

## THE SPIDER · CORPSE CARGO

By Grant Stockbridge (Norvell Page)

*Thundering far beneath Manhattan's thronging streets came the Death Express—a crack New York Central train bearing a gruesome cargo of lifeless men, women and children—their bodies stripped of valuables, naked and mutilated! A grim warning of the terror-reign that threatened America—at the hands of Twentieth century land-pirates, whose weapon was neither gun nor sword, but the stunning, body-shivering force which lies in electricity! Can The Spider, using mortal weapons, fight the numbing power of the thunderbolt—and survive?*

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### CHAPTER ONE

Richard Wentworth's hands were light on the steering wheel, his eyes warily sharp, as he searched the night blackness of Clark Street. The summons to visit the Police Commissioner's home had been casual, but there had been an undercurrent of tension in Kirkpatrick's quiet words, of tension and—fear!

Wentworth clicked off all lights and let his sleek roadster drift with only the faint whisper of the engine, the purr of its fat tires, to betray its passage. At the far corner of the next block, fronting on Hardesty Boulevard, the Commissioner's home sat remotely amid wide-spread grounds. But Wentworth had no intention of entering the gates openly. A single vertical line creased his smooth brows as he recalled Stanley Kirkpatrick's clipped, precise words.

"Dick," Kirkpatrick had said over the phone, "could you drop over to my home at once? Yes, my home. And, Dick, if you could come—" there had been a pause of seconds there—"if you could come ... unobtrusively . . . it would be better for us both."

Kirkpatrick had refused further information over the phone, and this secrecy was not like the Police Commissioner. Nor did that accent of fear fit into his character. There was some dark mystery here, else why should the *Spider* be summoned—secretly—to the Commissioner's home?

Wentworth caught up a silver-headed cane from the seat and stepped from the car to the narrow foot pavement along Clark Street. An untrimmed ten-foot hedge, backed by a stone

wall, crowded close. He walked quietly toward a certain familiar break in that hedge, where a quick vault would put him inside Kirkpatrick's grounds, "unobtrusively."

He frowned slightly as he located the break he sought; then his firm, mobile lips curved into a slight smile. Unless his eyes played him false—and the *Spider's* eyes were incredibly keen—a man had moved in that black opening in the hedge. That meant just one thing. Kirkpatrick's home was watched!

When he was still twenty-five feet from the break, other shoes than his own made small rasping noises on the pavement, and a man stepped slowly and deliberately into his path. Wentworth continued his unhurried stroll, muscles relaxed. The man's heavy, short body was silhouetted faintly against the dim rays of the corner street light. His head was thrust forward, shoulders hunched. But he waited quietly until Wentworth had covered fifteen feet, and then he spoke:

"Got a match, Buddy?"

Wentworth's smile tugged at his mouth corners again as he strolled to within a single stride of the man. An old trick, this. Either a man, reaching for a match, dipped his right hand into his pocket and was hampered when the attack was made; or, if the intent was less violent, he revealed his face in the glimmer.

Wentworth slid his left hand to his vest pocket. He gripped his cane lightly in his right fist, knob uppermost. The solid silver knob was round and heavy.

"I have no matches," he said casually, "but I can give you a light."

He slipped out a small cigarette lighter whose platinum sides glinted dully, and snapped it into flame, the cane poised and ready in his right hand. A bulbous face moved into the halo-glow, a face of sagging jowls with a rosy, button nose. The man wheezed as he sucked in smoke. His eyes sought Wentworth's face across the yellow cone of flame.

But Wentworth held the lighter so the shadow of his fist fell blackly across his countenance. When the man's cigarette glowed, he snapped out the lighter. The man straightened with apparent reluctance, hesitated, then mumbled his thanks and moved to pass.

Wentworth stepped aside politely, turned to walk on. His straining ears caught the sharp rasp of gritty shoe leather. He ducked and whirled, as a swishing blackjack missed his head by an inch!

The fat man grunted in surprise. Wentworth snapped his right arm upward and the silver cane head clicked against his assailant's jaw. The man's breath hissed out and he went down hard.

Wentworth peered swiftly up and down Clark Street. It was deserted. Swiftly he bent over the man and ran through his pockets, found papers identifying him as Ralph Donaghue of the Black Detective Agency.

A low whistle hissed between Wentworth's teeth as he jerked erect. Why were private detectives watching the Police Commissioner's home? But there was no time for speculation now. He must move fast. There was, it seemed, work for the *Spider*!

His eyes were withdrawn and alert as he was ushered ceremoniously into Kirkpatrick's home office, but there was warm smile on his vital, clean-cut face.

Kirkpatrick rose behind his desk, a faultlessly attired man a trifle taller than Wentworth's scant six feet. His long, saturnine face was smiling slightly, moving the waxed points of a neat mustache.

He shook Wentworth's hand. "You've thinned up some, Dick," he said casually.

Wentworth smiled at him blandly. For the present, he wouldn't mention that encounter in the dark. Better to learn first the reason for this summons, the reason the Commissioner of Police called in such a notorious criminal as the *Spider*. Replying to Kirkpatrick's mention of his thinner, paler face, he reminded him of the recent weeks he had spent in the hospital recovering from

wounds. He limped slightly, favoring his left leg, as he moved toward a chair a suavely waved hand indicated. He sat back and continued to smile, but his eyes were questioning.

He and Kirkpatrick were warm friends, drawn together by mutual admiration and respect. But between them was a barrier, the insurmountable barrier of the law!

On one side was Richard Wentworth, whom the world knew as a wealthy clubman who sometimes gave charity concerts, playing a violin that sang with the soul of genius, or who, again, brought back some rare beast, alive, from the wilds of far Sumatra, or purchased some fabulously valuable painting. They knew him for a great philanthropist given to freakish, but sociologically sound, benefices. But of his real altruism as the *Spider* only a trusted few knew. For that mysterious avenger who brought his swift and awful justice to the Underworld was a criminal and a murderer in the eyes of the law!

Kirkpatrick had long ago become convinced that Wentworth was the *Spider*, but because of his intense admiration for the man, because Wentworth administered swift justice where Kirkpatrick's law-hampered forces could not act, he had declared an armed truce. If Kirkpatrick ever found positive proof that Wentworth was the *Spider*, he had sworn to act with the full power of his office. But until such time as the proof should fall into Kirkpatrick's hands, he would assist Wentworth in every way possible. And the *Spider* would return the favor.

"Why this mysterious night call?" Wentworth asked.

Kirkpatrick, seated now behind his desk, glanced toward the drawn window shades, toward the closed door, and then dipped two fingers into a vest pocket. He held across the desk a signet ring on whose seal a sprawling, hairy-legged figure glowed crimson. And as he held the thing, his hand trembled slightly. Wentworth's smile did not alter. No tension crept into his body. Yet the thing he gazed upon was his own signet ring, and on it had been imprinted the *seal of the Spider*!

Kirkpatrick was talking hurriedly, half fearfully, his eyes sharp upon Wentworth's lean face.

"There is no need for fencing between us, Dick," he said in his quick, clipped accent. "You and I both know you are the *Spider*, but I'm not trying to trap you. I think this ring brings some sort

of message to you and I am afraid to think what that message is."

"I asked you to come secretly because I wish no one to know that I have this ring, or that I know what to do with such a ring when it comes into my hands."

Wentworth asked: "Where did you get that ring?"

His thoughts raced back over months of battle against the Underworld. He knew when last he had worn that ring. It had been a simple signet then, but he had printed his seal upon it and given it to a boy of twelve who had helped save the *Spider's* life. He had told that boy: "If you ever need help, send this ring to Stanley Kirkpatrick, Commissioner of Police, and I will come."

Now young Jim Walsh must need the *Spider's* help! But what of that detective on watch outside the house? Surely he was not connected with the boy!

Wentworth leaned forward tensely. "Quickly, Kirk," he said. "This is important. Where did you get that ring?"

Kirkpatrick's saturnine face was grave.

"A boy came here," he said, "and insisted on seeing me. He gave me this ring and seemed to think I would know what to do with it. He refused absolutely to say anything except to give his name and address."

Kirkpatrick took a slip of paper from his drawer. "James Walsh," he read, "723 Dugan Street."

Wentworth snapped, "Thanks!" and reached the door in two strides.

"Wait, Dick," Kirkpatrick cried.

The door closed. Wentworth caught his hat from the expressionless butler and went long-legged to his car. When he spun the corner, he noted the detective he had knocked out had disappeared.

Thoughts crowded thickly as Wentworth raced southward through the city. He was sure that young Jim Walsh would not have sought help for himself. Time and again Wentworth's secret charities had tried to help the boy and his family, only to meet self-reliant refusal. No, there was more to this than a call for help—though the *Spider* would gladly have answered such an appeal. Jim Walsh had uncovered some new threat to society. The detective's attack lent support to that....

The streets grew narrow and twisting. Tenements reared their squalid brick walls to either side, their slatternly fire escapes draped with the poor people who panted for relief from the heat. The streets were like ovens and hot wind fanned his face. Children, too listless to play, sat soddently on the blistering curbstones. The air was heavy and rancid with the smells of close-packed humanity. In the sweltering heart of this district, Dugan Street writhed its crooked way.

Around the corner from Dugan Street, Wentworth parked his car and pushed on afoot, cane swinging, his slight limp hardly perceptible. The heat of the pavements penetrated his shoe soles. He paused by a tenement wall to light a cigarette, and the brick radiated warmth like an oven. The platinum side of his lighter made a perfect mirror. In it he surveyed the street, but found no pursuer.

He slipped the lighter into his pocket and hurried on. He reached the Walsh home and, pausing a moment in the black shadows, fastened on a blond mustache and wig, placed small bits of hard rubber so that they distended his lips and altered his nose. It was a crude disguise, but in the dim light it would pass.

He climbed to the boy's home on the third floor of a tenement. At his knock, Mrs. Walsh, a heavy woman, her unkempt hair stringy with perspiration, her broad face good-humored, opened the door. She held a baby straddling her hip and laughed at Wentworth's request for Jim.

"Sure, and Jim is over in the shack with his *Spider* Club," she said, indicating its direction with a jerk of her thumb. "And is the spalpeen the popular mumber of the family these days!"

"I don't getcha," Wentworth said with a Bowery accent.

The woman kept on chuckling. "You're the second man to come asking after me boy tonight," she said, "and . . ."

She gaped at empty darkness. A moment before a man with a blonde mustache had stood there. Now a shadow moved swiftly down the steps.

Descending with long, rapid strides, Wentworth was grim-faced and fearful. If another man had asked for Jim tonight, the *Spider* might already be too late! For that query could mean but one thing. The menace Jim feared, the threat he sought to expose to the *Spider*, was closing in upon him.

Past a sputtering gas jet, Wentworth whirled back along the first-floor hall. Mrs. Walsh had pointed this way when she mentioned Jim's "shack." He guessed that by "shack," she meant a shanty such as boys out of time immemorial had erected from scrap wood for their "secret club" meetings.

Wentworth legged out into the night, spotted instantly a huddle of blackness in the middle of the vacant rear lot from which a gleam of light escaped. That would be the shack. He raced toward it.

Then, abruptly, Wentworth flung flat down on his face on the hot, dusty earth. A bullet whined past his head. He had seen the glint of warning metal a half-second before. But there came now no flash of powder flame and no crash of gunfire. A silenced revolver!

Wentworth lay unmoving, scanning the shadows with keen, hard eyes. A silenced gun spelled organized crime! Nothing less! Jim Walsh had done well to send for the *Spider*. Heaven grant that the *Spider's* coming was not too late!

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