

# THE RESURRECTION OF MADAME ATOMOS

## *Chapter I*

Smith Beffort tore the page off the calendar and

The armored truck drove down Quebec Road, turned onto Queens City Avenue and then turned again to avoid the traffic jams. The route was always the same. The driver and his two guards were completely relaxed. This particular cash transport was actually one of the safest in Cincinnati, maybe in all of Ohio. In fifteen years of service, no incidents, not even the most minor, occurred on this route.

This probably had to do with the fact that truck 504 had only a very short trip. From the general depot to main post office was barely three miles. A perfect drive along big, usually empty streets, going by six permanent checkpoints. No alleyways or bottlenecks. Almost no sharp turns that might hide an ambush. Armored body, puncture-proof tires, bulletproof windows and windshield. All the doors of 504 were locked from the outside at departure and could not be opened until arrival. Furthermore, in case of an emergency, the guards could contact police headquarters directly by radio and lock down the gun slots while waiting for help.

In short, the 504 truck seemed impregnable and the experts of the insurance company, during their trials of resistance and maneuverability, had declared that this vehicle answered exactly to the norms of security demanded by the contract signed by Lloyds with the US Post Office.

Today was the first Saturday of the month of May 1968 and the 504 was transporting only 200,000 dollars in used bills. The sky was blue, the temperature relatively mild, and the weather forecast a beautiful weekend throughout Ohio, but with a chance of showers in the evening if the low front moved in from the northwest, etc.

This did not keep the inhabitants of Cincinnati from escaping to the country, although the real exodus did not start until noon when the school children had shaken off the week's fatigue with a typical late morning. Still, no one was working in Cincinnati this morning except for the cabbies, deliverymen, and the occupants of truck 504, who accepted it stoically.

At the corner of Montana Avenue and Harrison Avenue, right after checkpoint 4 and before the building under construction, a gust of wind shook the bended antenna on the roof and the driver said that the weather was probably going to change for the worse. His partner answered that it was all the same to him because he was planning to go to the movies. Afterward the two men began the usual conversation about the movies they had seen lately and the 504 went calmly on its way. The two guards behind them were keeping half an eye on the back of the truck and a limp finger on the triggers of their machine guns. Everything was quiet, normal, routine...

Light traffic; almost no pedestrians; only a little, bottle-green delivery van coming up fast behind the 504. Routine...

The van turned on its blinker, started to pass and disappeared from the guards' sight only show up in the side view mirror. The driver conscientiously squeezed the truck over to the right and glanced in the rear view mirror, thinking that the green van was passing a little too close and then strangely slowing down.

At that very moment, out of sight of the guards and driver of the 504, a man was sliding open a window built into the roof of the van. Then he pressed a button that automatically deployed a telescopic pole that was wired to a powerful battery and it reached out toward the base of the bent antenna on top of the 504. When contact was made, there was a flash and the antenna snapped, flew off its base, broke its second point of contact and curved through the air without even grazing the armored truck's roof.

Then the delivery van finished passing in front of the truck and slowed down again. The two vehicles reached the building under construction. The worksite looked deserted, enclosed by a 15-foot high fence over which you could steel girders sticking up and the arm of a huge crane whose

enormous claws were unusually lowered. From this side of the fence no one could tell what was going on at ground level.

All of a sudden the green van moved to the left and turned on its blinker again. The driver of the 504 veered to the right to pass between the sidewalk and vehicle, but hit a pothole and swore as he slammed on the brakes when the van went the wrong way. The collision took place under the crane. The 504 had hit the right side of the van and spun it around, although the truck itself stayed straight, without too much damage, but the engine died.

When an incident like this happens, there are always a few seconds of surprise on both sides.

The green van was stalled across the road and the driver sat still. The truck got its engine started and one of the guards picked up the radio to warn the Central Office as regulations required. No need to sound an alert. With one glance they would say that it could not be an attack!

Meanwhile, the claws of the crane sliced silently through the air, stopped above the truck and dropped, gripping the vehicle up in its four stiff fingers. The “snatch” made a noise that sounded like an explosion as the 504 rose off the ground like a butterfly, over the fence, swinging in the air, while the guard tried in vain to get the antennaless radio working.

In the worksite, hidden from the street, a huge tanker truck was parked. Its tank was open like the door of a cargo plane but open to the sky, and it contained enough water to engulf two vehicles like the 504.

The crane came to a stop over the tank and let down its load, loosening its grip only when the roof was underwater. At the same time, the tanker closed up its jaws and left the worksite while the crane operator and van driver ran off before the eyes of a few petrified witnesses.

Ten minutes later the 504 contained only four corpses and 200,000 dollars, a little wet. It had become a kind of safe that a blowtorch could inevitably break into.

Three months earlier, in February, in Billings, Montana, Madame Atomos had once again escaped from Smith Beffort and in the height of irony had made an appointment to meet again in Cincinnati in May<sup>1</sup>. They knew that the formidable woman was trying to rebuild her criminal organization and that she had some support, for example that incredible A.O.F.M.A.<sup>2</sup>, and that she needed vast sums of cash to build her super-laboratory. This, of course, was what Beffort and his team were hoping to stop.

Stripped bare Madame Atomos was dangerous. At the head of a gang she was very dangerous. In control of a laboratory that could provide her with a disintegrating ray again, she would become dreadfully dangerous. The woman’s only ambition in life was to destroy and murder. Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been the original pretext for Madame Atomos’ hatred for the United States, but what remained of that now?

Moreover, who could swear that the terrible woman was still of sound mind? Who could say that she was working toward a specific goal, according to a determined plan, and not just playing it by ear?

Kill, kill, kill... Little Bob Beffort, Doctor Soblen and Lucky Simms were her last victims<sup>3</sup>. Who would be eliminated in her next operation?

“We’re four days into the month of May,” Smith Beffort said, “and she hasn’t shown herself yet. I wonder if she’s not going to strike somewhere else while we’re waiting here in Cincinnati?”

Mie and Yoshio Akamatsu did not even look up. They kept playing chess as if it were nothing. Little by little as the days passed Smith was becoming more and more nervous and irritable. Several times over the course of the past few years Madame Atomos had been at his mercy, but the diabolical Japanese woman had always found a way to escape the final punishment.

Smith was beginning to feel an inferiority complex after this series of failures. In the end he wondered whether he was really capable of thwarting the projects of his archenemy. Of course, Atomos City, Atomos Island and her criminal organization had been destroyed, but all that might count for nothing if Madame Atomos became rich again.

Well, that was exactly what she was trying to do.

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Evil of Madame Atomos* in *The Revenge of Madame Atomos*.

<sup>2</sup> American Organization of the Friends of Madame Atomos.

<sup>3</sup> See *The Revenge of Madame Atomos*, q.v.

At 10:30 the telephone rang in the living room of the bungalow that Beffort had rented for his stay in Cincinnati. The G-man got his long legs moving, crossed the room and picked it up.

“Smith Beffort?”

“That’s me...”

“Samuel Tiger here. I have some news for you.” Tiger was the director of the regional FBI office.

“Madame Atomos?” Beffort asked, full of hope.

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know. I just called because you asked me to inform you of any incidents...”

“Exactly,” Beffort agreed. “What’s it about?”

“Something pretty weird,” Tiger started haltingly. “Fifteen minutes ago two calls notified the west side police station that an armored truck was lifted off the road by a crane and stuck in a construction site...”

“Lifted?” Beffort asked. “What does that mean?”

“Whatever you think it means,” Tiger was forced to say. “In fact, the truck was literally picked up off the ground and since then nobody has seen it. Personally I think it’s a little too much.”

“A hoax?”

Tiger hesitated again before saying, “I’d bet on a hoax if the truck wasn’t carrying 200,000 dollars.”

Beffort whistled softly and asked, “Don’t beat around the bush, would you? When such an amount has disappeared, it’s usually not...”

“I know!” Tiger interjected. “But there’s something kooky in this affair. The truck had a radio but didn’t use it. Moreover, when they went to look on the other side of the fence, they didn’t find it and they couldn’t find its tire tracks in the mud.”

Beffort snickered to himself. He was already convinced that only Madame Atomos could pull off such a stunt.

“And,” Tiger continued, “I forgot to tell you that before getting grappled by the crane the truck had an accident with another vehicle whose driver took off.”

“And the crane operator?”

“Also took off.”

“Who called the west side station?”

“Two witnesses who don’t know each other. They both live across the street from the worksite. One is a civil servant and the other’s a shopkeeper.”

“Give me their addresses. I guess you’re going to go looking for the armored truck?”

“Of course. And at the same time we’ll try to find out who was driving the vehicle that caused the accident. Here’s the names and addresses of the witnesses...”

Smith Beffort and Akamatsu crossed Harrison Avenue and entered the construction site.

“Strange story,” Akamatsu commented after listening to the two witnesses being questioned by Beffort. “They agree on all points, but only the shopkeeper mentioned a man in a leather jacket.”

That was the man with the telescopic rod who had cut off the 504’s antenna. According to the witness, the man had jumped out of the little green van right after the truck had crossed over the fence and he walked calmly toward a black Buick with a case that looked like it contained a fishing rod.

“I’m not so interested in the details,” Beffort said dryly. “Looking at the result of the operation, my mental adding machine tells me that Madame Atomos just made off with 200,000 dollars, all the while proving once again how clever she is! The 504 was impregnable, had a radio and some firepower. Madame Atomos managed to silence the radio and stop the truck under the crane. So, with no target the guards didn’t have any reason at all to use their weapons. Nice work!”

Akamatsu nodded half-heartedly and leaned with Beffort over the countless tire tracks that crisscrossed the site’s muddy ground. Nothing but heavy loads, some zigzagging grooves from a wheelbarrow, a couple of intersecting lines from a motorcycle...

“The truck didn’t drive by here,” Beffort declared as he lit a cigarette. “Since it didn’t just vanish, we have to figure that they loaded it on a platform. Hold on! Look at these tracks, Yoshio.”

Twenty inches wide and ten deep. S-shaped in profile and W from above. The trench still wet and thus relatively fresh. The two men followed them, ended up at the exit and saw the muddy tracks head toward Bridgetown. Farther down the road, the tracks faded into nothingness.

“No need to go on,” Beffort said. “Better get back to headquarters and order the patrol cars to stop any rigs over 15 tons. Still, I wonder what could have kept the guards from opening fire?”

Akamatsu shrugged his shoulders, buried his hands in his pockets, but said nothing. He knew that the question was only the first of an endless series.

At noon Samuel Tiger arrived home. It was not usual for him, but a telephone call from his wife had made him jump into his car.

“Come, quick, Sam! Come, quick! I can’t move... just enough strength to drag myself to the telephone... I think I’m going to die!” Then, inexplicably, she hung up. Tiger’s two return calls remained unanswered, so he ran out of his office as worried as a man could be in such a situation.

Now he had just left the elevator and stood petrified before the astonishing note pinned to the door of his apartment:

*Samuel Tiger, you will die like all the important people in Cincinnati will die within the next eight days. In your apartment you will find your wife’s corpse and a lethal trap prepared specially for you. I am telling you because I am following the rules of the game for Operation Ohio that henceforth pits me against Smith Beffort, the federal agents and the Green Dragon Force. From now on, Madame Atomos will strike only after a warning! My intelligence against yours. What is the ordinary object that you should not touch if you want to stay alive? Good death, Samuel Tiger! Hiroshima! Nagasaki! Compliments of Madame Atomos!*

It was crazy, unbelievable, and terrifying all at the same time.

Without his wife’s phone call and without the dreadful signature of Madame Atomos, Tiger would have thought it was a bad joke. He tried, in fact, to believe this for a few seconds, but how can a man think calmly when he knows that a corpse is waiting for him at home?

Tiger put his key in the lock, opened the door and ran toward the living room. From the entrance he was sure that Helen was dead. Immobile in an armchair, eyes wide open, dilated by horror, she could not have looked more like a corpse.

Tiger bit his lip to keep from screaming, remembering Madame Atomos’ warning in time, and walked slowly over to the armchair. He had a son boarding at College Hill High School and wanted to stay alive long enough to see him become a man.

His hand touched his wife’s arm, felt it warm and also a certain tensing of the skin. Tiger suddenly realized that, in spite of all appearances, Helen was still alive. She had no visible wounds. They probably injected her with a slow-acting poison and could only be saved by a quick intervention.

Tiger swung around, reached for the nearest telephone and picked it up.

*Ordinary object!*

The explosion almost tore off his head... and at the same time killed Helen, who had only fainted.