

XITLI, GOD OF FIRE

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I. AZTEC DRUMS

KENT ALLARD stood by his window in the Hotel Hidalgo, overlooking Mexico City. He was watching the ever-mysterious transformation that dusk was bringing to the Mexican capital, a change unparalleled elsewhere.

By day, the city had lain basking in a gigantic bowl, its valley rimmed by the surrounding mountains, which included the great peaks of Popocatepetl and Ixtacihuatl. With darkness wiping away those summits, the city alone remained, its lights forming a twinkling carpet patched with areas of blackness.

Mexico City was taking on life. Even the traffic denoted by moving lights, was moving faster and more steadily. All afternoon it had stalled around the fourteen-acre Zocalo, or Plaza de la Constitucion, blocked by a protest parade of school children who disapproved of certain teachers and wanted the government to know it.

Tomorrow the cab drivers threatened a parade of their own, demanding compensation for the fares that they had lost while traffic was jammed the day before. But in between those daytime problems, Mexico City would enjoy a night of glitter and gaiety, as was its wont.

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To the keen eyes of Kent Allard, each new spot of light that appeared below possessed a significance.

The lights were like living things that were being rallied and regimented to fight off night's encroachment. Modern though Mexico City might be, it still lay in the great valley amid the plateau of Anahuac, once the heart of the Aztec empire. Here, until the death of Montezuma, last of the Aztec rulers, had stood the strange citadel of an even stranger race.

With darkness, all the weird legends of the past seemed to close in upon the modern city, creeping down from the time-haunted slopes of the Ajusco Mountains. The Aztecs lived anew, not merely in men's imaginations but in their descendants, the Indians of the mountainsides.

There were nights when the rarefied atmosphere of Mexico City carried distant throbs that were true echoes of the past, yet actual symbols of the present. This was one such evening, and Kent Allard recognized it. When the shrouding darkness thickened to a point where his keen eyes could not pierce it, his acute hearing served him.

From beyond the night-deepened waters of Lakes Chalco and Xochimilco, where remnants of famed floating gardens still drifted, Allard caught the faint thrum of Aztec drums, beating in a steady, gloomy rhythm. Those Aztec drums were bringing in some message from afar to the capital city, where a barbaric emperor no longer ruled.

They were carrying an old story, those drums; one that had been repeated, at intervals, during several centuries. The throbs were tuning: "Loot – loot – loot –" telling that once again hostile searchers had come across some buried treasure, once the property of Montezuma or other Aztec kings, and were taking possession of the wealth.

Centuries ago, such drumbeats would have summoned hordes of Aztec warriors to the scene where the evil was in progress; but the armies of Montezuma existed no more. Though the drum throbs carried far and wide, they were little more than protest.

The beating of the drums was a duty passed down through generations, and the news no longer stirred the blood of listeners. Yet Allard was intent when he harkened to the drums.

Had their rhythm changed, he would have known that a long-expected time had come – when surviving Aztecs might rally to a cause far more important than the protection of treasure belonging to a vanished dynasty.

The kings of the Aztecs had perished, and their power with them. But the gods of Mexico merely slept, like the giant volcano, Popocatepetl. Once disturbed, those ancient deities might rise again to rule, and all who acknowledged them would then obey.

There was a knock at Allard's door; as he turned to answer it the sounds of the drums faded, as though imagination, along with hearing, had been needed to discern them. A Mexican lieutenant in full-dress uniform was at the door.

"Senor Cuzana will see you," announced the lieutenant, with a salute. "He has requested that you come with me, Senor Allard."

THEY rode along streets like boulevards, passing theaters and cafes, through parks where strollers were enjoying the mild evening air. Near the leading park, the Alamedo, the car swung into the Paseo de la Reforma and followed that magnificent promenade to the residence of Senor Cuzana.

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There, guided by the lieutenant, Allard was ushered into a salon where three men were seated. One was Senor Luis Cuzana, a bland but friendly Mexican official, connected with the presidential cabinet. The others were Americans, whose names Allard already knew.

One was Graham Talborn, wealthy exporter from New Orleans, who had done much to stimulate trade between Louisiana and Central America. Talborn was tall, affable of manner; so energetic that he seemed youthful, except for his grizzled hair.

The other was James Carland, an oil operator who had, until recently, held large concessions in Mexico. Carland looked old and haggard, with good reason. For two years he had been fighting to regain his oil interests, which had been outlawed by the Mexican government.

All three – Cuzana, Talborn, Carland – studied Kent Allard with interest. They remembered a time when he had been famous as an aviator; but at present Allard looked as though the world had forgotten him.

Allard was tall, and his gaunt features had a hawklike expression that suited a master of the skies. But his shoulders were stooped, as from weariness; the cane that he had used did not hide his limp, the souvenir of a forced landing some years before.

On Cuzana's table stood the model of a Mayan pyramid, which attracted Allard's eye. Cuzana lifted the top of the model and it came apart in sections, showing interior compartments.

"A replica of the great pyramid at Chichen Itza," he said. "They are building a full-scale reproduction in New Orleans to serve as a permanent Mayan museum."

"We have already built it," corrected Talborn. "The interior of this model represents the arrangement of the new museum, not the ancient pyramid. We are quite sure that the museum will be open to the public in time for the West Indian Exposition."

"Thanks to you, Senor Talborn," acknowledged Cuzana. "The museum could not have been completed, I understand, if you had not supplied the hundred thousand dollars still required."

Carland thrust himself forward; his eyes were tiny, ugly beads that blazed from his haggard face.

"I was the man who promised that money!" stormed Carland. "I could still give my donation, Cuzana, if your government had not robbed me of my oil concessions!"

"I am very sorry. Senor Carland," – Cuzana's tone was cool – "but the decision did not rest with my department."

"But you could use your influence –"

"I have already used it. Nothing can be done. I tell you, officially, Senor Carland, that you can never hope to regain the concessions. The decision is final."

Carland stared, swaying like a drunken man. Then, steady, he flexed his features into a sneer. Turning on his heel, he left the salon without bidding anyone goodbye. Cuzana gave a bland shrug, then said in a tone of sincerity:

"I am very sorry for Senor Carland."

"You don't need to be," spoke Talborn promptly. "He bought those concessions for a song and made the most of them while he had them. If he had salted away his cash instead of sinking it in other speculations, he wouldn't have to worry.

"Let me tell you something about Carland" – Talborn's tone became confidential – "that may change your opinion of the fellow. When he announced that he could not pay his promised contribution of one hundred thousand dollars to the museum fund, it naturally worried many people, principally Eugene Brendle, the contractor, who had a lot at stake.

"So Carland went to Brendle and borrowed fifty thousand dollars on very flimsy security. All that Carland gave Brendle was temporary title to a few thousand acres of Louisiana swampland. Naturally, Brendle supposed that Carland would use the money toward the museum fund. Instead, Carland spent it.

"Poor Carland!" Talborn's tone was filled with contempt. "You should say 'Poor Brendle!' He would be down and out if I hadn't saved the situation by donating the money that Carland had pledged but failed to supply."

TALBORN'S denunciation put a new light on the matter. It brought a nod from Senor Cuzana, indicating that he was not surprised to learn of Carland's double-dealing.

"Mexico is better rid of such men," declared Cuzana. "They represent the old regime's faults. They came here at a time when men in power were willing to bargain away the republic's resources to the first person who offered money."

Cuzana was assembling the model pyramid. He put it back in the box where it belonged. Then, unfolding a map of Mexico, he spread it on the table and turned to Allard.

"I have bad news for you, too," said Cuzana, "but it is the sort that I feel sure that you will be glad to hear. You came here, Senor Allard, to superintend a search, by air, for the missing expedition of Professor Darius Hedwin.

"Quite fortunately" – and Cuzana gave a whimsical smile – "the expedition has found itself. As you know, they started from Chichen Itza" – he laid his forefinger on a point in the peninsula of Yucatan – "and started into the interior. For a while we heard from them" – Cuzana's finger was making a curve from Yucatan, downward, then up toward Mexico City – "and then communications ceased.

"The reason, we have learned, was because they expected to arrive here before anyone had cause to worry. But Professor Hedwin decided to stop at the ruins of Cuicuilco, less than twenty miles south of Mexico City. He has been there nearly a week."

Talborn inserted a chuckle as Cuzana finished.

"And all the while," added Talborn, "the professor overlooked the trifling detail of informing us – until tonight, when a messenger came in with word. However, Mr. Allard, I feel sure that we can use you later in a search for undiscovered ruins as soon as we have raised more funds."

"How soon will that be?"

"Quite soon, I hope," replied Talborn. "For the present, my chief concern is the shipment of the Mayan relics which Professor Hedwin has uncovered. Senor Cuzana is making such arrangements so that the usual red tape can be avoided."

Taking the remark as an invitation to leave, Allard shook hands with the others. Cuzana politely conducted him out to the front door, where a car was waiting. There, Cuzana remarked on the fact that Allard had earlier noted: the clarity of the night air in Mexico City.

"Sometimes," said Cuzana, "you can almost imagine that you hear the beat of distant Aztec drums."

Allard's keen ears did hear such throbs. They were coming from the south, the direction of Cuicuilco.

Alone in the rear of the limousine to which Cuzana conducted him, Allard smiled as he rode away. Then, from his lips, came a strange, low whisper, a sinister laugh, which carried anticipation, not disappointment. Allard's business in Mexico City was simply an excuse for his presence.

The laugh marked him as The Shadow – the strange master who hunted down crime, no matter where it might be. His mirth told that The Shadow was on the trail of evil, and had learned its location.

Cuicuilco, close by the town of Tlalpan, had become The Shadow's immediate objective. There, near the very mountains that could be seen by day from Mexico City, The Shadow was to solve the riddle of the Aztec drums!

CHAPTER II. STRIFE BY NIGHT

PROFESSOR DARIUS HEDWIN stood in the glow of a powerful electric lantern, directing a small crew of swarthy men who were hacking deep into a stony passage that was cemented with volcanic lava.

Frail of build, with a face as wrinkled as a mummy's, the professor might have been a Mayan god himself. He looked something like a golliwog, for his dried-up face was topped by a mass of shocky white hair.

Near the professor stood his chief assistant, Andrew Ames. He was young, but his square-jawed face and broad shoulders carried the build of experience. So did his manner as he watched the slaving workers. But his face showed disapproval, which Professor Hedwin noticed.

"Come, Andy!" wheezed the professor. "Drop your moping and take an interest. I am sure that we are about to uncover new relics of Xitli, the forgotten fire god."

"Good enough," returned Andy, "but why can't you do the excavating by day and spend the nights in Mexico City?"

"So civilization lures you, Andy!"

"Not at all, professor. I'm speaking from the standpoint of common sense."

Hedwin gave a head-shake.

"You are wrong, Andy," he said. "These workers prefer to work at night. They sleep in the daytime. That's when they take their siestas."

"Siestas by day," returned Andy, "and fiestas by night. It's one and the same, professor. They won't work unless you drive them, and that goes for either day or night."

The professor told the workers to rest. He drew Andy aside and began to wag a scrawny forefinger. Andy braced himself for what was coming. He could see the strange gleam in the old professor's eyes. Hedwin was

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going to confide the same facts that he had spoken a dozen times before.

"Many have found relics of the fire god," whispered Hedwin, "and have believed that a strange cult worshipped that mysterious deity – a cult that began with the Mayas and survived among the Aztecs, even to this day.

"But only I" – the professor drew himself up proudly – "have learned the name of the unknown fire god. I have identified him with Xitli, the volcano which disgorged its mass of lava to cover and preserve the ruins of Cuicuilco."

Andy nodded. It was always wise to humor the professor. Hedwin did not take the nod as a criticism, for he knew that Andy understood the history of Cuicuilco.

By day the two had roamed over the pedregal, the fifteen-mile "stony place" of rough volcanic lava, broken with deep cracks and yawning cisterns. The pedregal, site of the Cuicuilco ruins, told its own story of a volcanic overflow in Mayan times, and would naturally have been attributed to the fire god.

Since the name of Xitli belonged to the volcano, which had become extinct, Andy was quite willing to agree that the fire god bore the same title and that the eruption had been regarded as proof of Xitli's wrath. But he still didn't agree with the professor on the matter of making excavations at night.

"Listen, professor," argued Andy. "When we left Yucatan we had a tough road ahead of us. I'll admit it wouldn't have been safe to hit the jungle without Panchez and his guards. But now that we've reached Cuicuilco we don't need them. While we're digging for relics of Xitli, Panchez and his mestizos are roaming the pedregal, up to their old game."

"Their old game, Andy?"

"Sure! They've been hunting for treasure all along, professor. They know that when the Spaniards put Montezuma in a tight spot, the Aztecs buried their gold and jade near the temples of the ancient gods, hoping that it would mean protection. I'll admit that Panchez and his crowd cleared the jungle for us, but only because the faster we went the more loot they could find."

Professor Hedwin shook his head.

"When Carland was in charge," he said, "he hired Panchez. When Talborn took Carland's place as financier of the expedition, he said that everything could continue as before. So I kept Panchez –"

"Of course," interrupted Andy. "Good enough, while we were in the jungle. But right now, Panchez and his bunch might as well be in Mexico City looking at a double feature. We're not going to run into hostile tribes of Indians around here."

"You think not?" Hedwin cocked his head wisely. "Haven't you heard the beat of Aztec drums?"

"Yes," agreed Andy. "But what do they mean? Nothing but an old ritual carried on by a lot of Indians who don't do anything more dangerous than weave baskets!"

PROFESSOR HEDWIN turned away. He felt that he had won his point. He ordered the workers to chop deeper into the lava, and his manner told that he intended to ignore Andy entirely. It did not hurt Andy's pride; instead, it was the very thing that he had been hoping for.

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Using his flashlight, Andy walked a few hundred yards to the deserted tents that made the headquarters for the expedition. As he expected, he found no sign of Panchez nor any of the mestizo guards. They had all gone to the pedregal again, which explained why some of the professor's workers talked of lights that had danced above Cuicuilco on previous nights.

Such lights, according to tradition, meant places where treasure lay buried under the protection of unknown deities like Xitli. But Andy Ames took a reverse view of the phenomenon. To him, the lights meant Panchez and the mestizo crew. If treasure figured, it would only come into the case should Panchez Co. uncover it.

In his tent, Andy put fresh batteries in his flashlight and picked up a supply of .38 cartridges to supplement the loaded revolver that he always carried. Then, keeping his light close to the ground, he started for the pedregal in search of Panchez.

Andy hoped to find the mestizo leader engaged in excavating of his own. Such a discovery might convince old Professor Hedwin that Andy's ideas were right.

There was one job that Panchez and his men handled very well: the shipment of all the motley curios and relics, such as the broken pottery and baked clay idols that Professor Hedwin uncovered. The willingness with which the mestizos plowed the jungle with such burdens simply convinced Andy that they also carried baggage that they considered valuable to themselves.

Lights were dancing above Cuicuilco. Andy located them, more than a mile distant, along the rough-surfaced pedregal. He watched the peculiar way in which they dipped and reappeared.

Gun in one hand, flashlight in the other, Andy crept closer to the lights. All the while he could hear the throb of Aztec drums, louder, closer than The Shadow had heard them in Mexico City.

The lights showed the stooping figures of men, but Andy could not see their faces. Some were pushing heavy sacks out from a cistern hole in the lava. The pit could not have been open when they discovered it, for Andy saw a great, chunky slab lying by the hole.

Four men were straining, as if prepared to push the slab back in place at an order from their leader, who was probably Panchez; but four were not enough. More were coming over to help them.

This was Andy's time for action. Springing forward, he suddenly emerged into the lights, brandishing his gun as he poured an order in Spanish for the prowlers to stop their task.

Like the snap of a whip came a countermanding order from a man back in the darkness. With one accord, the stooping men quit their task and surged toward Andy.

His first shots, delivered in the air did not halt them. Finding the warning useless, Andy fired point blank, then hurled his revolver at faces that he could not see. Knives were flashing toward him, and Andy's only weapons were his fists, good enough against mestizos if he could use them quicker than the slashing blades.

The surge reached him; with it came a quick-snarled order from the rear. Instead of stabbing knives, Andy received the clutches of a dozen hands that thrust him backward toward the pit. The men at the slab had dropped it; they were joining the onrush.

Shoved to the brink, Andy heard another call. With it, the knives began to flash. Instinct prompted Andy to the only course. As he wrenched free from the gripping hands that had thrust his arms behind him, he twisted back to the pit itself.

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In that last instant on the brink, Andy Ames saw blackness that loomed fantastically from overhead. Some monstrous shape that looked like a windmill off its moorings was falling toward Andy and his mestizo foemen. Through the whirling shape, the night stars were blinking in kaleidoscopic fashion.

As knives slashed at the sleeves of Andy's flaying arms, the bulking blackness from above gave him the crazed impression that the pit had inverted itself; that he was actually over the brink and falling into the depths. The pricking knives, too, were forcing him to frantic measures.

Wildly, Andy made a sideward lunge, away from the knives, toward what he thought was the edge of the engulfing hole.

Then his illusion was actuality. Blackness was not surging down upon him; he was plunging into it. His hands had grabbed in the wrong direction; he had lost his balance and was pitching headlong into the yawning hole.

Knives were no longer slashing, nor could he hear the snarls of the mestizos. The receiving blackness was complete, lacking its starry blinks, but only for a single second.

It ended in a crash that brought a great burst of light, then darkness absolute, as Andy struck the bottom of the rocky pit. Fortunately, the fall was shorter than he had supposed, and Andy did not strike headfirst, because he glanced from obstructions on the way down.

But those details were lost to Andy Ames, for the jolt that he received was sufficient to render him senseless.

CLINGING to the brink of the pit, the mestizos were the ones who realized the closer approach of the spinning blackness that Andy had seen. It was almost upon them, a silently descending autogiro, a wingless monster of the air, controlled by the whirl of its horizontal blades as it reached the rough surface of the pedregal, landing less than a dozen yards from the open pit.

By then, the men who had conquered Andy were scattering to safety. They saw the autogiro bounce and expected it to overturn as an ordinary plane would have. But the wingless ship held its own, stopping short with a single turn of its landing wheels.

The ugly shout of Panchez told the mestizos that they had to deal with a human foe, not some prehistoric creature sent here by an outraged Aztec god. Rallying to their leader's cry, the murderous crew surged toward the autogiro.

Two dozen strong, they expected to overwhelm the sky ship and the daring enemy who had landed it on the pedregal. But before they could reach their goal, a figure lunged to meet them. They did not see their challenger; instead, they heard him.

Blackness from blackness: a cloaked shape driving from the giro's center – a fighter who issued a peal of uncanny mirth more weird than the continuing thrum of Aztec drumbeats that seemed to form a musical background with their cadence.

Strange, shivering, that mighty laugh chilled the mixed blood of the startled mestizos, stopping them with upraised knives in their hands. They knew, in that instant, that they were faced with a foe more formidable than any they could have imagined.

They had heard the laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER III. PATHS OF DARKNESS

GARBED in a flowing cloak of black, wearing a slouch hat that belonged to his shrouding costume, The Shadow was a living mass of dynamite, quite different from Kent Allard, the taciturn veteran aviator who had flown by autogiro from Mexico City only a short while before.

Though the guise of Allard was his real identity, The Shadow always gave it a weary pose, even to the pretended limp that everyone identified with Allard. Once cloaked, he became a knight of darkness whose challenging laugh was but the spear point of his attack. The Shadow knew that he had startled his foemen almost to confusion; but such did not spell victory.

Once scattered, the mestizos could prove more dangerous than when assembled, unless they first felt the power of The Shadow in physical combat. With that design, The Shadow drove in upon them as silently, as ominously as his autogiro had dropped down from the sky.

His tactics were the opposite of Andy's. The Shadow had two guns, big .45 caliber automatics, but he did not pull the triggers. Instead, he used them as sledge hammers, smashing down the knife blades that flashed in belated style; reaching the owners of those weapons with hard blows that met human skulls.

To Panchez, bringing up the reserves, the scene was one of dark confusion; he could see figures sprawling upon the grimy gray surface of the pedregal; others rolling, stumbling in search of safety. But the center of that human flywheel, the forceful fighter who flung mestizos right and left, was no more than a core of blackness, so evasive that it could only be seen in chance glimpses.

The men with Panchez were armed with carbines. Snarling, the mestizo leader pointed his revolver in The Shadow's general direction and fired a shot to start the carbineers. The clear air echoed with the volley from half a dozen guns; then the reverberations were stirred by a mocking answer: The Shadow's laugh!

Not a single shot had reached the foeman from the sky, and Panchez alone realized why. He had chosen the foreground near the autogiro as his target, thinking that The Shadow would be wheeling back toward the plane that he had left.

Instead, the cloaked warrior had whisked in another direction, finding some entrenchment on the roughened pedregal.

To Panchez's men, the thing was uncanny. They were dropping away, leaving their leader to guess where The Shadow had gone; a thing impossible to tell from the elusive laugh itself. Then, from the darkness, came a wild, half-gloating cry, uttered by one of the mestizos who had scattered earlier.

The man had stumbled upon The Shadow and was trying to knife him. Two figures came grappling upward from a lava bulkhead against a grayish ledge that showed them plainly. They whirled, and Panchez saw the mestizo sprawl from a hard gun stroke.

But The Shadow, whirling away, was still vaguely visible; moreover, he had lost his refuge behind the volcanic mound. Again Panchez fired, and his followers began to blast away with their carbines. As before, they were too late, but this time The Shadow answered in kind.

He picked out the marksmen by their gun blasts, stabbing shots that wounded them in their tracks. It was a system that he had used often in dealing with dangerous foemen, but it did not scatter the present breed of warriors.

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Like Panchez, the unwounded mestizos dropped low and began to copy The Shadow's own tactics. Trained to convoy parties through the jungle, this was the very type of battle that Panchez and his tribe liked.

The Shadow was ahead of them, both in shifts and gunfire, but his moves were so quick that his rapid shots could not take effect.

He had to keep battling while on the go against these sharpshooters, who had demonstrated their skill by very nearly clipping him. Nor could The Shadow change tactics, for he knew that the men with knives had rallied and were crawling in toward him.

Even a trifling wound might mean disaster for The Shadow; and he faced the same fate should his guns run out of ammunition. The knifers would come with their deadly machetes, and backing them, Panchez and the men with carbines would complete the mopping-up process.

But The Shadow had a way to avoid such consequences. Taking a reverse spin as he fired at a carabineer, he went straight for the pit where Andy had disappeared, reaching it while guns were blasting in the wrong direction.

AT the mouth of the pit, The Shadow encountered a rising mestizo who had picked that very refuge after the original fray. Again gunners heard a shout, and aimed in the direction that Panchez pointed out to them.

The volley brought results, flattening a figure that came reeling from the pit. Panchez and his men charged forward.

A laugh greeted them. They had felled their own man, not The Shadow. Instead of shoving his adversary down into the pit, The Shadow had hauled him out and whirled him about as a shield, all in one speedy, superhuman action.

It was The Shadow who held the pit, clinging to the rungs of a crude ladder that Andy had missed in his fall, but which the lurking mestizo had known about and used.

The Shadow's laugh was like a call to action, addressed to unseen fighters who served him. It should have stopped Panchez and his men, making them prey for The Shadow's remaining shots.

But Panchez had come too far; he was beside the huge slab that belonged on the opening of the pit. There he found himself among men who were creeping in with knives.

With one accord, they grasped the big slab. Four of them managed to tilt the huge lava-hewn stone as a shield against The Shadow's bullets, but they could move it no farther, until another arriving pair ducked behind the same shelter. The new hands tossed aside their carbines and helped with the slab.

Overturning, the huge chunk settled into the rough hole, muffling The Shadow's laugh. For the moment Panchez and his crew thought that they had settled their foe permanently, but as they started in the direction of the autogiro, they heard the taunting laugh trickle from a crack beneath the rock. The slab had not fully settled in place.

Panchez ordered a few carbine shots, which was a bad mistake. In answer, fiery stabs came from the crack beneath the slab. In closing the pit partially but not entirely, the mestizos had given The Shadow an effective pillbox wherein he could not only fire, but reload. He was evidently determined to nick any persons who attempted to approach his precious autogiro.

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Snarling at first, Panchez changed his tone to glee as he withdrew his men across the pedregal. He was telling them that The Shadow, or La Sombra, as Panchez termed him, would simply experience a slow but merciless death, far greater misery than that which bullets could deliver.

"The professor will not know," said Panchez in Spanish. "We will tell him that Senor Ames has gone to Mexico City. Tomorrow the professor will follow, without crossing the pedregal. Later we can return, when La Sombra is too weak to give us battle. We will close the slab and destroy his autogiro."

Quiet settled over the pedregal, though the atmosphere still held the quiver of The Shadow's last laugh. It had carried a strange tone, that mirth – like a signal telling certain men to wait. Then, with Panchez and his mestizos gone, The Shadow's laugh came anew, low-toned, like a summons.

Figures stirred from within the autogiro, two squatly shapes that approached the sunken slab. They were Xinca Indians, belonging to a Guatemala tribe which Kent Allard ruled as a white king. He had brought them with him from Mexico City, but had kept them in reserve.

About to summon them when the slab fell, The Shadow had countermanded his order by a laugh of another tone. At present he needed them.

THE Xincas reached the slab, which had required six men to lift. Each Xinca had the strength of two mestizos, as did The Shadow.

While the squatly men heaved at the slab, The Shadow provided pressure from below. The rickety ladder groaned, but The Shadow gained the pit edge with his hands and knees and supplied the upward pressure with his shoulders.

The slab tilted away. Emerging, The Shadow turned a flashlight down into the pit, saw Andy's crumpled figure. Alone, he descended and stooped above the unconscious man. Finding that Andy's strong frame had borne the shock without serious injury, The Shadow lifted him up the ladder to the waiting Xincas.

Studying the pit, The Shadow saw that it had been a treasure cache, as evidenced by odd trinkets of jade and gold that still remained in pockets hewn in the walls. But Panchez and his thieving crew had taken the cream of the buried Aztec wealth.

Aided by the Xincas, The Shadow put the slab tightly in place. With the Indians carrying Andy, he traced a course across the pedregal, basing his route on the location of ancient temple ruins where Professor Hedwin would probably be at work.

The procession came upon the camp; ordering the Xincas to wait, The Shadow moved among the tents.

Men were present, evidently some of Hedwin's regular workers, waiting for the next shift. Recognizing that such men were friendly to Andy, The Shadow knew that it would be safe to leave his human burden. He picked Andy's tent by inspecting its belongings, and returned to the Xincas. They took Andy into the tent and laid him on a cot.

Then, with a stealth that the Xincas matched, The Shadow left the camp. Returned to the autogiro, he and his two followers listened to the rhythm of Aztec drums, which continued their unchanged strain.

"Loot – loot – loot –"

XITLI, GOD OF FIRE

The same cadence; one of passive indignation. Strange folk of the Ajusco Mountains sorrowed over the loss of wealth long buried by some forgotten Aztec king. But the mountain tribesmen, stirred only by vestiges of old traditions belonging to their ancestors, seemed not inclined to interfere. None had appeared to attack Panchez and the mestizos during the rifling of the treasure cavern.

The Shadow spoke to his two Xincas; silently they acknowledged that a certain mission pertaining to themselves had been fulfilled. They followed The Shadow into the autogiro. Big blades whirred; with a short roll the strange machine took off vertically into the starry night.

Above the roar of the motor that drowned the throb of sullen Aztec drums came the weird crescendo of a parting laugh – The Shadow's farewell to a scene of triumph; a prediction that he would later settle the matter of stolen treasure.

But this strange terrain was soon to bear a new significance. The Shadow had banished crime, only to clear the way for a coming menace that would carry its threat far from the land of the Aztecs!

The very evidence that The Shadow and his Xincas had come to seek, but had not found, was already in the making at the time of their departure!

CHAPTER IV. THE THRONE OF XITLI

THE pounding of drums awakened Andy Ames. They were beating harder, louder than before, in a strange, irregular fashion that seemed tuned to the welling throbs of his aching head. Never had Andy heard them sound like that before, nor had he known them to persist as late as dawn.

Daylight was breaking from across the pedregal, filtering through the palm trees that fringed the camp. Men were astir, babbling excitedly, and the noise of their tongues roused Andy further.

When he demanded the reason for the confusion, Andy received excited head-shakes and the pointing of hands. The workers were indicating the direction of Hedwin's excavation, and Andy decided that something must have happened to the old professor. Starting out to find Hedwin, he was passed by more of the excited workers, who were running into camp.

From the night before, Andy could remember a broken chain of experiences that did not seem to make sense. As he recalled it, he had been with Professor Hedwin, watching the workers, who were mostly full-blooded Indians, hack away at the lava passages in the ruins of an old Mayan temple.

Then, as Andy recalled it, he had gone to the pedregal alone. He had been attacked, flung into a pit by men who had been uncommonly like Panchez and the mestizo guards who had been hired to scour the jungle and keep trouble away. How he had gotten back to his tent was a mystery to Andy. There were vague recollections, however, of strange Indians and a man in black.

Maybe he was wrong about the whole thing. The fight might have happened at Hedwin's excavation, not out on the pedregal. Certainly it seemed that the professor was at present in some difficulty, the way his men were deserting him.

Andy found the hewn opening into the old temple. He shouted for Hedwin and was answered by a hollow voice from within, a tone which seemed testy, more than anything else. Entering, Andy used his flashlight to find the chamber where he had last seen the professor.

XITLI, GOD OF FIRE

There he discovered Hedwin, looking more like a golliwog than ever. He was sitting on a squarish chunk of stone that looked like smooth, black basalt.

Apparently the stone had been dragged from some adjoining chamber, for Andy had not seen it the night before. But he saw now that a hole had been chopped into a small secret chamber adjoining this big one.

Hedwin held up a doll-sized figurine of baked clay that reminded Andy somewhat of a Buddha, except that its features were coarse and grinning. He simply nodded, because he had seen similar figurines before.

They represented the fire god which Hedwin claimed the Mayas had worshipped under the name of Xitli. The expedition had picked up quite a few of the statuettes while coming in from Yucatan.

"I was right!" exclaimed Hedwin gleefully. "Xitli was the fire god! Look in that chamber, Andy, and you will see a temple of Xitli, complete in every detail" – the professor chuckled – "except one."

Andy looked into the temple and marked the arrangement of it. He saw figurines on crude stone shelves, carved frescoes that represented flame along the walls. At one end of the room was a hewn space that looked like a throne. But nothing was much different from other tiny temples that Andy had seen before, and which Hedwin had identified with the fire god.

True, there were the remains of human skeletons, half buried in the rubble on the ground, but Andy had seen such bones in other excavations. He had particularly expected to find them at Cuicuilco, inasmuch as the ancient inhabitants had been overwhelmed by the lava flow from the volcano Xitli.

"It's just like the temple that you arranged for the new museum," said Andy. "You've been shipping all sorts of fire-god relics to Salter so that he can put them in it. Why, you've even sent him masks and costumes of the fire god for his other exhibit rooms."

Professor Hedwin inserted a chuckle, inspired by Andy's mention of Fitzhugh Salter, curator of the Mayan Museum in New Orleans.

"Yes, I suppose that Salter is at his wits' end," Hedwin cackled. "But wait until this arrives. Perhaps he will then believe that Xitli was the fire god!"

RISING, the professor indicated the black stone on which he had been seated. Studying the square of basalt, Andy looked into the temple again and saw that the black chunk had formed the seat of the great stone throne.

"This explains it, Andy." Hedwin was tapping the black stone. "Basalt is a form of volcanic rock, aptly suited to such a deity as Xitli. But only the true temple of Xitli would contain the god's own throne.

"Look at the inscriptions on this basalt. They prove its origin, Andy. Deciphered, they say that this stone represents the true Xitli, that this throne is his own. Look at some of those pictures in the temple chamber, where men with torches are bowing to a god crowned with flame. My theory was right. I have proven Xitli to be the fire god!"

Professor Hedwin had raised his voice in such high-pitched triumph that he had to relax. He sat down on the basalt square and began to mop his forehead with a ragged handkerchief. Andy asked:

"What's happened to the workers?"

XITLI, GOD OF FIRE

"The fools!" retorted Hedwin, suddenly remembering that the crew had left him. "They dragged the black stone from the temple an hour ago. When I sat down to rest they suddenly began to babble. Then they fled."

Hedwin paused. Springing to his feet, he exclaimed:

"I have it, Andy! They feared this stone! It was difficult to persuade them to touch it. When I sat upon the stone I was actually occupying the throne of Xitli, the fire god. That is why they fled!"

It sounded logical to Andy, although his head was splitting so badly that he could hardly think. Daylight was creeping into the excavation, and with it, Andy still heard the irregular thrum–thrum of Aztec drums.

"How long have those drums been beating?" he asked suddenly. "I mean the way we hear them now, with that funny discord."

The professor listened, stroking his dryish chin.

"They began soon after the men fled," he said. "Do you know, Andy, I wonder –" He caught himself. "No, no, it could not be that. And yet –"

"What could not be?"

"The Tribe of Fire. You've heard of it – an ancient group among the Mayas that continued into Aztec times. Men something like the thugs of India, who killed to please the god they represented. Yes, there was such a tribe once. Perhaps it still exists today – the cult of Xitli –"

He broke off suddenly and threw a suspicious glance toward Andy, something that the professor always did when he had voiced his thoughts aloud.

But this time Hedwin's glance seemed cannier than ever. His lips snapped shut like a clamshell; then curved themselves into a twisted smile. Stooping, Hedwin gripped one side of the basalt stone and nodded for Andy to do the same.

The black rock was not heavy, though it needed their combined strength to carry it out through the passages without dropping it. After a brief rest, Hedwin and Andy continued into camp, bringing the stone with them.

Immediately upon their arrival the superstitious workers scattered.

Daylight was full by this time. The discordant strum of distant drums had ended. Andy, too, was beginning to mop his forehead, when he turned to see a man who stared at him with unbelieving eyes.

The arrival was Panchez; the mestizo leader was holding a carbine under his arm. Andy noted that the weapon was shaking, as though it had been imbued with life and was trying to jump from its owner's grasp.

"Well, Panchez?"

At Andy's words, Panchez recovered himself. He decided that ghosts did not rove by daylight, nor did they talk with human voice. Panchez licked his lips, smiled.

"I am glad, Senor Ames," he said, "to find that you are still alive. It was very bad, last night, the fight we have with the banditti."

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"Along the pedregal?"

"Si, senior," acknowledged Panchez. "We hear you fight them and we come with carbines. We shoot" – he gestured with his carbine – "and pouf! – they run away. But we look for you and do not find you.

"I think, senior" – Panchez had laid the carbine aside and was beginning to roll a cigarette – "that maybe you have gone into Mexico City to tell the police of trouble."

Panchez was lying, and Andy knew it from the way the mestizo had averted his eyes. But there was no use pressing the issue. It was Hedwin's job, not Andy's, to reprimand the guards for any faults. At present the professor was too exuberant about finding Xitli's temple and the throne seat of the fire god to be interested in anything else.

Besides, Hedwin's find meant that the expedition had completed its purpose. Soon the professor would order a start for Mexico City, and men would be needed to carry the basalt stone.

Since the Indian workers would not touch the piece of basalt, that task would have to go to Panchez. When Andy pointed out the stone to Panchez, the rogue nodded and summoned a pair of mestizos, who took up the burden.

WHEN camp was broken, Andy suggested a detour across the pedregal, to which Panchez agreed. His hand ready to reach for his revolver, Andy kept a sharp eye on Panchez's carbine as they strolled along together. He asked Panchez where the trouble had begun, and the mestizo shook his head.

"It is different now, senior," he said. "Day and night they are different. Sometime we make mistake, senior. My men, perhaps, could not tell who you were. You may have mistake banditti for mestizos."

Nowhere among the open cisterns did Andy see a cavity that resembled the pit of the night before. He looked for a crack in the lava rock, but failed to find one. The slab had been fitted tightly into place; even Panchez looked puzzled when Andy was not gazing his way.

"What about your men?" demanded Andy suddenly. "You are short-handed today, Panchez."

"Some have been wounded," returned Panchez blandly. "Others, they were killed. You will see them, senior, when we reach Tlalpan, the place where I have sent them."

Arriving at Tlalpan, Andy did see Panchez's corps of cripples; their wounds testified to a larger fight than the one that Andy had made against them. Andy half believed that Panchez and his men had actually encountered bandits, and that he had therewith misjudged them, so he simply congratulated Panchez on having put up an excellent fight.

Later that day a train took Hedwin and Andy to Mexico City, along with a supply of Mayan relics, including the Xitli throne stone, and Andy saw no signs of any luggage belonging to Panchez.

Still, some of the mestizos were not accounted for, and Andy knew that they could have gone ahead with their loot. He decided to forget Panchez and the rest, as he would a bad dream.

Yet there was something that Andy could not forget, and it belonged in the dream class. Vaguely he could recall brief periods when he had been conscious; after his fall into the pit.

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Out of such recollections came a person cloaked in black who spoke in a strange, weird whisper to a pair of squatty Indians. Andy recalled a floating sensation, which made him believe that the Indians had carried him into camp at the cloaked rescuer's order.

He was still thinking of that episode when evening came and he visited Senor Cuzana and Graham Talborn. Andy was with Professor Hedwin, who was too busy talking about Xitli to note the broken beat of Aztec drums that seemed to float in from the mountains.

Angry drums, menacing in tone, the same that Andy had heard at dawn, they seemed to spell a message that certain men would surely heed.

Unfortunately, the story of those drums had not yet carried to distant Guatemala, where The Shadow, otherwise Kent Allard, was bidding farewell to the Xinca tribe that acknowledged him as ruler. Wisely, The Shadow did not deny the rumor that worried the Xincas: namely, that the cult of Xitli was about to form anew.

He let his two Xinca servants make the report. They testified that they had been to Mexico with their great white king and had heard the beat of Aztec drums that told of theft alone. They had seen men engaged in such theft, and had watched their powerful chief drive away the marauders.

The robbers had been punished, hence no revenge was needed. Protection of the stolen treasure was the duty of the Aztecs, not of the Xincas.

But when his servants had finished with their story, The Shadow told them to remain with the tribe when he had gone. They were to be alert, still on the watch for any revival of the Xitli cult.

It was a wise decision on The Shadow's part, considering that the Xitli legend was firmly fixed in Xinca minds. It strengthened The Shadow's authority with the tribe. When he took off in the autogiro, he saw the Xincas gathered about their jungle fire, their arms folded as a token of farewell.

The Shadow's wisdom was to prove twofold. The time was coming shortly when the Xitli rumor was to prove reality. Then would the Xincas more than ever acknowledge the foresight of their ruler, The Shadow, who had warned them to remain alert, even when the menace of the Xitli cult had seemed to be disproven!

Moreover, they would be pleased because their black-clad chief had left the servants who knew how to reach him and carry such tidings. When that time came, not one among the Xinca tribe would believe that at the time of his actual departure, The Shadow, master of mystery, had in his own mind classed all talk of Xitli as a legend without foundation!

CHAPTER V. THE MAYAN MUSEUM

VIEWED from the window of an arriving passenger plane, New Orleans formed an intriguing sight, a city spread upon a broad plain cut by the curving ribbon of the Mississippi. Toy ships were anchored all along the river front, while beyond, the city showed an array of buildings that marked the new town from the old.

New Orleans, however, differed from most American cities. Others were distinguishable by modern skyscrapers, impressive even when viewed from a high altitude. New Orleans lacked buildings that were really tall. A structure of a dozen stories rated high in the Louisiana metropolis.

Perhaps it was quite as well that New Orleans lacked a mammoth skyline. Otherwise, the city's newest landmark, the Mayan Museum, would not have dominated the scene as remarkably as it did.

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The museum, built in the form of a pyramid, stood on the outskirts of the city, and its glistening white steps immediately caught the eye. Though only a hundred-odd feet in height, its shape made it appear much greater, and the architectural beauty gained a final touch from the surmounting temple that capped the pyramid.

It was The Shadow's first view of the great stone structure, which had been completed in a rush after a long delay through lack of funds. Other passengers in the same airliner were also intrigued by sight of the pyramid, and they scarcely noticed the hawk-faced traveler with them.

The Shadow was no longer Kent Allard. His hawkish features were fuller, less gaunt. His whole pose seemed leisurely, indolent. His face had a mask-like expression that seemed a token of reserve. Actually, it signified a disguise. The Shadow had assumed a different identity, yet one with which he was quite familiar.

He was passing as Lamont Cranston, millionaire globe-trotter, who traveled where whim might call him. Why he had come to New Orleans was something which seemed logically explained as soon as the plane landed.

At the airport, Lamont Cranston was greeted by James Carland, the haggard-eyed oil operator who had so recently left Mexico City, where the government had emphatically ousted him from his concessions.

Carland did not in any wise recognize Cranston as Allard. The resemblance between The Shadow's old face and his new was traceable only in vague fashion, and Carland was not interested in comparisons. As he shook hands with Cranston, Carland failed utterly to guess the significance behind the visitor's slight but inscrutable smile.

The Shadow was thinking of the meeting in Mexico City, where Carland had ignored Kent Allard as a person of no consequence, a broken-down aviator. Here in New Orleans, Carland was sparing no effort at welcoming Lamont Cranston, man of reputed wealth. The contrast gave an excellent index to Carland's nature.

Carland's motto was "cash and carry"; others could supply the cash, and he would carry it. If they ever saw the cash again, it would mean simply that Carland had slipped.

Not that Carland was crooked in the legal sense of the term. On the contrary, Carland was noted for his ironclad methods, as witness his Mexican oil concessions, to which he still argued a valid claim. Carland simply never missed a trick when it lay within the rules of a game called business.

Inviting Cranston into a limousine, Carland began a string of patter as they rode away from the airport.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Cranston," he declaimed. "Glad to meet anyone with vision enough to see the future of rice land in the Mississippi delta. I have thousands of acres of it, the finest land in the world.

"Swampland, some call it" – Carland's chuckle showed contempt – "and that's where they are wrong. It may have been salt marsh once, but today it is covered with rich Mississippi silt, the accumulation of many years. The reeds that grow through the silt simply bind it, and help it to thicken.

"Salt-grass flats? Bah! Two hundred years ago the French called those lands 'trembling prairies,' which proves that they knew the ground was good, although unstable. Modern methods of agriculture weren't known then, Mr. Cranston, but we understand them today.

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"Rice can be grown along every bayou and lagoon. Big amphibian tractors, with wheels like paddles, will cultivate the land. We'll have barges moving along channels where now you see only shrimp boats and natives paddling those funny dugout canoes they call 'pirogues.'"

IT was an impressive sales talk, and by the time the car had reached the heart of the city, Carland was tabulating figures to show the big profits from rice that could be brought straight to New Orleans by the water route.

Then, as the car stopped in front of an office building, Carland glanced anxiously at his watch.

"It's well after five," he said, "but I think we shall still find Mr. Brendle in his office. He's a contractor; used to lay roads all over the State. He thinks the rice project is feasible. I want you to meet him, Mr. Cranston."

They found Eugene Brendle in his office. The contractor was a stocky, broad-shouldered man whose concave profile, with bulging forehead and chin, was centered by a very stubby nose. He was the type of man who evidently thought over all decisions, but once having made them, would not alter his final plan.

It happened that The Shadow knew the exact situation between James Carland and Eugene Brendle, for, as Allard, The Shadow had heard it from Graham Talborn, the exporter, while in Mexico City. At present Carland owed Brendle fifty thousands dollars, and the future rice lands – whether salt marsh or rich silt – were the security for the loan.

Evidently Brendle mistrusted Carland, and well he might, for the fifty thousand dollars had not gone to the completion of the museum. Calling the loan when the time came would not help either, unless the delta land proved to be worth fifty thousand dollars, which Brendle appeared to doubt. In his turn, Carland was attempting to convince Brendle that the land was good.

"You're a good judge of property, Mr. Cranston," said Carland, turning to The Shadow. "You know the facts and figures on rice" – glibly, Carland was glossing over the fact that he had just provided Cranston with such information – "and I think you will agree that my land is worth more than fifty thousand dollars."

"As represented, yes," returned The Shadow, in a calm tone that suited Cranston. "Of course, before investing such a sum, I would like to see the land in question."

"And if you found it up to specifications –"

"I would either purchase it or offer to invest in its development."

Carland threw a triumphant look at Brendle, as though Cranston's statement had settled the whole question. Then, like a man slapping a trump card on the table, Carland stated:

"Your offer is a trifle late, Mr. Cranston. I have already heard from Jonathan Dorn, the New York financier, requesting first opportunity to inspect the property. It would not be fair to Dorn to consider any transaction before he arrives."

"How soon will that be?"

"Frankly, I don't know," replied Carland. "Within a week, I hope, Mr. Cranston. If you will be staying in New Orleans that long –"

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"I shall be." Cranston's lips formed one of their half smiles. "My hobby happens to be the study of Mayan remains. I hoped that I might get a preview of the exhibits in the new museum before it was open to the public."

Mention of the museum brought a glare to Carland's haggard face. Angrily, he exclaimed:

"I'll have nothing to do with the Mayan Museum! If Graham Talborn had waited, giving me a chance to straighten out matters, I might have regained my oil concessions on the strength of that museum. The Mexican government wanted it completed before the West Indian Exposition; they would have listened to reason while I held the upper hand."

Brendle gave a steady look toward Carland.

"You forget," said Brendle, "that others had much to lose while the museum remained unfinished. Salter, the curator, had his job to think about. Professor Hedwin was nearly stranded, down in Yucatan. I had contracted for materials, and had loaned you fifty thousand dollars –"

Carland's glare had turned to a wince. He interrupted Brendle by clapping the contractor on the shoulder.

"I owe you a lot, Brendle," said Carland. "You're the one friend I had among the whole crowd. The way they deserted me, like rats, when Talborn came along! Don't worry, Brendle. You'll get your fifty thousand dollars, with interest."

"I hope so, Carland."

There was an actual touch of hope in Brendle's tone, inspired, perhaps, by Cranston's interest in the rice fields on which the cash depended, plus Carland's statement that a financier named Dorn had already considered their development.

"Why don't you take Mr. Cranston to the museum?" suggested Carland to Brendle. "Salter will probably be glad to see you, though he wouldn't care to see me. You can call me later, after you've looked over the place."

BRENDLE accepted the suggestion. He closed his office, and they rode to the museum in Carland's limousine. The Shadow and Brendle left the car, and Carland drove away. Entering the museum, Brendle conducted his new acquaintance, Cranston, to the curator's office.

There, they found Graham Talborn, also back from Mexico. Like Carland, Talborn failed to identify Cranston as Allard.

The Shadow also shook hands with Fitzhugh Salter, the curator, a middle-aged man of portly proportions, chubby-faced, and of retiring disposition. There was a smug touch, however, to Salter's features, that marked him shrewder than his surface showed.

"I'll show you the museum from the bottom up," declared Salter, when he learned why Cranston had come. "That means from the top down, because all our exhibits are on the higher floors. The lower floors are for offices. Come, gentlemen; this way."

They went to the very center of the pyramid, which, on the ground floor, did resemble an office building. The elevators were necessarily in the center, in order to reach the top floor of the tapering structure. They entered an elevator and Salter took them to the top, where they stepped out to a promenade atop the temple that surmounted the museum.

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Daylight had diminished. New Orleans stretched off into the distance, sparkling with lights, a scene that reminded The Shadow of Mexico City, except that here there was no throb of Aztec drums. Yet, somehow, the spell of the past seemed stronger here than in old Mexico.

Like ancient priests who had ruled Chichen Itza, The Shadow and his companions stood beside a parapet from which they could see the spreading steps of the massive pyramid below. It was almost as if the structure itself had been lifted from the ancient city of the Mayas and placed, in all its prime, upon the fringe of a modern metropolis.

This pyramid was, of course, a reproduction; but that only made the illusion more real. The Shadow could sense the spirit of grandeur even more than at Chichen Itza, where he had often visited the ruined temple of the Mayas upon its crumbling mound.

Gazing toward the terraces below, noting the gloom of the low shrubbery that surrounded the museum grounds, The Shadow could almost picture stealthy figures of the past, creeping into this chosen place where a vanished glory had been renewed. The lower darkness, like the blackening sky above, seemed fraught with ominous significance.

Tuned to the unknown, The Shadow possessed a sixth sense that seldom failed him. The very atmosphere was charged with menace of a sort that he had sensed often in the past. Voiceless tongues were crying a message of coming danger that no one else could hear.

Whether it meant evil of an ancient origin, or crime of a modern type, The Shadow could not tell. But his whole being told him to be ready for strange events soon due!

CHAPTER VI. WITHIN THE MUSEUM

FITZHUGH SALTER stood smugly by while the visitors enjoyed the view from the parapet. The curator seemed in no hurry to show them through the museum "from the top down," as he had expressed it. Not until he saw Cranston turn and gaze questioningly in his direction, did Salter suddenly rouse himself.

He bowed his visitors toward the stairs leading down from the roof, and they descended. Darkness greeted them, until Salter found a switch box and supplied lights to the top-floor corridor. The Shadow saw a stairway leading down around the elevator shafts, also the doors of various exhibit rooms.

The doors were locked, but Salter produced keys that opened them. The locks were of a very ordinary sort, which was natural enough, considering that when the museum itself was locked, the whole top floor would be protected.

Many of the Mayan exhibits were already in place, and they formed as large a collection as The Shadow had ever seen.

There were tablets with hieroglyphic carvings that Professor Hedwin had sent from Chichen Itza; great stone rings, four feet in diameter, decorated with intertwining feathered serpents.

In another room were pottery exhibits; also some ancient masks fashioned from such hard substances as turquoise, shell and jet. Salter said they were ceremonial masks, representing such deities as Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, but he did not undertake to identify any more of them by name, though there were dozens of the masks.

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Passing a rack of costumes, garish and of vivid colors, Salter said that they were of modern manufacture, but that they represented the actual robes used in rituals wherein the masks were also worn. Then, either ignoring, or not hearing, questions, the curator opened the door to a long room that showed an array of statuary, all hewn with stone tools.

They were the gods of the Aztecs: Xochipilli, goddess of flowers; Huitzilopochtli, the war god; his sister, Coyaxauhqui. Stopping to pick up a remarkable life-sized skull of crystal, Salter said that it represented Tezcatlipoca, chief of the Aztec gods. But when they had gone the entire length of the gallery, Salter had at no time mentioned any god of fire.

The answer came when the curator opened the door of a small room that bore a special combination lock, like the dial of a safe. The room was lined with carved slabs of stone; at the far end was a rough-hewn stone, that seemed part of the wall. At the sides of the room, The Shadow saw empty niches.

"The throne room of Xitli, the fire god," spoke Salter, with a smile. "That is, if such a god belonged in the Mayan pantheon. Professor Hedwin believes in such a legend, so to humor his whim, we allowed him to install this throne room. None of the exhibits have arrived, as Hedwin is bringing them in personally from Mexico.

"According to Hedwin" – Salter's tone carried the slight trace of a chuckle – "a strange cult used to gather in the throne room of Xitli. They were Mayas, and later Aztecs, who accepted a living leader as the incarnation of Xitli. Murder, torture, pillage were not crimes, when Xitli ordered them."

Salter locked the throne room and turned toward the elevators. Politely, he invited Cranston to come back on another day, when more relics would be on display. Many boxes, Salter said, had not yet been opened. Most of them were in the cellar of the museum.

At that moment, Salter was interrupted. He was standing by the door of the elevator, which he had opened, when all the group detected scraping sounds that seemed to filter through the museum. The noise was uncanny, for it was quite untraceable, at first. It was Cranston who explained the riddle.

"Probably from the elevator shaft," he said. "Which might indicate the cellar. You spoke of boxes down there, Mr. Salter."

Salter shook his head.

"It couldn't be the cellar. Do you think so, Mr. Talborn?"

Talborn decided with Salter, that the sounds came from a higher floor; but Brendle accepted The Shadow's theory, that the cellar was the source. It was The Shadow who suggested, in Cranston's easy style:

"If we go down to the ground floor, we can trace the sounds from there."

Salter took them to the ground floor in the elevator. As he stopped the car, they listened; the sounds still came from below. Stepping from the elevator, Salter beckoned the group toward his office.

There, he opened a desk drawer and took out two revolvers, after which, he pointed to some canes in the corner and a pair of spears crossed on the wall.

"There are four stairways to the cellar," he said, "each from a corner of the ground floor. I would suggest that we each take a separate stairway and converge on the intruders."

XITLI, GOD OF FIRE

SALTER took a revolver, and so did Talborn. Brendle preferred one of the big spears, while The Shadow, quite indifferently, picked one of the canes. Softly, they started out into the corridor.

The Shadow let the others go ahead. Then, stepping back into the office, he replaced the cane where it belonged.

Opening a brief case that he had brought with him, the leisurely Mr. Cranston became a man of rapid action. Producing a slouch hat and a black cloak, he put on the garments, then packed a brace of automatics into holsters beneath his coat. By that rapid transformation, he became The Shadow.

Side-stepping from the office, The Shadow became a gliding shape along the dim corridor as he moved toward the outer door. Once he was outside the museum, he vanished. Blackness from the shrubbery blotted out his arriving form. Picking his way through the gloom, The Shadow paced the lower wall of the huge museum.

Somewhere, he expected to find an outside entrance to the cellar, as Salter had termed it, though actually it was a basement, its floor only a trifle below ground level. The museum, according to report, had been built upon a solid square of concrete that served as a permanent foundation.

At the rear of the pyramid, The Shadow came upon the cellar entrance, which betrayed itself by a thin line of light from a sliding door that was not quite shut. Halting, the black-cloaked arrival drew back to a clump of shrubs, finding cover in the darkness, which was now complete except for the whiteness of the museum wall.

The door was sliding open; a man carrying a burlap sack moved outward, past where The Shadow stood. The burden was heavy, even for the husky man who hauled it. The Shadow could not see the man's face, for it was turned away, but his rough clothes and low-pulled cap gave him a thuggish appearance.

The fellow passed the sack to someone in the darkness, then returned to the cellar. Hearing footsteps move away beyond the shrubs, The Shadow decided to look into the cellar first. The man who went inside had closed the door again, but The Shadow worked it open wide enough to wedge through.

A light was glowing in the cellar. Beneath its glare, three men were stooping above a large box, newly arrived from Mexico, working on its half-raised lid. One fist holding a drawn gun, The Shadow placed his other hand behind him and slid the door shut.

He began a slow advance, unnoticed by the stooping men, who failed even to see the stretch of elongated blackness that crept along the floor and into their midst.

A few steps more would have brought The Shadow squarely upon the trio of human rats who were obviously engaged in looting the boxes that Hedwin had sent from Mexico. But The Shadow's unseen command was suddenly broken by a sound from a corner of the cellar.

One of three other invaders, Salter, Talborn, or Brendle, had stumbled while coming down a stairway.

Instantly, the three men by the boxes were up on their feet, one trying to learn which corner the sound had come from, another grabbing for the light, the third turning toward the very doorway through which The Shadow had entered.

All three were armed and when the third man saw The Shadow, his yell brought the other two about. There were snarls as the light went out; then the sudden bark of revolvers.

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Those shots were harmless, fired by men who were spinning, sprawling over boxes under the hard-sledged blows of a human whirlwind. The man who doused the light hadn't given his pals, nor himself, sufficient time to witness the speed of The Shadow's lunge.

Darkness was no handicap to The Shadow, especially when he knew that every figure he encountered was a foeman, deserving of prompt settlement.

The darkness, however, saved the bewildered crooks, as they scrambled for the corners of the cellar, two minus their guns, the third too anxious for flight to try pot shots against an invisible target.

The Shadow could not risk shots in their direction, because he heard other sounds beyond and knew that Salter, Talborn, and Brendle were coming into the fray, where they could receive stray bullets.

Only one of them had a flashlight: Salter. The curator used it, somewhat frantically, spreading a beam that he didn't hold in any one place. Each time his light uncovered a crook, Salter shed the glare somewhere else, and the thug went scuttling to cover.

The laugh of The Shadow reverberated through the cellar, bringing startling echoes from the stone-lined room. It told the robbers that surrender was their only course, and they were about to heed it, when new invaders entered. They came from the outer door, which they slid aside, a crew of them with flashlights.

Outlined in the glare, The Shadow furnished gun stabs that brought howls and scattered flashlights. Other guns were blazing from the door, but their shots were wide, spasmodic. In the confusion, the three thugs from the cellar were seeking escape, and blocking off the very marksmen who had helped them.

SUCH were not the only blunders. Salter and Talborn were shooting from their corners, aiming short of the door for fear that some enemies might be diving in upon them. With bullets ricocheting close at hand, The Shadow reversed his course, seeking to fire from a longer, but safer, range.

As he wheeled, the chance sweep of Salter's flashlight showed a bulky man driving in with a big spear. It was Brendle, hoping to head off some of the scattering crooks. The Shadow met him with a charge that sent Brendle backward, his spear clattering away. Seeing Brendle's fall, Salter charged in, shouting to Talborn to join him.

From the floor, Brendle was bellowing for them to stop; that they had made a bad mistake. Salter, by then, was feeling the weight of a fist that carried a gun. He sagged, clutching his jaw, and heard Brendle's shouts. He tried to yell at Talborn, too, but his jaw was too numbed to work.

Talborn was reeling away from The Shadow, when Salter and Brendle reached him. Gone berserk, Talborn began to battle his own friends and gave them a terrific grapple. He had lost his revolver under a slashing blow that The Shadow had given him, and the fact that he was weaponless drove Talborn to greater frenzy.

While three men tumbled around the cellar, they heard The Shadow's laugh again, near the outer door, accompanied by staccato shots that he fired after fleeing crooks. Then the roar of auto motors from a block away told that crooks had maneuvered a departure, due to the chance mix-up that had retarded The Shadow.

The crazed fray in the cellar took a sudden end when another man strong-armed his way among the battlers. Spilled to the floor, Salter found his flashlight and turned it in the direction of grunts and groans.

He saw Talborn lying on the floor, quite subdued by a complacent man who was seated upon the prone fighter. The seated man had Brendle stymied, too. He had gripped Brendle's arm and was holding it behind

him, so tightly that Brendle could not twist away.

Groggy though he was, Salter laughed. The man who had pitched him out of things, and separated Talborn and Brendle, too, was the unruffled Mr. Cranston. It seemed that Cranston must have stayed in his own corner, until he realized what turn the fight had taken. He had then proceeded to put his friends in their proper places.

Sheepishly, Talborn and Brendle thanked Cranston for putting them right. Salter, meanwhile, began to examine the boxes. He found them partly opened, and made a check-up of the contents.

The boxes were loosely packed, but none of the Mayan curios were missing, for Salter had a list that he consulted while he made the check-up.

"At least, we managed to get here in time," declared the curator. "Those crooks hadn't finished opening the boxes, when we disturbed them. They have fled, so we might as well go upstairs to my office and inform the police of the attempted robbery.

Lamont Cranston was the last to leave the cellar. He stood alone, with a flashlight of his own, as the others returned the stairs. With his probing light, The Shadow first studied the corner where he had left his cloak and hat in order to become Cranston again. The garments were out of sight, where he could pick them up at leisure.

Then the light glowed on the boxes. A soft laugh, only a whisper, issued from The Shadow's lips. Fitzhugh Salter had a wrong surmise, as bad as Eugene Brendle's mistaken attack upon The Shadow, or the stumble that Graham Talborn had made, still earlier, while descending the corner stairway.

Intruders had not been opening the boxes when The Shadow found them. They had been closing those crates from Mexico. In fact, before entering the cellar, The Shadow had seen some sneaking away with the last load of goods that they had bagged.

Nothing was gone from the boxes, according to the list that Salter claimed had come from Professor Hedwin. But the fact still remained that the boxes, loosely packed, could have held a great deal more than the list stated; indeed, had actually held a great deal more.

The Shadow knew what the crooks had stolen. They had picked up Aztec treasure, which Panchez and his mestizos had been gathering all along the route while Hedwin and his expedition were traveling from Yucatan to Mexico City. The treasure had been shipped along with the bone-fide Mayan relics intended for the museum.

Who was behind the game, remained a riddle. Whether or not Professor Hedwin had secretly engineered the crooked shipment, was a question not yet answered. Conversely, it might be that Fitzhugh Salter was covering the deliveries. Yet, either or both might be innocent, not guilty.

The best way to solve the problem would be to find the men who had carried away the treasure tonight. Such was The Shadow's coming problem, in New Orleans.

CHAPTER VII. CRIME'S NEW CHANCE

LAMONT CRANSTON sat at a writing desk, in his room at the Hotel Montebazan. Another night had come to New Orleans, the fourth since his arrival. From the windows of his corner room, The Shadow covered every angle that he wanted.

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In one direction, he could see the city's center; off, far beyond, the white shape of the strange but slightly pyramid that housed the Mayan Museum. In another direction, The Shadow overlooked the French Quarter, otherwise the Vieux Carre, which carried the charm of old New Orleans and was a place where many problems might be answered.

A third outlook showed the Mississippi, with its long curved line of docks. There lay the waterfront, where East met West, with North and South to boot, and the law of human survival prevailed in its rawest form. No city in the United States had a more polyglot waterfront than New Orleans, and The Shadow was quite convinced that the men he wanted would be found there.

The New Orleans police had investigated the attempted robbery at the Mayan Museum, but the belief that the marauders had departed empty-handed made the case an empty one, as well. Hence, the law had practically dropped the matter, leaving intensive investigation solely to The Shadow.

On the writing desk lay a list of names, all of persons who might have been concerned. Gamblers, smugglers, petty racketeers, even former politicians, were on The Shadow's list. He had crossed off names, a dozen and more, until only one remained:

Pierre Laboutard.

It was difficult to class Pierre Laboutard. Some termed him a modern Jean Lafitte, a cross between a smuggler and a pirate, yet a heroic figure who would turn patriotic when occasion called. Such a description exaggerated Laboutard.

He had been a rum-runner in the old days, and later had tried to muscle in on the shrimp-fishing industry, to the extent of taking over some fishing shacks from their rightful owners. To save his hide, he had subsequently tipped off Federal authorities to the whereabouts of some gun runners who were shipping weapons to Central America.

Thus Laboutard, the smuggler-pirate who went patriotic, was, in short, a bootlegger and racketeer who had turned State's evidence. Since then, Pierre Laboutard had faded neatly into the background; but he and his mixed tribe still had to live.

Lately, Laboutard Co. hadn't been seen, and it was supposed that they had gone back to the bayous. But The Shadow had traced them to the New Orleans waterfront.

Laboutard wasn't in the habit of leaving a forwarding address, but The Shadow, familiar with life along the New Orleans docks, had finally narrowed down the hunt. Tonight, he expected to call on Laboutard; but first, he had another appointment.

Professor Darius Hedwin had arrived from Mexico, Andy Ames with him. Fitzhugh Salter was holding a reception at the Mayan Museum, in Hedwin's honor, and Lamont Cranston was one of the invited guests. Since the event promised some threads to the past that might lead to the future, The Shadow had decided to attend, and look to Laboutard afterward.

Attired in faultless evening clothes, The Shadow reached the museum, where he was introduced to Professor Hedwin and Andy Ames; Fitzhugh Salter was there, of course, and The Shadow also found Graham Talborn and Eugene Brendle.

Affable as ever, Talborn was surrounded by a group of prosperous looking men, contributors to the museum fund. Talborn's enthusiasm over the museum was quite contagious, and the grizzled exporter was very

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generous in his statements. Though Talborn was the largest contributor to the cause, he shared the credit with others, much to their pleasure.

A contrasting group acknowledged Brendle as their spokesman. They were men connected with the building trades, who had helped in the construction of the museum. There were architects among them, and craftsmen, and they all received a share of praise from Brendle.

The contractor made it quite plain that he had left many of the details to various specialists, knowing that they were both competent and reliable.

One man was noticeably absent: James Carland. He had been invited, as a matter of courtesy, but no one expected him to appear. There was a slight stir, however, when a girl arrived in Salter's office. The Shadow heard her name buzz through the group:

"Yvonne Carland!"

Promptly, The Shadow gathered that the girl was Carland's niece; that she lived in New Orleans with her uncle. She must have inherited her disposition, as well as her looks, from the other side of her family, for she wasn't a bit like her Uncle James.

YVONNE CARLAND was a brunette, with large brown eyes, and a complexion of a delicate cream that made an excellent contrast to her ruddy, smiling lips. Her features, like her name, denoted the French ancestry of her mother's family, while her voice had a slight touch of the musical Louisiana drawl.

"Uncle Jim wouldn't come," Yvonne told Salter, "and I can't say that I blame him. But I thought you ought to know that we appreciated the invitation, so I up and came myself."

Dropping his smug style, Salter became profoundly polite.

"You are very welcome, Miss Carland," he said. "We feel that your uncle would still be one of us, but for his financial problems. We hope you will assure him on that point."

Yvonne shook hands with Professor Hedwin, who scarcely noticed her during the process. His eyes were far away, as though his thoughts were still in Mexico. But Yvonne's eyes, The Shadow noted, were fixed on someone very close at hand. She had a warm smile, too, for Andy Ames.

"I knew you would come," The Shadow heard Andy confide. "Otherwise, I would have telephoned you, Yvonne."

"Which would have been unwise," the girl returned. "It will take a while, Andy, before my uncle will be in a good humor. He won't hear or speak of anyone who has a thing to do with this museum, except Mr. Brendle."

"Because he owes Brendle money?"

"That's why. It's just good policy with Uncle Jim, to be friendly under such circumstances. Honestly, Andy" – the girl's eyes blazed – "sometimes I hate my uncle."

"You haven't anything on Professor Hedwin," said Andy. "All you have to do is say 'James Carland,' and he erupts like a Mexican volcano!"

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Andy's voice had raised a trifle. Hedwin was close enough to hear Carland's name and the reference to the volcano. Instantly, Hedwin's high-pitched voice cackled an interruption to all other conversations.

"James Carland!" he exclaimed. "Why mention the man who tried to destroy all our efforts? He pledged himself to build this museum, and then abandoned us. He used his evil influence on others, too. There was a man from New York, named Jonathan Dorn, who offered to finance my expedition while it was in Yucatan.

"But Carland talked to him and wanted him to put money into rice fields. We heard no more from Dorn. Bah! He was as bad as Carland!

"Don't try to stop me, Salter" – waving his arms, Hedwin pushed the curator away – "because I don't like interruptions. Let me see." The professor's glower became a reflective stare. "What did I intend to tell you? Ah, yes!" Hedwin brightened. "I meant to speak about the volcano; Xitli."

The whole group showed relief as Hedwin changed the subject. They listened, with real interest, while the professor harped upon his theory that the Mayas had identified their fire god with the volcano. Once talking about Xitli, Hedwin became hard to stop.

"Let us go upstairs," he finally suggested, "and I shall show you the prize of this museum – the throne room of Xitli, furnished with the relics that I personally brought back from Cuicuilco."

Riding up in the elevators, the group reassembled outside the throne room. Salter started to turn the combination, but Hedwin pushed him aside. Those two, it seemed, were the only ones who knew the combination to the big strong door.

When he opened the door, Hedwin turned on a light that gave the room a ruddy glow, symbolizing flame.

THE room contained the curios that Hedwin mentioned. Little images of the squatly fire god were in the niches along the walls. Two tablets of stone, with odd hieroglyphics, were on either side of the built-in throne. There were vases and urns about the room, but most important was the seat of the throne itself.

There, The Shadow saw a squarish block of basalt, smooth except for its special markings. He heard Andy telling Yvonne how the professor had unearthed the black stone on the last night at Cuicuilco.

Then, like the rest, The Shadow was watching Professor Hedwin parade across the room, to take his place upon the throne. Seated there, the gray-haired excavator cackled happily.

"I am Xitli!" announced Hedwin. "And you" – he swept his withery hand about the group – "are my followers. Because Xitli had followers" – Hedwin was nodding, wisely – "yes, many of them. The Xitli cult was powerful, and dangerous. It survives to this day, and now its meeting place is in New Orleans, instead of at Cuicuilco!"

Salter was undertoning something to the persons near him. Rising from the throne, Hedwin advanced to the door, demanding sharply:

"What's that you are saying, Salter?"

"I was saying," returned Salter, crisply, "that the Xitli legend as yet remains unproven. This throne room is your whim, Hedwin, not mine."

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Hedwin's scrawny hands came up, as though he intended to dig his clawish fingernails into Salter's throat. With a shrug, the curator turned away.

"Come, let us look at the other exhibits," he said. "Then we'll return downstairs, where a buffet supper has been prepared for us."

It was Andy who restrained old Hedwin, for he knew how to humor the professor. Blocking the door, Andy asked Hedwin to identify the various Xitli images in the niches, according to their inscriptions.

Yvonne Carland looked quite interested; so did Lamont Cranston. Finding that he had an audience, the professor roamed the room, picking out the various figurines and stating in what parts of Mexico he had uncovered them.

By the time Hedwin and his present companions rejoined the group downstairs, the old professor was beaming happily, his feud with Salter forgotten, like his outbursts against Carland and Dorn. In fact, Hedwin became deeply interested when he heard Salter tell about the thwarted robbery of a few nights before.

Both Talborn and Brendle supported Salter's description, and all seemed pleased when they saw Cranston nod his agreement to their account. Meanwhile, the guests were making inroads into the buffet supper, and when the story was finished, Professor Hedwin wagged an oyster fork about the group.

"Those robbers were after the Xitli relics, I warrant," declared the professor, solemnly. "But I tricked them. I didn't ship the Xitli remains; I brought them personally, instead. But I am glad, Salter, that you stopped the robbery. By doing so, you saved some very fine exhibits.

"Which reminds me, Andy" – Hedwin turned to his assistant – "another shipment is arriving tonight, on the Amazonia. It is the last shipment from Mexico. I think that you should be there when the boxes are unloaded."

"You want me to go right away, professor?"

"No, not right away." Hedwin threw a smile toward Yvonne. "I would say that an hour from now would be soon enough. They called me at the hotel, to tell me that the Amazonia had docked; but there is no hurry, Andy. No hurry at all."

Rather gratefully, Andy Ames accepted the professor's decision, because it allowed him another hour with Yvonne Carland. But there was one guest in the group who felt that the matter of the Amazonia demanded prompt attention: Lamont Cranston.

This was the first that The Shadow had heard of another shipment from Mexico. Its significance was plain.

Since crooks had stolen unlisted contents from boxes in the museum cellar, it was likely that they might intend to repeat the operation. But the museum was better protected than before, and this evening it was thronged with people. Which left the criminals one other choice: a robbery before the boxes were unloaded from the Amazonia.

Unnoticed by the chatting group, Cranston left the museum. Stepping into a car, he drove away, drawing a black cloak around his shoulders. Again, Lamont Cranston had become The Shadow, as was evidenced by his whispered laugh as he placed his slouch hat on his head.

The Shadow was bound for the waterfront ahead of schedule, to look up Pierre Laboutard. If he did not find the so-called pirate at the spot where he expected, there would still be another place to look: the wharf where the steamship Amazonia had docked!

CHAPTER VIII. ALONG THE WATERFRONT

BACK from the extensive line of wharves along the Mississippi, the huddled buildings of the waterfront seemed dwarfed and shrunken as they crouched behind the shelter of the levee, where loomed the steel sheds of the wharves.

There was life throughout that district, as mixed as a score of nationalities could make it, and at nightfall the bulking darkness of the sheds shrouded the menace of the district below, frequently hiding deeds as dark as the night itself.

Only the banana wharves presented activity by night; the chief danger in their vicinity was from tarantulas and tropical snakes that came in with banana shipments. But along the docks where coffee and cotton were unloaded, and near the molasses sheds, menace could exist in human form.

Picking his way past waterfront dives that emitted the babble of many tongues, The Shadow reached an old store front that made a forbidding portal. Windows close by betokened watchful eyes, ready to report the advent of any stranger; but no eye could have discerned the cloaked form of The Shadow in that gloom.

Working the door open, The Shadow glided through a pitch-black hallway, down a short flight of steps, to another door that signified a back room. The room was lighted; it contained a crew of rough-clad men, who felt too secure in these preserves to bother about placing a guard on the inner door.

The Shadow was looking in on Pierre Laboutard and his band of thugs. Smugglers, pirates, or mere cutthroats – any of the terms would have suited them. Laboutard, himself, was brawny, hard-faced, and sharp of eye. But the same description applied equally to the rest.

A few were Cajuns, members of the darkish, indefinable race found in the environs of New Orleans. They considered themselves a chosen group, for one of their number was Laboutard's lone lieutenant. Laboutard addressed the fellow as Jaro, and seemed to value his opinions. The rest of the band were largely ex-sailors, of various nationalities.

Laboutard was talking, when The Shadow viewed the meeting through the door crack. The leader's tone came in a forced purr that carried traces of a venomous hiss. Jaro, seated beside Laboutard, saw fit to put in brief comments of his own, supplementing some of the leader's statements.

"Tonight will be one more job," spoke Laboutard. "Like the others, but not at the museum. No. It will be more wise to go to the ship, the Amazonia. What matter if we make much trouble? This one will be the last time. A few can go to the ship more easily than many."

"With me," put in Jaro, tapping his chest. "I pick my men." He pointed to the Cajuns. "I take five."

"Then afterward," continued Laboutard, "after all is over, we come back here. I pay you all; maybe more than the price I promise. Then we wait, and do nothing."

Jaro offered an objection.

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"First you say there was something more," he reminded. "Some more jobs, for special men, that would bring big money, Pierre."

"Ah, oui," recalled Laboutard. "But I have thought it over. I do not like it. To steal, it is easy, even if one have to kill. But to kill for nothing but the pay, is different. It is too foolish."

Jaro looked doubtful on that point, as did several of the others, but Laboutard remained unruffled. He merely made his point more plain.

"One man say steal," he declared, "in a way that nobody find out. We do it, and even with trouble like we have the other night, the police do not bother us. So we can steal more, the same way. Good, eh, Jaro?"

Jaro admitted that it was.

"But another man say kill," added Laboutard, "and when we do, what happen? There will be police everywhere. They ask questions that make trouble for a lot of you, even though they do not arrest for murder."

The ex-sailors caught the point. Some of them would be due for deportation if questioned too closely by the authorities, no matter what the subject.

"So we wait, after tonight," concluded Laboutard, shrewdly, "and then decide what is the best to do. Maybe the man who wish the murder pay for something else. It may be that I know something that he would not like people to hear."

LABOUTARD had made it quite plain that he had two clients: one, who wanted robberies committed and was getting them; the other, a man who desired murder done. In typical fashion, Laboutard was planning a shakedown as an easier way of collecting cash from the second man in question.

The fact that Laboutard had been approached by two different schemers did not strike The Shadow as a coincidence. The simple fact was that Laboutard was the one man in New Orleans best equipped to handle specialized crime. He and his band were the clearing house for such operations.

"I send you, Jaro, to the ship," decided Laboutard. "Go, now, and we can follow. Through the alley will be best for you, while we go out the front. Because maybe you find trouble; but for us, maybe we only watch."

The Shadow took the route through the front door, while Jaro and his squad were sneaking from the back. The cloaked fighter was gone when Laboutard and his reserve crew came sauntering from the front door.

But The Shadow did not pick up Jaro's trail direct. Instead, he took a route of his own to the pier where the Amazonia was docked.

The Amazonia was an old freighter that often berthed in New Orleans. Her mixed cargo wasn't the sort that anyone would want to rifle, hence no pains were taken to protect the ship from boarders. Getting over the rail, The Shadow found a convenient lurking place behind a huge coil of rope, near a hatchway. There, he waited for Jaro and the Cajun squad.

They came on board as stealthily as snakes. Crouching low, they wormed their way to the open hatchway and descended, one by one. When the last had gone, The Shadow moved forward from the rope coil and took a careful look toward the wharf, to make sure that Laboutard and the reserves were not too close at hand.

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Then, two guns drawn, The Shadow turned to make his own descent, intending to surprise Jaro and his Cajuns at work in the hold below.

It was a bold plan, but a sure one, considering The Shadow's methods. He had trapped crooks before, below decks, and knew that they did not like it when boxed. Maybe some shooting would be necessary, but it would be in The Shadow's favor.

His shots would alarm the ship's crew and bring them to take over the prisoners. That would leave The Shadow free to greet Laboutard and the reserves, when they made their delayed arrival.

As The Shadow foresaw it, the surprise would strike Jaro and the Cajuns, and there would be no way for them to reverse the situation.

But there was one factor not in The Shadow's calculations: the chance that Jaro and his men might receive a surprise before The Shadow reached them. Such was to happen, for things were happening below deck without The Shadow's knowledge.

Crouched above boxes which they had rapidly opened, the Cajuns were reaching for heavy burlap sacks that Jaro pointed out, when a stir came from deeper in the hold. Low voices seemed to mutter a chant that was anything but human.

Bounding up from a box, Jaro gave a snarl that showed actual fright, for his superstitious nature was aroused. Then, contemptuously, he flung a light into the depths.

The beam showed a sight that froze the band of Cajuns. They were ready to battle man, beast, or reptile, but not the creatures that came clumping toward them. They were men, yes, those figures from the hold, but a sort that could have come from another world. In fact, they did belong to another period.

They were Aztecs, a dozen of them, lineal descendants of the bronze fighters who had ruled ancient Mexico. Chunky-built, with metallic faces topped by sharp-slanted foreheads, they were clad in dusky garb, the hides of jungle beasts.

For arms, they had stone hatchets, which they raised as they advanced. Then, when Jaro reached for a knife as a suitable weapon for a silent fray, the stony Aztecs lunged.

Jaro sprang away, his knife half drawn. The Cajuns followed their leader, frantically trying to get at weapons of their own. Pursued by the Aztecs, who were charging full force, Jaro and his squad went up through the hatchway at top speed, with an impetus that even a superhuman force could not halt.

The Shadow learned that when he tried to stop them. He greeted Jaro's swarming men with a challenging laugh so startling, coming from darkness, that it would ordinarily have made the superstitious Cajuns falter.

Moreover, he was in among them with his guns, swinging to beat them down into the hatchway. But the terror that pursued the maddened tribe numbed their minds to any menace that might lie ahead.

HOISTED high by the mass of crazed men who erupted from the hatchway, The Shadow was swept back on the crest of a human tidal wave. A light from the ship's bridge showed darkish faces and gleaming knives.

Though too wild to recognize The Shadow as the fighter who had battled them in the museum, Jaro's men saw him as an obstacle to their path and tried to hew him down.

Flaying with his arms, The Shadow beat off the knife thrusts, but could do no more. The swirl carried him to the far rail of the ship, where he managed to disentangle himself, though slashing knives threatened to cut his cloak to ribbons. Spinning sideways, The Shadow brought up against a stanchion and landed on his hands and knees.

Jaro was going overboard, and his men were copying his example except for one who had stumbled short, staggered by a gun blow from The Shadow. The luckless Cajun was on his feet as soon as The Shadow, and seeing the cloaked fighter, the fellow came at him. Grappling, they reeled toward the rail, just as the Aztecs reached the deck.

The excitement on the Amazonia had been heard by Laboutard and his men, who were lurking far back in the darkness of a shed. Wondering what had happened to his shock troops, Laboutard started forward with the reserves. But another man had already reached the scene. Andy Ames had just come from the museum and was stepping on board the Amazonia.

Andy saw The Shadow half across the far rail, a man with a knife poised above him. Andy didn't notice that The Shadow had dropped one gun overboard and had caught the foeman's wrist. Andy was still carrying his revolver, and he used it. His shot clipped the Cajun. With a howl, the wounded man went over the rail, carrying The Shadow with him.

His gunshot echoed by a splash, Andy heard another sound that whizzed past his ear. Something landed with a choppy noise in a post just behind him. In the dim light of the deck, Andy spied the thrower, a squatly man who had come from a hatchway. Remembering the night at Cuicuilco, Andy mistook the Aztec for one of The Shadow's Xincas.

Rather than mistakenly battle a friend, Andy turned for the wharf. Stumbling against the post, he found the object that had driven into it: a stone-headed ax. Yanking the weapon from the post, Andy carried it with him. Hearing a snarly shout from the wharf shed, Andy cut away for cover just as guns began to shoot in his general direction.

Then Laboutard and his mixed reserves were surging on board the Amazonia, expecting to find The Shadow milling with Jaro's Cajuns. Instead, they discovered a deserted deck. Like Jaro's crew, The Shadow had gone overboard, and the Aztecs, too, had disappeared.

The strange men from Mexico had sought battle only to keep their presence unknown. Having cleared the deck, they had taken shore leave before the arrival of Laboutard and his reinforcements. So swiftly had they seized their opportunity that even The Shadow, busied with the Cajuns, had failed to see the Aztecs come and go!

CHAPTER IX. TRAIL DELAYED

COMMOTION broke on the Amazonia as soon as Pierre Laboutard and his men boarded the ship.

Andy's gunshot had wakened members of the sleeping crew, and the volley that Laboutard's followers supplied completely aroused the sailors. But as soon as they poked themselves in sight, Laboutard ordered gunfire that drove the sailors back to cover.

Laboutard ordered half of his men below to complete the robbery that Jaro had begun. They scurried down the hatchway, and the man who remained on deck began exchanging sniping shots with the barricaded sailors.

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All the while, Laboutard was fuming. He knew there would be trouble from the shore, and feared that time would prove too short to complete his purpose.

Things worked to Laboutard's advantage. His men were back in no time, bringing the burlap sacks. Having found the boxes open, they had simply seized the swag. As soon as they arrived, Laboutard ordered a swift trip ashore.

The burden carriers hurried ahead, while Laboutard and the gunners fired shots to keep the sailors of the Amazonia in their quarters.

Attracted by the gunfire, two policemen had reached the wharf. They saw the stooped figures of the scurrying men who carried the bags of loot. Shouting for them to stop, the officers hurried forward, firing warning shots as they came.

It was a serious gesture, for they were unwittingly putting themselves in the path of Laboutard's gun squad, which was coming from the boat.

From the next wharf, where he had found shelter, Andy Ames saw the danger. Andy held two weapons: his revolver in one hand, the Aztec hatchet in the other.

He hesitated a mere moment, then flung the hatchet out into the river, where it landed with a choppy plunk, its stone head carrying it to the muddy bottom. Waving his revolver, Andy dashed toward the Amazonia, shouting a warning to the officers.

"Look out!" he called. "They're coming from the ship, a whole mob with guns!"

Andy didn't give the cops time to doubt. He fired at the gangway of the Amazonia, then dropped for the nearest shelter, easily ahead of the return volley that Laboutard's gunners supplied. But Andy's warning wasn't enough.

This was more than a ship-side quarrel, which the cops mistook it to be. Laboutard had just committed piracy in earnest, and intended to chop down any blockers who might hold him responsible for the deed.

His roustabouts were joined by Jaro and the Cajuns, who had swum around the ship like water rats, to come ashore. Some were surging en masse, to overwhelm the two patrolmen, who by this time were rapidly retiring; while others, men with knives, were creeping in to wipe out Andy, who couldn't see them against the black side of the Amazonia.

Out of that ominous situation came the one challenge that could reverse matters: the laugh of The Shadow!

The black-cloaked fighter had not swum around the Amazonia. Instead, he had returned to the deck by way of the anchor chain. He was on the bridge, boldly placing himself where all could see him, confident that Laboutard's close-range fighters could not put up an accurate fire from the comparatively distant wharf.

Having regained the automatic that he had dropped on deck, The Shadow was proving that long range was his forte. His shots were either nicking Laboutard's followers or ricocheting from the concrete at their feet. With his second gun, The Shadow added side shots toward the knifemen who were creeping toward Andy.

They were too close to the Amazonia to be picked off, but the shots were dangerously close. In scuffling to the wharf edge under the steamship's side, they gave themselves away, and Andy began to blast, glad that his experience at Cuicuilco had taught him to always carry extra ammunition for his revolver.

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Laboutard's whole tribe took the quickest course that offered flight. It was every man for himself, with escape the only object, as they scattered everywhere. Laboutard himself was on the run, and Jaro with him, but when they reached the depths of the shed, the pirate chief and his lieutenants shouted for the tribe to rally.

By then it was too late.

The Shadow's timely demonstration had already brought a compact crew to action. The sailors on the Amazonia were taking over the vessel's deck, armed with a variety of weapons. They heard The Shadow's laugh, saw the pointing stabs of his flashing guns. They took to the land as readily as the Cajuns had gone for the water.

Crippled members of Laboutard's band tried to stop that surge, and the wharf became a general melee, with everything favoring the sailors from the Amazonia. Andy and the officers were coming in to aid, forgetful that Laboutard might rally his remaining men back from the waterfront.

IT was The Shadow who foresaw that complication. Down from the bridge, over the gangway, he was speeding across the wharf, a black-clad avenger whose streaking figure was actually invisible under the gloom of the sheltering shed.

His purpose was to hurl himself as a living bombshell into the cluster that was forming around Laboutard and Jaro.

They were across a street that ran beside a railroad track, and a stretch of light intervened. They spied The Shadow as he reached that last lap and began to scatter, some aiming revolvers, others hurling knives.

Had they remained grouped, The Shadow would have launched into their midst; but since they were scattering of their own volition, he simply went into the next stage of his clean-up.

Wheeling back into darkness, The Shadow jabbed telling shots at flashing guns, shifting his own position with such alacrity that his foemen were belated when they tried to pick his gun bursts as targets.

Nor did The Shadow's mocking laugh give them a key. It could have come from anywhere – or from nowhere.

Laboutard's baffled band was in a tight spot, when a big spotlight suddenly blazed in from a corner. It showed The Shadow, a sleek shape in black, dripping from his trip into the river. Guns began a haphazard tattoo in his direction.

The light was from a police car that covered the waterfront. Its occupants mistook The Shadow for the prime trouble-maker, and to add to the complication, other cars were coming up to follow the example of the first. The Shadow's only course was landward flight. As he sped in one direction to elude the revealing lights, Laboutard's fighters fled in another.

Still misguided, the cops in police cars tried to hunt down The Shadow. Those that stopped at the wharf learned of the mistake, but by then the pursuers were too far away. They spotted The Shadow at infrequent intervals as he took to alleyways.

Finally reaching his car, The Shadow managed to get a start to safety, but to avoid a clash with the police, he was forced to drive away from the city's center instead of toward it.

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Meanwhile, order had been restored near the Amazonia. Laboutard's cripples had fought to the death; not one remained to name the leader who had ordered them into combat.

Andy Ames explained how he had happened to come to the wharf, and sailors from the Amazonia supported him with the testimony that the ship had boxes for the Mayan Museum in its cargo.

Accompanied by a police captain who had taken charge, Andy went on board to examine the boxes. Not only did the shipment appear rifled, but sailors testified that they had seen marauders fleeing with loaded sacks. Nevertheless, the remaining contents of the boxes coincided with a list that Andy had brought from the museum.

It didn't puzzle Andy. He remembered how Panchez and the mestizos had gathered loot on the way from Yucatan. It was plain that they had shipped it with the relics that the expedition had accumulated. Goods for the Mayan Museum had been passed, almost unexamined, by Mexican officials and United States customs officers.

When the police decided that the sacks might have come from elsewhere in the ship's cargo, the men on the Amazonia admitted that such might be the case. But Andy was thinking in terms of Professor Hedwin and Fitzhugh Salter, wondering if one or the other could have been responsible for what had happened.

Accompanied by the police captain, Andy returned to the museum. Most of the guests had gone, but the rest were listening to a hectic argument between Hedwin and Salter on the subject of the fire god, Xitli. Graham Talborn and Eugene Brendle were still present; so was Yvonne Carland.

Though Hedwin and Salter seldom agreed on anything, both the professor and the curator were satisfied when Andy announced that the list showed nothing stolen. Hedwin couldn't remember precisely what had gone in various shipments, and Salter declared that all typewritten lists were precise copies of those that Hedwin had sent him.

Hence, Andy's quandary still continued until a new and rather startling element developed. It came when a police car arrived, bringing a darkish, ugly-faced prisoner whose arm was bandaged.

Andy recognized that the fellow must be the Cajun who had grappled The Shadow by the rail of the Amazonia. The man's wound was from the bullet that Andy had triggered.

FISHED from the river by the police, the prisoner was in a mood to talk. He was telling a certain amount of truth because he thought it would be for his benefit and Laboutard's.

The Cajun insisted that he hadn't been on the Amazonia at all, but had simply been strolling along the wharf when trouble began. That much was false, but the fellow followed it with facts.

He said that men from the Amazonia had started all the trouble; strange men, whose faces looked like copper and whose garments were the rough hides of animals. When he came to the description of their sloping foreheads there was an interruption from Hedwin.

"Aztecs!" exclaimed the professor, as if quite pleased. "Stowaways from Mexico. Do you know why they are here?" He shot the question at Salter. "They have heard that the temple of Xitli has been restored. My theories are proven!"

"Nonsense!" returned the curator. "Your talk of Xitli is all fol-de-rol. I've let you go too far with it, Hedwin, merely because I didn't want to argue."

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"What about the mask and robe?" queried Hedwin narrowly. "The costume that you were unable to identify when you put labels on the rest?"

"It is merely an unclassified exhibit," defined Salter. "There is nothing to prove that it represented Xitli. It could belong to any unknown Mayan deity."

Hedwin retorted that there were no unknown Mayan gods, with the possible exception of Xitli. The discussion brought smiles from Talborn and Brendle, who were anxious to see how far it would go. But the police captain wasn't interested in Mayan lore.

"Let's drop this X god," he stormed, "and talk about the Aztecs. They sound phony to me" – he was turning to glare at the Cajun – "and unless somebody else got a look at them, and I mean somebody reliable, we'll count them out."

Looking for someone reliable, the captain noticed Andy Ames and decided that his opinion would do.

"You were there at the start, Ames," he said. "You have already stated that you saw a bunch that looked like Cajuns, along with a crowd of roustabouts. This man" – he nudged toward the prisoner – "and the dead ones at the dock support that statement. But did you see any Aztecs?"

Stolidly, Andy shook his head. He did not feel that he was telling a silent lie. In his opinion, the squatly man who had thrown the stone hatchet was a member of some unknown tribe and could not be classed as an Aztec.

Coupled to that was Andy's recollection of the Xincas who had served The Shadow. They fell under Andy's classification of an "unknown tribe." Andy was sure that the hatchet man had come after him by mistake. There had been other mistakes later in the battle at the wharf, and by rectifying one, Andy felt that he was returning a favor to The Shadow.

It never occurred to him that he might be making a greater mistake than all the rest combined, that there had been many stone-faced men on board the Amazonia, and that those stowaways, all actual Aztecs, were now loose in New Orleans, forming a murderous flock.

"No Aztecs," decided the police captain. He turned to the Cajun: "Come along, you, and keep your trap shut until you're ready to give us a straight story."

Trucks had arrived with the boxes from the Amazonia; all were unloaded and safely stored in the cellar of the museum. Fitzhugh Salter was preparing to close the big pyramid for the night. Ready to leave with the rest, Andy Ames was wondering what had become of The Shadow.

It did not occur to him that The Shadow's trail should rightfully have led back to the Mayan Museum, but that it had been delayed by the interference of the police. Nor did Andy realize that The Shadow was the one person who could have properly judged the statement of the captured Cajun.

This was a time when something that The Shadow had not learned was to prove a hideous factor in schemes of monstrous crime!

CHAPTER X. THE CULT OF XITLI

ALL was quiet outside the Mayan Museum, but the calm itself was so intense that it gave Yvonne Carland the shivers. She pointed to the shrubbery surrounding the pyramid and remarked to Andy that she could

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almost see the bushes move, as though lurkers were creeping from them.

The comment brought a cackly laugh from Professor Hedwin. He squinted at the bushes, then nodded wisely in support of Yvonne's opinion; but he made no mention of Aztecs.

"Perhaps she is right, Andy," declared Hedwin. "I would advise you to look out for Miss Carland and see her safely home. From all reports, you handled yourself well down at the wharf. If other dangers are abroad, you can protect Miss Carland from them."

With a bow that signified good night, the professor entered a cab and rode away, leaving Andy with Yvonne. Smilingly, Andy asked if he could see Yvonne home. The girl started to nod, then shook her head.

"It wouldn't be best, Andy," she asserted. "My uncle might be up, and he wouldn't like to know that I was really friendly with anyone connected with the recent expedition."

Graham Talborn was standing by. He had heard all the comments. The affable exporter gave a disappointed smile.

"I was going to offer to take you home," he said to Yvonne, "in case Andy did not qualify. But it seems that I am on the blacklist, too. Good night."

Eugene Brendle stepped up when Graham Talborn had strolled away. Brendle offered a prompt solution to the dilemma.

"Come in my car," he told Yvonne. "I'll drop you off at the apartment. If your uncle is watching, he will recognize the car. He doesn't regard me as connected with the museum. I'm only a contractor who couldn't help myself."

Yvonne left with Brendle, and Andy strolled glumly to his car. He took a look at the shrubbery as he drove away and noticed that huddling clumps did seem to move, as Yvonne had suggested. But Andy attributed it to the swing of the car lights.

One man alone remained at the museum: Fitzhugh Salter. The curator was locking the huge front door, and all the while he was wearing a half-smug smile. He glanced sharply about the premises, then walked away on foot. Salter lived in the vicinity of the museum and never used a car.

The stir about the grounds became actual. Squatty figures approached the museum itself. Probing along the walls, they must have found secret places of entry, for they gradually disappeared. Then came a half-hour of profound calm, until another visitor appeared upon the scene.

He was crouched, and he kept his face well buried in the collar of a light overcoat that was turned up about his chin. If he had come from a car, he must have left it a few blocks away. His tactics were rapid, as well as sneaky. Rounding the corner of the museum, he disappeared.

Within the terraced walls of the great pyramid, creeping men were moving upward by degrees. They were the Aztecs from the Amazonia, and they were feeling out their new preserves.

Clever enough to find some secret route that had been left open for them, they were looking for suitable lurking spots in the museum itself, and were discovering them among the passages and rooms of the lower floors. But always their path continued upward.

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Only once did the Aztecs pause when the rumble of an elevator told them that someone was ascending more rapidly, passing them on the way. Tightening their grips on the stone axes that they carried, the Aztecs kept on toward their top-floor goal.

Ahead of them, the man with the concealing overcoat reached the exhibit room that held the costumes. He unlocked it quite readily with a master key. With a flashlight, he picked out the unclassified costume that Hedwin had identified with Xitli.

Disposing of his overcoat, he clad himself in the ancient garb. Turning on a light in the inner corridor, the masquerader stepped into the glow.

HE was both hideous and imposing in his new attire. The mask was greenish, composed from bits of jade, but with black lips and eyes formed of jet. His robe was crimson, with streaks of vermilion and dashes of yellow, including varying shades of scarlet and orange.

The whole effect was one of vivid flame, the symbol of Xitli, the fire god.

In fact, the masquerader was Xitli – to the Aztecs, when they saw him. Arriving from the stairs, they lowered their stone axes and stood in respectful silence as the fire god addressed them with a hiss. His words, plucked from the vocabulary of the ancient Mayan, pronounced him as the true Xitli.

Then, in case his words did not suffice, Xitli advanced with extended hands which were encased in rough gauntlets that had come with the costume. From one clenched fist he flung a small vial, which cracked on the floor in front of the stolid Aztecs.

There was a burst of dazzling flame that left a quantity of pungent smoke. Their eyes dazzled by the flash, their nostrils stifled by the fumes, the Aztecs drew away with startled babbles. When their sight was clear again, Xitli was gone.

A few minutes passed while the crouching Aztecs waited. Where Xitli had gone was a total mystery to them.

He could have retired along the corridor or he could have passed right through their midst to reach the stairs. However, their blinking eyes were fixed upon one given spot: the door of the throne room.

It was suddenly swung open from within. The hand that shoved it was withdrawn. Approaching, the Aztecs stared into the room itself, to see Xitli standing beside his throne. His pointing finger indicated the black stone that formed the throne's seat.

As his followers entered the room, giving deep-throated tones of elation, Xitli calmly seated himself upon the basalt slab.

Immediately the Aztecs huddled to the floor. To these descendants of the Xitli cult, whose worship of the fire god had been transmitted down through successive generations, mere possession of that throne established the flame-costumed man as a living deity. Tradition had it that if a usurper sat in the throne of Xitli, fire would destroy him.

Such was the legend of Cuicuilco. Once, so the story ran, a Mayan emperor had taken the throne of Xitli with the approval of his people. The fire god had therewith destroyed the entire city, along with its human ruler, by an overwhelming outpour of green-hot flame and molten rock from the volcanic crater which, therewith, had been named Xitli, in honor of the fire god who controlled it.

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Those excavators who worked with Professor Hedwin were men of sufficient Aztec blood to fear the basalt throne slab when they uncovered it. In fact, Hedwin had hazily indicated such facts in a pamphlet which he had written and given to Salter.

Amused by the professor's literary effort, the curator had shown the pamphlet freely. One of Hedwin's "daydreams," Salter had termed it; something that no one could believe.

But these Aztecs accepted such facts, and more. They were of the pure strain that composed the long-smoldering Xitli cult. Presumably extinct, like the crater near Cuicuilco, they had been awaiting the eruption that would bring them back into their own. That time had come, thanks to the green-masked man who occupied the Xitli throne.

Above the mask, Xitli wore a feathered headgear that matched the rest of his barbaric costume. Those feathers had the dye of flame that gave added bearing to the pose of Xitli. By way of emphasizing his power, the pretended fire god repeated the trick that he had performed in the hall. He threw another vial and let it burst into flame.

To the untutored Aztecs, who had no knowledge of modern chemicals, the act was some of Xitli's magic. They expected the fire god to disappear; instead, this time he remained.

From the black, frozen lips of his mask he spoke again, slowly, forcing his words, yet making them plain. He was telling the members of his cult that a duty lay ahead.

It was a task that pleased them.

Voices mingled in obedience. Hands gripped stone weapons with new fervor. A wave of Xitli's hand brought his worshippers to their feet. A dozen or more, they were waiting only the fire god's departure before proceeding with the task assigned. They expected another of Xitli's remarkable demonstrations, and he did not disappoint them.

A fling of Xitli's hand, a puff of fire more vivid than the one before. When the smoke cleared, Xitli had vanished. The Aztecs left the throne room and started for the stairs.

When they had gone, Xitli himself appeared surprisingly from the room that they had left. Closing its door, he went back to the costume room and disposed of his flame-hued garb.

Again wearing his muffling overcoat, he descended in the elevator, once more passing the Aztecs, who were taking the slower stairway route.

THE modern Xitli had overlooked one detail. In leaving the throne room open while meeting with his followers, he had supposed that the glare of his chemical flame could not be seen from the windows of the top floor.

He was right, so far as a view from the ground was concerned, because a series of broad terraces intervened.

It happened, however, that an observer was much closer at hand. The Shadow had returned to the museum; desiring to visit its interior, he was scaling the smooth walls at the time the flash came.

The Shadow was using his favorite method for the climb. He was wearing rubber suction cups on hands and feet, squidging those concave disks against the smooth wall that rose from one terrace to the next.

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His eyes, looking upward, caught the reflection of the final flash – dim, yet sufficient to tell that something was amiss. The Shadow paused, clinging to the wall; then, on the theory that he might find an inner route from some hidden entrance below, he started downward.

He made rapid progress, for the terraces were only a dozen feet in height, each an easy drop to the one below it.

By the time The Shadow reached the ground, the man from the elevator had gone. But The Shadow's keen eyes picked out the swift-moving figures of the Aztecs who had just come from the pyramid. On foot, The Shadow took up their trail, to find it one of the shiftiest that he had ever attempted to follow.

Had there been less of the Aztecs, The Shadow would have lost them. But with a dozen or more, he was able to gain fleeting glimpses of different natives at sufficient intervals to remain upon their route. It led through dilapidated districts, where houses were thicker, until finally it reached the narrow streets of the French quarter.

There, under a line of balconies, The Shadow found the trail was gone. His only course was to eliminate the places that the Aztecs would have avoided, particularly lighted streets. Choosing alleyways and courtyards, The Shadow soon narrowed down his search, but still he was hunting in the dark.

It was too late to give any sort of alarm that would arouse the neighborhood and bring the police. If the Aztecs were true followers of Xitli, they would hurry whatever deadly work had been assigned to them. Grimly, The Shadow kept to his silent task, yet in the stillness of the alleyways he sensed the ominous.

Death was on the move tonight. Murder insidious, which even the hand of The Shadow might be too late to prevent.

CHAPTER XI. KILLERS BY NIGHT

YVONNE CARLAND wasn't sleepy, though she had gone to bed immediately upon arriving home. The brisk ten-minute ride in Brendle's car had fully roused her by the time she reached the French quarter – Vieux Carre – where her uncle's apartment was located.

The reason Yvonne had gone to bed was because her uncle was asleep when she arrived. She knew that if he awakened and found her still up, he would start to quibble because she had gone to the museum reception.

So Yvonne had undressed in the darkness of her room, to spend the next three quarters of an hour lying in bed, listening to distant sounds of merriment which pervaded the Vieux Carre.

It gradually dawned on her that she hadn't bothered to look at her watch; when she did, she found that it was still early. She began to feel quite foolish at coming home so soon.

Andy had said something about looking up some friends in town. They were all in Yvonne's set, and were probably having a party somewhere. Andy had mentioned it before his visit to the waterfront; probably he would remember the invitation, if reminded.

Yvonne decided to make a call to Andy's hotel, so she slipped from bed and went to the telephone in the hall.

Cautiously, she called Andy's hotel, but found he wasn't there. She asked if he happened to be in Hedwin's room, and learned that the professor had left word that he wasn't to be disturbed.

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Yvonne was debating whether to get dressed and go out, or to return to bed and try to sleep, when her uncle's door opened on the other side of the hall.

Glaring at his nightgowned niece, Carland demanded to know whom she had called. Very sweetly, Yvonne replied that she had heard the telephone bell ring, but that no one was on the wire when she answered.

"Perhaps it was Cranston!" exclaimed Carland. Then, shaking his head: "No; he only had my old address. Bah! What a fool I was to move to this place!"

"I like Frenchtown," replied Yvonne demurely. "It has become quite fashionable to live here, uncle."

"Not when people know you're broke," snapped Carland. "Which I wouldn't be, if I hadn't sunk so much money into that museum. The nerve of that crowd, expecting me to fork over a hundred thousand more after my oil concessions were lost. By the way" – his eyes went sharp – "who brought you home, Yvonne?"

"Your friend, Mr. Brendle," the girl replied. "And if you don't mind, I'm going back to bed and get some sleep."

Again in bed, more wide awake than ever, Yvonne tried to forget the distant music that floated into the courtyard on which the second-story apartment opened. Her system was to concentrate on closer sounds, and she began to hear them, but not in a pleasant fashion.

There were creaks in the hall, strange whispers that Yvonne could not define. Sometimes her uncle paced the hall, muttering to himself, but these sounds were less noticeable. So stealthy, in fact, that Yvonne would not have heard them if her ears had not been more than usually alert.

They were sounds that she finally classed as imaginary, but she still wanted to satisfy her mind about them. She felt that by merely opening the door of the bedroom and glancing into the hall, she could put her worries at rest.

Opening the door, Yvonne looked toward the end of the hall, where a window opened on a little balcony. The window had ornamental bars, and as Yvonne gazed she saw two objects that looked like snake heads come up to the grille. They made a twisting motion, then were gone, so suddenly that Yvonne believed she had imagined it.

She was scared, none the less, and when she stood behind the door that she had automatically closed, she listened intently for further sounds. None came, and the silence terrified her.

She opened the door again; seeing the window vacant, she stole toward it. When she arrived there she gave a horrified gasp.

The things that she had seen were hands, powerful ones. Though they had gone, they had left the evidence of their work. The window bars were lying on the balcony, twisted into pretzel shape. Any hands that could so silently have made a hash of wrought iron must be possessed of terrific strength.

TURNING about, Yvonne saw that her uncle's door was ajar, a dim light coming from it. She felt he ought to know what had happened; that he might be able to do something about it. Still, it wasn't wise to call him; judgment told her to approach his room cautiously.

Not having bothered to put on slippers, Yvonne was able to reach the door very silently. But the moment that she peered through the opening, a total horror froze her.

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She saw the same darkish hands that she had viewed before, but this time they were dealing with an object more pliable than iron bars. Those hands were tight-clenched upon a human neck, bringing a face into the light.

Whatever horror Yvonne felt was written tenfold upon the features above those gripping hands. The face belonged to James Carland; it was petrified in death.

The killer's pressure had seemingly bulged Carland's eyes and forced his tongue to its full extension. As Yvonne swayed, the movement enabled her to see the murderer's coppery face, as well as his tawny hands. It was a stony face, yet its very mold seemed one of venom. The man was relishing his evil handiwork as only a savage could.

Memories of her museum visit swept through Yvonne's brain. This man was an Aztec, a member of the Xitli cult that Professor Hedwin had likened to the thugs of India. He was a strangler, whose weapons were his fingers; a fiend inhuman, who served an ancient fire god. Those thoughts came almost in a single flash, and Yvonne's mind was too crowded to think of anything else.

Her scream therefore was involuntary, and louder than any she would have normally given. It must have carried through the outer courtyard and off into the alleyways beyond. Her own vocal effort even startled Yvonne from her lethargy before the Aztec could spring about.

The girl was dashing frantically along the hallway while the killer was still reaching for the stone-headed knife that he wore in his belt. Yvonne's one hope was to reach the balcony before she could be overtaken.

She managed it so well that she was scrambling through the window before her pursuer reached the hall. But on the balcony she encountered a new menace.

A figure came over the rail, another of the squatly Aztecs, his hatchet already in his hand. Sight of the frail, cringing girl slowed the would-be killer, but only because of his contempt. He was choosing the side of Yvonne's neck, above her shuddering shoulder, as a target for his weapon. The girl's eyes went shut, her lips were gaspless, as she saw the hatchet begin its swinging curve.

The roar that came from the courtyard was indefinable to Yvonne. It was the burst of a gun, accompanied by echoes from the walls about. To Yvonne it sounded as a blast of doom; which it was, but not for her. A whirl of air went by her cheek; a lunging body struck the balcony rail beside her.

Opening her eyes, Yvonne saw the floundering Aztec; as she turned her head, she struck against the stone ax, buried deep in the window frame. Then, from the courtyard, she heard a strange laugh that awoke new quivers from the surrounding walls. Yvonne saw her rescuer – a marksman cloaked in black who held a smoking automatic.

Guided by Yvonne's first shriek, The Shadow had arrived in time to turn the course of the Aztec's ax by planting a bullet between the savage's shoulders.

Danger wasn't past. Yvonne remembered the killer inside the apartment. Coming up to the balcony rail, she beckoned frantically to The Shadow. At the same time she saw a ladder extending up from the courtyard, the route that the Aztecs had used for the invasion.

The Shadow was reaching the ladder with rapid strides, but Yvonne feared that he could not possibly arrive in time.

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With both hands, the girl grabbed the hatchet in the window frame and tried to tug it free. It came loose and she sprawled backward, half across the rail. She was facing the window, and there she saw her uncle's murderer.

The Aztec saw Yvonne, too, and seemed to gloat at her helpless plight. Off balance, her arms flung apart, Yvonne was so posed that the killer had her heart as a target for his ax.

Again the downward swing of a stone hatchet was beaten by the upward stab of a gun. The Shadow had actually leaped half up the ladder, to thrust the point of his gun between the iron posts below the balcony rail.

The impact of the bullet from his .45 jolted the sturdy Aztec, sending the tawny knife-hand high. Again a stone weapon whirled past Yvonne, this time skimming just above her upturned face.

The Shadow was across the rail. Plucking Yvonne from her resting place, he swept her through the window, where she landed, breathless, upon the hallway floor. The stone ax was gone from her hand; she had dropped it over the balcony rail into the courtyard.

She didn't need a weapon while The Shadow was at hand. Still, she could not understand why this black-clad fighter had flung her to safety when the danger was all over.

Then Yvonne saw that danger was not ended.

THE crippled Aztecs were on their feet, both clutching at the cloaked foe who had downed them. A single bullet couldn't finish those stony fighters unless planted in their hearts. Their hatchets gone, they were battling The Shadow barehanded, but their wounds had given them a frenzied power.

The Shadow's gun swings couldn't dent the thick skulls of the stony men, nor was he able to work his muzzle past their warding hands. Hopelessly, Yvonne saw them bend The Shadow half across the rail and thought that no power could save him.

He sagged, then came up with a whip action that quivered his entire form. The snap, to Yvonne's amazement, catapulted one Aztec over the rail. Twisting away from the other's lunge, The Shadow made a cross swing with his gun, hooking the killer underneath the chin.

This leverage sent the Aztec backward, and The Shadow's other arm did the rest. Sweeping up, it lifted the Aztec's legs and tilted the wounded fighter over the rail, where he plunged to join his companion. It was a timely disposal of a troublesome foe, for The Shadow had more by that time.

A third member of the murderous tribe was coming over the rail to the balcony, and Yvonne saw a fourth slanted face on the ladder below. These fighters had their axes, which made The Shadow's chances look slim until he gave them battle. Then he proved that the swing of a stone ax was more to his liking than the clutch of tawny hands.

The Shadow sledged one knife hand with his gun and stabbed the other with a bullet. Borne toward the rail by the man on the balcony, he twisted as he met the one from the ladder, letting one Aztec bear the brunt of the other's drive.

Each was grabbing, one-handed, for The Shadow, and he was wrenching from their combined grasp in a style that this time indicated easy victory.

XITLI, GOD OF FIRE

The fault lay with the balcony rail. It couldn't stand the strain of triple weight. It broke, and the fighters fell from Yvonne's sight, carrying the ladder with them. Like the enemies that he had conquered, The Shadow had gone to the stone courtyard a dozen feet below!

On the balcony again, Yvonne saw The Shadow. He was on his feet, miraculously intact, but he was reeling as he stabbed wild shots, not at four savages, but more than twice that number.

Fortunately, the servers of Xitli had tasted enough of The Shadow's bullets, and supposed that his shots were taking effect. Moreover, they had their crippled companions to look after.

Yvonne saw the Aztecs, making off through a passage on the other side of the courtyard, dragging their wounded with them. The Shadow was staggering after them, blundering into walls and doorways, but still blasting shots that hurried the fugitives along their way.

Dazed from the ordeal, Yvonne regained her senses to find herself back in bed. Andy Ames was standing beside her, waving back police who wanted to question her.

Mechanically, Yvonne told her hazy story of savage fighters beaten off by a foeman cloaked in black – a tale so fantastic that all listeners except Andy believed it the result of Yvonne's strained imagination.

Even Andy had his doubts. He, too, had been rescued by The Shadow, but he couldn't understand about the Aztecs. Grimly, Andy kept his silence, wondering how well The Shadow had fared at the finish of the fray.

Yvonne's final description of The Shadow's staggery departure made it seem that the victor's plight might be worse than that of his conquered foemen.

CHAPTER XII. CRIME'S SEQUEL

LATE the next afternoon, Andy Ames stopped at the Mayan Museum to talk to Fitzhugh Salter. He felt that the curator was the one man who might be able to link events that seemed divided between Mexico and Louisiana.

Andy's suggestion that the men who murdered James Carland might have been Aztecs produced a smile from Salter. The curator summed up the case quite simply.

"You have spent too much time with Professor Hedwin," he told Andy. "Unconsciously, you have absorbed some of his strange notions. His talk of the Xitli cult is quite convincing, of course, and I noticed last night that such men as Talborn and Brendle were impressed by it. Probably the same applied to Yvonne Carland.

"She was distraught by her uncle's death, and her imagination became overworked. Until we have proof that an Xitli cult exists – and I assure you that I shall give the possibility a thorough and impartial study – we must accept the opinion of the police; namely, that James Carland was murdered by local assassins."

Leaving the museum, Andy wondered if he should have told Salter all that he knew. Andy was in a serious dilemma, for he felt that he had put the law on a wrong trail. It went back to last night, when Andy had spiked the testimony of the captured Cajun regarding strange men from the Amazonia.

Should he reverse his own statements, Andy would put himself in a serious position, one that might involve actual suspicion on the part of the police, who were not inclined to accept Yvonne's description of the men who had slain her uncle.

XITLI, GOD OF FIRE

It would be better not to talk about the stone hatchet that Andy had thrown into the river, though Yvonne, too, had mentioned such weapons. None of the primitive hatchets had been found in the courtyard outside the Carland apartment, which meant that the invaders must have carried them away.

In fact, Andy himself was doubtful of Yvonne's testimony; not regarding the actual presence of the squatly men, but as to their actual number.

From certain facts, Andy was trying to size the whole situation. He knew that The Shadow was in New Orleans; that the cloaked fighter had helpers who looked like Aztecs, but were not. Assuming that the squatly man on the Amazonia was one of The Shadow's Xincas, Andy naturally presumed that Yvonne had seen men of the same type at the time of her uncle's death.

She could have mistaken them for the killers, and supposed that they were the men The Shadow battled later. But she talked of many, not a mere few, which rather puzzled Andy. He didn't want to fall into the same error as the police, that of regarding Yvonne's story as sheer imagination. But he found himself taking a halfway view of it.

It never occurred to Andy that The Shadow might not have brought his Xincas to New Orleans at all. But Andy Ames did strike upon the theory that the Xincas themselves might be worshippers of Xitli, who had suddenly revolted against their proper chief, The Shadow.

The idea gave Andy qualms, for it brought back the question of last night: how had The Shadow fared after staggering off into the night, as Yvonne had described?

FROM the window of his office in the Mayan Museum, Fitzhugh Salter was watching Andy Ames stroll slowly along the street. The smug curator evidently guessed that Andy was in a quandary, for his smile had broadened by the time Andy was out of sight.

Returning to his desk, Salter began to thumb through a sheaf of typewritten sheets that pertained to the ancient Mayan language.

These were revisions of an earlier manuscript that the museum had already published. The work engrossed Salter so completely that it was dark when he again looked toward the window. It was time to close the museum, so Salter went out and locked the door, but did not leave. Instead, he returned to his office and drew the window shades down.

To all appearances the museum was closed for the night. Deep dusk was settling when a taxicab stopped at the nearest corner and a man alighted from it. As soon as the cab had left, the man walked toward the museum and stopped to gaze at the great pyramid. There was still enough light to show his face; it was the withery countenance of Professor Darius Hedwin.

Like probing gimlets, the professor's sharp eyes picked out a tiny crack of light that issued past one of the drawn shades in Salter's office. For a short while Hedwin rubbed his chin; then, giving a cackly laugh, the professor sidled away in stoop-shouldered fashion off into the increasing darkness.

This was a cloudy evening. Tonight the shrubbery was invisible. Only the museum itself could be seen – like ghostly steps, moving up toward the blackened sky. A perfect night for an outsider to approach unseen. Once inside the museum, anyone could prowl at will.

Thus it was not surprising that things occurred, a short while later, on the top floor of the pyramid.

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As on the previous night, the flame-robed, green-masked figure of Xitli made a sudden appearance from the room that held the costumes. His casting of a chemical flare was the signal that brought a horde of Aztecs from their hiding places to greet their feathered chief.

This time the door of the throne room stood wide. When Xitli entered and took to his throne, the Aztecs followed at the fire god's beckon.

Xitli questioned them with brief, hissed words. They gave their story of the night before. Xitli sat silent, his eyes glistening through the inlaid jet that formed the eye slits of his mask. The Aztecs waited fearfully, until his hissed voice came again, telling them that what they had done was good.

Evidently Xitli was pleased because of Carland's death; enough so to excuse his followers for their failure to slay Yvonne and their inability to overwhelm The Shadow. Then, in his same forced tone, the fire god spoke new instructions, which the crouching Aztecs accepted as absolute. A fling of Xitli's hand produced a glare that dazzled them; then Xitli was gone.

Stealthily, the Aztecs stole down the stairs, to find the exit that took them out into the night. Later there was a rumble of the elevator which signified that Xitli, too, had come down from the top-most floor. But the thick darkness outside the museum was too deep to reveal any departure by those who had assembled in the throne room.

The gleam of street lamps a block away did show a pair of squatly men moving from the direction of the Mayan Museum. It was fortunate that Andy Ames was not on hand to view that pair. He would have believed that his doubtful theories were actually correct. For the two who passed that light were not Aztecs; they were The Shadow's Xinka servants, mysteriously arrived in New Orleans!

WHILE strange events were occurring near the Mayan Museum, Andy Ames was dining with Yvonne Carland in a private room of the second floor of a French restaurant. They were avoiding discussion of the night before; rather, their talk concerned the future as a relief from the horrible past.

Though Yvonne regretted her uncle's death, Andy knew quite well that she held no sentiment for James Carland. Yvonne's own parents were dead, and it had been Carland's duty to administer the small fund that they had left their daughter.

Yvonne had been living with her uncle not just as a measure of economy, but because she knew that she would have to watch her money as long as he held control of it.

All that was ended; from now on Yvonne could handle her own affairs. She was to inherit Carland's money; too; but his estate consisted largely of debts. They were not the sort that Yvonne would ever have to pay; still, they worried her.

"When Mr. Talborn arrives," declared Yvonne, "I am going to tell him that whatever money is left will go to the museum fund toward the pledge that my uncle did not keep."

"Talborn will be glad to hear it," returned Andy, "if he ever gets here. I wonder what's keeping him? I called him right after I left the museum, and he said he would join us within an hour. But it's been more than that —"

There was an interrupting knock, followed by Talborn himself. Smiling apologetically, the affable exporter explained his delay. There had been some mix-up in a cotton shipment which had forced him to remain at his office. Seating himself at the table, Talborn ordered dinner. His smile faded suddenly when Yvonne began:

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"There is something I must tell you, Mr. Talborn. It concerns my uncle and the money he pledged to the museum –"

"One moment, Yvonne," Talborn interrupted. "I think that we should consider that particular subject as closed. None of the men who took over his pledges – that is, persons like myself – felt any animosity toward James Carland. I, for one, could not possibly have been responsible for his death."

Talborn's manner rather shocked Yvonne, particularly as she had not intended to blame him. Knowing what was in Yvonne's mind, Andy promptly intervened by questioning Talborn very bluntly:

"Who do you think might be responsible?"

"I don't know," returned Talborn, "but there were persons whose plans were badly hampered when Carland failed to supply the promised funds."

Andy went hot beneath his collar. One such person might be Fitzhugh Salter, whose job as curator had depended on the completion of the Mayan Museum. Another happened to be Professor Hedwin, who had faced the problem of a stranded expedition in Yucatan. But Andy himself had been with the expedition and could take Talborn's thrust as a personal one.

It was Yvonne who tactfully veered the discussion to safer ground. Quite coolly, she said:

"I was starting to tell you, Mr. Talborn, that I intend to pay my uncle's pledge, in part, at least, from whatever funds his estate provides."

Immediately Talborn became his affable self, but his head-shake was a doubtful one.

"A generous offer," he said, "but I doubt that Carland's debts will be covered. You must remember that he owed fifty thousand dollars to Eugene Brendle, in return for which he gave the worthless marshland."

Yvonne's lips tightened. She had to agree that the so-called rice fields were worthless. Too often she had heard her uncle boast of the shrewd deal that he had made when he borrowed the cash from Brendle. He said that if he failed to promote the rice fields, he would let Brendle keep the swampland.

"Mr. Brendle will come first," assured Yvonne. "When I see him I shall tell him so."

YVONNE hadn't long to wait. At that moment Brendle made an unexpected entrance. The stocky contractor was quite excited and greatly pleased to see Yvonne. He pulled a telegram from his pocket and handed it to the girl.

"For your uncle," said Brendle. "They sent it over to my office. It's from Jonathan Dorn, the man who was going to finance the rice fields. I've been looking all over town for you, Yvonne."

The telegram stated that Dorn was arriving on his yacht that evening and would expect Carland to meet him. The yacht was to dock on Lake Pontchartrain, in the northern section of New Orleans. Quite obviously, Dorn had not heard of Carland's death.

"We should see Dorn at once," insisted Brendle. "It means a lot to both of us, Yvonne. If he really intends to finance the rice lands, he might pay more than fifty thousand dollars –"

"Or less," put in Talborn. "But don't worry, Brendle. Whatever comes from the property will go toward paying the money that Carland owed you."

"I'm sorry," apologized Brendle. "I only thought –"

"We know what you thought," interposed Talborn. "Carland stuck you with those swamp acres, Brendle, and you want Yvonne to help you get rid of them."

"An outrageous accusation, Talborn."

Andy arose, to come between the pair. As he urged Brendle toward the door, Andy supplied a statement that soothed his own feelings as much as Brendle's.

"Don't worry about Talborn," Andy told Brendle. "At least you stand to be a loser because of Carland's death. So Talborn can't put you in the class of a suspected murderer, as he did with me."

As he turned back to look at Talborn, Andy noted a surprised expression on the man's face, as though Talborn, for the first time, realized that Andy belonged in the same category as Salter and Hedwin.

Yvonne was rising from her chair; she ignored Talborn as she went through the door. Both Andy and Brendle followed, leaving Talborn to his own accusations.

"We'll go to see Dorn right now," declared Andy as they started down the stairs. "We'll put the proposition to him squarely and see if he wants to buy those rice fields."

It didn't occur to Andy that others might already be on the way to visit Jonathan Dorn; men whose ways were dark and deadly, whose propositions were those of primitive law.

CHAPTER XIII. FIENDS OF THE FLAME

NIGHT lights and the sounds of evening were puzzling to The Shadow as he stared toward the windows of his hotel room. He could not understand the lights at all, for he expected daylight. He could recall a battle, which he had followed up with an incomplete pursuit. Then he had dragged himself away to rest; and, considering his weariness, he should have slept past dawn.

But it was still night, and, more puzzling still, he was wearing his black cloak, a most serious oversight.

It wasn't good policy for Kent Allard to return to a hotel room in Mexico City, clad in a garb that might create a panic among superstitious employees. It would be understandable, perhaps, if this happened to be New Orleans and The Shadow had assumed the character of Lamont Cranston, which in itself preserved his actual identity.

Suddenly the answer broke through. This was New Orleans. Mexico City was a thing of the past, despite the fact that The Shadow had battled Aztecs quite recently. Yes, this was New Orleans; even though the city lights were still confusing, sounds told The Shadow where he was. He could hear the calliope of a river showboat wheezing out its ceaseless music.

Rolling from the bed, The Shadow moved unsteadily toward a mirror. His cloak dropped from his shoulders, the slouch hat fell from its folds. Finding a light, The Shadow turned it on and looked at his face. He saw the hawkish features of Lamont Cranston, not the gaunt face of Kent Allard.

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The Shadow laughed, his low tone mirthless. He was Cranston for the present, but he could not recollect his recent adventures. Pressing his hand against the side of his aching head, The Shadow began to understand.

He had taken a fall during the fight and must have received a brain concussion. He knew the effects from old. Fortunately, the result was wearing off.

Then, as The Shadow turned from the mirror, his head whirled anew. He couldn't be Cranston; he must be Allard, because, facing him, were two stolid Xincas who stood like patient sentinels.

Those Xincas served Kent Allard, not Lamont Cranston. Their very presence caused The Shadow to stare from them to the mirror, doubting his own eyes, until the Xincas spoke.

They were using their own language, which The Shadow understood, telling him of new drumbeats that had penetrated to their remote domain in Guatemala, carrying the tale that the cult of Xitli was again alive. These two Xincas, The Shadow's own servants, had smuggled themselves to New Orleans, to bring their chief the news.

As the Xincas spoke, The Shadow recalled that he had given them such an order. But he had expected to contact them at another hotel, where he went daily, as Allard. Not having found him there, the Xincas, through ways peculiar to themselves, had managed to trace The Shadow in his guise of Cranston.

The Shadow was thinking clearly, rapidly, by the time those facts had been recounted. He opened the door of the hotel room, found a newspaper in the hall. It wasn't today's newspaper by The Shadow's calculation. It was tomorrow's!

Therewith, The Shadow realized that he had spent a full twenty-four hours in a semiconscious state. Hours that should have been devoted to further investigation, for the newspaper headlined the mysterious murder of James Carland.

Scanning the columns, The Shadow learned how far the police had missed the truth, for Yvonne's description of the hatchet killers was scarcely mentioned. Turning the pages to read the final paragraphs of the murder story, The Shadow came upon a minor item that most eyes would have missed.

It simply stated that the yacht *Miramar* was to arrive at Lake Pontchartrain; but the news was weighty to The Shadow. He knew that the *Miramar* belonged to Jonathan Dorn, with whom Carland had dealings.

Considering the riddle of Carland's death – namely, why he had been slated for murder – The Shadow found a partial answer. The menace which doomed Carland might now apply to Dorn!

Seizing hat and cloak, The Shadow bundled them across his arm. Followed by the Xincas, he went down a stairway, out through an obscure exit from the hotel, to the almost deserted parking lot where he kept his car.

A few minutes later, The Shadow and his companions were whizzing northward along Canal Street, the wide, main thoroughfare of New Orleans.

It was better than a tip-off to police headquarters, that pace set by The Shadow. Traffic whistles shrilled as the car roared by, its mad speed forcing other vehicles to the curb. Attracted by the whistles, police cars took up the chase, until it seemed that half the New Orleans force was on The Shadow's trail.

But the cloaked driver outraced them, even slackening at times, to make sure they did not lose his course. The threat that loomed ahead was one wherein The Shadow might need all the aid that he could muster.

XITLI, GOD OF FIRE

ABOARD his yacht, the Miramar, Jonathan Dorn was seated in his cabin, going over letters that he had received from James Carland. Hearing a knock at the door, Dorn covered the correspondence, and testily demanded: "Who's there?"

The door opened and a pale secretary inserted his face. He was hesitant when he saw the glower on Dorn's heavy-jowled features. The secretary was greatly in awe of Dorn; ordinarily, he would have retired at the financier's growl.

"I'm busy, Nevil," boomed Dorn. "Don't you remember my order? I told you not to disturb me until Carland arrives."

"But it's about Mr. Carland –"

"What about Mr. Carland? Have you heard from him? Isn't he coming here this evening?"

"No, sir." For once, Nevil was firm. "I think you'd better read this, Mr. Dorn."

He advanced and placed a newspaper on Dorn's desk. When the financier read the headlines that concerned Carland's death, he broke into a fit of rage, which he directed toward Nevil, who was the only person available.

"Get out!" stormed Dorn. "I'll call you when I need you. What does it matter to me, if Carland is dead?" He paused, while Nevil darted through the door. Then, almost to himself, Dorn added: "Perhaps it proves – all these."

By "all these," Dorn meant the letters that lay on his desk. He began to handle them again, as if they were priceless documents. He was stroking his chin, smiling to himself, half pleased, half doubtful, when the door opened again.

Dorn did not hear it, for his attention was attracted by the sound of sirens that were coming toward the lake front, where the yacht was docked.

The door closed with a click. Dorn turned about angrily, expecting to see Nevil. Instead, his jowlish face froze itself, agape, as his eyes viewed three intruders. They were men with faces as stony as the crude hatchets which they carried; squatly men with sloping foreheads; savages attired in jungle garb.

With a sharp cry, Dorn came to his feet. He was grabbing for the desk drawer where he kept his revolver; with the other hand, he was seizing the precious Carland correspondence. Dorn's fingers did not even grasp the handle of the drawer. The Aztecs had released their hatchets with short, choppy swings.

The stone weapons buried their crude cutting edges deep into Jonathan Dorn. One ax found his skull, another his neck, while the third drove to his heart.

As Dorn sprawled, scattering the sheaf of letters, the Aztecs bounded forward in rubbery fashion and tugged their weapons from the victim's body.

Dorn's death, at least, was merciful, for it was very swift. Each of the axes had struck with sufficient force to kill him. But the Aztecs were not yet through. Ignoring the arriving police sirens as things which could not concern them, they produced small, bomb-like objects and flung them against the desk.

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These were new weapons, provided by their master, Xitli, and the effect exceeded the expectations of the Aztecs. The objects were actually bombs, of an incendiary type, that broke instantly into gushing flame, which spurted throughout the cabin.

By the time the Aztecs were safely through the door, Dorn's body was the center of a miniature inferno. Fiery tongues gulped the Carland letters and ignited the desk, threatening to dispose of its contents, also.

Racing for the yacht's deck, the Aztecs encountered Nevil and members of the crew, who had heard the roar and now saw the raging flames that issued from the cabin. The wild chant of the Aztecs, the anthem that marked them as servants of Xitli, did more than drown the cackle of the flames. It brought a horde of other stony men into sight, from lurking spots about the deck.

Nevil and the other unfortunates were diving for shelter that they could not find, with members of the murderous tribe close after them, when a mighty taunt was delivered from the forward deck, rising to a challenging crescendo that made the Aztecs halt.

They had heard that mirth the night before. It signified a lone foeman, the only one in all their experience who had out-dealt them in their game of quick-delivered death.

The laugh of The Shadow brought vengeful howls from the Aztecs. The followers of Xitli remembered those of their tribe that they had carried from the battle of the night before. Nevil and the others were forgotten.

As a barrage preliminary to their attack, the Aztecs flung more of the incendiary bombs. The Shadow wheeled back to cover as the deadly shells broke and spewed flame everywhere. Leaping for the gaps, the Aztecs were upon him with their axes, but swift though their swings were, the stabs of The Shadow's guns could not be beaten.

Wild savages sprawled, their hatchets flying wide. The Shadow had beaten off the brunt of that attack, but he knew the wily ways of the Aztecs. Other men of Xitli had reached the superstructure of the Miramar, and were poised for long throws. They looked like howling demons amid the flames which they had produced – great sheets of fire that now enveloped the yacht.

The Shadow's only refuge was the bow of the boat. He reached it ahead of flying axes. The axes cleaved the deck behind him and stayed there, waiting for men who were coming, with long leaps, to regain them. Against that horde, even The Shadow's guns were not sufficient; but his reinforcements had arrived.

Police were on the dock, shooting at the savage demons who were clearly outlined by the flames. Some of the Aztecs jolted in midair, sprawled on the deck when they struck it. The Shadow, coolly picking targets, was handling the foemen that the police bullets missed.

Though Dorn was dead, The Shadow had saved Nevil and the crew of the Miramar, for they had dived overboard to escape the hell-heat that now possessed the yacht. With his own guns, backed by those of the deploying police, The Shadow had his chance to exterminate the tribe of Xitli. All that saved the murderous Aztecs was the thing of their own making: the fire that raged along the deck of the Miramar.

Even the power of Xitli did not grant them immunity from flames. They gave up their thrust toward The Shadow and left the yacht in two directions, some diving to the water, others leaping for the dock. Even the bullet-riddled members of the band were capable of fight. Seeing them coming, still alive, the police wisely dropped away, hoping to clip them as they passed.

XITLI, GOD OF FIRE

Then the Aztecs were gone, beyond the revealing range of the flames. With fire sweeping toward him, The Shadow dived from the bow of the Miramar and disappeared into the lake. The police controlled the scene, but their work consisted of simple task; that of helping Nevil and the crew of the Miramar, who were floundering in the lake.

Farther along the shore, in the sheltering darkness of a pier, The Shadow came dripping from the water, to find his Xincas waiting. They had started to the aid of their chief, only to be driven off by the flames. Not wanting to be mistaken for Aztecs, they had wisely slid from sight of the police.

From a car which had arrived amidst the strife, other witnesses watched the burning of the Miramar. One was Eugene Brendle; he was gasping as he viewed the scene. To Brendle, this meant the death of Jonathan Dorn, a man he had never met.

Brendle was declaring something very obvious: that the death of Dorn must be connected with the murder of Carland; that both crimes were certainly the work of an enemy who had a double grudge against both victims.

To Yvonne Carland, the horror of the scene was almost as great as the terror of her uncle's death. Yet, through her numbed brain drilled the thought that at last her story of strange hatchet men would be believed, for those very creatures had tonight revealed themselves amid the flames.

Most stunned of all was Andy Ames. His theories were utterly destroyed. He knew that he had been mistaken during the battle on the Amazonia; that Yvonne had been entirely correct in her description of the strife at the apartment.

The men with hatchets were not the fighters who served The Shadow, for Andy had seen the cloaked warrior engaged in combat with the Aztec throng.

From somewhere, vaguely, came the strident tone of a departing laugh. It told that The Shadow, alone, could solve the riddle of the Aztecs, just as he had proven himself the one opponent who could make them taste defeat!

CHAPTER XIV. MINIONS OF MURDER

MORNING spread terror throughout New Orleans. The destruction of the Miramar and the death of its owner, Jonathan Dorn, presaged the beginning of new, and more fearful, events.

The city was in a state of siege against a horde within its gates. Even by daylight, persons feared to walk through parks or isolated areas, dreading the menace of squatly killers – strange, stony-faced men who might have come from Mars.

All day, the police were searching for the Aztecs. They did not use that term to describe the assassins; the police simply called them "hatchet killers." By evening, announcement was made that the search had been narrowed to the river front; though a rather large area, nevertheless, the news allowed people to breathe more easily.

The waterfront was always a section where anything might happen, and sooner or later, the law could find any culprits who were hiding there. But it didn't occur to anyone to question why the police were so sure that the Aztecs were near the river. The simple answer was that the police had not uncovered the killers anywhere else.

XITLI, GOD OF FIRE

It had not occurred to them that the Aztecs might be living in the colossal new Mayan pyramid that dominated the New Orleans skyline. There had been trouble at the museum a while before, but since then, the place seemed amply protected. More important, in police estimate, was the episode of the Amazonia.

The police now believed the testimony of the captured Cajun: that squatly men of an unknown race had started the battle on the docked steamship. Hence, the waterfront was the place to look for them.

At dusk, Fitzhugh Salter stopped at the Hotel Luzane, where Professor Hedwin was a guest. Salter tried to call Hedwin's room, but learned that the professor was asleep and could not be disturbed. Hedwin, it seemed, had picked up the Mexican custom of taking a siesta every afternoon.

With a smug smile, Salter left word that he was dining out, and would call the professor later.

But Salter did not go to dinner; instead, he returned to the Mayan Museum. There, in furtive fashion, the curator unlocked the big front door and stole into his own preserves, like a prowling thief.

Despite his stealth, Salter was observed by a watcher across the street – a stooped man, who repressed a cackly laugh. The watcher was Professor Hedwin.

Waiting until a chink of light appeared from Salter's office window, Hedwin crept into the thickened darkness in a fashion much stealthier than Salter. Hedwin was using a system that he had learned while traversing Mexican jungles, where safety often depended upon complete stealth.

Meanwhile, Andy Ames and Yvonne Carland were dining together, a third person with them. The third person was Eugene Brendle, but the contractor was not having dinner. Instead, he was talking about the deaths of James Carland and Jonathan Dorn.

"We are both losers, Yvonne," declared Brendle, moodily. "Whoever had it in for your uncle and Dorn, certainly hurt us, too. Evidently, all the correspondence concerning the rice land was lost when the yacht burned."

"But I have to raise fifty thousand dollars, somehow," insisted Yvonne. "I owe you the money, Mr. Brendle."

"Your uncle owed it to me," corrected Brendle, "and after all, he did give me security, though I was a fool to take it. So I'll have to bear the brunt of it, Yvonne. Next week, when the money comes due, I'll simply become the owner of a lot of salt grass that nobody wants."

"Won't someone else buy it?"

"I don't think so. Your uncle used some sales pressure on Cranston, but I think it was just talk. What's more, I haven't seen Cranston since that reception at the museum."

Glancing at his watch, Brendle arose. He went to a telephone in the corner of the private dining room and made a call, but received no answer.

"I was to meet Talborn, for dinner," he said. "Both of us were sorry about our little quarrel. But I can't seem to get hold of him. He was supposed to be home, but he isn't. Well, I suppose I'll find him at one of his many hangouts. Looking for him will give me an appetite."

When Brendle had gone, the conversation shifted. As they finished dinner, nearly an hour later, Andy and Yvonne began to discuss The Shadow. Both were agreed that the black-cloaked fighter was the one person

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who might uncover the missing Aztecs. In that surmise, they were one hundred percent correct.

AT that precise moment, The Shadow was entering the top floor of the Mayan Museum, coming down from the roof promenade. He could hear the low chant of voices.

Placing his suction cups beneath his cloak, he advanced to the door of the throne room. The door was ajar; peering through the crack, The Shadow saw a most singular sight.

On the throne, occupying the basalt stone, sat the living figure of Xitli, the fire god. In the foreground were the Aztecs, as numerous as the night before, despite the fact that The Shadow had considerably thinned their ranks, in battle. The answer was that more members of the Xitli cult must have arrived from Mexico.

The meeting was coming to its end, and apparently it had been a brief one, otherwise Xitli would have ordered the door of the throne room to be locked.

The throned masquerader had given his Aztecs new instructions for this evening; their chant, which The Shadow understood, was merely their way of saying that the commands of the fire god would be obeyed.

With an automatic wedged through the crack of the door, The Shadow was preparing to end the cult of Xitli by proving that the fire god was very human; a fact that a single bullet would establish. But he wanted Xitli alive, and therefore was taking very careful aim toward the flame-robed figure. The Shadow's exactitude proved fortunate for Xitli.

Just as The Shadow was ready to squeeze the trigger, Xitli gave a gesture with one hand. Something struck the stone floor of the room; there was a vivid spurt of flame. The dazzle blinded The Shadow, as it did the Aztecs. When he obtained a clear view of the throne, Xitli was gone.

The Aztecs were coming from the throne room. Still blinking, they did not see The Shadow. He drew rapidly away, to the door of an exhibit room. His eyes were keen again, but the Aztecs also had regained full vision.

Battle, at this time, would be fruitless. To meet the Aztecs on their home ground, where they could dive for every cranny and fling stone axes from cover, would mean odds much to The Shadow's disadvantage, with no chance of finding the master murderer who ruled this cult in the guise of Xitli.

Having work ahead, the Aztecs moved toward the stairway, and The Shadow followed. To all appearances, Xitli had gone ahead of the stony-faced tribe. At present, the Aztecs were the persons to be followed, as on that night when they had murdered Carland.

But whatever the crime that Xitli had designed for this evening, with the Aztecs as the perpetrators, The Shadow intended to block it.

The trail led down through the museum cellar, where the Aztecs drew away a loosened block and exited through a grating on the ground level, a few feet above.

There were numerous gratings around the museum; they led to drainage pipes that carried water away from the foundation of the pyramid. The Aztecs had simply used the grating in reverse; whether Xitli had loosened the stone for them, or had left the task to his followers, was something of less importance than the fact that the secret route existed.

As before, The Shadow kept close behind the Aztecs, after he, too, had used the grating as an exit. But tonight, the trail was much more certain, because The Shadow called in two waiting aids to help him.

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Those two were the Xincas, and they were right in their element. Not only could they move as craftily as the Aztecs; they looked like the squat men, and could approach very close to them, since the Aztecs mistook them for companions.

Thus, when stretches of light forced The Shadow to remain behind, the Xincas carried through. One followed the Aztecs; the other waited for The Shadow. At no time did the trail show signs of breakage. The amazing thing was the destination. The Aztecs chose the very area where they were being hunted: the waterfront!

POLICE were on hand in plenty, but the Aztecs filtered right through the loose cordon. In the main, they chose alleys; but at intervals, they scaled low roofs. They formed as insidious a swarm as any that The Shadow had ever hunted; coppery men, who moved with the stealth of reptiles and, moreover, resembled snakes in the hissed signals that they exchanged.

At last, the Aztecs reached their goal. They became a close-knit cordon around the doorway of an old, forgotten frame house that was squeezed among other buildings. The door was evidently the rear entrance to the house, and to cover it, the Aztecs chose various vantage spots.

Some lay in the shelter of a little fence; others crouched in an alley. The rest were on top of adjacent sheds, from which they could fling axes with increased effect.

The Shadow drew the two Xincas to a deserted house, pointing them to a low roof. Taking their positions, they produced arrows and short, thick bows.

The Xincas were deadly with such weapons, and their present duty was to be ready with a barrage against the Aztecs, should it be necessary to cover The Shadow's advance. There was enough light, fringing the yard that the Aztecs watched, for the Xincas to pick out the hatchet-armed fighters.

Then, along the darkness of the ground, The Shadow entered the death yard, alone. Entry was easy, for the Aztecs were watching the rear of the frame house. Approaching the door, however, was a feat requiring all The Shadow's skill.

He had to move with the trickling effect of cloudy smoke; and did. His black figure was as flitting as the shadowy motion of the wavering palm trees near the door that he sought.

Inch by inch, it seemed, The Shadow blotted the darkened door itself, and gradually eased his way inside, muffling the very creaks of the woodwork with the folds of his enveloping cloak.

He was inside, the door closed behind him; next came a passage to a room where he heard voices. The Shadow approached, and peered at faces that he had seen before.

Pierre Laboutard was in conference with his motley band; this was their new hide-out, and Laboutard, backed by Jaro, was assuring them that they had nothing to worry about. He didn't consider it good policy even to lock the door, or place guards about.

"Perhaps the police find us," suggested Laboutard. "If they do, what can it matter? Like many other people, we are staying away from trouble. So we wait, and say nothing. But if the police do not find us, so much the better."

Laboutard's comments brought approving nods. His men weren't asking him about the "other job" that they had once discussed. They had done enough crime in the past to be particular about the present. As for the future, it would have to wait until the Aztec scare was ended.

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A jangle sounded from a side room, reached from the hall where The Shadow stood. Drawing back, The Shadow waited while Laboutard went alone to answer the telephone. He saw the crafty look on Laboutard's face, listened while the man talked to someone who had called. There was a light in the little room, and through the crack of the door The Shadow observed a tightening of Laboutard's expression.

"Ah, oui," said Laboutard. "They have been done, those things you wish, but not by me. So you wonder why I call, eh?"

The Shadow recognized that Laboutard was referring to the murders of Carland and Dorn, tasks on which he had hedged. The man who wanted those murders done had found a better way. He had taken advantage of the Aztecs, and made himself their ruler.

Laboutard, at this moment, was talking to the master mind who called himself Xitli!

OBVIOUSLY, Laboutard knew who Xitli really was, and had sent him word to call this number. Smoothly, Laboutard was planning a shakedown. He wanted hush money from the master plotter who styled himself Xitli. Naturally, Laboutard wasn't putting it too bluntly. His words were actually purred.

"You promise me that I could kill those men" – Laboutard was referring to Carland and Dorn – "and while I wait, pouf! – I find it is already done. It is not fair that you should forget me, after we make the bargain."

His face shrewd, Laboutard listened to Xitli's reply. Evidently Xitli was not willing to pay for work that the Aztecs had done in place of Laboutard's men. But the wily Laboutard expected such refusal.

"But I tell my men so much," insisted Laboutard. "I tell them everything m'sieu', about those men you say for us to kill. Everything, oui, except why you wish such murder."

A brief pause; then Laboutard added, cunningly:

"You think I do not know why you wish murder? Ah, you are very foolish. You should remember that I come from the bayou, where I paddle many places in my pirogue. I see many thing while in my canoe. I learn – Ah, you understand?"

Triumph gleamed on Laboutard's shrewd features. He was driving home the very point he wanted. But there were things that Laboutard could see, and learn about, without making another trip to the delta of the Mississippi. Things right here in New Orleans, which were happening right around him.

Shadowy patches were creeping in upon Laboutard, climbing onto the wall beside him. Suddenly startled, Laboutard remembered his old enemy, The Shadow. He wheeled from the telephone and gave a sharp cry of alarm.

But it wasn't sight of The Shadow that caused Laboutard's consternation. The Shadow was still away from view, beyond the hallway door. Other figures had caused the creeping blackness.

Pierre Laboutard was enmeshed by a half circle of Aztecs, chunky warriors who had come in from the windows of this room while Laboutard was busy at the telephone. They were menacing him, with their raised hatchets, as if waiting a signal to bury the weapons in their victim.

From the dangling telephone receiver that Laboutard had dropped came a harsh, significant chuckle: the tone of Xitli!

CHAPTER XV. LINKS IN CRIME

FACED by the horrendous Aztecs, Pierre Laboutard showed frantic changes of expression that told a story which needed no words. Peering from the doorway, waiting with leveled gun, The Shadow could read the entire tale. It summed to this: Laboutard knew too much.

Xitli had foreseen that Laboutard would try a shakedown, demanding cash for silence regarding the motives of, as well as knowledge of, the man who had ordered the deaths of Carland and Dorn. So Xitli had postponed his telephone call until his Aztecs were on the ground. The jangle of the telephone bell had been the signal for the squatly killers to creep in upon Laboutard.

At that moment, The Shadow could have taken toll among the Aztecs. But to do so would have been sure death for Laboutard. Other Aztecs had crept in from the windows, to support the ones who held Laboutard encircled. The newcomers were watching the door, and would handle matters from that direction.

So The Shadow waited in the darkened hall, preserving Laboutard's life for the simple reason that Laboutard was the one man whose testimony could prove the identity of Xitli.

Numbly, Laboutard groped for the telephone receiver and found it. Then, in gasps, he was pleading over the wire, promising anything if Xitli would spare him. The Shadow had foreseen that Xitli would give Laboutard a chance to beg; otherwise, the Aztecs would have struck down their victim without waiting.

"Ah, non!" gulped Laboutard. "I did not mean that I would ever talk. I meant that because of things I know, I thought that I could be useful to you... Ah, oui, I can do anything you ask, and my men will help... Non, they do not know why you wished murder. None know, I swear it; not even Jaro!"

The plea seemed to bring results, for Laboutard's voice returned to normal, as did his expression. Then:

"You think I work for someone else?" queried Laboutard. "That I take something from the museum, and from the Amazonia?... Very well, I say I have done those things. I take treasure from the boxes, and no one find out... Oui, I do it for the man you name, and he has given me the pay..."

"Ah, very good!" Laboutard's tone showed his approval of Xitli's cunning. "You wish me to rob the man who has the treasure... Why not? If he do not watch it, he should lose it... We go and take it, right away, and bring it wherever you say."

This time, the pause was longer, and Laboutard showed a trace of worry.

"You wish to know the place?" he queried. "But if I take my men there, it should be enough –"

Xitli's tone came harsh, from the receiver. Hearing it, Aztecs shifted forward. The edges of their hatchets actually grazed Laboutard's neck. There was no more argument from Laboutard.

"I tell you where!" he exclaimed hurriedly. "We put all the treasure in the old Monseca crypt... Oui, the one that stands in the corner of the little cemetery, but which no one ever use... Very good. I send my men with Jaro, and I bring these men of yours..."

Xitli must have spoken more instructions, for Laboutard gingerly passed the telephone receiver to one of the Aztecs. Hearing the voice of Xitli, the Aztec gave a guttural reply. He pointed Laboutard toward the door; but when Laboutard moved in that direction, two Aztecs closed in beside him.

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They stopped Laboutard when he reached the hall, where The Shadow, by then, was deep in darkness near the stairway. Laboutard called for Jaro; the lieutenant poked his face from the rear room. He didn't see the Aztecs; they were still in the doorway of the side room.

Laboutard ordered Jaro to go to the Monseca crypt and pick up the treasure. Jaro began to sputter something.

"Do what I say!" stormed Laboutard. "Take it all to the old truck, and leave it. Where it goes later, is my business. But it means more pay for all of us."

That was good enough for Jaro. He told the men in the rear room to come along.

Meanwhile, the Aztecs were drawing Laboutard back into the side room. They had closed the door when Jaro passed. Nor did Jaro and the entire crew encounter The Shadow.

He avoided them by moving a short way up the stairs. As soon as the last of them were gone, The Shadow crossed the hall and reached the side room.

The door came open a trifle. An Aztec peered out, to make sure that Jaro's men had left. The Aztec did not see The Shadow, for the cloaked watcher had edged toward the rear room.

But the moment the Aztec pressed the door tight shut, The Shadow sprang forward. Grabbing the doorknob, he slashed the door inward and came upon the Aztecs with a sudden laugh of challenge.

At that moment, the stony men were surrounding Laboutard, waiting while one of their number talked to Xitli on the telephone. An order was coming across the wire, one that Laboutard should certainly have understood by this time.

His own men gone, Laboutard, surrounded by Aztecs, was definitely on the spot. The Shadow was actually coming to his rescue!

THE Aztecs were no longer worried about the door. That was why The Shadow's entry came as a surprise, and brought them all away from Laboutard.

Reversing his spin, The Shadow was back into the hall, blazing shots while stone hatchets came flying past him. It was life for Laboutard, if the fellow had shown sense enough to dive for a window.

Instead, Laboutard yanked out a revolver and drove for the hall, shooting vain shots that he hoped would reach The Shadow!

Like whippets, the Aztecs were after him. Those who still had hatchets used them on Laboutard's skull, felling him on the way. The rest were plucking up their weapons from the places where they had lodged. To make it worse for The Shadow, the door from the yard clattered open, showing a pair of waiting Aztecs, cutting off retreat.

With Laboutard dead, The Shadow had no reason to wait. He made for the outer door in one long dive, disregarding the fact that the two blockers were already lunging toward him, their hatchets swinging.

The lunges became sprawls, even though The Shadow lacked time to use his automatic. With a bound, he was across his flattened foemen, who were writhing on their faces, each with an arrow projecting from the center of his back. The Shadow's Xincas had picked off the murderous men who threatened their chief.

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Whirling across the yard, The Shadow avoided other hatchets that were flung from sheds. Again, he owed his life to his bow-and-arrow specialists. Their quivers handy, the Xincas were quick to twang fresh shafts, that downed the hatchet throwers before any could complete a proper hurl.

Then, his Xincas with him, The Shadow was away in his car, leaving the field to police who had been attracted by the shooting. He knew that the officers would not encounter any Aztecs. Having finished Laboutard, Xitli's followers would prefer departure, taking their wounded with them.

MEANWHILE, Jaro and his men were well on their way to the Monseca crypt. They had lost no time in getting away from the waterfront, where there were too many police to suit them.

Far from earshot when The Shadow attempted the rescue of Laboutard, Jaro and his mixed crowd had no idea of what had happened in the hide-out.

The Monseca crypt answered the description that Laboutard had given Xitli. It was a mausoleum of a type very common in New Orleans, and it stood in a corner of a small cemetery that was slated for removal.

The Monseca family had built the crypt, but had shortly afterward migrated from New Orleans. Never visited, the empty mausoleum made an excellent place for the storing of secret treasure.

Approaching the crypt, Jaro and his men found it unlocked, which did not entirely surprise them. Laboutard had been paid for storing the stolen treasure there, and it was never Pierre's policy to double-cross a client.

Even Laboutard's recent dealing with Xitli was not a departure from custom, for Laboutard, by his own system of reasoning, felt that he was the one who had been betrayed in such matters as the murders of Carland and Dorn.

Knowing nothing of Laboutard's game, nor his death, Jaro and his company entered the crypt and began to stack the heavy sacks that they found there. They had been at work only a few minutes, when a guard reported that someone was approaching.

With drawn knives and guns, the invaders waited. As they heard the door swing open, then shut, they used their flashlights.

In the glare stood Graham Talborn.

Obligingly, Jaro hung an electric lantern from the wall, so that Talborn could see the faces of the crowd. Talborn promptly recognized them, but the exporter did not show his usual affable manner. Instead, he demanded sharply:

"Where is Laboutard?"

"He is coming later," rejoined Jaro. "Maybe he is at the truck, waiting until we bring the sacks."

"Did Laboutard send you here?"

Jaro nodded, in answer to Talborn's question. Eyes narrowing, the exporter looked around the group. Seeing that Jaro had them quite under control, Talborn addressed the lieutenant.

"When I hired Laboutard," stated Talborn, "I had to let him know my game: that I was secretly bringing in treasure from Mexico with the shipments to the Mayan Museum. Later, you men found out the full facts. It

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seemed best to tell you, so that you would be careful never to injure me by mistake."

"That is right," agreed Jaro.

"So it means," continued Talborn, "that you actually worked for me. Any order from Laboutard, regarding this treasure; would have to come from me."

Again, Jaro nodded.

"But I did not tell Laboutard to bring you here tonight," asserted Talborn. "This is his own idea, and it means just one thing. He is trying to double-cross me, although I have paid him in full. If he will do that to me, he will do the same to you!"

The argument bore weight with Jaro. It promised him the opportunity that he had long wanted: to supplant Laboutard as chief of the motley organization. Too long had Laboutard been letting Jaro do the heavy work; the lieutenant had remained loyal, purely because he knew that Laboutard was reliable. Talborn's words put an end to Jaro's shreds of esteem toward Laboutard.

Naturally, Jaro did not guess that Laboutard had made a deal with Xitli, under stress; that otherwise, Pierre would not have double-crossed his former employer, Talborn. Even had he known it, Jaro would hardly have rejected his present opportunity. Looking among his men, he studied their faces to see how they stood.

Of a dozen, about a third were Cajuns, who would side with Jaro under any circumstances. The rest of the crowd, beachcombers and roustabouts, were all riffraff who might do anything. Certainly, Jaro could persuade some of those waterfront rats to see things his way. He decided to sound them out.

"You hear what Talborn says," began Jaro. "Pierre has double-crossed us. Maybe" – he threw a wise look at Talborn – "Pierre didn't pay us all we had coming to us before. If we can't trust Pierre –"

A HOLLOW tone interrupted from the rear of the crypt. Jaro and his men turned; like Talborn, they stared in awe at the figure that had stepped into sight from beyond a heap of sacks.

Certainly, their challenger was powerful. His very appearance proved it. The startled men were viewing Xitli, the ominous fire god, attired in his full regalia.

Green mask, flame-hued robe, vivid headdress, gave the masquerader the appearance of a living monstrosity, a creature who, for all the viewers knew, could have been created by the very atmosphere of the crypt. The hollow tone of Xitli's voice seemed, in itself, a proof that he was something more than human.

Partly muffled by the mask, deepened by the walls of the crypt, the voice did hold an unearthly resonance. To the majority of those who heard them, the words of Xitli were commands that could not be ignored.

"It was I who gave the order!" pronounced Xitli. "The treasure is to be removed. As for that man" – Xitli pointed toward Talborn – "he is to be taken, also. As for reward" – the tone was scoffing – "I can pay far more than Talborn can ever offer."

Xitli's final words were a mistake. He should have made his rule one of threat, rather than promise. Xitli won out, so far as Talborn was concerned, for men surged promptly in Talborn's direction despite Jaro's appeals for them to wait. But Xitli left himself wide open, should anyone supply a stronger threat.

One came.

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The walls of the crypt re-echoed to the fierce crescendo of a mighty laugh, that promised death to any who laid a hand on Talborn. Flung in from the outer darkness by a challenger whose might was known, that sinister mockery brought shivers to men of crime.

Amid the echoes, they saw the very being who had countered Xitli's orders – a black-cloaked fighter whose eyes burned from beneath the brim of a slouch hat, as he wheeled into the crypt to prove his mastery.

The Shadow!

The muzzle of The Shadow's automatic was pointed toward Xitli. One tug of his finger would have ended the masquerader's career. Such demonstration was sure to cow Jaro and his ruffraff, who, even now, were at odds among themselves.

Talborn saw the situation; to him, it promised life. He was ready to bear the blame for his own crimes, if The Shadow won. Talborn's one fear was that some of Jaro's men might intervene in Xitli's behalf. Madly, Talborn tried to prevent such disaster.

Springing from hands that made no effort to clutch him, Talborn lunged toward Xitli, shouting for others to follow. His mad rush put him straight in front of The Shadow's gun. As Xitli shifted one way, The Shadow made a side step to get new aim at him. But Xitli's hand had already made a fling.

Glass crackled on the crypt's floor. There was a burst of flame that dazzled all but The Shadow, whose cloaked arm was half across his face. A .45 thundered its reply to Xitli's fire bomb, but The Shadow had been forced to swing too wide.

Xitli was gone, down behind the protecting sacks, and the crypt was becoming a scene of chaos.

To Jaro's men, the great spurt of fire meant that Xitli was more powerful than The Shadow. Knowing that Xitli favored crime, whereas The Shadow fought it, they took sides with the fire god.

Even Jaro and the Cajuns sprang for The Shadow, who was trapped in their midst. Xitli's promise of reward now carried the stronger force. One against a dozen, The Shadow seemed doomed.

He would have been, could the attackers have managed to find him. But the very blast of fire with which Xitli had sworn in new followers was the thing that worked against them. Still blinded by the flare, Jaro's men were stabbing knives, shooting revolvers at everything that looked black.

They were making victims out of treasure sacks and the niches in the wall, but they couldn't find the one target that they wanted: the cloaked fighter who was slugging through the midst of them, delivering the mocking laugh they hated, that came from every side, gathered by the crypt and flung upon their eardrums in a fashion that made them think they fought a horde of Shadows.

Xitli saw the muddle that he himself had caused. Like The Shadow, he was undazzled, and took advantage of it. Unable to reach The Shadow in the midst of the fray, Xitli skirted the battle and reached the crypt door, while The Shadow was flinging off fighters in order to get at him.

From a corner where The Shadow had thrust him, Talborn saw Xitli. Though Talborn's eyes were viewing black spots, too, he couldn't be mistaken about the vivid flame-hued costume.

Talborn lunged, half blindly, not noticing the glint of a revolver that Xitli had scooped up from the floor. Xitli fired, point-blank; then made a frantic leap to outside safety, just before The Shadow managed to break loose

and aim his way.

Leaping across the dying figure of Talborn, The Shadow issued from the crypt. He saw Xitli going through a gate, where figures that looked like blocks of stone were lunging in from gloom. Fading for the crypt wall, The Shadow fired at the lunging figures and sprawled a pair of Aztecs, as their hatchets rebounded from the wall.

Only Jaro had managed to follow The Shadow. Out from the crypt, he saw the black blot against the marble wall. Savagely, Jaro sprang, intending to bury his knife in The Shadow's back.

Halfway to his target, he was halted short by a pair of Xınca arrows, that came from different angles and crossed points in Jaro's heart.

Xitli was gone, the remainder of the Aztecs with him. Wails of sirens told that police were coming.

With a strange, low laugh that sounded like a mirthless knell, The Shadow effaced himself in darkness, accompanied by the silent Xincas who had aided him in triumph.

CHAPTER XVI. CRIME BRINGS CALM

FACTS of the fray at the Monseca crypt left New Orleans aghast. That battle was a thing comparable to the greatest events in the city's history. Mere rumors were nothing, compared to the actual discoveries that the police made when they took over the scene of battle.

The truth about Graham Talborn came out. In taking charge of the museum fund, Talborn had raised the hundred thousand dollars that James Carland had failed to supply, but in so doing, Talborn had proven himself as smart as Carland, if not smarter.

As the new benefactor of the Mayan Museum, Talborn had gone to Mexico City, not to dispute about oil concessions, as Carland had, but to arrange the shipment of Mayan relics, which he had managed very nicely.

So nicely, that Talborn had found it child's play to bring in the treasures that Panchez and the mestizos found while with the Hedwin expedition, and planted in among the relics.

Naturally, Talborn had bought out Panchez. He had bought out Laboutard, too, to handle matters at the New Orleans end. Talborn was the one who had mused things badly during the museum robbery, helping Laboutard to get away. After that one close call, he had shifted activities from the museum; hence the final robbery had taken place on the Amazonia.

Startling enough in itself, the exposure of Graham Talborn was small when compared with the mystery of the strange opposition that had been raised against him. He had, to all appearances, met up with Xitli, the fire god that Professor Hedwin talked about!

None other than Xitli could have brought Aztecs to New Orleans. Aztecs who had murdered James Carland and Jonathan Dorn; who had later slain Laboutard, and then wiped out Jaro and the whole crew, along with Talborn.

Such, at least, was evidence; for dead Aztecs had been found not only at Laboutard's hide-out, but near the Monseca crypt. Besides, there were wounded men, members of Laboutard's band, who claimed that they had seen a fiery figure who matched Hedwin's description of Xitli.

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There was talk, too, of The Shadow, which proved that he had played an important part. Having seen The Shadow at the burning of the yacht Miramar, the police agreed that the cloaked fighter had again been the deciding factor; but that this time, he had handled two factions at once. However, the police were puzzled by finding certain Aztecs who had been felled by arrows, instead of bullets.

They discussed that point with Fitzhugh Salter, on the afternoon following the fray at the Monseca crypt. Salter received detectives in his office at the Mayan Museum, but he was not much help. The curator could not at all understand the arrows.

"Talk to Professor Hedwin," he suggested. "He is better informed on Mayan ethnology than I am, or at least he thinks so. Of course, he will probably attribute this trouble to Xitli, the fire god. I would prefer that you obtain his opinions first. Meanwhile, I shall study the subject, and let you know when I have more to offer."

THE detectives found Professor Hedwin in his room at the Hotel Luzane, where he had just awakened from an afternoon nap. As Salter had predicted, Hedwin promptly plunged into the subject of Xitli and the cult of the fire god.

"It is quite obvious that the cult revived itself," declared Hedwin. "I should have known that it was coming" – he shook his head reflectively – "when I heard the beat of Aztec drums at Cuicuilco. Mr. Ames will tell you the same" – Hedwin gestured to Andy, who was seated near him – "and how the drums disturbed us."

"They disturbed me," said Andy, "but you didn't particularly notice them, professor. You were too busy digging up the throne of Xitli."

The professor threw an outraged look at Andy, then turned to the detectives. He examined stone hatchets that they had brought, and took a look at the mysterious arrows.

"The modern remnants of the Aztecs sought vengeance against Talborn," decided Hedwin, "because he was responsible for the thefts committed by Panchez. That is why they revived the Xitli cult and came to New Orleans. Unfortunately, they also identified Carland with the thefts, and slew him first. They killed Dorn next, because they thought that he was in it, too.

"In attacking Talborn, they met with opposition from Laboutard's men. I cannot give the exact details, since I know nothing about criminal investigation. But I can help you regarding these arrows. They are the sort used by certain primitive tribes in Guatemala. Therefore, I would say that certain natives, unfriendly toward the Xitli cult, also came to New Orleans.

"You speak of a mysterious avenger called The Shadow. Perhaps he employed those tribesmen who were unfriendly to the Xitli cult. That would account for his remarkable success, as well as the finding of the arrows."

It sounded logical to the detectives, and to Andy, too, inasmuch as he knew of The Shadow's Xincas. In fact, many things, particularly the fray at the Amazonia, were clearing themselves in Andy's mind. He had struck upon the fact that the Aztecs must have come to New Orleans first; the Xincas later.

There was something else that occurred to Andy. He expressed it to Hedwin, after the detectives had gone.

"About the Xitli cult," remarked Andy. "Since it is active again, right here in New Orleans, wouldn't the members meet in that throne room at the museum?"

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Professor Hedwin darted a sharp look toward Andy, then gave a withery smile, accompanied by a head–shake.

"I doubt it," he said. "You must be careful, Andy" – Hedwin's hand fell on Andy's shoulder – "or they will accuse you of harboring absurd notions, like myself. Why should clumsy detectives tramp through the throne room which I so carefully arranged? No Aztecs have been reported around the Mayan Museum."

Nodding his agreement, Andy remarked that he was going out to dinner with Yvonne. He went down to the lobby, where he ran into the detectives. He guessed what was on their minds before they spoke it.

"We'd like you to do a favor for us," said one. "Stay with Professor Hedwin, and see what he does. It's for his own good, Mr. Ames. He's a trifle eccentric –"

"If you mean that he didn't like Carland or Dorn," interrupted Andy, "I'll agree with you. Carland left our expedition high and dry, and Dorn didn't help us out as we expected."

"Then you think that the professor –"

"I think he's all right. To prove it, I'll do exactly what you want. I'll go up and chat with him, and sound him out on the whole Xitli business."

RETURNING to Hedwin's room, Andy told him that he had called Yvonne, but that she was out. He began to talk about Xitli and the throne room. Hedwin was right, in Andy's opinion, about keeping the police away from the place; still, as Andy put it, a visit to the throne room might be a very good idea, later.

"A very good idea," decided Hedwin, with a nod. "It might even be that someone is masquerading as Xitli. Look, Andy!" He picked up a small statue of the fire god from among his curios. "Here is Xitli, himself. How cunning his features are!"

With an upward sweep, Hedwin drew the statue from his outstretched palm. The thing was hollow, and it left an object behind – a small revolver, which gleamed from Hedwin's hand. As Andy gave an instinctive shift, Hedwin cackled gleefully. Laying the statuette aside, he pocketed the gun. Then:

"I think I shall call on our friend Salter," declared Hedwin, "and learn what he really thinks about Xitli."

The professor went out, and Andy grabbed for the telephone. He knew that the detectives had left the lobby, hence they wouldn't be there to stop Hedwin. Andy had to call someone, so he chose Yvonne, whose phone number was in his mind. The girl answered Andy's call promptly. In a tense voice, he told her:

"Professor Hedwin just left the hotel. He's going to the museum to talk with Salter. I want you to call Salter and tell him. Then call –"

Before Andy could add "the police," a chuckle interrupted. It came from the door of the room, where Hedwin was standing with the revolver. The professor gestured for Andy to drop the receiver on its hook, which Andy did, glad that Hedwin had not heard him mention Yvonne's name.

Then, keeping Andy covered, Hedwin picked an odd–shaped chain from among the Mayan relics in the room. With a deft sweep, he linked Andy's wrists in the primitive handcuffs.

"So you came back to spy on me," Hedwin clucked. "Very well; we shall put a stop to it! Your ankles next" – he applied another chain, that bound Andy's legs – "and, finally, this!"

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The final object was a looped thong, with a metal ring through its knot. Hedwin threw the noose over Andy's head and twisted the ring, thus tightening the loop. The thing was much like a garotte, and a few more twists would have choked Andy; but Hedwin was kind enough to stop it just before the strangulation point.

"Breathe carefully," suggested the professor, "and slowly. But if you try to shout, what happens will be your own fault. I shall see you later, Andy" – Hedwin's cackle reached a high, gleeful pitch – "after I have finished what I intend to do."

Again, Hedwin walked from the room, and soon afterward the telephone began to ring. Andy knew that Yvonne was calling back, but he was forced to listen grimly. At least, Andy decided, Yvonne was safe from harm. She had probably called Salter, and was wondering who should be called next.

Andy was half right.

FROM the hotel where she had been residing since her uncle's death, Yvonne had called Salter, but without an answer. She was calling Andy, to tell him so.

Receiving no reply, Yvonne hung up. Deciding that Andy might have gone to the museum himself, Yvonne went out and called a taxicab. She rode to the Mayan Museum.

It was dusk, and the great pyramid loomed forbiddingly against the last touches of sunset. Yvonne went to the door and found it open; but when she arrived at Salter's office, it was closed. A note on the door stated that the curator would return in fifteen minutes.

Pondering, Yvonne wondered if Salter could still be in the museum. She thought of the exhibit rooms on the top floor.

Walking to the elevators, Yvonne found one open. The car was of the automatic type, and a sudden impulse seized Yvonne. Entering, she pressed the button to the top floor. Smoothly, the elevator carried her to her destination.

Salter wasn't on the top floor, but the exhibit rooms were still open, with the exception of Xitli's throne room.

Wandering from room to room, Yvonne was gripped with a shuddery feeling. The light was getting dimmer and the statues in the gallery looked like living figures. So did the costumes in the next room, for they were hung from racks. Deciding that the hall was better, Yvonne started through a doorway, then halted in real fright.

Squatty shapes were moving through the hall. They were alive, and very real. From the primitive costumes that they wore, Yvonne identified them as Aztecs, the murderous members of the Xitli cult known to be at large in New Orleans. Frantically, she groped back toward the costumes, expecting to hear padded footsteps follow.

No footsteps came. Evidently the Aztecs were staying in the corridor. Perhaps they were gone, leaving a clear path to the elevator. But Yvonne was afraid to venture out among killers who might recognize her from the night when they had invaded her uncle's apartment and slain him.

A sudden hope struck her.

She had evaded the Aztecs that other night, up until the time she screamed. She might be able to do it again, if she used real stealth. As for recognition, there was a way to avoid it. Among the costumes were primitive

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dresses worn by Mayan maids, that resembled the very garb of the Aztecs.

Finding one, Yvonne kept deep behind the racks and hurriedly disposed of her modern garb, putting on the Mayan costume, instead. It wasn't a very elaborate outfit. Skirt and tunic formed one piece, and there were slippers shaped like moccasins. Yvonne decided to dispense with the headdress that went with it, because the Aztecs wore none.

With pounding heart, she crept out through the corridor, which had grown darker. A dim glow greeted Yvonne as she passed a corner; it was the light from the open elevator. No Aztecs were in sight, but the chance to reach quick refuge made Yvonne forget her stealthy tactics. She started a quick dash for the elevator.

Her haste betrayed her. Squatty men popped out from lurking places and overtook her before she could reach her goal. Yvonne held back a scream; knowing that it might be recognized; and her silence proved salvation.

Instead of drawing stone hatchets, the Aztecs merely suppressed her struggles. They bound her, hand and foot, with thong-like cords that they wore as necklaces with their deer-hide costumes. Quite solemnly, the Aztecs carried Yvonne to the door of the throne room and rested her upon the floor.

They began a low-pitched babble, in which Yvonne identified a single word: "Xitli." It chilled her more than the coldness of the stone floor for it meant that the rumors concerning Xitli were actual. Someone, Yvonne was certain, must be masquerading as the fire god.

Murderous captors had spared Yvonne's life, only that her fate might be decided by Xitli, the fiend of flame!

CHAPTER XVII. TRAILS LEAD HOME

ABOUT the time of Yvonne's capture by the Aztecs, two men were having dinner together in a hotel dining room. One was Eugene Brendle, and the stocky contractor was more talkative than usual. He had found the man he wanted to see: Lamont Cranston.

Brendle was discussing real estate. He had the title deeds to Carland's delta land and was going over them in detail, calculating the price per acre and talking about the possibilities of rice production.

As Brendle warmed to the subject, Cranston listened, his features remaining quite immobile. At last, Brendle shook his head and leaned back in his chair.

"It's no use, Cranston," he said. "Carland was a promoter, while I am not. He sold me on the idea that this land was worth the fifty thousand that he wanted to borrow; but after I gave him the money, I was no longer sure.

"I've been telling you things that Carland told me. I've been more conservative in my statements than he was, but at that, I've overstepped myself. There is only one way to learn if rice can be grown on this land. That way is to try it."

The first semblance of a smile appeared upon Cranston's lips. Brendle was encouraged.

"I know what you have been thinking," he admitted. "You suppose that I am trying to dispose of a white elephant – and you are right. But I am not actuated because of my own interests; at least, not entirely. I am thinking of Yvonne Carland.

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"She insists upon paying her uncle's debt, and she cannot possibly do it. But she is determined enough to try, and for years to come, she will be thrusting dribs of money upon me. Even worse, Yvonne intends to marry a man as determined as herself: Andrew Ames. He will consider it a debt of honor, too.

"If I could write the whole thing off, by getting rid of the property for the amount I loaned Carland, I would be satisfied. But I can't keep trying to convince you that you ought to buy. I've merely given a rosy picture of the proposition, and the rest is up to you."

For answer, The Shadow drew a check book from his pocket. In Cranston's leisurely style, he wrote out a check for sixty thousand dollars and handed it to Brendle.

"That covers the loan," he said, "with ten thousand dollars over, which I expect you to pay to Yvonne Carland, after deducting interest. If this property was good enough to interest Jonathan Dorn, it is satisfactory to me."

"I hadn't looked at it that way!" exclaimed Brendle, in a tone of surprise. "I was thinking purely in terms of James Carland. But you are right, Cranston. Dorn intended to buy –" Brendle paused, gave his head a rueful shake. "Or did he?"

"Carland claimed that he did."

"Not precisely. Carland said that Dorn was willing to finance the rice project. But frankly, Cranston, it is impossible to rely on anything that Carland stated. However, you have offered a solution to the problem."

Folding the title deeds, Brendle placed them in his pocket. Then, picking up the check, he tore it into small pieces. He expected Cranston's face to register surprise; but it did not. Nevertheless, Brendle felt that there must be some puzzlement on Cranston's part; inwardly, at least.

"Our best plan is to leave the proposition open," explained Brendle. "If you wish, you can give me a letter stating that you value the property at sixty thousand dollars, which you evidently do, and that you are willing to buy. That, in turn, should satisfy Yvonne regarding her debt to me.

"We can then proceed to have the land inspected from a marsh tractor. If it proves suitable for planting rice, I shall gladly sell it to you at the price named. In fact, I can sign a contract to that effect. With a clause, by the way, stating that any amount in excess of fifty thousand dollars will go to Yvonne Carland."

Therewith, Brendle proceeded to draw up a memorandum stipulating the terms. He made two copies, and handed one to The Shadow. Brendle emphasized the point that the contract would specify the sale of rice land, not salt marsh, which automatically protected Cranston.

"If you see Yvonne," Brendle added, "you might show her the memorandum, Cranston. If I told her, she would simply think that I was trying to eradicate the debt. She mistrusted her uncle – of that, I am sure – and this Talborn business must have worried her, too.

"Think of it, Cranston! Only last night, I was looking everywhere for Talborn, wondering where he had gone. All the while, he must have been watching that precious crypt where he had stored a quarter million in smuggled treasure."

DINNER ended, both men left the hotel. The Shadow went to his car and blinked a signal with a little flashlight. It brought no answer, which meant that the Xincas had gone. Their departure was in keeping with The Shadow's plans. A soft laugh came from his lips.

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Driving from the parking lot, The Shadow thought over the case of Graham Talborn. The police had appraised the treasure, and the estimate given by Brendle, a quarter million dollars, was about correct.

It would have been all profit for Talborn, too. Being in the export business, he could have shipped his spoils far and wide. Much of the treasure was pure gold or fine jade, which could always find a market.

Again The Shadow laughed.

Not only had he balked Talborn, but he had spoiled the game for Xitli before the masquerader could acquire Talborn's treasure as his own. But the crimes of the self-styled fire god were by no means settled. The Shadow did not share the increasing popular opinion that Xitli's main purpose had been to obtain the loot that Talborn secretly possessed.

Behind the machinations of Xitli lay a larger game, something concerning Carland and Dorn.

One person might, unwittingly, be able to supply proofs that The Shadow needed. That person was Yvonne Carland. It would be easy to talk with the girl and subtly urge her to unravel the past. As Cranston, The Shadow would start proceedings by telling Yvonne that he proposed to buy the rice lands.

Yvonne wasn't at her hotel when The Shadow stopped there. He called Andy at the Hotel Luzane, but received no answer. Next The Shadow tried Professor Hedwin, again with no success. He finally decided to go to the Hotel Luzane. There he learned that Hedwin had gone out, but that the clerk had not seen Andy leave.

It struck The Shadow as rather curious that one should have been noticed, the other not, particularly as the clerk's desk was directly opposite the elevators and the lobby quite small.

The Shadow went upstairs; he tried Andy's door with a special key and found the room empty. Then, as a matter of routine, he went to Hedwin's room.

Gargly sounds greeted the opening of the door. If ever eyes had expressed welcome, they were Andy's when they saw Cranston in the doorway. With a speed quite unusual for Cranston, The Shadow released Andy from the Mayan chains and removed the strangling thong. After feeling his throat and finding he still had one, Andy gulped his story.

"The professor has gone haywire!" he said. "He went to the museum, and didn't trust me enough to take me along. I can't exactly blame him, because he guessed that I was spying on him – something that the detectives asked me to do.

"It's the Xitli stuff again. The professor can't think of anything else. Sometimes I wonder –" Andy caught himself, urged by a fading loyalty toward Hedwin. "I'm wondering about Yvonne. She was on the telephone when the professor grabbed me. You don't think that she went to the museum, too?"

Andy wasn't merely changing the subject; he was really anxious about Yvonne. Calmly The Shadow told him not to worry, and suggested that they go to the museum, which suited Andy.

Riding in Cranston's car, they made a rapid trip, and to Andy's delight they found it open, with a few lights on the ground floor.

Starting in through the museum door, Andy felt himself restrained by Cranston's grip. He heard the calm tone of his companion:

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"Wait, Andy. Suppose we enter quietly and look things over. Professor Hedwin does not trust Fitzhugh Salter. He may have treated Salter as he did you."

THEY moved quietly toward Salter's office, where, again, Cranston's hand drew Andy back. From a turn in the dim corridor they saw the door of Salter's office. Two men were standing there, shaking hands. One was Salter, the other Hedwin; they seemed on the best of terms.

"I owe you an apology, Salter," Hedwin was saying. "I thought that you might have stressed the Xitli story and thereby caused me inconvenience. I was annoyed, of course, when the police came to the hotel."

"As I was, when they came here," returned Salter. "So I reserved comment until after they talked to you, professor. We agree on one thing, Hedwin" – Salter was smiling pleasantly – "and that is that neither of us care to be disturbed."

Hedwin came shambling toward the outer door, apparently engrossed in his thoughts. But his eyes took on a keen light when he heard a slight slam behind him, indicating that Salter had gone back into the office and closed the door.

Hedwin did not see Cranston or Andy; they had drawn toward a deep corner of the corridor. But they saw what Hedwin did next.

Turning about, the professor tiptoed past Salter's office toward the elevators. As soon as he had turned a corner, Andy started forward. The Shadow let him follow as far as Salter's office. There, the gripping hand asserted itself again.

Deftly, without the slightest trace of noise, The Shadow turned the knob of Salter's door. Opening it a crack, he motioned for Andy to listen.

Salter was on the telephone. He was calling police headquarters. They heard him requesting detectives to come to the museum. Coolly, Salter was telling them that he had obtained new facts concerning Xitli, the fire god.

Perplexed, Andy looked toward Cranston, who was silently closing the door. The Shadow pointed toward the outer door. More puzzled than ever, Andy came along.

"Wait here," was Cranston's suggestion when they stood on the outside steps. "When you see the police arriving, go into Salter's office and be there when they come. Let Salter do the talking, and learn all you can."

With that The Shadow strolled away. Andy watched Cranston's figure enter the parked car and decided that his friend intended to wait there. It happened that the car was too obscure to allow Andy a view of the cloaked shape that emerged.

Clad in black, The Shadow was skirting toward the museum, totally unseen by Andy. Nor did the watching man hear the low, sibilant whisper that came from somewhere near the shrubbery. In answer to that call, two chunky men joined the figure in black. They were the Shadow's Xincas.

Then all three were gone without a single glimpse on Andy's part. The lights of police cars were coming toward the museum. Remembering Cranston's injunction, Andy turned to go inside. More puzzled than ever, he was wondering what the next events would be. One person alone could have told him:

The Shadow!

CHAPTER XVIII. THE CHANT OF XITLI

FITZHUGH SALTER was not at all surprised when Andy Ames entered his office. He took it for granted that Andy had heard from the police. A few minutes later the police themselves were stamping into the curator's office in a fashion that made Salter motion for silence.

"I have something to tell you," declared the curator. "Something which may be in the nature of a demonstration, though I am not quite sure. Meanwhile" – he glanced at the half circle composed of six detectives – "I must insist upon absolute silence."

The quiet was broken by new footfalls coming in from the outside door. Hurriedly, Salter went to quiet the newcomers. He came back with two more detectives and another man: Eugene Brendle. As soon as Salter closed the door, Brendle explained that the detectives had called him, to which Salter nodded.

"I asked them to do so," he said. "Odd things have been happening in this museum, Brendle. Matters which concern both of us, as well as others."

He turned a half-doubtful glance toward Andy. In Salter's gaze Andy recognized a revival of the curator's old feud with Professor Hedwin.

If Salter had known how Hedwin had treated Andy before coming to the museum, the curator's doubt would have vanished. However, since Salter decided not to protest Andy's presence, Andy simply followed Cranston's injunction to remain silent.

Andy was thinking about Yvonne, and his worry was increasing. He finally reassured himself that Yvonne could not have come to the museum, or Salter would have mentioned it. When Salter began to speak, Andy did not realize that the curator's own statement proved that Yvonne could have come without Salter's knowledge.

"Professor Hedwin believes in a cult of Xitli," Salter told the group. "In my opinion, such a theory was more than unproven; it was preposterous. Such, I say, was my opinion. I have modified it within the past few days. When Aztecs were reported in New Orleans I began to wonder.

"Hedwin laid great stress upon the throne room of Xitli. He claimed that the basalt block which he brought back from Cuicuilco was the throne seat of Xitli. But, mind you, in all his talk of Xitli rituals involving a living fire god, Hedwin never declared that a real Xitli existed.

"He made it plain that someone, masked as Xitli, could control the cult. It would be possible, by Hedwin's own analysis, for a clever man to assemble Aztecs in the top floor of this museum and there give them orders which they would accept as law."

Opening a cabinet, Salter produced a phonograph record. Moving a screen from a corner, he revealed a recording machine. Running his fingers along a crack, he drew a thin, green wire into sight.

"I stayed in the museum purposely," declared Salter, "and on certain evenings I was sure of two things: that persons were moving about, and that someone was using the elevator. So I installed a microphone in Xitli's throne room and carried the wiring down here.

"Last night I not only heard all that happened in the throne room, but I recorded it. Unfortunately, my knowledge of spoken Mayan is limited. I was forced to play the record over and over to make sure of all that Xitli had said to his Aztecs. It would have been no use to call the police until my work was finished.

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"By then the thing had happened. The Aztecs had done what Xitli told them. They had gone to the waterfront and murdered Pierre Laboutard. Fortunately" – Salter showed a relieved smile – "the loss of Laboutard was not serious."

"But they killed Talborn, too!" exclaimed Brendle. "If you had notified the police in time, you might have saved him, Salter!"

"Not at all," insisted Salter. "There was no mention of Talborn, or the Monseca crypt, in the recording. Xitli must have learned about the place where the treasure was hidden through Laboutard. This translation" – he placed typewritten papers on the desk – "proves that he told his Aztecs not to harm Laboutard until Xitli gave the word."

THE detectives were picking up the sheets, but Brendle was more interested in the phonograph record. He asked Salter to run it through, but the curator shook his head.

"Not yet," he said. "I have a new disk on the machine in case the cult meets again tonight. Though the Aztecs apparently can go in and out at will, I purposely left the museum open to encourage them if they came here. I was gone myself for a matter of fifteen minutes."

That statement was the one that should have impressed Andy. It meant that Yvonne could have come to the museum and entered unobserved. But Andy was thinking in terms of Professor Hedwin, who had stayed inside the museum after leaving Salter's office.

At this moment the professor could be up in the throne room, garbed as Xitli, ready to receive the killers who formed the Aztec cult!

Startling though the thought was, its realization was far more sensational. Almost in response to Andy's thoughts, a crackling came from the loud-speaker above Salter's recording machine.

Excitedly, the curator sprang to the corner and started the blank disk that promised to receive again the words of Xitli, to keep them as permanent evidence.

From out of the crackling came the voice of the masquerader; a muffled tone, yet startling. It was fluent, proving the speaker's knowledge of the strange tongue that he spoke. Salter, motioning for silence, was listening intently.

As the voice paused to receive a return babble from Aztec throats, Salter whispered excitedly:

"I can understand it! His words are more coherent since I improved the reception –"

The voice of Xitli interrupted. Salter was nodding, at moments excitedly, at others solemnly. He kept pushing back the persons who asked him to translate the things he heard. There were intervals when Xitli let the Aztecs reply, but Salter managed only to wedge in a few remarks.

"This is their last meeting," said the curator. "Xitli is telling them that their work is done. They are to disband and return to Mexico."

Again, after a necessary pause while Xitli spoke, Salter relayed the words of the fire god.

"He is speaking of a sacrifice," declared Salter. "The Aztecs are clamoring for one. He is telling them to wait until the time when –"

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Xitli's voice had begun again, rising above the clamor of the Aztecs. Before Salter could say another word, a low chant began. Strange, discordant, it became a terrifying thing; into its weird cadence came the beat of drums.

At every break there was a word from Xitli, as though the fire god had picked up the burden of the chant and reduced the others to a mere accompaniment.

Turning from his corner, Salter started toward the door, moving mechanically, like a man in a strange dream. He was reaching in his pocket for a revolver. Moving after him, the detectives did the same.

At the door, Salter paused, listening to the swelling of the chant, which had reached a hideous, outlandish pitch punctuated by the sharp articulations of Xitli.

"Come," spoke Salter. "A few of you – no more. It would not be safe for many. But if we watch –"

At that instant the chant was broken; not by the voice of Xitli, nor the hammering of drums, but a shriek so ardent that it seemed the only human thing in all that vocal horror. To most who heard it, the scream was an appeal for help from some unknown person whose distress was so packed in the cry that words would have been superfluous.

To one, the shriek signified more. Andy Ames realized that only one person could have uttered it: Yvonne Carland. His worst fears had been realized. Yvonne had fallen into the power of the Aztec cult. She was the sacrifice that the fiends demanded from their monstrous leader, Xitli!

ONE man stood in Andy's path; that man was Fitzhugh Salter. He had sprung about, was waving his arms, apparently to tell his numbed companions that a mere venture to the throne room of Xitli would mean their doom. But Andy wasn't one to be convinced by Salter, though the detectives were willing to take the curator's advice.

Shoulder first, Andy bowled Salter from the doorway, sent him sprawling across the corridor. Andy had the gun that he had used in Mexico, and he tugged it from his pocket as he sped for the elevator.

His boldness influenced the rest. Brendle came from the curator's office with a flood of detectives that nearly trampled Salter in the rush.

As he ran, Andy could still hear the chant of Xitli coming from the loud-speaker in the office, above the surge of many feet. It was loud, discordant, still carrying a note of frenzy; but there was no repetition of Yvonne's scream.

All was a blur to Andy as he reached the elevator. Rescue was his motive, but over him had come the appalling thought that he might be too late to save Yvonne. Yet Andy's ardor did not fade. If he could not save Yvonne, another motive would inspire him; that of revenge upon Xitli, god of fire!

CHAPTER XIX. XITLI SPEAKS

THEY dashed into the throne room in the same positions as when they had left the curator's office, Andy ahead of the detectives. But in the race along the corridor of the top floor, Andy doubled his lead on his companions. He had one thought: to reach the throne room in the least time possible and consider consequences later.

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So ardent was Andy's dash that he lunged into the fateful room before he could stop himself. A fire was burning in the center of the floor; beyond it, Andy saw Yvonne, attired in Aztec costume, senseless on a slab in front of Xitli's throne.

In the throne itself was the green-masked, feathered fire god, his flame-hued costume blending with the flickering of the flames. Poised between the palms of Xitli's gauntlets was a stone knife, its handle against one hand, its point against the other.

The knife of sacrifice!

Too well did Andy know the practices of the ancient Mayas and their successors, the Aztecs; their way of sacrificing maidens to appease their mythical gods. But all that was summed in Andy's one desire – death to Xitli!

Rescue or revenge. It would be one or the other, dependent upon whether or not Yvonne still lived. By downing Xitli, Andy could end the curse of the fire god and the power that went with it. But Andy found no time to aim his gun, let alone pull the trigger.

He had precipitated himself into the midst of the Xitli cult, and Aztecs were upon him in a wave. Floundering, his revolver spinning from his hand, Andy saw the cleaving edges of hatchets brandished above him, ready to descend in time to the still persisting chant and the beat of the drums.

The thing that saved Andy was the voice of Xitli. At the fire god's harsh command, the Aztecs restrained their weapons. Then Andy found himself faced about, his arms pinned behind him. They had dragged him to the throne at Xitli's order

Other Aztecs had covered the doorway. They were flanking it, their stone hatchets at their fingertips. Stopped almost under the blades were a pair of detectives who were motioning back to others, telling the rest to wait. They had fallen into a trap almost as bad as Andy's.

They could have used their guns; in fact, they were still ready to do so if the Aztec hatchets budged. But it was better policy to wait, for no shots could reach Xitli. Aztecs were blocking off the path of aim toward the fire god. This frozen scene at least meant life, if no one disturbed the situation.

It was the voice of Xitli that all awaited; the one tone that could decide between life and death.

The words from the green mask were harsh, yet lulling to the Aztecs. The chant faded and a weird silence gripped the throne room, wherein the slight crackle of the fire seemed to grow in accompaniment to the tone of Xitli. Then the fire god did a most singular thing.

Gripping the knife by its blade, he proffered the handle to Andy. With his other hand Xitli gestured toward Yvonne, motioning for Andy to cut the thongs that bound her.

Numbly, Andy did so, and he saw the girl's eyes open. A moment later he was lifting Yvonne to her feet, helping her past the fire where Aztecs stood immobile, their hatchets still upraised.

Andy heard the tone of Xitli, a voice that he recognized, speaking in English. As he reached the door he told the detectives to put their guns away. Andy still could not understand the situation, but he knew that he had been spared by Xitli and that the fire god was a friend.

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The detectives pocketed their revolvers, and Xitli's followers lowered their stone hatchets. They retired to the walls and squatted there, like patient lions obeying the mandate of a trainer. Then Xitli himself was coming from the throne room to meet the group in the hall.

He stepped toward the costume room where the Aztecs could not see him. There he removed his mask, to reveal himself as Professor Hedwin.

"BE careful," warned Hedwin in a low tone. "The Aztecs must not know that I am one of you. They cannot be blamed for the murders which they committed. They did those deeds through ignorance."

"You mean you aren't Xitli?" queried Andy. "That is, you weren't the man who brought the Aztecs here?"

"A correct assumption," returned Hedwin with a smile. "In fact, I actually doubted my own theories for a while. But when I realized that the Xitli cult must actually exist, I decided to disband it. There was only one way: to pose as Xitli myself."

Hedwin was taking off the headdress and the flame-hued robe. But his argument, though it appealed to Andy, did not go over with the detectives. They crowded in upon the old professor, then looked about for Salter. The curator had not yet arrived, but Eugene Brendle was on hand. He gave Hedwin a scathing look.

"It won't do, Hedwin," declared Brendle. "The proof is all against you. Smart business, trying to frame an alibi, but it won't go, under the circumstances."

"The proof is against me?" queried Hedwin. "You mean these?" He shoved the robe, the mask, into Brendle's hands, along with the headdress. "Bah! What do they mean? Put them back where they belong in the costume room. Let the real Xitli have them when he comes."

"The real Xitli?"

"Yes." Pressing Brendle aside, Hedwin pointed a bony finger toward a man who was coming from the corner of the corridor. "Here he is!"

The man was Fitzhugh Salter. He was still breathless from his spill outside the office. Before Salter could say a word, Hedwin had the floor.

"I watched you, Salter," cackled the professor. "Night after night you came to the museum, thinking that no one knew it. But I understood your game. While you pretended that my theories were worthless, you were gathering the Xitli clan.

"You knew that I detested Carland and Dorn. But so did you, Salter. You found a perfect way to murder them, for which I cannot entirely blame you. But it was despicable on your part to throw the guilt on me!"

In his harangue, Hedwin made no mention of Talborn's treasure, which in itself provided a profit motive for the crimes of Xitli. But the question of the treasure merely weighed each side of the balance between Hedwin and Salter.

Either of the two could have learned what Talborn had done. Hedwin might have looked over the shipments from Mexico, while Salter had such opportunity upon their arrival in New Orleans.

"Call Brendle," suggested Hedwin, turning to Andy. "Have him bring back the Xitli costume. Or better still, suppose we take Salter to the costume room and let him put on the regalia. We'll make him show himself as

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Xitli!"

His face thrust close to Salter's, Hedwin gave the curator a fierce glare. Quite undisturbed, the curator finally found his breath and turned to the detectives.

"Does Hedwin know about the recordings?" he questioned. "If he did, he might change his tune. Suppose" – Salter was smiling as the detectives shook their heads – "that I tell him."

A baffled look came over Hedwin's face. Then Salter was detailing the scene that had taken place in the office; how, on the night before, he had also listened in on a meeting of the Xitli cult and had kept a record of it.

Hedwin couldn't seem to find an answer; even Andy, whose leanings had turned toward the professor, was convinced by Salter's argument. Only Yvonne still had a plea for Hedwin.

"I shouldn't have screamed," she told Andy earnestly. "When Xitli held the knife above me, my nerves gave way. But he was only trying to quiet the Aztecs."

"Quite right," agreed Hedwin quickly. "I told them that the sacrifice should wait until they returned to Mexico. I had to go through all the drama of an actual threat to show them that Xitli could restrain his hand at the very moment of a sacrifice."

THE detectives were not restraining their hands. They had heard enough of Hedwin's alibis. They started to drag Hedwin toward the elevator, and the professor made no protest. Right then Salter inserted a single word:

"Wait!"

Surprised that Salter would intervene for Hedwin, the detectives halted. Facing the slumped professor, Salter spoke in a tone of marked apology.

"I believe your story, Hedwin," he said simply. "But first I had to prove my own. I was never Xitli; neither were you until tonight. Do you remember" – Salter had turned to Andy and the detectives – "how I tried to hold you back downstairs?"

"It was because I understood the things that Xitli was saying when Yvonne screamed. He was telling them that there had been enough of blood, that they were to leave this land as they had come here. He said that Xitli would dwell alone within his temple.

"But that was not all. The voice of Xitli was more fluent than it was last night. Then he spoke only in forced phrases; tonight he used the language as if it were his own.

"I have satisfied everyone that I was not Xitli, now I declare Hedwin innocent, too. The proof is in my office. You will all recognize it when I play the records. You will hear the voice of the Xitli that we seek, the one who actually demanded murder –"

They heard it without going to Salter's office. It came from behind them at the very door of the throne room, which everyone had forgotten. Turning about, the startled group saw Xitli himself, come upon them so suddenly that he seemed actually to have materialized himself like a genuine god of fire.

Masked, feathered, in full regalia, Xitli was throating the order to his Aztecs, who still occupied the throne room – an order which, even to those who lacked all knowledge of Mayan, could mean but one thing. Death!

CHAPTER XX. THE FINAL DUEL

THE surge toward Xitli was immediate but hopeless. Before Andy and the detectives could bring their guns into action, the feathered fire god had swept into his throne room.

Hoping to stop him before he roused the Aztecs, the attackers swarmed through the door, only to be met by lunging men with swinging hatchets. Well did Xitli know the speed with which his Aztecs acted, how little they feared death themselves.

In one swift instant it seemed that doom was certain for Andy and the over-ardent detectives. Then, without a single gunshot, Aztecs were plunging headlong to the floor, tripped by two of their own companions – the men nearest the door. A pair of squatly blockers had literally flung themselves in front of the surging horde.

They were not Aztecs, those two, even though they had passed as such in the flickering glow of the throne room. They were The Shadow's Xincas, sent to the meeting by their chief with orders to thwart murder when the time came.

The fact that they had not intervened earlier was proof that Hedwin's story was true. All along the Xincas had known that Hedwin, garbed as Xitli, was trying to calm the cult.

But it was a different Xitli who now commanded. His attacking Aztecs had been slowed, but not stopped. Andy and the detectives were plunging into battle, unwisely giving the Aztecs the close range that the squatly fighters liked. Above all rose the triumphant voice of Xitli, with its loud command to kill.

Only a power more startling than Xitli's could turn the tide. Such a power did.

It began with a roar from the throne of the fire god toward which Xitli himself had turned. The roar was the splitting of the built-in throne as it spread in two parts, revealing a black passage behind it.

From the blackness came a challenging laugh, the mockery of an invisible foe. At that mirth, Aztecs turned, for they knew the fighter that it meant.

Xitli himself tried to drown the challenge with another cry to kill, but the tone of The Shadow, increased by the hollow behind the throne, still dominated.

Like blocks of stone come to life, The Shadow's Xincas rose and hurled themselves toward the door, bowling Andy and the nonplused detectives out into the corridor.

Starting to shoot at Aztecs, the surprised invaders did not see the Xincas until the pair hit them, below gun level, with the force of battering rams.

The Xincas were simply clearing the battleground, where only one combatant was needed: The Shadow!

Tongues of gun flame were stabbing lead from the sundered throne, clipping the Aztecs who tried to fling their hatchets. Others were dropping back, amazed by the broken throne, which seemed to spell an end to the power of Xitli.

But one thing more was needed to throw the murder tribe into utter confusion. The Shadow supplied the necessary deed.

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Springing from the secret passage, he reached the seat of Xitli's throne and poised, crouched with his aiming guns, upon the basalt block that was the symbol of the fire god.

To the Aztecs, it was death to touch that stone. In The Shadow they saw a god of death, the only sort of being that could defy Xitli!

FROM behind the shelter of his followers, Xitli howled for a new attack that did not come. In desperation, he flung one of his fire vials. The Shadow saw it coming and swept his cloak over his eyes.

The thing burst with a blaze, and with the flare the Aztecs heard the shout of Xitli, competing with the laugh that The Shadow delivered through his muffling cloak.

Blindly the Aztecs charged. The Shadow side-stepped, letting them stumble toward the throne, from which they quailed as they felt its touch. Through the mass of blundering figures, The Shadow was looking for Xitli. He saw the masquerader beyond the throng, coming up from the floor, where he had stooped to shield his eyes.

Xitli saw The Shadow and gave another fling. This time his weapon was a stone ax that one of his followers had dropped. He lobbed it over the heads of the Aztecs and howled new triumph as he saw The Shadow make a desperate twist.

But in that spin The Shadow found the opening he wanted. With his sideward dive he stabbed a shot between the figures of two Aztecs.

The Shadow's aim was perfect. Xitli never saw the finish of the ax fling as the stone blade sliced the brim of The Shadow's hat and harmlessly slashed the black cloak before clattering on the floor. For Xitli's heart had received a bullet straight from The Shadow's gun.

No longer could Xitli command. The only tone that echoed through the throne room was the laugh of The Shadow.

Thrusting Aztecs aside, The Shadow reached the throne. There his laugh ended; he was speaking commands that the Aztecs understood. His voice was in their language; it came from Xitli's throne. It was the word of a power greater than the fire god. Submissively, the Aztecs dropped their weapons.

They heard the clatter of the closing throne. When their blinking eyes could view the change they saw that The Shadow was gone. But Xitli still remained among them, a dead figure on the floor. Death to Xitli meant the end of the fire god's cult. No longer would these Aztecs murder.

From the corridor, Professor Hedwin entered. He spoke to the Aztecs and they listened, for The Shadow had told them to await another's order. Behind Hedwin came Fitzhugh Salter.

The curator stooped above the form of Xitli and removed the dead man's mask. He beckoned others to come and view the lifeless face of Eugene Brendle, the man who had covered his crimes, along with his identity, when he posed as Xitli.

A SHORT while later they found Lamont Cranston down in the curator's office, where he had just arrived. A mere spectator, Cranston listened to the details that the others pieced while detectives were marching the surviving Aztecs out from the museum.

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It was easy to fit facts regarding Brendle once he had been identified as Xitli. He had been connected with the Mayan Museum from the start and had heard the Xitli legend. As the contractor who superintended the building, Brendle had easily installed the secret entrance to the throne room.

"Brendle suffered more than either of us, so far as Carland was concerned," said Salter to Hedwin. "The same applied in Dorn's case. But Brendle was clever. He kept up a friendship with Carland so that the blame would be placed on one of us."

"You mean on me," corrected Hedwin. "The throne room was my idea. But do you know" – the professor's eyes gleamed wisely – "I don't think that Brendle expected the Aztecs at all. He intended to use Laboutard for murder; then, perhaps, hold some brief masquerade to draw attention to the Aztec cult."

"The throne room was of my design; Brendle's addition of a secret passage would have been attributed to me, though I knew nothing of it."

"But when the Aztecs came –"

"Brendle used them, of course. He posed as Xitli and put the Aztecs to the task that Laboutard refused."

Silently, The Shadow admired Hedwin's analysis. It lacked a few details, but was otherwise correct. The Shadow could have supplied the missing points, for he had recognized them while many were still in progress. But when the story had been thrashed out, The Shadow had something to add, which he could do quite capably as Cranston.

"You speak of a double game," he remarked. "Talborn was after treasure. When Brendle learned it, he followed up the murders of Carland and Dorn by attempting to take Talborn's treasure."

"Quite right," agreed Salter. "The idea of wealth appealed to Brendle."

"He needed money," insisted Hedwin. "He was constantly worried over the fifty thousand dollars that Carland owed him."

"Then why," came Cranston's query, "did Brendle refuse sixty thousand that I offered him for the Carland property this evening. I actually gave him a check for it, but he tore it up and insisted upon this instead. You will find the duplicate in Brendle's pocket, along with the title deeds that still belong to Yvonne Carland."

The Shadow produced his copy of the written memorandum. At first sight Brendle's contract regarding the rice lands looked like a generous arrangement, but Brendle, exposed as Xitli, could no longer be regarded as generous. Cranston's lips formed a smile as his keen eyes roved the puzzled group.

"There must be a catch to it," he said. "Otherwise Brendle would not have made the offer. I think the catch concerns the term 'rice lands.' Brendle knew that the property was salt marsh, unfit for raising rice. All he wanted was a chance to survey the land and find something else, presumably by accident."

"What else?" queried Andy.

"I would say oil," replied The Shadow. "The land was Carland's to begin with, and oil was his business. His talk of rice was merely a blind. Having to borrow on the property, he did not want Brendle to know its real worth. But Dorn knew all about it. Carland talked to him in terms of oil, not rice."

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The whole of Brendle's scheme opened wide. His double murder had been a quest for wealth, not a mere grudge against Carland and Dorn. It brought home another point, which the listeners heard Cranston supply in a matter-of-fact fashion.

"Laboutard knew the delta region," said The Shadow. "He is probably the man who informed Brendle that there was oil on Carland's property. Which made it all the more necessary for Brendle to dispose of Laboutard, the one man who could have blackmailed him later.

"I have heard that there are great possibilities in Louisiana oil land." The Shadow turned to Yvonne. "So allow me to congratulate you, Miss Carland, on the future wealth that you deserve. From what I have learned of Brendle, he would not have played for small stakes. If you need fifty thousand dollars to regain those title deeds, my check book is still available."

STROLLING from the office, The Shadow left the museum and returned to his car, where the faithful Xincas waited. They had kept right on through, after turning battle over to The Shadow.

As he started the car, The Shadow gazed toward the great museum, its piles of pyramiding steps leading to the topmost floor, where crime had risen to its heights, then fallen. From Cranston's lips came the laugh of The Shadow.

Those within the museum caught the echoes of that mirth. It was fanciful, weird, seemingly distant, yet as real as the vast bulk of the mighty pyramid above them. Real to those who had seen the fray in which that laugh had resounded from the lips of a black-clad battler who fought for justice.

They knew the parting laugh of The Shadow, the tone that symbolized his triumph over Xitli, god of fire!

THE END