

SECRET AGENT "X"

THE MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES

CORNERSTONE BOOK PUBLISHERS



SECRET AGENT X: VOLUME TWO
An Airship 27 Production

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AN ALL NEW
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Volume Two
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SECRET AGENT "X"

MASTERPIECE
of VENGEANCE

By Sean Ellis

Prologue

No one saw the figure in black lingering in the North Gallery, despite the fact that he made no special attempt to conceal his presence. He had situated himself in a corner of the great hall, out of the way to be sure, but in plain view of anyone who might have happened to glance in his direction. Of course, no one did; people came to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to look at renowned works of paint and sculpture, not to peer into musty vacant corners. Even fewer eyes strayed to the corners where the wall met the ceiling, some sixteen feet overhead, which was, in fact, where the dark-clad man waited, secured by a rig of ropes and hooks screwed into the plaster, biding his time until the museum closed for the night.

The North Gallery was busy that day, as it had been for two weeks already, owing primarily to the exhibition of Rembrandt originals on loan from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, but the crowds thinned out with the onset of afternoon and before the last rays of the summer sun dimmed into twilight, the Museum was all but deserted. The man in black however, did not stir. Only when the lights were turned down and the watchman completed his first sentry round did he leave the perch he had occupied since the early dawn hours before the first visitors began touring the museum.

He moved with an economy of motion, dropping spider-like from his fixed line, and crept stealthily toward the one painting he had been watching throughout the day: *The Night Watch*. He did not pause to admire or



*"...where the wall met the ceiling...
was in fact where the dark-clad man waited..."*

appraise the arrangement of oil on canvas; it was merely an object, which he wished to possess. He was far more interested in what lay behind the image.

The display frame, he knew from careful planning and hard bought intelligence, was part of the museum's protective system. It was no mere construct of wood, but rather was connected to an elaborate network of electronic detection measures. Any attempt to lift the frame from its mount would immediately sound an alarm. Likewise, if a burglar were to try breaking the frame apart in order to remove the canvas itself, the result would be an immediate clamor. Even the swiftest thief could not hope to gain the exit with his prize before the uniformed security guards swept in like a flash flood. Success in this venture hinged upon defeating the alarm system, which was why the thief had spared no expense in learning the intricacies of the device. And because forewarned is forearmed, he had brought exactly the right tools to complement the knowledge he had acquired.

With deft precision, he exposed the electrical filaments embedded in the segments of the frame, splicing in extra lengths of wire to bridge the connection and maintain the circuit. Only when he was satisfied with his handiwork did he began separating the ornately carved pieces of the frame.

The last bit required extreme care. A pressure sensitive switch behind the painting itself was keyed to sound the claxons if the canvas was lifted away, but the burglar knew exactly how to fool the system. He took a long strip of metal, thinner than the blade of a surgeon's scalpel, from his tool satchel and insinuated it into the imperceptible gap between the canvas and the wall. His sensitive fingers felt the slightest resistance as the shim slid across the pressure switch and a faint smile crossed his lips.

Success!

Still cautious, he lifted the bottom of the painting, sliding his fingers along the metal strip to maintain the illusion of normalcy for the sensors beneath, until the wall was completely exposed. Laying the portrait aside, he crossed the shim with a thick piece of adhesive tape to secure it in place, and with that final touch, was done. The painting was as good as his.

No one saw the black clad man lingering in the corner of the North Gallery, and no one saw him leave. The theft was not discovered until more than hour after he crept through the 53rd street exit with his prize wrapped in a piece of dark velvet, and despite the best efforts of the museum staff to hide the deed, news of the daring escapade made the front page of the late edition of *The Herald*. The scandal was the talk of the town for more than forty-eight hours as frustrated policemen and insurance investigators chased endless leads to fruitless conclusions. It seemed destined to become a crime for the ages.

Then the unimaginable happened. Following up on a vague telephone call from an anonymous tipster, a beat cop discovered the canvas, still wrapped in a swatch of black fabric, in a public restroom in Central Park, less than ten blocks from the museum's main entrance.

"The rascal was feeling the heat," Police Commissioner Foster explained to reporters. "The moment he tried to fence the goods, we would have had him, and he knew it. Giving the painting back was the only thing he could do."

The affair of the stolen masterpiece quickly slipped from headline to footnote, and although the thief was never apprehended, interest in bringing him to heel soon waned in the face of more immediate crimes and misdemeanors. As far as everyone was concerned, the story was over.

Of course, the real story had only just begun.

Chapter One

THE ART EXPERT

Betty Dale sat primly in the hard wooden chair, her petite form seemingly immune to its intentionally uncomfortable planes and angles, and regarded the man across the desktop with a curious expression. Without breaking eye contact, she slid a hand into the deep recesses of her purse and, by touch alone, found a pack of Beeman's gum. Her nimble fingers unwrapped the foil and with a minimum of effort, brought forth the slim white stick of candy. Her ruby lips parted in a wry smile as she popped the gum in her mouth and began chewing.

The man on the opposite side of the tableau, the one man for whom the museum theft was not old news – Detective Malvern – watched the performance as if hypnotized, and for a moment completely forgot what it was that the slim blonde reporter had just asked him.

“Ah, no,” he finally managed, shaking his head in an effort to bring himself back to reality “Nothing new on the case, but I’ll be damned, pardon my language, Miss Dale... but I’ll be danged if I give up on this one. That scoundrel made a mockery of the museum’s security. He might not have gotten away with it this time, but there’s nothing to stop him from doing the same thing to a bank vault or a jewelry collection. I’ll warrant he’d have a much easier go of fencing the Hope diamond than he would have that painting.”

“If he was such a smart fellow, why didn’t he realize that from the start? There’s something fishy about the whole thing, Jim.”

“You’re telling me, Betts.”

Betty popped her gum thoughtfully. She was no stranger to the crime beat, and the time she had spent following and chronicling the exploits of some of the city’s most diabolical villains had given her unique insights

into the criminal mind. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed a well-dressed man entering the precinct station house. The newcomer, almost youthful with a shock of tousled blonde hair and a pair of wire rimmed glasses looked out of place in the dreary environs of the police station. Betty watched him gaze around the open area until their eyes met, then snapped her attention back to the detective.

"How do we know he didn't swap it for a fake?"

Malvern smiled confidently. "Give us a little credit. That was the first thing we thought of. The museum is putting together a panel of art experts to go over that canvas inch by inch."

"Ah, excuse me..."

Malvern looked up to the source of the soft interruption; the sandy-haired newcomer now stood a few steps to Betty's left. "Be with you in a moment, pal."

"Yes, quite." The man's tone was affable, but he did not retreat. "I do have an appointment, detective."

Although he had spoken only a few words, Betty did not fail to peg his British accent, and was immediately intrigued. Her keen instincts told her that this fellow was not here to report a petty crime.

Malvern's eyebrows came together in a crease. "Oh, you must be the fellow from Lloyds."

"Indeed. Well met, sir." A pleasant grin cracked the blonde man's countenance as he proffered a business card. "Jonathan Rhys-Reynolds at your service."

Malvern stood, took the card and politely extended a hand, which Rhys-Reynolds grasped and shook in a quick business-like manner.

"Hiya!" Betty chirped, interposing herself between the men. She scrutinized his face, memorizing every detail right down to the mole below his left eye, and seized his hand as soon as Malvern let go. "Betty Dale from The Herald."

Rhys-Reynolds' smile did not falter. "Charmed," he answered, inclining his head. "The Herald, you say? Then you are a journalist?"

"Betty covers the city crime beat," Malvern intoned, and then enunciating clearly so that there would be no mistaking his meaning, added: "She was just leaving."

"Not on my account, I hope." The Englishman gave a light chuckle. "There's no reason to conduct this business under a veil of secrecy, detective. Miss Dale's readers might find the business of art appraisal less than sensational, but I see no reason to keep her in the dark."

“Great! It’s settled then.” Betty threw a triumphant glance at Malvern then looked back to the newcomer. “So, you’re the guy who’s going to authenticate the painting?”

“Oh, good heavens no. I wouldn’t know a real Rembrandt from a cigar box lid. No, I am simply a representative from the insurance company, here to observe the panel of experts.”

“One of our early theories,” explained detective, “was that the thief might have been in cahoots with one of these experts. Switch the original with a fake, and then have an expert authenticate the phony. Mr. Reynolds is here to make sure that no shenanigans of that sort are in the works.”

Betty raised an eyebrow. “Do you really think that’s possible? An art expert turning into an art thief?”

Rhys-Reynolds waved airily. “Oh, probably not. Doesn’t hurt to check though.”

Malvern shuffled some papers on his desk and then passed over a small bundle held together with a paper clip. “Here’s the list. Everyone seems to be above suspicion; all native citizens in good standing... except for the last one, Professor Richard. He’s actually a Belgian immigrant. Still, nothing out of the ordinary there.”

The Englishman flipped through the papers quickly – too quickly for more than a cursory examination. “Jolly good, detective. You seem to have everything well in hand.”

“So you’re not going to check up on these guys?” Betty challenged, chewing her gum with an unconscious intensity.

“Oh, I’ll probably do a little investigating on my own, especially this Richards fellow, but I see no reason to interfere with the appraisal.” Rhys-Reynolds tucked the sheaf of paper into a small leather portfolio, then again extended his hand to Malvern. “Thank you for your cooperation, detective.”

“No problem.”

Betty’s instincts were buzzing. “Mind if I tag along?”

The Englishman’s mouth parted in an expression that lay somewhere in the middle ground between amusement and dismay. “I’m not certain that it would be proper...”

“Ah, come on, pal. This is America and I’m a big girl. Why don’t you buy me a cup of coffee, and we’ll call it a date?”

Rhys-Reynolds seemed about to choke and Betty expected his cheeks to flush with embarrassment, but strangely his pale complexion remained unchanged. He shook his head in apparent consternation, and then offered his arm to her.

As Detective Malvern watched them leave a low whistle escaped his lips. "That Betty Dale is a spitfire," he said to no one in particular. "No doubt about it."

Ever the perfect gentleman, Rhys-Reynolds opened the passenger door of the sedan and offered a helping hand as Betty slid into the seat. The pretty journalist was a bit surprised to find that the visitor from across the Atlantic had his own automobile, even one as bland as the brown 1935 Ford Tourer, and said as much once he was seated behind the wheel.

"A hired car," he explained. "And please, if this is to be a date, then I must insist you call me Jonathan."

Betty laughed. "Don't get the wrong idea, chum... Jonathan. You're sweet and all, but I'm here for the story."

Rhys-Reynolds started the engine and decisively pulled out into traffic. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

Although she made small talk during the drive, Betty observed that her foreign companion navigated the city streets with the surety of an inveterate taxicab driver. He never once consulted a map or appeared to scrutinize street signs as he traveled main thoroughfares and side streets, some familiar and others totally alien to the city girl beside him. She filed the inconsistency away for future consideration and silently congratulated herself for having made this play; there was a lot more to Jonathan Rhys-Reynolds than met the eye.

In short order, they found their way to Fifth Avenue, and it wasn't long before the grand Beaux-arts façade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art hove into view. Betty had spent more than a few afternoons admiring the exhaustive collection of artwork on display, but since the theft, she had spent an inordinate amount of time in the vaulted halls of the Met. Nevertheless, she had a feeling that the man driving the sedan knew far more about the inner workings of the fifty-odd-year old institution than she did.

"The Rembrandt is under constant guard in a private viewing room," he explained as they left the car, and made the short hike down the sidewalk and up the chiseled marble steps to the entrance. "The appraisal will be closely supervised and each one of the judges will be permitted only fifteen minutes with the painting. The museum director personally chose this panel of experts, so I don't anticipate any problems."

"What happens if they discover it's a forgery?"

“Oh, I think that quite unlikely. You see, this is a mere formality. The director has already conducted a cursory examination of the painting and declared it authentic.”

“Uh, huh. Okay, so what happens if they discover it’s a forgery?”

Rhys-Reynolds chuckled. “Why then, Miss Dale, you’ll have a front page exclusive.”

There was little time to admire the architecture of the vast museum complex, much less its priceless collection of art both contemporary and antique. The Englishman briskly led Betty past the grand galleries to a section of the Met she had never before seen. The corridors they traveled were less elegant than the public area, but retained a bit of its old world charm and featured assorted pieces of art and ancient relics, though there was a sense that these works were of inferior value and purely decorative. At one point, she chanced to catch a glimpse of the interior of one adjoining room and saw what appeared to be a small classroom, but Rhys-Reynolds whisked her along before she could get a better look.

“It’s right up here,” he explained, directing her attention to another non-descript doorway. The only difference this time was that two uniformed guards, with large holstered pistols on their hips, stood to either side of the portal. The guards admitted them, a terse nod the only form of communication that was exchanged. The insurance representative escorted her into a chamber that was nothing like the modest classroom she had spied moments before.

The anteroom had been richly appointed with velvet wall treatments, extravagant cherry-wood tables and several divans upholstered in dark leather. Betty felt her heels catching in the nap of the rug and looked down to find the elaborate designs of an honest-to-goodness Persian carpet. Yet, despite the trappings, she detected a hastiness about the décor; it was as if this room had been slapped together on the spur of the moment. Betty made a mental note of this bit of theater, adding it to her already deep suspicion that something was up.

There was a second door leading out of the sitting room, and two more guards posted there, but aside from that pair and Betty and her guide, the room was empty. The Englishman gestured to one of the sofas positioned at the back of the room, facing a large courtyard window, and took a seat beside her. Not long thereafter, the first door opened and an older man

with the demeanor of a college professor entered the room. Rhys-Reynolds stood and greeted the fellow as if they were old friends, then introduced him to Betty as the museum director.

The older man sat with them, and over the course of the next few minutes, several more people entered the room. Each time, the director supplied a name, which prompted the Englishman to consult the documents in his portfolio. One by one, the art experts arrived and took their turn in the second guarded room. Without exception, each man emerged from the viewing chamber with a confident smile and a nod to the director.

"Well, that's that," the older man said. "Not that I had any doubts."

Rhys-Reynolds smiled, then as an afterthought, consulted his papers. "Wasn't there supposed to be one more...? Ah, yes. Professor Richard?"

A nerve in the director's cheek twitched. "Professor Auguste Richard," he said with a sigh, correcting the Englishman and pronouncing it *Ree-shard*, "is a very private man; a bit of a recluse. I didn't have much hope that he'd actually put in an appearance, but he's the absolute authority on the Dutch masters so I had to extend the invitation."

Rhys-Reynolds shrugged. "No matter. We have five perfectly qualified experts who all say yea; I think the case has been made adequately." He got to his feet and offered Betty a hand up. "It seems all of this was much ado about nothing."

The director grimaced. "If nothing else, we were found wanting in our security precautions. The police are still at a loss for how this devil got in and out without attracting notice..."

The older man's voice trailed off as the guards opened the door admitting two more people. Betty's gaze snapped to the second of the pair, a young woman dressed to the nines. A spark of innate jealousy caused the reporter's shoulders to tense up as she watched the other woman stride confidently into the anteroom; this lady was a Grade A knockout. Not a strand of her stylishly cut auburn hair was out of place beneath the spiffy green trilby, which perfectly matched the lady's handbag and shoes and nicely accented her dark red suit. She tore her gaze from the woman and glanced at the Englishman, expecting him to be likewise entranced, but to her surprise, Rhys-Reynolds was staring transfixed at the other newcomer. The intensity of his scrutiny prompted her to then give the lady's companion a closer look and as she did, she heard the director's muted exclamation:

"My goodness, it's him!"

Like the young woman beside him, the man was immaculately dressed,

though his perfectly tailored charcoal gray suit was a good deal more subdued than hers, appropriately enough since he was old enough to be her father.

“Professor Richard, I presume?” the Englishman asked, quietly.

The director nodded, still breathless in amazement. “I didn’t dare to hope... The young lady must be his daughter Amelia. I’ve not seen her since she was a child.”

Professor Richard inclined his head toward the director, giving Betty her first real look at the elusive art expert. His erect posture, along with a mane of silver hair and a slightly darker Van Dyck beard lent an air of regal majesty to his countenance.

Betty cleared her throat impulsively. “I thought this guy was a hermit.”

Richard did not loiter, but moved immediately toward the viewing room doors, while his daughter took a station near the window, casually assuming a pose to rival a department store mannequin.

The director shook his head. “Perhaps I misled you. Professor Richard stays out of the public eye, but he is a man of means to be sure. He has donated several of the pieces that are now in our permanent collection, but those are a drop in the bucket compared to the private collection he keeps at his estate in the Hamptons.”

Betty glanced at the Englishman again. “A wealthy reclusive art collector and he’s keen on Rembrandts? Sounds like the sort of guy who might want *The Night Watch* for himself.”

Rhys-Reynolds continued to watch the door of the viewing room, oblivious to her comment, but the director came quickly to Richard’s defense. “Miss Dale, I’d think twice if I were you, before making such a libelous accusation in your newspaper. Professor Richard is a man of the highest character.”

The Englishman nodded absently but said nothing, and an uncomfortable silence ensued, until after what seemed an eternity, the viewing room door opened and Richard emerged, his magisterial face now wearing a mask of reverential awe. He caught the director’s eye and nodded.

“There you go,” exclaimed the museum official. “Six of six.”

Abruptly, Rhys-Reynolds took a step forward. “I say, Professor, might I have a word in private?”

Betty gasped at the sudden turn of events, and was almost speechless when the Englishman turned to her apologetically. “Forgive me, Miss Dale, this won’t take a moment.”

Betty’s eyes flashed from the now confused countenance of the art

expert back to her own companion. "No trouble at all," she said, with a wan smile. "In fact, I should probably be running along anyway. Gotta scoop *The Clarion* with the big news that the painting ain't a fake... not that it's really news." She was rambling and she knew it.

"But I promised you a cup of coffee..."

Betty grinned and raised her hands. "Rain check. Gotta make the evening edition."

She hastened from the room, stealing a look over her shoulder as the sandy-haired Englishman and museum director moved off to stand next to Richard. The latter's daughter remained where she was and with placid indifference, took a cigarette from a silver case, lit it, and pressed it to her painted lips. But as Betty opened the exit door, she paused and affected a dizzy expression. "Whoops! Forgot my pocketbook."

She turned back inside, but now her strides were as stealthy as a stalking panther. No one in the anteroom paid her heed or even seemed to notice as she returned to the divan and knelt as if to search for something lost. She lingered there a moment, out of direct view of the others, then crept forward until she could hear their voices.

The director was making introductions. "Professor, this is Mr. Jonathan Rhys-Reynolds of Lloyds—"

"Your faithful servant," the Englishman exclaimed quickly. "Forgive me, but what I have to say is for Professor Richard's ears only."

"Ah, I see." The director was clearly disappointed at the dismissal, but regained his composure. "Professor, it was good to see you again. We must arrange for a future rendezvous."

"It would be my pleasure," answered a third voice, a rich baritone, faintly accented, that could only belong to Richard.

Betty crawled closer, straining to hear the voices that now dropped to barely a whisper, and what she heard made her fingertips tingle in anticipation. She hastily fetched her notepad and pen and began scribbling furiously.

"Professor Richard," began the Englishman. "I apologize for deceiving both your honored self and the director, but I am not from Lloyds of London, and my name is not Jonathan Rhys-Reynolds ..."

Andre LeMartre stood in the grand central lobby of the museum, nervously fingering what looked to all appearances like a large

crucifix depending from a silver chain around his neck. Aside from the religious icon, his attire was plain; he seemed no different than the hundreds of other tourists wandering the vast repository of aesthetic treasure. But LeMartre's dark eyes did not seek out works of art on display; his gaze was fixed on another man, similarly dressed to blend in, and somewhat less conspicuously, also wearing a large silver crucifix. Though nearly a hundred yards separated them, the two men were deep in conversation.

"This is the man we seek," the second man observed, confirming their suspicions.

LeMartre nodded, then replied: "Do nothing. I will attend to this."

The other man's face was a mask of concern. "This place is too public..."

LeMartre looked away, effectively silencing the protest. Had anyone in the museum cared to observe the men, they would have noticed no strange behavior, and certainly nothing they would have understood as communication. The entire exchange had occurred without the use of spoken words – their common tongue was a language of signs and gestures, which to the untrained eye seemed like little more than the tics of a nervous man fidgeting anxiously. It was just one of the skills that made LeMartre and his comrades into one of the most effective infiltration and espionage forces on the planet.

There was no need for the young man to explain himself; though he was only a second tier apprentice, he was still senior to the other operatives spread throughout the museum, and more importantly, he had been given complete oversight of the mission. His success would guarantee his ascension to the first tier – perhaps even a leap forward to knighthood; he wasn't about to let anything prevent or delay the accomplishment of his sworn task. And there were other reasons why he longed to see this mission finished as quickly as possible.

Gripping the upright length of the crucifix in his left hand, he strode from the lobby and hastened through the maze of exhibits and dioramas to the section reserved for offices and classrooms.

The guards spied him from a long ways off, but failed to see the obvious warning signs in his determined stride and the intensity of his gaze. It was only when it became plainly obvious that he was heading for the very door they protected that one of them stepped forward to block him. It was an error in judgment he would never get the opportunity to repeat.

LeMartre closed with the guard and tugged at his crucifix with his right hand. The seemingly solid piece of silver came apart – the long vertical

shaft of the cross still depended from a chain about his neck, but the cross piece and upright came away in his hand, along with a deadly revelation. He swiped the metal across the guard's throat, and then pirouetted on his left foot like a ballet dancer, spinning completely around and slashing the second watchman before the first one even realized he was dead. A sharp tang of iron filled the air as the stricken men sank to their knees, struggling in vain to staunch the pulsing flow of crimson. Le Martre lingered long enough only to unlimber a holstered revolver from one of the slain men, and then burst through the door.

He surveyed the sitting room in an instant, his eyes alighting on the target of his quest, but not remaining fixed there; there would be time enough to savor that blow. He dismissed the young woman near the window and the young blonde-haired man as posing little threat, but a second pair of guards demanded his full attention. Like their ill-fated counterparts in the corridor, the two men were slow to recognize the danger they were in, but one of them spied the revolver in LeMartre's hand and instinctively reached for his own sidearm. The killer however, had the element of surprise on his side and used it decisively,

The stout little police model revolver thundered twice in the confines of the anteroom, and two well-placed rounds punched the watchmen back against the wall. The young woman at the window let out a shriek of alarm, but the sound was lost in the ringing echo and miasma of cordite.

A triumphant grin broke across LeMarte's face as he strode boldly forward to confront the silver-haired man. He exchanged the gun in his right hand for the bloodstained cruciform object in his left and looked the man squarely in the eye. "For Mont Sacre!" he cried, and then struck with all his might.