

WIZARD OF CRIME

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I. LUCK OF A SORT

IT was five o'clock, the end of a very gloomy afternoon. Ralph Atgood took a long, final look at the rows of empty desks in the large office of the defunct Art Imprint Corp. They had been vacant for a month, those desks, and to Ralph, who had come here daily to clean up left-over business, the place had the aspect of a morgue.

All of Ralph's fellow workers were gone; some, fortunately, to new jobs. But Ralph, though he had been given an extra month of work at half salary, was the hardest hit of the lot. All his hopes and ambitions had been tied up with Art Imprint. As secretary to the president, old Mr. Carruthers, Ralph had actually looked forward to becoming a junior partner.

Until the fatal day when Carruthers, tempted by a large offer from a rival concern, had sold out his entire business. He had sailed for Europe, to spend his remaining years on the Riviera, and in place of a junior partnership, Carruthers had given Ralph a very lovely letter, recommending him to all the world at large.

So far, the letter of recommendation had produced no offers that Ralph could not have obtained without it. Jobs were open, yes; but none that Ralph could afford to take without giving up the greatest hope of all: his

chance of marrying Alicia Weylan.

The phone bell was ringing, but Ralph left without answering it. He knew that it was probably Alicia, calling up to insist that she would marry him whether he had a job or not. But that simply wouldn't do. Alicia's father was wealthy, and would class Ralph as a fortune hunter – unless Ralph had an actual job as good as the one that he had just lost.

Money, of course, would help. Ralph was thinking in such terms as he stalked along the rain-swept street toward the subway. He had saved some cash, and if he only had a thousand dollars more, he could go into business on his own, which ought to satisfy old Carter J. Weylan. Alicia's father had started his huge patent-medicine business on a small amount of capital; perhaps Ralph could get somewhere with art prints.

He couldn't risk it, though, without that added thousand dollars. Ralph had gone over the figures often enough to know.

AT the change booth in the subway, Ralph's thoughts switched suddenly from dollars to nickels. The shift came when a drunk bumped into him and sent a handful of change scattering from Ralph's fist. Mumbling apologies, the fellow tried to help Ralph pick up the rolling coins, but barely managed to hang on to a nickel of his own.

His money gathered, Ralph grinned and started the staggery man through the turnstile ahead of him. The stumble-bum managed to keep his footing going down the steps, where Ralph grabbed him, near the track edge, just as an uptown express roared in beside the platform.

Reeling into the crowded car along with Ralph, the drunk clamped a hand upon the young man's shoulder. Thrusting a puffy, bearded face close to Ralph's, the drunk gave a bleary-eyed stare and announced:

"You're a good guy! Yessir! A good guy –"

Acknowledging the approval, Ralph listened to the drunk repeat it. The fellow tried to get confidential, but his conversation invariably failed, until the express was nearing Forty-second Street. That was when the drunk managed to get an envelope out of his pocket. It was a long envelope, and quite thick; Ralph noticed the scrawled address on it: "R. G. Dean, 310 Harmon Bldg., New York."

"D'liver it for me, will you, good guy?" – the bleary-eyed man pitched, as the train stopped – "an' don't tell 'em I was drunk. Wouldn't like to hear it." He shook his head sadly. "No, R. G. wouldn't like to hear that Jerry was plastered.

"I wouldn't hurt R. G., no sir, I wouldn't! He's a good guy, like you. So take this to him" – the drunk pushed the envelope into Ralph's hands – "before his office closes. This is where I gotta get off."

With a sudden stagger, the fellow went through the door just before it slid shut. A few seconds later, the express was under way.

With a shrug, Ralph glanced at the envelope; noting that it was unsealed, he lifted the flap to see what it contained. Only the rattle of the subway train drowned the exclamation that came to Ralph's lips.

Looking about, Ralph saw that no one was noticing him. Shifting the envelope close to the door, he lifted the flap farther. He was right; the green that he had seen inside was currency, and he hadn't been mistaken about the denominations of the bills.

They were hundred-dollar bills, twenty in all. Twice the sum that Ralph Atgood so badly wanted, placed in his hands by a drunken stranger who would probably forget him – for delivery to a man named R. G. Dean, who had probably never heard of Ralph!

WHILE Ralph Atgood was making his astonishing discovery, the drunk who had left the train at Forty-second Street was performing in a singular fashion of his own. Instead of boarding a local train, he discarded his reeling gait, hurried up the steps to the street and hopped into the first cab that he saw. In a voice no longer thick, he told the driver to take him to the Harmon Building only a few blocks east.

Arrived there, the man unlocked the door of an office that bore the number 310; beneath it, the rather cryptic legend:

R. G. DEAN

Representative

Inside the office, the ex-drunk hung his battered hat and shabby overcoat in the closet. Peeling off coat, vest, and ragged necktie, he stepped into an alcove where there was a mirror and a washstand. He began to shave, smoothly but rapidly, and when he had sleeked his hair and eyebrows, he bore but little resemblance to the whisker-stubbed drunk.

Instead of keeping his chin shoved forward and lower lip outthrust, the sleek man let both return to normal. For a finishing touch, he put on a lavish necktie, fancy vest, and well-fitted frock coat. His long face quite solemn, the transformed man seated himself at a mahogany desk and waited.

Someone tried the door, found it locked; stepping from the desk, the sleek man opened the door and looked into the hallway. He was confronted by a very earnest-looking young chap, who happened to be the man that he expected: Ralph Atgood.

The man in the office gave no sign of recognition. His eyes, feigning query, noted that Ralph was quite deceived by the transformation. Ralph's question proved it:

"Are you Mr. Dean?"

"No. I am Frederick Glenn" – the sleek man's tone was a purred contrast to the thick speech he has used a while before – "but I manage Mr. Dean's transactions when he is absent. Step right in, Mr. –"

Ralph supplied his name, and handed Glenn the envelope. Even before he opened it, Glenn shook his head.

"From Jerry Vorden," he said. "One of the inventors that Mr. Dean has helped. When he collects royalties, Jerry insists on paying us half, to show his gratitude. Of course, we use the money to assist others who are struggling for scientific recognition."

The facts interested Ralph. Apparently, R. G. Dean was a philanthropist who helped worthy persons, and used the term "Representative" to make them feel more independent. The way Glenn tossed the money into a desk drawer proved that his office handled large amounts.

When Glenn asked how Ralph had happened to bring the money, the young man told his story, softening the description of Jerry's drunken condition.

"That explains much," declared Glennly. "Sometimes Jerry has said that he sent us the money, but could not remember how or when. Not having received it, we assumed that he had actually spent it. Since we regard the money as his, not ours, we made no inquiry.

"From what you tell me, it is obvious that he gave those sums to strangers, who simply kept the money. Which proves" – Glennly's eyes fixed steadily on Ralph – "that you are a singularly honest person. Might I inquire just what is your present occupation?"

For reply, Ralph produced the letter that old Carruthers had given him. It was phrased in such glowing terms that other readers had probably discounted it. But the recommendation seemed to make a strong impression upon Frederick Glennly, which did not surprise Ralph at all, considering his prompt delivery of Jerry's two thousand dollars.

"I can use a man of your caliber," declared Glennly, promptly. "It happens that I am going out of town and will need someone to take care of correspondence, delivery of important packages, and such matters."

"From this office?"

"No. I am closing the office. Only Mr. Dean or myself could handle the curiosity seekers and half-crazed inventors who sometimes come here. You can attend to matters from your own address, coming here once a day, of course, to get any mail from the box outside the door."

From a chain that carried the office key, Glennly drew off one that opened the mailbox. Ralph's expression became troubled; he was beginning to think that the job would pay very little, when Glennly smiled and added:

"Your salary will be one hundred dollars a week."

AMAZEMENT swept Ralph. The amount was much more than he had received on his former job, with all its promise of a junior partnership. Thinking that Glennly was joking, he exclaimed:

"But how can you pay so much for such slight service?"

"They are important services," returned Glennly. "You will be intrusted with sums far greater than the money you brought here today" – he gestured toward the desk drawer – "and you will also have access to very confidential information. In fact, your job is so important to us that Mr. Dean doubted that I could possibly find a man who could be intrusted with it.

"This letter from your former employer, together with my testimony regarding your integrity, will satisfy Mr. Dean. Your job has already begun. Give me your address and telephone number, so that I can contact you whenever necessary."

While Ralph was writing out the information, Glennly produced a stack of bank books and various lists. He handed them to Ralph and added a check book, thumbing its pages. Ralph saw that all the checks bore the signature of R G. Dean, but that they were otherwise blank.

"This illustrates what I said," stated Glennly. "I am trusting you to fill in those checks, to the proper persons and for the exact amounts, whenever you are notified. As for your own salary, you can draw it each week by simply filling in a check payable to yourself."

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When Ralph had pocketed those important items, Glennie produced an envelope that was stamped and sealed. It was addressed to George Thurver, Chem-Lab Co., White Meadows, New Jersey. Tapping the envelope, Glennie said seriously:

"Mail this as soon as you leave here. It is highly important that it should reach Thurver by tomorrow. The lives of certain persons may depend upon it."

With that admonition, Glennie bowed Ralph from the office. As soon as the clang of an elevator door occurred, Glennie stepped back into the office, picked up the telephone and dialed a number. Recognizing the voice that answered, Glennie purred:

"Congratulate me, chief... Yeah, I pulled the Diogenes stuff and got the honest man we were after. It worked just like we thought it would... About the dough? Of course, he thought a hundred a week was a lot.

"But when I trusted him with the signed checks, he began to feel important... I told him about the letter, too, and that impressed him... Yeah, I'm packing everything, and I'll be out of here in half an hour... See you later, chief."

Posting the Thurver letter at the nearest mailbox, Ralph Atgood, at that minute, was feeling quite as impressed as Glennie had stated. He was elated, too, by the good fortune that had come his way.

Ralph Atgood had struck luck. But had he overheard the telephone conversation that followed his departure, he would have realized that it was luck of a sort that would bring him future trouble!

CHAPTER II. FLAME OF DEATH

THE Chem-Lab Co. stood on the Jersey Meadows, a collection of squatly buildings, with a tall one in the center. From the top floor of the central structure, the windows offered a view across the Meadows, revealing the tower of the Empire State Building beyond the heights of Jersey City.

But Eugene Bristow, president of Chem-Lab, was not interested in viewing Manhattan. He had forgotten the city of New York the moment that he had left it this morning. Until mid-afternoon, he had been watching one of the squatly buildings, listening to the slow, intermittent throb of machinery.

The slow motion, as well as the pauses in between, made Bristow chafe. Tall and pompous, he suddenly forgot his usual dignity to shake his fist at the window, while he stormed at three startled secretaries:

"Do you know what's happening down there? We're losing a thousand dollars a day, that's what! Just because our fiber-finishing formula won't stand the test!"

The secretaries nodded, dumbly and pathetically, while Bristow paced the floor. Facing them again, in calmer mood, the pompous man spoke again.

"I have decided to suppress the facts no longer," he declared. "You all know why we enlarged this plant, and began to build others. It was because we developed Fibrolast, the best of all materials for finishing the interiors of buildings."

He picked up a flat object from his desk, it looked like a slab of thin marble. Bristow waved the fiber square, bent it and finally thwacked it against the desk.

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"Lighter than aluminum!" he exclaimed. "Pliable as rubber, as strong as steel! Stained any color or pattern that you want it. Partition a room with Fibrolast and you have the equivalent of wallpaper. This sample is better than any imitation marble on the market, and can be turned out at half the price – provided we get production.

"That's the trouble. The fiber goes through a chemical bath, and is finished under machine pressure. Our first experiments were entirely successful, but when we sped production on Fibrolast we found out what we didn't know.

"The machine pressure produces heat; and the finishing formula won't stand it. Sooner or later, one of the chemicals ignites. That's what caused those fires down in the Fibrolast Division. Unless Thurver finds out what's wrong –"

Bristow was pounding the desk with his fist. The thumps were echoed by a knock at the door. A secretary answered; two workmen pushed in a wheeled table loaded with bottles, test tubes, and other chemical equipment.

Following the table came a worried looking man with high, bald head. He was George Thurver, chief chemist of the Chem-Lab plant.

SOLEMNLY, Thurver began to measure off various colored liquids from different bottles, which were marked with letters, each representing a solution used in the Chem-Lab secret formula. He poured them all into a large beaker, which he placed on a tripod over a Bunsen burner.

"This represents average heat," began Thurver, "gauged to the present speed of the machinery –"

He paused, gave worried glances toward the secretaries. Bristow told him to go right ahead.

"And this," continued Thurver, "will bring high-speed heat."

Carefully, he increased the flame of the burner. Bristow drew away. Thurver made a gesture.

"Don't worry," he insisted. "This is not a superheat. It's merely the same demonstration that I gave you in the laboratory."

As Thurver finished, there was a mild puff from the beaker. Bubbling liquid formed a jet of flame, which was repeated, until the chemist turned off the burner.

"How does that help us?" demanded Bristow. "It's what happened before – the very thing we are trying to prevent. Gad, Thurver, do you know what will happen if you can't correct this fault?"

"We'll have to buy the formula the Experimento Co. offered us. Bah! Those hijackers! They own nothing but a formula, no better than ours ought to be. But they want to hold us up for half a mill –"

Bristow caught himself.

"They want too much money," he declared. "But we'll have to pay it, if this doesn't work out."

Thurver was pouring ingredients into a fresh beaker. He apparently hadn't noticed the slip, wherein Bristow had almost said "half a million dollars." The Chem-Lab formula, developed in its own plant, had cost the company nothing more than a few bonus payments to Thurver and some others.

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The formula was mixed. Picking up an extra bottle, Thurver added a small quantity of liquid from it.

"Solution K," he stated; "It has no effect upon the other chemicals, except as a cooling agent. Watch, while I demonstrate how it offsets heat."

He repeated his former experiment. Under the high flame of the Bunsen burner, the mixture occasionally bubbled and emitted smoke, but there was no flame. Bristow, his elbows propped upon the desk, watched the process for a fascinated ten minutes.

"Do you have enough of this new solution?" he demanded. "A sufficient quantity to use in the plant?"

Thurver nodded.

"Have it added at once! We shall speed production as soon as you are ready."

"It might be better to wait," suggested Thurver, "until I have made longer tests –"

"You've been experimenting for five weeks," snapped Bristow. "That's long enough, Thurver."

WITHIN half an hour, Bristow received word that all was ready in the Fibrolast Division. Descending from his tower office, Bristow joined the chief chemist on a platform high above the huge pressure machines. Watching the flow of the chemical baths, Thurver gave the nod.

Great wheels started. Masses of brownish shoddy were shredded through machines that shoved the raw product into a vat. Rendered pulpy by the liquid, the stuff came dripping along rollers, to pass beneath the first presses.

Dipped again, it was pressed farther. Past intervening machines, Bristow could see the final process that sent the sheets of Fibrolast into great stacks that were wheeled away by busy workmen. It was Bristow who signaled for more speed. The pounding of giant machines became a heavy clatter.

Half deaf to things that Thurver shouted in his ear, Bristow was nodding and shaking his head at random. Gleefully, the president of Chem-Lab was seeing a long-awaited order turned out in record time. The vats were bubbling, but workers were ignoring them. Already accustomed to wisps of fading smoke instead of sudden puffs of flame, the men were close to the machines.

Thurver was shouting, warningly, in Bristow's ear, when a sudden thing happened.

With a fury volcanic, a whole vat ignited. As scorched workers yelled, another vat burst into flame. Great licking tongues were flinging out to ignite the remaining baths, which responded instantly. The pulpy fiber turned into a huge torch, serving as a carrier for the flames.

Men, like machines, were enveloped in an acrid smoke that carried to all corners of the great floor. Bristow, Thurver, others near them, were staggering for the open air, their faces buried in their coats. Men at the stacking racks were getting into a corner exit, but those near the center of the floor were doomed.

Loud clangs told that the company fire-fighting apparatus was on hand. The smoke-eaters who worked for Chem-Lab were always ready, with gas masks handy. They knew how to fight conflagrations that occurred in the Fibrolast division. Though up against a bigger job than ever, they handled it.

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By the time Eugene Bristow had been helped, choking, to his office, he was able to look down and see only great billows of smoke where titanic gushes of flame had been. The machines had been saved; but the men were a different matter.

Bristow could see a score of them on stretchers, handled by gas-masked rescuers. Flame-tortured victims were being taken to the emergency hospital; from some of them, Bristow could hear agonized shrieks. A few, he noted, did not move.

LATER, Bristow found Thurver brooding in the laboratory. The chief chemist spoke mournfully.

"Evaporation must have caused it," he said. "The puffs were the deterioration of Solution K. I tried to tell you, Mr. Bristow, that something might go wrong."

"You should have foreseen it, Thurver –"

"I asked for time to make further experiments," interrupted Thurver, almost accusingly. "You should have given it. There was a chance that the new solution might not work; and it finally didn't. You'll have to buy up that Experimento formula."

Bristow shook his head.

"I'm going to see Ray Parringer," he declared. "As a consulting chemist, he is the best. He is reliable, and his fees are reasonable."

"But Parringer doesn't have our formula."

"I'm taking it to him," declared Bristow, grimly, "so he can test it thoroughly with fresh ingredients."

When Bristow had gone, Thurver still sat mournfully at his bench, but his eyes were darting side glances toward his assistants. When they had left, Thurver reached quickly for the telephone and gave a New York number. Like Glenn the day before, Thurver recognized the voice that responded.

"The works went, chief," informed Thurver, in a low tone, "like I said it would... Sure! Bristow fell for my bluff. He thought I had something that would help... Our solutions? No, he doesn't suspect them. He's too worried to try to blame me..."

"He's going to Parringer, though, like we thought... Yes, taking him the formula. To have him test it on his own... All right, chief. I know you can spike it... Leave this end of it to me. When I take my vacation, I won't come back... Yes, the Experimento buy is set, if Parringer flukes..."

His call finished, Thurver took another darting glance around him. Finding himself alone, he drew an envelope from his pocket. It was the one that Ralph Atgood had mailed the afternoon before.

George Thurver had already opened the envelope, but he wanted another gloating look at its contents. He drew a slip of paper into sight, chuckled, then thrust it back again.

That slip was a check for twenty-five thousand dollars, made out to cash and signed by R. G. Dean.

CHAPTER III. CRIME MOVES AHEAD

As late as dusk, the flame-streaked walls of the Chem-Lab plant were visible from the Skyway, the great motor highway that stretches across the Jersey Meadows, carrying traffic to and from Manhattan.

A passenger in a large limousine noted the vague outlines of those ghostlike buildings. There was a keen flash to the eyes that peered from the viewer's hawklike face; a whispered laugh escaped his thin, straight lips.

Tuning the dial of the limousine's radio, the hawkish passenger listened intently to new accounts of the Chem-Lab tragedy that were coming over the air.

The passenger in the limousine was named Lamont Cranston. He was riding into Manhattan to have dinner at the Cobalt Club with his friend Ralph Weston, New York's police commissioner. But Cranston was already planning to cancel that engagement.

Usually, Commissioner Weston insisted upon talking about crime. Cranston enjoyed the topic, when it related to events of importance. But he didn't care to listen while Weston reviewed a hodgepodge of trifling gang fights and police raids; not while real crime was in the air.

The Chem-Lab tragedy came under the head of real crime in Cranston's opinion. There had been smaller fires at the plant; this afternoon's holocaust linked with them. True, Cranston was probably the only crime investigator who held that theory; but his ideas were usually correct.

At night, when crime was on the move, Lamont Cranston frequently changed from a placid clubman of leisurely manner to a weird, black-cloaked being whose actions were swift and devastating to persons who wallowed in evil deeds. Actually, this personage, who posed as Lamont Cranston, was The Shadow!

There was a real Lamont Cranston, but he was usually out of the country on big-game hunts or travels to strange places; thus, The Shadow adopted his identity.

Arriving at the Cobalt Club, Cranston took a simple but direct step toward crime's trail. He called up the hotel where Eugene Bristow lived and asked to talk to the president of the Chem-Lab Co. It seemed that Mr. Bristow was not about; that should he return, he would not care to make a statement to anyone. Mr. Bristow's attorneys could be seen tomorrow, if the matter was important.

Hearing all that from a glib secretary, The Shadow made his own comments in the slow, even tone of Cranston. What he said changed the situation entirely.

It happened that Cranston held stock in the Chem-Lab Co., and was also a resident of New Jersey. He had learned, from a confidential source, that Bristow was due for an unpleasant get-together with the Jersey authorities, which might be smoothed over if he held a preliminary conference with an influential friend like Cranston.

The argument brought results. From the anxious-toned secretary, The Shadow learned that Bristow was already on his way back to New Jersey, but that he was making a short stop and could be reached by calling a phone number that the secretary gave: Caravan 6-2347.

Calling the Caravan number, The Shadow received no answer. He put in a call to Burbank, his contact man, who checked on Caravan 6-2347 in a special phone book listed by numbers, instead of names. Burbank

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informed that the number belonged to a consulting chemist named Ray Parringer.

The clue was a pointed one; the fact that Parringer did not answer, gave it an element of mystery. Telling Burbank to contact another of The Shadow's secret agents, named Harry Vincent, The Shadow strolled from the Cobalt Club. He was scarcely in his limousine before he dropped the guise of Cranston.

From a secret drawer beneath the big rear seat, The Shadow produced a black cloak, a slouch hat, a pair of thin gloves, and a brace of automatics. Equipped with such garb and implements, he became – The Shadow!

ACTUALLY, the mystery of the unanswered telephone call was a very slight one. It happened that Parringer hadn't heard the bell ring. His telephone was in a tiny office that adjoined his second-floor laboratory over an empty garage. Parringer had chosen a very squalid neighborhood, where the smells from the lab would not annoy the residents.

At present, the consulting chemist had a visitor: Eugene Bristow. The Chem-Lab president had given Parringer the secret formula and was impatiently watching while the chemist made up the various solutions. Glancing, at his watch, Bristow remarked:

"I can't wait any longer, Parringer. I have an appointment in New Jersey. Check your own findings with Thurver's report sheet and let me know the result. We are willing to pay your highest consultant fee."

Parringer nodded, blinking, like a wise owl, through a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. But Parringer, withered and gray, was not as wise as he looked; a fact to which Bristow could testify. For a mere fifty dollars – Parringer's highest fee – Bristow hoped to get facts that might save him half a million.

The door at the bottom of the stairs was locked, so Parringer conducted Bristow down to open it. On the way, the chemist remarked:

"It surprises me that your formula should become inflammable, even under heat. Of course, if some of the solutions were not precisely right, anything might happen. An overamount of Solution B, for instance –"

"Thurver has double-checked all that," interposed Bristow. "Nevertheless, that may be the trouble. I am depending upon you to learn the answer."

Parringer nodded. Then: "If the formula proves inflammable, it will be impossible to remedy it, Mr. Bristow. Thurver's addition of a cooling agent, which he called Solution K, could not cure the trouble. Any such solution would be liable to evaporation under heat."

Bristow's car was waiting. Parringer watched it pull away, then locked the door and started upstairs. Halfway to the top, he heard someone rapping at the door. Thinking that Bristow had returned, he went down and opened it. Instead of finding Bristow, he faced a very earnest young man who handed him a package.

"My name is Atgood," said the stranger. "I was told to bring you this package. It must have been sent from the Chem-Lab Co., for it bears their label."

Parringer nodded. He decided that the package must contain sample ingredients from the plant. Probably Thurver had decided to send them, for on the package was the rubber-stamped statement: "For Immediate Test. Rush."

Then suspicion gleamed from Parringer's wise eyes. He asked sharply:

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"Why didn't you deliver this while Mr. Bristow was here?"

"Mr. Bristow?" asked Ralph

"Yes," returned Parringer. "He is the president of Chem-Lab Co. He left only a few minutes ago."

Ralph smiled at his own ignorance.

"I never met Mr. Bristow," he explained. "In fact, I never heard of him before. I was told that this package was so important that it had to be delivered to you alone. That is why I waited until Mr. Bristow had gone. I saw his car outside, but had no idea who your visitor was."

The frank statement satisfied Parringer. Ralph went his way, and the chemist returned upstairs. Laying the package on a shelf, he placed his own mixture over a Bunsen burner and increased the heat. After a few minutes, Parringer smiled and said: "Ah!"

He had put the burner up to what Thurver described as "superheat" and the mixture did not even bubble. Parringer's theory was right. The ingredients at the plant were faulty. As a consequence, Parringer's interest centered immediately upon the package that Ralph had brought.

OPENING the package, Parringer found one bottle already mixed, along with smaller bottles, each bearing a lettered label, including the new Solution K. Deciding to test the faulty formula, Parringer poured some of the complete mixture into a beaker. Before proceeding, he opened an envelope that was tucked in beside the bottles.

What Parringer expected to find was a note from Thurver embellished with a lot of chemical symbols, to help him in the test. He wasn't surprised that the company chemist should be seeking his cooperation. But Parringer was actually astonished at what he did find in the envelope.

His lean fingers drew out a slip of paper that bore the terse typewritten statement:

Thurver's work is satisfactory. Return these chemicals intact,

and mark the labels: "Analyzed." Instead of summing your own tests,

simply mark Thurver's report sheet with the word: "Confirmed."

R. G. D.

Parringer was puzzled by the initials R. G. D., until he unfolded a larger slip that the envelope contained. It was a check for ten thousand dollars, made out to cash and signed R. G. Dean.

Who Mr. Dean was, Parringer neither knew nor cared. The angry mutters that the owlish man gave were meant for George Thurver. He saw Thurver not as a man responsible for murder, or a person faithless to his employer, but as a traitor to his own profession.

Thurver had been bribed to fake the Chem-Lab formula. The master crook behind the game was trying the same tactics with Parringer. This time, the mysterious Mr. Dean had picked the wrong man. Parringer did not intend to heed his thin-veiled threat, even with its offer of easy money.

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There was just one duty for Ray Parringer. That was to expose Thurver's fraud and let the law take care of the rest, including R. G. Dean. The first step was at hand: to test the doped mixture that Thurver had supplied, then analyze its ingredients. Intent upon that task, Parringer set the beaker with the mixture on a tripod above a burner.

The withery chemist had just increased the flame, when blackness stretched across the workbench. Hearing a sharp hiss from the doorway, Parringer looked up.

He saw a figure in black, with burning eyes that peered from beneath a slouch hat. Those eyes had spied the open package and the envelope lying upon the workbench.

Hidden lips voiced a quick order that Parringer did not heed. The Shadow sped for the workbench, to end the test that the chemist had so unwisely started. From his cramped space behind the bench, Parringer grabbed a crucible and hurled it at The Shadow's head.

Half diving toward the floor, The Shadow dodged the missile. On hands and knees, he was ready to come up again, to complete his spring toward the workbench where the brewing mixture had begun to bubble. But The Shadow did not complete that spring, nor did Parringer hurl the hydrometer jar that he had grabbed as a new weapon.

At that moment, the bubbling broth exploded with a roar that could be heard for blocks. With the force of TNT, it crumpled the walls and roof of the laboratory. Ignited chemicals gushed flames of all colors, while the tumbling walls engulfed Ray Parringer and the rescuer who had arrived too late to save him.

Crime had moved ahead of The Shadow, and had scored a double gain. Not only was Ray Parringer gone, into a flaming pit beneath his abolished laboratory; but The Shadow, arch-foe of crime, had taken a similar dive into those same depths of doom!

CHAPTER IV. BLASTED EVIDENCE

THERE was a difference in the way they went, The Shadow and Ray Parringer – a difference that meant the dividing mark between life and death.

On hands and knees, below the level of the workbench, The Shadow escaped the direct force of the blast. Though he was jarred by a blinding concussion that seemed to buckle his skull and wrench his brain, The Shadow was still alive when he plunged through the spreading floor of the crashing laboratory.

Parringer's fate was the opposite. Close to the bench where the explosion occurred, and above the level of the blast, the chemist was killed instantly. Like his equipment and the walls about him, Parringer was blown into chunks.

Crime's evidence vanished with the ill-fated chemist. As for the lone witness to the catastrophe – namely, The Shadow – he likewise seemed destined for oblivion, despite the lucky factor that had temporarily prolonged his life.

The Shadow's plunge was carrying him into a pit represented by the vacant garage below the laboratory. After him came tons of tumbling debris bringing masses of flaming wreckage that threatened The Shadow with a hideous death should he be unfortunate enough to survive his fall.

The fact that The Shadow did survive was due entirely to the mushroom action of the explosion. With the

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spread of the upstairs laboratory, lower walls caved under the building weight. Old beams, crashing and splintering, criss-crossing one another like a pile of jack-straws, received the ruins of the laboratory walls and roof.

In the space of a dozen seconds, the two-story building was reduced to a pyramid pile that bulged up from the ground level. Flames were mounting to form a great pyre, and beneath the very center of that fiery mass lay The Shadow!

HALF stunned and partly crippled by his impact with the cement floor of the garage, The Shadow was in a pitiable plight. He was wedged beneath shattered timbers; when he tried to crawl, chunks of crumbled masonry blocked his path.

The flames were rising away from the imprisoned victim. But it would not be many minutes before burning fragments dropped through to The Shadow's tiny nest, to consume him. The one merciful prospect was the likelihood that he would be dead before the cremation began. The fire was sucking air from the space below the pyre. Chances were that The Shadow would die from suffocation, if nothing came to aid him.

Drilling through The Shadow's disjointed thoughts came the crackle of the flames, echoing along with shrieks and clangs that grew louder every few seconds. Unable to analyze that discordant medley, The Shadow did not guess that it promised rescue.

Fire engines were on the scene, summoned from a firehouse only a few blocks away. Illuminated by the glare of the furious flames, firemen were attaching hoses to hydrants close beside the ruins of Parringer's burning laboratory.

Streams of water brought vicious hisses from the flames. Remaining chemicals exploded with little spurts like tiny bombs. But the mass of the fire disappeared, changing to clouds of steam. This type of blaze was made to order for the firemen, for they could reach it easily.

Partly recuperated from his daze, The Shadow gained the illusion that he was stranded in a roaring surf, surrounded by timbers from a wrecked ship. Deluged by water from the fire hose, he revived sufficiently to try to grope his way toward what he thought was shore.

All strength was gone from his left shoulder, but he used his right arm to shove the broken beams aside. Bricks and mortar fell about him, but none struck his head. Drafts of fresh air, sucked in through the debris, gave him added energy for his painful crawl.

Hauling himself one-handed through a narrow space, The Shadow found his feet. Through knee-deep rubbish, he stumbled toward the street, reached it with a final stagger and sprawled in front of a pair of astonished firemen.

It was a sight of a self-rescued victim that amazed the smoke-eaters; not anything unusual about The Shadow's garb. He was cloaked in black no longer. His hat was gone; only a few straggly remnants of his cloak clung to his shoulders. Even the evening clothes that he wore beneath were scarcely recognizable as the immaculate attire that had adorned the person of Lamont Cranston.

Closer scrutiny might have enabled the firemen to identify him as The Shadow, but with the flames subsided, they lacked the chance to fully view the groggy victim from the pit. Besides, there were others who had seen The Shadow sprawl upon the sidewalk: men who occupied a sedan that was blocked by the fire engines.

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Jumping from their car, they offered to take the crippled victim to a hospital. The firemen helped them put The Shadow into the sedan. The car was waved through the fire lines; with its horn sounding loudly, it headed for the nearest avenue.

SLUMPED in the middle of the rear seat, The Shadow could hear the conversation of men on each side of him, along with the buzz of voices from the front. At first their words were vague, drowned somewhat by the loud honks of the horn. Then the horn had stopped, the car was gliding smoothly. Voices were plain; eyes shut, The Shadow listened.

"It's The Shadow, all right!" The man beside the driver was speaking, as he looked back into the rear. "The chief thought he might be clever enough to drop in and see Parringer."

"What do you suppose he was doing there?"

The query came from the man on The Shadow's right. The speaker in front gave a cryptic answer.

"Parringer's death was necessary," he said. "That is all that any of us need to know. But it is equally necessary that any witness should die, particularly The Shadow."

The man on The Shadow's left entered the discussion. His tone was very matter-of-fact.

"Then here goes," he announced. "One bullet will settle our friend, The Shadow!"

A gun muzzle poked The Shadow's ribs, close to his heart. Too weak to respond, The Shadow was unable to gather strength before an exclamation came from his right

"No, no! Don't shoot him. There's a simpler way than that. We'll simply strangle the chap and deliver him at the hospital. Let them find out who he is, while we testify that he died on the way."

"A good idea!" came the voice from the front seat. "Here – pass me that gun, while you fellows settle the blighter."

Reluctantly, the man on the left extended his hand toward the front seat. Eyes half opened, The Shadow saw the revolver's glitter as the man in front reached for it. The Shadow could not make out faces, for his eyes were still dazzled from the fierce glare of the laboratory explosion; but sight of the gun was enough.

The Shadow had been gathering all his strength for a supreme effort, and this moment was his opportunity. Mechanically, he shot his own hand forward. It seemed to go of its own accord, impelled solely by his will, but it functioned under that remote control.

Clamping the gun with a fist that was powerful through sheer instinctive action, The Shadow yanked it away from the hands of his captors. His lips voiced a quavery laugh, as he rolled his body forward from the seat.

With hissed responses, three captors were upon him: the two men beside him, plus the fellow from the front seat, who was coming over to help them.

WITH all their urge to suppress the recuperating prisoner, the three were too late to stop the toss that The Shadow's hand gave to the gun. It flipped over, thanks to a move that The Shadow had long practiced, and his finger found the trigger. He knew that he was firing, for he could see the flashes of the gun and hear its reports. But he wasn't shooting anyone.

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The Shadow's captors had shoved his gun hand upward. His bullets were merely denting the top of the sedan; they had hold of his hand and were trying to wrench the gun from it. Yanking his fist away, The Shadow swept it downward; the revolver went from his fingers.

They were upon him, all three, ramming him against the door on the left.

With a wild grope, The Shadow tried to find the gun, and thought he had it. The thing that he actually gripped was the door handle. He caught it, just as slugging fists knocked him to the floor. But his hand kept its grip.

The door handle clicked downward. The Shadow's weight, impelled by the shove of hands that were going for his throat, gave the door an outward swing. With a writhing twist of his right arm and shoulder, The Shadow turned his pitch into a plunge. Before hands could grip him, he had literally catapulted himself from the rolling car.

He struck the paving head first. The shock brought a flash of imaginary light as vivid as the blast in Parringer's laboratory. The Shadow had completed his sprawl for freedom, but it had knocked him senseless.

The sedan was stopping, thirty feet ahead. One man was already on the step, gun in hand, ready to settle The Shadow with bullets if there proved to be no easier way.

The gun that talked first did not come from the sedan. It spoke from the window of a taxicab that sputtered in from a corner on the sedan's trail. The man on the sedan step dropped back into the car just as a bullet skimmed the driver's ear and cracked the windshield.

Shoving the sedan into gear, the frantic driver wheeled it around a corner just ahead, while the spurts of an automatic, coming closer, beat a tattoo against the sides and fenders of the fleeing car.

One marksman, supplying a timely barrage from the taxi, had driven off The Shadow's captors, who were totally unprepared to meet such a stanch attack.

The cab stopped beside The Shadow. Two men leaped from it. One was Moe Shrevnitz, the driver, who used this cab in The Shadow's service as a secret agent. The other was Harry Vincent, ace of The Shadow's agents. Harry was the marksman who had supplied the effective gunfire.

They put The Shadow into the cab. With Moe at the wheel, skimming corners at breakneck speed, and Harry in the back, ready to meet all comers with his reloaded automatic, the agents were on their way again.

Though stunned and crippled, The Shadow was being carried to safety, from which he could begin a new campaign against the tribe of enemies whose unknown chief had ordained The Shadow's doom – and failed to obtain it!

CHAPTER V. CRIME'S LINKS

IT was three days before Lamont Cranston appeared at the swanky Cobalt Club, where he spent so much of his leisure time. On the afternoon that he arrived there, various members greeted him and expressed their pleasure at his return.

The news was about that Cranston had cracked up one of his sport planes in making a forced landing, and had gone to a hospital as a result. Such an accident, like his early return to circulation, was nothing unusual. Cranston was frequently running into such complications, and getting out of them with very little damage.

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Nevertheless, the club members were glad that the latest episode had not been severe, and among those most ardent in congratulations was Eugene Bristow, president of the Chem-Lab Co. Bristow had come into the club to attend a business luncheon, and, although he did not know it, his presence was the reason why Cranston had also come to the club this afternoon.

Soon, the two were chatting in a secluded corner of the reading room. Dropping his pompous manner, Bristow discussed the very facts that The Shadow wanted to learn.

"Our formula failed us," declared Bristow, ruefully. "Just as Thurver said it would. He is the chief chemist at the Plant. I was afraid that Thurver was wrong, so I gave the formula to Parringer, a consulting chemist. You heard what happened to him?" The Shadow nodded.

"I warned Parringer to be careful," insisted Bristow. "It was horrible, Cranston, that tragedy at the plant; but I never supposed that Parringer would meet with a similar accident! I should have listened to Thurver in the first place."

Though he cared little for Bristow, The Shadow credited the corporation president with being sincere. Business came first in everything Bristow did, but the man had a certain amount of human sentiment. It was conceivable, of course, that Bristow might have some reason for ruining his own plant and blowing up Parringer's laboratory, but the chances were quite remote.

Bristow's repeated mention of Thurver offered a more plausible solution of the mystery. In the casual tone that suited Cranston, The Shadow inquired what Thurver's present opinions might be.

"Thurver blames me for everything," said Bristow, bitterly. "He was terribly shocked by Parringer's death. There was nothing I could do but tell Thurver to take a long vacation on full pay, hoping that he would view matters more reasonably when he returned."

"Thurver has gone?"

"Yes; he left this morning. He won't be back for two months. Yesterday, I completed the purchase of another formula, offered us by the Experimento Co. It's sheer robbery, Cranston! Paying those Experimento people half a million dollars, in six installments of a hundred thousand dollars each."

"You have made the first payment?"

"Yes. To a man named R. G. Dean, who has an office in the Harmon Building. I went there to see him this morning, but the office was closed."

"How did he communicate with you?"

"By telephone. He mailed the contracts; I signed them, and mailed him the first payment. The formula arrived this morning and is satisfactory. That's why I tried to see Dean today."

DESPITE his mask-faced expression, The Shadow was in a thoughtful mood. Whatever Thurver's part in the scheme to milk Chem-Lab of half a million dollars, it was merely a step to the more important operation managed by the mysterious Mr. R. G. Dean. Therefore, Thurver's departure on a so-called vacation did not matter. The Shadow could hunt up "Dean" instead.

One detail needed to be settled. Before The Shadow could mention it, Bristow brought up a point of his own.

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"I understand that you telephoned me the other night, Cranston," he said. "The call must have come while I was at Parringer's. Was the matter important?"

"Not at all," replied The Shadow, in an indifferent tone. "I merely wanted to express my regret over the accident that occurred at your plant."

"I thought that you might have wanted to be present when I talked to the New Jersey authorities," remarked Bristow. "But, very oddly, when I went to see them, I found that they did not expect me."

A sudden glint came to Cranston's eyes. It was gone before Bristow noticed it.

"Of course," added Bristow, "I told no one that you called. I know that my servants are discreet, so I decided to keep the matter entirely confidential."

Lamont Cranston bowed his appreciation. Then, calmly, The Shadow brought up his own question:

"What have you done with your old formula, Bristow?"

"We regard it as worthless," returned Bristow, "as well as dangerous. All copies have been destroyed. That is" – he corrected himself – "all except this one."

He brought a folded sheet of paper from his wallet. The Shadow glanced at it; then, about to return it, he asked in casual fashion:

"You're through with it?"

Bristow nodded. For answer, The Shadow crumpled the paper and tossed it into a wastebasket. Rising, he clapped Bristow on the shoulder and remarked:

"Sorry to have detained you, Bristow. I know you're anxious to get back to the plant. How about having dinner with me this evening, here at the club? I'll introduce you to the police commissioner."

With a wry expression, Bristow declined. He wasn't anxious to meet anyone connected with the law. Public opinion was in agreement with the sentiments expressed by George Thurver: namely, that Bristow's negligence was responsible for two tragedies and therefore was of a criminal sort.

All the way to his New Jersey factory, Eugene Bristow felt worried. Reaching his tower office, he dismissed his secretaries and shut himself up alone, like a hiding fugitive. His lawyers had assured him that he was not criminally liable for anything that had occurred, but Bristow was in a most mistrustful mood.

The Shadow had foreseen that Bristow would be in such a state; and there were reasons why it would prove to The Shadow's own advantage. But The Shadow also calculated that Bristow's conscious-stricken condition would not be observed by anyone connected with crime. That calculation missed

A knock at Bristow's door startled the chemical-plant president. Popping up from his desk, Bristow gulped the words: "Come in." He was considerably shaken when he saw George Thurver step across the threshold.

"I... I THOUGHT you had left!" exclaimed Bristow. "Is anything wrong, Thurver – anything else?"

"Not at all," replied Thurver, in a serious tone. "I just wanted to apologize for some of the things I said, Mr. Bristow. That's why I waited."

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The two shook hands. Thurver could feel a tremble of Bristow's fingers. About to leave, the chemist said:

"I meant to ask you about the old formula. Didn't you have an extra copy of it?"

"Why... why, yes!" Bristow fumbled for his wallet; then, as if in recollection. "I destroyed it, Thurver. You can forget it. Have a good vacation; stay away as long as you want."

Outside the office door, Thurver paused to listen. He could hear Bristow pacing the floor. When the footsteps stopped, he knew that Bristow was at the telephone. Working the door slightly open, Thurver heard Bristow calling his New York hotel apartment.

In a worried tone, Bristow was reminding his servant to say nothing of the fact that Mr. Cranston had called the apartment a few nights before. he added:

"Call the Cobalt Club, Roger. See if you can get Mr. Cranston there. Tell him I would like to join him at dinner with the police commissioner... Yes, Cranston will be able to reach me here at the office..."

Thurver waited awhile, having pulled the door tight shut. He could still hear Bristow pacing up and down, but there was no ring of the telephone bell. Evidently Cranston was not at the Cobalt Club. With a shrewd smile, Thurver stole away and reached his laboratory.

The place was empty except for Thurver's bags, which were packed and bulging. Making a phone call of his own, Thurver talked to his hidden chief, told him all that he had heard. His final remarks were emphatic.

"It looks like Cranston is The Shadow!" said Thurver. "Maybe he has that copy of the formula... Yes, I'm all packed. I'll be on my way in five minutes... If you want to get at The Shadow, you'll find him at the Cobalt Club... Yes, he might head for the Dean office first..."

THERE was a sequel to Thurver's call. It came one hour later, when Ralph Atgood heard a ring at the door of his apartment. A messenger was there, to deliver a square wooden box addressed to Ralph, but bearing no other words.

Opening the box, Ralph found a cardboard container inside it. Tucked under the flap of the carton was an envelope. Opening it, Ralph read:

Deliver this at once to Cyrus Shawnwood. State that it comes

from Isaac Loman. Give it to anyone of Shawnwood's servants. No

receipt will be necessary.

R. G. DEAN.

Finding Shawnwood's address in the telephone book, Ralph left the apartment carrying the small but heavy carton. He reached an old brownstone house on the West Side, and delivered the box to the servant who answered the door.

Ralph practically forgot the box as soon as he delivered it, for he had a date that evening with Alicia Weylan. It was just another bit of routine duty, Ralph thought, in behalf of his benefactor, R. G. Dean. Certain phases of his present job had begun to worry Ralph; but the delivery of a package was so trifling, that his confidence was restored.

Oddly, that package was destined for a career that would have horrified Ralph, had he guessed its purpose. But Ralph, as yet, had no idea of the purposes that lay behind the ways of R. G. Dean.

Only The Shadow had found crime's links; he, alone, could forge them into a connected chain. But crooks, in their turn, had gained a link to The Shadow. When the master investigator moved, crime's chief would be prepared to meet him!

CHAPTER VI. THE BARREN TRAIL

IN a windowless room where black walls glistened, The Shadow was testing the original formula used by the Chem-Lab Co. He was getting results identical with those obtained by Ray Parringer. Even under superheat, the mixture did not explode.

This room, with its tiled walls, was The Shadow's own laboratory. It adjoined his sanctum, the hidden spot from which he contacted his loyal agents when they aided him in tracking down crime.

From his experiments, The Shadow had proven the fact that he suspected: namely, that George Thurver had deliberately doctored the chemicals used at the Chem-Lab plant. No possible harm could have come to Ray Parringer with the latter using a copy of the formula as supplied by Eugene Bristow.

For The Shadow was using one of Bristow's own copies – the last one in existence. On the laboratory bench lay the crumpled sheet of paper that The Shadow, as Cranston, had tossed into a wastebasket at the Cobalt Club. The Shadow had recovered the discarded document soon after Bristow had left for the factory.

One experiment concluded, The Shadow began another. He wanted an answer to the riddle of tragedy at the Chem-Lab plant, as well as the matter of Parringer's death. It did not take him long to settle his problem.

By slightly changing the quantities of certain solutions, The Shadow brewed a mixture that bubbled under heat, then emitted puffs of flame. Taking a very small amount, he added a few drops from a bottle marked "D" and put the mixture over a burner.

Within a few seconds, there was a sharp explosion that shattered the test tube containing the mixture. The blast was strong enough to shake the laboratory bench, but other chemicals were too distant to be ignited.

On a tiny scale, The Shadow had duplicated the explosion that wrecked Parringer's laboratory. Extinguishing the burner, he used a large black cloth to mop up the remains of the experiment.

The flash of light, though small, had produced a blinding effect upon The Shadow's eyes, which proved that he had not entirely recuperated from the terrific experience at Parringer's. His left arm, too, seemed to ache, as he recalled the plunge that he had taken into the old garage.

Resting in a corner of the laboratory, The Shadow let his thoughts drift back to that horrendous night. He could remember everything perfectly, up until the roar that had shaken the building clear to its foundations. From then on, incidents were like snatches from a nightmare.

Fire – water – voices – gunshots: all formed an imperfect progression. Of all those, The Shadow was most anxious to recall the voices; but there his recollection failed him. They were threads to crime, those voices; had The Shadow remembered them clearly, he could hope to someday identify their owners. But the threads were tangled too hopelessly to be of present use.

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Unfortunately, neither Harry Vincent nor Moe Shrevnitz had been able to spot the number of the fugitive sedan. They had noticed a car pull away from the scene of the explosion, had heard firemen speak of "a guy that was being taken to the hospital." Guessing that it was The Shadow who was on his way to the hospital, they had followed in time to aid their chief.

They had taken The Shadow to a small private hospital managed by Dr. Rupert Sayre, who knew The Shadow as Lamont Cranston. After three delirious nights, The Shadow had recovered from a brain concussion and had talked things over with Sayre. The physician had provided one definite fact, to which both Harry and Moe could testify:

The Shadow's captors could not possibly have identified him as Lamont Cranston. His face, smeared with blood, grime, and streaks of black from charred timbers, was such that no one could recognize it. Therefore, The Shadow had felt confident that his Cranston personality would remain unknown – unless Bristow supplied a clue.

In talking with Bristow this afternoon, The Shadow had spiked that prospect. Thus he felt himself immune from any back-handed attacks by crooks who served the unknown Mr. Dean. Lacking knowledge of Thurver's snoop tactics, The Shadow was therefore lulled into a faulty security that was to warp his future actions.

MOVING into the sanctum, The Shadow pressed a switch upon the wall. A tiny light glowed; a voice came through earphones as The Shadow adjusted them:

"Burbank speaking."

To Burbank, his contact man, The Shadow gave instructions for various agents. They were to post themselves in the neighborhood of the Harmon Building while The Shadow investigated the Dean office.

The Shadow was banking on the probability that his master foe would consider the Dean alias sufficient protection. Such a theory was plausible, as the Dean transactions were definitely legal. Even Bristow, who was handing over half a million dollars in sizable payments, did not have any intention of trying to brand the unknown Mr. Dean as a crook.

Dusk was heavy when The Shadow, cloaked in a new outfit of black, glided toward the Harmon Building. He saw a young man sauntering along the street; a taxicab was parked a few yards away. Harry Vincent and Moe Shrevnitz were both on the job.

Pausing near a corner of the building, The Shadow saw another man alight from an arriving cab, which promptly pulled away. The man was wearing a Tuxedo, and seemed in quite a hurry to reach some office in the building. Harry also saw him and started toward the building entrance.

A tiny red sparkle came from a flashlight in The Shadow's hand. Harry spied the glimmer and stopped short. It was a signal, to halt him. The Shadow was closer to the building entrance, and intended to take up the trail.

Harry failed to see The Shadow glide through the doorway. The lobby lights were dim and The Shadow had a remarkable ability to keep close to the shelter of gloomy side walls. But, as he entered, The Shadow flashed another signal. He had shifted the lens; this time, the blink was green, and The Shadow repeated it.

Such a series of green flashes meant for Harry to keep on the move. Resuming his stroll, the agent walked toward the next corner. On the way, Harry reasoned out The Shadow's purpose.

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Since the Tuxedoed man had come by cab, he would probably take one when he left. Since Moe's cab was already parked near the Harmon Building, it would be eligible to receive the Tuxedoed passenger. The Shadow often had Moe carry suspicious-looking persons to their destinations.

Inside the building, The Shadow glimpsed the face above the Tuxedo. He noted that the man was an earnest-looking fellow, light-haired and with a rather well-shaped profile. In age, he was probably well into his twenties.

The Shadow was gaining his first view of Ralph Atgood, the sincere emissary who served R. G. Dean. His scrutiny, however, was brief, for The Shadow preferred to learn if this hasty visitor was going to the upstairs office.

It was after six o'clock, and only one elevator was in operation. While Ralph waited for it, The Shadow ascended a stairway that stood closer to the building entrance. Finding the Dean office by the number that he had noted on the lobby board, The Shadow was watching from an extension of the hallway when Ralph arrived.

The cloaked observer saw the young man unlock the mailbox outside the office door. Finding no letters in it, Ralph went his way, while The Shadow blinked a message from the hallway window. Flashing from the folds of his cloak, the tiny flashlight sparkled in ordinary white.

Its muffled beam was noted by Moe, watching from the cab directly below the window. Moe read the brief coded message. He was ready when Ralph arrived on the street. The young man rode away, a passenger in The Shadow's cab.

That trail proved shorter than either The Shadow or Moe expected. It was not only short, but blind. Under orders to make his visits to the Dean office inconspicuous, Ralph left the cab near a subway station. Moe was about to discard his taxi driver's cap and follow him, when another fare stepped into the cab.

It happened to be Frederick Glenny, covering Ralph's trail without the latter's knowledge. Moe could not desert his cab while he had a passenger. Taking Glenny for a chance customer, the cabby never suspected that the fellow was in the game. He drove Glenny to Times Square, and there reported to Burbank, stating that he had lost track of his first passenger.

WHILE Moe was muffling a second choice quite as good as the one that he had lost, The Shadow descended to the ground floor of the office building. Something about the locked office signified new danger. The best route of entry would be an unexpected one.

In an area behind the building, the flashlight gave green blinks, then red. The Shadow was joined by a wizened man who crept stealthily from the darkness.

This was Hawkeye, another of The Shadow's agents. Burbank had posted him behind the building, and Hawkeye reported that no hostile watchers were about. Leaving Hawkeye on guard, The Shadow began an outside trip to the locked Dean office.

Scaling the brick wall, with its cornices and window ledges, was an easy matter for The Shadow. Hand over hand, he ascended the darkened surface, gaining toe holds as he went. Lost even from Hawkeye's sharp view, The Shadow reached the window that he wanted. It was latched, but he worked a thin strip of metal between the portions of the sash, to release the catch.

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Inside the office, The Shadow probed the place with his thin-rayed flashlight. Empty filing cases and vacant desk drawers supplied no clues whatever. It was apparent that everything of any consequence had been removed; that the office was used as a mailing address only.

In hope of some slight clue, The Shadow decided to examine the office more thoroughly. He lowered the window shades, then stabbed his flashlight through pitch-darkness. The ray focused on a squat metal desk lamp that stood beside the telephone.

The switch was at the bottom of the lamp. Extinguishing the flashlight, The Shadow reached out to light the lamp and thus illuminate the office completely. The instant that his fingers pressed the switch, he heard a muffled click from deep within the lamp base. The light came on, but at the same moment something sliced outward from a narrow slit just below the switch.

The Shadow whipped his hand away as the thin object struck his gloved hand, close to the palm. For an instant, he thought that a knife had been ejected from the lamp, but as he clenched his fist and looked along the polished desk, he saw no sign of a blade.

Something crinkled in The Shadow's palm. Opening his fist, he saw a white card. It was the thing from the lamp, and it had slithered squarely into The Shadow's quick-formed fist before he had been able to whisk his hand from the danger zone. As he eyed the card in the lamplight, The Shadow phrased a whispered laugh.

There was no mockery in that tone. Rather, it carried a note of hidden understanding. The Shadow knew that he was dealing with a superfoe whose tricky ways were so numerous and varied that the crafty criminal could pass up opportunities for murder, to show his contempt for those who tried to balk him.

The strip of pasteboard in The Shadow's hand was an engraved calling card that bore the name: R. G. DEAN.

CHAPTER VII. CRIME'S ULTIMATUM

THERE was nothing trivial about the souvenir that The Shadow had so unexpectedly received. On the contrary, that innocent-looking card spelled danger in large letters, the way The Shadow read it.

Behind the alias of R. G. Dean lay the crafty brain of an insidious plotter, who had already demonstrated his murderous technique when he wrecked the Chem-Lab plant and ruined Parringer's laboratory.

Death came to those who tried to block the unknown killer whose purpose was to obtain great wealth through seemingly legal methods detached from his deeds of crime. The Shadow had been lucky to escape such doom a few nights ago. He was even luckier at present.

The lamp on the office table could have projected a poisoned needle as easily as it had shot out the calling card. The reason why it had merely been used to deliver a warning was quite obvious to The Shadow. The conniving Mr. Dean did not want dead bodies lying around an office that he used for legitimate purposes; that was all.

Here, The Shadow stood on safe ground within the enemy's territory. But he did not deceive himself with the notion that he had made headway. This office belonged to the so-called R. G. Dean, but it was obviously a place where the supercrook never came in person. The Shadow had an idea that the master criminal was at this moment chuckling to himself in the security of some remote headquarters.

The hunch was right. It was proven while The Shadow still stood staring at the card. The telephone bell began

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to ring. Apparently, the telephone was connected to the lamp, and the operation of the latter had flashed a signal across the wire. The call was meant for The Shadow. He lifted the receiver, but did not speak.

A chuckly voice reached The Shadow's ear; he recognized that the chortle meant more than mere mirth. It was the speaker's effective way of disguising his usual tone, so that The Shadow would not be able to identify it afterward.

"Hello, Shadow!" clucked the speaker. "We know all about you. We do not fear you. But you will have occasion to fear us unless you cease your useless meddling!"

There was a pause, during which the chortle was replaced by the mechanical sounds of a poor connection, which The Shadow decided was deliberately intended.

"I am giving you an opportunity for life," resumed the chuckly voice. "Remove your hat and cloak. Carry them over one arm, and tie a white handkerchief about the other. If you display that token of complete truce, as guarantee that you will no longer annoy me, you may walk out free and unmolested. Otherwise –"

The voice paused. The silence, broken only by rasping sounds from the receiver, was more ominous than any spoken word. Finally, came the click of the receiver being hung up. The wire went dead. It symbolized what would happen to The Shadow, if he did not heed the warning of the unknown foe who had voiced the unfinished threat.

CALMLY, The Shadow extinguished the office light. Moving to the window, he began his precarious descent. At the ground level, he summoned Hawkeye with varicolored blinks of the flashlight and told the wizened man to make a prompt and stealthy departure.

Danger was due, and The Shadow intended to meet it alone. In the darkness, he made a careful analysis of the situation.

Evidently the dangerous Mr. Dean had miscalculated on one important point. He supposed that The Shadow had entered the office by picking the door lock, and would go out by the same route. There was no menace here behind the office building, for Hawkeye, competent as well as stealthy, would have spotted some trace of it.

The front street was the danger zone. The Shadow made a circuit in that direction. Avoiding the front entrance of the office building, he picked a blackened stretch between two street lamps and glided across the thoroughfare.

There was another building opposite; its dark entrance commanded a perfect view of the Harmon Building. The Shadow conjectured that he would find a lurker in that vantage spot.

Approaching the doorway, The Shadow drew an automatic. He had lost one brace of guns in the ruins below Parringer's laboratory and intended to keep a firm grip on the ones he carried tonight. Creeping close, holding to the darkness, The Shadow could hear the tense breathing of a man who occupied the doorway. With a swift surge, he sprang for the lurking crook.

A warning bell clanged, actuated by a strip of metal in a crack of the sidewalk. The man in the doorway flung himself about, made an inward dive, just in time to escape a slugging swing from The Shadow's heavy gun. The building door was of the revolving type, divided into four sections. The man landed in one, whirling the door as he passed through. The Shadow followed.

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Half into the revolving door, The Shadow spun about diving back to the sidewalk just as the traveling partition skimmed his shoulder. He had whisked himself from a trap just in time. The fleeing man was a decoy. The door locked as The Shadow left it.

From the closed section of the door came a muffled puff; a cloud of white steam filled the interior. The locking door had automatically released that jet. Even the protecting folds of The Shadow's cloak could not have saved him from a scalding death, had he been trapped within the revolving door.

AGAINST the whiteness of the steam, The Shadow's cloaked form was plainly visible. Guns barked from a spot across the street well past the Harmon Building. Dropping behind the partial protection of a lighting standard, The Shadow answered the long-range fire. He saw two men jump into a parked coupe. The car started away.

Moe's cab was not around, but another taxi was cruising through the street. The Shadow knew that its arrival was a mere coincidence; that the driver could not be a member of the crooked band. There was no way in which the cab's arrival might have been timed.

Furthermore, the cab was halting with a shriek of brakes. The driver was anxious to turn about and buck traffic on the one-way street to get away from a district where guns were cutting loose. The Shadow did not give him time to make a retreat.

Springing into the cab, the cloaked fighter ordered the wide-mouthed cabby to pursue the coupe and emphasized the order with a flourish of a .45 automatic. The cab took up the chase, with The Shadow leaning from the window, ready to fire at the coupe as soon as they overhauled it.

The fleeing car was zigzagging as if crippled. Nearing the avenue, it skidded. Something had struck the street; an object that had dropped from the coupe, to spread an oily substance from curb to curb.

The Shadow saw the thing strike. As the cab's front wheels hit the oil, he shoved a gloved hand through to the driver's seat. Giving the steering wheel a hard yank. The Shadow whipped the cab over the curb, up to the broad sidewalk, just as a sizzling fuse was tossed back from the car ahead.

As the fuse struck, the oily stuff ignited. The whole street broke loose with liquid fire. The coupe outraced that roaring flame, carrying away another pair of decoys. Cars parked along the curb were withered; their gasoline tanks burst with sharp explosions that literally twisted their steel frames.

That sight told what would have happened to the taxicab, or any other pursuing car that contained The Shadow, had it continued along the street. By wrenching the cab to the sidewalk, The Shadow had jolted it above the level of the curb, the boundary line of the engulfing fire.

The cab thudded a building wall, but its occupants were safe from harm. Leaving the stupefied driver staring at the fading fire, The Shadow cut through between two buildings to the next street, in the direction toward which the coupe had turned. Coming out from shelter, with guns drawn, he saw the fleeing car speed by.

Opening fire, The Shadow employed his usual method of dropping back to cover as he loosed the shots. It was well that he did so, instead of springing to the middle of the street. where the average marksman would have gone to get better aim.

A new lurker had seen The Shadow's lunge; not expecting the fade-away that followed, the crook released the third of the Dean-laid devices. There was a manhole in the center of the street. It lifted thirty feet in air, hoisted by a gigantic cough that carried great chunks of paving with it.

Ripped asphalt spread, dropping like hail into the mouth of the alley that formed The Shadow's present shelter. From darkness came a mocking laugh: The Shadow's answer to departing bombers. Then, reversing his own path, The Shadow took a quick course through the night.

IN a quiet area several blocks away, The Shadow reappeared as Cranston. He was carrying his cloak and hat across his left arm, but there was no sign of a white handkerchief around his right. Entering a limousine, he lighted a cigarette, then spoke calmly through the speaking tube to the chauffeur.

"Drive through Central Park, Stanley," was Cranston's order. "It is too early to go to the club. I shall tell you when to start there."

While the limousine rolled placidly through Manhattan streets, The Shadow gave deliberate thought to the devastating events that had occurred in such rapid fashion. Those three thrusts by a scientific killer would scarcely be classed as accidents when the law heard about them. Nevertheless, they would carry elements of mystery.

A broken steam pipe opening into a revolving door; a flood of fire that had come and gone without a trace, a blasted mass of paving that might have been caused by a faulty gas line underneath the street – none of those could be linked to a quiet inconspicuous office in the Harmon Building, where the name of R. G. Dean appeared upon the door.

The search for the master crook would remain The Shadow's problem. The question was, would the hidden foe again find The Shadow first? Evidently, the self-styled Mr. Dean knew more about The Shadow than the black-cloaked investigator had supposed.

For perhaps the first time in his career, The Shadow faced a future that offered nothing but uncertainty of a most precarious sort. His only policy was to be prepared for another thrust, that might come any time and anywhere!

CHAPTER VIII. AT THE COBALT CLUB

THOUGH the chaos near the Harmon Building attracted a flock of police cars and fire engines, it did not interest a stocky swarthy-faced man who rode past the scene in a taxicab some ten minutes after the commotion had occurred.

Ordinarily, that cab rider would have stopped off to see what it was all about, for he was a police inspector and had a reputation for being around soon after things happened. But Joe Cardona hadn't time to investigate any matters that seemed of an accidental nature; not this evening.

Joe was on his way to see Police Commissioner Ralph Weston, and he was late.

As Cardona alighted in front of the Cobalt Club, he saw an elderly man step from an old-fashioned limousine. The man was gray-haired, with whiskers to match, and he carried a cane in one hand and a heavy square-shaped bundle under the other arm. Cardona approached him, with the query:

"You're Cyrus Shawnwood?"

The whiskered man gave Cardona a sharp but troubled look; then seeing the badge that the inspector displayed, Shawnwood gave a relieved nod.

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"You must be Inspector Cardona," said Shawnwood, in a wheezy tone. "The commissioner said that he had called you."

"That's right," returned Joe. "It looks like we're both late, Mr. Shawnwood. Which helps me a lot, because the commissioner gets sore sometimes, if I don't show up as soon as he expects. Let's go in and see him together."

They entered the Cobalt Club, were informed that Commissioner Weston was in the grillroom, which rather surprised Joe Cardona because he knew that the room in question was being redecorated. They descended the steep stairs that led down to the grillroom, Cardona carrying the heavy package while Shawnwood used the cane to hobble down the steep steps.

Cardona had heard correctly. The grillroom was under a course of reconstruction. Tables were stacked in corners, with chairs surmounting them. There were ladders and planks along one wall, where some artist had partly finished a mural decoration showing a tropical scene.

But the inner corner of the room was still in use. A table had been laid there especially for Commissioner Weston. A waiter was peering in from a door that led to the kitchen, to see if the commissioner was ready for dinner. Weston waved him impatiently away, then arose to meet the arrivals.

A broad-faced man, with short-clipped military mustache, Ralph Weston was brisk in everything he did. He shook hands with Cyrus Shawnwood, told Joe Cardona to put the package on the table, then invited both to be seated.

JOE CARDONA cast a curious eye around the grillroom, then remarked:

"They're changing the old place, aren't they, commissioner?"

"Yes, they are," snapped Weston. "They're ruining it! Look at those murals, Cardona, and those rubber plants over in the alcove. When they get through with their messing, the place will look like a tropical garden!"

"Tropical garden –"

The voice croaked from the center of the room, near the ceiling. Looking up, Cardona saw a large cage that contained a fair-sized parrot. Weston was glaring at the green-plumed bird, and the parrot slanted its head to survey the police commissioner.

"Look at the fool bird," grumbled Weston. "Some member gave it to the club, and they finally decided to put it down here. Having a parrot to begin with, they gained the notion that they ought to have a tropical grillroom. I tell you, inspector" – Weston's tone rose to an indignant pitch – "everyone around here has gone crazy!"

"Crazy!" squawked the parrot. "Crazy... crazy –"

Weston reached for his own cane, as if he intended to march over and smash the cage. The parrot fluttered its feathers, walked up the side of the cage, under the top, and down the other side. All during that acrobatic performance, it kept one eye cocked on the commissioner.

Weston finally subsided and laid aside his cane, but the parrot kept on walking, muttering the same words as though it liked them and was keeping them for future reference: "Crazy... crazy... crazy –"

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"Let us get to the matter at hand," declared Weston, his brisk voice drowning the parrot's mutters. "I'm sorry that Cranston has not yet arrived, as I think this would interest him. However, I left word for him to come down here and he will be with us shortly.

"As I told you over the telephone, inspector" – Weston had turned to Cardona – "Mr. Shawnwood has received some sort of a threat. That is why I suggested that he come here and give us all the details. Very well, Mr. Shawnwood" – Weston swung to the gray-haired man – "you may proceed."

Shawnwood drew a small bundle of papers from his pocket, unfolded them and placed them on the square package.

"Some months ago," he wheezed, "I was approached by a chemist named Isaac Loman. A very eccentric fellow, Loman, but apparently sincere in everything he said. He was working on a process to extract motor fuel from cottonseed oil. It seemed to have great possibilities."

"I've heard that sort of stuff before," grunted Cardona. "All those ideas are whacky! They just don't work. The guy was trying to flim-flam you, Mr. Shawnwood."

"Very possibly he was," admitted Shawnwood, stroking his bearded chin. "At the same time, his process sounded plausible. I agreed to buy it."

"For how much?" queried Weston.

"Twenty thousand dollars," replied Shawnwood. "Here is the contract, all signed. Also a receipt for the first payment, of five thousand dollars."

"That's tough," put in Cardona. "If my hunch is right, Mr. Shawnwood, you can kiss that cash good-by!"

Shawnwood's eyes showed surprise, as though the possibility had never occurred to him. In the momentary silence, the parrot picked up Cardona's final word.

"Good-by!" croaked the green bird. "Good-by... good-by... good-by –"

The rest was a trail of squawks, which included some muttered profanity. The parrot had caught another glare from Weston and saw the commissioner's hand going toward the cane. Then Weston suddenly relaxed, a broad smile beneath his mustache.

All evening, the parrot had been picking up everything that Weston said. It had begun that process when the commissioner had first talked to the waiter. This time, the bird had decided to mimic Cardona, instead. Weston thought it rather funny, when he heard the parrot imitate someone else.

"Perhaps the five thousand dollars is lost," declared Shawnwood, "but I am wealthy enough to charge it off to experience. What really troubles me, though, is this."

HE showed them a letter signed by Isaac Loman. It stated that the inventor had decided to deal through a representative, whose name was not mentioned.

Evidently acting on the representative's advice, Loman stated in the letter that twenty thousand dollars was not enough. He wanted ten times the amount: namely, two hundred thousand dollars. Shawnwood was to agree to the new sum, or return the original contract.

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"The man must really have something!" exclaimed Weston. "Nevertheless, his proposition is outrageous. Outrageous!"

"Outrageous!"

"You must ignore this letter, Mr. Shawnwood," continued the commissioner, with an angry side glance at the interrupting parrot. "Leave the matter in our hands. When we have located Loman, you can demand the return of your five thousand dollars, or delivery of the process which you bought from him."

Shawnwood sat back, pleased. Gradually, the happy look left his face. He shook his head in a troubled manner, and his thin hands trembled as they pressed the table edge.

"I have heard from the representative that Loman mentions," whispered Shawnwood, hoarsely. "He talked to me over the telephone, but did not give his name. He asked me if I would return the contract. I said no."

"Did he say where to deliver it?"

"No." Shawnwood shook his gray head. "I don't know where Loman is, and I have no idea who this so-called representative may be. I suppose that if I offered to settle, they would let me know how to reach them."

Weston pondered; then asked: "About this representative – what did his voice sound like?"

"It was a croak!" Shawnwood's tone was awed. "He chuckled while he talked, almost like" – the bearded man paused, then pointed to the bird cage in the middle of the room – "almost like that parrot!"

The parrot did not seem to relish the reference. For the first time, it remained quite silent, tilting its head from side to side as though waiting to hear more before voicing an opinion. Again, Weston started to smile, then straightened his lips, for he saw that Shawnwood was very serious.

The elderly man reached for the square cardboard box and opened it with trembling hands. Cardona helped him lift out a metal contrivance about the size of a typewriter.

"This was delivered at my house today," declared Shawnwood. "A young man left it, and said that it came from Isaac Loman. What it means, what its purpose is, I cannot begin to guess."

Neither Weston nor Cardona expressed surprise at the statement. They, too, were puzzled by the squarish machine. Its whole top was a large metal cylinder, at the front of which were six little windows, each showing a printed letter. At present, those letters spelled:

G R A N D E

Below the cylinder, and in front of it, was a keyboard consisting of six rounded metal buttons which bore no letters at all.

"There you are," wheezed Shawnwood. "What the contrivance is for, why it was sent to me –" He shrugged; then added: "Perhaps you can answer those questions. I can't."

Neither could Weston nor Cardona. They sat there staring puzzled at the machine, their expressions as blank as Shawnwood's. In fact, all three looked as dumb as the beady-eyed parrot which peered through the wires of its cage as if it also sought some answer to the riddle.

CHAPTER IX. DEATH STRIKES AGAIN

IT was Joe Cardona who offered the first suggestion regarding the curious machine that had been delivered to Cyrus Shawnwood.

"I wonder what happens," mused the inspector, half aloud, "if you press any of these buttons."

"I can tell you that much," volunteered Shawnwood. "We tried it this afternoon, my guests and myself, while we were in my little study."

He pressed the buttons one by one. Each stayed down, until the sixth was pressed. There was a whirl inside the machine, produced by the revolutions of inner cylinders. The buttons sprang up automatically, but there was a blur from the little widows that had shown the letters: G R A N D E.

Finally, the spinning wheels clicked to a stop. The letters showed, but in different order. They formed a jumble that spelled no word at all: ERNGDA. Cardona started to press the buttons again, but Weston stopped him. The commissioner pulled out a pencil and a sheet of paper torn from a notebook.

"We must write down all those combinations," he said. "Perhaps the letters will produce a coded message."

"Sometimes words appear," wheezed Shawnwood, as he took the paper and pencil. "Shall I list them in a separate column?"

"A good idea."

With Cardona manipulating the buttons, Shawnwood wrote down every new combination when the wheels stopped spinning. Suddenly, Shawnwood exclaimed:

"There's a word!"

Weston peered across the table. Shawnwood was right. The six letters formed the word: RANGED.

"List it in a special column," said the commissioner. "Press the buttons, Cardona –"

Stopping suddenly, the commissioner looked about in surprise. He heard the whirring noise begin before Cardona had time to start the wheels. Grinning, Joe pointed to the parrot cage. The polly was imitating the sound that came from the machine.

"Proceed!" snapped Weston. "Pay no attention to the bird!"

The wheels resumed their spinning under the pressure of the buttons. New combinations appeared, always showing the same six letters, differently arranged with occasional repeats. At last another word appeared: GANDER.

Cardona waited while Shawnwood listed the word in both columns. The parrot, meanwhile, kept up a constant whirl whenever the machine stopped. The result was a continuous sound, with the machine and the parrot talking turns.

A few more jumbles; then another word: GARDEN.

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Quite interested, Weston began to keep a word list of his own on a separate sheet of paper, but when no more words appeared, the commissioner began to regard the process as foolish. The parrot's echoes were annoying him, and he was about ready to call off the silly game, when the machine clicked a new word into sight: DANGER.

Weston regarded the new word as highly important. So did Shawnwood. They both added it to their lists of words, then Shawnwood began to count down the entire column of combinations, to find out at what number the word "danger" had appeared.

Distracted by the parrot's imitations of the whirs, Shawnwood lost count, until the polly finally decided to wait in patient silence, like Joe Cardona, who was resting his thumb and fingers loosely on the buttons.

Footfalls were sounding from the boxlike marble staircase leading down into the grillroom, when Shawnwood nodded and said:

"Thirty-eight combinations. The word 'danger' is number thirty-eight –"

Cardona's fingers tightened on the buttons just as Weston, looking toward the stairway, recognized the person who had reached the bottom. The commissioner exclaimed:

"It's Cranston!"

There was a shrill squawk from the parrot. It forgot the whir to render a new imitation.

"Cranston... Cranston –"

AT that moment, Cardona pressed the buttons, starting a new spin of the lettered wheels. This time, however, the machine acted in a most rapid and unexpected fashion. As the rotary motion sped up, the whole top of the outer cylinder sprang open.

Lettered wheels were ripped to fragments, as the machine released a solid inner cylinder and scaled it almost to the ceiling. The cylindrical projectile was made of some transparent substance that contained a greenish liquid. As large as a tomato can, it was traveling like a bomb shot from a mortar. Its long arc was carrying the missile straight for the boxlike steps where The Shadow stood.

There wasn't a chance for The Shadow to dive into the grillroom or take to the stairway. Neither course would take him far enough from the spot where the bomb was due to strike. But The Shadow supplied a different move, that served perfectly in the emergency.

All eyes were toward the scaling cylinder. None saw Cranston's hand whip upward from the coat-tail pocket of his full dress suit. There was a gun in that quick fist, and The Shadow pressed the trigger of the big automatic the instant that the muzzle pointed toward the flying cylinder.

The roar from the .45 sounded like an explosion from the bomb, for the bullet met the cylindrical object at the highest point of its flight: near the ceiling at the very center of the large grillroom.

From the smashing cylinder came a fountain of greenish liquid, that turned instantly into a spray of thickish vapor. Through that cloud, which filled the center of the room, it was impossible for the men at the table to see Cranston at the foot of the stairs.

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In fact, they did not wait to look for him through the greenish haze. Cardona was shoving Weston with one hand, dragging Shawnwood with the other, getting them through the door to the kitchen. The Shadow, full about, was bounding quickly up the stairway, dropping his automatic into his coat-tail pocket as he went.

All were beyond the range of the gas cloud. The greenish vapor settled rapidly, becoming nothing more than dampness on the grillroom floor. Cardona, peering gingerly from the kitchen, sniffed the air and found it clear. He beckoned to Weston and Shawnwood.

As they returned to the grillroom, the three saw Lamont Cranston strolling down the stairs. He joined them and was introduced to Shawnwood. While Weston was relating all that had happened, Shawnwood interrupted with a wheezy gulp.

"If that gas was deadly," he expressed, "it would have killed all of us – myself and my friends – this afternoon! We were toying with the machine in my study – a very small room, where none of us could have possibly escaped!"

"There is still a question," declared Weston, "as to whether or not the chemical compound formed a deadly gas."

Cardona nodded agreement. Weston fumed to The Shadow and inquired:

"What is your opinion, Cranston?"

"The gas was deadly," came Cranston's calm reply. "So deadly, commissioner, that it actually took a victim. Look!"

He pointed to the parrot cage. Weston gaped. The green-hued bird was rigid in its cage, fixed to its perch. Its beak was wide, frozen in the midst of an undelivered squawk. The bird's eyes were like solid bits of glass.

COMMISSIONER WESTON went to get his cane. Returning, he poked the cane tip through the cage wires. Not only did the stick fail to budge the rigid parrot; the metal ferrule clicked when it struck the bird's wing.

"The parrot is more than dead!" voiced Weston, in an awed tone. "It is petrified; turned to a thing of stone! If that bomb had reached you, Cranston –"

"The Cobalt Club would have had a human statue," interposed The Shadow, with a slight smile, "instead of a petrified bird. It was very fortunate, commissioner, that the bomb exploded in midair and never reached the stairway. That is, fortunate for me, not for the poor parrot."

Turning, The Shadow clapped his hand on Shawnwood's shoulder.

"You were lucky, too," he told the bearded man. "If you and your friends had kept on tinkering with that machine, you might have turned your study into a hall of statuary."

Shawnwood nodded, very shakily.

Gesturing to the corner table. The Shadow coolly suggested that they have dinner while they talked over the mystery. All during the meal they kept up a steady discussion, but arrived nowhere.

Whether the death machine had come from the missing chemist, Isaac Loman, or from his so-called representative, was still an open question. There was the possibility, as Weston suggested, that some third

party had entered the game, with designs on Shawnwood's life.

The point that all seemed to overlook, was the fact that doom could have originally been intended not for Cyrus Shawnwood, but for Lamont Cranston. Only The Shadow held that theory, and he did not express it.

The last to leave the grillroom. The Shadow picked up a piece of paper that had fluttered to the floor. It was Weston's list of words, all formed from the same letters on the spinning wheels. At the bottom was the word that the machine had registered just before it had cracked apart and flung the whirling bombshell.

That word was: DANGER.

Transposing the letters, The Shadow made his addition to the list; but he inscribed a name, not a word. It was the sobriquet used by a hidden master foe: R. G. DEAN.

Danger and R. G. Dean: the two were the same, so far as The Shadow was concerned. From this time on, The Shadow's own ways could have to be as fully camouflaged as those of the supercrook that he sought to foil.

CHAPTER X. BEHIND THE SCENES

LAMONT CRANSTON did not return to his New Jersey home that night. Instead, he stopped off at Newark Airport and took a plane bound for Miami. Next morning, the newspapers announced that Cranston had gone on an exploration trip up the Amazon River and would not return for six months.

That story was arranged by Burbank, the contact man, in accordance with orders that The Shadow gave him over the telephone before leaving Newark. Actually, Burbank knew that The Shadow would return within a week or less. He had made the trip south merely to throw crooks off his trail.

In view of his various experiences, The Shadow had decided that this was one campaign wherein direct tactics would not work; at least, not until after he had made further progress. He was dealing with a very crafty enemy, whose chief ability lay in creating blind trails and using his hirelings as decoys.

It was highly probable that none of the men who had tried to assassinate The Shadow had any idea who their evil chief really was. Even the man who had delivered the death machine to Shawnwood was probably in the dark. There would be no advantage in meeting up with human tools who could testify only that they worked for R. G. Dean.

It would be a blind quest, and during it there was always the chance that one of Dean's death devices would succeed. Even The Shadow, intrepid though he was, considered it mere folly to risk his neck for nothing. Besides, he felt a responsibility for innocent bystanders. The Shadow rather regretted the loss of the talkative parrot at the Cobalt Club.

For the present, The Shadow's agents were better placed than himself, when it came to ferreting out facts regarding R. G. Dean. The fact that The Shadow had been identified as Cranston, was a very good reason for him to leave town. It would give crooks the impression that they were unwatched.

The newspapers did not heavily stress the matter of Cranston's departure. Globe-trotting was his hobby; he frequently made excursions to places like the Amazon jungle. Moreover, no one supposed that the death thrust in the Cobalt Club had been for Cranston's benefit.

From the facts that were given to the newspapers, it seemed that Cyrus Shawnwood was the man endangered.

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The police were looking for a crazed inventor named Isaac Loman, supposedly the master hand behind the death plot. Nor did anyone connect the matter of the death machine with tragedy at the Chem-Lab Co., only a few days before.

That was past history, much to the relish of Eugene Bristow, the Chem-Lab president.

PRESENT attention was centered upon Cyrus Shawnwood. His three-story brownstone house was under police protection. A crowd of reporters went to see him, the morning after the near-tragedy at the Cobalt Club, and he showed them the little study where he had first tinkered with the death machine, in the presence of his friends.

Photographs of the little room appeared in the evening newspapers, together with Shawnwood's statements. Other pictures showed officers on duty in front of the brownstone mansion, and a few cameramen took shots of the rear alley, where detectives had been posted.

Among the scribes who visited Shawnwood was Clyde Burke, who worked for the New York Classic. He not only made a carbon copy of all the notes he took, he also obtained a complete set of photographs, including a distant picture of Shawnwood's high-fronted mansion, and sent the duplicate material to an investment and insurance broker named Rutledge Mann.

Both Clyde Burke and Mann were agents of The Shadow. Between them, they were seeing to it that their chief received full details. At present, there was only one person, other than Lamont Cranston, who might logically be considered as listed for death. The man in question was Cyrus Shawnwood.

By his own admission, Shawnwood had ignored the demands of a master criminal. True, he was under police protection, and his persecutor was supposed to be a crazy inventor who could be handled easily, if he ever came from hiding. But The Shadow's agents, like their chief, knew that the missing Isaac Loman might be nothing more than a mere pawn in the game of supercrime.

Some mighty plotter, a man of chemical as well as criminal ability, was seeking wealth and power. Even the name that he used – R. G. Dean – was one that he could drop forever, if he encountered complications. The shakedown of the Chem-Lab Co., the threat directed against Shawnwood, were merely preliminary events in the evil campaign begun by this brain of crime.

Those very thoughts occurred to Ralph Atgood when he read the evening newspaper in the living room of his little apartment. Ralph's notions were somewhat hazy, for he still felt that he was indebted to R. G. Dean; but the further he read, the more troubled he became.

Weighing many factors, Ralph decided that they did not balance. Things that he had previously regarded as accidental, such as the fire at the Chem-Lab plant, began to take on an ominous meaning when linked to last night's episode at the Cobalt Club.

If the police wanted Isaac Loman, they would also want Ralph Atgood, should they learn that he had delivered the package to Cyrus Shawnwood.

It suddenly struck Ralph that his story, frankly told, might get a hearing. Ready and willing to confess his part to the police, he reached for the telephone. He had the receiver off the hook and was dialing the operator, when a hand clapped upon his shoulder.

Ralph turned about, to face Frederick Glenny.

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"HELLO, Atgood!" purred the sleek man. "Go right ahead. Don't let me interrupt you."

Ralph let the receiver drop back on the hook. He stammered the question:

"How... how did you get into this apartment?"

Glenny exhibited a key in the palm of his hand. Ralph recognized it as a passkey that fitted all the apartments in the building.

"The janitor gave it to me," said Glenny. "He's a friend of mine. I have a great many friends, Atgood. I'd like to keep you on the list."

"You mean you want me to be a crook, like the rest of the people you know?"

Seated in a large armchair, Glenny gave a sad smile, as though the implication hurt him. Then:

"You're all wrong, Atgood," he said, solemnly. "But I don't feel angry. You are honest, and that is what really counts. I know you're worried and I want you to tell me why. Ask all the questions that you want, and I'll answer them frankly."

The proposition was fair enough to suit Ralph. He asked first about the trouble at the Chem-Lab Co.

"What did that fellow Thurver have to do with it?"

"Thurver?" Glenny seemed shocked. "Why, he's the finest fellow in the world! You know that letter I gave you to mail to him?"

Ralph nodded.

"It contained a letter from Mr. Dean," glibbed Glenny, "telling him that the Chem-Lab formula was dangerous, that it should not be used. Thurver did his best to prevent what happened, but Bristow, the Chem-Lab president, overwhelmed him!"

There was cunning logic to Glenny's explanation, considering the criticism that Bristow had received from the newspapers. Half convinced that Glenny was right Ralph shot another question:

"What about the package that I delivered to Ray Parringer? It came from the Chem-Lab plant didn't it?"

"Of course!" returned Glenny. "Thurver sent it, at Mr. Dean's request. It was an improved formula, not as dangerous as the other. Thurver wanted Parringer to try it."

"Why didn't he tell Bristow?"

"Because Bristow was insisting that Parringer work with the original. He didn't care what happened to Parringer; all he wanted to do was save money. There was a note in the package that you delivered to Parringer, warning him that the old formula was dangerous. But Parringer evidently did not heed it."

Again, Glenny had completely reversed the facts very smoothly and logically. Ralph felt himself mistaken about the Chem-Lab situation. He came to the Shawnwood matter.

"Yesterday," said Ralph, slowly, "I delivered a package to Cyrus Shawnwood. It contained a death machine —"

"So it did," interposed Glennly soberly. "But you certainly cannot think that Mr. Dean or I knew what the package held."

"It came from Mr. Dean —"

"It came originally from Isaac Loman," corrected Glennly. "You'd better read those newspapers that I see on the table. Listen, Atgood: do you remember what I told you the first time we met? How Mr. Dean is often annoyed by half-crazed inventors?"

Ralph nodded.

"Isaac Loman is one of them," stated Glennly, "but we didn't know it. We thought that the package contained a model of the machine that he designed for his motor-fuel process; that he was sending it to Shawnwood for inspection."

Glennly's story sounded reasonable. Ralph decided to ask one question more. He wanted to know why Mr. Dean was demanding such large sums from persons like Bristow and Shawnwood. It happened that Ralph had deposited Bristow's hundred thousand dollars in various banks, the sum having been sent in small checks, by request of R. G. Dean.

"The Chem-Lab Co. needed that new formula," declared Glennly. "It was worth what they paid for it. As for Shawnwood, he fleeced Loman, buying that fuel process for twenty thousand dollars. That's why Loman became vengeful. The thing preyed on his mind. As I told you before, Atgood, Mr. Dean has only one purpose: to see that people get what should be coming to them."

Ralph didn't catch the double meaning to Glennly's final remark. His conscience cleared. Ralph thrust forth his hand and Glennly received it in a warm grip. Turning to the telephone, Ralph called Alicia Weylan and arranged to take her to a night club that evening.

Behind Ralph's back, Frederick Glennly was indulging in a smile. He knew that his visit had been timely and worth while. Though Ralph Atgood was behind the scenes where he could see crime in the raw he was still a dupe.

Frederick Glennly could picture new uses for Ralph Atgood in the very near future.

CHAPTER XI. CRIME'S NEW THREAT

THREE days later, The Shadow was back in New York. He had gone to Havana from Miami, and had stayed there long enough to ship a nice assortment of parrots and macaws to the Cobalt Club, as ornaments for the Tropical Grillroom.

Then, on the day when Lamont Cranston had ostensibly boarded a plane for South America, The Shadow had dropped his usual personality, to leave Havana in disguise, northward bound.

His stay in Cuba had been by no means uneventful. The Shadow had run into several street brawls, and twice bombs had exploded in his hotel. The first blast took place in the lobby, just after The Shadow had left it. The second occurred in an elevator, as he was about to board it.

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On the latter occasion, The Shadow had time to yank a sleepy-eyed elevator operator to safety just before the car was wrecked. Both explosions were attributed to the activities of some revolutionary faction, of which there were many in Havana. No one, except The Shadow himself, blamed the incidents on the fact that Lamont Cranston happened to be a guest at the hotel.

Evidently the elusive supercrook who called himself R. G. Dean, was pulling the proper strings from New York. He was also spending a lump of his ill-gotten funds, bribing the Cuban troublemakers to go after Cranston. But such payments made very little dent on the coffers of R. G. Dean Co., as The Shadow learned after arriving in New York incognito.

During their chief's absence, The Shadow's agents had been busy and had gotten good results. Three of them were showing heady team play, in accordance with The Shadow's instructions.

One worker was Rutledge Mann. As an insurance and investment broker, he was able to feel the pulse of many important chemical corporations. The second was Clyde Burke; the reporter followed the leads that Mann gave him. The third was Harry Vincent; properly tipped off by Clyde, he made the acquaintance of the proper key men in those business concerns and learned further facts from them in their off-guard moments, which usually came around three o'clock in the morning, while they were at Manhattan night clubs.

It was quite apparent that R. G. Dean was twisting the Achilles heel of the entire chemical industry. He was not loosing murder, as he had done in the Chem-Lab case, but that was simply because he did not find it necessary.

New facts had eluded the law because the law did not interfere in legitimate business transactions, the sort of thing in which the Dean combination specialized. As instances, the master crook was shaking down a huge dye corporation, a twenty-five-million-dollar outfit, by the simple expedient of threatening to put a cheaper process on the market if they would not buy it.

He had tied up the business of a wax-products company, another big concern, by cutting off their supply of a special chemical needed in the manufacture of their product.

Again, R. G. Dean was the gentleman who advised the Sololight Corporation that they would be wise to use a newly developed chemical compound in place of phosphorous, because the latter was too dangerous a substance to sell to the public.

It happened that Sololight was using a harmless brand of phosphorous; nevertheless, the company had to listen to the argument. They knew that if a whispering campaign began, denouncing their product as dangerous, they would never be able to stop the spreading rumor.

ALL these companies were paying tribute in one way or another to R. G. Dean, and could actually do nothing about it. He was selling them things that they had good enough reason to buy.

The fact that Dean's prices were always multiplied by ten did not make his deals illegal. Furthermore, they were unable to trace the clever crook who was tormenting them.

The letters they received came from different cities, instructing them to send checks promptly to other towns, as specified. All such checks went through different banks, never the same one twice. In fact, R. G. Dean seemed to be somewhat of a myth, except that he always cashed his checks. Finding him was about as easy as gripping some solid substance in the midst of thin, clear air.

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Behind all this lay hidden factors. Frederick Glenny was handling the Dean correspondence, performing that duty while on the move. Instead of mailing checks into the old office, he sent them directly to Ralph Atgood's apartment.

In his turn, Ralph, the dupe, was opening new bank accounts in the name of R. G. Dean, and closing old ones, thanks to the supply of signed checks in his possession.

It was a first-class arrangement, that kept the crooked game several jumps ahead of anyone who might try to trace it, and the racket was bringing in thousands of dollars daily. During the week that followed, new concerns were drawn into the vortex, always too late for The Shadow to block the swindle.

Through other agents besides the three who were reporting on the financial situation, The Shadow was checking on the underworld to see if R. G. Dean had a strong-arm crew in readiness. The Shadow had not forgotten his hectic battle with three armed fighters in a sedan, that night when he had crawled from the wreckage of Parringer's lab.

But neither Cliff Marsland, the agent who buddied with big-shots in the underworld, nor Hawkeye, the crafty spotter who could trail anything larger than a flea, were able to supply The Shadow with an ounce of information. The Dean-owned mobbies, whoever they were, had extremely fine talent at staying under cover.

Meanwhile, police were still guarding Cyrus Shawnwood and hunting for Isaac Loman. They were managing to protect Shawnwood well enough, but finding Loman was another matter. It was almost as bad as looking for an invisible needle in an imaginary haystack, according to the reports that reached The Shadow.

IT was the last night of a disappointing week, when The Shadow got the break that he had been positive would come. He was in his sanctum, going over stacks of reports and clippings supplied by Rutledge Mann, when he struck upon a fact that interested him.

Carter J. Weylan, manufacturer of a patent medicine called Renovo, had postponed an expansion program which his company had announced only a few days before. Patent medicines came under the general head of chemical products, and while there was no indication that Weylan had been victimized, the case indicated that he might have heard from R. G. Dean.

On The Shadow's table, apart from the data supplied by Rutledge Mann, lay an engraved invitation that had been mailed to Lamont Cranston, requesting his presence to a farewell party being given for Weylan's daughter, Alicia, who was leaving on a Mediterranean cruise. The party was scheduled for tonight.

In fact, the party had already begun, but that did not matter. Checking on a clipping from a society page that accompanied a report from Harry Vincent, The Shadow noted that his most capable agent was a guest at the same affair.

In making the rounds of the night clubs, Harry had become acquainted with members of the set that included Alicia Weylan. Rather than lose such contacts, he had accepted the invitation to the Weylan party.

Specifically, The Shadow was interested in matters that concerned Carter J. Weylan, rather than the farewell party. But the latter was a sure wedge by which Weylan could be reached. Properly pumped, by someone as important as Lamont Cranston, the millionaire manufacturer might unfold a tale of woe regarding R. G. Dean – if such a story existed.

This, of all nights, was the right one for Lamont Cranston to make a surprise reappearance, explaining that he had called off his trip to the Amazon country. The Shadow promptly decided upon such a course.

The only hitch was the fact that Weylan's house was quite a distance out on Long Island, though within the limits of New York City. The minutes that The Shadow would require in getting there might prove of vital importance. It was fortunate, therefore that Harry Vincent was already at the Weylan home. He could pinch-hit until The Shadow arrived.

Reaching for the earphones, The Shadow spoke to Burbank and instructed him to contact Harry. A few moments later, The Shadow's fingers plucked a switch that extinguished the bluish glow which filled the sanctum. From the thick blackness that followed came the tone of a whispered laugh, sinister and prophetic.

The Shadow's period of inactivity was ended. He was on the move again. The situation was the sort that promised real results. The Shadow was seldom wrong when he played a hunch like this. Tonight, The Shadow hoped for a solid trail that would lead him to the supercreek who masqueraded under the title of R. G. Dean.

One fact, perhaps, had been forgotten by The Shadow. To everyone, The Shadow included, the manufactured name of R. G. Dean could still be translated in terms of a single word:

Danger!

CHAPTER XII. THE PROPOSITION

UNTIL the telephone call came from Burbank, Harry Vincent was only slightly interested in the evening party at the home of Carter J. Weylan. Though it was quite a fashionable affair, Harry considered it to be a mere waste of time that he could otherwise have spent with persons who might offer chance clues to crime.

The word that Burbank relayed from The Shadow promptly changed the situation. Immediately, Harry began to look for suspicious characters in the Weylan homestead, hoping that he would spot some. But the scene proved very placid.

There were some twenty guests at the place with men slightly in the majority. Harry knew all of them, and they constituted an exclusive crowd. Alicia Weylan was very popular; and she was one young lady who avoided fortune hunters. Her friends were blue bloods, men who came from old and solid families. In a brief check-up of noses, Harry assured himself that there wasn't a phony in the entire lot.

One guest was not listed in the social register, but Harry automatically gave him a clean slate. He was a young man named Ralph Atgood who was supposed to be engaged to Alicia Weylan. Ralph wasn't wealthy, as the other guests were reputed to be, but everyone liked him and spoke well of him.

Harry had met Ralph previously and had sized him up as a good sort. The chap had a certain sincerity that was a recommendation in itself. Furthermore, he stood high in the estimation of Alicia's father. Harry had seen Ralph chatting with Carter Weylan earlier in the evening, and there was every indication that Weylan would be pleased to have Ralph as a son-in-law.

That, in itself, gave Ralph a high rating. If any man had a right to brag about his ability at judging human character, the man in question was Carter J. Weylan.

The patent-medicine king owed his success to his policy of always picking the right people as his friends and business associates. Weylan was not only friendly toward Ralph; he had offered the young man a job and a good one. Ralph, so Harry had learned, had declined the offer for the present, which indicated that he was already well placed.

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Just by way of check-up, Harry stepped over to chat with Montague Fitzcroft, the most aristocratic of the socially prominent guests.

A polo player and steeplechase rider, Fitzcroft was lounging in a corner of the Weylan ballroom, looking rather bored as he watched half a dozen couples dancing to the music of a seven-piece orchestra.

"HELLO Monty!" said Harry. "When is the big event of the evening coming off?"

Fitzcroft puffed his cigarette through a long holder, drew the latter from his lips and inquired in a drawly, but puzzled tone:

"What big event?"

"The announcement of the engagement," replied Harry, "between Alicia and this chap Atgood. I thought it was all settled."

"Not yet," returned Fitzcroft. "Percy Caulden was asking Alicia about it this evening. They were childhood sweethearts you know Percy and Alicia. She told Percy that the engagement would not be announced until after she returns from the Mediterranean."

Harry looked toward the dance floor. Ralph was dancing with Alicia, and they made a very handsome pair: Ralph serious-faced and well-groomed, from his evening clothes to his light curly hair; Alicia a dreamy blonde, whose blue gown matched the lovely eyes that made her really beautiful.

"A likable chap, Atgood," remarked Harry. "Where did Alicia meet him – at Palm Beach?"

"No, here in town," replied Fitzcroft, supplying a fresh cigarette to his elongated holder. "He's not in the set, you know, but we have all accepted him."

"What does he do?"

"He's the junior partner in a large printing concern," replied Fitzcroft, repeating what he had heard a month before the last polo matches. "That's why Carter Weylan thinks so much of him. The old gentleman likes blokes who make their own way through honest effort."

Satisfied that Ralph came up to specifications, Harry strolled away to look over some of the Weylan servants. He soon decided that they were old family retainers who had been chosen because of honesty and merit by Carter J. Weylan himself.

It began to look as though everything was perfect in the Weylan household, when Harry walked squarely into something unexpected.

Harry had circled from the ballroom through a short hallway that offered a roundabout route to an inclosed veranda, when he neared a short side passage. From beyond a door that stood a trifle ajar, Harry could hear the buzz of voices; one was the deep tone of Carter Weylan.

Stepping into the little passage, Harry came close enough to hear what the speakers said. He was also able to look into a lighted room, where many trophies hung from the walls.

The room was Weylan's den; the parent-medicine king was seated beyond a small table, talking to a very scrawny, stoop-shouldered man who perched on the edge of his chair grinning with big teeth at everything

Weylan said.

Indignation was plain on Weylan's large, strong-jawed features. His dark eyes, set below bushy brows, were boring right through the scrawny visitor, who did not seem to mind it at all.

"I'VE heard about your company, Gruble," stormed Weylan. "I wouldn't give you thirty cents for all the stock you've got! So you're the great Glade Gruble, inventor of Gruble's Health Tonic. Bah! What is the stuff, but a lot of licorice and water with a dash of mint?"

"It has special ingredients," returned Gruble. "I told you that before, Mr. Weylan."

"Yes, and so did a fellow who called himself Dean," returned Weylan, "when he called me up a while ago. He said I ought to buy your fifth-rate concoction for the price you asked, a quarter million dollars.

"The only thing that impressed me" – Weylan thwacked a big hand on the table – "was Dean's claim that the price would be doubled if I didn't buy right away. That's why I consented to talk to you."

Gruble nodded. Leaning back in his chair, he tightened his grin, cocked his head and asked shrewdly:

"What about the money? Do you have it here? You will remember that I said I would give the details of the proposition, only if you were able to pay."

"In case I wanted to buy," nodded Weylan. "Yes, Gruble, I brought the quarter million, in cash and negotiable securities, just so I could hear more about your proposition."

He brought bundles of currency and bonds from a table drawer, stacked them into two big piles. He let Gruble get a good look at the stacks, then planked one hand upon them. Weylan's other fist was big enough to throttle Gruble, if the scrawny man tried to make a grab for the wealth.

"All right," boomed Weylan, "let me hear what your racket is, Gruble!"

Scrawny-face shot a look toward the door of the den. He did not notice that it was ajar, for the doorway was set back in the passage where Harry stood.

"To begin with," Gruble told Weylan, in a cackly tone, "you manufacture a patent medicine called Renovo."

"And a very good medicine," assured Weylan. "Nothing like that licorice tonic of yours, Gruble!"

"I happen to know what goes into Renovo," said Gruble, "and it has one important ingredient that will mix very well with a certain thing we use in my health tonic."

Weylan's eyes narrowed. "Just what do you mean?"

"Mix the two together," returned Gruble, "in equal proportions and you will have dope, Mr. Weylan! Not a very good brand of dope, but people won't be particular, because they will get it cheap.

"Once the fact becomes known, dope addicts will give up smoking marijuana and go after stronger narcotics. Every drugstore in the country will be supplying them with a liquid opiate that will soothe them and give them all the lovely dreams they want."

WEYLAN was on his feet, shaking one fist while he kept the other hand clamped upon his precious stacks of cash and bonds.

"I'll have your health tonic banned!" he blurted. "There won't be a bottle of it sold anywhere in the United States!"

"Nor a bottle of Renovo," added Gruble, wisely. "Your idea can work two ways, Mr. Weylan."

Slowly, Weylan subsided. From his chair he put both hands upon the bundles and started to push them toward Gruble. The scrawny man was bringing out contracts ready for Weylan to sign, as a completion of the deal. Gruble's signature was already on the documents, and then, suddenly, Weylan remarked:

"You're the front for this racket, aren't you, Gruble?"

"Of course!" chuckled the scrawny tool. "I figured you had guessed that already."

"Then this chap who calls himself R. G. Dean is really in back of it."

"Right again! But you'll never find out who he really is. Only a few people know. I happen to be one of them, but I don't intend to talk."

"We'll see about that."

As he spoke, Weylan drew back his stacks of money and securities. He waved away the papers that Gruble was about to hand him. Pointing to a picture just above the table, Weylan commented:

"There's a microphone behind there, Gruble. It's wired to a room upstairs. Inspector Cardona, of the New York police, is up there. So is a Federal agent named Vic Marquette. They have other witnesses, including a stenographer who is making notes of everything that you have said.

"You'll talk about Dean, Gruble, because you have already talked yourself into a blackmail charge! That mouth of yours is too big! So stay right where you are, until –"

Weylan was reaching into the table drawer for a gun. Before he could get it, Gruble gave a snarl and sprang from his chair, drawing a revolver of his own. He was leaping sideways toward the door, to be out of Weylan's reach.

Aiming as he went, Gruble was all set to deliver quick murder. Harry Vincent was the man who blocked it, with a long dive into the den. He bowled Gruble to the floor; as the scrawny man frantically tugged the gun trigger, the bullets were pumped toward the ceiling.

With a pleased shout, Carter Weylan hurried forward to help Harry suppress the straggling crook. At that instant, every light in the house went out.

CHAPTER XIII. THE SHADOW'S RETURN

CRIME wasn't through for the night. It had just begun. When darkness blanketed Weylan's study, Harry Vincent knew that probably a criminal mob was on hand to back Glade Gruble.

The scrawny man knew it, too, for he gave a frenzied wriggle that carried him from Harry's clutch. Gruble's

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gun hit the floor for Harry heard it thud. But Harry was anxious to stop the fellow's getaway, and so was Carter Weylan.

In fact, Weylan was ahead of Harry when they started after Gruble in the pitch-darkness, for Harry had stumbled over the crook's gun and paused to pick it up. Their chances of overtaking Gruble were large, however, at that moment. Then came the surge that Harry feared.

The window of the den was shattered with a terrific smash. Men with flashlights bounded through, their faces masked with handkerchiefs. Weylan gave a yell as he saw one of them grab for the money and the bonds. He turned to fire at the flashlights.

Again Harry made a flying tackle. This time, Weylan was his target. He bowled the millionaire to the floor, just as guns began to blast. Those bullets whined above the level where Harry and Weylan lay sprawled. Harry's timely tackle had saved Weylan's life.

More flashlights appeared, from the passage outside the door. Shoving Weylan behind a table that kept him clear of the fire from the window, Harry began to shoot at the new invaders. They dropped back before he could score a hit. Springing after them, Harry tugged the trigger again.

The revolver failed to fire. Harry had forgotten the few shots that Gruble had fired before his flight. But the mobsters who had invaded Weylan's den were on their way. Those who had smashed through the window left by the same route while Harry was battling the thugs from the door.

Turning back, Harry found Weylan at the table where the millionaire had talked with Gruble. His revolver in one hand, Weylan was snapping a cigar lighter with the other. A flame appeared; it showed the table – blank!

Armed thugs had grabbed the quarter million dollars that Gruble had been too frantic to take. With a groan, Carter Weylan sagged into his big chair. Recognizing Harry as a friend, he let The Shadow's agent pluck the gun from his loosening hand.

"Stay here," Harry told him. "I'll go after them. You're safe, since they got what they came for."

USING the window as his exit, Harry leaped out upon a darkened lawn, where the spurts of guns provided a very meager light. Things were happening outside in rapid fashion.

Crooks were shooting at an upstairs window, where Cardona, Marquette and others were firing back. The invasion of the den had been too sudden for the men of the law to get downstairs. With flashlights, they had seen Gruble coming from a side door; then the fire of the protecting mob had forced the men upstairs to drop their flashlights.

There was battle on the lawn, however. It was provided by the guests at Alicia's party. Sportsmen all, those active young blades had accepted crime's challenge. From along the side lawn, Harry could hear the cultured shouts of blue blooded fighters mingling with the hoarse jargon of the thugs.

An automobile, swinging in from the driveway, threw its headlights toward the house wall. It showed one man in evening clothes, who shouted: "Cheerio!" and grabbed up a revolver that he saw lying on the grass.

The glare revealed another of the house guests staggering back from a corner of the mansion, where a crouched opponent was diving from sight. In his hand, the society man held a handkerchief mask that he had managed to pull from his foeman's face.

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Then the lights revealed Gruble darting catercornered across the lawn, There were cries of "Tallyho!" as men in mussed-up evening clothes started after the scrawny crook. A few were using captured revolvers, but not with good effect.

Weylan's guests were better hands at shooting quail and deer than they were at bagging human quarry. Accustomed to shotguns and rifles, they didn't seem to have the touch required with pistols.

There was another fighter, however, who was entering the chase, which by this time was too far advanced for Harry Vincent to get into it. The new man in the game was dressed in evening clothes, the required uniform for those who were championing the side of right.

He could have worn a slouch hat and a black cloak, had he chosen, but he left those garments behind him, under the seat of his limousine. It was The Shadow's big car that had rolled into the driveway. As Lamont Cranston, he was leaping out, armed with a handy automatic, to cut off Gruble's flight.

The blackmailer was away from the glow of the headlights, but his destination was an obvious one. He was making for an opening in the hedge, which The Shadow had seen and was able to find for himself.

Ahead of the other well-dressed pursuers, The Shadow went through that gap a few seconds after Gruble. He saw the scrawny man yank open the door of a waiting sedan that was parked with dim lights, its motor throbbing, at the top of a steep slope.

There was a huddled figure in the driver's seat; for that reason, The Shadow dodged around the back of the car and came in from the door on the other side. As he did, others arrived, and they were not merely pursuers. Revolvers began to blast; The Shadow could hear raucous shouts along with the sporting cries of Weylan's guests.

Battle had started here about the car. Gruble, suddenly confronted by The Shadow coming in from the other side, started out through his own door, screaming as he went. He had heard a fierce whisper in his ear; it was enough to make him screech:

"The Shadow!"

GUNS roared. If their bullets were intended for The Shadow, they proved useless. They found Gruble instead, and pitched the blackmailer back into the car.

Men flung themselves into the rear of the sedan, slugging as they came. One lucky stroke glanced from the side of The Shadow's head. Groggily, he slashed an automatic at his attacker. The man dived outward.

The car door slammed. The sedan was in motion, starting down the hill. The Shadow could hear yells behind it; from their tone, the indications were that mobsters had scattered, leaving the field to Weylan's polished guests.

The Shadow repressed a low laugh, as he blinked his flashlight along the floor of the car.

In the thick darkness under overhanging trees in back of the hedge, it had been impossible to tell friend from foe, except by the actions of the various fighters. Even those deeds had been a poor index, for mistakes were apt to happen in the blackness.

The Shadow, however, had managed a neat piece of strategy. Instead of remaining in the middle of a useless brawl, he had managed to get into this car, which was speeding down the slope carrying away a very

important participant in the game of crime.

Flicking his flashlight on Gruble's toothy mouth, The Shadow saw that the scrawny man was dead. His flattened pockets, outspread coat, showed that he carried nothing on him. Though The Shadow had not yet learned Gruble's identity, he classed him as an important cog in the crime machine.

Possibly Gruble's usefulness had ended tonight. Those shots that had killed him might have been ordered by the master criminal. Whatever the present schemes of R. G. Dean Co., there was one man close at hand who might provide some useful information regarding them.

The Shadow was thinking of the driver who was operating this rapidly moving car.

Rising, The Shadow pushed his automatic over the top of the front seat. He wondered, momentarily, why the driver had not turned on the bright lights; for the lane, though straight and rutted, was quite steep and showed only hazily by the glow of the dimmers.

The question was answered when The Shadow pressed his gun point against what seemed to be the driver's neck. A high-collar coat slumped downward, a shabby felt hat rolled to the floor. The car was driverless; the figure at the wheel was nothing but a dummy, that fell apart under pressure of The Shadow's gun!

Some crook had released the hand brake, to let the sedan roll down hill under its own momentum. It wasn't in gear, it was in neutral. This car was slated for destruction, and Gruble – whether alive or dead – was supposed to go with it. The same applied to any chance passenger who might have joined Gruble for the ride.

The Shadow was such a passenger. By the dashlight, he saw the object that had propped up the fake driver. It was a thing shaped like a big pineapple. Still keeping to the deep ruts of the straight lane, the sedan was doing close to forty, and ahead, something gray was looming into the dull glare of the dim lights!

HEADLONG, The Shadow dove across the car. His hand, shooting ahead of him, slashed the door handle downward with a single sweep. As on a previous night, The Shadow took a reckless, breakneck dive out into the open, but this time the impelling force was entirely his own.

Shoulder first, The Shadow hit the ground beside the lane, rolled over three times and bumped his head against a chunk of rock. With that forceful blow came a fierce blast of light, a huge roar that seemed to burst The Shadow's head.

Those were not illusions, caused by the thump that knocked The Shadow senseless. The swaying sedan had reached the end of the lane, only thirty yards ahead. The gray mass that it struck was a stone wall. The crash had bounced the pineapple against the steering wheel.

The blast was the explosion of a huge bomb, that ripped the halted car to shreds, dismembering Gruble's body and destroying all traces of the dummy figure at the wheel. Another of the death devices designed by R. G. Dean had done its appointed work.

More narrowly than ever before, The Shadow had escaped the fate that the master crook had so often tried to deal to him!

CHAPTER XIV. THE MISSING SWAG

THREE men reached the stretch where The Shadow lay unconscious. One was Harry Vincent; with him were

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Joe Cardona and Vic Marquette, the Fed. It was Cardona who spoke the identity of the well-dressed fighter, when he saw the pale, blood-streaked face in the glare of a flashlight.

"Lamont Cranston!" he exclaimed. "I thought he'd gone to South America! Say – the commissioner will be upset when he hears about this. Unless" – Cardona did not intend his afterthought to be humorous – "unless the commissioner is still sore about Cranston shipping all those squawking birds to the club."

Harry and Marquette were stopping beside the outstretched figure.

"His head is all right," said Harry. "That cut isn't very deep."

"He took it on the shoulder, though," observed Marquette. "It looks like it was dislocated. We'd better get him to a hospital."

Some of the house guests had arrived. Cardona detailed them to carry Cranston up to the mansion. Harry Vincent guided them with a flashlight, keeping close watch to see that no one jarred the injured shoulder.

Near the head of the lane, they found a waiting limousine. It was Cranston's car, Stanley, the chauffeur, had driven it across the lawn and through the hedge. They put The Shadow into the rear seat, and two of the carriers told Stanley how to get to the nearest hospital.

It was Harry who spoke later to the chauffeur, just as Stanley was about to drive away. Harry undertoned the words:

"Better take him to Dr. Sayre."

Stanley nodded. He wasn't one of The Shadow's agents, but he knew Harry to be a close friend of Cranston. Furthermore, Stanley was familiar with some of Cranston's eccentricities. He knew that his employer had a habit of poking into strange and troublesome places; that when he needed a physician's services he always preferred to go to Dr. Rupert Sayre.

Thus, with Stanley's assistance, Harry had seen to it that The Shadow would not meet with any new complications while unable to handle them.

It was quite clear to Harry that the bomb-laden sedan had been partly a trap for The Shadow, should he appear upon the scene tonight. The big brain who had baited that snare would certainly make allowance for The Shadow being injured; not killed.

If so, the Long Island hospital would be watched, in case Lamont Cranston happened to be sent there. Any watchers provided by R. G. Dean would certainly be capable.

The master crook's mobbies had demonstrated that they were clever. Not only had they grabbed Weylan's pile of wealth; to a man, the tribe had vanished after the running fight from the house to the hedge.

In battling the thugs, Weylan's guests had taken some trophies in the way of handkerchief masks, flashlights and guns. By picking up lost revolvers, they had been able to continue the pursuit, harrying the mobbies all the more. But they had failed to capture any of the swift-footed crew.

Crooks had made a complete getaway in the blackness. A complete search of the grounds around Weylan's house failed to reveal any hiding of crippled thugs who might have been deserted by their scattering pals. Nor was there any trace of a single dollar or bond that had belonged to Carter Weylan.

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RETURNING from an inspection of the blasted car, Cardona and Marquette joined in the fruitless search for men and money. It was Cardona who expressed the opinion that the swag might have been in the sedan with Gruble; but Marquette thought it unlikely, for he felt that they would have found some traces of it.

Carter Weylan took his loss philosophically, on the ground that he would no longer have the money if he had paid it over to Gruble, the agent for R. G. Dean. He felt that he had exposed the master crook's racket, and therefore had a good chance of reclaiming his lost fortune.

While police and servants searched the house, on the chance that the bundles had been stowed there by the hurried crooks, Weylan went around congratulating the party guests, thanking them for the timely aid that they had given him.

Such chaps as Fitzcroft and Caulden were nursing scratches, black eyes, and swollen jaws, while a few had received minor flesh wounds that needed attention. But there had been no serious casualties among them.

Weylan was particularly anxious to learn who had rescued him from murder at the hands of Gruble, but no one took credit for the deed. Harry Vincent felt it good policy to minimize the part that he had played in Weylan's behalf.

Harry was still worried over the matter of the vanished mob; he felt that a few lurkers might still be dodging around Weylan's spacious premises. Some might even be bold enough to eavesdrop near the house, in which case the less they learned, the better.

Among those who received Weylan's congratulations was Ralph Atgood. He was using Harry's policy of keeping silent, for two reasons. First, Ralph was learning things that utterly destroyed his confidence in the beneficent Mr. Dean; again, he had played no part in the fray wherein the other guests had routed the mobbies.

Ralph had been dancing with Alicia when the lights went out. They were the only couple on the floor, for the dance had just begun. Thinking the thing a joke, they had kept on dancing, until gunfire alarmed them. By that time, everyone else had gone crook-hunting except Ralph.

He felt very conspicuous in his unmussed evening clothes, while most of the other guests were smoothing grass-stained coat lapels and pinning up torn swallowtails. Alicia seemed to understand Ralph's thoughts, for she drew him aside and mentioned the matter.

"I was to blame," she said. "The others were out on the veranda, or strolling somewhere, when the trouble started. It was my fault, keeping you on the dance floor, Ralph."

"I'd like to have gotten into it," returned Ralph, grimly. "Somebody should have been able to recover a part of your father's money."

"Dad will get it back," assured Alicia. "The police have searched the house, but they are out looking through the cars. Maybe the crooks threw the package in somebody's automobile."

Alicia's hope was short-lived, for Cardona and Marquette soon returned, stating that the cars had been inspected and that no cash had been found. They said that the guests were free to leave, so the party began to break up.

After a short talk with her father, Alicia joined Ralph.

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"I'm going on board the boat tonight," said the girl. "Dad thinks it would be best. So you can drive me to the pier, if you wish."

RALPH was quite pleased by the opportunity. Alicia had the servants carry her luggage out to his coupe. Most of the guests were waiting to say good-bye to Alicia; some of them helped the servants put the trunk and suitcases into the rumble of Ralph's car.

Harry Vincent arrived from the house just as Ralph's car pulled away. Since the rest of the guests were departing, Harry decided that it was time for him to leave. He had many details that he wanted to report to Burbank, but none of them included a theory regarding the missing swag.

Riding into Manhattan, Ralph was discussing that perplexing subject with Alicia.

"From the lists your father had," he told the girl, "the cash and the bonds would have made a stack a foot and a half high. That would be a pretty big bundle for anyone to carry."

Alicia nodded.

"I know you trust the servants," said Ralph. "but I was looking them over, just the same, to see if their pockets bulged. They didn't. They were as smooth-fitting as the dress suits that the rest of us were wearing."

"Not quite so rumped, though," laughed Alicia. "Did you see Percy Caulden? He looked as if he had been through a mowing machine!"

Ralph dropped the subject immediately, remembering that his clothes were the only ones that had not been partly ruined. They reached the pier and he said good-bye to Alicia at the gangplank, then started to drive back to his apartment.

Wondering what to do about the Dean question, Ralph decided to wait until the morning, in the hope that Weylan's lost wealth might be recovered. He became a bit shaky at the thought that some shift of chance might cause him to be branded as one of the crooked band.

Then came the satisfying thought that he had been treated like the other guests, had been accepted as equally honest. He was glad that the police had searched his car, along with the others that had been standing out front.

Perhaps, as matters stood, Ralph would be able to learn more about the Dean organization and therefore supply the police with valuable evidence, when he told them his truthful story.

Leaving the car in front of the apartment house, Ralph bundled up a light topcoat that lay on the shelf behind the seat. He hadn't worn the coat tonight because the weather was too warm. From the way it had been mussed, he decided that the detectives must have looked through it while searching the car.

It was not until he entered his apartment that Ralph began to realize how heavy the coat was. Shaking it, he found that the pockets were weighted. Looking for the reason, Ralph fished in a pocket; his fingers felt the crinkle of crisp paper.

Struck with a sudden alarm, Ralph spread the topcoat on a couch.

He was right. Weylan's pile of wealth made a big bundle, even when divided into three packets, two in the side pockets of the coat, the third in the inside pocket. Ralph's topcoat was literally stuffed with cash and

salable securities, to the extent of a quarter million dollars.

Ralph Atgood stifled a groan. Confronted by new mystery, he realized that he was deeper in crime than he had ever supposed. The missing swag had turned up – in Ralph's own possession!

CHAPTER XV. RALPH HEARS HALF

RALPH ATGOOD had long ago conceded that his true story, if told to the police, would be considered flimsy. He had thought, at times, of confiding it to some person who would not doubt his sincerity, such as Carter Weylan. In fact while chatting with Alicia's father earlier this evening, Ralph had felt that Weylan would believe him and give him sound advice.

He had decided to wait until after Alicia's party was over, and therewith had made a great mistake. He realized, too late, that if he had told Weylan about the Dean business before Gruble's arrival, it would have helped. But crime's new stroke, delivered in Weylan's own home, had changed all that.

Right at present, Ralph's first course would be to visit Weylan and return the stolen funds. Naturally, Weylan would be glad to regain the quarter million, but he would want to know how Ralph had recovered it. That was the hitch, and a big one.

Even Ralph, present possessor of the missing wealth, was unable to guess how it had reached his car. The quick disappearance of the mob that had invaded Weylan's house was a trivial mystery compared to this one. The crooks could have been lucky enough to scatter and get to cars hidden some distance from Weylan's estate. But how, or why, any of them would have doubled back, to plant the boodle in Ralph's coupe, was something quite unfathomable.

Maybe Weylan and the police would not consider it such. They might jump to the simple idea that Ralph was more than a dupe; that he was an important cog in the Dean organization. They would presume that Ralph, thinking the swag too hot, was trying to ease himself out of the game by restoring the funds and pretending that he had never really been in the mess.

They would want to know a lot about R. G. Dean, and when Ralph failed to tell it they would discredit his dupe story altogether. Thinking that prospect over, Ralph could picture himself undergoing a grilling at the hands of Cardona and a squad of detectives.

They'd give him a going-over, until he cracked. But Ralph had often wondered what happened to chaps who didn't "crack" for the simple reason that they had nothing to tell.

Mopping the sweat from his forehead, Ralph wished that he was actually guilty, instead of innocent. Then, at least, he could give himself up, tell all, and take his proper punishment without going through an undeserved ordeal at police headquarters.

Sight of the valuable bundles belonging to Weylan brought Ralph back to his original idea: that of returning the money to its owner as soon as possible. Out of a new flood of hopeless ideas came one that struck him like an inspiration.

Alicia!

She would believe whatever Ralph told her. If he talked to her, and gave her the recovered funds, she would willingly return the property to her father. She was the sort, too, who would never tell where the recovered

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wealth had come from, until Weylan had cooled enough to listen to a reasonable story. At least, Weylan would give Ralph the benefit of all doubt, if Alicia insisted that he do so.

IT was easy enough to reach Alicia. The cruise ship had an extensive telephone system, connected with an outside wire. Calling the pier, Ralph gave the number of Alicia's stateroom and received a sleepy-voiced reply.

When he told the girl that he wanted to meet her, she replied that she had already undressed and gone to bed. It was plain that she wondered why Ralph didn't tell her everything he wanted to say during this telephone conversation.

Ralph felt that he couldn't mention the money. He was afraid that Alicia would get excited and telephone her father. He said that he would drive down to the pier, would be there by the time that she was dressed. So Alicia, at last, agreed to meet him at the pier entrance.

Hardly had Ralph ended the phone call before a suave voice spoke behind him. He knew that voice, but had supposed that Frederick Glennly was out of town. Turning, Ralph found the sleek-haired man covering him with a revolver. Glennly motioned Ralph to a chair.

"So you want to talk to your girl friend?" purred Glennly. "I don't think that would be a good idea, Atgood. She might want you to return all the dough that used to belong to her father."

"It still belongs to him!"

"Not at all!" Glennly picked up the telephone. "Weylan agreed to a deal, and then tried to welsh on it. That money goes to R. G. Dean."

Very deftly, Glennly was dialing a number, using his left hand. His right hand, gripping the telephone, also held the revolver pointed toward Ralph.

"Don't forget," added Glennly, as he tucked the telephone receiver between his shoulder and his ear. "that you are on our pay roll. It was a neat idea, wasn't it, putting the swag in your charge? Anyway, you're working for us —"

A clicking sound interrupted from the telephone. Glennly began to talk, and Ralph knew that he was holding conversation with his chief. But Glennly's voice was very low, his lips close to the mouthpiece. Ralph didn't hear enough to know what Glennly was telling over the wire. When the call was finished, Ralph asked anxiously:

"What's going to happen, Glennly?"

"You'll find out," Glennly told him. "So just sit tight awhile. You'll hear the rest soon enough."

Ralph never suspected that Alicia was to learn the other half of the situation sooner than he did. Nor did the girl, still in her stateroom, suspect that she was in for trouble.

QUITE tired out by the evening's excitement, Alicia did not relish the idea of getting dressed again. She had changed her clothes after the party and had found it a lot of bother. She was rather piqued that she had promised to meet Ralph at the pier entrance, until a bright idea occurred to her.

She didn't have to bother getting dressed. The nightie that she wore was a rather elaborate one, with a broad, flowing skirt below its snug-fitted waist

The skirt, at least, would pass for part of a gown.

After sliding her feet into a pair of evening slippers, Alicia put on a light coat that had a fur collar, which she bundled around her neck.

Looking at herself in a full-length mirror, she was quite pleased with the effect. She seemed fully attired, except for stockings, and her lack of hosiery would not be noticeable under the dim lights of the pier.

Alicia spent a while fixing her hair and putting on some make-up. Then she strolled out to the deck, passed across the gangway and walked to the shore end of the pier.

While Alicia was waiting for Ralph's car to appear, an old-fashioned cab drew up beside her. The driver, a blocky-built man with squarish, blunt-featured face, looked toward the girl as he alighted from the cab. He asked in a mechanical tone:

"Miss Weylan?"

Alicia nodded. The driver opened the rear door and gestured her toward the cab.

"Mr. Atgood sent me," he said. "His car is broken down. He said to bring you to see him."

Alicia took two steps forward; then, in terrified suspicion, she turned about to run back toward the boat. The fake taxi driver clamped a solid hand on her shoulder and twisted her toward the cab. With a quick wriggle of her arms, Alicia slid completely out of her fur-collared coat, leaving it in the man's hand.

Instead of screaming, she took the first route that offered. Alicia leaped into the cab intending to yank open the door on the other side. She thought she would be safely away before the pretended cab driver could get back to his wheel. Instead, Alicia flung herself squarely into a trap.

There was another man in the rear of the cab, a chunky individual who might have been the phony driver's twin. With one hand, he caught the girl's throat, stifling the shriek that she at last attempted to give. With his other hand, he covered Alicia's face with a cloth that reeked of chloroform.

The blocky driver tossed the coat into the rear of the cab. His equally chunky pal draped it over the nightgowned girl, who had slumped deep in the seat. Not a word passed between the pair as the driver took his place behind the wheel. These mechanical-minded men were trained to treat all tasks as simple; kidnapping was just a routine job for them.

The ancient cab rolled away from the pier carrying Alicia Weylan to an unknown destination, where a master plotter ruled.

CHAPTER XVI. CRIME'S HEADQUARTERS

FOR more than an hour, Ralph Atgood had been glumly waiting under the cover of a gun, wondering what was going to happen next. He had begun to think that Frederick Glenn, with his smooth, indifferent manner, was an artist at giving the third degree.

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Smacks across the jaw, or wallops from a rubber hose, would have been tame compared to this tormenting period of silence. At intervals, Ralph was almost ready to jump the gun that covered him, not caring whether or not it blasted him full of slugs.

Glenny wasn't entirely inactive. At times, he toyed with the swag that had come from Weylan's, hefting it with one hand, while he kept the gun pointed with the other. At times, he would light a fresh cigarette with a mechanical lighter that he could manipulate easily with one hand.

Ralph was free to smoke, which he did; but Glenny did not let him talk or leave his chair. A gesture of Glenny's gun, the snap of the fellow's dark eyes, were the elements that always made Ralph subside when he tried to indulge in motion or conversation.

There was just one factor that sustained Ralph through that period.

He knew that Glenny had overheard his talk with Alicia. Therefore Glenny, in his turn, knew that Ralph had not mentioned his possession of the missing funds. On that account, Ralph reasoned, Alicia was in no danger – provided, of course, that she did not come here to the apartment when Ralph failed to meet her at the dock.

Ralph hoped that Alicia wouldn't come, and believed that he could bank on it. The idea of a meeting was his own, and he hadn't overstressed it. If she called up, Glenny would probably give Ralph a chance to dissuade her from leaving the ship, by saying that the matter was unimportant. That, Ralph finally decided, was why Glenny waited to see if Alicia would call.

In his confidence that Alicia would remain unharmed, Ralph managed to forget his own dilemma.

The prolonged period ended when the phone bell rang. Ralph had waited for that jangle so long, that he started to spring from his chair. Glenny thrust him back with a shove of the gun muzzle.

"That won't be your girl friend," purred the crook. "She has given you up as a bad bet, long before this. Sit where you are, Atgood! That call is for me!"

Glenny was right. With the receiver tucked to his ear, he held a brief conversation, during which Ralph could make out only a single phrase, which Glenny spoke louder than the others:

"In five minutes –"

Ending the call, the suave crook turned to Ralph.

"You aren't so badly off, Atgood," he said. "The chief is willing to make allowances because you are new to the game. How would you like to drop in and see him?"

"You mean R. G. Dean?"

"Who else?" laughed Glenny. "Of course, that isn't his actual name, but I wouldn't advise you to ask him his real one. But he'd like to see you."

The way Glenny put the word like made it sound very much a command. Ralph nodded his willingness to call on crime's hidden chief.

"In five minutes –"

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The phrase repeated itself through Ralph's brain. Some of those minutes still remained. Maybe the best way to use them would be to start a battle with Glenn. Ralph had thought of that off and on, but his concern for Alicia had made him reject the idea.

Of course, there was merit in visiting R. G. Dean, whoever he might be, and finding out more about him. It would help Ralph when he talked to the police as he still hoped to do sometime. But he questioned whether Glenn actually intended to take him to see the big-shot. Maybe this little excursion was intended as a one-way ride.

"Call your garage," suggested Glenn. "Tell them to come over and get your car. It's been standing out front long enough."

Ralph made the call, thereby wasting another of his precious minutes. He looked inquiringly toward the door; Glenn nodded him in that direction.

They were starting out from the apartment. Ralph first and this looked like the right time for a break. Ralph knew that Glenn wouldn't leave a few hundred thousand dollars lying loose. He decided to start things as soon as Glenn picked up the loot.

Opening the apartment door, Ralph took one slow step toward the hall, then swung about. Glenn was at the couch, hooking the stacks of currency and bonds under one arm. His gun was out of aim; with a savage lunge Ralph made for the fellow. Glenn must have expected the move, for he dropped away but did not fire.

Then, as Ralph tried to sidestep the swinging muzzle of the gun, a pair of men pounced in from the hallway and caught him, one from each side. His arms wrenched behind him. Ralph stared left and right at two chunky, expressionless faces.

"The chief's main helpers," introduced Glenn, with a smirk. "They usually stay around his lab, but once in a while he sends them out. All right" – this was to the block-faced pair – "take him along!"

Going down in the automatic elevator, Ralph could feel the grip of powerful hands on each of his arms. On the street, one man released him, to step into a cab, but Glenn took over duty on that side, with his gun. He and the remaining man pushed Ralph into the cab and Glenn followed.

Between Glenn and one blocky captor Ralph was blindfolded, while the other fellow took the wheel. Then began a twisty ride through so many streets that Ralph had no idea how far they traveled.

He struck upon an idea, though, soon after the cab started. He began to count turns left or right, as the vehicle made them. He wasn't trying to keep his sense of direction; he could figure out the points of the compass later, if he remembered the progression of the turn.

The task was comparatively simple, for Ralph was used to keeping strings of figures in his head and had something of a system that he used for it. He noticed that nearly all of the intervals were short ones, which might prove a help later.

WHEN the cab stopped, Ralph was repeating the string of numbers to himself; they came mostly in ones and twos. He found himself in a pitch-black alleyway, where his captors took him through a creaky doorway and down a flight of steps. Then came what seemed a passage in a cellar, a fairly long one.

The walk ended at a blank wall, which Ralph could feel in the darkness. Glenn was feeling along that wall, evidently seeking a hidden catch, for something clicked and Ralph was pushed into a darkened elevator. His

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blindfold was off by this time, for Glenny had decided that the prisoner did not need it in the darkness.

As the elevator moved slowly, silently upward, Ralph heard Glenny's purred tone in his ear:

"Keep cool, Atgood. We're treating you all right. This is the way we bring everybody who comes to see the chief."

How high the elevator traveled, Ralph was not sure, but he calculated it as about half a dozen floors. He had fixed the numbers in his mind, for positive reference, by the time they reached the top.

The door slid back; Ralph found himself in a large rectangular room which was windowless and had a very low ceiling.

The whole place was pervaded by a greenish glow that gave the scene a ghoulish touch. All about were odd-shaped tanks, small vats, large beakers, coils of hollow glass tubes, and other items of chemical equipment.

Under Ralph's feet was a steel floor; his feet made metallic clicks as he walked. In one place, only a short way from the elevator, which was at the rear of the laboratory, Ralph thought that he noted the clink of loose rivets in the metal flooring.

Ghastly colors showed from bubbling liquids that Ralph saw in enormous test tubes. He realized that their hues were due to the greenish glow, for when he looked at Glenny's face beside him, he could not recognize it. His chunky acquaintances looked odd, too. Their features were nothing but square green blurs.

At the front of the lab, Ralph saw a man waiting to receive them. From his chuckly welcome, that came in a forced voice, Ralph knew that he was meeting crime's chief.

He heard Glenny's prompting whisper: "Mr. Dean." Ralph bowed, muttered a greeting, then tried to make out the face in front of him. It was impossible.

Like the others, the mysterious Mr. Dean had a visage that was merely a mass of green, but Ralph noted that it formed a long oval and that it was very large. He was thereby acquainted with one fact regarding the master crook.

R. G., as Glenny addressed him, had a head far out of proportion to his body; probably one big enough to contain his giant brain. Gauging that head again, Ralph decided that R. G. could be classed as deformed. That would be a valuable point to remember in describing him.

The master criminal was speaking. His forced tone, though unnatural, was persuasive.

"You are welcome here," he chortled. "All are welcome who serve me. Like others, you understand that my transactions are legitimate. You are paid well to aid me, and later, you will receive a great reward – if you continue to be faithful.

"My plans are many. Soon" – there was confidence in the rising cackle – "I shall control the entire chemical industry! My wealth shall mount to millions, and far beyond, until no one can hope to compete with me!"

Ralph nodded. Dean seemed pleased for he gave a chuckle. Then, his tone lowered to a cluck, he added:

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"We did not fail tonight. Look" – he spread the bundle of cash and bonds, as Glennly passed them to him – "and then decide who was victor."

Ralph noted that the crisp sheaves seemed pale, their green printing merging with the glow of the laboratory. He heard Glennly buzz something to the master crook. Then came the chuckly voice.

"Glennly says that you can be fully trusted in the future. He has suggested that I show you our latest experiment, with what I term my sleep gas, something that will prove a boon to humanity."

IT was Glennly who conducted Ralph to a coffin-shaped object in the corner of the laboratory. Ralph saw that the device was fitted with gas pipes that led from a large tank. Glennly drew aside a roller cloth that covered the top.

Through a sheet of thick glass, Ralph saw what he mistook for a waxwork imitation of a woman's figure, so perfectly was it molded. Resting peacefully in the satin-lined box, the life-sized form had the slightly olive hue that the laboratory lights gave to person's faces.

Glennly pressed a switch; tiny white lights shone within the glass-topped casket. Ralph's eyes moved toward the head of the box. As he saw the figure's face plainly, he gasped the name:

"Alicia!"

"She is asleep," purred Glennly, "and will remain so for days – or weeks. There is nothing harmful about the chief's new gas. I tried a whiff of it myself. But if the supply is cut off –"

"She will die from lack of air in the coffin!" The croak came from the crime chief. "But I prefer that she remain alive, to prove the value of my harmless sleep gas."

"That depends on you," added Glennly, in Ralph's ear. "We still need you in our business, Atgood."

Ralph was tense. He still believed that the figure might be a waxwork imitation. As he watched, he saw blue eyes open, then close again. He noticed a slight rise and fall of the figure's breast, which indicated a slow, but steady breathing. Even then, he tried to doubt.

"It's a mechanical figure!" Ralph exclaimed, hoarsely. "It can't be Alicia!"

Glennly rolled the cloth top over the oblong box. He produced a flashlight, turned its rays upon a table near the box. A slipper fell to the steel floor, as Glennly lifted a fur-necked coat from the table.

"Do you recognize this?"

"Alicia's!" gasped Ralph. "She wore it tonight!"

Glennly let the coat drop back with the other objects on the table. Extinguishing the flashlight, he turned to his chief and remarked:

"I told you we could depend upon Atgood."

The master crook's chortle followed them across the laboratory to the elevator. Ralph caught its final cackle as the door slid shut. Riding back to his apartment in the taxi, blindfolded and under guard, Ralph fancied that he could still hear the master's parting gloat.

Whatever his previous intentions, Ralph had finally chosen to side with crime.

The life of the girl he loved depended upon such a decision.

CHAPTER XVII. RALPH'S MISSION

EARLY the next afternoon, Lamont Cranston paid an unexpected visit to the Cobalt Club. He timed his arrival there to meet Commissioner Weston, who had just finished lunch and was coming from the newly decorated grillroom.

Weston was so pleased to see his friend that he actually forgot that Cranston was responsible for the flock of many-colored tropical birds that were squawking among the potted palms and rubber plants, making the grillroom a very annoying place to eat.

"Folks have been inquiring about you, Cranston," announced the commissioner. "I told them that we had received a message stating that you were not seriously injured. But we've been wondering what hospital you were in."

The Shadow explained that he had not gone to a hospital at all. His chauffeur had taken Cranston to his personal physician. The Shadow did not state the doctor's name; he merely assured the commissioner that he, Cranston, had suffered nothing more than painful bruises, slight cuts, and a badly wrenched shoulder.

Weston was glad to hear that the latter had not been a dislocation.

There were some messages waiting for Cranston at the club. The Shadow read one, passed it along to the commissioner, who read it with a broad smile.

"You're quite a hero, Cranston," he said. "So are the rest of those chaps who helped scatter that mob at Weylan's. One of them, young Fitzcroft, called me and asked if it would be all right for them to throw a celebration.

"I said yes, if they would accept police protection. Otherwise, there might be some reprisals from the underworld. But Fitzcroft did not set the time. He said that they would postpone the victory party until you were well enough to attend."

Cranston's slight smile was a pleased one.

"I shall call Fitzcroft later," he told Weston, "and suggest that the affair be held this evening, if convenient. You will probably hear from him commissioner."

Before Weston could say anything more, his friend Cranston waved him a farewell and strolled from the club. The commissioner wondered why Cranston wasn't staying longer at the Cobalt Club.

He did not know that Cranston regarded both his home and the club as very unhealthy places to stay, for anything longer than a few minutes.

When The Shadow left the club, he ignored his limousine and stepped into a cab, instead. It was Moe's cab, and it wheeled into sight just as The Shadow reached the sidewalk.

Soon, it was whisking through many streets, on a very roundabout route, calculated to throw all followers off

the trail.

While The Shadow was anxious to check on the law's progress since last night, he preferred to get his information from indirect sources, rather than through Commissioner Weston. It was safer to be out of sight, while planning a campaign against a master crook whose chemical wizardry enabled him to throw the equivalent of thunderbolts at the most unexpected times and places.

REACHING his sanctum, where blackness reigned by day as well as night, The Shadow turned on the bluish light and opened a bundle of report sheets that he had picked up on the way. While spreading the paper, he called Burbank, who put through a connection to Montague Fitzcroft's apartment.

In Cranston's leisurely tone, The Shadow accepted the invitation to the victory dinner. Fitzcroft decided to hold it at eight o'clock that evening, and said that he would get in touch with Percy Caulden and the others. Later, he would call the Cobalt Club and leave a message for Cranston, stating where the affair would take place.

With that matter settled, The Shadow began to study the reports, which were chiefly from Rutledge Mann and Clyde Burke. While Mann had been checking on the business angles, Clyde had covered the law's investigation of crime.

The present affairs of R. G. Dean, unlimited and unincorporated, constituted one of the most interesting cases that The Shadow had ever encountered.

Federal agents, like the New York police, were looking for a man who called himself R. G. Dean. They had raided an office which had that name on the door, but had found nothing there but furniture.

Questioning Eugene Bristow, president of the Chem-Lab Co., along with the heads of other chemical enterprises that looked like logical targets for crime, the authorities had learned that several of them were paying tribute to the crime head. All the victims detailed the ways in which they had been shaken down, but none of them could furnish a lead to R. G. Dean.

They had received phone calls, all of them, and a chuckly voice had told them to postpone further payments until later. The master crook was obviously covering up his tracks, for the present. He could afford to do so. He was already a million dollars to the good, hence had plenty of money to support his hidden organization.

Later on, the mysterious Mr. Dean would get at his victims again. By that time, if the law had failed to get results, they would be willing to pay tribute secretly. Their businesses, life-blood to persons like Bristow, were actually in pawn to the crime ring.

The law was trying to check on bank accounts in the name of R. G. Dean. By the time the investigation had gotten that far, all such accounts had been closed. The banks had made payments on checks this very morning. The crime wizard's funds had been transferred to his own secret coffers.

Balked at every turn, the law was forced back to its starting point. A nation-wide hunt was under way for a maniac named Isaac Loman, who had tried to murder old Cyrus Shawnwood. The police guard had been doubled at Shawnwood's home, and the bearded man who had defied the racket was living in fear and trembling, never venturing below the third floor of his three-story house.

Shawnwood had refused further interviews to reporters, except by telephone, fearing that some pretended scribe might be an assassin in disguise. So far, however, Shawnwood had been protected, even though the law had failed to find any trail to Loman, the man whose name was definitely linked to crime.

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The only optimist was Carter J. Weylan. The Renovo manufacturer was confident that he would get his money back eventually. He was pleased, too, because he had sent his only child, Alicia, on a cruise to the Mediterranean.

Weylan felt sure, in his quiet way, that his daughter was safe from harm. He argued too, that he had nothing to fear, because he had met the full demands of R. G. Dean. It wasn't likely that crooks would bother Weylan, even though he had made matters difficult for them.

From Marsland and Hawkeye, The Shadow received barren reports. They had scoured the underworld all night, seeking some trace of the vanished mob that had battled the blue-blooded guests at Weylan's. But the thugs had made their disappearing act a complete one.

Somehow they had slipped into hide-aways without leaving a ripple. Usually, The Shadow's agents could gain inklings of such occurrences; on this occasion, they were quite as nonplused as the police.

AGAIN, The Shadow was waiting for another break. He was content to play a waiting game because of the many angles to the case, any one of which might offer a sudden lead.

He was sure that crooks still regarded him as their most potent foe; that the wizard who pulled the strings of crime would soon attempt another thrust at Lamont Cranston, otherwise The Shadow. There was always a chance that such an effort might boomerang back to the master crook who made it.

Nevertheless, The Shadow was not inviting such attempts, though he was on the lookout for them. The previous Dean-designed thrusts had been anything but boomerangs. In fact, The Shadow wondered just what type of instrument the wizard of crime would use, should he try to deliver death again.

The answer to that question was unfolding itself in Ralph Atgood's apartment.

There, Ralph was seated dopedly in a chair, two half-filled bottles and an empty glass beside him. He did not realize that Frederick Glenny had entered the apartment, until he felt a hand shake his shoulder. Moodily, Ralph looked up at the sleek man, saw Glenny smile.

"Snap out of it, old man," said Glenny. "When I told you to mix Renovo with Gruble's Tonic, I didn't expect you to swig it like a kitten lapping milk!"

Muttering something about "trying to forget," Ralph reached for the bottles. He started to fill the glass, pouring from a bottle in each hand as the easiest way to make the proportions equal. Glenny stopped him.

"Better let the stuff wear off," he said. "It won't take more than an hour. The chief may need you later."

"What for?" demanded Ralph.

"Almost anything." Glenny's quick eye was roving the room. He noted that Ralph's telephone book lay open on the table. "Did you call anybody up this afternoon?"

Ralph shook his head.

"I got a call from Monty Fitzcroft," he mumbled. "Wants me to come to a dinner tonight. Told him I'd call him back later. Too much trouble, finding his number in the book."

"Where's the dinner going to be?"

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"Red Ribbon Cafe," replied Ralph. "Upstairs. Eight o'clock. Going to be a celebration. Everybody will be there. Everybody that was out at Weylan's, except me."

"Will Lamont Cranston be there?"

Ralph nodded to Glenn's question. The sleek man stepped to the telephone, smiling as he went. Ralph knew that Glenn was calling the chief, but he didn't care. Then Glenn was back again, shaking Ralph more violently, actually rousing him.

"This is a great break for you!" insisted Glenn. "The chief is going to give you a chance to get your girl friend out of hock!"

Ralph's eyes popped open.

"Here's the story," purred Glenn. "There's just one man the chief really wants to get. That's Cranston. You'd do anything to help Alicia, wouldn't you?"

Ralph nodded, eagerly.

"Get rid of Cranston, then," said Glenn. "Go to that dinner, take this with you" – he produced a .32 revolver – "and settle Cranston with it."

"You mean – murder him?"

"Call it that, if you like," returned Glenn. "But there is a better way to look at it. Somebody is going to die: either Lamont Cranston or Alicia Weylan. The choice is up to you."

Ralph's teeth were set tight, his eyes bulging wide, when Glenn hauled him to his feet.

"Take a shower," Glenn advised him, "and get togged up for the party. I'll fix things at the Red Ribbon. It will be easy enough to have someone yank the lights, even if the police happen to be around. When the glims go out, it will be your cue to put the blast on Cranston."

A night ago, Ralph would have used the revolver on Glenn, had the sleek mobster thrust such a weapon in his hand. But that was before Ralph had learned of Alicia's plight. Receiving the gun, Ralph steadied himself and walked to a closet, where he put the revolver in the coat-tail pocket of his evening clothes.

"Good luck!" purred Glenn, from the door. "Remember, Atgood – when the lights go out."

Out in the hallway, Frederick Glenn indulged in a very ugly grin. He was thinking of facts that Ralph Atgood did not know, and probably would never guess. Again Glenn, chief lieutenant who served crime's great wizard, had told only half the story to Ralph, who still remained a dupe.

The rest of crime's sequence would be revealed tonight, when Ralph Atgood would acquire fame as the murderer of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XVIII. THE VICTORY DINNER

THE victory dinner was at its height. As guest of honor, Lamont Cranston was the center of the scene. The celebration was making history as one of the social events of the season, considering the caliber of the

participants.

It was Montague Fitzcroft who suggested that the event be made an annual institution, one of those reunions that would last through the years, until someone in the far future, perhaps the next century, one lone member of the group would open an aged bottle of wine and drink to the health of his departed friends.

The motion was ably seconded by Percy Caulden, and received a chorus of cultured ayes from the remaining diners. One voice, however, was lacking in the unison: Ralph Atgood's.

All during the dinner, the eyes of Lamont Cranston had been observing Ralph. The Shadow had recognized him as the young man who had come to look for mail at the Dean office the evening when a series of thrusts had been made against Cranston's life.

Ralph in his turn, was watching Cranston – so steadily, at times, that The Shadow would have suspected that something was preying on the young man's mind, even without that clue from the past.

In fact, Ralph's peculiar mood was so apparent that Harry Vincent seated near him, had been puzzled by his manner and had begun to keep close watch on him before receiving a signal from The Shadow.

Harry had not seen Ralph's face that night when the dupe had entered the Harmon Building. At first, Harry had an idea that Ralph was uneasy because he was something of an outsider among the swanky social group that included Fitzcroft and Caulden. But Harry's position was the same and he did not feel ill at ease. Reasoning from that point Harry wondered what was actually troubling Ralph.

Then came The Shadow's signals. He gave them with his eyes, whenever he gazed toward Harry. The changes of Cranston's glances, with the slight tilts of his head, spelled the letters of a visual code:

"Watch Atgood. Look for a gun."

Harry looked. He could see Ralph's coat tail, tucked on the side of the chair. He noted the occasional creep of Ralph's fingers, saw the bulge of some object in the coat-tail pocket. Harry's head nodded as he looked toward Cranston. The Shadow flashed another message:

"Take it. Later."

Again Harry nodded. He was on the same side of the table as Ralph, in a position to handle the matter capably. While he waited for the crisis Harry began to reason matters, and they shaped rather clearly in his mind.

This dinner was protected by the police. Some were downstairs others at the very portals of the banquet room. It would be useless for any mob to attack the Red Ribbon Cafe. Even if such a crew broke through the police cordon they would have to deal with Fitzcroft, Caulden, and the other socialites who had shown themselves to be remarkable fighters in the battle around Weylan's home.

The only way to strike at The Shadow on such occasion would be through a single assassin. The master crook who wanted The Shadow's life had obtained the needed man: Ralph Atgood.

That was as far as Harry reasoned. But The Shadow's thoughts probed further.

WHILE he chatted in the leisurely, pleasant style of Cranston, The Shadow was wondering why Ralph was willing to take so long a chance. Unless he knew a great deal about the so-called R. G. Dean, Ralph would

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not be willing to serve the crime wizard by attempting a murder on an occasion such as this.

Steadily The Shadow watched Ralph. The scrutiny made the young man nervous. His eyes shifted away. Noting him with sidelong gaze, The Shadow saw Ralph glance toward the ceiling light. That was the give-away Ralph expected the lights to go out as they had at Weylan's.

One light switch controlled all the illumination. It was in a corner near the banquet table at a spot where no waiter could wedge through to reach it. Furthermore, the waiters were picked men who had been thoroughly investigated by the police before any were allowed to serve at this important dinner.

Unless some crooks had been detailed to fix the master switch in the cellar of the restaurant, it would be a difficult job to extinguish those lights. The thing had been done at Weylan's, but it was an easy matter there.

Unquestionably, Ralph was in a desperate mood. The Shadow could tell that from the restless twitches of Ralph's face. But that did not apply to the master crook who had somehow induced Ralph to play a murderer's role.

What if the lights did go out, giving Ralph a chance to try some gunplay? He would be overwhelmed by Cranston's friends – Fitzcroft, Caulden and the other society men. They wouldn't kill him; they would take him alive. A man who knew much about the Dean business would be a prisoner, who might be forced to talk.

The Shadow's train of thought came to an distant halt. He was on the wrong track. The master behind this game of murder could not afford to let Ralph live after attempting a kill. Gruble hadn't been given a chance to live after he had rendered his required services at Weylan's.

Tracing back to the battle on Weylan's lawn, The Shadow considered the mystery of the vanished mob. An amazing solution threaded itself through his mind.

Letting his eyes close, The Shadow projected himself back further to the ride that he had taken with a squad of killers after his crawl from the remains of Parringer's blasted laboratory.

Voices came to mind. Voices that The Shadow had been unable to recall but which came plainly to him at this moment, not as echoes from the past but as actual sounds about this very table. Opening his eyes, The Shadow gave a typical Cranston smile and began to chat with the other diners.

Not one of the jolly throng realized that their guest of honor had solved crime's subtle secret.

There was no vanished mob!

The wizard who manipulated crime had been too crafty to hire a horde from the underworld. He had chosen his followers, not from the rogues' gallery but from the social register. Fitzcroft, Caulden, a dozen more who belonged to their exclusive set were the high-priced thugs who worked for R. G. Dean!

Four of them had grabbed The Shadow outside Parringer's. They had acted like mobbies, but they had talked like gentlemen. They had served again as decoys and bomb-setters, the night that The Shadow had dodged a succession of traps outside the Harmon Building. Their neatest trick however, was the one that they had staged at Weylan's house.

One man had slipped down to the cellar to put out the lights. A few others had sneaked outside, to put on masks and start the mob attack. The rest had posed as what they were supposed to be: society men attending a fashionable party.

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They had carried that faked fray across the lawn, each man playing whichever part he chose. Some had remembered to give raucous battle shouts, the sort that went with the part of mobsmen. No wonder they had come back bringing captured guns and masks. Those articles had belonged to them from the start!

Tonight, they were going to let Ralph Atgood do the dirty work. But they wouldn't merely suppress him afterward. They would kill him and testify, one and all, that he had gone berserk. They would claim that Ralph had jumped up and turned off the lights, though The Shadow knew exactly who was to perform that duty; Percy Caulden was seated closest to the light switch.

If Ralph failed to make the kill, these chaps would do it on their own. They could still put the blame on Ralph. The only way to clear with these well-groomed rats who had sold their birthright, was to make them show their hand too soon.

SIGHTING a waiter, The Shadow called for champagne, which brought plaudits from his pretended friends. When the waiter suggested two bottles they heard Cranston order a magnum, which produced more acclaim.

In the midst of the hilarity that followed, The Shadow flashed quick looks to Harry Vincent, giving him the news in brief.

The magnum arrived. It was a huge two-quart bottle that stood as high as The Shadow's shoulder when the waiter rested it on the table.

When The Shadow nodded, the waiter poured the champagne finishing with Cranston's glass. Rising, The Shadow raised his glass with his right hand, his left elbow grazing the now emptied magnum.

All others rose with the guest of honor. Ralph Atgood was holding his glass in his left hand. He let his right hand go to the coat-tail pocket where he had the gun. Harry Vincent shifted in from Ralph's right, ready for a sideward, left-handed grab.

This was the logical time for the stroke to come. In the act of sipping champagne while standing, Lamont Cranston would be a perfect target, even when the lights were gone. Ralph sensed that the lights would blacken the moment that the glass reached Cranston's lips. But The Shadow planned to force that action earlier.

Smiling as he looked toward the faces all about him The Shadow spoke in Cranston's even fashion.

"I propose a toast" – there was a trace of mockery in that level tone – "to a man who is not with us. One whose cleverness is great but not great enough to prevent us from knowing one another as we really are."

Strained expressions showed on the faces of the listeners. The Shadow broke the tension, as he uttered:

"To your friend and my enemy – R. G. Dean!"

THERE was a fierce shout from Fitzcroft, the leader of the gilt-edged mob. Caulden yanked the light switch; before Ralph could get his revolver from his pocket, Harry Vincent floored him with a punch and wrested the gun away from him.

Men were springing for The Shadow, thinking that they could reach him before he had a chance to ward them off. They thought that he was unarmed and defenseless at the moment the lights went out. They had forgotten the empty champagne magnum.

The Shadow caught the massive two-quart bottle by the neck and swung it like an Indian club. It battered past the hands that grabbed for him, found jaws and skulls beyond. Clearing a wide circle, he voiced a sinister, challenging laugh that seemed a part of the very darkness that filled the room.

He was fading backward as he delivered that mockery. Guns blasted for the spot where he had been. The Shadow answered with shots from an automatic that he whipped from beneath his tail coat. He was picking out foemen by the spurts of their guns, and Harry was doing the same with Ralph's revolver.

The terrific tumult brought smashes from the door. Under the glare of police flashlights, de luxe crooks went mad, knowing that their game was up. Some were sprawled, others were staggery, but the rest made a drive for the doorway, preferring to rush a headquarters squad rather than risk further chances with The Shadow.

As he wheeled to a small doorway, The Shadow flayed those crooks with bullets. They were flattening beneath an avalanche of police, when the little door broke inward.

Sidestepping, The Shadow flashed a red gleam with his tiny flashlight; it changed to green as a pair of detectives charged in from the door to join the fray, leaving the way open.

Catching the signal, Harry dragged Ralph from underneath the banquet table. Groggily, Ralph stumbled ahead, for he was anxious to get away. The Shadow caught him from the other side, helped Harry hustle the prisoner through the little doorway.

A detective found the light switch, pulled it. In the glare that filled the room, a dozen police found themselves winners over a crew of the same size. No fight was left in the bedraggled, wounded men whose uniforms were evening clothes.

The Shadow had found the vanished mob, conquered its members, and left the roundup to the law. From a stairway beyond the little doorway, headquarters men heard the weird, trailing tone of a parting laugh.

The victory dinner had ended with an actual triumph, instead of the murder that society mobsters had planned as part of a fake celebration.

Victory belonged with The Shadow!

CHAPTER XIX. THE NEEDED LINK

RALPH ATGOOD found himself riding in a taxicab, staring into glowing eyes that seemed to burn him with their intensity. He was listening to a whispered voice – one that put questions in the tone of commands.

He wondered what had happened to Lamont Cranston. This being wasn't Cranston. He was some superhuman sort of creature, who wore a black cloak and a slouch hat that obscured his face, except for those amazing eyes.

Ralph was feeling the forceful power that only The Shadow could apply. The whispered voice was telling him to talk, and Ralph responded. He felt as though he had come into the province of an impartial judge, who would know the truth of his story.

Coming rapidly to the events at Weylan's, Ralph told how he had found the money in his own possession after the robbery. He heard The Shadow's understanding laugh, and it seemed to clear up the mystery.

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Fitzcroft and his stuffed-shirt crew were the ones who had taken the swag. They had hidden it, by the simple expedient of dividing it into a dozen thin bundles, each man carrying a quota.

Those small packets hadn't shown under their evening clothes. Strolling outside so they could bid Alicia good-bye, they had stuffed Ralph's topcoat with the stolen goods after the police had searched the car.

Eagerly continuing with his story, Ralph told of his visit to crime's headquarters, how he had met the wizard of crime in person, under the glare of the bewildering green light that filled the low-ceilinged laboratory. He described Alicia's plight; how he had agreed to murder Cranston, in order to save her life.

The Shadow spoke. His words were an acceptance of Ralph's story. From that tone, Ralph understood that he had been released from blame for his misguided actions. In return, The Shadow stipulated that Ralph was to aid in an immediate search for the master criminal to which Ralph willingly agreed.

He described the man, as much as he could. Oddly, the only important point – the enormous size of the crime wizard's oval head – was the very clue that The Shadow wanted. Ralph heard the whisper of a laugh, then the words:

"You spoke of the route you followed, blindfolded; how you remembered the number of turns."

Ralph fumbled in his vest pocket, brought out a slip of paper upon which he had dejectedly jotted that data, after returning to his apartment. The Shadow's gloved hand passed the list to Harry Vincent, who sat on the other side of Ralph. For the first time, Ralph realized that there was another passenger in the car.

Giving the driver the address of Ralph's apartment, The Shadow spread a map of Manhattan and studied it beneath a flashlight, while Harry read off the lefts and rights.

Tracing a course, The Shadow checked it. His laugh was sibilant. Fitting Ralph's clues to a trail he had in mind, The Shadow found that it finished at the very place he expected.

BEGINNING the route from Ralph's apartment, the cab eventually pulled up into an alleyway that Moe Shrevnitz found by cruising along the street. The Shadow alighted, Harry and Ralph with him; he sent Moe back for other agents.

Finding the doorway that Ralph remembered, The Shadow used his flashlight on the steep stone stairs, then through the long underground passage. They came at last to the elevator.

Probing a loose board, The Shadow slid it aside and found a button that controlled the lift. He brought the elevator down to the subbasement level and left the button uncovered, so that others would notice it when they arrived.

Tonight, Ralph judged from the slow motion of the elevator that the trip to the top of the shaft was not more than four or five stories. When the elevator stopped, The Shadow began to slide the door open, very slowly.

A greenish glow reached it from the laboratory, then was blocked by The Shadow's form.

Ralph heard The Shadow whisper something to Harry Vincent. The door, never more than a quarter open, began to close again. Harry had his finger on the control, ready to start the car down to the basement. Disquieted, Ralph asked the reason.

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In the darkness, Harry told him that The Shadow believed their arrival was suspected; that it would be better to withdraw.

Before Ralph could offer a protest, Harry pressed the button. The elevator gave a slight jolt, then stopped. Before Harry could find a way to make it move again, the door slid wide, operated from the other side. This time, its slide was swift.

The elevator was bathed in greenish light; the visitors found themselves covered by a pair of guns, held by the two chunky men who served as the chemical wizard's assistants.

Harry's hands lifted; so did Ralph's. As they stepped forward, Ralph looked for The Shadow, wondering what the black-cloaked fighter was doing in this emergency. To his surprise, he saw no sign of the black-clad leader who had brought them to this lair!

Marched toward the front of the laboratory, the prisoners were greeted by two men that Ralph could recognize by their voices. One was the master crook, who used his chortling tone; the other, Glenny, who spoke in his purred style.

"So you have returned," chuckled the chief of crime, "and brought a witness with you to testify, I suppose, that you disposed of our enemy Cranston."

"Clever stuff, Atgood," added Glenny, in his smoothest manner, "finding your way here. Who is this chap you brought along?"

Ralph introduced Harry, stammering as he did. He realized that the pair were ridiculing them. By this time, the pretended Mr. Dean had probably learned that matters had not worked out well at the Red Ribbon Cafe. Probably his informant was Glenny, who could easily have been in the vicinity of the cafe.

Then came snarled words from the man with the enormous head. The master crook had discarded his chortle. He was ready, apparently, to reveal his true identity to these helpless prisoners.

Ralph and Harry saw a scrawny, green-dyed hand reach out and press a switch. The greenish glow dwindled, white light gradually replacing it.

Under the changing illumination, the man with the great head seemed to undergo a magical transformation. The size of his head was dwindling, although another outline curved beneath it. Two ovals, a smaller and a larger, gradually took on the complete form of a face.

The prisoners saw a gray-haired man, whose grizzled beard formed a large curve beneath his chin. It was Harry who recognized that face, from a description that he had previously been given. Harry exclaimed the name:

"Cyrus Shawnwood!"

BOWING, Shawnwood acknowledged his own name. Then, in a wheezy tone that carried an ugly note of malice, he declared:

"You were fools, to let The Shadow send you here to test my trap! But I could hardly expect fools to serve any one other than a fool! At last, The Shadow's wandering brain has grasped the facts that he should have known long ago!"

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Tilting his head back, Shawnwood indulged in a reminiscent laugh.

"There never was an Isaac Loman," he announced. "I sent that death machine to myself, through you, Atgood, and I arranged the Loman correspondence myself. For weeks, the police have been looking for a man who does not exist.

"By passing myself as one of my own victims. I was able to meet the police commissioner, at the Cobalt Club. I halted the action of the death machine, when it showed the word 'danger,' until Cranston arrived. Then I let Cardona push the buttons."

The cleverness of that scheme made Shawnwood laugh again, until he remembered that the flying bomb had not killed The Shadow. From that, he recalled that all his other methods of assassination had likewise failed. Shawnwood's next snarl was venomous.

"Tonight," he spat, "The Shadow learned one fact that enabled him to guess another. He found out that my mob was imaginary. That made him think about Loman. He probably decided that Loman was a myth, also."

There was more to it than Shawnwood realized. On top of the possibility regarding Loman's nonexistence, The Shadow had listened to Ralph's description of a supercreek with a giant head. Ralph's details had been clouded because of the laboratory's greenish glow. Discounting that, The Shadow had found a simple answer.

The great head that Ralph described was obviously the combination of a face and a beard. Ralph had remembered that the head seemed long-faced and narrow. Such a description fitted the probable appearance of Cyrus Shawnwood under the green light.

Knowing the location of Shawnwood's brownstone house, The Shadow had checked a route to it in terms of the turns that Ralph remembered. With that finishing touch, he decided that the alleyway entrance must be in the next block, with an underground passage beneath the intervening street.

Otherwise, Shawnwood's hidden servitors could not go in and out, because the police were on guard all about the master criminal's house.

"How do you like my laboratory," sneered Shawnwood to the prisoners, "now that you are viewing it in brighter light? This is the attic of my house; a fourth floor, that no one suspected, not even The Shadow.

"It is where I conduct experiments in every branch of chemistry, so that I can replace outmoded methods with new ones. As you have learned, I never sell a process for a trivial sum, as most chemists do.

"No, I am the representative" – he chuckled over the word – "of poor, forgotten men, who have never received their proper due. Using their names – mythical ones, like Loman; or those of mere tools, like Gruble – I reap huge rewards – for Cyrus Shawnwood!"

The wizard of crime was moving forward, raising his clenched fists to the level of his shaggy beard. He thrust his tightened hands toward the faces of the prisoners.

"I dispose of fools!" he told them. "That rule applies to you! But first, particularly for your benefit, Atgood, I shall end the experiment with my sleep gas."

He swung about, shoved a scrawny finger toward the high, oblong box, like a sarcophagus, in the corner. Ralph's own fist tightened. He knew that Shawnwood's words were Alicia's death warrant.

"Go there, Glenny!" ordered Shawnwood. "Turn off the flow of gas. We shall let Atgood watch the girl die the slow death of suffocation! It will be a merciful end" – Shawnwood's tone was a gloat – "compared with the death that he and Vincent will suffer!"

GLENNY reached the coffin-shaped box. Ralph wanted to start after him, but one of the chunky assistants prodded him with a gun point. Harry spoke, telling his companion to wait and watch. Harry hadn't lost confidence in The Shadow, even though Ralph had.

"It's off already!" exclaimed Glenny, as he tried to change the gas flow. "Perhaps the girl is dead!"

He was reaching for the cloth that topped the great box, when the oblong object started to tilt forward. Glenny sprang back; the side of the box hit the floor. The cloth covering fell away, and with it came the glass top.

Before the astonished eyes of Shawnwood, and the equally amazed prisoners, lay the open interior of the satin-lined casket – empty!

Then, above the edge of the overturned box came a head topped by a slouch hat. On either side of a pair of burning eyes looked the mouths of automatics, covering the chunky men who held Harry and Ralph captive.

Lips that were vaguely visible voiced a weird, outlandish laugh that seemed to creep to every corner of the lair of crime and whisper back in multitudinous echoes:

The laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XX. CRIME'S LAST STAND

SHAWNWOOD'S chunky assistants took up The Shadow's challenge. Swinging their guns away from Harry and Ralph, they aimed for the head above the casket. They didn't fire as most crooks did, when facing The Shadow; hastily, before completing aim.

The chunky men did not fire at all. Trained to act with exactness, they were overlong about it. The Shadow's guns spurted fire, before the thick fingers of his opponents found time to pull their triggers.

Reeling, the pair sank slowly to the floor, each carrying a bullet in his chest. The Shadow swung his guns for Shawnwood and Glenny. The next shots that he fired were ineffective. Neither the crime wizard nor his lieutenant had lost an instant in getting to cover, which was easy in the laboratory.

Shawnwood's bearded face disappeared beyond a metal cabinet; Glenny took a dive behind a squatty steel vat. As Shawnwood moved, he grabbed the light switch with his scrawny hand. White glare began to change into green.

The Shadow was out from cover. Cloakless, he was weaving a swift course in and out among the chemical equipment, trying to get new angles of fire at Shawnwood and Glenny, who answered back with guns of their own.

Harry understood the reason for The Shadow's move. He wanted Harry and Ralph to get to the cover that he had left. Dragging Ralph with him, Harry reached the shelter of the corner.

There, they found a human bundle in the corner. It was Alicia Weylan, still asleep, wrapped in The Shadow's cloak, the collar folded over her blond head like a cowl. Lifting the girl, the two men waited for a signal from

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The Shadow.

He was fighting a grim battle under the greenish glare, that had regained its full intensity. Shifting from one shelter to another, he kept up the duel against a pair of desperate foemen. Beakers were smashing; glass coils broke to bits as bullets struck them. The air became pungent with the reek of many chemicals.

Ralph, watching The Shadow's amazing zigzag course, realized what had happened at the elevator. The Shadow had shifted through the partly open door, to take a gliding course along the laboratory wall. He had allowed Harry and Ralph to be trapped, only that he might have time to reach the big box and open it.

The Shadow had shut off the sleep gas; he had worked the casket open, from the hinges at the back. By draping his cloak over Alicia, he had managed to remove her while Shawnwood and his companions were concentrated entirely upon their prisoners.

Alicia was rescued; the prisoners were free. The Shadow was waging battle in the heart of enemy territory. But how were they to make their exit while Shawnwood and Glenny held out?

That seemed a real problem, even for The Shadow, considering that Shawnwood had locked the elevator on this floor.

The Shadow was near the elevator at present; he was gesturing for the others to join him. It was time, for fumes were filling the laboratory. Chemicals were puffing, beginning blazes that might develop into a huge fire.

KEEPING to shelter, Harry and Ralph brought Alicia along the wall, dodging jets of fire and smoke that came from pools of chemicals. They were near the elevator, when they heard a shout from Shawnwood.

He had made a dive from one shelter to another. He was behind a large wheeled tank, a squatty cylinder that was five feet in height and at least six in diameter.

Shawnwood shoved the thing in front of him, until he reached Glenny's shelter. The lieutenant joined him; from behind their tank, they took potshots at The Shadow. The tank had a conical top that made it look like a massive skyrocket. Shawnwood suddenly poked the cap and knocked it from the tank.

Then the wheeled thing was rolling along the steel floor, and Shawnwood and Glenny were gone, beyond a steel door that dropped behind them. They reappeared, a few seconds later, upon a little balcony that overhung the corner of the laboratory and had a bulletproof screen.

Shawnwood's grinning teeth were visible, despite the fact that his face and beard were scarcely more than a great green glow. He was carrying a small control box attached to a wire that ran to the big tank on the lower floor. The tank, itself, had rolled partly beneath the balcony, where it had only a foot to spare.

Safe in his screened nest, Shawnwood was pointing downward, shouting something.

It was obvious that the tank was filled with a high explosive, that would go off the moment Shawnwood pressed the switch. But he did not intend to perform that action until he and Glenny were safe. The lieutenant was unbarring a trapdoor at the top of a boxlike space above the ceiling.

Once on the roof, the pair could stretch their wire to another house. From that remote spot, Shawnwood planned to use the control and wreck the laboratory, with its trapped victims. Evidently the elevator was out of commission to stay, for Shawnwood's glee denoted that the exit would not serve The Shadow or the

trapped people with him.

Calmly, The Shadow dropped to the floor near the elevator and began a probe with his fingers. Shawnwood's glee ended. The Shadow had found what he wanted. The portion of the floor where Ralph had noticed loose rivets, on his previous visit, was a concealed trapdoor that led down to the floor below.

The Shadow knew that the connection must exist, otherwise Shawnwood would have no access to his laboratory, for the elevator went down inside the wall, to the subbasement. Working with his quick discovery, The Shadow found the release and brought the snug door upward.

Glenny, meanwhile, was having trouble with the outlet to the roof. Shawnwood, screeching for him to hurry, forgot the scene below. Harry and Ralph had reached the opened trapdoor.

Below, they saw Joe Cardona and a pair of excited detectives. The police inspector had come to visit Shawnwood, just in time to learn that gunfire had started somewhere in the top of the house.

A black-cloaked figure came through the trap. Cardona thought it was The Shadow. He and his men caught the falling form, expecting a heavier weight than they received. The loosening cloak dropped half away, leaving Cardona amazed by the sight of Alicia's blond head resting on his shoulder, with a slender arm draped around his neck.

Harry and Ralph landed in quick succession and yelled for Cardona and the others to head downstairs. They thought that The Shadow was following them, for he had ordered them to make a rapid departure. But The Shadow had something else in mind.

STILL in the laboratory, he could see Shawnwood helping Glenny to crack their exit open. On the other side of the bullet-proof mesh, they were safe from gunfire. Given a few moments more, they would be on their way to permanent security, where Shawnwood's evil brain could hatch out new schemes of crime, which Glenny could help put in operation.

The Shadow did not allow those needed moments. Clutching the raised trapdoor in the steel floor with one hand, he reached to the nearest bench, stuffed cotton wadding into a burning beaker and tossed the improvised firebrand like a hand grenade.

With the same move, The Shadow dropped through the trap, pulling the hinged door after him. The beaker was still in midair, as the steel-sheeted barrier clanged in place. The flames were igniting the wadding, as the beaker skimmed the edge of the cylindrical tank and dropped into the explosive contents.

The squat tank ripped apart in a titanic blast. It lifted the steel-meshed balcony, and took the entire roof along with it. People who saw that explosion said that the top of Shawnwood's house opened like an umbrella; that the flames it gushed would have done credit to a volcano.

Two figures went skyward with that mighty eruption, but they were lost among the many fragments of Shawnwood's laboratory equipment. As he had planned, Cyrus Shawnwood took Frederick Glenny with him on a long, long trip, beyond The Shadow's future reach. But the destination was not the one that the wizard of crime had contemplated.

Cyrus Shawnwood, the chemical genius who fumed his wizardry to schemes of crime, had found his own doom in the final thrust that he launched against The Shadow.

WIZARD OF CRIME

Thanks to the steel floor of the laboratory, the shock did not destroy the house below it. The Shadow had calculated that the main portion of the building would resist the explosion. Nevertheless, he had ordered others to be on their way, before he risked the blast.

They were all outside, watching the flames gorge the ruined housetop, when The Shadow made his own departure by a side door.

THOUGH Cyrus Shawnwood had paid his followers well, as Fitzcroft, Caulden, and other later admitted, the master crook had stowed away the major portion of his profits for the future that he never realized.

His bank accounts were closed, but Ralph Atgood supplied a list of safe-deposit boxes, which were opened and found stuffed with Shawnwood's spoils.

The recovered funds were restored to the proper owners. Weylan's cash and securities were identified by the lists that he supplied, and Joe Cardona went out to Long Island to deliver the quarter million. Joe made the trip in an armored car, and finished his rough ride by stopping at the Cobalt Club, to report to Commissioner Weston.

Cardona found the commissioner in the grillroom, talking with Lamont Cranston amid the interrupting squawks of parrots and macaws. Planking a package on the table, Cardona announced that he had checked over all needed details with Ralph Atgood.

"They're going to be married," said Joe. "Young Atgood and Weylan's daughter. He's a tricky guy, getting a wife that has a good sense of humor!"

Cardona opened the package, to display The Shadow's cloak.

"Miss Weylan was wearing this," said Cardona, "when she was rescued. She says she doesn't need it any longer, because she has a more extensive wardrobe. So she suggested that I return it to The Shadow."

"Why don't you?" asked Weston with a smile.

"I said you would, commissioner," returned Cardona. "I told Miss Weylan that you were going to meet The Shadow on the City Hall steps and that you'd give him his cloak, along with the pass-key to the city. The cloak is yours, commissioner!"

Weston was still chuckling after Cardona left. The chortles were being echoed from a dozen cages when Weston turned to The Shadow.

"You keep the cloak, Cranston," said the commissioner. "Put it in that trophy room of yours. Just as a memento of the time when Inspector Cardona found a blonde inside it instead of The Shadow!"

While Cranston was wrapping the cloak in its package, the commissioner had another thought and expressed it.

"Cyrus Shawnwood was very crafty," he said soberly. "I think he was a bit gone" – Weston tapped his forehead – "up here. Do you remember that time when he let that gas bomb loose, right here in the grillroom?"

The Shadow nodded. Weston leaned across the table and spoke in a confiding tone too low for the listening tropical birds to hear.

WIZARD OF CRIME

"Shawnwood tried to kill you!" asserted Weston. "I know it sounds fantastic Cranston but I actually believe that Shawnwood was crazy enough" – Weston paused to shake his head – "just crazy enough to think that you could be The Shadow!"

THE END