

SECRET AGENT "X"

THE MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES

CORNERSTONE BOOK PUBLISHERS



SECRET AGENT X: VOLUME ONE
Edited by Ron Fortier

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The Agent X-Files
NORMAN HAMILTON

At the height of their popularity, the hero pulps starred half a dozen heroes whose main ability was the art of disguise; to be able to change their appearances and become someone totally new. Of all these masters of the personal camouflage trick, none was more adept or successful at it than Secret Agent X –The Man of a Thousand Faces. During his long run he was published by Periodicals House Inc., and his stories attributed to writer Brant House; a wry in-joke as it was obviously a house name. Most pulp historians believe many of the Agent X adventures were written by veteran wordsmith, Paul Chadwick.

As a hero, Agent X was a strange oddity. His real name and background were unknown to most people, but one such individual was K-9, a very high government official in Washington. Unlike the typical, chisel jawed; gray-eyed hero of his era, Agent X was for all intents and purposes a faceless protagonist who invariably is hounded by the police because his rather daring methods brought X into conflict with the law. He was an enigma to them.

What was gleaned by the readers over countless issues was both fascinating and equally mysterious. He was clearly a young man, in the prime of life. While doing research to write the new tales you are about to read, the four writers of this volume amassed a good deal of information and shared it with each other. Under Ron Fortier's guidance it became the Agent X Data File and is presented for your edification here.

1 – As a young man he spent many years in the Far East and learned many Oriental languages. He became a member of the Mint Tong Brotherhood and was known by them as Ho Ling. It was during this part of his life he also mastered the fighting arts of judo and ju-jitsu.

2 – He joined the Armed Forces in World War I and served in France as a flyer for the 151st British Camel Squadron. Besides his missions as a skilled pilot, he also had a fancy for fast motorcycles and was often drafted as a dispatch rider. He once performed a mission for Lawrence of Arabia. During the war he traveled extensively from Russia, to Mongolia and even had assignments in Mexico.

3 – He was severely wounded in France. A piece of shrapnel pierced his side and almost killed him. When the field doctors stitched the wound shut, the resulting scar was in the form of an X and it would forever cause him mild twitches of pain whenever he over-exerted himself in later battles.

4 – Upon his discharge, he was recruited by K-9 into the Government's Intelligence Department to become an independent agent able to confront any and all threats to the welfare and security of America at a given notice.

5 – Agent X's operations are funded by 10 wealthy men. He has never met any of them or vice versa. He is subscribed to an unlimited fund which is on deposit to him in the name of Elisha Pond (one of X's two permanent false identities) at the First National Bank. As the fund is depleted, the 10 replenish it so that X is never without money he needs to maintain his vigilant war against crime. As Pond, X is a doctor and millionaire philanthropist. Eventually as time went on, crooks that had run afoul of Agent X in the past began to suspect the Pond identity.

6 – Although he is an independent agent, X does not work alone and has created an extensive network of very special operatives under the bogus cover of the Colonial Research Foundation managed by Harvey Bates: a powerhouse of a fellow, rugged, six feet tall and

fiercely loyal to Agent X.

Jim Hobart is a chief operative, but doesn't know it. The red-headed Private Investigator was once a police officer who was framed for corruption. X helped to clear his name and now employs the Hobart Detective Agency as its number one client.

Lastly there is the lovely Betty Dale, the daughter of a police chief murdered by underworld gunmen. Blond, blue-eyed, with a knock-out figure, this gorgeous spitfire is a crime reporter for the Herald and one of the few human beings in the world who knows the history of Agent X. She is in love with him but is willing to defer marriage and a normal life together until the day X puts aside his make-up kit and retires.

All of X's operatives were required to use ID papers and ever-changing passwords to identify themselves to each other.

7 – Other recurring disguises used by X in his exploits are, A.J.Martin, a reporter for the Associated Press. This persona allowed him access to news conferences and contact with many of the people involved with the cases he investigated. By far his most daring ruse was portraying Charlie Foster, Police Commissioner. The bravado by which he donned this face and entered the very den of the men hunting him was pulp panache at its most colorful.

8 – Because he abhorred deadly force, Agent X armed himself with a collection of gas guns. His suits always were sewn with many hidden pockets in which were hidden chemical pellets used to drug unsuspecting enemies. Even his right shoe contained a tiny air gun that fired a non-lethal dart when a certain pressure was applied to the heel. And as mentioned before, X was a master of empty-handed martial arts.

9 – Among X's many other fantastical abilities were his talent for hypnotizing animals with his gaze or affecting them with a high pitched whistle. Besides his linguistic expertise, X was a genius in cryptanalysis and toxicology. He had also made extensive study of electrical components and his radio equipment was far superior to that of the regular law enforcement agencies. The guy was a veritable one man army if he had to be.

10 – Finally the remaining regular cast member was the honest,

hard working, ace of detectives, John Burks, who had made it his personal mission to capture Secret Agent X. Though he could never prove X had ever murdered anyone, Burks automatically suspected X was behind every new crime wave he investigated. In the end he was considered an expert on Agent X by other agencies and often called upon as a consulting figure.

And there you have it, the incredible dossier on one of pulpdom's most enduring heroes.

What is most ironic is that most pulp historians consider Secret Agent X as a low level hero in the pantheon of the great pulp characters. Granted he's not as famous or popular as the mighty trio of the Shadow, Doc Savage and the Spider, but I would argue that he very much deserves to be listed among the second tier of notable crime-busters along with the Avenger, G-8 and Operator 5. Simply by the sheer longevity of his own title and his continued appeal to a majority of veteran pulp enthusiasts. Surely this must stand for something. In fact, Fortier says that no other character in this new series of hero anthologies has generated as much buzz among readers as Secret Agent X. "At the mention of his name, people look up and then smile," he said after attending his first Pulp Con earlier this year in Dayton, Ohio. "I soon realized Secret Agent X still has a very large following among fans."

Thus this grand collection of four brand new, fast paced stories from the files of America's number one defender, the Man of a Thousand Faces. One of the unique challenges it presented was to artist Rob Davis who found himself having to draw a hero whose face was always different. The problem was how to let people know which figure in his dramatic, action scenes was actually the redoubtable hero. He solved that dilemma in a most ingenious fashion, by adding a very small letter X somewhere on the character's body. He leaves it up to the readers to spot the telltale mark of the super spy.

For many, many years the adventures of Secret Agent X thrilled his fans all across the country. Get ready to join their company as the faceless avenger once again leaps into mayhem and action as only he can!

FINIS

SECRET AGENT "X"

SKELETON-MEN
of **CALCUTTA**

By Kevin Noel Olson

PROLOGUE

My friend,

It has been too long since we have spoken. It is for necessary expediency that I hope you will understand I must forego all pleasantries to relay a recent adventure so that you are aware what fate threatens the citizens of my beloved India. Indeed, what fate threatens all humanity with death, and at worst, slavery under the most extreme brutality and degradation ever seen upon the face of the glorious Earth.

I discovered the pall that now hangs over our collective race under the most unassuming circumstances. At the behest of five American adventurers, I found myself visiting a small village deep in Kashmir in the interest of studying certain documents contained in the home of a holy man living there. My American companions and I became aware of an extraordinary mystery.

As you are aware, unique scriptures containing ancient histories are often contained deep in the basements of houses.

Many of these documents are utterly unique in their existence and contents, and there are untold numbers of them. Many have not been read by a living soul in several centuries. The largest portion of these scrolls and their contents remain entirely unknown to the Western world.

Upon arriving at the village riding on our finest Arabian horses, we encountered a plume of what we initially thought to be smoke. We thought nothing of it, supposing a villager engaged in burning an offering to any one of the plethora of Hindu gods. As we got closer, however, we readily noted the earthen tone of the cloud and its lack of the black

hue often associated with animal sacrifice.

When we reached our destination, the house of a holy man in the center of the village, we found the structure relocated an indeterminate distance beneath the surface of the Earth. We gathered from the villagers the structure disappeared the night before into a gaping hole now residing in its place. The plume we took as smoke was a cloud of dust that accompanied the deafening sound (so described by the villagers) of the Earth opening its maw to swallow entirely the house, its basement full of scrolls, and the holy man. The cloud diminished overnight with its remnants being what greeted us over the Kashmir sky that morning.

The party, supposing the scrolls could have survived the plunge downward with a minimum of damage, immediately decided upon an investigation into the hole.

It was not an easy descent, my friend, utilizing the mountain climbing equipment we carried with us. Traversing such a treacherous cavern would have proved entirely impossible without the proper tools.

We utilized electric torches to light the way. Adding to our artificial means, luminescent lichen on the walls of the cavern aided in illuminating the cave's interior. The cavern system we entered amazed us all in its enormity. Every man in our party carried an accomplished history in mountain climbing and cavern exploration, but this construction of gods or devils found no home in any of our previous experiences.

Our first, unexpected loss of a member of our party occurred when Saul Wakely's rope failed and he plunged to the darkness below. Characteristic of brave Wakely's strange humor, he yelled to us as he fell, "Take heart, gentlemen! I have expected my demise for years!" The depth of the cavern was such as to not allow us to hear his body strike anything.

Our expedition might have wisely been cut short right then, but it emboldened our sense of determination and adventure to continue in the memory of our fallen brother. With much effort, we made our way to one of the several ledges on the side of the cavern. Inside the wall next to the ledge, we found a small hole large enough for us to crawl through. Using a mountain climbing device peculiar to Tibetan Sherpas, we unhooked our ropes from high above us and

recovered them to continue our travels.

Moving through the hole, we found a smaller cavern leading downward, likely as deep but not so wide. Ledges and outcroppings in the new cavern allowed for easier climbing, and we continued.

Despite the loss of one of the party, we necessarily retained good spirits. After much arduous travel downward, we encountered creatures entirely beyond the description of words. If you will accept an insufficient but expedient description, they appeared as tiny, emaciated corpses. The skin on their faces, if you can call them faces, was pulled taut. The pale, yellow color of their translucent skin allowed display of their skulls beneath. Oh, the horror of such an initial encounter deep below the surface! We faced the undead crawling from their graves!

With the celerity of spiders on their webs, and as easily as a man traverses a boardwalk, the hideous beings came. Their long, thin fingers found handholds where none could be found by the thick hands of a human.

Climbing upward for escape was not possible given the creatures' speed. This fact did not deter Johnson, as stark terror made the usually stolid man lose all reason. As the remainder of the party watched his frenetic climb and pleaded with him to return to the ledge we had found with yet another egress, we barely made out the skeletal figure hanging impossibly from the roof where we had tied off the ropes on sturdy stalactites. With a gleaming knife, the skeleton-man cut Johnson's rope and sent him careening downward as the outcroppings battered him to death. His screams did not last long, and, praise the gods, Johnson's death proved a blessing compared to what shortly befell others in our party.

The creatures offered us no respite or time to contemplate the fine man that Johnson was while yet alive. We hurriedly moved through the small hole into yet another side-cavern. Using all our strength, and some given to us from the gods-know-where, the four of us lifted one of the massive stones littering the floor of our new surroundings and pushed it into the hole we had just entered. Just as we prepared to fill the hole, one of the creatures stuck its head into it. The eerie light from the lichen illuminated the wicked grin of the creature, almost

disrupting our resolve as we shoved the rock violently into the hole. From the scratching sounds on the rock, we knew it purchased us only temporary respite.

Please do not judge me harshly for what I will tell you next. The others rushed down the tunnel as the creatures prepared to tumble the rock inward. Quickly taking stock of my surroundings, I discovered a small hole, barely large enough to fit a single man, next to the passage. I knew, given time, it could easily hide and save one of us. One of us, yes, but only one. Call it fear if you will, call it cowardice if you must, but I chose the hole as my salvation and damned each and every man in the remainder of our party. I prayed they might find their own salvation as I slid feet-first into the coffin-like aperture and covered my head and face with dirt.

Like the lowliest worm, I crawled into the hole just in time. The rock tumbled to the cave floor. I watched with one eye. My heart fell as I saw my companions against a wall. The cave was a dead-end. No escape remained to them as the terrifying horde approached. I cannot tell you how horrifying it was that occurred next to such fine men as I shall ever hope to know! Seeing they had trapped the rest, the creatures surrounded them and, they started biting and scratching at them with their bared teeth and needle-like fingers! They tore my companions apart with their bare hands and teeth! Impossibly, I held my urge to vomit. To further their ignominious and painful murders, the skeleton creatures, oh gods!, they started eating them alive! Those screams carry on in my ears even now as an opera of pain!

As I observed this abomination, I wished to stand up and join my friends in death. I wish I had let those abominable creatures tear me asunder, limb from limb, and devour me alive. It would likely be more bearable than the shame that I felt, but I could not move. Eventually, they slaked their inhuman thirst for flesh and moved out of the cavern of death.

I lay there for an interminable time after the skeleton-men finished their gruesome feast. When I finally moved, it was not entirely on my own volition. Hearing a voice coming from behind me in the diminutive hole caused me to rush out of it in stark fear. The voice said, "Please sir, can you help me?"

I picked up a rock as a skeleton-man's face appeared from inside the hole. I meant to throw the rock, but the repetition of the entreaty

stayed my hand. *“How is it you speak English?” I asked.*

The creature crawled from the hole. For the first time, I saw one of them with clarity and with unease rather than terror. His size gave the impression of a pre-pubescent child. His wide-eyes did not have lids of any kind, and his translucent, pallid skin displayed his wiry muscles along with his bones, organs and veins. He wore a diaper to hide his shame, as I noted now the others had as well. Something primal attempted to rise in me and strike the creature down, but I subdued the urge.

“My people live a subterranean existence,” he explained. “My name is Levech. I ran away from my people for a time. I lived in the streets of Calcutta, pretending to be a homeless orphan begging for change from the British. I wore dirty clothes to hide my frame, and very few bother to even look at a street urchin. I learned quickly how to speak English from listening. My race has a unique ability to adapt. After some time and further education about humans, I returned to my people. A hatred of mankind runs rampant in our society, but I found humans to be exactly like us. The potential for good and evil is as inherent in our history as it is in humans.

“I returned to try to teach my people a way to cooperate with humans and understand them. Unfortunately, my efforts made me a monster by one among us named Pamerach. He hates humans with a passion, and has remarkable powers of persuasion. He sought objects he assured the people would devastate the human race.” (I will not here describe the objects lest this message fall into hands other than your own.)

“Pamerach discovered where the man lived with these objects. A holy man lived in the village above us, who belonged to a secret society that kept the objects hidden for centuries. Last night, my people excavated under the holy man’s house and sent it plunging to the bottom of the abysmal cavern. They are now searching for the objects amongst the ruins.”

I swallowed, entirely engaged in the creature’s narrative. “Have they found them?”

He shook his head and reached into his pocket. “They have not discovered both. I have discovered the one they have not, and both might be vital to the dark designs of Pamerach.” Levech held the object

out to me. "Will you help me, sir, and take it to the outside world? If Pamerach gets a hold of both, your kind is doomed!" (I will explain further the dangers when we speak face-to-face, if ever the gods will such a meeting.)

That is all of the information possible and necessary to relay concerning the uncanny adventure, of which I am sole survivor. The good skeleton-man helped me escape the damnable pit after ensuring his people did not suspect any had survived out of my party. Disguising myself as an indigent wanderer, I managed to travel virtually unmolested in this society with its phobia of untouchables. I made my way to Bombay, and eventually found passage to America. I dropped the object in my possession with a museum display shipment to your great land, although it will take investigation to discover the shipment's exact destination.

To answer one further question you may have with my limited time before departing India, I will tell you this. I did not destroy the object as it may prove vital in fighting the results if the object Pamerach holds is sufficient for his wicked scheme. I come to you, Agent X, because you are the only warrior I can imagine ingenious enough to defeat these unholy designs against my people, and all of mankind!

Yours truly,

Ambassador Casavis

Chapter One

THOSE WITH DEATH'S VISAGE

Betty Dale shifted in her chair. It was not an uncomfortable chair; far from it. In fact, she never experienced a more luxurious piece of furniture in her life. An ornate design complimented the dark wood outlining the red velvet upholstery of the high-backed chair. No, it was not the chair itself that left Ms. Dale struggling for composure.

The man who sat across from her in an identical chair caused her to blush unwittingly with his suave features and charming voice. To say his impeccable gray pinstripe suit fit like a glove insulted the fine tailor work that paled such an analogy. His suit fit him as a coat of fur befitted a lion, and Ambassador Casavis exuded strength from his chair. His offered an easy smile, somehow making Betty feel entirely at ease.

“Miss Dale,” the Ambassador said with a foreign accent nearly hypnotic in its naturalness, “Can I offer you something to drink?”

Betty looked at the four large Sikhs standing at attention behind the Ambassador. Thick, naked arms escaped their open shirts and their beards fell thickly around their exposed chests. Their long scimitars reflected the electric light about the room. She repressed a shudder and offered a smile to Casavis. “No, thank you very much. I am here to ask you some questions for the Herald.”

The Ambassador opened his hands, indicating his openness to her questions. “I serve at your pleasure, Miss Dale.”

“Well,” Betty began, “I understand your life is endangered?” She

halted as she saw Casavis' smile falter slightly. "Oh, I am so sorry. I did not mean to offend."

Casavis waved his hand dismissively and stood to his feet. "Not at all, Miss Dale." His smile returned as he put his hands behind his back. "I presumed you would ask that question, although it came rather early in the interview. I appreciate your candor. Most reporters would try to skirt the issue, when they knew all along that there was only one question people want to know about. You are a strong woman, and a man of my stature can appreciate that."

It was not often a man made Betty feel something akin to a swoon. In her past experiences with the Ambassador, he had not affected her as strongly as he did tonight. "If you feel this line of questioning too forward..."

Returning to a full smile, Casavis splayed his fingers questioningly. "What is too forward when a man is faced with death at every turn? Indeed, you are very correct, Miss Dale—could I presume to call you by your first name?"

"Of course. My name is Betty."

"Betty," Casavis let it drip off his tongue. "It always reminds me of a flower. Yes, Betty. I live under the mounting threat of death. I can trust no one, and regret placing you in danger just by your presence here."

Betty shook her head. "It's not your fault. I practically demanded this interview, and you were kind enough to agree."

"Kind enough?" Casavis let out a long sigh. "I do not know of kindness any longer. When I became ambassador to America, I did not expect what has been placed, unwelcome, at my doorstep. You see, it is not just my life that is in danger. No, I could easily live with that. Nor is it even the threat of civil war that concerns me. It is the future of my countrymen and all of India. I can trust no one to keep me safe."

Betty wrote the information on her pad as quickly as she could, her pencil scratching across the paper. "This will make for a very good story."

Casavis nodded. "Of course, of course. The Herald readers will be enthralled. Yet, my country continues to be endangered with my life."

"Oh," Betty said. "I did not mean to infer..."

"I am well aware of your good intentions. That is why I agreed to this interview. Now, I will reveal to you what I can reveal to none for fear of my life."

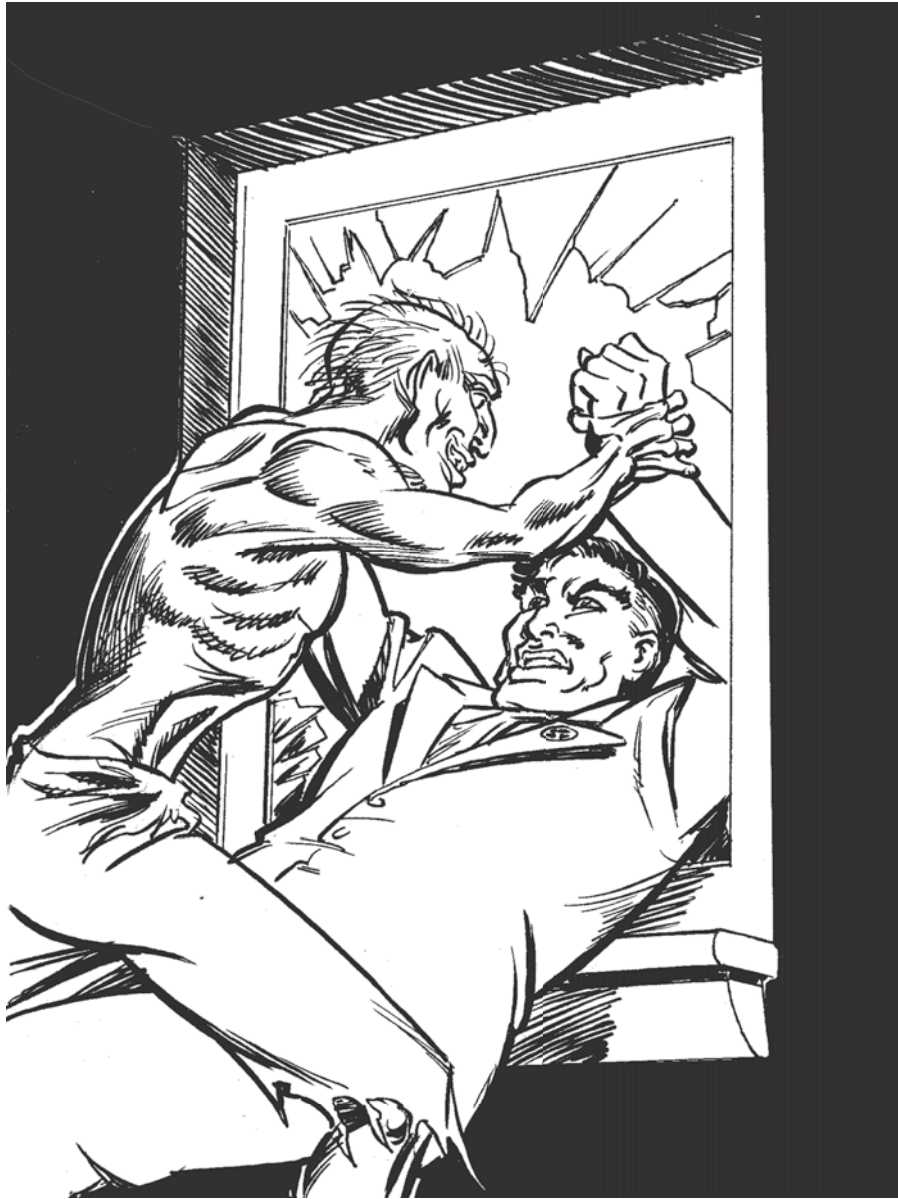
As he said this, one of the guards pulled a slim pistol. Before the

other guards could react, the guard with the pistol shot them all with tranquilizer darts. They all three fell to the ground to the tune of Betty's scream. The guard pulled a scimitar from beneath his belt and moved toward Casavis. The Ambassador did not seem surprised. "Hide behind the chair, Betty!" he ordered in a voice distinctly not belonging to Ambassador Casavis. It was a voice only Betty would recognize, and delivered for her recognition. It was the voice of Secret Agent X!

Betty obeyed the orders and slid behind the ornate and substantial chair, though keeping an eye on the action. The guard swung his deadly blade at X, but the agent stepped deftly aside. He grasped the assassin's arm with inhuman speed and dexterity, only to watch as the thickly-muscled arm fell apart like so much wet putty. Beneath the thick muscles, there appeared to be a much thinner man! The bone-thin hand escaped the remains of the counterfeit arm that served as a sheath and delivered a solid blow that belied its emaciated appearance.

The unexpected strength of the blow knocked X backward. The skeletal man crawled from beneath the remains of his erstwhile disguise much as a snake crawls forth from its wasted skin. The figure's translucent, sickly skin pulled tight against his flesh and showed the reddish muscle beneath. As a finale, he tore off the artificial visage to reveal features of a corpse-like face displaying the skull beneath the tight, semi-clear dermal layer. The thin lips of the mouth failed to cover the teeth, leaving a permanent grin. Likewise, the eyelids remained wide and spread away from its fiendish, bloodshot eyes. The idea of a mummified body instantly impressed in X's mind.

With the speed of a tarantula honing in on its prey, the creature headed straight for X. The tiny man thrust himself violently at X, driving the agent toward the tall window behind him. X crashed into the glass and used his strength to avoid the largest pieces. The pair of combatants engaged in a battle of titanic proportions, despite the skeletal figure's apparent lack of physical advantage. The assassin tried with all his impressive strength to push X out the window. They tumbled against the broken glass on the sill, precariously battling on the edge of a five story drop. The assassin picked up a convenient



"The assassin tried...to push X out the window."

piece of glass and thrust it at X.

Rather than avoiding the makeshift blade, X intentionally took the thrust in his arm and twisted quickly, using the piece of glass buried in his skin and muscle as a convenient lever to send the tiny figure off balance. Though not an intentional effect, the diminutive assassin rolled over the broken glass covering the window sill and out the window.

The assassin grasped the pointed glass remaining in the window sill and hung on. As X rushed to the window to offer his foe salvation, a shot rang out from across the street. The assassin's head exploded into bits of bone, brain, and blood as the limp body began its descent to the ground below. The window across from the one X stood near went dark.

"The shot came from the Kali Arms Hotel," X decided aloud. "The ruse was necessary, Betty. I had to pretend to be the Ambassador to draw out the assassins. Go home. I'm going to find the gunman-if it's not too late."

* * * *

The apartment emptied of the female reporter. Only Secret Agent X remained. The three body guards still lay comatose on the floor. Moving to a bookcase in the wall, he pulled out a rare and thick volume labeled *Tabularis Smaragdus* and replaced it in the same spot upside down. The bookshelf slid away, revealing an elevator. X knew the room, usually reserved for dignitaries and those who wished to hide indiscretions. His knowledge of such secrets in the hotels of the city made him a veritable Master of Trapdoors equal to Leroux's Phantom.

X slid into the small elevator and shut the door, leaving the interior utterly dark. He pulled the lever in the side, causing the contraption to move ruggedly downward in bumping, irregular motion. The device proved extremely utilitarian and without elegance or comfort.

With a clunk, the elevator signaled the abrupt end of its descent. Pushing the door open, X spilled out into the shadowed alleyway. After closing the door, which turned invisible against the brick wall as the door resembled seamlessly the rest of the wall, the secret agent rushed into the street.

People stared as the gape-mouthed doorman allowed the regal

and unattended figure to enter the lobby. Whispers reached his ears. Time and its essence stood against X, so he moved to the elevator of the lobby before anyone could engage him, or rather Ambassador Casavis, in a conversation.

In a perfect accent attributable to India, X ordered the floor number to the young elevator operator. Though impressive looking, it became clear the teenage operator did not recognize the Ambassador's likeness. The unlikely pair completed the journey in silence, with X delivering a handful of bills as a tip into the grateful and bewildered operator's hands. "If you keep the elevator here for ten minutes," the disguised agent promised, "you will receive more."

Leaving the smiling elevator operator, Secret Agent X rushed down the hallway. He hoped he was not too late to catch the gunman. Arriving at the apartment, X tried the door. He found it unlocked and entered cautiously. With a cursory glance he satisfied himself that the gunman had left the room, although it would certainly require closer examination to be certain.

The room was small, consisting of a bed and a dresser with mirror and a door likely leading to a closet. Although it was clean and comfortable, it did not compare in lavishness to the room directly across the street. The room was empty of anything untoward such as an abandoned rifle or spent shell.

X moved to the most obvious place someone might hide and carefully opened it. Inside stood a skeletal figure nearly identical to the one X faced across the street. It wore a long white robe over its emaciated frame. The steely sinews of its taut muscles showed through its pale skin. Several red sticks of explosives were strapped to its chest with a leather belt. A small timer and wires decorated the deadly device.

It became apparent to the agent that the assassin did not wish to escape. Rather, all useful evidence would be destroyed in the blast and the ensuing incendiary fire. Instantly assessing the situation, X deftly pulled the wires out of the sticks of explosive. His knowledge of explosives made the crude device mere child's play for his keen mind. "None of that now," he admonished. "You will leave a mess for the maid."

The tiny figure's eyes widened impossibly, adding further to his

skull-like appearance. His face fell, and the corners of his insufficient mouth bent awkwardly downward. With a snarl, the creature lunged at X.

His previous encounter with one of these men prepared X for its inordinate strength, and he let out a grunt as he avoided the lunge. Out of control and moving fast with momentum, the tiny ghoul ran into the mirror. The gruesome reflection greeted him before he smashed into the silvery glass and shattered it.

Retrieving the rifle from the closet, X spun about to face the creature. As the assassin struggled to its feet and gained its bearings, X pointed the rifle at it. "Give it up," the agent suggested. "There is no need for you to lose your life. I only want to ask you a few questions."

Without hesitation, the skeletal man thrust himself at X again. Agent X expected this, as the small figure showed full preparedness to die by explosives. He'd hoped he could save the poor creature, as its figure engendered pity along with repulsion. It obviously remained on a death-wish. Quickly, X raised the rifle at the figure's head and pulled the trigger. The silenced rifle made the sound of a *whiff*, and the tiny man fell prostrate to the floor.

Dropping the rifle, X rushed to the diminutive man's side and removed the explosives still strapped to his chest. If the agent wanted the creature dead, the drab wallpaper would be stained with new colors. Instead, the bullet merely grazed the skull in a spot where X knew it would render the man unconscious. Tearing some of the white material from the figure's robe, he carefully dressed the wound. He used some of the material to tie the man up as well before examining the remainder of the room.

Returning to the closet, X did a more thorough search than he had previously been allowed. He found a strange case about five-feet long and shaped like a cigar. Carved entirely from a single piece of a dark wood, the craftsmanship proved impressive. Opening its latch, X found a man-shaped indentation where the small man would fit perfectly. A rifle case was nearby, but that did not concern X.

Picking up the small figure, the agent set it gently inside the case and snapped it shut. He lifted it by its handle, surprised at its incredible lightness and well-balanced design. The emaciated man added about ninety pounds, but the weight was not unmanageable

for someone of reasonable strength and size. Of course, X realized this meant at least one other conspirator besides the two encountered already, although he suspected many more.

X ran his hand around the outside of the case and felt an interruption in the wood. Under the English words Rabelis Import Company, someone had neatly carved an address, written in an ancient Sanskrit, into the side of the case. Out of the few people familiar with this form of writing, X counted among them. X noted the address in his photographic memory and carried the case into the hallway.

Returning to the elevator, he found the operator waiting patiently for him. "The elevator is here for you, sir," the operator said.

Smiling through his disguise, X pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket with no thought to the denomination and handed it to the young man. "Here you are. Thank you for staying."

The operator shut the door once X got inside and pulled the lever. "Pleased to be of service, sir." He looked at the unusual case X carried, but he didn't think it fitting to ask questions.

Leaving the hotel, Agent X put the case in the trunk of a black sedan waiting nearby. He started the car and pulled away from the curb.