The Mysterious Mister X

by William T. Brannon

DURING THE YEARS they chased him without quite catching up, the FBI learned a lot about the man known to them only as Mr. X. He was an expert burglar, an accomplished penman, a master confidence man—and a narcotics addict.

He started in Boston in the '30s, and his trail extended through New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Atlanta, and other large cities all the way to Miami. Painstaking study of the evidence gave a clear picture of how he operated, though it didn't reveal his identity.

His first step was to locate a prosperous firm in an office building. When he was satisfied that the company had enough money to make his efforts worthwhile, he would wait until after closing, then enter the office, using a strip of celluloid to pry open the spring lock. His main interest was the bookkeeper's desk.

First, he examined bank statements to determine the firm's average cash balance. Then he lifted two or three cancelled checks bearing signatures of company officials, and from far back in the checkbook he removed two blank checks. With a rubber stamp, he put an endorsement on the stubs: "Void—defective." If the bookkeeper happened to notice the checks were missing, she would assume the printer had removed them.

The next day, Mr. X opened an account at a bank other than that of the firm, depositing a forged check for $8,300. Two days later he deposited another, for $4,000.

Five days elapsed before the firm's office manager received a phone call: "This is Police Captain Allman. A ring of burglars has been operating in your building and we're checking all the offices. Did you lose anything?"

"No," the office manager replied.

"In that case, you needn't worry. This mob never goes back to the same building a second time."

It was only a short time later that Mr. X appeared at the bank and drew out $6,000. He drew an additional $6,000 the following day. It wasn't until after the first of the next month that the forgeries were discovered. The signatures were so good they weren't questioned at the firm's bank.

DURING THIS TIME, Mr. X had stolen some prescription pads from a doctor's office and forged orders for narcotics, which he bought at a drugstore. The pharmacist's best description was that the purchaser was about the same size and age as Lionel Barrymore. This jibed with the description of the man who recently had opened the phony bank account.

This procedure recurred many times in many cities. Finally, the banks issued instructions that every new depositor offering a large check was to be closely checked. Mr. X apparently knew this and devised a new scheme.

It called for burglarizing two offices, several blocks apart, on the same night. For more than a week, he hung around the two office buildings, making it a point to get acquainted with the night elevator operators. When he decided to raid the two offices, nobody questioned his presence.

From the office of Mr. Adams, who had a substantial account at the First National Bank, he took two cancelled checks bearing Adams' signature and a few blank checks. Then he entered the office of Mr. Jackson, who had an account at the Central National Bank. He lifted only some cancelled checks, but he studied Jackson's records, noting particularly the names of his best customers.

The following day, posing as Jackson, he went to the Third State Bank and opened an account, depositing a check for $6,000 forged on the account of Adams. The bank official checked the references and soon learned that Jackson had a fine reputation, so it looked like a very good new account.

After three days, Mr. X called Adams, posed as the head of a private detective agency, and said he was checking on forgeries. Had Mr. Adams had any trouble with forgeries? Mr. Adams replied that he hadn't. Mr. X went immediately to the bank and withdrew $4,200 with a counter check. With no trouble at all, he signed Jackson's signature in the teller's presence.

The next day, he deposited another forged Adams check for $3,800. He waited three days and made another withdrawal of $3,600. Then he apparently left town. On the first of the month, Adams discovered two checks he didn't write and Jackson received a bank statement showing he had withdrawn $7,800 and still had a balance of $2,000 in a bank where he didn't have an account.

Mr. X had many other schemes and he got away with them for years, meanwhile buying narcotics by forging prescriptions on blanks stolen from physicians' offices. On June 13, 1943, Mr. X walked into a drugstore in Chicago, offered a forged prescription for morphine, and was nabbed by Federal narcotics agents. They had been watching this and several other drugstores where prescriptions with the forged signature of one particular doctor had been used to buy morphine.

Mr. X was identified as Alexander Thiel. He had a prison record, but this was his first arrest in 24 years. He was sent to the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Lexington, Ky., for treatment as an addict. After a year, he was removed to New York City, where he faced Federal and state larceny and forgery charges. He confessed the crimes and gave details, many of which the FBI men already knew.

In July, 1945, Thiel was sentenced to four years in Federal prison. In February, 1946, he was sentenced to an additional term of five to 10 years to be served in New York State Prison after the Federal hitch.

Thiel's narcotics habit led to his undoing. He knew that Federal agents check narcotics prescriptions, but he had such confidence in his ability to make convincing copies of signatures that he thought he was safe. When the agents saw the prescriptions supposedly signed by a Chicago physician, however, they set a trap and Mr. X walked into it.

No matter how fine the forgery, the agents knew the doctor hadn't written the prescriptions because he was in the Army overseas!