X hooked his arm through the secretary's arm and steered him toward a small, private room.

X uttered Pond's crackling chuckle again. "We'll have a game to ourselves with something to drink on the side, eh, my boy?"

Birr smiled. "I'd like nothing better."

The small room where X had suggested that Birr learn the game was actually an alcove near a small stage which the club sometimes used for entertainment purposes. There was no door to the place, but it offered sufficient privacy for X's purpose.

They consumed three, rather potent, highballs before X had managed to cover the simple rules of double

solitaire. It was no difficult task for a man of X's skill in sleight-of-hand to doctor Birr's fourth highball with the drug. So it was that shortly after the game itself, Birr began to nod.

"Damned stuffy in here," he commented, playing the wrong card.

"So glad you agree with me." X said pleasantly. "And, if you'll pardon me, you can not play a queen on an eight spot, my boy."

Birr corrected his error. "Feel queer," he mumbled. He tried to stand up, but flapped limply across the table. X got up, stepped quickly to Birr's side.

"Hullo, what's happened to the youngster?" a thin voice behind X said.

The Agent turned, saw nervous Thomas Ingram looking into the alcove.

"Too many drinks, I'm afraid," X said.

Ingram turned his head slightly and called: "Dr. Ormand!"

"Oh, it's nothing to be alarmed about," X said hastily. "I noticed Birr was becoming a bit foggy. Couldn't keep his mind on the game."

Ormand came up. His eyes glistened brightly behind his rimless glasses as he pushed in front of Ingram. "What's the trouble, Birr?" he demanded. Birr, of course, did not answer. Ormand stooped over, sniffed, though how he could have smelled anything above the reek of his underslung pipe was a mystery. Then he picked up Birr's glass and sniffed it. Then he sniffed at Birr's slightly parted lips.

Agent X inwardly cursed Ingram's nosiness while cleverly feigning anxiety. Dr. Ormand turned quickly to

X. "Who was your waiter, Mr. Pond?"

"Number six, I believe," said X. "What's the trouble? Nothing serious, I hope?"

Ormand grunted. "Nothing except that the waiter has evidently tried to poison Birr. His glass contained chloral hydrate. I hardly think a lethal dose was given, however, we must not delay a moment. Ingram, have some one get strong coffee. Be quick about it, man!"

Major Hatfield and other club members came up. X knew that if he was to spirit Birr out of the club now, he would have to be a magician.

"Poison, you say?" Hatfield cried. "This is serious!"

"Not necessarily," Dr. Ormand contradicted as he coolly caressed his pipe. "Not if Ingram hurries with that coffee. I believe some one has merely given Birr a sleeping potion."

INGRAM came bustling up with Waiter Number Six in tow. The waiter was pale. His hand shook so that had not Ormand seized the coffee cup the waiter surely would have spilled the liquid. Ormand, with X assisting him, got a cup of the hot, black liquid into Birr.

"I think he'll be all right," Ormand said.

"But," Hatfield insisted, "this matter needs looking into. Though I am an investigator by profession, I should like to have the police here at once. Suppose you call the police, Ormand, while I arrange to have all exits guarded."

"Oh, really," said Ingram, "is such formality needed?"

Dr. Ormand's eyes rooted the waiter to the floor. "I believe so," he said, quietly. He turned on his heel, and with Hatfield at his side, left the room.

Ingram wrung his hands and danced worriedly around X. "I don't like the publicity this may mean, do you. Mr. Pond? What will our wives say?"

"I've no idea," declared X. "I haven't met mine yet."

Ingram groaned. "Lucky man! I propose that we get this thing over as soon as possible. Suppose we were all to submit to a search. Wouldn't that satisfy justice? I mean, the man with the poison bottle—it does come in bottles, doesn't it? I'm frightfully ignorant on the subject of murder, ha, naturally, eh?"

"Naturally," X said, without enthusiasm.

"And inasmuch as this isn't really murder," Ingram sputtered on, "and poor Birr will suffer nothing more than a headache, why the devil can't we find the culprit ourselves and shut the matter up? A search would reveal the bottle."

"Ingram," said one of the club members, "you're making a colossal ass of yourself. Inspector Burks of the Homicide Department, seeing you act like a jumping jack, will be apt to clap the cuffs on you."

"Cuffs—homicide." Ingram held his head, and he was holding his head when the lights went out.

"What the hell?" some one cried.

Agent X leaped into the card room. "Probably a blown-out fuse," he said soothingly.

"It's the murderer!" cried Ingram. "I know it. He's going to escape!"

"Keep calm, you fool!" some one yelled at Ingram. "Look! there's a light now—that spot light in the balcony—the light we used at the last show."

The keen beam of light cut across the room, finding white, taut faces of the club members in the room.

"What the devil's happened to the lights?" demanded Dr. Ormand, who had just run up.

"Fuse gone, no doubt." X said.

"Or the murderer trying to escape!" cried Ingram. "Who's missing? Watch that waiter!"

"Nobody's missing." boomed Major Hatfield, as he joined the others. "I've guards posted at every exit. As soon as the police arrive, we'll search everybody."

A search was something that X dared not risk. He had all of his special devices with him, as well as the incriminating bottle of chloral hydrate. The Elisha Pond alias was too valuable to him, as it was his means of obtaining necessary funds, to have it discovered that Elisha Pond was Agent X. No, before he would allow that, he would declare himself Agent X and tell every one in the club that he was impersonating Elisha Pond.

A man clutched Agent X's arm. It was Dr. Ormand. "Damn it! We've very nearly forgot our patient. Birr should show some sign of improv—"

Ormand's sentence hung in midair. His keen eyes were staring in the direction of the alcove. No one had noted it before, but the spotlight, the only illumination in the room, was directed at the table where X and Birr had been seated.

Birr lay exactly as they had left him;

there was nothing alarming about that. What was stranger than anything else was the spot of light itself. Its yellow circle was centered by Birr's form and also a shadow—a shadow that was a perfect cross.

The circle and the cross—the sign of sudden death.

Ormand and Agent X leaped toward the alcove at one and the same time. They crowded shoulder to shoulder as they stooped over the man on the table.

"Not a mark," Ormand muttered. "Nothing but that damned shadow of a cross. Yet the man is dead, do you hear? Nelson Birr has been murdered!"

CHAPTER IX

"MEET MR. X."

MURDER. The word was breathed around the room. Horrified eyes were anchored on that motionless body, on the cross and circle sign that seemed to have stamped out life.

Agent X was momentarily stunned by this revelation. He had picked a spot in the murder puzzle where Nelson Birr seemed to fit perfectly. Yet Birr was dead, and Agent X was at a loss as to how that death could be explained. It could not have come from the drug X had placed in Birr's drink, for the dose had been only enough to produce a coma. Plainly it was the work of the same person who directed the white-cross killings.

"Don't suppose Pond had anything to do with it?" Ingram was heard to whisper.

"Absurd!" snapped Ormand.

"But wasn't he drinking with Burr?" Ingram insisted.

"Pond, where the devil are you?" demanded Major Hatfield.

"Here," said X in Pond's mild voice. He stepped nearer the ray of light, and Hatfield came up to him.

"You've no objection to my searching you, have you, Pond?" the major asked. "It would stop some ugly insinuations."

X's muscles tensed as he answered: "I have every objection," he said acidly. "The mere suggestion of a search is the gravest insinuation I have to face, major."

Hatfield's bronzed brow furrowed. He took a step nearer. "If it wasn't for your unimpeachable reputation, Pond, I'd say you were trying to conceal something."

Some one pressed against the Agent's right side. X turned to see Ingram darting back into the shadows. Ingram exclaimed: "He's got a gun! I felt a gun in Pond's pocket!"

Major Hatfield's teeth clenched. "I'm going to search you. Mr. Pond!"

Hatfield put his hand out toward X. But he had scarcely touched the Agent before X's left fist shot out and up, straight to the point of Hatfield's chin. The major had traveled the world over and had seen much of war, but never in his life had he encountered such a blow as that. His long body struck the floor.

"Mr. Pond, Mr. Pond!" a clubman shouted excitedly.

But Mr. Pond was running toward the door of the room to stop suddenly as a spotlight pierced the gloom and centered upon him. More lights were gleaming through the doorway, and

Inspector Burks could be heard bellowing: "Why the black-out here? What's the trouble?"

"Stop him!" shouted Ingram. "Stop Pond. He killed Nelson Burr. He's just killed Major Hatfield. He'll kill us all!"

"Pond killed some one?" Burks roared. "You're crazy. I—"

"Look at him!" yelled Ingram. "He—he's growing!"

Police flashlights focused on a figure in the center of the floor—a figure that had been Elisha Pond's. Age was dropping from the man's shoulders. As X straightened up, Elisha Pond seemed actually to grow. It was as if a magnificent character actor were showing them how his miracles were wrought. There was Elisha Pond's wrinkled face above a tall, sinewy, youthful body. And on Pond's lips was almost boyish laughter.

"You're quite right, Inspector Burks," came a voice that was not Pond's, yet came from Pond's lips. "Elisha Pond did not kill Nelson Burr. You will find that Elisha Pond is quietly sleeping somewhere in this club. Gentlemen, I want you to meet an old friend of Inspector Burks. Gentlemen, meet Mr. X!"

And with that, X's right hand raked across his face, instantly altering the plastic features that had identified him as Pond. At the same time, he tossed a mysterious cylinder to the floor directly in front of him. As police guns barked, a cloud of dense black smoke broke from the cylinder, to form a screen which effectively masked X's movements.

"Watch the doors!" shouted Burks. "he'll not get away this time. Send

somebody to fix the lights. Damn that smoke!”

To follow Agent X as he moved about the club in the darkness, would have required bloodhounds. Even when they found him, they did not know him; for he was on the floor of the washroom, apparently asleep. It was Inspector Burks, himself, who came very near to falling over him.

Burks turned his flashlight on the recumbent form of an old, white-haired man whose features were unmistakably those of Elisha Pond. There was an empty drinking glass close by which Burks’ detective sense told him had contained chloral hydrate in solution.

THE inspector fell to shaking Pond by the shoulders, little suspecting that he actually had Agent X in his hands. As Hatfield and Dr. Ormand came into the room, the lights came on. Agent X’s eyelids fluttered. “Coming to,” murmured Burks.

“That devil drugged him.”

“That devil” opened his eyes and muttered feebly: “Where am I?”

“You’re okeh, Mr. Pond,” Burks said kindly. “Mr. X handed you some knockout drops and has been impersonating you all evening. Disguised as you, he’s murdered a man, that’s what!”

“I—I remember now,” X said. “I was having a little indigestion. A man came up to me here. I thought he was a fellow club member. He gave me something for my indigestion.”

“What’d he look like?” demanded Burks. Then: “Oh, hell, don’t answer that question, he never looks the same way twice.” Then Burks did something

that, knowingly, he never would have done: he helped Agent X to his feet.

Not only had X cleared all suspicion from the name of Elisha Pond, but he now had further opportunity of investigating the mysterious murder of Nelson Birr. The shadow of the cross-and-circle sign was readily explained. Some one, undoubtedly the murderer, had simply and quickly cut out a silhouette, representing the cross and circle, from a magazine cover. This had been placed over the spot light which had been turned on the body. Consequently the silhouette had been projected on the corpse.

This piece of paper, Burks deemed important evidence. But in his zeal to trace the owner of the magazine from which the cover had been torn, Burks overlooked a vastly more important clew—a dark-brown stain, hardly more than a quarter of an inch across, on the card table cover on which the body was lying. This stain X quietly removed by cutting off a bit of the cloth and putting it into his pocket.

Shortly after, X left the club to go to one of his hideouts. He emerged a little later, a young man with commonplace features, and drove one of his cars to the United States Court House. Using credentials which represented him as a member of the city police force, he eventually entered the office of Special Agent Weston. As soon as Weston had had a look at the credentials X carried, the Secret Agent tore them up before Weston’s wondering eyes.

“They’re quite false,” said X with a smile. “I used them as a means of entering only. I am Secret Agent X.”

“Secret Agent X!” Weston repeated

slowly. He leaned eagerly across the desk. "Can you prove that?" he asked in a whisper.

AGENT X reached into his inner coat pocket and produced an envelope which contained a message from X's official sponsor in Washington.* Weston read the message over twice. Then he stood up slowly, almost timidly extended his hand to Agent X.

"Naturally," he said, "I've heard of you. Now that I meet the man, I realize fully that what I have heard in Washington, concerning the great work you are doing, is not an exaggeration. This message from K9 clears up much that I haven't been able to understand."

X nodded and took back his sponsor's note. "The nature of my work, my methods of procedure, make it imperative that my official capacity be kept secret."

"But, Mr. Agent X, yours is a most dangerous position. I don't know how many times I've read of your capture by the police. Once, I even read that you had been killed by Inspector Burks. Is there no way of giving yourself official protection?"

X smiled. "I take pretty good care of myself," he said quietly. "If my real capacity were known to the city police, it would eventually get into the papers. However, this is not a social call,

Weston. No doubt I've caused your men a little trouble, but I am actually working with them in an effort to untangle the mystery behind these white-cross killings. Quite by accident, I came across this slip of paper." X showed Weston the corner of paper that had dropped from Birr's wallet, and explained the circumstances under which it had been found.

"You have confided in me, Agent X. I am most happy to be able to cooperate with you in this matter. Because we did not wish to arouse public apprehension, we have kept the matter quiet. Perhaps I should begin at the beginning and tell you that the late Wolf Hollis was illiterate. He could not even write his own name. The cross and circle, which the Safety League uses to designate the spot where fatal motor accidents occur, happens to be the mark by which Wolf Hollis was known. Any written order which he issued was written at his dictation and signed by his mark—the cross and circle.

"Knowing this, there are but two possible conclusions to the mystery: either Wolf Hollis lives, a maniacal murderer, or gang vengeance is taking its toll for the death of Wolf Hollis. You can take your choice, Agent X."

"I'd choose neither," said X quietly. "There is a definite greed motive behind these killings. The mob is directed by a hired butcher; I am certain of this. The man called the Brain kills for a price—kills anyone. Only one of the murders has been motivated differently. Nelson Birr was obviously killed because of that slip of paper, which I'll keep for a while if

**AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Agent's Washington sponsor prefers that his identity be shrouded and that he simply be referred to as K9. It is through the activity of K9 and certain public-spirited persons that Agent X is supplied with funds for continuing his war against crime.*

you don't mind. Birr had solved the mystery of the identity of the Brain."

"Possibly," said Weston slowly. "Birr was a life-insurance claim detective, working for Major Hatfield."

That explained Birr's suspicious actions to Agent X, who prepared to take his leave. "Inside of thirty minutes, I'll try to have proof of the identity of the Brain. I strongly suspect who he is, even now. But the proof I might obtain will be of little use to me."

"Why?" asked Weston.

X smiled queerly. "I am sorry I can not explain the matter. But I must catch the Brain red-handed. Good-night—and my heartiest thanks."

A possibility of the Brain's identity was in X's pocket—a little brown stain on a piece of cloth from a card-table cover. Yet it was Elisha Pond who had obtained that, and Elisha Pond was not supposed to be even an amateur criminologist. As Elisha Pond, X must catch the Brain red-handed.

Morning papers screamed about the murder of Nelson Birr, dead from chloral hydrate poisoning. His murderer was admittedly Agent X. About the only truth in the entire article was that Nelson Birr was dead.

Agent X tossed the paper aside, went to the phone, and set in motion the machine that was to turn out a trap for the Brain—a trap in which Agent X was to be the bait.

Harvey Bates and some of his men attended to the kidnapping of Charles McAdam. When McAdam became a guarded prisoner in one of the Agent's hideouts, X became Charles McAdam. Shortly after, it was announced that a

new business firm had been established—McAdam and Pond Investments. An office was opened, and there both Pond and McAdam might be found; but, because Agent X was playing a dual role of both partners, Pond and McAdam were never seen together in the same room.

Furthermore, to insure that neither partner would greatly lose in the event of the death of one member of the firm, heavy partnership-plan life insurance was written up for the new firm by Thomas Ingram.

There was nothing to do but wait. Eventually, the Brain would take notice of the organization and approach "McAdam" on the delicate subject of removing Mr. Pond from this earth, collecting the insurance, to the mutual benefit of the supposed Mr. McAdam and the criminal gang.

It was a neat plan—if it worked...

CHAPTER X

NETS OF STEEL

THERE followed a period of ominous quiet in the underworld. It was as if a storm gathered on the horizon, waiting for something before breaking. Evening of the second Tuesday in April, three opposing forces were set in motion: the Brain moved to carry on his mercenary murder; Sally Vergane, vengeance mad, conceived a means of wiping out most of the G-men in the city; Secret Agent X made ready for the culmination of his scheme to trap the Brain.

Though she did not realize it. Betty

Dale was calmly walking into the center of this perilous snarl of conflicting forces. Agent X had welcomed her information regarding Sally Vergane's masquerade as Pamela Dean. Betty was determined to add measurably to that information in an effort to aid the man she loved. So it was that when Sally Vergane asked Betty Dale to meet her at an appointed spot for another talk, Betty eagerly accepted, having no reason to suppose that it was an invitation that held no promise save death.

So eager was she to meet Sally Vergane at the Milan Cafe that Betty Dale took no notice of the pug-faced drunk who staggered into her when she was within a block of the appointed place. She hurried on to find Sally waiting for her outside the dingy door of the restaurant.

Sally looked worried. She clamped her fingers on Betty's arm. "Say, Miss Dale, you don't mind if we get out of this neighborhood? There's a man that's been botherin' me inside this joint. You know how it is. Tough how hard it is for a girl, down on her luck, to keep on the level. I know a place where we can go that's better than the Milan."

Betty was agreeable. Had she noticed the face of the driver of the taxi Sally hailed, she might have recognized the driver as the same pug-faced fellow who had bumped into her on the street.

The taxi took them eastward, but by such a circuitous route that Betty had trouble keeping track of the direction. It was not until the taxi rolled into a garage that Betty realized that she had

been nicely tricked.

Sally Vergane drove the muzzle of an automatic into Betty's side. "Now, you cheap little sob-sister, you're goin' to meet Squid Murphy. He'll give you somethin' to print in your paper!"

Betty measured the lank blonde beside her. Had not the pug-faced Twist turned out of the front of the cab and come to Sally's assistance, Betty would have put up some sort of resistance. But after one look at Twist, Betty realized the seriousness of the situation. Propped between two guns, she was hurried from the garage and through several dark rooms into Squid Murphy's new headquarters. Murphy and his men had left the onetime speakeasy as soon as they learned that Agent X had been visiting them in the disguise of Lewey Cassino.

Squid Murphy looked Betty coolly up and down, his hands in his pockets, his fingers squirming. Then he gave Sally Vergane a fishy stare and said:

"What the hell? Don't bring dames around here—even good-lookin' ones. Ain't I got enough trouble just keep-in' an eye on you?"

"Look the kid over, Squid," Sally said.

"Ain't that what I been doin'?"

"I mean give her a frisk. I got an idea you want this dame, dead or alive."

Squid's pale, twisting fingers darted into the pockets of Betty's coat. The girl reporter watched, astonished and afraid, as Murphy brought out a piece of paper, opened it, and held it to the light. Betty had not seen the paper before, but she realized that the collision she and the pug-faced man had had on the sidewalk had not been

an accident.

Murphy's lips twisted into an ugly smile. "So you got the dope on this joint, did you? You was goin' to hand it over to the G-men, was you?"

"I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about," declared Betty. "Furthermore, I advise you to let me go at once."

"She don't know what we was talkin' about!" Murphy scoffed. "She wants to go home! Well, baby, wait till the Brain gets a load of this!"

THAT same evening, Secret Agent X was in McAdam's Elmhurst home, sitting quietly and alone, as he had sat on several previous evenings. He had put in rather a hard day at the new office, acting first the part of Mr. Pond and then appearing as Mr. McAdam. Tonight, some sixth sense warned him that his patience would be rewarded.

At about nine o'clock, every light in the McAdam house went out. Either some one had cut the wires or opened the master switch. X felt certain that he was about to receive a visitation from the Brain himself

Doors opened and closed quietly. Agent X never moved from his chair, gave no indication that his nerves were taut, that every sense was on the alert. Velvety footsteps approached the very chair in which X sat.

"Are you there, Brain?" asked X in the voice of McAdam.

"Yes," came the Brain's answering monotone. "What is it you want, McAdam?"

"How did you know I wanted you?" X stalled.

"Obviously, the formation of the Pond-McAdam combine was for some blacker business than the swindling of investors, McAdam. Have you exhausted all of your portion of the funds realized from our last job?"

"The need of money is not pressing," replied X, for he had thoroughly investigated McAdam's finances. The insurance money gleaned from Corlears' murder had helped McAdam out of a scrape that had endangered McAdam's bank account and personal liberty as well. "I merely thought that inasmuch as the first job was so clean we ought to be able to repeat it. Pond seemed a likely victim, and I have seen to it that the firm is heavily insured."

"Then you would like to see Mr. Pond in the center of the white cross, eh?" the Brain asked.

X's hand strayed to his pocket. He was tempted to take his flashlight and turn it on the man's face, but he strangled his curiosity. After all, if his deductions were correct, he knew the man to whom he was speaking. And besides, it was evident that the Brain did not rely entirely upon the darkness to conceal his identity; from the muffled quality of his voice, X judged that he wore some sort of a mask. No, it was better to play the game until he caught the Brain in the midst of his hired killers.

"That's the idea exactly," X replied in answer to the Brain's question.

"And quite agreeable to me. But what shall be the terms?"

X had no idea what the Brain charged for his murderous service. It was better that he did not state any exact amount. "Suppose we make the

fee the same as it was for the Corlears job.”

“Thirty per cent of the insurance to go to you, then?”

X rubbed his hands greedily. “That’s fine.”

“Very well. I’ll draw up a contract and deliver it tomorrow night.” And the Brain stole through the darkness as quietly as he had entered.

But hardly had the door closed behind the Brain than Agent X was on his feet, following. The Brain had evidently possessed himself of a key to the McAdam house, for he locked the side door after going out. X watched through a window. The Agent’s mind was like a super-sensitive photographic plate that instantly recorded every detail of the man’s figure and stride.

A moment later, X left by the same route the Brain had taken. He hurried to the front of the house, looked down the street, and saw the Brain entering a parked car in which he had evidently driven to the McAdam house. X ran back to the McAdam garage, got in one of his own super-charged cars, and drove it to the edge of the drive. Just as the Brain got his car started and was leisurely wheeling it around the corner, X sprang into his car and followed.

The Brain’s car headed down Northern Boulevard to Forty-second, crossed the bridge into Manhattan. From there on, the trail kept close to the river to end abruptly in front of an apparently deserted loft building.

Agent X had driven with one hand all the way while his other hand had been occupied with artful changes in the plastic material that covered his face. When he left his car, about a

block from the old building, his face was that of a younger and leaner man than McAdam. He had only to slip out of his padded coat, that had helped him simulate McAdam’s fleshy body, and he seemed quite another person.

He approached the door through which the Brain had passed. It appeared of flimsy construction, yet the weight of the thing, as it yielded to one of the Agent’s master keys, told him that it was backed by solid steel.

BEYOND the door was dark, silent emptiness. X entered cautiously and explored the room without benefit of light. He hesitated only a moment, opened a door leading into the next room, and stepped across the threshold.

Air swished. Instinctively, X jumped aside, but not far enough to escape the chill, weighty thing that landed across his shoulders. He twisted around, his arms flinging out to grapple with thin, flexible steel ropes woven into a net that tightened quickly about his body. Every fully developed muscle in his body strained against that metal mesh, but it was being drawn tighter and tighter.

He jammed his arms down to his sides, kept every muscle distended in order to obtain more play in the trap of steel rope. Still, the net tightened until he was practically helpless, standing upright in spite of the weight of the net.

There was derisive laughter in the darkness, followed by the monotonous voice of the Brain: “It was a fifty-fifty split, Agent X. It was agreed between McAdam and I that I was to get fifty per cent of the proceeds for the killing of Corlears. Had you objected to the

seventy per cent I demanded for killing old Pond, I would not have been suspicious of you.”

“So,” said X softly. “you led me deliberately into a trap. I am afraid you’ve let yourself in for a lot of trouble, Brain.”

“The most fruitless bit of bluffing you’ve ever attempted, Mr. X,” the Brain chuckled.

There was a second of silence followed by the sound of men moving cautiously through the dark. Then lights came on. Agent X looked out through the steel mesh of his flexible prison. Six tough-looking men, three of them with drawn guns, stood in the room. There was no sign of the man X knew to be the Brain.

It would have added measurably to the Agent’s worries had he known that Betty Dale was a prisoner in the same house.

AT about the same time that the Brain had led X into the trap made ready for him, Sally Vergane left the building where Squid Murphy’s men held X and Betty prisoners. There was fever heat in Sally’s brain, and the fires of hate burning in her eyes, as she got into the fake taxi where the faithful Twist waited for her.

At Sally’s direction, Twist drove at a furious pace to the apartment where the glamorous “Pamela Dean” lived. There Twist was directed to wait. Once again, Sally accomplished her metamorphosis. This would be the last time, she declared. Sally Vergane was dead—Long live Pamela Dean!

She dressed with extreme care and left the apartment as the beautiful and

seductive Pamela Dean. Then Twist drove her directly to the headquarters of the federal Agents. Ten minutes later she came out, a gleam of insane happiness in her eyes.

“Wolf Hollis,” she whispered, into the darkness. “Dear, dear Wolf! For every bullet in your body, a G-man dies tonight!”

She did not care how many of Squid Murphy’s men were killed. They could fight it out—G-men and gunmen. The point was that she had directed the Feds against Murphy’s whole crowd, against Murphy’s all but impregnable hideout. Men would die on both sides, but she would count only the dead that wore the badge of the Department of Justice. Justice? This was justice!

She opened the door of the cab, started to get in. The toe of her pump slipped on something on the running board. She looked down, caught her breath. “Twist!” she said hoarsely to the man in the front seat. “Twist!”

Twist made no answer. He lay across the back of the front seat. Cushions of the cab were splashed with blood and white paint—white paint drawn in the form of a crude circle. And struck across the body was a white cross.

Sally Vergane stepped back, turned around. The back of her hand smothered a scream. Out of the shadows came the figure of a man. There was the threatening gleam of gun steel in his hand.

“Miss Dean,” he whispered. “The guns are silenced. I can kill you as easily as I killed Twist, but I would rather not at this moment, Miss Dean. Or shall I just continue to call you Sally?”

“You!” Sally breathed. “You—”

"Yes," said the man slowly. "I have been following you, and I am delighted to learn of your treachery."

"You—your voice—" Sally gasped. "Like Wolf Hollis. No—no, it can't be. He's dead."

"And I tell you that Wolf Hollis still lives!"

CHAPTER XI

BEHIND THE MASK

THE steel net was drawn down tight and secured to X's ankles by means of ropes tied to the four corners of the net. The mesh looked so tight that it seemed it must bite through clothing and into his flesh. Actually, this was because every muscle in his body was distended to its fullest. A second of relaxation, and he would be able to move his hands and arms to a limited degree.

"So this is the famous Secret Agent X!" one of the gunmen sneered. He swaggered up to the net and shoved his gun into his belt. "And he's caught in a net just like any other sucker. Don't worry, fella, soon as I frisk you we'll get you out of there and into a nice coffin."

The gunman, his hands working through the opening in the net, emptied X's coat and trouser pockets of their useful miscellany. But as the gunman moved to search X's vest pockets, something happened. Agent X suddenly relaxed. The steel net hung a little loosely about him. His right hand darted to his lower right vest pocket, slipped in beneath the gunman's

clumsy fingers, and pulled out something which dropped to the floor beneath the gunman's feet.

"What the hell!" the searcher gasped. He stepped back, yanked out his gun. But his heel came down directly on top of the fragile glass vial which X had dropped. This vial was filled with the Agent's anaesthetizing gas, forced in under pressure.

The man who had searched Agent X was the first to go down under the powerful gas. As it spread about the room, men staggered crazily and flopped to the floor. Agent X alone remained standing, his locked lips smiling slightly. If he could hold his breath long enough, until he could work his way over to the door, he believed that a few minutes alone would enable him to free himself from the net.

Though he was hobbled by the rope that tied the net to his ankles, he could move his feet inches at a time. He shuffled slowly across the room. Sixty seconds, counted by the hammer strokes of his over-burdened heart were required before he could reach the door. His vest pockets, as yet unexplored by the searcher, contained, among other things, his master keys. If the door was locked, he would have little trouble.

He tried the knob. The door was locked. He got out his master keys, selected one which was most likely to fit the lock, and thrust it out between the strands of the net. The key went part way into the lock and stuck there. He pulled it out and tried another. It failed to enter the key hole at all. Another and another key refused to

open the lock.

He dropped to his knees in front of the door and tried to see through the keyhole. Something obstructed his vision. The key, of course—the key to the lock was inserted from the opposite side of the door. Again he tried the master key that he knew would open the door. He jammed at the key in the lock, but still it refused to move. Whoever had locked the door from the other side had turned the key so that it could not be pushed out.

That meant tool work. And his tools had been removed by the searcher. Desperately, he turned and shuffled back to the man who had searched him. He procured his case of tiny, tempered tools and started back toward the door.

It is impossible for a man to kill himself simply by holding his breath, yet Agent X came very near doing that very thing. His vision was blurred with red. He could hear nothing in the world but the pounding of his own pulse, rapping in the arteries at his temples. It was coming and coming fast—that moment when he should be forced to gasp in a great lungful of that sleep-producing atmosphere.

He shook his tools out on the floor. It was chiefly by means of his sense of touch that he found the needle-nosed pliers. Something snapped in the Agent's brain. His lips sprang apart. His aching lungs rebelled against the control of their master. He drank deeply of his own poison, coughed once, dropped flat on his face in front of the door.

IN another room at the rear of the building, Squid Murphy paced the floor. Five of his best men were in the room with him, two of them occupied in guarding Betty Dale who was seated in one of the two chairs in the room.

Squid Murphy felt edgy. He didn't know why. It just seemed to him that he had a seat on top of a volcano.

"It's the dame and the X guy!" Murphy growled, flashing Betty Dale a glance. "I can handle the cops and the G-men, and not twiddle a finger, but these nosey dames and the X-guy—they make my head itch. Tell you, guys, if the Brain don't show up pretty quick, you knocks the dame and the X-guy. What's eatin' the boys anyway? I told 'em to bring X back here. Go see what's eatin' 'em, Pike."

A lean, sallow-faced youth, who looked hop-fed, complied eagerly with Murphy's order. Pike left Murphy's sanctum and went through door after door until he came to the front part of the building where X had been trapped.

He found the door locked, twisted the key, and pulled the door open. Six men, like six corpses, lay on the floor of the room. A seventh, confined in a steel net, lay at Pike's feet. It was like stumbling into a morgue.

Pike took a step backward, tripped and fell flat. Something was hooked around his ankle. It was the hand of the man in the net.

Pike tried to scramble to his feet. But the man in the net, despite the tangle of steel mesh surrounding him, rolled and squirmed, grappled with Pike. Pike tried to cry out, but fingers that had the same steely strength as the net itself, pinched on his throat and slowly,

surely, choked him into unconsciousness.

When the first effects of the gas had reached X's lungs, he had fallen purposely so that his face was near the bottom edge of the door. Enough pure air from the outer room had reached him, in that position, so that his recovery had been much more rapid than that of the others in the room.

He had come to, just in time to hear Pike's footsteps outside the door and had simply played dead until Pike had the door unlocked. The anaesthetizing vapor had dissipated sufficiently, so that the air was no longer dangerous. Agent X hastily gathered his tools, selected the sharpest, hardest blade among them, and began work on the steel wires of the net. Five minutes later, he was a free man. He quickly gathered up his weapons and equipment which had been taken from him, and quietly left the room.

SQUID MURPHY'S patience lasted about six minutes. Then he swore he'd find Pike and bring him back dead.

"He's had time enough," Murphy declared. "You guys watch that dame. I'm goin' after Pike."

Murphy left the room and went to the front of the building where he found Pike, still unconscious, an empty steel net, and the Agent's six guards still under the influence of the gas.

Murphy paled. He got cold all over as he realized fully just what kind of an opponent he had met in Agent X. He stumbled on unsteady feet from one exit to another of the building, checking up on the men who guarded

the outer doors. No, no one had left the building. Murphy passed a trembling hand over his face.

"Gripes, the X guy is loose, in here with us somewhere!" Then he snapped his fingers. "We got him. We'll put a slug in his brain, if he don't get us all first!"

Squid Murphy hurried back to where he had left Betty Dale. More members of the gang had drifted into the room and were lounging about, leering at Betty. Murphy slammed the door of the room and flattened himself against the panel. His fishy eyes skated from one face to another. A crafty smile smeared across his lips.

"Gotcha, Mr. X," he said. Gotcha this time."

Murphy's men looked queerly at their leader. "Who in hell you talkin' to?" one of them asked.

"Mr. X," laughed Murphy. "He's in here, damn him. He *would* be here, tryin' to rescue the dame."

"Are you nuts, Squid?" one of the crooks jerked. "I ain't X. None of the boys is X."

Murphy's fingers danced on his chest. "Sure—crazy smart. You don't know who X is. He's never the same guy twice. I got a feelin' he's right here in this room."

Betty Dale's pulse quickened. She knew that Murphy's way of learning X's identity depended upon some terrible ordeal for her. If X was in the room, at the slightest threat against her, he would reveal himself. That meant death for Agent X. If he wasn't in the room, she could look forward only to agonizing pain.

She drew a long breath and fixed

Squid Murphy with a blue-eyed stare. "Don't be absurd," she said scornfully. "I know Agent X. If he were in this room right now, you'd know it the worst way."

Squid Murphy's lips twisted. "So you know him, do you, baby? That's fine and dandy, that is." He walked across the room, opened a steel box, and rummaged among tools. Finally, he picked up one that suited his purpose and turned to Betty.

Betty's fingers clenched until it seemed that her finger nails would penetrate the palms of her hands. There was an electric soldering iron in Murphy's fist.

Absolutely ignorant of the fact that Betty Dale was in the same building with him, Agent X was concentrating every effort to outwitting the Brain. He had no idea how much time had elapsed since the Brain had trapped him in the building. Perhaps by now the elusive killer was miles away. But there was only one way to make certain—search the building.

Three doors opened on the hall in which he found himself. He decided to try the one to the right of the door he had just closed behind him. He found it locked, all the more reason why the room beyond would bear close investigating. Again his master keys were brought into play. He opened the door softly and found the room beyond, dark.

X listened and detected the faint sound of some one breathing. He stepped into the room. The Brain always moved in darkness. Perhaps the other occupant of the room was the man he was hunting. X drew his gas

pistol and moved quietly in the direction of the breathing sound.

"Brain," he said quietly, "I've come."

LOW laughter sounded within the room. X's body tensed. He waited. Nothing more came out of the blackness. X unclipped his penlight from his pocket. Had the Brain given him the slip again? He ventured a beam of light that stabbed across the room. Instantly he ducked and chopped off his light. Nothing happened. Yet his light had centered upon a man who sat in a chair and wore a black hood and mask over his head.

X took another step toward where he had seen the man. "Brain," he whispered again, "don't move. I'll shoot at the slightest sound."

Again came soft laughter. X scowled at the darkness. He turned his flashlight on again and stepped boldly up to the man in the chair. The muzzle of the gas gun pointed at the man's masked face. Queer, glittering eyes watched him from slits in the mask.

"You disappoint me, Brain," X said. "After all, I expected a little more resistance at the finish."

The man moved stiffly in his chair, but said nothing and simply stared in fascination at X's gun. In the masked man's right hand was a rusty nail. He was scratching on the arm of the chair with it—making queer designs that consisted chiefly of a cross surrounded by a circle.

X drew a quick startled breath. Was it possible?... His left hand shot out and tore the mask from the man's face. For a long moment, X was silent. The face

of the man in the chair was a distorted mask of lifeless-looking flesh. The mouth was set in an open-lipped snarl. His head was twisted on his shoulders at an odd angle. As he stared at Agent X, he laughed that soft, idiotic laughter.

Agent X nodded. He understood now why the man in the chair continually scratched the sign of the cross and the circle. The cross and circle was his signature—all, perhaps, that his crazed brain remembered of the life he had lived before. For the man in the chair was Wolf Hollis, the feared and hunted, reduced to a crippled imbecile.

Somehow Wolf Hollis had escaped the G-men. The burned body that had been found among the ashes of the house that had been his last stand, must have belonged to one of Wolf's henchmen. Perhaps one of the federal men's bullets had lodged in Wolf's brain, resulting in his paralysis and feeble-mindedness.

Wolf Hollis was not the Brain. He hadn't brains enough to plot the killing of an ant. But somehow, some way, the Brain planned to use Wolf Hollis. The Brain had marked every murder with the cross-and-circle signature of the illiterate Hollis. Clearly, he intended that when the showdown came, Wolf Hollis should bear the blame for all the crimes.

But if Hollis were to be the fall guy for the Brain, Hollis would have to be found dead; for no one would ever believe that this imbecile was the man behind the white-cross murders. That meant that in all probability, the Brain would return to kill Hollis.

CHAPTER XII

FRAME FOR A DEAD MAN

A QUICK rap on the front door of Murphy's loft-building hideout brought two guards to their feet. With guns drawn, they approached the door. One of them peeked through a hidden slot.

"That was the Brain's signal," the guard said to his companion. "It's him, all right, and he's got a dame with him."

The guard unlocked the door and admitted the Brain and Sally Vergane, still in the guise of Pamela Dean.

The Brain and Sally crossed to the room beyond. The Brain turned on a light. His face was covered from forehead to chin by a black silk mask. He carried a silenced pistol in each hand.

The girl looked pleadingly at the masked man. "Wolf," she began in a choked voice.

"Please refrain from calling me Wolf Hollis," said the Brain. "The similarity between my voice and his is due chiefly to your imagination."

"Then—then—"

"Keep still, Sally. I told you that Wolf Hollis is alive. I'm taking you to him. He's been with me a long time. I've been running this for him. He's slightly—shall we say, he has retired?" He nudged the woman into a dark hall, unlocked another door, and thrust her into another room.

"Wh-where's Wolf," Sally whispered. "That's all I want. I gotta know if I'm all right with Wolf."

The Brain pocketed one of his guns



*Wolf Hollis' moll had Betty Dale covered when
a pug-faced fellow bore down on them.*

and took out a flashlight. The searching beam bored the gloom and centered upon the figure in the chair, the crooked body of Wolf Hollis.

Sally Vergane stared, wild-eyed, at the man in the chair, at his hideously distorted face and madman's eyes. "Wolf!" she screamed. "Wolf, what's the matter? It's Sally." A sob choked her off. She ran across the room to fall on her knees before the man in the chair. She seized his hands. "Wolf, say something. Wolf!"

The man in the chair stared dully down at her and laughed his soft, mellow-witted laughter.

Somewhere in that room was a shuffling sound. The Brain's flashlight darted toward the corner, picked out

the upright form of a man whose commonplace features were unmistakable. The Brain had seen that face once that evening under circumstances he was not likely to forget, it was the man he feared, his mind telegraphed. It was the man he had trapped. How that man had escaped from that trap, the Brain didn't know. He knew only that that man must die, for he was Secret Agent X.

Even before the man he feared could take a step toward him, the Brain fired. His shot was surprisingly accurate for such hasty aiming. Without a groan, the man pitched forward to the floor.

A triumphant oath spilled from the Brain's lips. He crossed quickly to the

man on the floor and dropped beside him. His shot had penetrated the center of his victim's forehead. He was stone dead.

The Brain heaved a long sigh. "Dead," he whispered. "Secret Agent X is dead. I can sleep again! The whole underworld can rest. I've killed Agent X."

Somewhere, outside the building, came the rattle of machine-gun fire. The Brain's moment of relaxation was gone. His body stiffened. G-men were outside the building, acting on the tip Sally Vergane had given them. G-men—what in hell did he care for G-men? Hadn't he just killed Agent X, greatest of them all? Wasn't everything set for a safe walkout, leaving Murphy and crazy Wolf Hollis holding the bag? Wolf Hollis—the man ought to be dead when the G-men found him; or better still, the G-men ought to kill Wolf.

The Brain sprang across the room to where Sally was sobbing beside the laughing man in the chair. The Brain clubbed one of his guns and brought it down on Sally's head. The girl slumped to the floor. The Brain chuckled, leaned over, and took one of the madman's hands in his.

"Wolf," he said, "you hang on to this, understand? Just like I give it to you, you keep holding it."

He pressed one of his pistols into the man's hand. When the G-men came in and saw Wolf Hollis with a gun in his hand, they'd shoot to kill.

The Brain hurried across the room. "Now, for the getaway," he mused. "Down into the basement, through that manhole, and into the sewer. As simple as that. Only, coming out of a sewer

with a mask on—" He shook his head. "Not so good. And a man in my position can't be seen popping out of manholes at any time. I have to do better than that. Now, if I came out with some one—" He chuckled and glanced at the dead man on the floor.

"Agent X," he said to the corpse, "the idea is almost worthy of you!"

BETTY DALE had been endowed with more than her share of courage. Though there was a terrified trembling going on inside of her, her face was a rigid, fearless mask as she watched the electric soldering iron begin to glow in Squid Murphy's hand.

Murphy planted a knee on the chair where Betty sat, then bent over her. "You got one more chance. If Mr. X is in this room, you'd better point him out. If you don't, I'll force him into the open. He ain't the kind to sit around and hear a dame's eyes sizzle."

"How many more times must I tell you that he is not in this room?" Betty cried.

Squid Murphy sneered. "Ain't that tough! Well, baby, here it comes!"

Murphy moved the soldering iron slowly toward Betty's face. Its pyramid tip pointed directly at her right eye. She felt the terrific heat of the glowing metal, shrank back as far as possible into the depths of the chair. There was a scream in her throat, locked there, choking her until she could hardly breathe.

Sweat stood out on Murphy's brow. "I'm goin' to jab, Agent X," he said hoarsely. "You've got a chance to save this skirt. It'll be damage no doc can repair, after I've jabbed. You hear me?"

The soldering iron quivered. Murphy snatched a breath. The iron leaped forward.

Lights went out. In the sudden darkness, the tip of the soldering iron glowed like a red eye and slowly faded. Murphy swung around. "*The Brain!*" he hushed.

Somewhere near at hand came the rattle of machine-gun fire again.

"The Feds!" one of Murphy's men gasped. "They're shootin' in the front door."

"The Feds," said a low, monotonous voice, "*and the Brain!*"

A flashlight held in a black-gloved hand beamed through blackness and spotted Murphy and the terrified Betty Dale. Murphy dropped the soldering iron.

"Get to your posts," the Brain ordered. "We'll have to shoot it out."

"We'll give 'em hell!" one of the men yelled as he drew his automatic and started for the door. "Let's go, you guys!"

Murphy's men scrambled from the room to scatter through the building.

Squid Murphy, in the light of the Brain's torch, pulled the chair, in which Betty sat, out from the wall to reveal a hole about fifteen inches square.

"Murphy," said the Brain, "what are you doing? Get out there and fight with your men."

Murphy uttered a strained laugh. "Like hell! I'm gettin' my share of the dough and gettin' out."

"Those Feds will shoot you down," the Brain warned.

"Nix. I got a hundred grand in this bag. I gotta live to spend it!" Murphy

yanked a leather satchel from the opening, swung around, and started across the room. The Brain stood in his way, a black and ominous shadow. Murphy paled. "What you goin' to do, Brain?"

The silenced gun in the Brain's hand plopped. An expression of blank amazement crossed Murphy's face. His knees melted under him.

Betty stared down at Murphy's twitching form, screamed, and sprang to her feet.

The Brain came at her, snatched up the bag containing Murphy's money, and hooked his arm around the girl's waist. "Keep still," he warned. "I'm saving you, Betty Dale!"

Betty struggled in his powerful grasp. "Let me go!" she panted. "I don't want to be saved by—by you, a murderer!"

The Brain dragged her through the room and to a door that opened on the basement steps.

"You're the Brain," Betty gasped. "You're not trying to save me. This is some sort of a trick."

The Brain said nothing. They had gained the basement. The gun battle between the G-men and Murphy's mob roared thunderously above their heads. In the basement floor was an opening which had been closed by a manhole cover. The Brain picked Betty up, carried her to the opening, and dropped her through.

She fell a distance of about eight feet to the damp floor of the sewer below. She got up, turned around, and started to run. The Brain's light slashed ahead. In another moment he had caught up with her.

"Try to escape, and I'll kill you," he said quietly. "Now walk straight ahead."

Betty clenched her fists, tried an angry blow at the Brain's head.

He ducked, laughing. "Trying to see behind the mask, Betty? Well, when you see my face, it will be a slow walk out of this life. When we get to the end of our underground journey, it may be necessary for me to take off my mask and tell the police how I rescued you. They will accept my word above those mad-sounding utterance of yours. Soon after, because you know the truth, I will have to kill you."

"You're mad," she said scornfully. "Do you think you can escape Agent X? He'll go through anything to get you, Mr. Brain!"

The Brain chuckled. "He'll have to go through the fires of hell. I killed him with a shot directly between the eyes."

"You—you're lying!" Betty stammered.

"Oh, you think—" The Brain stopped. From somewhere behind them came a strange, shuffling sound. The Brain dropped the bag of money. His left arm, holding his flashlight, looped through Betty's arm. In his right hand, he held his silenced pistol.

THE BRAIN'S light quivered on the twisted, hideous face of Wolf Hollis. The man dragged his crippled body along the passage. The silenced pistol the Brain had pressed into his hand, pointed stiffly at the Brain himself.

"Hollis!" the Brain said hoarsely. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Following you, Brain," came the

reply from grimly twisted lips.

The Brain muttered an oath. "He sounds almost rational. Yet he couldn't regain his sanity with that federal bullet pressing into his brain."

The twisted man shuffled forward until he was within ten feet of the Brain and Betty. "Rational, did you say? Never more so!" He laughed softly. "How beautifully you'll fit into the electric chair, Brain. A portion of the loot is now at your side. I find you abducting an innocent girl. I have seen you commit murder. Furthermore, I have indisputable evidence that you killed Nelson Birr because Birr had uncovered your secret, by finding a portion of the note which Wolf Hollis had dictated and signed, appointing you his successor.

"The Birr murder was one of the cleverest unpremeditated crimes I have ever encountered," went on the twisted man. "You found Nelson Birr under the influence of a non-lethal dose of chloral hydrate. You administered the approved antidote for chloral hydrate—strong coffee. But in that coffee, you placed nicotine. Even a non-lethal dose of chloral hydrate, when fortified by nicotine, becomes deadly. The nicotine was readily obtained in the form of tobacco residue from the catch-basin of your pipe. Placed in the coffee, it was unnoticed. Your only error was spilling a drop of the tobacco juice on the card table cover.

"Examination of that stain told me what it was. Who but you would have had the necessary scientific knowledge to pull such a murder trick? Who but you, a world-famous authority on

potential murderers, would have been able to pick out men like McAdam and Aaron Malthus—men who had motives for murder, lacked the nerve to commit them, and would be willing to pay you for doing the job.

“My evidence can be further substantiated: the handwriting on the scrap of paper which dropped from Birr’s wallet, was identical to that on the note placed around the butt of the automatic you handed me, proving that the illiterate Wolf Hollis dictated the message Birr found to you. And why should you have helped me by passing me that gun when the police held me in Malthus’ house? Simply to alibi yourself and preclude any suspicion I might form about you.”

“Then—then,” the Brain stammered, “you’re not Wolf Hollis?”

“An absurd question! It was all a matter of mistaken identities. By means of makeup, I simply switched identities with Wolf Hollis. It was Wolf Hollis you killed, not Agent X. I am Agent X. The Wolf Hollis who allowed you to press this gun into his hand was Agent X.”

The Brain laughed. He turned his pistol quickly and pressed it against Betty Dale. “This young woman tells me that Agent X would do much for her. And if Agent X comes a step nearer, he will be able to consider himself her murderer!”

Agent X flung the empty gun straight at the Brain’s head. The Brain ducked, released Betty Dale, and flung himself at Agent X. Fists thudded on flesh. The Brain was a windmill gone mad. He had power that terror-stimulus had doubled, but he lacked the cool, fighting nerves of Agent X.

X took blow after blow, but always ducked under killing haymakers. The Brain’s breath was coming in desperate sobs. He was quickly wearing himself down, yet he felt that X’s telling blows were hammering him with more power than before.

“Damn you!” he shouted, as one of his punches cleared the point of X’s chin.

X laughed, coldly, disconcertingly. “Save your breath, doctor. You need it!” Then he closed in for a quick finish. A blow to the belt doubled the Brain over. A hook to the jaw straightened him out again—out on the floor.

Agent X sprang to Betty Dale and seized her in his arms. “Dear, I hadn’t the slightest idea you were here! I’d have torn the place apart—”

“Let’s not talk,” Betty whispered. She raised her lips to his.

WHITE light speared through the darkness. Agent X swung around, his body shielding Betty against this new, unforeseen danger.

“Put up your hands, Wolf Hollis!” cried a familiar voice. Special Agent Weston matured from the gloom. Behind him were half a dozen G-men.

Agent X raised his hands above his head. “So you’ve cleaned out another rats’ nest, Weston? Allow me to congratulate you!”

Weston came closer. “No funny cracks, Hollis. This time you won’t get away.”

“I’m not trying,” laughed X. “I wish you’d search me. Inside a secret pocket of my coat, you’ll find that note signed by a person known as K9. It will identify me.”

Weston's jaw dropped. "You—you're—"

"Look for yourself, Weston!"

Eagerly, Weston sought out the note that he had read on a previous occasion. He turned to his men. "Boys, this man is all right!"

A G-man grunted: "Looks enough like Wolf Hollis to be his brother."

Weston laughed. "He's everybody's brother—twin brother!" He shook X by the hand. "We've rounded up the whole crew, the Dean woman and all. The Dean woman must have been giving us the run-around before, but this last tip was genuine enough. But who's this?" Weston dropped beside the unconscious masked man on the floor. He jerked off the mask. "Dr. Stuart Ormand! What does this mean?"

X smiled grimly. "It means the chair for Dr. Ormand and another

triumph for the F.B.I. Helpless, because of a bullet pressing on his brain, Wolf Hollis was merely a tool, a fall-guy for Dr. Ormand, the Brain, cleverest criminal brain I have ever met. His true identity was not even suspected by his own henchmen. His profits from his mercenary murders must have reached something well over a million. All of his killings were trade-marked by Wolf Hollis' cross-and-circle signature so that Hollis would get the blame. He got on all right until he had to pull that cover-up murder of Nelson Birr, because Birr had the dope on him.

"I'll be glad to hand over the proof that will find Dr. Ormand guilty in any court. But right now—" he turned to Betty Dale and smiled gently. "Well, Weston, you interrupted some rather important business of mine—mine and this young woman's."

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