

# THE MELTING DEATH

By Curtis Steele

*Out of the blue it struck—that dread, mysterious force, dealing death, destruction and misery to millions. America found herself stripped of her strongest defenses as battleships, huge guns, skyscrapers, factories and transportation systems crumbled to dust before the voracious flame. No one could tell where it came from; where it would next strike; no one was safe from its hot, devouring maw. An entire nation stood crippled, paralyzed by panic as Operator 5, alone, fought to save America from the red ruin loosed upon it.*



## CHAPTER ONE Span of Doom

THE gigantic suspension bridge, spanning the turbid waters of the Mississippi and linking together two important states, was about to be dedicated to the people.

For four years hundreds of men had labored to erect the tremendous structure. Millions of man-hours of work had gone into its construction. The finest architectural and engineering talent in the United States had combined to make of it a monument of enduring utility and beauty. The world had watched its gigantic masonry-encased piers rise into the sky above the water, and the weaving of the huge spider-web of cables, until at last it stood, a miracle in stone and steel.

It was a breath-taking sight, this gargantuan span, glistening black and white in the clear sunlight of a Spring day. Its interweaving strands of steel shone clean and new, its roadbed of unblemished concrete lay a white stretch beneath the catenary curves of the thick suspension cables. No traffic had yet passed across it, but the hour of its opening to the public was now at hand.

On the far-reaching ramps, which fanned out across both banks of the Mississippi, thousands of automobiles were driven into line, each loaded with passengers, all eager for the honor of being among the first to cross the beautiful span. Far beneath it, numberless boats were shuttling back and forth in the water. The attention of a million people was turned to the cleared space on the bridge midway over the river.

The dedication ceremonies were about to begin.

The cars which stood first in line were those of important public men, and from them morning-coated and silk-hatted officials had alighted to gather at the center of the bridge. The glistening lenses of newsreel cameras looked down upon them. Radio announcers chattered a running account of the event into microphones.

Across the roadbed hung a shining silk ribbon, barring the way, and near it stood a child of five who was holding in her chubby hands a pair of golden shears inscribed for the occasion. She was Betty Merwin, only daughter of the governor of one of the two states joined by this tremendous link of steel and concrete, and it was to be her honor to sever the ribbon and symbolically open the bridge to the waiting swarm of cars.

On the Missouri side of the span a low-slung, streamlined roadster was approaching. It passed on the left of hundreds of parked cars as it climbed the ramp. Presently it paused, as four uniformed policemen officiously moved to bar its way. In answer to their demand that it turn back, the young man at the wheel produced from his pocket an envelope, and from the envelope removed a sheet of stiff vellum stationery. The policemen read it—a letter signed by Senator Morrison of Missouri—and waved the roadster on.

ITS motor hummed powerfully with a peculiar sighing noise as it climbed to a position near the foremost cars. The young man alighted from it and promptly strode to a silk-hatted official. The impressive-looking man turned, holding in his hand a copy of a prepared speech his eyes curious.

"You are Wilbur Benson, President of the Central States Chamber of Commerce?" the young man asked.

"Yes."

"I must see you privately, sir, at once."

Mr. Benson answered with testy impatience. "I'm very busy. I am about to open the dedication ceremonies. Later—"

"But this matter can't wait," the young man insisted in a quiet voice. "It's of the utmost importance."

"Very well," snapped Benson. "Make it fast, then."

The young man stepped aside and Benson followed. Out of earshot of the others, he produced from his breast-pocket a flat silver case. His thumb-nail pressed upon a corner of it, activating a hidden spring, and a strong catch released a silver leaf which sprang up. The young man held before Benson's eyes a silver-framed credential.

Benson's eyebrows arched as he read:

#### THE WHITE HOUSE

*Washington*

*To Whom It May Concern:*

*The identity of the bearer of this letter must be kept absolutely confidential.*

*He is Operator 5 of the United States Intelligence Service.*

The name signed to the document was that of the President of the United States. Wilbur Benson's eyes rose curiously. "Yes?" he asked.

"I must ask you, Mr. Benson," Operator 5 said briskly, "to cancel immediately the dedication ceremonies."

Benson blurted: "What!"

"Cancel them," Operator 5 continued quietly, "and direct that all persons and all cars leave the bridge at once."

Benson frowned: "What is this—a joke? What possible reason—?"

"My reason for asking it," Operator 5 interrupted, "is well-founded. Unless you do as I suggest, this celebration will become a tragedy."

"A—! I don't understand!"

"I mean, Mr. Benson," Operator 5 declared, "that this great new bridge is in the utmost danger. And with it, the lives of these people here." His gaze swept about the holiday throng of men and women; humble families and high dignitaries.

Wilbur Benson took a step backward and stared incredulously. "What are you saying? Are you mad? How could this bridge possibly—?"

The blue eyes of Operator 5 darkened. "There is no time to give you an explanation, and I am pledged to secrecy. Please make the announcement at once that the ceremony will not be held, and that the bridge must be cleared and closed to traffic immediately."

Benson scowled. "My dear young man," he answered angrily. "Your suggestion is absurd—fantastic. We are going ahead with the ceremony at once!"

Operator 5's shoulders squared. "I've warned you, sir."

Wilbur Benson blurted again, angrily: "Impossible!" and turned away.

Jimmy Christopher, who had identified himself as Operator 5 of the United States Intelligence Service, gazed coldly after his retreating back, then retired to an inconspicuous position near the footwalk. As he stood aside, the voice of the President of the Central States Chamber of Commerce boomed from a nearby amplifier, marking the beginning of the dedication.

"Ladies and gentlemen of these two great states, and of all the United States—"

Operator 5 smiled wryly but his eyes, as he glanced about, were worried. In spite of the fact that the bridge would be opened to a heavy flow of traffic within a few minutes, men were still at work on it. Tiny figures were crawling about the webbed steel cables, spraying them with fluid pumped from glass tanks strapped on their backs. More than a score of them were visible, some high on the web, some climbing low above the roadbed. The hissing of the spray issuing from the nozzles in their hands could be heard through the amplified voice of the speaker.

OPERATOR 5 turned as an older man approached him. They exchanged a sharp and searching glance. The older man spoke quietly: "Stranger here, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Come far?"

"Two thousand."

The older man smiled and offered his hand. "Good. I am J-9. You are—"

"Operator 5."

From the public-address system the speaker's voice was still booming:

". . . I am proud and happy now to present to you, ladies and gentlemen, Governor Merwin. . . "

The fingers of J-9 clasped warmly those of the younger man. "I have heard a great deal about you, of course. . . ."

Jimmy Christopher smiled. "Forget it."

J-9 turned to watch the ceremony taking place in the center of the huge span, standing so that he could speak directly to Jimmy Christopher without danger of being overheard. "I received word a short time ago from Secret Intelligence Headquarters SL in St. Louis that you would be here, and I was given your signal. You've come direct from Washington on special detail, haven't you? My orders are to co-operate with you if you wish."

"Direct orders," Jimmy Christopher nodded, speaking in a low tone that could carry no farther than J-9's ears. "I am here looking for Peter Janover."

"Janover?"

"One of the most dangerous espionage agents in the world—a spy of the Purple Shirts. He has been traced to this country. I have followed his trail as far as St. Louis. I'm positive that he's here now—close to us, very likely, on this bridge."

Appearing to listen to the speech of the governor, and watching the little girl still standing by the rippling ribbon, J-9 asked: "That means trouble?"

"It means," Jimmy Christopher answered quietly, "that the danger of implication in a war in Europe has come straight to our door. Janover is in this country for a definite purpose—he is too valuable a man to the Purple Shirts to waste on unimportant matters. We know that he has already organized a secret espionage system in America. Unless he is discovered and his system destroyed—" Jimmy Christopher's eyes narrowed— "either the United States will be drawn into a new European war or we'll be subjected to sabotage that will render us helpless to defend ourselves—or both."

J-9's bushy eyebrows straightened. "It's no secret, of course," he commented, "that this new bridge has been constructed with an eye to military convenience."

"None. Its destruction would be a heavy blow against us. Yet it's that very thing that Peter Janover may be planning. We've learned enough of his purposes to know—"

J-9 broke in: "What's that?"

Through the air, carrying through the voice of the governor booming from the expotential horns, came a sharp hissing. Jimmy Christopher raised eyes quickly, searching for its source. He saw, on the web of steel, the overalled workmen

climbing down carrying their glass spraytanks on their backs. The sibilant noise was coming from above them, seemingly, out of the empty air.

Jimmy Christopher asked curiously: "What are they doing, J-9?"

"Ogden, the chief construction engineer, told me that they were giving the cables a final spray of rust-resistant. Ogden's standing over there, near the ribbon."

SIDNEY OGDEN was a heavy-set, thick-shouldered man included in the ceremonial party. He looked uncomfortable in tight-fitting cutaway and silk hat. He glanced upward, curiously, as the sizzling sound continued to come from above and Jimmy Christopher saw his face pale suddenly—go gray as death.

"Look—look at that!" J-9 exclaimed. He pointed toward the webwork of steel strands stretching above. From the cables fumes were rising, thick, white fumes drifting off on the wind. On the metal strands something was bubbling briskly, giving off the heavy vapor. A pungent odor came into the air as the fog drifted downward—an odor that tightened the throat and bit into the lungs.

"Good Lord! The whole top of the bridge is smoking!" J-9 blurted.

Within the space of a minute the fumes thickened amazingly. From each strand of steel the writhing smoke rose, forming into a drifting cloud. Beneath the rapidly swelling, surging mass of mist the overalled workmen were climbing down toward the roadbed. They were lowering themselves swiftly, even frantically, away from the growing mass of vapor.

"Something's wrong!"

The bewildering cloud was attracting the attention of the thousands on the bridge. Even those in the ceremonial party were staring as the rays of the sun were cut off and a murky shadow fell across the span. It was as though the great webbed suspension cables were made of pitch-caked rope—as if, somehow, they had been set afire and were smoldering!

Jimmy Christopher started forward quickly, toward the exact center of the span, but eyes raised to the surging cloud, he stopped short, a startled exclamation bursting from his lips. For, as he watched, one of the thick steel cables tore apart and began writhing out of the steel web. Its ragged ends sputtered; a dry, flaky powder

dropped from it; in a few seconds it grew shorter as though some swift corrosive were eating it away.

J-9 sped past Jimmy Christopher, toward the rail, where two of the overalled men bearing glass tanks were climbing down. Jimmy Christopher sent a sharp glance toward the bulky figure of Sidney Ogden. Ogden had turned; he was peering upward, amazement and horror imprinted on his blunt features under the lowering menace of the cloud of fumes.

"Wait a minute there—wait!"

It was J-9's sharp voice, shouting at the two workmen who were climbing down the criss-crossing strands. One of them leaped to the walk and whirled in terror, breaking into a crazy, stumbling run. J-9 leaped to the rail as the second workman paused, clinging to a steel cable, staring down in terror.

Suddenly, without warning, the cable to which the workman was hanging parted and sagged. Almost instantly it disintegrated along its sweeping length, while flaky dust dropped through the air and swirling fumes sprang high. Desperately the man snatched at another cable for support—but too late. The sudden parting of the thick strand threw him off balance and he fell.

A shrill cry broke from his lips as he twisted, groping for support. The wrench of his body threw the glass tank on his back against another steel cable. A sharp crash sounded as the container flew to bits. From it poured a glistening yellow liquid. And instantly, from the parted lips of the overalled man, came a shriek of frightful pain.

He sprawled outward, his arms windmilling wildly as he plunged through empty space toward the rippling water far below. Another prolonged, tortured scream tore from his throat, diminishing in the yawning space.

Jimmy Christopher stood shocked, motionless. The breaking of the glass spraytank had spilled upon J-9 some of the sparkling yellow fluid. The Intelligence man stumbled forward blindly, clawing thin air. He sprawled on the cement of the walk, and rolled over with a quick, convulsive movement.

From his body, as though he were a straw man set afire, writhed white fumes. The choking vapor surged over him as he struggled to rise. Strength failed him; he fell back and lay motionless in the spreading fog. Jimmy

Christopher sprang toward him and others, startled by the tortured cries, rushed close.

"Don't touch him!" Jimmy Christopher shouted it. *"Don't touch him!"*

OPERATOR 5 stood appalled and rigid, staring at a horrible sight. The yellow fluid had drenched J-9; had enveloped his entire body swiftly in a viscid film. As if hypnotized by the horror of it, Jimmy Christopher watched the man's clothing drop off to disintegrate into a muddy flow; and then the very flesh of his body was dissolving away. His teeth lay exposed; his skull was appearing beneath vanishing skin and muscles; cartilage and blood and bone was being transformed, as if by some unearthly power, into a gummy liquid that spread across the concrete on which he lay.

From the white pavement fumes sprang up thickly. A sharp, bubbling, hissing sound filled the air. Beneath the disintegrating body of J-9 the cement was melting! Swiftly a hole appeared—a hole that deepened and spread, exposing the steel plates and iron reinforcements, penetrating low into the structure of the bridge.

A sharp cry came from Jimmy Christopher's lips. "Get back! *Get back!*"

Suddenly, with a crashing rumble, a great aperture gaped through the roadbed. Tremendous chunks of concrete spilled down, hurtling through space toward the water below. The remains of the body of J-9 disappeared through it. And as the choking fumes thickened, as the rim of the hole crumbled and the yawning emptiness widened, the entire bridge trembled and shook!

Operator 5 whirled, staring up. The great spider-web of steel cables was torn and tattered as though giant claws had ripped across it! Thick strands were dropping from their moorings. The mass of vapor had thickened until the whole sky was obscured. On the concrete of the span and into the river a snow of brownish flakes was falling thickly. Along the whole length of the bridge traveled a violent tremor.

Resounding crashes echoed. Out of the span dropped huge sections of concrete. They plummeted down into the river, sending up roaring geysers. Beneath the bridge the thousands of boats were fleeing on turbulent waves. On the surface bobbed the wreckage of small craft crushed by the plunging tons of stone. Bodies were floating, men and women swimming

desperately. The air shook with a thunderous rumbling, a cataclysmic roar that grew louder by the second.

The governor's voice was no longer issuing from the amplifiers of the loudspeaker system. The top-hatted officials were clustered in the center of the swaying span, terrorized, speechless. The silk ribbon that barred the way had not been cut; the ceremony had not been completed. In the center of the roadway stood the bewildered little girl holding the inscribed shears. Her blue eyes widened upon Jimmy Christopher as he leaped close.

"Get off the bridge! Get off before it goes to pieces!"

Even as he spoke a new roar broke out, and a gigantic section of the span crumbled away. Half the smoking suspension cables were already frayed, and the terrific dead weight of the bridge was ripping them asunder. The rest were sizzling while dusty flakes thickened in the air. Jimmy Christopher snatched at the microphone through which the governor had been speaking.

"Get off the bridge!" he shouted, and his magnified voice boomed the warning. "Everybody, all cars, off the bridge! Move fast—to save your lives!"

He whirled at a loud, resounding crack behind him. There, a fissure suddenly appeared in the cement, a jagged opening that spread entirely across the span. A tremendous section of the roadbed sagged, supported by interlaced reinforcing rods; but the rods were sputtering and fuming with the weird destructive power than had struck the bridge. As it sagged downward, frantically struggling men slid along it to the edge and rolled helplessly over, dropping and spilling through the dizzy space, down into the river, so far below.

A shrill, childish cry of terror came from the lips of the little girl who had been waiting to terminate the dedication ceremonies. She dropped flat, her pudgy fingers clawing for support, striving desperately to keep herself from sliding into the chasm. A piercing scream came from a woman on the opposite side of the fissure—from the wife of the governor, Elizabeth Merwin's mother: "Betty! Betty!"

OPERATOR 5 sprawled as the crack widened, as the huge section of roadbed leafed downward. He gripped the ragged edge in one

hand, stretching out his lower arm toward the child as she began to slip away. He caught her hand; he pulled her closer. Circling one arm around her, he dragged himself upon the jagged edge of the bending section, and straightened.

He held her close, and gathering his muscles, leaped across the edge of the lowering segment. The girl clung to him frightenedly, while he tottered. He twisted back as a deafening grinding sound filled the air; as suddenly, the great block of roadbed hinged downward. The corroding fumes cut it away as it sagged. Two coated men in cutaways shouted hoarsely as the gigantic segment tore loose and plunged toward the river and they pinwheeled through the air after it.

Jimmy Christopher carried Betty Merwin quickly toward her terror-stricken another. "She's all right! For God's sake, get off the bridge!"

The starters of a thousand cars were snarling; engines were whirring with sudden power as drivers twisted at their steering wheels, swinging about in the open lane, driving swiftly off the span. The cloud of vapor blanketed down, enveloping automobiles under which the fissure had opened; automobiles filled with screaming, white-faced men and women, teetering now on the crumbling edge over yawning space.

Jimmy Christopher shouted at Governor Merwin: "In my car—the roadster—quick!"

Thousands were abandoning their cars, running wildly along the walks, herding toward the ramps. Women shrieked and men shouted crazily as the doom-sounding rumble shook the broken span again. Overhead, cables were parting, sending out deafening notes like plucked harpstrings. The brown dust was a choking rain. The jagged edges of the sundered span were crumbling swiftly.

Jimmy Christopher slipped behind the wheel of his roadster as Governor and Mrs. Merwin, with their little daughter, climbed in beside him. The whirr of the Diesel engine sounded as he shot forward, pounding the horn-button, winding his way through the maddened mob. Another segment of bridge crashed down a second after he sped off it, and the roadbed shook with the violence of an earthquake.

Motorcycle policemen, swinging in front of Jimmy Christopher's car, opened the way for the Governor's family with shrieking sirens. Once off the ramp, once on the road which led toward the

bridge, Jimmy Christopher swung to a stop and looked back at all that was left of the great span.

Its webwork of cables had broken apart; the strands were dangling, falling to dust as they hung. The great gap in the center of the bridge had widened toward the shores. Rearing high, the tremendous masonry-enclosed piers were crumbling, disclosing framework that melted as it fumed. Appallingly, the disintegrating power was reducing the span to ruins, even as the terror-stricken crowd of survivors watched.

Jimmy Christopher scarcely heard the hysterical thanks which Mrs. Merwin addressed to him; he scarcely felt the hand of Governor Merwin clasp his; he was not aware of the shrieking of the motorcycle sirens as they were carried away in another car. He stood peering at the crumbling bridge, his blue eyes narrowed, his fingers straying unconsciously to the gold ornament dangling from his watch-chain—a charm that was a tiny golden skull and crossbones with glittering eyes that flashed like blood-red rubies.

Conscious of nothing save the disaster that spread before him, Operator 5 watched while the greatest suspension bridge in the world was transformed by an appalling, unknown power into—dust!

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