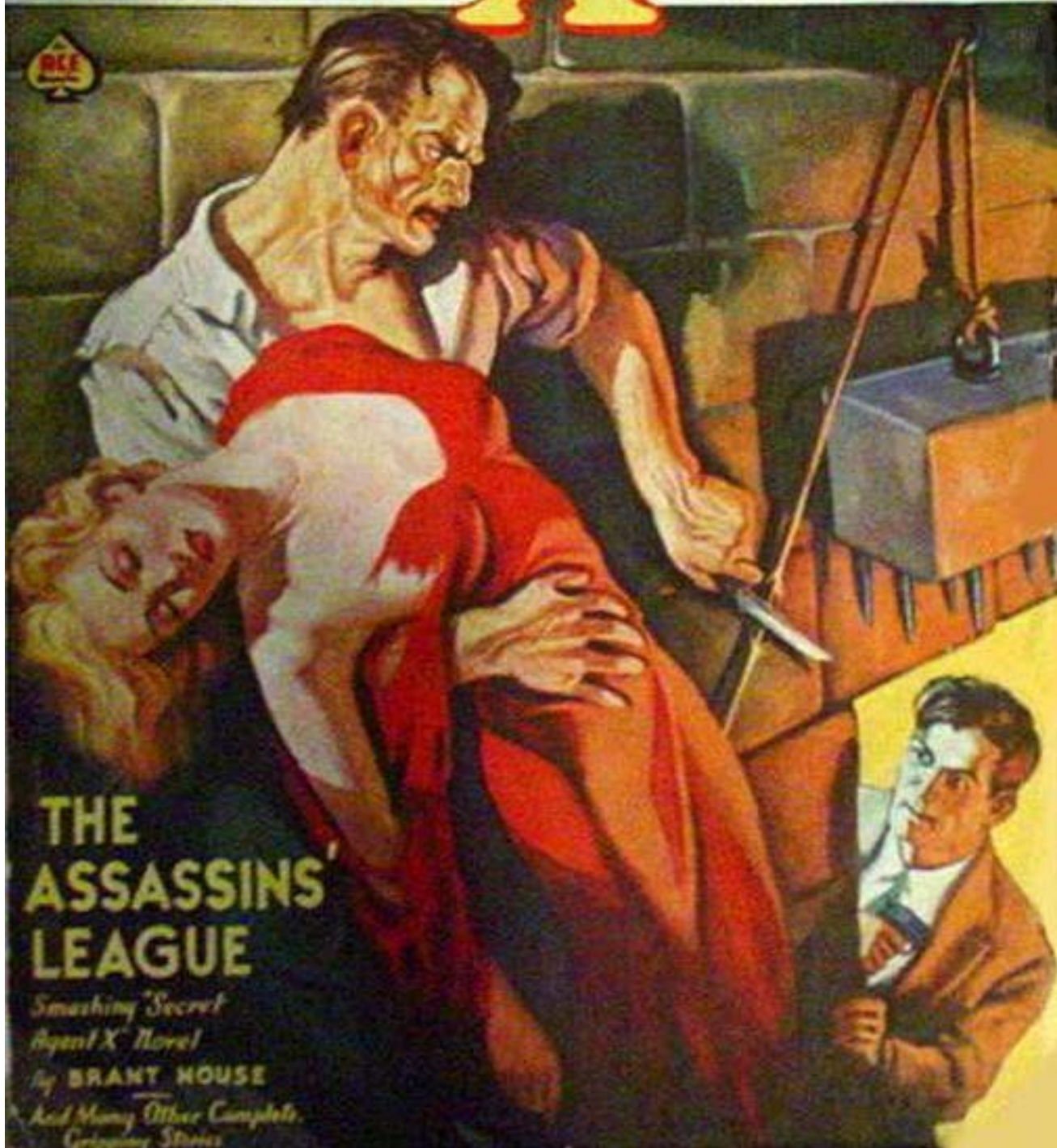


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OCTOBER

SECRET AGENT X

G-MAN ACTION MYSTERIES



THE ASSASSINS' LEAGUE

*Smashing Secret
Agent X Novel*

by BRANT HOUSE

*And Many Other Complete,
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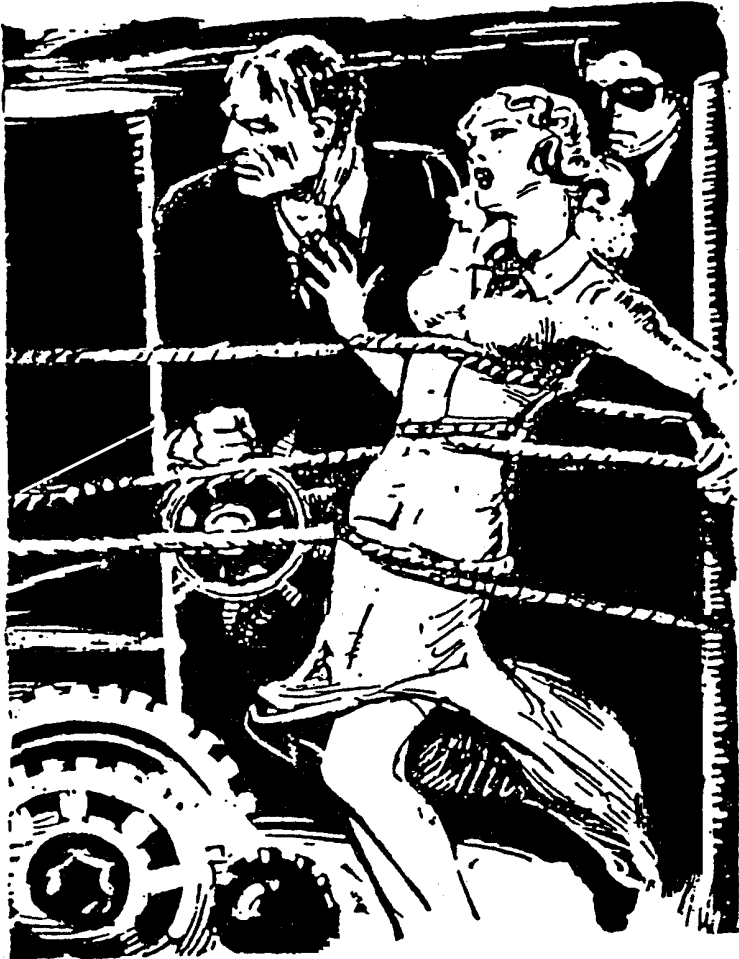


By Brant House

Author of "Satan's Syndicate," "Slaves of the Scorpion." etc.

A wealthy arms manufacturer and a powerful gang lord killed themselves—when they had the world by the tail. Secret Agent X sought to discover the baffling, contradictory cause of their enigmatic suicides. But even the Agent's amazing disguises failed him. For a strange, beautiful girl was able to pierce every clever face worn by the man of a thousand faces.

League



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Vivid

“Secret

Agent X”

Novel

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CHAPTER I

KILLER'S HOMECOMING

THE reputation for quiet dignity for which Chicago's Ayreshire Hotel was famous had become somewhat defiled by the presence of twelve men who had come to meet a murderer. They were mostly young men, armed with cameras,

pencils, photo flash-lamps, notebooks, wads of chewing gum, jeers, cigarettes, stories, wisecracks about passing women and press cards that served them as open-sesames to most of the doors in town.

They were reporters, their habitual nervous tension somewhat loosened for a few minutes. They were about to polish off a long story of legal and illegal warfare with a few photos and a final interview. Then most of them were going out to get drunk. A few anticipated their moments of relaxation by frequent visits to the Ayreshire bar.

The murdered was Steve Hackman.

Whether it was because of smart work on the part of Hackman's mouthpiece, Hackman's money, the inexperience of the prosecutor, or jury intimidation, was a matter of considerable debate; but anyway, the law said that Hackman wasn't a murderer.

These reporters knew differently.

If he hadn't killed this time, he had a time or so before. So Hackman was a murderer—he was news.

A dour-faced reporter came out of the bar with a glass in his hand. He leaned against the door-frame and allowed his lackluster eyes to rove across the thickly carpeted lounge. Then his eyes brightened perceptibly. He beckoned with his glass to a near-by colleague. "Hey, 'Red'," he called softly.

"Red" broke away from a window and came toward the dour-faced man. Red was all that the name implied. He was perhaps the youngest man in the group. He had a turned-up nose, a laughing mouth, countless freckles and a shock of unruly red hair. He was lean-waisted and broad-shouldered. The pocket of his coat was sagged by the weight of his flash-lamp. He had a camera and a tripod over one shoulder. An otherwise sad hat was given an air of jauntiness by the way it was tilted on the back of his head.

The dour-faced reporter stuck out his glass and squinted over its rim at the stairway that curved artistically around the side of an immense, stone-faced fireplace in the lounge and climbed on up behind the huge chimney. He said:

"Red, how would you like to have *that* phone number? These old eyes have piped them from the Rialto to the Palmer House and never seen such a Juliet as the one about to do a balcony with Gee-Gee Janes."

The "Juliet" was wearing a low-cut evening gown of flame-colored material that hugged her tall, svelte figure. She was blond. The wave of her straw-gold hair was unusual. Her eyes were so deep a blue that, in the parchment-shaded lights of the lounge, they

appeared almost black.

"Hmmm," breathed Red. "That nose and chin—a lot of hauteur, If I may say so."

"Oh, quite," said Dour-face. "And that mouth! Would you say luscious? I think I would. Who the hell is she? And what does a room in the Ayreshire cost, my boy?"

Red shook his carrotty mop. His ignorance of the woman was a neat bit of deception. His very face was clever deceit. His hair was a toupee. And if the dour-faced reporter had paid any attention to Red's eyes, he would have noticed that they were steel-gray instead of blue.

They were remarkable eyes, now lighter with ironic laughter, now grave with the responsibility that rested upon their owner, and again fired with tremendous will-power that was almost hypnotic. Had the reporters but known, here was a man whose adventures would have made greater news than the acquittal of a crimster-murderer like Steve Hackman.

For their redheaded colleague was Secret Agent X, whose life was devoted to leading men like Hackman to inevitable justice that lay along strange paths that wound in and out between law and lawlessness. Secretly sponsored by the federal government, Agent X could well afford to overlook the narrow boundaries between the world and the underworld; could ignore the orthodox routine that paralyzes an ordinary investigator.

AGENT X knew the woman In the flame-colored frock. He had followed her for days, ever since her boat had docked at New York. But he had averted every chance of her knowing that she was being followed, by his masterly disguises. On previous days he had entered the Ayreshire, but always in different clothes and behind a different face. A great portion of his success as an investigator depended upon his uncanny skill to impersonate, both in appearance and in voice,

almost any man. The woman had almost as many aliases as the Agent. For the moment, she was Sheila Landi. Yet always, for some reason unknown to Agent X, she was known as the "Mole." And she was always involved in high crime, political intrigue or espionage. When secret police of Europe smelled scandal in high places, or learned of smoldering revolt, they sought the woman. When she was found, inevitably she was the "Mole."

She was standing on the artistic stairway, an appropriate setting for her gemlike beauty. She had her slender, tapering hand on the arm of a man whose coat was the least bit too tight about the waist and across the shoulders:

"Wonder," said Agent X, "why she's turned her thousand candlepower charm on a guy like Gee-Gee?"

"Me too," the reporter groaned. "Wonder if she don't know any better. Apt to get herself a set of scorched fingers messing around with Gee-Gee. What's he got that I haven't?"

X chuckled. "A smile, for one thing."

Gee-Gee Janes had a smile that spread all over his dark, round face.

"And dough," sighed the reporter. Gee-Gee had some of the best dough in Chicago, though it was frequently scorched around the edges. Gee-Gee Janes was "in the racket." He generated one of the most powerful gangs in the town. He took off his hat to no one save Steve Hackman, and only to Hackman because it made him richer. Also, if you were in the rackets, you took off your hat to Hackman because you lived longer by doing so.

Janes and the woman continued up the stairway. They reached the balcony. They walked—or rather the woman walked—while Janes swashbuckled the length of the balcony. In the shadow of the great chimney, Janes became more presumptuous. He got one arm around Sheila Landi's waist. His large, dark eyes met hers in an intimate glance. Then they were out of sight behind

the great chimney.

"Hell!" said the dour-faced reporter, and turned away.

The Agent's eyes studied the shadows along the balcony. Queer business—Sheila Landi playing up to a swaggering racketeer. He certainly wasn't her usual game, nor was she the sort for Gee-Gee Janes.

A reporter flew off tangent from the revolving door of the Ayreshire, cupped his hands over his mouth and yelled: "Here's Steve!"

Thus heralded, Steve Hackman came home. Just inside the door he stood, dwarfed by two strong-arm men who accompanied him, for Hackman wasn't a big man physically. He had sleek, white hair. His eyebrows were bushy and never on the same level with each other. His eyes were expressionless, nor had his clean-shaven-face changed from the stoical mask it had always been in the court rooms.

THE REPORTERS circled Hackman, yelled questions, asked him to "hold it" for a photo. Steve Hackman silenced them with a gesture as perhaps no other man in the city could have done. Then, for the first time in a long while, Steve Hackman smiled.

"Quite a little reception, boys," he said in a quiet, inflexible voice.

Then he saw Gee-Gee Janes coming in from the lounge. Janes had the woman in the flame-colored gown on his arm. She hung back, and Gee-Gee went forward to elbow his way between Agent X and the dour-faced reporter.

Closely, the Agent studied Janes' face, its plump cheeks, slightly hooked nose, wide mouth, and that white, horizontal scar that creased Gee-Gee's chin. He studied Janes' walk and the curious twist he gave his shoulder after the manner of a fighter coming out of his corner of the ring.

"Howyah, Steve?" Janes grinned and stuck out his hand at Steve Hackman.

Hackman took the hand. With the knuckles of his left hand he rapped Janes' barrel of a chest. Then Hackman looked past the reporters and saw Sheila Landi.

"Doing plenty for yourself—eh, Gee-Gee?" Hackman grinned.

"How about a story, Mr. Hackman?" asked the dour-faced reporter.

Hackman nodded. "Guess you boys treated me all right in the papers, didn't you? There isn't much in the way of a story, but come on upstairs and we'll have a drink. How about it?"

Reporters and crimesters started for the elevator. X saw Janes turn his head and beckon to Sheila Landi. She moved quickly across the sheen of floor and was beside Janes by the time the crowd reached the elevator.

"Want you to meet Sheila Landi, boss," announced Gee-Gee. "Sheila, this is my pal. Guess I don't have to tell you his name."

"Guess you don't," purred Sheila Landi. She extended her hand to Hackman. "How are you, Mr. Hackman?"

There was little that was continental in the way Sheila spoke and acted now, X noted. She had her part down well; knew exactly what she was after. X only wished that he knew as much.

"It's a pleasure," said Hackman, but he scarcely more than touched her hand.

Hackman leased the penthouse on top of the Ayreshire. Night breezes off the lake swept through French windows of the living room and brought along the perfume of flowers from Hackman's roof garden. Hackman waved toward the walnut-paneled bar at one end of the room. "Help yourselves, boys. Get what you want. Take your time about it."

"How about a picture, first?" said Agent X. "A little home stuff for the public."

Hackman nodded, rested his hand on the back of a chair, and stared at the various cameras set up about him. Janes tried to

crowd into the picture, but Hackman kept him at a distance with a gesture.

"When they mug you, Gee-Gee," he laughed, "you'll have a number on your chest... Get started, boys."

Flash bulbs flared. Expert fingers manipulated plates. Hackman sighed after it was over, dropped into a chair. "Shoot!" he said to the reporters, but he was looking at Sheila Landi where she leaned on the back of a chair and kept admiring eyes on Gee-Gee Janes.

"Well, how do you feel, Mr. Hackman?" began one of the reporters.

"A little tired," said Hackman. "I don't want to rush you boys off, but as soon as you're through, I'll go to bed and relax. Don't think I won't relax."

"Got nothing to worry about, eh?"

"Not a thing. Got the world by the tail."

"And what's on the ticket, next, Mr. Hackman?"

Hackman chuckled. "Wouldn't a lot of people like to know? But—" he held up his hand—"don't print that. Tell 'em I'm going to take a jaunt to Europe. Going to see the Louvre. Art and history, see?"

"And when you get back?" a reporter prompted.

"Well, it's hard to keep a good horse out of harness," Hackman admitted. "I've got business to attend to. Quite a bit of it."

"Yeah?" The reporters waited breathlessly, for Hackman seemed in deadly earnest.

"What kind of business?" X asked. Hackman eyed the Agent's red hair keenly. "Tell you what you can say, Red. Tell Johnny Q. for me that when I get back from the Louvre I'm going to raise chickens."

Gee-Gee Janes' roar of laughter was a welcome applause. Janes got a wink from his gray-faced chief. Then Hackman stood up: "And anything else Johnny Q. wants to know, tell him to go to hell. That's all, boys." Hackman glanced toward the bar where the

dour-faced reporter was caught with a tall bottle in his hand. Hackman frowned. "You like that stuff, Long Pan?"

The reporter started to put the bottle down, but Hackman checked him. "Take it with you. Just save me enough rye for a nightcap. And get going, boys. Like to be alone for a change."

NEWSHAWKS took what bottles they could get their hands on, thanked Hackman enthusiastically, and trooped out of the penthouse. Agent X was the last to go. Looking back, he saw Hackman saying good-night to Sheila Landi, Janes, and the two strong-arm boys.

X said to his long-faced companion: "Guess he really means he's going to do a Garbo."

The reporter nodded. "And all along I thought he'd go for Gee-Gee's girl friend. You know I've a crazy sort of a hunch that Steve Hackman will be back in print in a little while. Something's in the air."

"Love in bloom," said the Agent as he and his companion stepped into the elevator.

Just as they passed the sixth floor, the Agent's companion elbowed the elevator operator. "Back up to the sixth. That's where we get off."

"What's the idea?" demanded the Agent.

"Wait." The reporter had hold of the Agent's arm, and as the car backed to the sixth floor, he shoved X into the hall hardly before the safety gate had slid all the way back. He was at X's side, pointing down the hall in another second.

"See it, Red? It's a story, if we're smart."

Down the hall, fumbling with a key in the lock of a door, was a tall, spare man with startled, pale eyes, a mustache that resembled a worn toothbrush, and close-clipped, yellow-gray hair.

"Mr. Madvig," the reporter hailed the man.

The tall man whipped around.

Suspiciously, his pop-eyes rolled from X to the reporter.

"Mr. Leo Madvig, isn't it?" The reporter nudged X. "Do your duty with the camera, Red. This is a scoop."

"Eh?" said Madvig. "What is all this?"

X planted his camera, focused it on the startled Madvig, set off a flash-lamp.

Madvig jumped, cursed softly, cried: "No, no, no! I don't want publicity. How many times have you got to be told I'm not for the papers?"

"You're a little late, now," X said as he slid the camera plate. "And we can't print your picture without a story." Aside to the reporter he asked: "Who is the guy?"

"Inventor," whispered the reporter. Aloud he said: "Look here, Mr. Madvig, I've got just the spot for you on the science and invention sheet of the Sunday paper. You know the sort of stuff—what the future holds and so on."

Madvig stamped his foot. "I tell you I'm not a soothsayer."

The reporter buttonholed Madvig. "Listen, I saw you talking with a couple of big shots in the munitions business the other day. You hinted at a revolutionary weapon, something that would insure the victory of any nation possessing it in case of war. Now come across, Mr. Madvig. Everything's confidential, see? If you don't—well, I could just turn my imagination loose. Just give me an idea of what sort of a future hell a battlefield in 1950 will be, can't you?"

Madvig smiled shyly. "Well," he dragged out, "this much I can tell you. And don't come asking for more. I have invented a weapon, the nature of which I refuse to reveal. To my own mother I wouldn't reveal it, if I had a mother. But let me tell you this—my weapon will give an entirely new conception of death. It is so deadly that whole nations might be wiped out, and, as the saying goes, wouldn't know what struck them. So you know why I guard my secret

with my life. To me it is like Frankenstein's monster. I have created it, yet I fear it."

"As bad as all that, eh?" X chimed in.

Madvig shook his long head. "Worse. My weapon is destruction—noiseless, certain destruction."

"And you're going to market it?" demanded the reporter.

"I do not know," replied Madvig sadly. Then his prominent eyes fell to jerking up and down the hall, glancing from door to door. "I—I should not have spoken," he said huskily. "Good-night."

"Hey, wait!"

But Leo Madvig had his door open. He backed into the room. The door slammed; the lock snicked.

"Ummm," sighed Agent X. "What have you got now? Picture of a queer fish and pessimistic words concerning the destruction of the universe. Too bad Jules Verne is dead. Let's get moving."

THEY went downstairs and into the taproom. There the reporter started his celebration as soon as he had phoned his story and dispatched the picture X had taken of Steve Hackman.

X sat at the bar and allowed his long-faced companion's pessimistic monologue to go through one ear and out the other. All the time, he was thinking of Sheila Landi and, curiously enough, Leo Madvig. Madvig had an invention that its creator feared; that he claimed would revolutionize warfare. Perhaps it was because of Madvig, rather than Janes, that Sheila Landi was at the Ayreshire Hotel. And he wondered what foreign power the Mole represented; if she expected to attain her secret purpose through underworld channels.

The reporter was becoming maudlin, for he was following each cocktail with a chaser from the bottle he had taken from Steve Hackman's bar. He was garbling about the next war, about women and children

slaughtered in the streets by Frankenstein monsters created by Leo Madvig. When he looked around for a shoulder to cry on, his cameraman was gone.

Agent X, ever on the alert, had glimpsed Sheila Landi on the arm of the swaggering Gee-Gee Janes as the pair had crossed the lobby going toward the door. As X walked nonchalantly into the lobby, he passed the hotel desk. A pale-faced clerk behind the desk was excitedly jiggling the hook of a telephone receiver. X heard the clerk's tense whisper:

"Call police headquarters at once."

X whirled. His right arm shot over the desk and ripped the clerk's shoulder. "What's that? Police headquarters?"

"The penthouse," the clerk worked out of quivering lips. "Something's happened. A boy went up with a case of liquor—Oh, for hell's sake keep this quiet. Don't get it in the papers."

Not any more was he a reporter. He was Secret Agent X, one jump ahead of the law, his lean legs clipping off the distance between the desk and the elevator. The laughter had gone out of his gray eyes, and when their glance lashed across the face of the elevator operator, the man moved to obey the crisp command:

"Penthouse!"

In that cool, luxurious house on the roof was a thick and heavy silence. The Agent's shoes scarcely whispered across the thick oriental rugs as he moved across the living room to the bedroom. He opened the door on darkness; needled the darkness with his tiny electric torch. The bed had not been touched. He went into the black-marble bathroom. Still no sign of any one. No one in the kitchen. No one in the library, where Steve Hackman had liked to pose as an intellectual.

He opened the French windows of the living room and stepped out onto the roof garden. The breeze off the lake that had been refreshingly cool, was now definitely

chilly—the ominous chill of death.

In the light of the amber-glazed lantern that swung out from the penthouse wall, he saw the narrow terrace, the chrome-and-leather furniture, the chaise longue where were two men—the house detective and a white-faced bellhop.

Quietly, X came around the chaise longue, saw Steve Hackman's spare, gray-haired body stretched out at full length, eyes wide open, pupils contracted to the merest pin-points. Beside the chaise longue was a cocktail table and on it a tall, empty glass. Beside the glass was a squat little vial with a red death's-head grinning from its label.

The house detective swung around. "Who are you?" jumped from his mouth.

X flashed his press card.

The house dick seemed relieved, and said: "Have they called the police yet? Steve Hackman's taken a highball of prussic acid."

X bent over the table, looked at the label on the bottle, sniffed at the glass. Then he stooped over the corpse, sniffed again. The lean, pale lips were speckled with blood flecks. The gray face was stone cold, the muscles rigid.

Prussic acid—the house dick was right. But those eyes of Steve Hackman, glassy, pupil-less, yet eloquent.

Suicide? The eyes said murder. And in their glazed surface, X seemed to see the reflection of a swaggering, dark-featured man and a svelte, graceful female form swathed in cloth made of flames.

The Agent's head nodded almost imperceptibly. Sheila Landi openly cultivated Gee-Gee Janes who became, on the death of Steve Hackman, the uncrowned king of crime. But what was Sheila Landi up to? There was one way of finding out. Agent X was determined to fill Janes' shoes, and from the impersonation of Janes, discover exactly how the Mole was involved in the murder of Steve Hackman—what new and more terrible crime that murder was to lead to.

CHAPTER II

"NO END BUT DEATH"



FAR down on the street below, a police siren wailed its chill alarm. The Agent dragged his living, burning eyes from the glassy ones of the dead man. He straightened, stepped around the chaise longue, crossed the terrace and went into

the penthouse. The hotel detective followed him with a shouted warning to touch nothing.

X hurried to the elevator, where the car and operator still waited, and demanded: "Did you bring any one up to the penthouse within the last half hour?"

The operator shook his head. "Swear I didn't. No one but the bellhop with the case of liquor. I waited for him, and he wasn't gone ten seconds before he was back saying that Steve Hackman had drained his last glass. I said to him: 'Jonesy, you're off your nut. A guy with all the money that Hackman's got don't bump himself right after fighting to stay out of the chair.' And Jonesy said maybe it was woman trouble. And I said maybe Hackman was asleep. And Jonesy—"

"And maybe Jonesy was right," X cut in.

Woman trouble—Sheila Landi trouble—was probably what had ailed Steve Hackman. But quickly X bridled his imagination. He had never been a man to jump at conclusions. It was simply that he exerted his every mental effort to fit Sheila Landi into the picture—a picture of Chicago rackets. And there was nowhere that an adventuress of the Mole's type could be fitted in. She just didn't mix with men of Janes' and Hackman's type.

As he descended in the elevator, bent on

singling out Gee-Gee Janes, those dead eyes of Steve Hackman haunted him, screamed of murder. It was inconceivable that a man in Hackman's apparent good spirits, having everything to live for, could have killed himself. It was equally inconceivable that some one had entered the penthouse, ordered Hackman to drink prussic acid, and triumphantly watched Hackman carry out the order.

Had there been any sign of a struggle, X might have believed that the poison was forced upon Hackman. But what kind of murder monster could have crept up the fire escape, for there was no other access to the roof except the elevator, and forced an alert and agile man into drinking poison?

When he reached the lobby, the Agent saw Gee-Gee Janes back away from the front door. Gee-Gee was hatless, and the breeze from the revolving door ruffled his dark hair. As he backed away from the door, he retreated from a man in plain clothes who headed a detail of blue-coated cops.

The plainclothes man fingered Janes. "Talk to you in a couple of shakes, Gee-Gee. I don't like the smell of this place. What with a kingpin like Hackman knockin' himself off, there's an odor of putrescent fish."

Gee-Gee Janes lost none of his swagger. His smile, however, was discreetly concealed. "Listen, lieutenant, you aren't tellin' yourself I'd bump my boss, are you? Did I know he was dead until this lobby began to buzz with the news? I didn't. I can prove—"

The lieutenant pushed Janes out of his path. "Sure, sure. But later, Gee-Gee. Let's see what Steve looks like as a corpse... You, Clancy, hold Gee-Gee somewhere."

The lieutenant ran to the elevator, two of his men following. Clancy led Janes into a little writing room at one side of the lounge.

Agent X went into the bar from where he could keep one eye on the room that held Janes. He sat down on a stool and ordered a

drink. He was wondering how best he might corner Janes, in order to study him for impersonation, when he happened to glance into a pillar of mirrors that centered a circular bar. There he glimpsed the graceful form of Sheila Landi.

He pretended to take no notice of the woman who slipped into the room and took the stool next to the one occupied by the Agent, drew out a cigarette from her handbag, lighted it, and gave an order. The Agent drank slowly, now and again stealing a glance at the reflection of the woman in the mirror. She was perfectly used to being looked at, and the room deprived her of none of her poise.

As she lifted a fragile cocktail glass in her slim, delicate fingers, she stared directly at the crooked pillar of cigarette smoke that coiled toward the ceiling. Glass all but touching her lips, she spoke. It was the softest of whispers, but every word she uttered was clearly audible to the Agent. And he was slightly startled, for he knew that they were for his ears alone:

"Stay out. This does not concern you in the least. You have been following me all the way from New York. It is a perilous path. Turn back before it is too late. If you persist in this mad investigation, there is no end but death."

When she had drained her glass, she turned to leave. The Agent's steel-gray eyes met her blue ones. But she seemed to look straight through him, as though she had not spoken. And then she was gone.

Sheila Landi knew that Agent X had followed her, though he had changed his disguise sometimes twice a day.

THE AGENT studied himself critically in the mirror. His makeup was perfect. She could not have penetrated that layer of plastic volatile material that covered his real features. Even if she had, there was but one living person that knew the Agent's real face,



X sprang through the door, flash-lamp in hand

and she was quite a different person than Sheila Landi.

More and more the cloud of mystery deepened around the woman in the flame-colored dress. And her warning—"No end but death." Many times had X been warned, but never had he felt the warning to be more pregnant. He was in danger, but he felt that his chief danger lay in the beautiful, X-ray eyes of Sheila Landi.

But in spite of this premonition of danger, X turned from the bar, his self-assurance unshaken. In the hotel lobby, a man had just come out of the elevator. He

was Leo Madvig. His yellow-gray hair hung down over his bulging eyes. His long head jerked first one way, then another. He took three quick, short steps toward the clerk's desk, turned quickly, his loose-jointed arms dangling like thick ropes from his shoulders, and saw the Agent.

"Trouble, Mr. Madvig?" asked X politely.

Madvig's fingers clenched into quivering claws. "Trouble?" he said huskily. "Do you know what's happened? Have you any conception of what is still to happen? Where *are* the police?"

"The hotel's full of them. There's been a—a suicide. What's the matter with you? Can't I help?"

Madvig's clenched fists trembled under



the Agent's nose. "Y-y-y-you!" he stuttered in his fury. "Perhaps you know what has become of it. But you're too damned dull-witted to know anything. Why did I ever listen to a reporter?"

There was a policeman standing outside the little writing room where Gee-Gee was being held for questioning. Madvig sighted him, ran toward him, bumping into people, until he had the officer by the belt. Then his tense, husky voice told every one in the lobby what had happened.

"It's gone—gone. It will take years for me to duplicate those calculations. The plans, the model, everything gone."

"What's gone?" asked the officer.

Madvig slapped his forehead. "My invention, don't you understand? It was stolen from my room. Oh, you don't understand. Nobody will understand until it's too late." He wheeled, his pop-eyes darting from one to another of the people who crowded around. "Listen," he said slowly and pleadingly. "You poor fools don't seem to grasp the situation. My invention has been taken from my room. But I'm not thinking of myself alone. I'm thinking of you and you and *you!*"

"What was this invention?" asked the cop. "A new kind of can opener?"

"Ugh!" Madvig looked as though he were about to faint. "My invention is safe only when it is in my hands. I alone know how to handle it. In other hands, guided by ignorance, or by a trial-and-error method of finding out its uses, it means destruction. Not death as you know death, but destruction. Not a man, woman or child is safe until I recover it. I—"

He stopped, dabbed at his dewy brow with a handkerchief. As he returned the handkerchief to his pocket, he caught sight of some one in the crowd. "There!" he shouted, his quivering fingers indicating a big, heavy-set man with a smudgy nose and a receding chin that was peppered with beard stubble.

The smudgy-nosed man elbowed his way forward. "What's wrong with this nut, officer?" He indicated Madvig. "I wouldn't steal his can opener. You know me. I'm Fred Poole. And if it's anything to you, I'm employed at present by Mr. Albert Loeb's."

The officer may not have known Fred Poole, but every one knew Al Loeb's, big boss of the Loeb's Munitions and Arms Works. Agent X knew Fred Poole, who had a reputation that was not of the best. Poole was a shady private investigator, who frequently twisted the duties of his profession to include blackmail and confidence games. Perhaps Poole felt his association with the Loeb's money was a sort of ink remover for the blot on his personal escutcheon.

"Now, now," the big cop soothed Madvig. "You'd better take this up with the hotel—though valuables should be placed in the hotel safe."

A mirthless laugh hacked from Madvig's mouth. "You couldn't put that in a safe, you fool."

"What is it?" asked Poole.

Madvig quivered with rage. "Wouldn't you like to know! You damned spy, you're working for Al Loeb's. You stole it. You—"

Poole crowded in, fist clenched and right arm back. "Let me bop that guy, officer."

"Keep out of this, Poole," the officer warned. "Listen, you—" to Madvig—"we can't find your gadget if you won't tell us what it is."

"I—I can't," Madvig breathed. "It—it's death, that's what. Certain death!"

A number of bystanders laughed with relief. It was pretty obvious to all of them that Leo Madvig was mad.

AS THE POLICEMAN led Madvig to the lounge, speaking to him as though the eminent scientist was a child, the door of the writing room opened and Gee-Gee Janes and the lieutenant of detectives came out. Gee-Gee was grinning and flicking imaginary dust

from the tightly stretched shoulder of his black coat.

"Told you, you had nothing on me, big stuff," Janes said triumphantly.

The lieutenant scowled. "Well, if this wasn't a clear case of suicide, I'd put something on you, Gee-Gee. Don't think you're going to take a powder even now. Where you going now?"

Gee-Gee struck a Fifth Avenue attitude. "Home, James. My car and chauffeur awaits me lord in the alley. Pip-pip, big stuff."

While the lieutenant was taking down Janes' address and telephone number, Agent X slipped through the lounge and into the coffee shop. From there he hastened into the kitchen. If Gee-Gee's car was in the alley, and Janes' chauffeur was behind the wheel, X was determined that Janes would have a new chauffeur by the time he was ready to go to his apartment.

Here was a welcome opportunity to slide into Gee-Gee's mirror-finished shoes, strut before the mysterious Sheila and obtain all available information about that woman's connection—a connection he felt linked her to the odd death of Steve Hackman and, possibly to the disappearance of Madvig's Frankenstein invention.

Agent X saw very little of Janes' chauffeur except shiny puttees and whipcord breeches, as he reached the alley. The man had the hood of a bright yellow Packard sedan up and was bending over the motor. X drew from his pocket an ordinary-looking cigarette lighter that concealed a tiny cartridge of anesthetizing gas—a non-lethal weapon which would knock a man out the instant the gas was inhaled.

Quietly, he approached the chauffeur, intending to release the gas under the man's nose. But as his arm extended toward the driver, the latter straightened suddenly and jerked back his right arm. His elbow struck the Agent's arm, knocking his hand against a sharp piece of metal protruding from under

the undersurface of the cowl. The metal lighter was knocked from X's fingers.

"What the hell?" the man roared. He pivoted, caught the Agent's short left jab on his forearm. Men who worked for Gee-Gee Janes were naturally apprehensive, and this man had undoubtedly served time as a hell-driver in one of the bank robberies Janes was suspected of engineering. He was very much on his toes, so much so that he had the wrench in his hand and up and down again in a split second.

X took the hacking blow from the wrench on his shoulder. It would have been a knockout blow except that the lean, leathery muscles that tightened across the Agent's shoulders took most of the kill out of it. X ducked back, but the chauffeur's right foot shot out, tangled in X's ankles, tripped him backwards. He was down with the wrench-wielding chauffeur on top of him.

But there were more punches in the Agent's jabbing arms than this Chicago hood knew were in the books. One to the middle sent the breath exploding from the chauffeur and left him limp. Another crashed to the right of the head and pitched him over on his side, out for the count.

X sprang to his feet, heard close at hand a jaunty, whistled tune that could come only from Gee-Gee Janes' lips. The Agent got the chauffeur under the armpits and all but flung him into a shadowy corner behind some garbage cans. He pulled off the man's cap and removed his own fiery red toupee at the same time. The toupee went into his pocket; the cap on his head, covering his dark-brown hair.

X jumped to the car, saw Gee-Gee swinging up the alley. He dropped the hood of the yellow sedan, got around to the front door and was under the wheel by the time Janes reached the car. His only hope was that the gloom of the alley would hide the fact that lack of time had not permitted him to hide with makeup.

Gee-Gee got into the back seat and flopped down on the cushions. He shook a cigarette from a pack, still whistling inaccurately the tune from a recent motion picture.

"Home," he ordered. The red dot of an electric cigarette lighter illuminated a portion of his dusky face for a moment. He was still smiling.

"Old Steve turnin' off his own light!" Gee-Gee mused. Then he laughed and shrugged as X got the car under way.

FORTUNATELY, X had followed Sheila Landi to Gee-Gee's apartment on the day before, so he knew its location on Twenty-second Street near the Chinese quarter, where Gee-Gee had business interests. Thirty minutes later, X brought the yellow car to a smooth stop in front of a shabby building that concealed the luxury of Gee-Gee's apartment.

There was a garage attached to the side of the building and Janes ordered him to drive in. The garage was lighted, and now there was no longer the friendly dark between Agent X and his exposure as an imposter.

But Gee-Gee was evidently oblivious of everything except the light of his lady's eyes, for he got out of the car, swinging and swaggered up a flight of steps that led to the floor above.

Quietly, the Agent followed him. The shabby stairway led into a thickly carpeted hall. He saw Gee-Gee's broad-shouldered silhouette swing through a lighted doorway at the end. X followed.

"Hello, Klinker," Janes greeted some one on the other side of the door.

X flattened himself against the door frame, peeked into Janes' magnificently furnished living room. Janes was at a table, picking up a glass and a decanter, his back toward the door. Behind Janes was a stocky man, chubby-featured and partially bald, in spite of other evidence of youth.

"How are you, boss?" the chubby-featured man asked, softly.

"Oh, I'm doin' myself a lot of good," Janes chuckled as he swizzled soda water into his whiskey. "What's under your scalp, Klinker? D'yah know I'm feelin' swell tonight, Klink? Never thought I was the guy to go for a gal, did you? And you was right—up to now. But this one's different. Ever know a gal that gave you a kick like a shot of juice from the chair, Klinker? That's her. A lady—the looks, the frame, the clothes. Lady all the way up and down. And boy has she flipped for Gee-Gee!"

"Yes," said the man called Klinker.

Janes swung around, thin lips grinning widely. "Yes, what?"

Klinker smiled slowly. "Like you just said—a girl. Mine's like that, too. She's the daughter of Beckardt, the grocer."

Janes guffawed. "Man, you had me worried! Thought it was the same as my dame. Listen, Klink, you don't know what's what. There's only one like her I'm speakin' about."

Klinker smiled good-naturedly. "Sure. That's the way we all feel, I guess. That's what I wanted to see you about. I want to get married."

"The hell you do?" Janes waved his glass. "Well, it's nothin' to me if you want her for a steady diet. Feel like I could go for Sheila the same way."

"So I'm resigning, boss," Klinker said.

The smile of Gee-Gee Janes drew into a tight, thin line. His brown eyes became slits. Gone was everything that was jovial about him. The nail-hardness, the eternal suspicion that is part of those who live outside the law, rose to the surface.

"Yeah?" he breathed. "You're what?" He edged a little closer to Klinker. "Say it in English."

"I'm quittin'," said Klinker. "Shovin' out of the racket for good. You've heard that before, but I'm in earnest. I've got to go

straight on account of my girl. She's decent. I ain't good enough for her when I'm on the square, let alone when I'm prowling around casing banks for you."

JANES took a long, swaggering step that brought him within a foot of Klinker. "Listen, greeny, who the hell you think you are? Duck out of the racket, eh? Leave the gang flat? Knowin' what you know and then talkin' of duckin' out? Hell, I thought that a sap like that run up the trees in the spring! Listen, Klinker, when you're in, you're in."

Klinker nodded. "I know how you feel. I know plenty about you and Steve. But you know I keep my mouth shut. I'll clear out of town if you'll sleep better."

Janes made a flat-handed gesture and swung his back on Klinker. "Nuts! You know damned well there's only one way out after you're in. That's surrounded by silver handles, with a wreath on your belly readin' 'From the Boys.' Sure, you're clean, now. But you won't stay that way. If that Jane loves you enough to disappoint the other guys for the rest of her life, she'll take you as is. You don't have to wear a halo to aisle it with a dame."

Klinker's jaw muscles worked in and out. He took a threatening step toward Janes. "You can go to hell, Gee-Gee. I'm through. On the straight from now on. I'm no squealer, but if you want to lose sleep over thinking I am, you can, and to hell with you!"

Janes faced Klinker; shrugged his shoulders, spread his hands. His voice was softer, deadlier, X thought. "It isn't like you was a rat, Klinker. But I know how stuff is. I been around. No, you ain't goin' to squeal, not now. But wait till you're feedin' the wife on twenty a week of clean money. And then the wife says she's goin' to have a kid. Hell, it happens. And on twenty a week you can't afford a kid. It's pretty damned easy to sell out to the cops—sell every damned thing you know about your old pals, just so that kid can

come squallin' through and grow up to be a nice big yellow punk like his old man!"

Klinker's fists clenched. Probably before he knew it, his right arm flung out and his big, capable fist had met Gee-Gee's jaw. Gee-Gee went back on his heels and into a crouch. His right hand went behind him and opened a drawer. Gee-Gee straightened. He was breathing hard. The scar across his chin might have been drawn with chalk. He had an automatic in his fist.

"Quit, eh? Okeh, you'll quit. Like I said, you'll quit. You're takin' it in the belly now!"

Klinker took a step backwards. "Okeh," he said hoarsely. "You aren't throwin' a scare into me. I don't want to go to my girl if I don't go clean. Shoot, you rotten, yellow killer!"

To Agent X, there was nothing more admirable than the killer with the courage to quit, to face the silence created by the gun-thunder of gang law. And though he jeopardized his own plans, reduced the value of his own life to a fraction of a cent, he vowed that Klinker would have his chance.

The boyish lips that were a part of the Agent's disguise, curved into a merry grin. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his photographer's flash-lamp.

CHAPTER III

BLOODY ALLIANCE



HOLD that pose, Gee-Gee, for a front page spread!"

As he said that, Agent X sprang through the door, the flash-lamp held high above his head.

A startled snarl from Janes. Undoubtedly he fancied himself already pictured in the papers, gun

in hand, brown eyes tempered to killer's hardness. He swung his gun slightly to cover Agent X, but before he could pull the trigger the flash-lamp had blown.

Under cover of intense light that momentarily blinded Janes, X dropped his lamp and sprang straight at Gee-Gee. He grabbed at Janes' gun, but got him by the wrist, forced the gun up toward the ceiling. His right arm lashed around Janes' hard waist. He gripped the man so close that Janes' left-handed blows to the body were too short to do any damage.

The Agent's head ducked, came up against Janes' chin. He bent his opponent backward as they reeled across the floor, legs tangling, each trying to throw the other. Out of the tail of his eye, X saw another man bound into the room, gun in hand. He tried to swing Gee-Gee around as a shield against Janes' henchman's gun, but before he could do so, the gun had blasted.

But the bullet was not for Agent X. Klinker, a little stunned at first by the Agent's surprise entrance, had launched himself at the newcomer, striking the man waist high in a flying tackle that sent both sprawling to the floor, fighting for the gun.

As he struggled with Janes, there was a grim smile on the Agent's lips. Klinker had been worth saving. He was a capable fighter, and evidently not without gratitude for the risk X had taken in his behalf.

Unexpectedly, Gee-Gee lurched to bring X back against the wall. X straightened. For a moment the terrific pressure he had applied to Janes' backbone relaxed. In that moment Janes again tried to bring his gun into play, only to have his right arm whipped down straight to his side where X forced it in beside him and bent it slowly, surely, up toward the small of Gee-Gee's back.

Janes' round face was streaming the sweat of agony. The strength of the Agent's arm was nothing like anything he had ever encountered. He dropped the gun, crying out

in pain. Desperately he broke away, only to put himself within range of the Agent's flying right fist, which connected in a blow to the jaw that rammed Janes clear across the room to crash backwards into the wall and slide to the floor.

X followed his advantage. He was fighting desperately against time. The racket was bound to bring police, in spite of the modern sound-proofing of the apartment. And X had not yet given up hope of carrying out his original plan of impersonating Janes.

Gee-Gee rallied, came up from the floor like a Jack-in-the-box. His hasty left jab fell short, and the spent force of the blow only served to fling him into a pile-driver blow to the heart that sent him backwards with such force that the back of his head cracked into the wall.

Somewhere, there was a pistol shot. As Gee-Gee went down unconscious, X flashed a look to his left and saw the tangle of arms and legs that was Klinker and his opponent, relax partially.

Klinker scrambled away from his opponent, stared in horror at the writhing man on the floor. X grasped the situation in a moment. Klinker's opponent had regained his gun, only to have it go off unexpectedly with its muzzle turned toward its owner.

The gunman's shirt already was stained with blood.

Klinker was like a wooden image, he was that frightened.

X stepped to Klinker's side, dropped on one knee, took a quick look at the wound in the man's chest. "Not a chance," he whispered. "Take it easy, Klinker. It was self-defense."

Klinker, his chubby face white, could not take his eyes off the dying man. "Never killed a guy before," he kept saying.

"And didn't now," X cut in. "Get a grip on yourself. Shut that door."

NOTHING but the tremendous will power of Agent X could have galvanized Klinker into action at that moment. But as he heard the authoritative ring of X's voice and felt the thrust of those steely eyes, he realized that his entire future depended upon obeying his rescuer's slightest command. He slammed the door of the living room.

"Quiet now," X cautioned, then went to the table where stood the phone and picked it up.

Klinker witnessed a miracle, or rather heard one. From the boyish lips of this man who had saved him from Janes' gun, came the voice of Gee-Gee Janes! X hadn't listened to Gee-Gee speak without memorizing his every vocal inflection. The impersonation was perfect.

"Yeah?" he snarled into the transmitter. Then his voice softened slightly. "Oh, Sheila. How're yah, angel... What's that?... Well, what's the game?"

X listened a moment, frowning. Somewhere in the street below, a police whistle was screaming. Every second counted, yet he had to listen patiently to what Sheila Landi was saying, and keep every trace of excitement out of his voice.

"Wait," he said to the girl. He pressed the transmitter against his chest, said to Klinker: "Can you bust a safe? I mean, did you ever crack one before you decided to go straight?"

"Yes, but—"

X rapped into the phone transmitter: "Sure, Sheila. Got what you want right here. Meet you in an hour. With those eyes of yours shootin' at my ticker, I could crack the U. S. mint like a tin-can bank."

X hung up. Snapped his fingers, pointed at the stunned Klinker. "I said, come out of it. Those footsteps on the stairs aren't butterflies. They're bulls. Pick up Gee-Gee. Follow me."

Klinker shook his head. "I'm stayin'. I'm takin' the rap. Maybe I can get off on a self-defense. I gotta come clean for the girl.

I'm kickin' out. I'm goin' straight."

X seized Klinker's shoulder. His eyes needled the man's brain. "I am a secret agent of the federal government. You want to go straight, so do as I say. I'm giving you a chance. Bring Gee-Gee over here."

Klinker moved to obey. X dropped beside the dead man on the floor, pulled the gun that had killed him from the limp fingers, hastily polished its butt with his handkerchief. Then, as Klinker dragged the unconscious Janes to X, the Agent pressed the butt of the newly cleaned gun into Janes' hand.

Certain that he had established a nice set of fingerprints that would tell the law that Janes was a murderer in irrefutable terms, X removed the gun from Janes' hand and tossed it to the floor. Janes' own gun, X put into his pocket. Then he tiptoed to the door and looked out into the hall.

Somebody was running up the front steps—a cop. X sprang into the hall, beckoned Klinker to follow. "And," he whispered, "bring Janes."

In the hall, they kept close to the wall, moved cautiously toward the back steps, by means of which X had entered the building. X had Janes' gun in his hand. His body was covering Klinker and Klinker's deadweight burden. His eyes were on the front stairway. He saw the flash of the shield on the cop's cap as it bobbed over the top of the steps. He swung around, shoved Klinker through the open door and into a bedroom, which must have adjoined Janes' living room.

Klinker was breathing noisily. "Another cop comin' up back," his whisper panted. "Sure this is on the up-and-up?"

"No questions," X snapped.

They were hemmed in, one cop coming up the front and another up the back. X glanced around the room. There was one door opening into Janes' living room, and two windows. Neither window was accessible from the outside by fire escape. On the other side of the door, opening into the hall was an

open electric-light socket.

X slipped to the other side of the door, held Janes' gun lightly by pressing thumb and fingers against the hard rubber grips, and thrust the barrel into the open socket so that it contacted both elements at once. There was a blue-white flash of light, then instant darkness throughout the house.

KLINKER breathed an oath, and a police flashlight lanced the darkness and fingered along the hall. X slipped to the doorway, waited, Janes' gun still in his hand. As the cop, who had approached from the rear, came abreast of the door, Agent X stepped quickly into the hall and lashed up with the barrel of the automatic to the cop's temple. The cop dropped his flashlight to the floor and fell limply into X's arms.

The Agent let the cop slide to the floor, saying to Klinker as he did so:

"Make for the back stair with Gee-Gee. I'll cover."

Klinker was on his way. The cop who had entered the building by the front way had turned his light into the living room. He would spot the body, lose a moment in so doing, and give X and his companion a chance to run for it. But as Klinker gained the back steps, the cop came out of Janes' living room and turned his light down the hall. The beam struck the Agent as he backed toward the steps.

X sent a gunshot high over the cop's head. That leaden waning was enough to compel the policeman to turn out his light. But the cop retaliated with a shot that came dangerously close to the Agent's head.

X jumped down onto the stairs, slammed the door at the top of the steps and legged down after Klinker, who had already gained the garage. X opened the back door of the sedan, motioned Klinker to get Janes into the car.

"Get in with him," the Agent ordered. "Keep an eye on Gee-Gee, for there's no

calculating the thickness of his skull. Might come to."

He got into the front seat and kicked the starter. As the motor thrummed, the cop was on the stairway. X had the car in reverse. It shot backward with a neck-breaking jerk, just as the cop gained the garage.

The cop shot. His slug spider-webbed the shatter-proof windshield, sang over X's ducked head and drilled through the top of the car. Before the sedan had stopped moving backwards, X forced the grinding transmission into low, spun the wheel, gave the car the gun. The sedan missed the drive incline entirely, headed along the sidewalk, to bounce from the curb into the street.

Police slugs traced them down the street, spanged from the fenders and top. But, miraculously, gas tank and tires escaped. Given a break like that, a bat out of hell could not have followed a car driven by Agent X.

Klinker leaned over the back of the front seat as soon as they were comparatively out of danger. "Say, mister, don't get it I'm not thankful for how you pulled me out of a hole tonight, but what is this? You say you're a Fed, then you have a gun battle with the bulls. I gotta know what's what."

"No," said X shortly. "If you're in this with me, the first thing you learn is not to ask questions, no matter how just they may seem. But I realize how you feel. You want to go straight. I heard your conversation with Janes. That's the only reason I moved to help you out. But think a little. If I were a crook, would I ask a guy like you, who wants to quit crime, to help me out?"

"Nope."

"Naturally I wouldn't. But if it will soothe your conscience, I'll tell you this much: I'm going to get in on the inside of something bigger and blacker than any racket Steve Hackman or Gee-Gee Janes ever hatched. I don't know what that is, but I want you in with me. You'll understand why, a little later. We'll work like criminals, as though we were

part of a gang.”

“I got it,” said Klinker. “And in the end turn the Feds loose on the gang. Say, mister, you’re regular, I got that all right. I owe you my life. I’m with you, but I know you aren’t takin’ me into the Feds. They don’t work that way. You’ve got to train and pass examinations and—”

“Stop worrying,” X interrupted. “You help me with this job, and I’ll see that you are jake with the law. You just killed a man in self-defense. Didn’t I fix it so there’s not a shred of evidence against you? It looked queer, maybe. If they ever catch Janes and give him a murder rap, it’s just what Janes has coming to him. He’d have killed you tonight and done an expert job because he’s had plenty of practice. A lot of things we’ll do may look queer. But remember, we’re fighting crime with its own weapons. We’ve just got to think quicker, draw sooner, create more clever deceptions than crime does. Inevitably, we’ll bring about justice.

“Tonight you may have to help me crack a safe. I don’t know why, but you’ve got to do it just as you would if I were Gee-gee Janes telling you to do it. I assure you that anything of value stolen will be returned to the proper owner.”

And that was really all that X knew of the adventure ahead. Sheila Landi had called Janes’ apartment to ask Janes to meet her in his car and bring a safe expert along. And X, impersonating Janes, intended to comply with Sheila’s demand with the sole purpose of worming his way into the confidence of Sheila or whoever was heading the mob with which she was associated.

It was doubly dangerous. Sheila had penetrated X’s disguises, apparently. Perhaps even after he had disguised himself as Gee-Gee Janes, she would still be able to see through his makeup. Furthermore, to insure Klinker’s safety, X had framed Janes for murder, which made an impersonation of Janes even more perilous. But danger was the

spice that made living enjoyable to X. He welcomed it. Could he, however, rely on Klinker?

CHAPTER IV

BEAUTY’S X-RAY EYES



ALWAYS, before he attempted an investigation in a city, outside New York, Agent X established a number of hideouts, renting rooms in out-of-the-way places, fitting doors and windows with special locks to insure secrecy, and stocking closets with clothes, makeup materials and scientific defensive weapons.

He had such a hideout above a drug store on Halstead Street. It was a two-room apartment, cheap and dirty, and the only living quarters in the tiny corner building.

He brought the yellow car to a halt in front of this building. The drug store had long since closed, and there were no loafers in sight.

X got out, hoisted Janes on his shoulders, and told Klinker to follow him. They went up a stairway of sunken treads into that smelly little hole that was to be the birthplace of another makeup miracle.

“You’ll wait here in the front room until I call you,” he informed Klinker. “When I call, come into the back room—and don’t be surprised at anything.”

His first action, once he was out of Klinker’s sight, was to stretch out Gee-Gee Janes on the bed. Janes was showing signs of reviving, but X soon put an end to that with a shot of a powerful narcotic in Janes’ arm. Then he turned a small dressing table around, so that he could keep an eye on Janes and on the triple mirror set up on the table.

He opened an elaborate kit of makeup

material on the dressing table. Next he removed a portion of the plastic material which covered his face, added more to the cheek and chin, rounding it out until the contours were similar to the cheeks of Janes. Quickly the turned-up nose, which had been a part of his disguise, was shaped into an exact replica of Janes' nose. Then he began adding brown pigment to the plastic on his face, shading it delicately with his fingers until it resembled Janes' dark complexion. The scar on the chin was easy to duplicate,

for he had only to crease the plastic and whiten the crease with special pigment.

The addition of a toupee of fine, black hair, pressed on over his head after his own hair had been slicked back, completed the picture.

From a closet he selected a black, double-breasted coat that was just a little too tight across the shoulders. He tightened the buttons of the coat at the waist.

*They were held together
by the frame*



X then leaned over the bed, studied the man's face closely. Next the Agent gave his lips an elongated line with a stick of coloring matter making them similar to Janes. A single drop of some chemical of his own compounding in each eye, gave X's gray irises a darker cast, so that they resembled the eyes of his prisoner. A final touch to the eyebrows, a glance in the mirror, and he was all ready. Secret Agent X had become Gee-Gee Janes, racketeer.

X swaggered to the door, for even movements were studied imitations of those of Janes'. He opened the door and called to Klinker, using the voice that had been associated with his disguise as the reporter.

Hunker came in, turned white, looked as though he were about to land his fist in the center of X's face. But he checked that impulse when X spoke:

"I think I've passed the test. I look so much like Janes that you had an uncontrollable desire to give me a poke. Well—" and instantly his voice assumed the characteristic inflections of the voice of Janes—"take a gander at the guy on the bed, pal. I got a wad of dough that says you can't tell one of us from the other!"

Klinker sagged limply into a chair. For fully twenty seconds he stared at Agent X. Then he stammered: "You—you're the guy that—that—"

X nodded. "I'm the guy."

"I mean, you're the guy with a thousand faces."

"Never counted them, but I've been called that, among other names not so complimentary."

"Say!" Klinker gasped. "You're Mr. X, the guy nobody knows, the guy no mobster wants to know. You mean I'm goin' to work for you? Hell, you give me the creeps."

X laughed shortly. "You'll get over it. We haven't a whole lot of time. We've got to help a lady crack a safe. That's where you come in. You ought to make pretty good

atmosphere for the impersonation of Mr. Gee-Gee Janes. So as soon as you get out of your trance, we'll get started."

Agent X busied himself making sure that his pockets contained none of the special devices he usually employed. If he was going to impersonate Janes he must use no weapon that Janes would not use. Much as he disliked lethal weapons, there were few that could handle an automatic better than he. So it was Janes' heavy gat he slipped into the gun clip under his arm.

IT was near the edge of Morgan Park that X had agreed to meet Sheila Landi. The woman was waiting in a small coupé and waved at them.

X stopped. In the illumination from the street lamp he wondered if his disguise would stand the test of her scrutiny. He motioned to Klinker to get over into the back seat. He leaned out of the car, smiled widely. "Say, angel-eyes, you waitin' for a boy friend?"

Sheila Landi gave him a dazzling smile as she stepped quickly into the car. "Yes—and I've found him. You're right on time, Gee-Gee. And the man in the back—"

"Best can opener in town, Sheila. Why, the first thing a prospective bank depositor asks is, can Klinker push in the vault. Now, what's the job, Sheila? I'm goin' into this blind. Don't know how come, unless it's the brilliance of those eyes of yours that's got me in a daze."

Sheila laughed a little. Then her deep-blue eyes became serious. "You're perfectly certain you want to go into this? There's no getting out, you know."

"Who'd want to get out, as long as you're mixed up in it, baby? You just say where to, and if it's to hell, it's okeh by me."

"Turn right at the next corner," she directed. "Do you know where the Albert Loeb's house is?"

"Loeb's! Say, angel this is a fancy job. That where we're goin'? Why didn't you let

me know, and I'd worn a soup-and-fish." X glanced back at Klinker. "Can you feature that? It'll be like openin' a trunk, won't it, Klink?"

"I'd have liked to case the joint first," said Klinker.

"Don't worry," Sheila said, "because that's all attended to. Loeb's is away. There are only a few servants, and I imagine they have been taken care of."

"Who's doin' the care-takin'?" X asked.

"Sabin," Sheila told him. "You haven't met him yet."

X was very glad she told him. He asked. "Who's Sabin?"

"Your boss," she told him, "if you go into this thing."

"And what are we goin' in after?" X persisted.

Sheila shook her head. "Sabin knows. There's something in that safe that Sabin needs for his cause... But here we are. That old English place on the hill—turn right in the drive. It circles the house, so we'll be headed for a quick getaway."

X squinted up at the tall stone peaks of the great Loeb's mansion. Every window was dark. He wondered if perhaps Leo Madvig wasn't right when he had accused Detective Fred Poole of stealing his invention for Al Loeb's. Perhaps this invention was housed in Loeb's safe. If it was all that Madvig claimed it to be, it was probably worth a small fortune to any one interested in the manufacture of munitions.

But was this Sabin an ordinary criminal? Or was he the director of some political society bent on revolution? Sheila Landi was hardly the sort to associate with ordinary criminals.

X brought the car to a stop in front of the big house. Sheila got out. X slid across the seat and followed her to the cement terrace extending in front of the door. Klinker, burdened with burglar's tools, got out more slowly. Then, as they approached the door,

Klinker stopped, grasped X's arm.

"Matter?" X whispered.

"Funny sound. Somebody moving through the bushes."

SHEILA, her arm linked with the Agent's, surged him forward. X's eyes were fastened on the door. On either side were tall, shadowy figures.

"Say, Sheila, what is this?" X asked. "A masquerade? Those guys up there by the door—they got black masks on."

"Don't be alarmed," she whispered. "They're Sabin's guards."

She approached the motionless, masked figures boldly. In the dim light, X could see that the guard's arms were crossed; that each held a revolver in his right hand.

Sheila addressed one of the motionless figures. "Has Sabin arrived?"

The masked head nodded. "He's behind you."

X, Klinker and the woman turned. The white ray of a flashlight was turned directly on their faces. Behind the light, X was conscious of the close scrutiny of a pair of cruel, keen eyes.

"So," came a sibilant whisper. "It is Mr. Janes. Look on my face, Janes. I want you to know me. Once you have met me, you will find me hard to forget."

The flashlight turned, speared upwards, and fell across the face of the man called Sabin.

Klinker gasped, and even Agent X could scarcely suppress an exclamation of surprise. Never had he seen such a face. Strings of greasy, black hair fringed from beneath the brim of a wide, black hat. Cruel, thick lips snarled back from set, sharp teeth. The jaw muscles were exaggerated lumps of power; the chin was a sharp, determined prow. From one high cheekbone a pink scar jagged down into a sunken cheek. Sabin's nose was large, crooked. His eyes were as white as china, save for extremely small irises of jet black.

"Yeah," said X softly. "How're yah?"

Laughter hissed from between Sabin's wolfish teeth. "To work, then. Here is the key, obtained from Mr. Loebs' chauffeur."

He handed the key to X, who fitted it into the lock, turned it, opened the door. Then X, Klinker, the two guards, and Sheila stepped over the threshold. Sabin followed and boldly turned on the light.

Inside the house, Sheila took the lead, moving with swift, fearless steps along the hall. In her short-skirted, tailored suit of gray, she was very like some business woman approaching her office. Absolutely sure, perfectly confident, she walked directly to a polished oak door. There she paused, seemed to be listening to the footsteps of the men as their heels clicked across the bare floor. Hand on the knob of the door, she turned quickly, gasped.

The woman's deep-blue eyes flickered from face to face. It seemed to X that some of the color had drained from her smooth cheeks.

"Something the matter, Sheila?" Sabin asked.

Sheila said nothing, turned, opened the door. Beyond was a library walled with books and centered by a large desk. In one corner of the room stood a large, old-fashioned safe. On the wall beside it hung a heavily framed portrait of the founder of the Loebs' business. Sheila went to the safe, turned, waited, her eyes fixed on those of Agent X.

"Well," said Sabin, "you know why you are here, Janes. This man with you I presume, can manage the safe?"

X turned to Klinker. "How about it? Looks like a cheese box to me."

Klinker nodded. "Sure, boss."

The Agent said: "Klinker was openin' that sort of a crib when most guys his age were bustin' their china-pig banks to get pennies."

He took hold of Klinker's arm and steered him toward the safe, and together they knelt

in front of the steel door. Sheila knelt beside X, resting her hand gently on his arm. Sabin and his two bodyguards came closer.

Klinker twirled the combination dial. Then he turned, grinned at X.

"You was right, boss. Cheese box. So old I can feel it out."

KLINKER slowly rotated the knob, "feeling" for the click of the tumblers with his thick, capable fingers that seemed too coarse for such delicate work. Five minutes clicked by. Then Klinker uttered a sigh of satisfaction and swung back the door.

"The papers," Sabin said eagerly. "Give them to me."

"What papers?" asked Klinker.

"All of them, fool. Hurry!"

Sabin leaned forward eagerly while Klinker scooped long, official-looking envelopes from the pigeon-holes in the safe. Perhaps, thought X, Sabin searched for the plans of Leo Madvig's stolen weapon.

Sabin took the papers, and was hastily looking through them, when Sheila's tapering fingers squeezed X's arm. The Agent turned. His eyes met the lovely, wise ones of Sheila Landi—those beautiful X-ray eyes. Her red lips were scarcely moving. She was whispering very low as she had in the bar of the Ayreshire Hotel that night:

"I warned you, remember? There is no end but death. You are not Gee-Gee Janes."

X jerked a quick breath. Again, the mystery woman had penetrated his disguise. He was trapped. If those lovely red lips spoke to Sabin, they spoke of death for Agent X. But they must not speak.

The Agent's right hand slipped up the front of his coat. His fingers crept inside, closed on the butt on Janes' gun. He withdrew it swiftly, and under cover of the outswung safe door, thrust the barrel of the gun in under Sheila's left arm.

X's eyes answered the girl's whisper, and if ever there was murder in the Agent's eyes,

it was there now. He was hoping that his silent threat would keep her quiet, for nothing in the world could have compelled him to pull that trigger.

"Sabin," said Sheila softly, her eyes fixed on the Agent's face, her breast rising and falling rapidly.

"Ah, this is it," Sabin muttered as he singled out an envelope and thrust it into his pocket. The rest of the papers he flung back into the safe.

"Sabin," Sheila repeated.

X pressed his gun closer into the girl's soft flesh.

"Yes?" Sabin smiled at Sheila.

"Sabin, you must be extremely careful in choosing your associates. You never can tell when Secret Agent X will turn up disguised as one of your confederates."

Sabin nodded. "But as long as I have you, pretty lady, I have no fear of Agent X. Can you identify him?"

Sheila looked straight at Agent X. She nodded. "I can identify him anywhere and at any time, regardless of what disguise he might assume."

CHAPTER V

THE SOCIETY OF ASSASSINS



AGENT X could not have been more uncomfortable mentally, had he been seated on the top of a volcano. Sheila's uncanny sense had penetrated his disguise, and she was about to make his identity known to Sabin. Furthermore, she was taunting him with her blue eyes, knowing, full well that he would not shoot her; knowing, too, that she held the power of life and death over him.

However, Sabin seemed utterly unaware

of what the girl was driving at as he patted the inner pocket of his coat, where the stolen paper rested, and said: "Close the safe, Janes."

X closed, locked the safe. He stood up, the automatic resting in the palm of his right hand, which was flat against his side. His eyes were on those of the lovely blonde who seemed about to betray him.

"We'll go," announced Sabin. "A very profitable evening, gentlemen. Janes, I am quite pleased with you and your assistant. Sheila tells me that you are interested in our society." He opened the hall door as though he owned the house and bowed them all out. Then he followed and closed the door.

"Boss," said Klinker huskily, "didn't we turn this light on when we came in?"

The hall was dark; yet, as Klinker had said, the light had been turned on when they entered.

Sabin cursed. A switch clicked, and spreading across the hall, appeared a line of four men, each with a gun in his hand. And one of these men was Private Detective Fred Poole, as unwashed and unshaven as ever.

"Drop the guns!" rapped Poole. "Gotcha covered."

One of Sabin's guards dropped his gun. The other tried to bring his up to shooting position, but it was immediately shot from his hand by one of Poole's men. The Agent simply slipped the gun he carried into his right-trouser pocket and raised his empty hands above his head.

Sabin glared. If looks could have killed, that look from Sabin's china eyes would have disintegrated Fred Poole. Nevertheless, Sabin, too, feared guns, and raised his hands.

"Fools!" Sabin hushed at his guards. "Why didn't you shoot? My instructions have always been—"

"You're not givin' instructions," said Poole. "When Al Loebs hires Fred Poole to keep one eye open, Fred Poole keeps both eyes open. You birds just backstep where you

came from. Let's see what you were up to, before we call the cops. You look like a crowd of nuts to me. A she-burglar, a couple of Ku-Klux, and—Well, I'm a dirty whatcha-call-it, if it isn't Gee-Gee Janes and his prize can opener. How're yah, Gee-Gee? Cops have been waitin' a long time to catch you. We'll see what Al's safe looks like."

They were backed into the library, Poole's men knotting tighter and tighter around them. Agent X retreated a little faster than the others, much to Poole's delight. For he had always claimed that Gee-Gee Janes was yellow. X did not stop backing until he was against the wall.

The Agent was in a tight squeeze. Though he had no reason to love Poole, he didn't care to start a gun battle. He hated killing of any sort, and if Poole and his tough operatives opened up with those gats, some one would get killed. His disguise had forbidden him to carry any of his special non-lethal weapons. If he did not assist Sabin to escape, there was the chance that Sabin would escape without assistance, to carry on the work he had begun, whatever that work might be. And X was pretty certain that a man of Sabin's appearance could not have any very beautiful thought for any one's future. If he could, however, help Sabin out, he stood a chance of getting in on the workings of Sabin's society in spite of what Sheila Landi might threaten to do.

THE KNUCKLES of X's upraised hands touched the heavy frame of the portrait of the founder of the Loebs fortune. At almost the same time, Poole and one of his men stepped forward, ahead of the other two, undoubtedly with the idea of searching their captives. To take immediate advantage of the breaks fate offered, had long been a motto of Secret Agent X. Instantly, his upraised hands grasped the portrait at the bottom, lifted it from its hook, swung the heavy picture over his head and down.

It was probably the last thing Poole expected the man he supposed to be Gee-Gee Janes to do. He shot, yes, but his shot drilled into the floor as the picture frame struck his extended gun arm a brain-stunning blow. The old canvas of the picture split over the heads of both Poole and his assistant. They were hooped by the heavy frame, half blinded by dust and lint from the riddled canvas. Their arms were helpless at their sides, held by the heavy frame.

But Agent X did not release his hold on the frame. No sooner had he flung it over the two men's heads, than he charged forward with every ounce of driving power in his lithe body. The two detectives, rimmed tightly together, stumbling over each other, were rammed into the two detectives behind them. One of the men behind them hit the floor. The other, twisting aside, was in a position to shoot.

"Nail that guy, Klink!" X roared.

Klinker swung his bag of burglar tools above his head and let it fly. The bag struck the man in the throat, all but knocking him down, and completely spoiling his aim. X gave the picture frame a final shove, which sent Poole and his aide tumbling over a chair. X's right hand whipped out the gat in his pocket, and a single, well-placed slug knocked out the library light.

Sabin, Sheila, and the two masked men were already racing down the front hall. X pushed Klinker ahead of him, gained the hall, snapped out the light.

"Get to the car, Klinker!" he snapped. "I'll hold 'em!"

Then, standing at one side of the door, he kept a flying curtain of lead crashing in a straight line in front of the library door. Any one in the room who risked passing through that door, was a potential suicide.

When the others were clear of the house, X managed his own retreat. He zigzagged down the hall, running ahead of flying lead from the library. One slug all but dislodged

his toupee. He straightened it with one hand as he sprang through the front door. He slammed the door behind him, found that the key Sabin had used was still in the lock, paused long enough to give it a twist before dashing for the car.

Klinker was behind the wheel, with Sheila beside him. Sabin and his two men were in the back. X jumped on the running board as Klinker let the clutch slap in, and then he crowded next to Sheila.

No one said anything until the Loeb's house was many blocks behind. Then Sabin said very softly:

"Turn back toward town. Go to the twenty-three hundred block on Wentworth. You, Mr. Janes, deserve the thanks of the society. Tonight you saved Sabin's life."

"Hell," X said, allowing Janes' characteristic air of bravado to creep into his voice, "I'd do the same for any pal."

Agent X glanced down at Sheila. Her blue eyes met his, and like deep pools, they seemed to ripple with silent laughter. Still, she did not speak the words that X feared.

NOTHING more was said until they reached Wentworth Avenue. There, in the heart of Chinatown, Sabin ordered Klinker to stop the car in front of a darkened Chinese gift shop.

"We shall leave the car," Sabin told them. "It will be taken care of so that there is no chance of its being traced. You will follow me to the council chambers of the Society of Assassins."

"Cripes," whispered Klinker to X as they got to the sidewalk, "the guy's nuts!"

X said nothing, but he had an idea that Klinker was not far wrong. There was something of the madman in Sabin; something, too, of genius—sinister and thoroughly unscrupulous genius.

They entered an alley. Sabin paused in front of a shabby doorway and took a key from his pocket.

"Understand," he said in his soft, sibilant voice, "we are not Orientals. We represent quite different interests. However, we do appreciate the traditional ability of the Oriental to hold his tongue. So we have leased this hiding place from the honorable Fung Ho. Few know of its existence, though old police records give it much attention. Years ago it was a secret place of black smoke, where Fung Ho's ancestors dispensed opium. But those days have gone by. Now this hidden house is our sanctuary."

"Janes, you and your man have pleased me. Enter, if you will, the House of Assassins."

Sabin opened the door and entered, waiting for the others to follow. Agent X looked down at Sheila Landi. She was very close to his side, so close that he was conscious, even in the gloom, of the contours of her svelte body.

"I warned you," she said, very softly, then stepped ahead to join Sabin.

X found himself in a small, dirty pantry, where Chinese sausages hung from the low ceiling. Across the room, Sabin was pulling out a large cupboard mounted on rollers. Behind the cupboard was a door that yielded to Sabin's key, revealing a long, black shaft and narrow stairway. X followed Sheila boldly into the stairwell, with Klinker behind him, clinging to the Agent's coat tails and muttering under his breath.

At the bottom of the steps was a narrow passage some forty feet beneath the surface of the street. Its walls were lined with blocks of stone, lichen-covered and sparkling with moisture in the light of Sabin's torch.

At the end of the passage was another door, guarded by two black-clad, masked men. The guards gave Sabin a flat-handed salute as he and his party were allowed to pass.

Then they were in a long, low chamber lighted dimly by electric bulbs. At one end was a modern office desk; at the other, a low

platform supported a heavy, thronelike chair. Behind the chair a curtain of flame-colored velvet was spread across the width of the room.

There were less impressive chairs ranged along the walls. Some of these were occupied by black-clad, black-masked figures. Behind the heavy office desk sat a man busily at work with pen and ledger. A silver "S" mounted on the brow of his mask designated him as secretary.

All in the room were talking in hushed tones, but these whisperings diminished into silence as Sabin strode the length of the room, mounted the platform, and sat down in the chair. Sabin had hid some of the hell in his hideous face by a white mask of celluloid that fitted his facial contours closely. He rapped with a gavel upon a small table at the side of his chair. The secretary arose.

"Honorable Sabin," came the secretary's muffled voice, "has your expedition been a success?"

"It has," said Sabin, "thanks to the work of our new brother, Mr. Janes. You will find a mask for Mr. Janes and for his assistant, Klinker, while I give them instructions. Sheila, you may go, if you wish. Accept our thanks."

Sheila Landi gave a sharp, almost frightened look, then quietly left the room as Sabin leaned forward and addressed Agent X and Klinker.

"JANES, you have tonight passed a door from which you may never wholly depart. For wherever you go, your soul shall be eternally devoted to our cause. We are not criminals. We do not fear the law. We stoop to murder only in extreme emergencies, either to attain our ends or to silence one who would betray us. And I may say that our members dare not think of treachery, as you will see."

"Sure, Sabin," X spoke boldly, "you know I ain't a squealer. But what's this all about?"

What's the racket?"

"Certain of your countrymen, Janes," Sabin went on, "are vitally interested in the cause I represent. Though you may not know it, certain of our South American republics are ready for the Great Change. The seeds of revolt are planted, yet the weeds of poverty may choke them before they are fully germinated. It is because of the Great Change that I live. Thousands in the other America are ready to strike, if they but be given the tools. It is to give them the tools that we, their sympathizers, have organized. Later, this new and greater form of government may displace this country's present democracy, but the United States is not yet ready. And since it is not ready, it is folly to suppose it would assist its brother republics to accomplish the Change.

"The blessings of peace are overrated in the United States. Your government has passed laws to place armaments under embargo. It is with the idea of furnishing our South American brothers with arms from your country that we have organized. Sympathizers are tithed for the cause. We are rich. Were it not for the laws of this country, we could supply the Army of the Great Change with splendid arms. And this we are determined to do, in spite of these laws.

"The best and most modern equipment," Sabin continued, "is manufactured in this city. We intend to force those manufacturers to comply with our wishes. That is all I have to say, except to impress you with the fact that here loyalty is exacted."

Sabin arose, turned so that he faced the flame-colored curtain. "Behind this curtain, Janes, is death—*the Death*. Nothing like it has ever before come from the brain of man. It is oblivion, it is complete destruction. It is the discontinuance of all mental and bodily function, all accomplished in the flicker of an eyelid. A Gorgonlike death of which great scientists have dreamed for years."

Sabin faced the Agent once more.

"Because of this death, *the Death*, no one in this room dares think of treason. Be warned. *There is no escape!*"

Majestically, Sabin stalked from the room.

To X, Klinker whispered: "He gives me the creeps. What kind of a racket is this—Black Legion stuff?"

X warned Klinker into silence. The secretary of the society was approaching. X struck a swaggering attitude typical of Gee-Gee Janes. "Say, brother secretary, what the hell is there in this for me? I thought you had a neat little racket here, jerking the suckers for a tenth of their income. All I get is a lot of Mumbo Jumbo about the Death. Hell, dyin' is dyin', hot seat or slug; what's the difference?"

"Do not joke about what hides behind that curtain," the secretary said in his muffled voice. "But," he added as he grasped X's hand, "there is money in this for you—and for you, too." He shook hands with Klinker. "Plenty of easy shekels. Wait."

THE secretary left them, and across the room, X saw Sheila standing in a doorway. Her blue eyes beckoned. The Agent left Klinker for the moment and hurried over to join the girl. In silence, she led him down a short, dark hall and into a tiny room, simply furnished. She faced him, placed both hands on his shoulders and eyed him steadily.

"Why did you persist in doing this thing, Agent X?" she whispered. "Why wouldn't you listen to my warning? Don't answer. No one better knows the courage and determination within you. But I tell you it is of no avail. You are lost, hopelessly lost. You voluntarily ended that career of service so well begun. There is no escape from Sabin's clutches—I *know*. Agent X, eventually, I will be forced to reveal your identity. Sabin knows tortures which have been lost to civilized minds. I could not bear up against them. He will force me to point you out. And then for you there is only death; for me,

eternal pain."

Smilingly, X took her hands in his. "Why, if you knew me, have you not betrayed me?"

Her eyelids veiled those deep-blue pools for a moment. "Because," she whispered, "I am a fool. But," she hurried on, "no less fool than you."

X shook his head. "Sabin may be a devil, but he's mad. This talk about death lurking behind that curtain—it's mostly talk. If there was such a death, he would not seek modern armaments for his revolutionary army."

"I have never heard Sabin make an idle threat," the girl said.

"Then, granting there is such a death, I promise you that I will not only engineer our escape, but also pull down the walls of Sabin's mad temple."

"No," Sheila contradicted. "For you will be apprehended. Understand that I alone, among millions, can identify you always."

"How?" he demanded.

Again the deep-blue eyes of Sheila became cryptic with a mysterious knowingness. Her only answer to the Agent's question was an inscrutable smile.

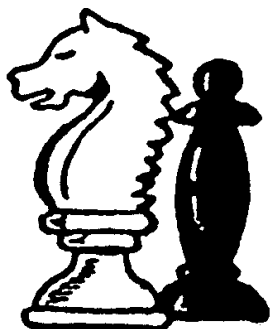
"Tell me, Sheila, what did Sabin take from Loeb's safe tonight?" the Agent asked, shifting his method of probing the girl.

"It was a written order," she explained, "for a new-type machine gun especially manufactured for the federal agents by the Loeb's plant. That order, signed by Al Loeb, will compel the men at the munitions plant to deliver these guns into the hands of the bearer of the note. You see, Sabin may be mad, but he is dangerous. Before morning, he will have those new and deadly weapons."

X shook his head, smiled. "No, my dear Sheila. Because Sabin or no Sabin, death or no death, I'm going to stop that order from going through."

CHAPTER VI

CHECKMATE CORPSE



AGENT X found Sabin awaiting him in the council chamber. Klinker and X were each handed a mask by one of the society members. Then Sabin put his strong, cruel fingers on X's arm and led him to one corner of the room. So steadily were those china-hard eyes fixed on the Agent, that he feared for a moment that his secret was known. Then Sabin smiled, or at least bared his pointed teeth.

"You are perfectly free to leave at any time, Janes," he said softly. "I might warn you that your footsteps will be dogged. Some of my men have peculiar nervous systems, so do nothing that would arouse their suspicion, and thus avoid a knife in the back."

X laughed. "Don't worry about me. I like to live. But say, I got to thinking what if Loeb discovered we ripped his can? He'll take a look, won't he? If he found that gun order missing, all he's got to do is phone his plant to toss a monkey wrench in your machinery."

The jagged scar on Sabin's cheek twisted as he curled his lips into a sneer. "Do not try to think for Sabin. When Loeb arrives at his house tonight, he will not live to phone his plant."

"A knife in the back?" Agent X shook his head. "No go, chief. A knife is too messy. It isn't sure. Listen, I'm a right guy. You don't trust me much farther than you can kick a brick with your bare foot. Let me prove my stuff by snuffin' out this Loeb the right way."

Sabin shook his head. "There are more subtle ways. Go. When you are needed again,

I shall communicate with you through my men. Remember, you will be followed."

"That's okeh by me," X shrugged, and swaggered across the council chamber, the dark eyes of masked assassins following him closely.

He opened the door, closed it behind him. The two masked guards silently took him by each arm. He looked from one to the other of the men. Neither spoke. Except for the scraping sound of their feet on the stone floor, they might have been shadows that accompanied him to the street. There they released him and melted back into the doorway of the Chinese gift shop that fronted the secret underground house.

But while the two guards had left him, X was certain that other members of the society followed. As he walked toward Twenty-second Street on Wentworth, he heard the whisper of padded feet behind him. But he ignored such sounds and continued to swagger along until he sighted a late taxi bouncing along the street.

X stopped, whistled it to the curb and flopped into the back seat. He gave the driver the address of the Loeb house, which he had left so hurriedly two hours before. There were no other taxi cabs on the street, and little chance of his shadowers keeping up with him now.

The cab had rolled only a little way, however, before X saw the gleam of yellow lights, like the eyes of a watchful cat, through the rear window of the cab. He shrugged his shoulders, settled back and lighted a cigarette. Sabin had long arms. The Secret Agent was not yet beyond their reach.

Half a block away from the Loeb house, he ordered the cab to stop. He got out, and walked boldly on until he reached Loeb's gate. He paused there, the car that had tailed his cab rolled slowly by. X tossed away his cigarette and walked briskly toward the house.

He found the front door unlocked. He

turned the knob as quietly as possible and walked in. Somewhere in the house a clock chimed half-past three. Yet in spite of the hour, Agent X knew Al Loeb's had visitors.

At the end of the hall, the living-room door was open. X went directly into it instead of turning into the library. There were three men in the living room: Leo Madvig, the startled-looking inventor; Fred Poole, Loeb's disheveled private detective, and a stout man whose sparse hair was white, whose mouth and sagging chops gave him something of the melancholy expression of a spaniel pup.

X recognized the melancholy man at once, and wondered at his being in Al Loeb's house; for he was Thomas Reedan, chief executive of a chemical manufacturing firm that rivaled Loeb's.

X remained in the hall, listening and watching. All three men were highly nervous. Madvig, with his two hands clasped in front of him, paced back and forth in front of the fireplace. His worn toothbrush of a mustache twitched. His prominent eyes rolled this way and that as though he was fearfully anxious about what might be lurking behind him.

Poole's unshaven, receding chin worked up and down as his teeth rabbit-nibbled tiny morsels from the end of a cigar. Then he growled at Thomas Reedan: "Can't sit here all night!"

"Absolutely not!" snapped Madvig, pointing at Poole. "I say I'm going to call the police. When they come, you're going to answer questions."

"Listen, pop-eyes," Poole worked out of one side of his mouth, "get that hallucination out of your head. I ain't denyin' that Loeb's hired me to keep an eye on you and get a load of what that new invention of yours is like. But I didn't steal it, and I never seen the damned thing. So go cut yourself a piece of cake."

"Cake?" Madvig asked dully. Then he

raked his fingers through his gray-yellow hair. "Bah! Why don't people speak English!" He started suddenly toward the telephone on the living-room table.

Thomas Reedan, heavy and helpless-looking in a huge chair, turned pleading eyes on Madvig. "No," he said, "Don't call the police. That would be murder. That would mean *my* murder. *They* will think that I called the police. They will kill me."

"Listen, Mr. Reedan," Poole said, "I tell you, you can't just sit here with a corpse in the house. It ain't done. He's bumped himself. You've got to inform the police. You didn't have anything to do with it, and neither did Madvig. So what the hell? Somebody's been threatening you, I suppose. But a threat don't mean a thing. I'm out of a job now. So why not just hire me as a watchdog? I won't let anybody harm you."

Reedan uttered a puffing sound through bulbous lips that was something like a refined Bronx cheer. "You? A fine bodyguard you are!"

Poole gestured helplessly. "I tell you he bumped himself. Is it my fault if a client chews on the wrong end of a gun?"

Poole's client? Did he mean Loeb's? X turned away from the living-room door and walked back to the library. He opened the door, stepped into the room and closed the portal behind him. Sitting at the desk, directly in front of a telephone, was a man. Dark, glassy eyes stared from beneath heavy, carefully-brushed eyebrows. His large, sharp nose was clotted with blood that had seeped from large, flaring nostrils. His mouth was a wide, raw-looking cavity that had spilled blood over chin, jaws, collar and shirt in a veritable beard of gore. His right hand, lying limply in his lap, was clasped on the butt of a revolver.

Al Loeb's lay dead. A man who had fought by fair means and foul, to keep Loeb's Munitions the leading arms manufacturers of the Middle West, had apparently put the

muzzle of a gun in his own mouth and pulled the trigger.

Sabin had promised that Loeb's would die. What sort of hellish fiend *was* Sabin, that he could influence men who stood in his way, to commit suicide without even approaching them?

AGENT X glanced toward the safe. It was standing open. Loeb's had discovered the missing order. Fearing that the guns prepared for federal men would fall into other hands, he had gone to the phone possibly to cancel the order. He had canceled the order and then committed suicide.

X bent over the corpse, stared into the glassy eyes. A whispered exclamation escaped his lips. The pupils of the eyes were constricted to the tiniest pin points. And he had found exactly the same condition in the eyes of Steve Hackman. What possible connection was there between the two men that both should apparently kill themselves in the same evening; that both should be marked by the same inexplicable constriction of the pupils?

There was but one answer: both Hackman and Loeb's had stood in some one's way.

The phone book was open on Loeb's desk. A telephone number was underlined—a number that X recognized immediately as that of the local office of the F.B.I. Had Loeb's been in time to cancel that machine-gun order? Had he phoned the Feds in hope of enabling them to trap Sabin's men who had acted on that order?

Agent X straightened. Thomas Reedan was terrified. He had been threatened. X had to have that man's confidence. He must know all the facts, if he was to check this weird assassin who held men's fate in the hollow of his hand. But as Gee-Gee Janes, he could hardly hope to gain the confidence of a man of Reedan's caliber.

He dropped into a chair, stooped over and twisted the heel from his left shoe. The heel

was hollow, and within that little compartment was a tube of makeup material. Small though it was, it was sufficient for an artist like X to effect a complete change of features. Fortunately, Loeb's complexion was very similar to that of Gee-Gee Janes.

His lean, graceful fingers worked quickly, reshaping the contours of his face, pinching the broad nose that was a part of the disguise as Janes, into the narrow beak that was like that of Al Loeb's. When he had finished, his face was a living replica of that of the dead man in the chair. For the rest of his impersonation he had to call on his memory for the exact tone of the well-known voice of Al Loeb's. His impersonation would not be perfect by any means, but it would be sufficiently so for his purpose.

He then went into the hall and walked with firm, quick steps into the Loeb's living room.

"Gentlemen!" the voice of the dead man rang from the lips of Agent X.

Madvig, Poole, and Reedan turned like puppets operated by the same string. Color drained from their faces. There was a marked unsteadiness about their legs. Then Fred Poole took a step forward.

"No," he said huskily, dashing a hand over his eyes. "No, I ain't goin' to believe it."

"And I'm not, either!" chimed in Madvig. "It's a twin brother!"

"No!" Reedan rocked his big body out of the chair. "It's Al Loeb's—Loeb's never had a brother."

X smiled slightly. "Do not be alarmed, gentlemen. If Loeb's is dead, I could not possibly be Loeb's. If he had a brother, I could not be his brother. Therefore—"

"Secret Agent X!" exploded Poole. His right hand crawled toward his pocket. His awed eyes were on the face of the man who confronted them.

X shook his head slightly. "Never mind the gun, Poole. I've come to help you. I must apologize for eaves-dropping a while ago. Mr. Reedan, I understand that some one has

threatened you. I am not of the police. So confide in me.

Reedan swallowed lumpily. "I—I—Oh, I've got to speak. I've harbored this fear long enough. I came here tonight to tell Mr. Loeb of the threats that hung above my head. I wanted to see if he had been approached in the same way. Some one, some one whose identity I do not know, threatens my life if I do not immediately hand over about fifty thousand dollars' worth of arms and munitions from our plant.

"I am to die tomorrow night at ten o'clock if I do not comply with that request. I am to die if I communicate with the police. If I do comply with the request, I'll be violating the law. Secret Agent X, can't you help me?" Reedan pleaded earnestly.

"I can only try," replied the Agent. His voice changed to the utter amazement of the three men. It became soft, low, musical—the natural speaking voice of Agent X. "I shall communicate with you again. Prepare to do exactly what this extortionist demands. And remember this voice. You will hear it again."

HE turned quickly, strode from the room, swung the living-room door shut and locked it. Because of Sabin's watchers, he dared not leave the house in any other identity than that of Gee-Gee Janes. He entered the library where was the corpse of Al Loeb. There, in front of a small mirror, he hastily regained the features of the gang boss, Gee-Gee Janes. For once he had attempted a disguise, it was a simple matter for him to duplicate it.

Lights from a car in the drive cut across the front window of the library. X turned out the light, went to the window and looked out. Across the lawn, two men scuttled into the shadows of the shrubbery—Sabin's watchers—and from the car that had just driven up, stepped two men. They were federal agents, come, no doubt, in answer to Loeb's call.

X had never been more completely trapped. If he faced the Feds as Gee-Gee Janes, he risked being arrested for murder—the murder of Janes' henchman. For when he had saved Klinker from Janes' gun, X had framed evidence against Janes for the accidental killing of Janes' henchman by Klinker. This he had done for Klinker's protection.

If he left the house in any other disguise than that of Janes, X would show his hand to Sabin's watchers. And he knew he could expect far less mercy at their hands than at the hands of the federal agents.

A desperate plan flashed into his brain—a plan which might end in the arrest of Sabin and those associated with him in the powerful murderers' society. He tore a piece of paper from a small pad on the desk, picked up a pencil and scribbled something across the face of the paper. Then his lean, skillful fingers rolled that paper into a small cylinder, which he thrust into the muzzle of the gun he carried—the gun belonging to Gee-Gee Janes.

CHAPTER VII

THE TORTURE FEST



PUTTING the gun into his pocket, X stepped swiftly into the hall. Behind him he could hear the pounding of clenched fists on the living-room door, which he had locked on Madvig, Poole and Reedan, in order that they might not observe his change of disguises.

He went to the front door, opened it and swaggered down the approach walk. Two men were coming toward him—the Feds. The Agent puckered his lips and began to whistle Gee-Gee Janes' favorite love song. He

paused, seemed to notice the two Feds for the first time. He reached for a cigarette, stuck it into his mouth, flamed it.

Match flame illuminated the moon face, the scarred-chin, the unmistakable features of Gee-Gee Janes.

One of the Feds whispered, "That's Janes!" and immediately sprang forward.

X whipped out Janes' gun. He was purposely a split second late in getting the gun out. He had no chance to level it before the G-man was grappling with him.

"Cops want you for murder, Gee-Gee!" snapped the Fed. At the same time he gave X's gun wrist a twist that disarmed the Agent without much trouble. X wanted the G-man to get hold of that gun, yet he wanted the struggle to look as genuine as possible because of the eyes of Sabin's watchers that were peering at him from the shadows.

The second G-man had drawn his gun and was coming to the assistance of the first. X had no desire that his body should be labeled with a ticket reading: "Died resisting arrest." He seized his capable opponent around the middle, lifted him bodily, swung him around so that he was between X and the second G-man. The man with whom he struggled was trying to get in a gun-barrel blow to the Agent's head, but for some reason he found this much more difficult than disarming X.

Again, X swung the man around as the second Fed approached from another angle. Then, as the second man brushed against a clump of shrubbery, a black-masked figure sprang from the shadows, an upraised gun in his hand. The second G-man turned halfway round, sensing danger, only to drop with a groan as the masked man landed his clubbed gun on the G-man's head.

X suddenly released his struggling opponent; ducked under a blow to the head, and shot a short left to the man's middle. The Fed backed, stumbled, hit the ground. X hurdled him, joined the masked man.

"Quick, boss, this way!"

It was Klinker's voice coming from behind the black mask. Sabin must have sent Klinker as one of those to trail the man he supposed to be Janes.

They scrambled through the bushes. Gun-lead traced them, slapping branches, rattling through leaves, whistling over their heads. They gained the open, raced toward the street. Through the gate, they turned to the right, ran perhaps two hundred feet, when a swift, silent car glided up beside them. The rear door sprang open.

"Get in, fools!" Sabin's sibilant whisper ordered.

X shoved Klinker ahead of him into the back seat of the car. Two bodyguards with drawn automatics were beside the hideous leader of the assassins. Klinker and X were crowded together upon the floor of the sedan.

"Janes," harshed Sabin, "whatever prompted you to go to Loeb's house? Klinker, you should be scourged with scorpions for assisting Janes to escape the federal men. Such a born fool does not deserve Sabin's protection."

"Now, listen, chief," said X to Sabin, "I was only doin' what I thought best. Youd'a' been in a sweet kettle of herring if Loeb's hadn't knocked himself off, now wouldn't you? I thought some of your knifers would mess things up, so I just went along to make sure Loeb's couldn't spoil that gun heist of yours."

"Idiot!" whispered Sabin. "You think to teach me my business? Do you suppose it was an accident that Loeb's chose to kill himself before he could cancel that gun order? I'll have you to understand that he killed himself because I *willed* him to!"

"Cripes!" Klinger breathed.

THE AGENT, however, himself an accomplished hypnotist, did not suppose for a moment that Sabin had accomplished Loeb's death through sheer strength of will. Sabin was mad.

"Get this, chief," he said, resolved to humor Sabin, "I got your cause deep down in the old liver. When I get thinking how badly those poor devils down in South America need your help, I'd just about do anything. I was thinking about them when I started out to fix Loeb's."

"Surely," said Sabin less harshly, "if it were not for the fact that your actions were prompted by true zeal, you would have tasted torture, possibly death. But beware of being over-zealous!"

"Well, I'm sure glad to know that the gun heist came off all right."

"Yes," said Sabin slowly, "but that is what it did not do—the guns were delivered into my men's hand upon presentation of the order. But less that a block from the plant, my men were held up by criminals and robbed. Do you see what that means, Janes?"

"Hijacked! I'll be damned!"

"Of course, you fool. But do you not see? It could not have happened, had it not been for the fact that there is a traitor in our society. How else would the thieves have known when we were to take the guns? And those blunderers who were sent for the weapons, what colossal idiots! They fired three shots, none of which drew blood. Then they were put into retreat. Ah, but some one is to pay for this!"

Sabin lapsed into moody silence until the car stopped at the hideout on Wentworth Avenue.

As they went again down the long stairway in to the underworld house, Klinker whispered to Agent X: "These guys ain't crimesters, boss. They're all of them hipped on this cause that Creepy Eyes keeps blabbing about. I got a look at some of them when you were gone. They're tough ones sure enough, but they aren't out after dough."

"Think you're right, Klinker," X whispered back. "I'd be sure you were, if it wasn't for the death of Steve Hackman. It fits in here somewhere. Hackman was a crime

lord. What would he have to do with the society if there wasn't money in it somewhere? But even if they are just political fanatics, they're murderers."

When they reached the council rooms below, X took Klinker to a secluded corner and sat down at a small card table. He picked up a deck of cards and pretended to interest his aide in a game. As he dealt the cards, he talked very quietly.

"The blow-up is coming, Klinker. We don't know how the cards are going to fall. I've laid a web to snare Sabin and his companions, but Sabin may be strong and smart enough to break through. We've got to look ahead. Sheila told me that sooner or later she would be forced to identify me. Sabin is an adept at torture, I understand. I'd believe anything of him after getting a squint at that face."

"Me too, boss."

"Then keep your eyes open. There's a traitor in his crowd somewhere. The blame may fall on me. He may try to force Sheila to point me out. Now if the worst comes and he turns the heat on Sheila, you are to betray me before he can harm the girl."

Klinker paled from chubby chin to that narrow rim of hair about his head. "Cripes, I can't do that, boss! Rat on you? Hell no!"

The Agent's eyes snapped. "Orders, Klinker. While you're working for me, remember that in cases of emergency no harm comes to any woman if we can prevent it. If I betray myself, I would only be making things more difficult for Sheila, for it would be an admission that she and I are acquainted. If you expose me, and do it cleverly, as though you had only discovered my identity, Sheila will be spared as much as possible; also you will remain in Sabin's good graces—still be a spy in the enemy camp."

"But, boss, you—Why, he'll kill you!"

The wide lips that were so like those of Gee-Gee Janes smiled slightly. "Let me worry about that, my friend."

A DOOR at the end of the room opened, and Sabin's two bodyguards were dragging a curious machine into the room. At the appearance of the device, a hush fell over the score or more of masked men in the room. The machine was awe-inspiring for one could only speculate as to its use.

It consisted of two cylindrical rollers, six feet in height and mounted on metal gears attached to the base. The rollers were about five feet apart. Three ropes were attached to three different points of each of the rollers, so that there was considerable slack in the ropes. A large hand wheel mounted on the base of the machine evidently operated the rollers so they could be turned in opposite directions.

Near the machine, Sabin was engaged in earnest conversation with his secretary, who had entered the room a moment before. Agent X tossed down his cards on the table, and wandered toward Sabin. As he walked, he nonchalantly lighted a cigarette.

"But, Sabin," he heard the secretary explain, "you can't rack every man in the organization to find the traitor. Besides, I can't see the necessity. There is only one man who might be your hidden enemy, and who might have found his way into this place. That man is Secret Agent X, known as the Man of a Thousand Faces. He might fool even so sagacious a person as yourself."

"I have heard of this man. Perhaps yours is a good suggestion." Sabin stepped to the secretary's desk, pressed a button. Somewhere in the underground house, an electric buzzer sounded.

The Agent walked over and boldly examined the machine, which seemed to hold every one else in awe. He thought he divined its purpose, and he grew chill with a cold hatred of Sabin, satanic madman.

Sheila Landi entered the room. She was still wearing that simple gray suit which she had worn to Loebs' house. She was apparently unconscious of every one in the

room except Sabin. His ruthless, china-hard eyes followed her perfect figure as she approached him placidly.

"Yes, Sabin?"

"My Sheila, you have boasted that you could identify the man called Agent X, regardless of disguise."

Sheila bowed her head, and the electric light of the room awakened gold in the waves of her hair.

"There is a traitor in our midst, Sheila," Sabin continued, "and—"

"I know," she interrupted, "but he is not Agent X. I would have pointed out Agent X the moment I saw him."

"Would you, Sheila?" Sabin asked doubtfully. "You are very beautiful. You are as cool as snow. But this man called X, is he not glamorous?"

Color heightened in Sheila's cheeks. She did not answer.

Sabin snapped his fingers. Instantly, his two masked bodyguards stepped to flank the girl.

"I have often wondered if you were human, my Sheila," said Sabin. "Now I shall see if you scream when you are squeezed. You may save yourself the torment of the three ropes by speaking—now."

Sheila glanced at the strange machine at the end of the room. She paled. "I have nothing to say, Sabin, except that for your own sake, I ask you not to do this thing."

The two men conducted the girl to the machine without a struggle. The three ropes were passed around her body in single loops at breast, abdomen and hips. Sabin stepped to the hand wheel and gave it a spin. The vertical cylinder revolved. The three ropes grew taut. No boa-constrictor of the jungle could crush a human body more effectively than Sabin's torture machine.

The Agent's eyes flickered from Sheila's pale face to the face of Klinker. Sweat gleamed on the high forehead of the Agent's ally. Suddenly Klinker stood up and threw

the deck of cards to the table, yelling:

"Wait a minute, chief."

Sabin paused, his hand on the wheel of the machine. "Yes?"

"That bird over there smokin' the cig. Looks like Gee-Gee Janes—a helluva lot like him. I been talkin' to him, and I didn't notice anything. But as long as I been with Gee-Gee, I ain't never seen him blow smoke through his nose. The dame doesn't know her onions. That guy ain't Gee-Gee Janes. I'll lay a dollar he's the X guy you've been lookin' for."

CHAPTER VIII

DEATH MONSTER



SABIN strode across the room to where Agent X was standing. For a few seconds, the two men eyed each other, Sabin's hateful, china-hard eyes

against those odd, compelling eye of Agent X. Then the fingers of Sabin's right hand became cruel claws that slashed across the Agent's cheek and left their mark in the plastic makeup material.

Immediately, X was surrounded by masked men, armed with revolvers and automatics. Foremost in this group that guarded him was Klinker. The man played his part well, apparently ready to tear the Agent apart.

Sabin crossed to the torture machine, ordered Sheila's release, "Why did you not call my attention to this man in the first place?"

"I had not noticed him walking," Sheila said calmly.

"You saw him walking when you brought him to Loeb's house," Sabin insisted.

"No, she didn't," Agent X spoke up. "I've never been to Loeb's house. Janes has, but I

haven't." Agent X now had a partial inkling of how Sheila had been able to identify him.

"Anyway," said Sabin, "we know you are Agent X; that you have been spying on us."

X shrugged. "Well, why not admit it? My job is done."

"What do you mean?"

X flipped cigarette ash airily. "Oh, you'll find out."

"Honorable Sabin," came the muffled voice of the secretary, "I advise that before you dispose of this spy, you compel him to tell what he has done with Gee-Gee Janes, the man we need. His criminals will be necessary to complete the work we have undertaken. And Janes is a capable man. I suggest torturing Mr. X until he is compelled to inform us what he has done with Janes."

X held up his hand. "Oh, no, I have no great desire to sample your artistic torture, Sabin. If you will look in the lodging rooms above Shemplar's drug store you will find Mr. Janes, safe and sound, though possibly a bit sleepy. You will find him if you live that long."

Sabin crossed the floor of the room slowly, his fingers clenching, his prominent jaw muscles pulsing as though he were grinding his enemy between his keen, pointed teeth. "What do you mean?"

The Agent glanced at his wrist watch. "Simply that my work is done. I have informed the federal agents of your plot to obtain arms, and also I have given them the location of this hideout. They should arrive—"

The distant roar of gun thunder muffled the rest of the Agent's words. Sabin stiffened. For a moment his strange eyes flickered about the room, as though seeking some outlet of escape.

"Into the hall, every man of you," he snapped. "No, one of you stay to guard Agent X. We shall attend to his execution as soon as these meddling fools have been taught a lesson. Move, men! We strike the first blow

for the Cause!"

One of Sabin's bodyguards confronted the Agent and plunged the muzzle of a gun into his ribs. All others in the room except the secretary, Sabin and Sheila, ran pell-mell from the room.

Sabin snapped at his secretary: "Get *the Death!*"

The masked secretary nodded, hurried to the end of the room, where the flame-colored curtain was suspended. Sabin turned on Sheila. His powerful arms slapped around her body. He swung her from her feet and started across the room. In those mad eyes of his was a hellish, hungry gleam. Because of the crash and the rolling echoes of guns, as the Feds strove to break their way into the hideout, all other sounds were muffled.

As Sabin stepped through the door at the other side of the room, Agent X lurched forward so that his face was but a few inches from that of the masked guard. At the same time, he blew forcefully on the cigarette in his lips. Smoke and sparks dimmed the guard's sight. The man blinked, and at that moment, X took a quick step to the side. The guard tried to turn.

His nervous fingers jerked the trigger of the gun. But at the same time, X started a long, fast, left-handed blow, which, by the time it reached the guard's jaw, had picked up tremendous power.

The guard's slug tore through the Agent's sleeve, but probably the man never knew anything about that. He was out before he hit the floor. X stooped, swept up the man's automatic, and raced across the room toward the door through which Sabin had disappeared. Now was his chance. Sabin was alone except for Sheila. It was man to man now.

The Agent's plan had worked to perfection. He had slipped orders to the Feds, written on that scrap paper he had stuffed into the muzzle of the automatic he had permitted the G-man to wrest from him in the struggle outside Loeb's house. The G-men would

round up Sabin's men, and X would capture Sabin, dead or alive.

THE Agent came through the door, into a short hall. The door of the same room in which he had spoken privately to Sheila, was open. X ran into the room, but it was empty. He was about to turn and try another door, when he saw a small opening half hidden by the only chair in the room. This opening was formed by the removal of one of the blocks of stone of which the walls were built. The stone, evidently, opened on the other side of the wall.

Cautiously, but quickly, X approached the opening, automatic in hand. Beyond was a small, gloomy chamber. It was so dark that he could scarcely make out the zigzag outline of a flight of stairs extending upwards. Head and shoulders through the opening, he paused. On the stair above he could make out a shadowy figure—Sabin, carrying the girl in his arms. Agent X dared not shoot in such uncertain light for fear of hitting Sheila. Furthermore, he wanted Sabin alive if possible.

But there was something else that disturbed him, a strange, foreboding sound that he could just make out in spite of the intermittent crashes of gun-fire. It was a rasping sound, like that of a knife or saw cutting into something with short, jerky strokes. Some sixth sense prompted him to look up. Above his head, was that block of stone which was used to conceal the secret opening. It was suspended in some fashion by a rope. The bottom of the block was studded with long spikes of steel, keen and gleaming as knife blades.

Somewhere up that stairway, Sabin was watching. And he was sawing through the rope that operated the secret door, sawing as quietly as possible in an effort to drop that heavy block on Agent X. Once he had cut the rope, the mechanism that lifted the stone would be thrown out of gear and Sabin's escape insured.

X wriggled through the opening. But before he was perfectly clear, there was a snap like that of a broken banjo string. He jerked his legs up close to his body. Too late. The spiked block had fallen, one spike tearing through a trouser leg, grazing his flesh, sending daggers of pain up his leg.

Something flashed like a ray of light through the gloom—Sabin's knife. Pinned to the floor as he was, X could not have ducked. The knife struck his left shoulder, point first, and was buried nearly to the hilt in his flesh. To the Agent's dilated nostrils came the flat, warm smell of new-let blood. Sabin hurried



up the steps.

Here was pain enough to drive the average man into unconsciousness. But as he worked in desperation to free himself, X had scarcely time to consider his two, freely bleeding wounds. He jerked and pulled until the stout cloth of his trouser leg gave way from the spike. He got to his knees. A wave of nausea passed over him as he pulled out Sabin's knife and flung it to the floor. Then he gained his feet and lurched on up the steps.

But at the top of the narrow flight, he encountered a solid trapdoor, locked on the other side. All his Herculean efforts to move it were in vain. Sabin had escaped.

X turned, went down the steps more rapidly than he had climbed them. The pain in his shoulder came in fierce stabs with every beat of his heart.

He re-entered the small room, crossed the hall and then came to the large council room. Bodies of men were strewn across the floor. The entire underground house was as silent as a tomb. But these men on the floor—they were federal agents, lying side by side, sprawled out, not a hint of motion in their bodies, not a drop of blood on the floor. It was *the Death*.

HEAVY-HEARTED, X dropped to his knees beside one of the federal men. He pressed his hand against the man's chest and detected the steady pulse of a heart. No mark was on the man's body, yet except for that steady heartbeat he would have been mistaken for dead. The man was merely stunned. Perhaps every man in the room had been similarly dealt with. But how?

With his fingers, X gently raised the eyelid of the federal agent. The eyeball stared out at him glassily. Its muscles seemed paralyzed so that the eye didn't roll back, as is the case when a man is truly unconscious. The pupil of the eye was constricted to a mere pin point, just as the pupils of Al Loeb and Steve Hackman had been constricted. Yet Loeb

and Hackman had been dead; apparently, they had killed themselves.

X got to his feet, ran across the council chamber and into the hall outside. In the hall and on the stairway were strewn bodies of Sabin's men, mowed down by G-guns in their effort to resist arrest.

X ran up the steps and into the Chinese gift shop. There were three excited Chinese who were babbling in their native tongue. Outside the shop were police, who had gathered quickly when the gun battle had broken loose. But in the gray dim light of the early morning, X ran past them unnoticed.

He gained a police car parked at the curb, motor running. He sprang in under the wheel, yanked on the gear shift, and spurted down the street. Behind him a few scattered shots sounded as the police attempted to stop him.

He drove straight to that hideout above the drug store, where he had imprisoned and drugged Gee-Gee Janes. Sabin's ranks had been considerably weakened by the attack of the Feds. If he was to go on with his mad scheme, he would need the assistance of Gee-Gee Janes badly. Furthermore, X had begun to see something in all this madness that was terrifyingly sane—something that was not typically Sabin. The more he thought about it, the more certain he became that there was a definite reason for the death of Steve Hackman.

When he arrived at his hideout, he went into the bedroom where Gee-Gee Janes stirred restlessly on the bed. It was only a short time before the crimster would come out from under the influence of the narcotic X had employed.

X went to a closet and brought out two small, leather-covered cases. One of these held material for first-aid. He removed coat and shirt and hastily administered iodine to his shoulder wound, then applied a bandage. He closed the first-aid kit and opened the second case. In it were all sorts of odds and ends that he had found useful in undertaking

various impersonations.

There he found a piece of black velvet and a pair of shears. From the velvet he cut two identical eye patches and attached these to cords by means of cement. One of these he carried to the bed and attached over the eye of the unresisting Janes. The other he tied over his own left eye, but in such a manner that the black patch could be flipped up and down in a moment.

The black patch pushed up from his eye, he returned to his leather case. From a small, cotton-lined compartment, he took out one of two convex pieces of clear, fine glass about an inch in diameter. With black paint and brush, he coated the center of this bit of glass. The black stuff dried in a few seconds with the aid of a tiny hand air-pump. About this black center, he painted a brown circle. This required more time and extreme artistic skill, for the brown circle had to resemble the brown iris of a human eye.

When the brown paint was dry, he put the piece of glass in a cotton-lined envelope together with a small rubber device, similar in size and appearance to the rubber bulb of a medicine dropper. Then he repacked his leather case and hid it, along with the first-aid kit, in the closet.

On the bed, Gee-Gee Janes groaned. X stepped over to the bed, took Janes by the shoulder and shook him awake. Janes stared at this man who so closely resembled him. His two fists went up to dig at his eyes.

"Don't rub that patch off your eye, Gee-Gee," X said softly.

"By hell!" groaned Janes. "Looks like me and talks like me. He must be me!"

X smiled grimly and drew an automatic from his pocket. "And shoots like you, so don't try anything smart, Gee-Gee. Get up."

TOO stunned to do otherwise, Janes got up from the bed to unsteady feet, but X kicked a straight chair to the door of the bedroom and told Gee-Gee to sit down.

Numbly, the man obeyed. X then took a length of strong, light cord from the closet and lashed Janes to the chair. By that time, Janes had recovered his senses, for the narcotic X had employed left no bad effects.

"I gotta know what this is all about. I gotta know who the hell you are."

Merriment twinkled in X's eyes. "I'm Gee-Gee Janes. It doesn't matter who you are."

Janes groaned: "Now *that* didn't sound like me speaking."

"Possibly not... Now, listen, Gee-Gee. You can expect callers—a guy with a scar on the side of his face and eyes like Satan's may come any time. You're to yes him. Agree with every thing he says. If he asks you about that patch on your eye, you got it because I gave you a poke. Tell him that Secret Agent X knocked you out for the count."

"Did he?" Janes asked. "I sure as hell will make his belly look like a sieve when I see him."

X chuckled. "You're not big stuff any more, Janes."

"But you—you—" Janes' jaw sagged dumbly. "Hell, you *must* be Agent X."

"That would account for a number of things, wouldn't it, Gee-Gee? But understand that the reason you're going to do just as I say is that I am going to be right around the corner of the door. Furthermore, I'm going to blast daylight into you if you don't answer just as I told you to."

X then went to the door, made certain that it was locked. Then he pulled down all the blinds in both of the rooms, so that the place was perfectly dark. Next he switched on the electric light in the first room and took his place beside the door in the bedroom. In his left hand he held a forked instrument with a handle of hard rubber that he could plug into an electrical outlet beside the door, shorting all the lights in the building. His right hand held the automatic that threatened Janes.

He had not long to wait before there were

sounds outside the door. The doorknob rattled, but because of the Agent's special lock, the door did not yield. A murmur of voices. Then a grinding sound. Some one was drilling the lock.

It took all of ten minutes to break that lock. Then the door swung open, and into the room walked Klinker. Behind him, guns in their hands, were three dark-faced men who looked like Latins. They stood in the doorway on guard while Sabin entered the room. The Agent's hunch was right. Sabin needed Janes' assistance.

Without a word, Sabin approached Janes. His cruel talons crooked, he scratched Janes' cheek until Janes howled. "This is the real Gee-Gee Janes," muttered Sabin. "What happened to your eye, Janes?"

"I—I—er, Agent X gave me a sock," replied Gee-Gee, remembering the threatening gun Agent X held on him in the next room.

"Then," Sabin said, "you'll welcome the opportunity for striking back at Mr. X. Unfortunately, he escaped. Janes, I need your help now more than ever. Are you with me and the Cause?"

"Sure," said Janes, wondering, no doubt, what Sabin was talking about.

Sabin hastily cut the ropes that bound Janes to the chair, and at that moment, Agent X rammed home the forked instrument that shorted the lights.

Darkness, and in the darkness X moved swifter than he had ever moved before. He brought the automatic in his hand crashing down on the top of Janes' skull. Janes uttered a prolonged groan and sagged over against the Agent. X seized him by the collar, dragged him out of the chair, and dropped him behind the door where he lay limp and unconscious.

SABIN got out his flashlight and turned it on. The spot of white light caught Agent

X, automatic in hand, just as the Agent appeared in the doorway.

"What was that noise?" demanded Sabin, of Agent X, who, undoubtedly, he supposed to be Gee-Gee Janes.

"'S all right, chief," X assured him. "A fuse must have gone haywire. It gave me a start, that's all. Since Mr. X sapped me I get the jitters. Let's get out of this place."

"Yes," said Sabin. "We have work to do. You, especially, have work to do. You will be sent to the home of Thomas Reedan, I have threatened him, but I have chosen you to carry out the threat, if necessary. However, I believe your American gangster methods will make it unnecessary to kill him. You have put on the pressure, as you call it, many times, have you not?"

"Don't get what you mean," said X. He was walking toward the door, anxious to get Sabin and his men out of the room as soon as possible.

"I mean that I have offered Reedan his life, in exchange for much-needed armaments for our cause. I want you to go to his place and threaten him once more. Gangster methods." The china-hard eyes leered. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Sure," X replied. "Nothin' to it. He comes across or he comes back dead. I'll handle it any time you say."

From the doorway came the sound of a rapidly drawn breath. Sabin flashed his light on the door of the shabby apartment. There stood Sheila Landi. In her deep-blue eyes, Agent X saw recognition. She had heard his footsteps on the floor of the room.

"Sheila," Sabin whispered, "why did you not stay in the car?"

"You were so long, I feared something had happened to you," the girl replied.

Sabin grunted. "You show extreme interest in my welfare, my Sheila. Come, let us be on our way. Klinker, you will go ahead. We dare not venture forth with Janes in broad daylight if there be police about."

CHAPTER IX

DARKNESS MADE
OF LIGHT

THAT evening a car pulled up to the side of the road in front of the tall iron fence that bound the country estate of Thomas Reedan. A man and a woman got out. Even in the gathering gloom, the trim, square shoulders of the Gee-Gee Janes, who was Secret Agent X, were recognizable. And the woman—few boasted of as charming a silhouette as that of Sheila Landi. Her hand on the Agent's arm, she walked along the shoulder of the road toward the wide-open gate of the forested estate.

"You should not have come, Sheila," said the Agent quietly.

"And I dared not stay," the girl said. "The moment I saw you this morning in that room above the drug store, I was certain of your identity. I never dreamed that you would attempt to fool Sabin again with the same disguise."

X laughed shortly. "But Sabin dreamed it. The first thing he did was to scratch the real Gee-Gee's face to make sure of the absence of makeup. I had to move fast to knock Janes out and get into his place before Sabin got that light on."

The Agent paused, then asked: "Exactly how have you been able to penetrate my disguises? I have a good idea, but I think you should explain the matter to me in full."

The girl smiled softly and said: "These two eyes of mine were not always as they are now. I was born totally blind. Eight years ago, an operation gave me sight. Up to that time, I devoted my every effort to developing

acute senses to take the place of my lost eyesight. That is one of the reasons I am so valuable in espionage. Sounds mean more to me than to others. Footsteps, for instance. You may change your face, Agent X, but you cannot long disguise your footsteps. It was by the sound of your footsteps that I recognized a man who looked like Gee-Gee Janes as the same redheaded reporter in the hotel tonight. And even before that, regardless of your disguise, I knew your footsteps. None but Agent X could have followed me so persistently, yet always as a different character."

"I see," replied the Agent slowly.

They were walking up the flagstone path. Sheila asked: "What do you expect to do?"

"Lay all the cards on the table. Urge Reedan to comply with Sabin's request for munitions, tip off the federal men at exactly the right time to catch Sabin and his men red-handed. Klinker and you and I will be ready on the inside of the game to see that Sabin walks right into our trap; not only Sabin, but the other—who is more dangerous than Sabin."

"What do you mean?"

"The man who kills so cleverly," X said cryptically.

Beyond a grove of tall pines, the lighted windows of the Reedan house gleamed cheerfully. Yet Sheila shuddered slightly.

"What's the matter?" X asked.

"These shadows—they might hold any number of Sabin's spies."

"Still there is nothing to fear. We are doing exactly as Sabin told us to do."

"Nevertheless, I intend to wait outside, to warn you if any danger approaches."

"If you prefer, Sheila," X agreed.

He really felt that he could handle the business before him better if Sheila was not with him. There was an indefinable something in her deep-blue eyes that he found disconcerting.

THREE MINUTES later, X found himself alone with Thomas Reedan in a study situated at the rear of the house. Reedan was extremely morose, his mouth sagging distastefully around the end of a thick cigar, his sad eyes fixed on the face of the man who looked like Janes but whose soft voice was the same as that of the man who had introduced himself as Secret Agent X on the night before.

"And now," said Agent X, "that we know each other, for my own safety, it would be wise if I continued with my impersonation of Gee-Gee Janes. Walls, I've heard, may develop ears. Suppose we confine ourselves to whispers.

Reedan nodded. "What's your proposal, Mr. X?"

X smiled, "A little more softly, or else address me as Mr. Janes," he whispered. "There is but one solution. You have the munitions ready, as I suggested?"

Reedan nodded. "Go on."

"Then call your plant and issue orders to have them turned over to any man who gives the countersign: 'The Great Change.' That is exactly as Sabin arranged it. Comply with his every wish, if you would live. I will see to it that justice is done."

Reedan reached for the phone, talked with his plant superintendent. Then he hung up. "Done, sir. Now this bogy man of yours, this mad Sabin; do you think that he killed Al Loeb?"

"At least," I replied, "he ordered the killing."

"But do you know how he was killed? Because if you don't, I have an idea. It couldn't have been suicide. I know Al too well. And did you notice Al's eyes; notice how the pupils were contracted? There was a very definite reason for that."

"Perhaps I can guess it," X said.

"And I," Reedan returned, "don't have to guess. You see—"

A draft ruffled papers on Reedan's desk.

Both men turned toward the study door. Very slowly, it was opening, as though by a spectral hand. Then something happened.

No pain, no shock, nothing similar to anything he had associated with danger before, passed over Agent X. Something seemed to snap within his head, as though a brain cell had suddenly burst under terrific pressure. There was blinding white light, followed by immediate darkness—a darkness akin to death, for there was a total and immediate loss of sensation. It was what Sabin called "*the Death*."

How long that interval of oblivion lasted, X had no way of knowing. But gradually it passed, and there was a world of gray about him that gradually dissipated. A man was bending over him, lifting him from the floor. A familiar voice was saying.

"He's coming to, thank heaven!"

Then X could distinguish features: narrow face, startled eyes, a brush of yellow-gray hair, a small mustache that was like a well-worn tooth brush. The man was Leo Madvig. X turned his head slightly. Sheila Landi was holding one of the Agent's hands and rubbing it gently. Beyond the girl Thomas Reedan was stretched out on the floor, apparently dead.

It was a knockout such as the Agent never before had experienced. Nothing had touched him, yet he had not known when he had struck the floor. His muscles felt quite as though they were made of warm custard. Somewhere deep in each eyeball were lightninglike flashes of white fire.

Madvig pushed a pillow under the Agent's head. "Be very thankful," he said, "that things are as they are. They did not know how to use it. Otherwise, there would have been no awakening. It was my weapon they turned against you. My weapon—the darkness made of light. They have stolen it. Nothing can save the world if it is not recovered—*nothing*."

Madvig took a flat flask from his pocket,

unscrewed the cupcap, and handed flask and cup to Sheila. "Give him some whisky."

Sheila pound some of the liquor into the cup and held it for X to drink. He drained the cup and lay back, and the fire of the liquor seemed to reach every cell of his body and give it new strength.

"And now, miss," said Madvig, "see if you can get Mr. Reedan to take some liquor. He seems to be a good bit worse than this other gentleman. But he will recover."

Madvig looked from X to Reedan and shook his yellow-gray head. "Had I only known the trouble it would cause, I would have destroyed my own brain-child. I was on my way out here to see if Mr. Reedan would advance some money for me to continue my experiments and attempt the construction of another model of my weapon, when I saw that flare of light. Like the sun it was. I knew immediately that some one was employing my weapon. At first, I am ashamed to say, I supposed it was some one working for Mr. Reedan who had employed it."

MADVIG went over and raised Reedan's head. Sheila emptied the flask into the little cup. The girl had lost some of her usual composure, and some of the liquor slopped over on her fingers as she extended the drink to Reedan's lips.

After the stuff had been poured into Reedan's mouth, the man gained a little color, groaned and moved his head restlessly.

Madvig jerked his tiny mustache and nodded his satisfaction. "He will come out of it, I am sure. Mr. Reedan's doctor lives next door. I'll just run over and see him a moment—some special instructions."

His eyes darted to Agent X. "You, my man, will shortly be quite yourself. Are you feeling better?"

"Sure." X sat up and managed, by holding to the back of a chair, to regain his feet. "I believe, Mr. Madvig, that Mr. Reedan knows something about your weapon."

Madvig nodded. "He has a theory that some criminal organization has stolen it."

X nodded. "It's in possession of a criminal all right. As to the criminal organization, it will be in the hands of the federal agents before morning."

Madvig frowned slightly. "Your face is familiar. So, for that matter, is the young lady's. Haven't I seen you two somewhere?"

"Possibly," X said. "We have both been in the Ayreshire Hotel, where you are staying."

"And you are a federal agent?" asked Madvig. "Perhaps it is that patch you have over your left eye, but there was something about your appearance that reminded me of a criminal character whose face I have seen somewhere. Hmm—becoming a little absent-minded, I guess. I'll just run over to the doctor's and be right back."

X watched Madvig's lank form as the latter hurried from the room. When the front door had slammed behind him, the Agent went over to Sheila. He thumbed toward the still unconscious Reedan.

"What was the idea?" he asked. "Reedan's death was scheduled tonight. But he came through with what Sabin wanted. Why this attempt to kill him?"

Sheila was twisting her fingers nervously. "I—I don't know. But Sabin's outside waiting for us. He—he's insane. Oh, I'm afraid—afraid of Sabin's eyes."

X stooped over Reedan, felt the man's pulse. It seemed very regular. He straightened. "There! Reedan's opening his eyes. It wouldn't be good for us to allow Sabin to see us here in friendly confab with Reedan. We'd better go."

As they left the house, they saw a man hurrying across the lawn with a physician's satchel in his hand. Confident of Reedan's safety, they returned to their car.

"Now," X whispered to Sheila, "to duck under Sabin's watchful eyes and contact the Feds. That will—" He stopped suddenly, for there were three figures in the back of the car.

The central one bent forward eagerly, and faint light found the china-hard whites of Sabin's eyes. The other two men were of Sabin's bodyguard.

"Get in quickly, Janes," Sabin commanded.

Under his breath, the Agent cursed. Small chance of evading Sabin's eyes now. He crawled in under the wheel, and Sheila got in behind him.

"What luck, Janes?" demanded Sabin as the car started.

"Luck, chief?" X blustered in the voice of Gee-Gee Janes. "When I handle 'em, it ain't luck. Reedan came across like a Fin. I sat right in the room while he phoned his plant. You get the stuff you want tonight."

SABIN began to chuckle, a rippling Smadman's chuckle that was uninterrupted save for the direction he gave to X. Eventually, he ordered the car to stop in an alley back of a building far out on South Wabash. There the two bodyguards took charge of X and Sheila, hurried them up a fire escape to a large suite of cheaply furnished rooms on the third floor.

The remnant of Sabin's gang had congregated there—perhaps a dozen men, all armed. There was still no possible chance for the Agent to contact the federal men.

"There's a phone in the hall," whispered Sheila. She was beside X, standing in front of a window. "But there are several members of the society standing around it. It seems to be our only means of contacting the authorities."

X took the girl's long, tapering hand in his. Grimly he shook his head. "We'll have to be much more subtle than that. Try to get to that phone, and somebody would nab us. We've—" A slight smile twisted his lips. "Say, you could attempt to reach that phone, permit Sabin to catch you in the act—"

The girl's hand quivered. X looked down at it, smoothed the white flesh. The long, oval nails were brilliantly tinted with red polish,

fastidiously applied, except for strange blotches of white across the first two nails on the left hand. Odd, this defect in the makeup of an attractive woman so careful about her appearance.

Sheila frowned. "What do you mean?"

"If you were caught in the act by Sabin, he would want to dispose of you. We could arrange a fake murder, and in that way you would be free to take our message to the federal men. If we just knew what Sabin planned to do—"

"Klinker just came in," said the girl without turning around. "I heard his footsteps. Perhaps he knows."

"I'll ask him," X told her. "Are you sure you'd have the courage to go through with a plan like that?"

Her deep-blue eyes met his squarely. She said nothing, yet X had her answer: a woman who had lived her adventurous life would have long ago learned to master fear.

"We'll try it," X whispered. "Good luck. As soon as Sabin returns, make a try for the phone."

X left the girl, walked over to where Klinker was standing. The man's high forehead was furrowed with a puzzled frown as the Agent took him to one side of the room.

"Boss," he whispered, "why aren't we doin' something? Sabin's havin' the guns and munitions loaded onto a boat he's chartered. That boat sails into the lake to await two planes that're goin' to fly the stuff to South America. It's nuts, but he's gettin' by with it."

"He hasn't got by with it yet," declared X. "He must have shot his whole roll to charter the boat and planes."

Klinker nodded. "I guess every cent these revolution-hungry spigs kicked in with. And you don't know the half of it—you and I are scheduled to sail on that boat with Sabin."

"That," said X slowly, "has its advantages. Go tell all details to Sheila."

TWO hours passed without seeing the return of Sabin. Nor was there the slightest opportunity for X to communicate with the federal officers. When at last Sabin did appear, all the men crowded eagerly about their chief to hear news of his activities.

Sabin's ugly teeth were bared in a hellish smile. The jagged scar on his sunken cheek was a brilliant red. Swollen arteries on neck and temple throbbed with excitement.

"All is ready, comrades," he said. "The boat is loaded with enough guns to equip five thousand men in the most modern manner, and there are high explosives. Besides the crew of the boat, I will take eight men with me in two cars. Janes will drive one car to Navy Pier; Klinker, the other. As soon as the planes have loaded from the boat, we shall return. And the great work goes on!"

The smile faded from Sabin's lips. His eyes seemed to take on a new degree of hardness. He held up his right hand. "Wait," he whispered.

Sabin tiptoed to the door of the room and glanced into the hall. X followed, stood behind Sabin, heard quite distinctly Sheila's whisper:

"Connect me with the local field office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Sabin sprang like a cat into the hall. Sheila was at the phone. She dropped the receiver, sprang back, genuine fear blanching her cheeks.

Sabin snarled: "So!" He strode over to the girl. One hand went out to seize her by the throat. The other clipped the receiver onto its hook. "So, my Sheila, you are the traitor!" He laughed harshly, pulled the girl to him until his hideous face was within inches of hers. "My Sheila," he said. "You are going to die. I am going to beat you to death."

X stepped forward, put a hand on Sabin's shoulder. "Nix," he said.

Sabin turned fiercely on the Agent. "I warn you not to interfere!"

"I'll interfere as I damned please when I see all the work you've accomplished going to hell because of your nut ideas. I've suspected that dame was behind your bad breaks for a long time. Now that we know it, you want to raise every cop in town, with her screams. There's only one way to handle a rat, male or female—a slug in the back and dump 'em from the car. I've given more than one guy the one-way ride. You leave this to me. You handle the important stuff I can't do. Remember, the Cause, comes first."

"You are right," said Sabin slowly. "We have work to do. How is this woman's silence to be managed?"

"Gag her," X directed. "You got a car with a radio in it?"

Sabin nodded.

"Then that's the car we take to the boat."

"Excellent!" snarled Sabin. "Get a gag, Corillo," he ordered one of his men.

Agent X was all ready for the desperate stroke he and Sheila had planned. The cartridge in the chamber of his automatic had its lead bullet removed, wadded-up paper substituted. When Sheila had been properly gagged, though not bound, Sabin, the Agent, and three of Sabin's men, took the girl down into the alley, where two cars were waiting. Klinker and four others were to man the second car.

Sabin got in under the wheel of the first. X sat in the back seat near the door, the struggling Sheila grasped in his left arm, the automatic in his right hand. The two others in the back seat also had guns in their hands.

AS they neared a viaduct, Sabin had the radio turned on to a noisy dance-band broadcast. X raised his automatic to Sheila's forehead. But at the instant he pulled the trigger, he tilted the muzzle so that the harmless charge of paper wads lodged in Sheila's thick straw-colored hair as the gun crashed.

Realistically, Sheila enacted the death

throes, every muscle in her body quivering as the Agent held her tightly and kicked open the door of the car.

"Slow down, damnit!" X said harshly. "I don't want to land on my face when I give her the roll. Slow down!"

Sabin braked the car to almost a standstill, and X, crouching on the running board, lowered the girl's limp form to the street as gently as possible and still put on a good show for Sabin's benefit. Sheila rolled to the gutter and lay perfectly still as the car picked up speed.

Never had the Agent attempted anything that had made him more nervous. Sheila's acting had been all too realistic. What if something had actually happened to her? What if she had been hurt in spite of X's precautions?

Suddenly, the music from the car radio was interrupted by the voice of an announcer:

"We interrupt the music from the Kettle Klub to give you a special news bulletin. Thomas J. Reedan, principle owner of the Majestic Chemical Company, took his own life in his home tonight less than thirty minutes ago."

Agent X leaned forward in his seat, a deep scowl on his face.

"Reedan, it is thought, was suffering from ill health. Earlier this evening, a friend had summoned Mr. Reedan's doctor who proclaimed that Mr. Reedan was suffering from a slight shock of unknown source. He apparently recovered under the doctor's care, only to be found dead in his bed a short time later. A half-empty bottle of prussic acid was found on his dresser, and the body showed every indication of prussic-acid poisoning.

"Reedan is the second prominent manufacturer of munitions to commit suicide in the past twenty-four hours. Yesterday, Albert Loeb, it will be remembered, shot himself to death. It is a curious coincidence that the death of Reedan duplicated the unwarranted suicide of Steve Hackman,

Chicago racketeer, early yesterday evening. Is Chicago faced with a veritable epidemic of suicides? See your newspaper for further details."

X tapped Sabin on the shoulder. "What was the idea?" he demanded. "Did you kill Thomas Reedan?"

Sabin chuckled insanely. "I willed that he die!"

"Yes, you did!" said Agent X under his breath. His mind flashed back to Sheila Landi, to the curious white blotches on her finger nails. His hopes of trapping Sabin and his gang began to dwindle, until they were all but obscured by a black cloud that gathered upon his own horizon.

CHAPTER X

THE HELL SHIP



TEN miles east of Chicago's skyline, the *Daughter of Deerborn*, a stern-wheeler that Sabin had chartered, rose and fell on the short, choppy waves of Lake Michigan. The ship was at anchor. Except for a white beam of light that flashed at regular intervals from the roof of the pilot house straight up into the black roof of the night, there was no light on board. In the distance, coming out of the west, was the throb of powerful engines, growing ever louder.

Under the decks of the ship rested Sabin's hell cargo, wrested by extortion from Thomas Reedan, only after X had recommended that Reedan comply with Sabin's demands. And Reedan was dead... Little wonder that the ship rode uneasily, with enough explosives in her hold to blow a skyscraper into the air.

Leaning over the stern rail, searching the darkness eagerly, was Secret Agent X. The patch that he had tied over his left eye, for

reasons known only to himself, was tuned back on his forehead so that both keen eyes might seek that slender ray of hope upon which hung his possible success in bringing Sabin and a clever killer to justice. Beside the Agent, Klinker paused in his anxious pacing of the deck.

"Sabin says the planes are coming," Klinker whispered.

"Sabin," said the Agent cheerfully, "is screwy. Those are gas engines on cruisers—police cruisers, I hope." He pulled a long, powerful flashlight from inside his coat, held it so the rail hid it, and flashed it rapidly—a curt message in Morse.

"What was that light?" Sabin's sibilant voice sounded from the pilot house.

X nudged Klinker. "We'd better walk around the deck before he's wise. Watch out for trouble."

The two men separated and took a turn around the deck, returning to approximately the same spot. The night was soundless now, save for the slap of water against the hull. The Agent strained his eyes against the gloom in an effort to sight the cruisers. Their motors were off now, and not far away sounded a splash that was like that made by a small boat lowered into the water.

"Klinker," X whispered, "go up into the pilot house and see if you can distract Sabin's attention. I'll stand by here to toss them a rope. Above everything else, see that Sabin keeps the lights out. The man's mad enough to fire those explosives, if he gets the idea that they are about to be taken over by Feds."

"Okeh, boss."

Klinker walked forward, and while he was climbing to the pilot house, Agent X was able to make out the outline of a small boat manned with a single pair of oars. Beyond the small boat, the ghostly shape of a cruiser could be seen as it drifted toward the ship. That Sabin didn't see it, could be credited to Klinker's skill at distracting attention.

X stooped, picked up a coil of rope, tossed

it to the small boat. It was caught. The man in the prow pulled in rapidly. The small boat thumped the hull of the ship. Hand over hand, the man in the prow climbed the rope, found X's helping hand extended over the rail.

"Secret Agent X?" a voice whispered.

"Right."

"Federal agents... How many men on board?"

Then the powerful searchlight on the roof of the pilot house dipped. Its white blade cut a clean swath through darkness, directly upon Agent X and the man he had helped aboard.

Without a word of warning, the man from the cruiser sprang at X. A club, blackjack, something heavy and moving fast, struck the Agent on the side of the head. The blow rolled him over, but he had ducked instinctively so that it had landed on a different spot from the intended one, and he had not lost his senses. He was on his feet in an instant just as a second and a third man boarded the ship.

Sabin's searchlight beamed on the barrels of new machine guns in the hands of two men—guns of the latest type, such as those Sabin had attempted to steal from the Loeb's plant. One of those guns covered Agent X. The other swept the deck menacingly until some one in the pilot house tried a shot.

Then machine-gun fire was loosed, throwing a line of bullets that laced the wooden walls of the pilot house.

"Surrender, Sabin!" called a muffled voice familiar to X.

THE AGENT turned. Another man had gained the deck of the ship, and rays of the searchlight fell upon his face—a face that was masked, the mask centered by a silver letter "S."

"I see," said X softly, "the honorable secretary of the society, the clever murderer, the man who hijacked the machine guns Sabin managed to steal from Loeb's, the man who killed Steve Hackman, in order to take

his place as underworld czar of the city; the man who killed Loeb, to prevent him from canceling the order for the machine guns you intended to hijack; the man who killed Thomas Reedan, to keep Reedan's mouth shut—because Reedan had guessed your identity. Well, Mr. Murderer, I know your identity!”

“Shut up, Mr. X!” came from the secretary. “I’m dealing with Sabin. As far as you’re concerned, you’re just a red herring. Sabin, I’m taking over this ship. I radioed your planes not to come. I need these arms and this ammunition you have on board to equip the greatest criminal syndicate the world has ever known. It makes Capone’s bunch look like pikers.”

“And,” X went on unperturbed, “you had such a plan in mind all the time. You were simply using the funds of Sabin’s society to make it easy for you to obtain your arms and equipment. No wonder you insisted upon the help of Gee-Gee Janes. His gang was badly needed in your army of crimesters. But you had to kill Gee-Gee’s boss first. Hackman wouldn’t step down and let you run things. And what’s that in your hand, Honorable Secretary? Not Madvig’s stolen invention?”

In the secretary’s hands was a curious instrument, like a gun and yet not like a gun. Its muzzle flared out like the lamp of a motor car.

“Yes,” sneered the secretary. “It is what Sabin liked to call *‘the Death.’* Want a sample? Keep your trap shut if you don’t. Men! Round up those fellows in the cabin. Sabin, come down from that pilot house.”

But Sabin wasn’t in the pilot house. From somewhere in the cabin, X heard his snarled command: “Shoot, fools!”

Scattered automatic fire from the cabin portholes, then two shots from the pilot house—one that went wild and another that knocked a leg from beneath the machine-gunner who covered Agent X.

Instantly the Agent was in motion. He

darted around the stern end of the cabin just as machine-gun fire swept the deck. On the other side of the cabin, X saw a stocky figure spring from the pilot house to the deck and come running toward him—Klinker.

“Boss!” whispered Klinker tensely. “The girl, Sheila—I’ve seen her!”

“Where?”

“Climbed over the rail on this side. Had a gun in her hand. She must be—”

“Right here,” came a soft voice. The musical voice of Sheila Landi. She stepped from the shelter of a cuddy, her water-soaked garments clasping her body as close as her skin. She placed a cold hand on the Agent’s arm. “There are only two criminals on the cruiser,” she whispered, “two men and a score of Feds and police under guard. The criminals took possession of the cruiser as it was leaving the pier. A good man could liberate those Feds.”

“Can you swim, Klinker?” X demanded.

“Like a fish.”

“Then make a try for the cruiser. Here’s your chance to square yourself with the law. Sheila, better hit the water.”

“But why?” the girl demanded. “I can use a gun. I’ll be of use here.”

“Why?” X said queerly. “Because I smell smoke—oil smoke!”

He turned swiftly and dived into a hatch. As he moved down the narrow steps, his fingers fished out the envelope which contained that convex bit of glass he had previously prepared so that it appeared like the front portion of a human eye. With the tiny rubber suction device he had included in the envelope, he gripped the bit of glass. Then he pulled down the lower lid of his eye and rocked the convex lens in over the front of his right eyeball. It was utterly impossible for him to see through the painted glass, but by raising the black patch over his other eye he was able to use it.

THE smell of oil smoke became more pronounced. Ahead of X, the darkness was tinged with a ruddy glow. He hastened his steps, saw Sabin bending over a wad of oil-soaked waste that had burst into flames. X drew his automatic.

"Reach, Sabin!"

Sabin spun on his heels. With a snarl, he sent the flaming ball of fire straight at the Agent's head. X ducked. From a crouch, Sabin sprang. A knife flashed. Before X could bring his gun around, the knife had hacked across his knuckles. The gun dropped. Sabin fell upon him, all the fury of a madman unleashed. Sabin, who saw his plans and hopes crumbling, was bent on destruction of enemies, friends, even himself. Over and over on the floor they rolled, the Agent just able to prevent that knife from seeking a vital spot.

A short punch to the midsection flattened Sabin on top of the Agent's body. But Sabin wasn't licked. The Agent felt the keen points of the madman's teeth sink into the flesh of his throat, seeking his jugular. At the same time, Sabin sought to plunge his knife into the Agent's side.

But when the knife point pierced flesh, the Agent tore his left arm free from the madman's grasp. His hand slapped to Sabin's knife wrist and locked there. His thumb nail gouged between the second and third knuckles of Sabin's thin fist, touched a particularly sensitive nerve center. Sabin's fingers sprang apart. The knife tinkled on the limber boards.

X's grasping fingers clutched the knife by its hasp. His arm looped around Sabin's back, so that the madman felt the prick of the knife between shoulder blades.

"Surrender, Sabin," X worked out between teeth clenched in pain. "Surrender—or I'll kill you."

Sabin only redoubled his efforts. X rolled back his eyes, saw the advancing flames licking up the door behind which the cargo was stored. His body wriggled frantically in

an effort to free himself from the madman's grasp. But the insane Sabin possessed the beast-strength that was equal to that of a dozen men. Much as X hated to kill, he thrust the knife downward, felt the steel grit against bone.

Sabin's body stiffened. From his hideous mouth, where lips and teeth drooled blood from the Agent's throat, came a harsh, bestial cry of pain. He scrambled to his knees, tried to get to his feet, pitched over on his side.

X sprang up. The ruddy glow of the fire pointed out the brazen body of a fire extinguisher. On the deck above, he heard the sound of running feet and the staccato bark of automatics mingled with the incessant chatter of machine-gun fire. Through the open hatch, a body fell down the steps, loose-jointedly, like a broken toy. The face of the man was contorted with pain. Blood spurted from wounds in his chest.

"The Feds!" the hoarse scream ripped from his throat. "The Feds are on the loose!"

CHAPTER XI

MADMAN'S INFERNO



AGENT X sprang to the fire extinguisher and yanked it from its rack. A twist on the hand wheel, and he had the smothering chemical spraying from the hose. But when the brass cylinder was exhausted, the

flames were still roaring with furnace fury. At any moment the cargo might be reached. Then fanatics, criminals, Feds—all would be blown sky high.

X dropped to his knees. His fingers ripped up the limber boards until he sighted the brass sea cock. He wondered if even sinking the

boat would prevent that pending explosion. He opened the cock. Cold lake-water fountained into the hold in a steady stream that drenched Agent X. Then he was on his feet, racing to the stairs.

On deck, men were crouching behind hatchways and ventilators. Federal men fought with automatics and hand to hand with criminals and Sabin's fanatics—a three-cornered battle of grim slaughter. But below decks was a fiery demon that would end all that in a blast that would send mountainous waves from shore to shore.

"Clear the ship!" shouted Agent X. "The cargo is on fire. Munitions! Hit the water!"

From behind the Agent a gun cracked twice. A scuffling sound was followed by a piteous cry for help. X pivoted, saw Sheila in the arms of a man who was dragging her back into the cabin, into the flame-tinted interior of the hell ship. Ruddy light fell across the man's face, illuminating the silvery "S" set in the top of his black mask.

Left hand raised to the patch above his eye, X followed. At the end of the largest cabin on the boat, Sheila Landi crouched before the threatening figure of Sabin's traitor-secretary—the man who would have built an empire of the underworld. In his hand was that gunlike thing X had seen before.

Its short, thick barrel was equipped with two handles. The muzzle flared out in a polished reflector like the head lamp of an automobile. Close to the butt of the weapon was a curved glass eye-shield that was made of special polarized glass, if X knew anything about it. Wires led down from the reflecting muzzle to a box of batteries and coils strapped to the man's waist. Glittering elements of metal crisscrossed the reflector.

"The Death!" gasped Sheila. "Back, Agent X!"

The Agent's left hand brushed the patch down over his eye. Because of the thick coating of paint on the contact lens covering the other eyeball, he was totally unable to see.

But he had marked the location of everything in the room perfectly. Resolutely, in total darkness, he walked straight toward the tall, thin form of the secretary.

"Agent X," came the secretary's mask-muffled voice, "you are about to die. When the police find you, you will simply be the corpse of Gee-Gee Janes, a man who killed himself because his plans, to equip the underworld with the best armaments obtainable, failed."

"No one," thought X, "will find the body. Every one aboard will be blown to atoms."

"But my work," continued the secretary, "goes on."

"I see," said the Agent. "You were the power behind Sabin. You took advantage of his mental derangement to use the strength of the Society to obtain equipment for your own criminal organization. Sabin's will had nothing to do with the murders you executed. The motive behind the death of Loeb happened to coincide with Sabin's plans. The other two murders, that of Hackman and Reedan, were all your own planning. Hackman out of the way, meant your dominance of the underworld. Reedan had to be removed because he had guessed your identity because of the weapon you employed. No doubt you tried to peddle the weapon to Reedan. Reedan knew it was impractical except for the purpose of murder, but he learned of its principle."

"As you now learn!" cried the secretary.

THEN, in the world of darkness which X had voluntarily created for himself, there was light like the sun. It penetrated the thick, painted covering on the lens over his right eye. It illuminated the entire cabin for an instant. The source of that intense light was the weapon in the killer's hand. In spite of the protection afforded by the painted lens and the patch, there was a sharp thrust of pain through the back of the Agent's brain. He crumpled to the floor to lie perfectly still.

The murderer chuckled. He stepped over Sheila Landi's unconscious form. From his belt, he pulled out an automatic, knelt beside the Agent and pressed the gun into X's limp fingers. Then he raised X's unresisting arm so that the muzzle of the gun pointed directly at X's head.

Suddenly, Agent X came to life. His two arms moved simultaneously, the left to rip the patch from his eye, the right to bring up that gun the secretary had handed him, to slap with terrific force into the killer's temple. There was no groan. The man's own weapon of light could not have scored a more complete knockout. The killer rolled over on his side and lay still.

On his feet, X ran to Sheila, lifted her limp body in his arms. He lurched through the cabin door to a deck deserted by all except the dead—the dead and a lone, staggering figure that came toward Agent X, gasping:

"Boss! Cripes, I've looked all over for you. They've all gone. The police boat is pulling away. We're stuck on this damned volcano!"

"Jump," X ordered. "We'll make a try for it. I'll handle Sheila. You look all in, Klinker."

X threw a leg over the rail, paused a moment, then stepped off into space.

The cold lake water closed over his head. He clung fiercely to Sheila's limp body, keeping her head above the water, while he struck out with long, powerful strokes toward the sound of the police cruiser's engines. Beside him, Klinker was swimming through the darkness, calling for help.

X swam on. Every stroke he thought to be his last. Still his stern will mastered fagged, numbed muscles and spurred them on. Then a searchlight cut across the water. The white ring of a life preserver arched across the beam to strike a few feet from him. The Agent and Klinker redoubled their efforts, caught the supporting ring of white, clung with unfeeling fingers to the rope.

The world rocked. A jet of blinding light flung up to meet the black canopy of the night. Waves engulfed them. Eardrums seemed to burst under the deafening roar of the explosion from the ship. Timbers, bodies, shot out of the water. Then cold, clammy darkness...

FEDERAL men, police and Secret Agent X, were seated about a small table in the cabin of the police cruiser, headed back toward Chicago. On bunks nearby, Sheila Landi and Klinker were under the skilled care of a police surgeon. Both, it was promised, would recover.

With that tiny rubber suction cup X rocked the contact lens from his eye. Smiling, he rolled it across the table for the others to examine.

"You see," he explained, "Madvig's weapon was not deadly. Just as a tremendous explosion may stun even a totally deaf person, simply through the shock of the intense illumination to the eye and consequently to that lobe of the brain where the seat of sight is located, so Madvig's invention stunned. It was, I believe, a device for heating magnesium elements to immediate incandescence. This terrible light was multiplied by a parabolic reflector and a magnifying lens. That the murderer was striking his victims by means of intense light, I judged by the marked contraction of the pupils of the victim's eyes.

"So I protected my own eyes, knowing that sooner or later the weapon would be turned on me. How the killer accomplished his 'suicides' was relatively simple. Having stunned his victim, he simply either put a gun in the victim's hand and forced him to shoot himself in the head, or prepared a poison highball that he forced into the unconscious victim's mouth. But the method used on Reedan differed a little from that used on Hackman.

"The killer stunned both Reedan and

myself with his magnesium gun. Then, to bring us out of unconsciousness, he gave us liquor from his flask. He did not want to kill me, for up to that time he thought I was Gee-Gee Janes, and Janes' gang was to be an important unit of his underworld army. But

"I get it," said one of the cops. "There were a couple of compartments in the flask. One contained prussic acid; the other, whisky. You got the whisky; Reedan, the acid."

X shook his head. "If such had been the



while I drank liquor from the same flask as Reedan, I did not die. This was to serve as an alibi in case the coroner decided that Reedan's death, some time later, was murder instead of suicide. I could have then testified in court that I drank from the same flask as Reedan, thus alibiing the murderer."

case, Reedan would never have regained consciousness. He would have died, as Hackman did, from the effects of the poison, before he awoke. What the killer's flask contained was nitrobenzene and whisky. The two do not mix. I got the liquor on top and

Reedan got the poison. The beauty of the killer's plan is that symptoms of nitrobenzene poisoning are identical to those of prussic acid. Having planted a half-empty bottle of prussic acid on Reedan's bedside table, the logical conclusion to come to was that Reedan had taken prussic acid, when he died some time later, as a result of the nitrobenzene and its slower but just as deadly action."

X pointed toward Sheila Landi's lovely white hands. "Madvig made Sheila administer the liquor and the poison. The girl was nervous and slopped some of the nitrobenzene over on her finger tips. Notice how the nitrobenzene attacked the red lacquer polish on her nails. See those white splotches? I noticed that, but of course could not interpret the reason for those splotches until Reedan died. Then, after a little thought, I discovered the truth. Whisky doesn't dissolve nail lacquer.

"Unwittingly, when, after Madvig's ministrations. I regained consciousness there in Reedan's house, I let out my plans to trap Sabin by notifying you men. That's how it

happened that Madvig's criminals were on hand when you put out in the cruiser."

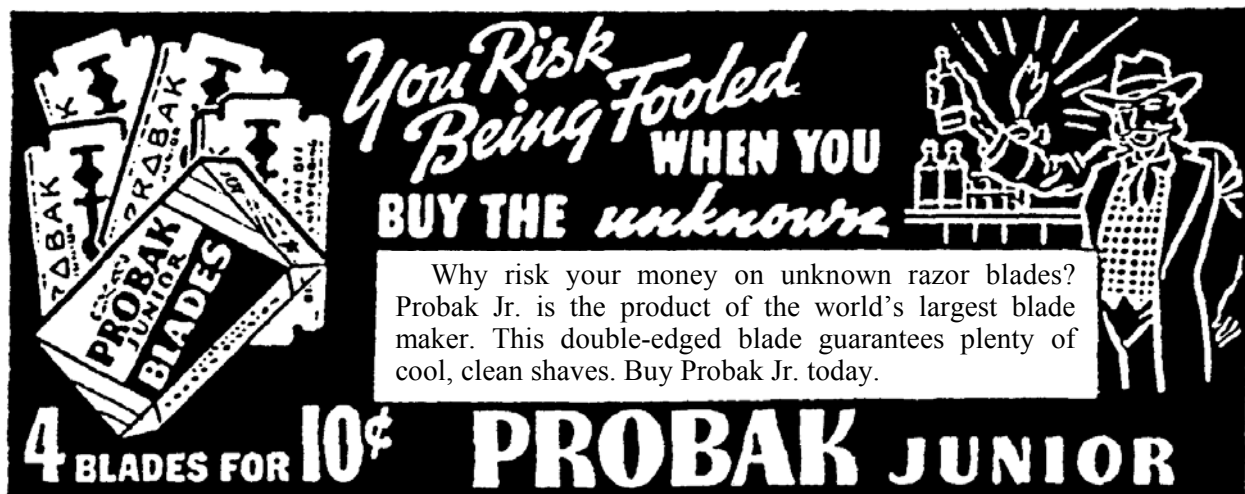
One of the federal agents shook his head. "So it was that seedy-looking inventor who had ringed together the criminal elements of the town. He would have equipped them with weapons far better than we now use. And all the time he was in and out of police headquarters, yelling about some one stealing his precious invention."

"More alibi," X said with a smile. "And he over-rated the ability of his weapon simply because he had convinced Sabin that it could produce instant death. Thus he must have wielded considerable power over Sabin, who was very much in awe of '*the Death*.' Kept it behind a curtain in his council chamber, a constant threat to all his crack-brained companions who served him in his wild scheme to precipitate revolution in South America."

Agent X and Klinker went off together to get some well-earned rest, leaving Sheila to take up a new life free from crime, that she had earned. But both men were to miss her beauty and loyalty.

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PLAGUE OF THE GOLDEN DEATH



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